

RESTORATION APPRECIATION
WEEK 2016

LLOYD A. KNOWLES & JOHN C. NUGENT



Great Lakes
Christian College

Pamphlet #1

Restoration Appreciation
Week 2016

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Great Lakes Christian College
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www.glcc.edu

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Preface

Great Lakes Christian College proudly embraces our heritage in the Restoration Movement and desires to celebrate that heritage with our constituent churches. Toward that end, in November of 2016, we launched GLCC's first annual "Restoration Appreciation Week." Our purpose was to foster awareness and appreciation for the Restoration Movement among our students, staff, alumni, and affiliated churches.

Our inaugural Restoration Appreciation Week had two major components. The first focused on our students. Though all GLCC graduates take our Restoration History class, we wanted to raise awareness among those who would not be with us all four years. So during Tuesday chapel, on November 1, Dr. Lloyd Knowles (Professor of History) painted the big picture of what the Restoration Movement is all about. He furnished important historical background and highlighted what is so great about our Movement. We also hosted an evening celebration in which students played a trivia game based on Lloyd's chapel message, broke bread together, and interacted with three GLCC alumni who shared insightful personal experiences within the Restoration Movement. Those who joined us include Sarah Johnson (Bangor Church of Christ), Todd Jones (Comstock Church of Christ), and Jordan Kellicut (Oakland Drive Christian Church).

The second component, which also included students, focused on alumni and all interested affiliated congregations. On Friday,

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during chapel, Dr. John Nugent (Professor of Old Testament) discussed the future of the Restoration Movement. Having observed that our churches are growing forgetful about our roots and confused about our unique calling, he made a compelling case for why we need a new and fresh wave of Restorationism. Following his presentation, we packed out Woodard Hall in the Administration building for a complimentary lunch and extended discussion about the future of our Movement, particularly in and around Michigan. The conversation was lively, engaging, and encouraging.

Participation in this event far exceeded GLCC's expectations. We also received extremely positive feedback. Many people who were not able to attend have asked for copies of our two main presentations. Several churches have also expressed interest in copies that they might use for congregational instruction. Based on this interest, we decided to create and distribute this pamphlet. In bringing together our two main presentations in print form, we hope to continue the important conversations that began last fall and to encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ to join us in proudly embracing our shared Restoration heritage.

What's So Great about the Restoration Movement?

Lloyd A. Knowles

I INTEND to keep this introductory presentation simple and focused. A few of you could expound a significant amount upon the history and purpose of what has been called The Restoration Movement. Some of you may be able to recite a small amount of information about it. But I'm confident that most of you know virtually nothing about the Movement, even if you're from a church that has its roots in the Stone-Campbell tradition. In this presentation, I will list, explain, and occasionally illustrate the four (or five) guiding principles or "slogans" historically advocated by the Movement's founders and four main progenitors.

AMERICAN AND BIBLICAL ORIGINS

Shortly after the American Revolution, Americans were looking for things to bring them together in political unity and religious syncretism (the blending of differing belief systems). In the late 18th century, the various Christian denominations that were planted in the colonies—often called "sects" in those days—were exclusive in their doctrines and contentious with each other. Many argued that they were "the true church," uniquely ordained by God. I've seen this in my lifetime, too. In the 1950s and 1960s,

different groups were saying, “We’re right and you’re wrong,” with some of them boldly crowing, “Therefore you’re going to hell and we’ll be the only ones in heaven.”

This generation doesn’t like that belief and attitude, and I applaud that. These days we have the feeling of evangelical unity because we all believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ—that he came as the incarnate Son of God to Earth, lived and died for our sins, resurrected and ascended to heaven, and is coming back for us some day. Those are the essential facts of the gospel.

That’s what “The Restoration Movement” is about. It began because many people were asking, “Can’t we all agree on something? Something central? Something around which we can have a basic unity?” So in 1800 a concordat was agreed upon by the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists to call a truce in their bickering over various interpretations of doctrinal issues and to join together in evangelizing the “frontier” (over the Appalachian Mountains, especially in Kentucky and Tennessee). Preachers from different denominations simply focused on presenting the message of the gospel itself. They stood on wagons and even tree stumps shouting the good news to all who gathered around to listen. Thus began what has been termed “The Second Great Awakening” or “The Great Revival” in America.¹

Let me ask you a personal question: If you knew you were terminally ill and in the final moments of your life, what would you want to say before you die? You would probably express your greatest concerns, the ones that are and have been most prominent in your mind. My dad died in July of 2015, and my mom followed in December of the same year. But when my dad died, he was lucid to the end. And what he uttered to my brother in his dying words was nothing trivial; it was in the forefront of his mind. He passionately expressed, “I’m glad God gave us you boys. We’ve been so

1. See John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1972).

grateful for you both.” That’s consistent with what he had assured us of regularly: “We pray for you every night.”

