WHY WE NEED A NEW WAVE OF RESTORATIONISM
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I have the unenviable task of following the excellent presentation of Lloyd Knowles. His message was positive. He looked back at the origins of our tradition and mined it for several gems that have historically defined who we are as a Restoration Movement. He brought out our best and showcased it in a way that only Lloyd can – raccoon skin cap and all.

My task is quite different. I'll be shining light on the shadow side of our legacy. I'll be discussing why some people now wonder whether the Restoration Movement is even moving anymore and whether it has moved away from what made it so great to begin with. But I don't do so in a spirit of shame or resignation. I do so with a spirit of optimism and for the purpose of drawing upon what is best in our heritage and using it to chart a course forward in our own day. I do so, in the spirit of the button that one of my favorite Great Lakes professors—Ron Fisher—has been passing around at this event. It says, "MAKE THE **RESTORATION MOVEMENT** GREAT AGAIN." Since this is a feat that only God can accomplish, let us begin be seeking him in prayer.

Lord God we know that you alone are good and so you alone can truly be great. But we humbly accept that you have great plans for your lowly people. Though we are but fragile clay vessels, you have appointed us *to bear the saving message of your kingdom, and toward that end you have granted us access to "the immeasurable greatness" of your power. So we come before you sheepishly aware that, like our ancestors in the faith, we are tempted to achieve greatness by fashioning kingdoms and institutions that look strikingly similar to the best that this world has to offer—a world that is terminally ill and passing away. So grant us, O Lord, the humility to trust that your plan for your people and your guide for your church is the one and only, all-sufficient guide for our life together and our mission in this world. And be with us this day, O Lord, that we might embolden one another to cling tenaciously to your vision for us and for all of your people from every tribe, language, and church tradition, according to your holy Word. We ask all of this in the powerful name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.*

Last Spring, Matt Schantz, the director of New Churches of Christ Evangelism, invited area-wide church leaders to the campus of Great Lakes Christian College to discuss and strategize about the state of the Independent Christian Churches in our region. Much to our surprise and delight, about eighty people showed up. The room was packed. There was clearly a hunger for comradery and collaboration. As the meeting began, we separated into small groups to discuss what we thought about the current state of the Independent Christian Churches. There was remarkable unity in the responses. An E-mailed summary that was sent to all participants said this:

> "To describe the state of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ in Michigan you used words like: isolated, stagnant, disjointed, disconnected, inward focused, lack of identity, lack of discipleship, unwillingness to cooperate, conflicted, sad, fractional, negative vision, lack of church planting, compartmentalized, directionless, defined by what we are

against not what we are for, upholding tradition over mission, stuck, independent, isolationist."

If I were to boil this list down to two words, I would say "disconnected" and "disoriented." We don't feel like we are part of a larger whole, and we're not sure exactly what to do because we're not sure exactly who we are. It's not that we don't know that we're churches and that we exist to fulfill the Great Commission. It's more like we don't know what it means to be Restorationist churches. Other churches seem to receive their identity from their denominations, which gain their bearings from their creeds, confessions, and denominational hierarchies. Without such aids, it's often difficult for us to articulate who we are, who we're not, and why it's important that we continue to be who we are. It might be an understatement to say that the Independent Christians Churches are facing an identity crisis right now, and not just here in Michigan. Several of our schools have merged in order to remain viable. Far too many have closed down. One of our main publishing houses was bought out by a Baptist press.

A bit of history may shed some light on how we got to where we are today. The Independent Christian Churches began as part of a unity movement in the early nineteenth century that split into three groups by the late-mid-twentieth century. The A Capella Churches of Christ fully embraced and took to its logical conclusions the restorationist impulse of the movement by holding fast the notion that congregations should practice only what the early church practiced, nothing more or less. The Disciples of Christ fully embraced and took to its logical conclusions the unity dimension of the movement by carving out a place within mainline denominationalism for the Stone-Campbell heritage. The Churches of Christ tend to me more conservative theologically and ecclesiologically. The Disciples tend to be more liberal.

