

In Search of Truth
A History of the Restoration Movement
“Darkening Horizons”
January 14, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

The Restoration Movement began as an effort to get back to the Bible, to throw off the creeds of denominationalism and to unite all believers in Christ on the simple commands of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Since the days of Roman Catholicism, this had been an effort that motivated the hearts of many, many men and women, in many different countries on at least two different continents.

After the Civil War in America, the number of disciples that were pursuing the restoration movement was numbered at half a million. But the devil saw too many of his followers being lost to this effort and he enticed men to put their opinions and beliefs and traditions back into the place of the commands of Christ. As we saw last week, a denomination had now formed from the restoration movement. I am calling them a denomination in the sense that many now believed that for all intents and purposes, they could do what they wanted to do in the name of Christ without having a command from Christ, without having a “thus says the Lord,” to use the parlance of the Hebrew prophets. That denomination was the Christian Church, frequently identified as the “independent Christian Church” as they will become distinct from the Disciples of Christ denomination which will develop its own denominational hierarchy. We will largely leave the Christian Church and the Disciples of Christ in our study of the “search for truth” because those two groups largely abandoned the search for truth in the pursuit of pleasure and/or unity. We will touch on the two only as their history touches on the churches of Christ.

E. G. SEWELL:

I have spoken frequently of David Lipscomb and the *Gospel Advocate* but I want to illustrate the times by giving a brief history of a co-worker of Lipscomb named E. G. Sewell. Sewell was born in Overton County, TN in 1830. The Sewells were all Baptists. The oldest Sewell son, William, was converted from the Baptists and married a Christian. Here's is something about how it happened... Sewell attended worship with his wife and eventually started taking the Lord's Supper with them. That was a heresy for his Baptist family and folks. He went on trial before the Wolf River Baptist Church association. At his trial, William raised his NT in one hand and the confession of faith of the Baptist Church in the other and asked by which he would be tried. That is a fair question. The Baptists were divided but Sewell was voted out of the Baptist Church.

The younger brothers were disturbed at Sewell's behavior but it did motivate one of the brothers, Jesse, apparently the next oldest brother, to search the Scriptures and was converted. Then two more sons, Isaac and Caleb were converted and then the whole family was converted except Elisha, or “E. G.” as he is better known. At 19 years old, E. G. started reading his NT and his older brother, Jesse, baptized him into Christ.

E. G. studied at Franklin College under Tolbert Fanning and William Lipscomb and at 40 years old, he joined David Lipscomb as editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, where he would serve for the next 50 years. In the 1880s, E. G. was instrumental in starting the Woodland Street Christian Church in East Nashville. He preached there for a dozen years and was also one of the elders. Some members of the congregation decided they wanted to participate in the TN state missionary society. E. G. was against the society and encouraged the group to abandon that idea. But, the group persisted until E. G. and those who disagreed with the society withdrew and started the Tenth Street Church of Christ in 1890.

That story could be retold numerous times during the decades of the 70s, 80s, and 90s as individual congregations reflected on a small scale what was happening to the brotherhood on a larger scale.

1865-1885:

A national census was taken in 1870 and it ranked the churches of Christ / Christian Church as fifth in size with 2,822 local congregations. By 1880, just in the state of Michigan, there were 75 congregations with 49 preachers and a total of 6,000 members. Now, just for a point of comparison, according to the directory of churches of Christ in the US published in 2015, there are now 183 congregations in Michigan and 25,700 members, 135 years later. The numbers are better from the perspective that the 1880 numbers include Christian Churches while the 2015 numbers include only the churches of Christ.

In 1880, the centers of strength for Christians were in IL, KY, IN, MO, and OH. At that time, it seems that the largest congregation in the brotherhood was the Fourth and Walnut Street Church in Louisville, KY which had an attendance of 800.

I'm not going to spend time detailing the growth in all the states but just some information on Michigan. In 1874, Grand Rapids had about twenty members but Detroit obviously had the largest, being the earliest. In August of 1842, Alexander Linn came to Detroit from Glasgow, Scotland. He found a Thomas Hawley worshiping and Linn joined them and they began worshiping together after the ancient order of things. In 1869, the Plum Street Church was organized with 30 members. By 1882, Plum Street had 300 members, without a full-time preacher.

At this point, again, the major publications in the brotherhood were *The Gospel Advocate*, *The Christian Standard*, *American Christian Review*, and the *Apostolic Times*. Other papers would be started and largely remaining local, would fade away. More Christian colleges would be started and would eventually close their doors. But, there was still lots of activity going on during this time, despite the painful division that was going on.

The brotherhood also decided to print commentaries on books of the Bible, largely focusing on the NT. J. W. McGarvey had already written his commentary on Acts. He would also write one on Matthew & Mark. Robert Milligan would write one on Hebrews. J. S. Lamar, whom I have not previously mentioned, would write one on Luke.