John 17 records the last prayer that Jesus ever said on earth. Now, understand the significance of this: he didn’t say something akin to, “Don’t forget to get milk and bread on the way home.” His final prayer was an earnest request: “I pray for them, Father. I’m not praying for the world, but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours and all you have is mine and the glory has come to me through them. I will remain in this world no longer, but they are still in this world and I am coming to you, Holy Father. Protect them by the power of your name, the name which you gave me so that they may be one as we are one.” That’s recorded in John 17:9-11. And then, in verses 20 and 21, Jesus further elaborated, “My prayer is not for them alone [i.e., his disciples]. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message [the ones who come after], that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.”

Now the question I’m supposed to deal with is, “What’s so great about the Restoration Movement?” The Restoration Movement emerged from numerous different churches. Many of the great leaders were Presbyterians. Some were Baptists. Others—including one major leader—were Methodist. Becoming frustrated with their pursuit of the true church “authorized” by God and disenchanted with the plethora of denominations claiming exclusively to be that church, they sought to find a “pattern” for the church that would satisfy their spiritual hunger. The result was expressed in two basic pleas (or goals), which they came to emphasize. The first was unity, and the second was restoration of the New Testament template for the ideal church in its principles and practices. The former would be accomplished through adherence to the latter.

OUR POLAR STAR

A Presbyterian minister named Barton W. Stone was the first of the “Big Four” to propagate the Restoration Movement. He preached at a little church in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, which to this day is still a rather isolated place in the hills, but which was destined to become the site of the largest gathering during the “The Great Revival.” Since Jesus requested the unity of his followers, Stone concluded and emphasized that unity should be our goal among the churches, the body of Christ on earth. Stone therefore created the motto, “Let unity be our polar star.” Now the polar star, Polaris or the North Star, is important and unique since it is the only one that appears not to move at night. It is always positioned in the north sky, whereas other stars seem to rotate indiscriminately in the heavens.

Years ago, when they were in elementary school, I taught my boys that if they were ever lost in the daytime, they should locate the sun and remember that it rises in the east and sets in the west. It can therefore help them establish where they were and which way to go. “However,” I would often say, “If it is nighttime you have an equal help (if it’s not cloudy), and that is the North Star. So if you ever are lost, just find the North Star.” I then taught them how to locate it using the Big Dipper as a pointer.

Once in a while, I would take my boys out in our backyard and ask, “Where’s the North Star?” Each time they very confidently and correctly identified, “It’s right there, Dad!” I reaffirmed, “That’s right. That’s the one. As we look at the heavens, which never seems to move; it’s always in the north, ok?”

One day when we went camping on a beautiful, star-studded night, I asked them again, “Boys, isn’t God’s creation beautiful? All those stars?”

“Yeah!” they obligingly, but appreciatively conceded.

I said, “Ok, where’s the North Star?” With a perplexed look, both confessed that they didn’t know. So I said, “Come on, you’ve told me this many times.”

“Yeah,” they admitted, “but it’s always between the Richards’ two trees!” (The Richards are our neighbors.)

During slavery days and the efforts of the Underground Railroad, the North Star was critical to the safety of escaping slaves who could only travel at night. They sang a song that instructed them to “Follow the Drinkin’ Gourd” (the Big Dipper). They kept their focus on that guide in hopes of finding freedom. That’s what Barton Stone was trying to express in his summons to find accord: “Let unity be our Polar Star”—our ultimate guide.

In 1801, the biggest occasion of the Great Revival took place at Cane Ridge. Historians estimate that attendees numbered between 10,000 and 30,000 people. But who could count them? They had huge camp meetings with tents and campfires all over the hill-sides. The leaders certainly didn’t say, “Line up and number off!” Participants likened the scene to a host of fireflies in July. They compared the noise to “the roar of Niagara” [Falls]—somewhat similar, I imagine, to the sound made in a large stadium today. Bear in mind, the biggest city west of the Appalachians at that time was Lexington, and its population was only about 7,000. Those of us who have been to Stone’s little church on the site realize that this was a truly great outdoor event, one in which God’s people were attempting to accomplish unity in Jesus Christ.