This left the Independent Christian Church somewhere in the middle—caring about restorationism, but not willing to go as far as our A Capella kin; caring about solidarity with the wider church, but not willing to go as far as the Disciples of Christ. The Disciples now have their general assemblies and denominational structures to rally around, and the Churches of Christ have their distinct commitment to noninstrumental worship and the conservative restoration principles that accompany it. But what do the Independent Christian Churches have? What makes us unique? What cause have we to rally around?

I recently listened to a lecture that renowned New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, delivered at Pepperdine University, a Church of Christ school. Pepperdine has a remarkably beautiful campus in Malibu, CA, with a breathtaking view of the Pacific Ocean. Yet Wright didn't comment on the amazing landscape. Rather, he began his address by wishing that his own Anglican tradition could break into the kind of spontaneous four-part harmony without instrumental accompaniment that he experienced among the A Capella folk at Pepperdine.

This got me thinking: What would a distinguished guest from another tradition admire about the Independent Christian Churches? What do we experience or represent that Professor Wright might wish he experienced more among Anglicans? Not being as conservative or liberal as our sister churches is hardly a noteworthy point of distinction.

We don't fare much better when we look more closely at the roots of our movement. In its early days, amazing things were happening. As Christians migrated to America and began settling into new territories, they began reimagining what Christian faith might look like in the "New World." Since no denomination would be officially established, the frontiers wouldn't have to be religiously fractured and belligerent like Europe once was. What is more, with those old hostilities in the rearview, many Protestants began discovering that their faith wasn't as different from other Christians as they once thought. So, many believers simultaneously began forsaking their denominational affiliations and joining together as "simply Christians." This was extremely exciting, even revolutionary. Many interpreted such radical unity as a sign that Christ would soon return. Should the church become one, the world would believe, and the kingdom would come at last!

So the earliest leaders began strategizing for unity. Everything was reconsidered in light of these new providential developments. Creeds and confessions were abandoned, divisive theological commitments were relativized, and the Bible was regarded as the only source that could truly unite all Christians. Apocalyptic fervor filled the air, just like during the sixteenth-century Reformation associated with Martin Luther. But, alas, Christ did not come. Instead, denominationalism came. It came in a specifically American way, but it came nonetheless. New towns and settlements wouldn't be populated by "Christians only," but also by Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and others. After a while, the dream of denominationless Christianity faded. All that restoration churches could do is cling to what made us different from other traditions. Though this could sustain our fragile unity for a while, it eventually collapsed in the twentieth century—resulting in the three distinct groups we have today.

As a result, many among the ICCs feel ashamed to call themselves a unity movement. We splintered off like everyone else (though we shouldn't overlook the fact that a threefold split is modest in comparison to what most denominations have undergone historically). Plus, the twentieth century saw the rise of a wider and perhaps more successful unity movement: the modern Ecumenical Movement. Global Protestantism came together in multiple forums to affirm what all mainline Christians share in common and to advance those common interests. One expression of this movement is the World Council of Churches, which has gathered ten times since 1948. Though it has not united the church in any concrete structural sense, the Ecumenical Movement has promoted a greater sense of inter-denominational solidarity that persists to this day. Independent Christian Churches have not been major players in this movement, and we're certainly not its leaders. And now that unity and interchurch cooperation is fashionable, we are largely at a loss as to how we might stand out as a *unity* movement. It seems that God has united his church to a much greater extent than it once was and that we have played, at best, only a marginal role in that process.