FOUR SLOGANS

I’m approached quite often by people who ask me what the Church of Christ/Christian Church “believes” or what the Restoration Movement is all about. With the typical limited time that I have to respond, I usually list and explain our four guiding principles:

1. “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, love.”

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2. “Where the Bible speaks, we speak. Where the Bible is silent, we are silent.”
3. “We have no creed but Christ, and no book but the Bible.”
4. “We are not the only Christians; we are Christians only.”

When I have finished briefly describing these slogans, people typically respond with evaluative statements such as, “I like those ideas.” If they have more time, they often request that I explain more about the Restoration Movement. Today I have that privilege of expounding upon these slogans.

“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty;
and in all things, love”

This statement emphasizes that in essentials for salvation we should have unity. In the early days, these “essentials” revolved around believing the facts of the gospel, which virtually all churches already held in common. Even today when someone comes forward to be baptized into Christ we ask him or her, “Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, your personal Lord and Savior?” We add nothing further to the question. We do not ask them whether they are pre-millennialists or post-millennialists. Our focus is not on what they believe, but in whom.

No matter how strongly we may feel about them, the non-essentials category has often included our chosen avenues of missionary support, the role of women in the church, the style of music we use in worship, the frequency of communion, and whether to use instruments or not. Those are matters of opinion, not salvation! Therefore, excluding issues plainly condemned in the Bible, we can exist as separate entities and still regard each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. However, the more we expand the essentials category to include what are nonessentials, like barnacles attaching themselves to a ship, the less hope we will have for a catholic brotherhood.

Somewhat recently the Restoration Movement was evaluated by a man named Richard Tristano, a Roman Catholic at the Glenmary Research Institute in Georgia. One of their purposes is to study and publish facts and figures regarding church memberships and attendance. In his study of the "Independent Christian Churches, Tristano admitted to being somewhat impressed with one unique feature of the Movement. Among other things, he acknowledged that our first principle ("in essentials unity") advocates syncretism in an age that is desperately seeking it, while also allowing for diversity ("in non-essentials"), which is becoming increasingly more prevalent in this country and others.

On the frontier at that time, Calvinistic theology dominated, as one man put it, "like a heavy clog," causing many people to implore God every Sunday to reveal to them that they are among the elect who are predestined for eternal salvation. The incipient Restoration Movement countered such a theology of salvation with a sort of Arminian doctrine of the free will of all, advocating that God offers grace to everyone who will respond in faith. He does not confine his offer to any single denomination or group.

Simply illustrated, let's pretend that we were out exploring somewhere and got caught in quicksand and were going down. Now imagine that there's a friend with us and a tree limb hanging over the top of the bog. The friend quickly climbs the tree, extends his arm down, and offers to save us. By way of analogy, that's the extension of God's grace. In order to be saved, we would need to reach up and grab his hand. Now, if God extends his grace and we don't reach up to grab it, we're going down into the quicksand. Or, if we are shouting, "Help! Help!" but there's nobody up there, we're going down into the quicksand. Salvation requires a combination of both the offer and the response. The Restoration alternative developed and promoted five or six basic responses to God's offer of grace:

1. We must learn the tenets of the gospel. That's vital. So we need to preach the gospel and not something else first. This means

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we are gravely mistaken if we preach baptism first. Baptism for what? Because of our emphasis on the act of baptism, some have tagged us with the nomenclature of being “water regenerationists.” If baptism itself saved people, then I’d go out to GLCC’s soccer field and, with the help of the soccer team, grab anybody who jogged by and drag them to the lake and dunk them. But then we would just have wet people because they wouldn’t know why they were dunked (cf. Rom 10:14-15).

2. It is imperative that we believe what we’ve heard: that Jesus is the Christ, our personal Lord and Savior (cf. Acts 16:30-31; John 8:24).
3. We must repent of our sins (cf. Luke 13:3; Acts 2:37-39).
4. We need to confess Jesus as Lord (cf. Matt 10:32-33; Rom 10:9-10).
5. We are to be baptized in the name of Jesus or the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:37-39; Rom 6:3-5; Matt 28:19).
6. We endure to the end in our faith and commitment (cf. Matt 10:22; 24:13).

On my first Sunday in an interim ministry years ago, I remember baptizing a person and somebody who knew her well saying to me, “You know what? I think she was just getting ‘fire insurance.’” Time proved that she didn’t really understand why she was being baptized. Even though I conducted a follow-up visit with her, after a week or two she drifted away from the church.