Since parting from the Disciples of Christ in the 1960s, the strength of the Independent Christian Churches has been in our conviction that we uniquely do church right. We keep alive the New Testament's vision of independent congregations led by congregationally-appointed elders. We observe the Lord's Supper weekly and recognize believers' baptism as the biblically-mandated means by which people enter Christian faith. Our people were quite insistent, at least for a while, that those who did otherwise erred greatly in God's sight. So it was deemed imperative that we hold fast to the true biblical vision and that we maintain schools, publishing houses, and church

camps to advocate that vision. We considered this vital for the sake of our congregations, the worldwide church, and our lost neighbors. If we didn't keep this vision alive, who would? We had a reason to exist, and so we circled the wagons around ourselves. We may have failed to unite the global church, but in our eyes we were the last bastion of ecclesial and biblical faithfulness.

Over the last few decades, however, a lot has changed. The causes are many, but at the risk of oversimplifying I want to highlight one: the Independent Christian Churches came out of isolation. Our students study at denominational schools, our scholars participate in multidenominational professional societies, our pastors attend multidenominational conferences, our members frequent multidenominational rallies, everyone is reading books and blogs written by everyone else, and many of our churches have come to see themselves as part of mainstream evangelicalism. All of this means that our people have made peace with believers from other traditions. They are Christians just like us. They may regard baptism and the Lord's Supper differently, but they follow the same Lord and want most of the same things. The old slogan, "We're not the only Christians, we're Christians only," now means that we recognize the faithfulness of other Christian traditions. We may be closer to Scripture in some ways, but other traditions are closer and more experienced in other ways.

What is more, having engaged other traditions, we now realize how young and in some ways naïve we have been as a movement. Our students often leave graduate school embarrassed to be Restorationists. Other denominations have such rich traditions, stable institutions, and sophisticated theological systems. Having emerged from isolation, we made friends with other traditions, and in the process lost all sense of urgency and pride in our existence.

As subtle as this shift was, the result is obvious: the movement is no longer moving. We are merely spinning our wheels. There seems to be no place to go. All we can do is maintain our institutions—but to what end? We don't appear to have a distinct voice. Having no sense of direction from within our tradition, our churches increasingly operate as entirely independent institutions trying to succeed at making disciples in their own cities. Just like all the other nondenominational startups, we've come to gauge our success numerically and adapt to the demands of the market. Instead of asking how we can unite all Christians or how can we restore the New Testament vision, we ask, how can we make as many disciples as possible? How may we extend our congregational reach as far as possible? What are unbelievers and churchless Christians looking for? What are their felt needs, and what can we do to meet them?

Next to Scripture, church growth and member enthusiasm have come to matter most. Any school or publishing house that provides basic biblical instruction and effective church growth tools will suffice. If there's a local Independent Christian Church school nearby, great. If not, any evangelical school will do. If our school is too expensive, we'll look elsewhere. Most church growth resources are written by non-Restorationist people anyway. What do our people have to offer that isn't available elsewhere for less money? And so our schools and publishing houses are flagging, with the result that they, too, are beholden to the market—focused on how they might attract consumers, solicit donations, and pay the bills.

Of course, not all Independent Christian Church institutions are struggling. The market has been kind to some, others have skillfully adapted to changing circumstances, and still others enjoy unwavering support from constituent churches and sizeable endowments. There is no one-size-fits-all explanation as to why some institutions have thrived while others have waned. But the prevailing trend is undeniable: only a few are trending upward and far too many are trending downward. The market is no respecter of persons or institutions. It's ecclesial Darwinism. Natural Selection. Survival of the fittest.

This outlook seems rather bleak, and I am sure it could be refined in various ways. But if it is mostly right, it seems that we are presented with a limited set of options.

1. **Keep Riding the Wave of Church Marketing.** We could concede that the marketing approach is here to stay and adapt accordingly. This means watching countless out-of-touch congregations drop off one-by-one and emulating whatever churches and institutions manage to stay ahead of the curve. This approach becomes quite dangerous when the market demands a kind of church that doesn't reflect the biblical vision, which if we're truly honest with ourselves, happens far more often than we like to admit.

2. **Paddle Backward into Isolation.** We could retreat from interdenominational activity, reaffirm key doctrines we have championed historically, and recover a posture of suspicion toward other church traditions. Yet neither the Scriptures nor our restoration roots support the kind of close-mindedness and pejorative view of other traditions that many of our churches once had.

3. **Wave Goodbye to the ICC.** We could disband altogether. This could take two forms. We could meld into generic, unaffiliated, nondenominationalism, which at the end of the day, means capitulating to church marketing. Or we could meld into one of the other strands of the Restoration Movement, whether the Churches of Christ or Disciples of Christ. This might be a reasonable option if no other viable option presented itself.

4. **Catch a New Wave of Restorationism.** We could identify within the Independent Christian Church tradition a unique emphasis that is worth preserving and emphasizing for the sake of both the unbelieving world and the wider Christian faith. Were we to do so, we could rally around that emphasis, make it integral to congregational life and affiliated institutions, and then do with excellence the one thing that God has uniquely gifted us to do.

By the title of this presentation, you already know what option I am recommending: we need a new wave of restorationism. By "new" I don't mean brand new, as if to suggest that we should replace the Restoration Movement with something altogether different. But I do mean something that is fresh, that isn't just a return to exactly where we've already been. Yet what needs to be renewed is something that already exists and has existed for quite some time among our churches. There are valuable treasures within this movement worth preserving—not just for the sake of historical preservation—but for the good of the world and for the good of the global church.

For the rest of this presentation I want to explore two elements of what a new wave of restorationism might entail. I submit these not as final answers or ultimate solutions, but as points for reflection and further discussion.

1. Identity

If the Restoration Movement wants to get moving again and retain its momentum, it needs a clear sense of identity. We've already discussed how the motifs of "unity" and "restoration" have morphed over time and no longer propel us forward like they used to. This is partly because most denominations want unity nowadays, there are a variety of ways to achieve it, and our approach appears to have failed. It is also partly because many people are cynical about the idea that one can actually restore something as nebulous as "New Testament Christianity." They are quick to point out that the New Testament doesn't provide us with a comprehensive blueprint to follow. Besides that, God has taught the church a lot of important lessons since New Testament times and it is sheer buffoonery to ignore them.

Do we really have anything unique and valuable to offer? As a Catholic by birth, a graduate of Methodist and Reformed seminaries, an expert in the thought of a Mennonite, a regular presenter at ecumenical conferences, and the head planner of an annual gathering of believers from all over the denominational spectrum—I can tell you with full confidence that we do, in fact, have something specific and important to offer—something that unites us in a way that it doesn't quite unite any other tradition.

What we uniquely offer is nothing about which we may boast because what we have to offer does not flow from the wealth of our tradition, but from our poverty. You see, nearly every other tradition has something concrete, something unique to it, that it alone possesses. It may be a doctrine, a practice, or a prominent thinker of great importance to the wider Christian tradition. The Pentecostals have tongues. The Reformed have Calvin and the Lutherans have Luther. The Mennonites have peace. The Churches of Christ have A Capella music. The Episcopalians are on the frontline of every socially progressive issue, and the Catholics have Mary, Aquinas, and the Pope.

But what do we have that everyone else doesn't already have? Sure, we have Campbell, Stone, and Walter Scott—but none of these thinkers are widely respected beyond our circles. Other schools don't offer graduate seminars on our leading figures. Believers Baptism is not unique to us either; there are a wide variety of Believers church traditions who affirm the same thing. Many of these traditions also affirm the importance of independent congregations with a plurality of elders in each one. Of course, all church traditions also claim the Bible.

Could it be, then, that we have nothing? And if that were true, could that itself be the very thing that unites and defines us? We have the Bible, like everyone else; but *only* we have the Bible and nothing else. For this very reason, we lean heavily on the Bible. It is the source and the center of our existence. While other traditions study the Scriptures *and* espouse their creed, or study the Scriptures *and* conform to the Catholic Catechism, or study the Scriptures *and* perpetuate the legacy of Calvin, Luther, or Wesley – all we really have is the Bible.