“Where the Bible speaks, we speak and where the Bible is silent, we are silent”

The second major pioneer of the Restoration Movement was an Old Light, Anti-Berger, Seceder, Presbyterian named Thomas Campbell. After a failed attempt to break down the divisions

within his own denomination in Northern Ireland, he came to America in 1807. As an irenic spirit, he sought unity among Christians, deploring the many argumentative sects that existed within the church, whether in the “old world” or his new one. He soon became a persona non grata within his presbytery for advocating non-sectarianism. They ostracized him for offering communion to a non-Seceder who was not of his specific branch of the Presbyterian Church. After submitting an apologetic for his actions to The Christian Association of Washington, Pennsylvania (where he advocated the above slogan), he expanded his sentiments in the fall of 1809 in his Declaration and Address, which is often considered the most important document in our Movement. It has three critical proposals which helped define the emerging Restoration Movement:

1. That the Church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one. It includes everyone in any place who professes trust and obedience to Christ in all matters according to the Scriptures; and who demonstrates such in character and conduct. No one else can be called a Christian.
2. Although the Church of Christ on earth exists in different locations, there should be no divisions among congregations. Each congregation should receive each other as Christ Jesus has. That would manifest God’s character before all.
3. In order to carry this out, nothing should be forced upon Christians except what is clearly taught in the Word of God.

At the meeting of the Washington Presbytery, a man named Andrew Munro challenged his proposals saying, “Mr. Campbell, if we adopt that as a basis, then there is an end of infant baptism.” Campbell responded, “Of course, if infant baptism be not found in Scripture, we can have nothing to do with it.” Then another man named Thomas Acheson stood up and, laying his hand on his heart in a melodramatic demeanor, opined, “I hope I may never see the day when my heart will renounce that blessed saying of the

Scripture, ‘Suffer [the] little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of Heaven.’” He then “burst into tears” and started to leave the room when Mr. James Foster cried out, “Mr. Acheson, I would remark that in the portion of Scripture you have quoted there is no reference, whatever, to infant baptism.” The scene ended when Thomas Acheson left the room to weep alone.²

Incidentally, I was standing in a parking lot one day and saw a little green tract on the ground. It was entitled “What the Bible Says about Infant Baptism.” With curiosity, I opened it only to find it completely blank inside. The only printing on it was the name of the publisher on the back.

The third major protagonist of the Restoration Movement, and almost universally recognized as the most influential one, was Thomas’s eldest son Alexander Campbell, who journeyed with the rest of Thomas’s family to join him in western Pennsylvania in 1809. After attempting the voyage in 1808 and being involved in a shipwreck due to a bad storm and some drunken sailors, Alexander spent the rest of that year attending the University of Glasgow. While there, he broke with the Presbyterian Church in a disagreement over the issue of closed communion; they allowed only approved members with tokens to partake of it.

When Thomas and his son Alexander finally rejoined each other, there must have been a tense and dramatic scene with each one trying to discern how to break the news of his “apostasy” to the other. I can picture them at last confessing it to each other with both of them perhaps laughing cathartically and asserting, “I can’t believe we both did this at the same time.” And why? Because they both believed sectarianism was wrong and they just wanted to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where it is silent.

2. Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell: Embracing a View of the Origin, Progress and Principles of the Religious Reformation which He Advocated*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1897), 238.

In 1811, Alexander married a young lady named Margaret Brown. They had a little daughter named Jane and, as was the common practice from their background traditions, they were going to take her to be sprinkled. But some of his Baptist friends exhorted him to study the biblical position regarding the candidate, the mode, and the purpose of baptism. After an intense study, Alexander concluded that the Presbyterian practice was unauthorized by Scripture. He not only called off Jane's baptism, but he and Margaret chose to be immersed upon their confessions of faith. In 1820 and 1823, he accepted challenges to debate this issue with two Presbyterians: John Walker and W. L. Maccalla.

When Alexander told his father what they determined to do, Thomas was at first reticent to approve of it, fearing that the act might injure any hopes they still held for unity with their Presbyterian friends. But when Alexander and Jane stopped by—on the day scheduled for Baptist preacher, Matthew Luce, to immerse them in Buffalo Creek—he was surprised to learn that his father, mother, and sister would join them in baptism. Out of concern for his Presbyterian friends, however, Thomas wrote a letter assuring them that he was doing this out of obedience to the Bible and not to “de-Christianize” them.

“No Creed but Christ, No Book but the Bible”

Among the different creeds propagated by the sects were the Augsburg Confession, the Westminster Confession and, most closely related to the Campbells, the Philadelphia Confession of Faith. The Campbells believed that, whereas the Bible was infallibly inspired by the Holy Spirit, creeds promoted division, not unity. They are man-made interpretations of the Bible used to define who is in and who is out.

I had a professor in college, Dr. Buford Bryant, who offered this opinion about creeds: “If you have a creed that says less than the Bible, you haven't said enough. If it says more than the Bible,

you've said too much. But if it says the same thing as the Bible, you don't need it; you have the Bible." That statement was simple, yet profound. Only the Bible is God-inspired—not the Book of Mormon, not Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, not the Koran, Upanishads, or Bhagavad Gita, none of those—only the Bible is authoritative.

“We’re not the only Christians, we’re Christians only”

As one of Alexander Campbell's colleagues originally worded it, “We are Christians who are simply Christians.” But we are Christians only in that we're not exclusivists claiming to be the only ones going to heaven. God has not assigned any of us the task of determining who's going to heaven and who's going to hell. And I'm grateful for that. I wouldn't want the job, and I'm not capable of doing it. But I have faith that God is completely capable of it because “man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Besides, such an approach in witnessing doesn't work very well, especially with someone who has dedicated his or her whole life to serving Christ.

I remember when everyone at Great Lakes was invited to participate in a weekend revival in Sault Ste. Marie. During the day, each one of us was encouraged to go out and witness to anyone we met in town while our choir sang from an alley. In the evening, we gathered at the church for a revival service. During one of those days, I was walking down the sidewalk when I overheard one of our students talking to a very wobbly, slurring drunk man. I heard the drunk man inquire of the student, “Ok, but who are you? What group are you part of?”

The young man answered, “Well, I'm just a Christian.”

The drunk responded, “I know that, and I'm one too, but I want to know what denomination are you?”

Again, the student repeated sincerely, “I'm just a Christian.”

When I finally arrived at where they were standing, the young man introduced me by saying, “Oh, well, here’s one of my professors. Maybe he can help.”

The drunk eyeballed me for a second or two and began with, “Okay, good. This guy doesn’t seem to understand what I’m asking. I’m asking, “What group are you? What denomination?”

And I said, “Oh, well, I’m just a Christian.”

Somewhat frustrated he persisted, “Oh, I know, but look,” and then he gestured back and forth with his hands as if he were going to help me understand, “I’m a Catholic, you’re a . . .?”

After intentionally giving time for a dramatic pause, I then leaned forward as if I were going to tell him a secret and pointedly asserted the word “Christian!”

He just rolled his eyes up as if to say toward heaven, “Lord, help them understand me someday.”

NUMERICAL GROWTH

Finally, I want to share with you some numbers concerning the growth of the Movement. In 1827, a Scottish immigrant named Walter Scott was chosen to serve as the Evangelist of the Mahoning Association, concentrating first on the Northeast area of Ohio. Scott is the last of the “Big Four” names I wanted to share with you: Barton Stone, Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell, and Walter Scott. The choice of Scott as the Evangelist was somewhat ironic because he hadn’t been a dominant preacher there. He had preached for a few years as a lay preacher in Pittsburg, but he wasn’t a dominant preacher there either. He was a teacher by trade, and he wasn’t a member of the Mahoning Association. He wasn’t even (what they were then called) a Reformed Baptist. Frankly, many regarded Sydney Rigdon as the greatest evangelist in the area at the time, but some considered him to be unstable and ambitious. Alexander Campbell thought he saw potential in Scott, and so recommended him to the Association for the position.

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Scott began by deciding that the “lynchpin” of his preaching was going to be the Good Confession of Matthew 16:16: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” He focused on it for a few sermons with only a moderate amount of success, which confounded him. So he went home for a little bit of rest and evaluation. What he finally realized was that on the frontier, Calvinism was still dominant and people were waiting for God to reveal them as being of the elect. They weren’t really sure that Scott’s message was right.