For this reason, we center our lives on the Bible with all that we have and are. It stands at the heart of our preaching in ways that one doesn't always hear from other pulpits. It dictates the shape of our leadership in ways quite different from mainline denominations and most megachurch conglomerations. It occupies a central position in our churches' lives, the programming of our camps, and the curriculum of our colleges. Or at least – it should, if we are truly being ourselves.

For example, every student who graduates from Great Lakes Christian College pursues a major in Bible and theology. And they're not getting Bible or theology from a specific denominational perspective. They're getting the Bible, as best we can interpret it in the original languages and according to its original context. Any commentary that gets us closer to these, is a commentary that helps us achieve our goals, regardless of what denominational press published it. Likewise, the theology we teach is not the entrenched dogma of a specific tradition, but a truly biblical theology that grows, first and foremost, out of the text and is aware of philosophy, church history, and major thinkers without being determined by them. That is why students come to us from all sorts of denominations and find that what they learn here applies directly to them in their own church context with little, if any, need for translation.

Many other church traditions take the Bible quite seriously and nearly all of them have Bible scholars, teachers, and preachers who are every bit as Bible centered as we are. But in those traditions, other emphases are also immensely important and equally central to their identity. We need not view this as a shortcoming or liability. Rather, it is a particular gift, a sacred trust with which the Lord has endowed them. Other church traditions keep visible rich dimensions of Christian faith that the global church ignores only to its detriment. It is the specific talent of which they must be a faithful steward. We dare not look down on them for it. We are neither better nor worse than them on account of this. "We are not the only Christians; we are Christians only."

Yet the fact that the Bible is all that we have means that it must remain central to our identity in ways that it cannot be central in traditions where it must share the spotlight with some other key emphasis. For the Bible to remain central doesn't mean that it's the only thing we study. It does mean, however, that we study all other things through the lens of the Bible. It doesn't mean that we ignore the insights of church history, philosophy, sociology, and the hard sciences; it means that we subjugate all learning to God's revelation in Scripture. It doesn't mean that we cannot read books from other traditions or study at denominational schools, but that we pillage other authors and traditions for resources that help us understand God's Word better and bring it to bear in faithful ways in our own context.

This may seem like common sense to many of our people, but it is not the case across the denominational spectrum. One of our most interesting students at Great Lakes is a Russian Orthodox priest who was ordained with very little Bible training. He came here, in part, to fill this gap. Yet his command of church tradition and philosophy is truly remarkable and puts many of us to shame. Not long ago, when I attended Calvin Seminary, one didn't need to take a single Bible class to receive a Ph.D. in theology. They focused, instead, on philosophy, ethics, history, and systematics. My experience at Duke was much the same. The Restoration Movement's relentless emphasis on the Bible is truly unique. Other schools have Bible departments where

Bible people study the Bible, but there is palpable tension between the Bible department and the theology, philosophy, and church history departments. That should never be so among us. For us, Scripture stands at the center of theology and everything else that pertains to the church's beliefs and practices. Theology is the queen of the sciences and Bible is the king of theology.

If we truly remain faithful to our own roots and keep the Bible central in everything we do, we will indeed have a unifying presence in this world. Not only that, but we will bring valuable treasures into conversation with other traditions who are usually quite eager to hear what the Bible has to say. A couple of years ago I was asked to present a paper on believers baptism at a multidenominational gathering at which over half the participates practiced infant baptism. So, in restorationist fashion I walked through all the New Testament passages on the subject, organized my findings into a simple framework, and presented it. There was nothing at all special about my presentation. It's the kind of thing I do for my students all the time. Yet afterwards, I received numerous compliments on how refreshing and biblically-informed my presentation was. A few people asked if they could use it in their catechetical training. A paedobaptist told me that he came to the session with claws out, ready for a fight. But the longer I spoke, the more his claws began to retract. He ended up understanding and appreciating what the tradition I represented had to offer. They ended up publishing my presentation alongside another one from a Roman Catholic perspective (http://d1swb5ay1qopx0.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/EP-pamphlet-22.pdf).

My point is this: the worldwide church values the Scriptures, and the Scriptures are all that we have. So when we stand alone on the Word of God, we not only stand in line with what God has called his church to be and do, but we represent an indispensable perspective that both lost people and the worldwide church earnestly long to see. Yet I cannot tell you how many Independent Christian Church pastors and scholars bend over backwards trying to impress brothers and sisters from other Christian traditions by trying to do what those traditions already do quite well without us. Let us, instead, do the very thing that God has equipped us to do best.

Today we often separate the unity vision in our tradition from the restoration vision. Unity then becomes a generic cipher that can be carried out in all sorts of trendy ways. That was not the approach of Alexander Campbell. He pursued unity by way of a central commitment to the Scriptures. And that is something worth recovering and worth fleshing out in all of its theological and practical dimensions.

2. Locality

The second element that a new wave of restoration must take seriously is locality. The Restoration Movement is not a denomination. We are a Christian tradition with a specific heritage, but we lack the most critical attributes of what makes a tradition a denomination. We don't have a centralized hierarchy, denominational headquarters, or defining documents that spell out what all affiliates must believe. Most denominations have chief officers and panels of leaders who assess candidates who wish to be ministers. There is a specific mold into which all clergy must fit. There is a specific set of doctrines they must affirm and practices they must implement to remain in good standing.

Congregations within a denomination must often pay regular dues, which sustain the superstructure that looks over all the congregations. This also allows them to provide the clergy with valuable services like health coverage and pensions. When the hierarchy determines that something in their churches must change, that change is mandated and made binding on all affiliated congregations. It sometimes frustrates pastors who see the need for change based on the Scriptures, but are powerless to implement that change until the denominational higher-ups gather and agree that this change indeed ought to be made. This requires great patience, but many believe it's worth it. It protects congregations from being swept away by the latest fad, and it stabilizes them in times of trouble. Should any pastor or congregation begin to stumble, there is a helping hand above them, to reach down and stabilize them.

Any pastor among the Independent Christian Churches will tell you that this is simply not the case among us. We wish we had group health insurance. We wish we had superstructures to bail us out during tough times. But we don't. There is no structure above us to keep us healthy. That doesn't mean, however, that we have no structures at all. We have structures of unity that are created by our churches to serve our churches in specific ways. Affiliation with these structures is strictly voluntary. A person or church may participate or refrain at will. Such unifying structures include church camps, colleges, seminaries, missions organizations, campus ministries, publishing houses, and conventions.

These organizations can and do offer great help and support to our churches. They are not above us, but they stand beside us and serve us in important ways. They connect us to one another and to other Independent Christian Churches throughout the world. But they, too, are independent organizations with no denominational hierarchy above them. So they rely on voluntarily affiliated churches to support them. Together our churches and our structures of unity form a horizontal web with great potential for strength and stability. It's the kind of horizontal stability that the Apostle Paul sought to create among first century churches: congregations in Greece offering financial help to congregations in Palestine. It's the kind of horizontal stability that God created Israel to be in Torah: a loose federation of equal tribes, each of which had its own local elders, Levites, judges, and prophets.

Here's the bottom line: if we are to remain viable as a restoration movement, we need a strong sense of *identity* to ground us and a strong sense of *local connectedness* to stabilize us. We need people outside of us to remind us to remain centered on the Scriptures. Otherwise we become isolated, disconnected, and directionless. We don't need a hierarchy of ruling powers to tell us what to do; we need a network of kingdom friends to come alongside us and remind us who we are and how privileged we are to be what God has gifted us to be.