For example, a man named Adamson Bentley agonized over the souls of his kids:

I used to take my little children on my knee, and look upon them as they played in harmless innocence about me, and wonder which of them was to be finally and forever lost! (by Predestination). It cannot be that God has been so good to me as to elect all my children! No, no! I am myself a miracle of mercy, and it cannot be that God has been kinder to me than to all other parents. Some of these (i.e. his own children) must be of the non-elect, and will be finally banished from God and all good. And now, if I only knew which one of my children were to dwell in everlasting burnings, oh! how kind and tender would I be to them, knowing that all the comfort they would ever experience would be here in this world!³

In November of 1827, Scott was invited to preach a series in New Lisbon, Ohio. At around the same time, there was a man named William Amend who was considered to be one of the most influential men of the town and who had been studying the book of Acts. After reading Acts 2:38, he excitedly proclaimed to his wife that this is what he had been searching for: a passage in the Bible where it would tell him that he could affect his own salvation instead of remaining a passive pawn to be chosen as one of God’s elect. He then informed his wife that if he ever heard a man preach this passage—“Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins,

3. Amos Sutton Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio* (Cincinnati: Chase & Hall, 1875), 103.

and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”—he would go forward in response. This is precisely what happened after he learned that Walter Scott was going to preach from it. This event, and the controversy surrounding this “new” message, set off an explosion of Bible reading and debate in the town. On the following Sunday, seventeen more people were baptized.

Soon after, Scott was invited to preach in an ever increasing number of evangelistic meetings, which also resulted in many responses. On January 18, 1828, one especially fruitful meeting yielded a harvest of over fifty people joining the young Restoration Movement. This occasion later came to be known as “The Siege of Warren” (in Ohio). Scott continued to focus his messages on Acts 2:38, even inventing a “Five Finger Exercise” to show kids on playgrounds.⁴ He encouraged these children to go home and tell their parents that it would be the topic of his preaching at the town church that evening. For the next thirty years, Scott was credited with baptizing a thousand people into Christ every year.

In 1832, Campbell’s “Disciples of Christ” from Western Pennsylvania (represented by “Raccoon” John Smith) and Barton Stone’s “Christian Churches” in Kentucky held a series of preaching meetings together, and both liked what they heard from each other. So they shook hands and, in this informal but lasting way, their two groups united. At that time, the two groups together numbered around 25,000 participants. Of course, statistics vary depending on the source. But the traditional estimates of the growth of the Restoration Movement are astounding no matter how much they differ. By 1865, only one generation later, there were about 200,000 adherents. How many of us would like our churches to grow eightfold in a generation? By 1875, only ten years later, the Movement had doubled to 400,000. By 1900, the statistics tripled to 1,120,000. It had become the fastest growing religious body indigenous to America. Today there are roughly 3,600,000

4. The five fingers point to faith, repentance, baptism, remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

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descendants of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement—despite some regrettable splits that ironically have taken place in a Movement that emphasizes unity.

What tremendous growth that was! And it was wrought mainly by people wanting to be Christians only, unifying in the essentials, agreeing to disagree on the non-essentials, and restoring original New Testament principles and practices—a simple movement, but a very dynamic one!

Why We Need a New Wave of Restorationism

John C. Nugent

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 and 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—was passing around during Restoration Appreciation Week. It says, "Make the Restoration Movement Great Again." Since this is a feat that only God can accomplish, let us begin by 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

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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.

IDENTITY CRISIS

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 was sent to all participants saying,

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 and

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

If I were to boil down this list 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 Christian 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 be more conservative theologically and ecclesologically. The Disciples tend to be more liberal.

This left the Independent Christian Churches 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 an exceptionally 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 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 rear view, 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

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leaders. And now that unity and interchurch cooperation are 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.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

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 multid denominational professional societies, our pastors attend multid denominational conferences, our members frequent multid denominational 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 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.

WEIGHING THE OPTIONS

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 Independent Christian Churches. 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 the most 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.

Here I explore two elements of what a new wave of restorationism might entail: identity and locality. I submit these not as final answers or ultimate solutions, but as points for reflection and further discussion.

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 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."

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. His command of church tradition and philosophy, on the other hand, 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 participants 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

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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.⁵

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. I cannot tell you how many Independent Christian Church pastors and scholars bend over backward 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.

LOCALITY

The second element that a new wave of restoration must take seriously is locality. The Restoration Movement is not a denomination.

5. Available at <http://d1swb5ay1qopxo.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/EP-pamphlet-22.pdf>

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 wish 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 requires that we

leave behind the vision of leadership and community cast by the New Testament, which assumes small and simple congregations.

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. Churches down south should support Lake James Christian 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 desires to plant churches, they should partner with New Churches of Christ Evangelism. Do you value the conference environment? Bring a group from your church to the Michigan Christian Convention and take your youth to GLCC's Fusion and Michigan Statewide. And, please, communicate enough not to

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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, 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? Is it not the devil?

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

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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.