If we don't center ourselves on the Scriptures and fortify ourselves with voluntary networks of kingdom partners, we will indeed cease to be a restoration movement. Without a sense of connectedness to other churches through fellowship and structures of unity, we become self-contained institutions. When we become self-contained, we lean more and more on our own understanding and resources. Sometimes we remain centered on the Scriptures, but often times we become obsessed with growing numerically and perpetuating ourselves. So we turn to marketing, sociology, and church growth gurus for guidance. And sociologists will be the first to tell us that significant growth require that we leave behind the vision of leadership and

community cast by the New Testament, which assumes small and simple congregations (http://seniorpastorcentral.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/04/Tim-Keller-Size-Dynamics.pdf).

So what can we do to foster a strong sense of locality? Let's use Michigan as an example. For the Restoration Movement to be great in Michigan, our churches must truly love one another. We must prioritize one another with our time energy and resources. If sister churches are in need, what might we do to come alongside them? We must also support our structures of unity. This means sending our youth to Independent Christian Church youth camps. Churches in mid-Michigan should be sending their youth to Rock Lake Christian Assembly. Churches up north should be sending their youth to Wilderness Christian Assembly. Churches on the east side should be sending them to Wolverine Christian Service Camp.

We shouldn't be asking, "What's the very best youth camp around?" or "Where can we get the most bang for our buck?" We should help make our camps, the ones we've started, some of the best youth camps around. Baptist camps have Baptist churches supporting them and Baptist denominational hierarchies stabilizing them. Of course they can offer amazing programming with thrilling aquatic super launchers. But our youth camps only have us. The Baptist hierarchies aren't going to start funding Rock Lake, and the Reformed aren't going to start sending their youth to Wolverine. They scholarship their kids to attend their camps, which their churches sponsor with every offering they take up. They take pride in their tradition and they invest their resources in such a way as to ensure that it thrives and has a future—and so must we.

If someone is interested in church planting – partner with New Churches of Christ Evangelism. Interested in conferences, bring a group from your church to the Michigan Christian Convention. Take your youth to GLCC's Fusion and Michigan Statewide. And, please, communicate enough not to schedule on top of each other so as to compete against one other. In the Lansing area, send your Jr. and Sr. Highers to Merge, which meets once a month. Interested in a Christian college education, by all means, send your students to Great Lakes.

Now I know what some of you are thinking. Not all of these camps and not all of these conferences and institutions put out the highest quality program. I get that. It feels natural to want the best for our youth, our congregations, and our families. But if that is our mentality, we might want to pause and ask, is that biblical? We need to ask why God took Abraham and the Israelites away from the height of ancient civilization to form them in Canaan the land of the perpetual underdog. We need to ask why God chose as patriarchs, judges, and kings those who were least likely to succeed by ordinary human standards. We need to ask why Jesus was born to a poor family in a Podunk town and carried out most of his ministry away from the most prominent cities in Palestine with the help of a bunch of poorly educated unimpressive men.

Ask why he preached that the first is last and the last first, why the least are the greatest, and leaders must be servants. Ask why the Apostle Paul regarded his most impressive accomplishments as rubbish and reminded the Corinthians that God chose them while they were nobodies precisely because he loves using nobodies to showcase his wisdom and power. Ask why God chooses the things that are not to shame the things that are, why the lowly are being raised and the high and mighty are lowered, why the meek inherit the earth, and why the rich and

successful find it nearly impossible to enter the kingdom. We should perhaps ask most of all, who in Scripture offers Jesus the best that this world has to offer? [hint: it rhymes with "the bevel"]

If we truly want the Restoration Movement to be great, we need to stop comparing what God has given us to what God has given others. We need to start receiving what God has given us as a precious gift that we are privileged to love and to cherish. I suspect that if enough Restoration folk start making God's Word our center and begin truly loving and prioritizing brothers and sisters, churches and institutions who are committed to doing the same – then the almighty God of boundless resources just might have a reason to make *the Restoration Movement* great again.