Lamar had been a lawyer but was converted by a graduate of Franklin College and then attended Bethany College. Lamar would be a supporter of the missionary society. Lamar wrote a book in 1860 called *The Organon of Scripture* in which he tried to apply Baconian logical thinking to the interpretation of Scripture. I have not read the book but it sounds like Lamar put into print and systematized the grammatical-critical method of Bible interpretation which I probably follow even today. Lamar had a son named Joseph Rucker Lamar who was appointed as an associate chief justice of the USSC by President William Howard Taft. Among the four Gospels, the commentary on John would remain unwritten until Guy N. Woods wrote it in the 20th century. I've also mentioned that Moses Lard wrote a commentary on the letter of Romans.

DARKENING HORIZONS:

Before we move into the next great controversy that challenged Christians' "search for truth," let us ask the question, why did churches in the south remain true to the biblical pattern and reject the missionary society and instrumental music while churches in the north, speaking in general, accepted the missionary society and instrumental music? Well, it was largely due to

the source of their influence. The south was influenced heavily by Tolbert Fanning, David Lipscomb and *The Gospel Advocate*, while the churches in the north were influenced by the *Christian Standard* and Isaac Errett. You remember that the *American Christian Review* was edited by Benjamin Franklin and they held the same position as the *Gospel Advocate*. But, Benjamin Franklin had passed away and the editorship had passed to a man that did not have the keen mind as John Rowe.

In one fateful article, Rowe published a list of ten things on which the Scriptures were silent and charged that the *Christian Standard* was promoting these ten things and causing division within the brotherhood. Of course, two of those ten items were the missionary society and instrumental music. But, Rowe made a fateful mistake and included *Bible School Quarterlies*. Bible School Quarterlies, and you may be familiar with the Gospel Advocate quarterlies, are just lesson materials to help the Bible class teacher teach the Gospel. I'm not a big fan of them because I would prefer to develop my own lessons. But, there is nothing wrong with them. But Rowe did not agree with them and he forfeited his entire argument because he could not see something different between instrumental music and Bible class material.

But Isaac Errett was shrewd and crafty and, rather than arguing biblically for instrumental music, he weakened Rowe's position by arguing that Bible school quarterlies could not, surely, be wrong! Errett pounded Rowe's position mercilessly and unthinking brethren too often accepted Errett's defense of the Bible School Quarterlies as a defense for the missionary society and the instrumental music in worship.

Let me state the Scriptures on these matters simply but briefly. The Bible commands *churches* to evangelize, under the leadership of their elderships. The "how" of evangelism is through the churches. The Bible commands Christians to make music with their voices, teaching and encouraging one another. That's the "how" of making music in worship. Those are specific commands, specific instructions. But when it comes to "how" to teach, Jesus has not gotten any more specific than to teach the Gospel. So, having pre-made lesson plans *if they are biblically accurate* is as acceptable biblically as writing one's own lessons.

Rowe found himself backed into a corner and called for a brotherhood wide meeting to address these concerns. Well, what do you have now? You have an anti-missionary society brother, editor of a paper, calling for a convention to condemn innovations, among which are - conventions! That weakened the whole influence of *The American Christian Review*, which led to many churches in the north siding with *The Christian Standard* and, as a side note, Benjamin Franklin's son, Joseph, was influenced to choose sides with the digressives. What all this shows is that we need to make sure that we examine all controversial subjects on an individual basis and make sure that we are accurately examining each one in the light of NT teaching and the clear commands of Jesus Christ.

Once again, and you may feel like I am beating a dead horse, at the end of the 19th century, we have division on several fronts: the missionary society and the instrument in worship are the two big issues. Other issues that played a role in the division was the "pastor" concept in which one man, the preacher, had control over the congregation rather than the biblically patterned eldership, the question of "open membership" - that is, anyone who claims to be a Christian *is* a Christian, whether immersed or not for whatever reason, and the question of the silence of the Scriptures.

If you remember, the whole *impetus* of the restoration plea, the search for Truth, was to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible was silent. That led the early reformers to leave denominational churches with their creeds and doctrines, and

commandments of men, and go back to the Scriptures for the commandments of Jesus Christ. But in these issues, 100 years later, many preachers, editors, and Christians were abandoning the whole idea that a return to the commandments of Christ was necessary or even possible.

Now, a significant number of Christians, because their hearts were not rooted in strong biblical teaching, were now susceptible to the onslaughts of German higher criticism...

GERMAN HIGHER CRITICISM:

The year 1859 was not just the year that instrumental music was first brought into worship of churches of Christ. It was also the fateful year that Charles Darwin published his earth-shattering *Origin of Species*. Darwin was not the first to try to explain nature without bringing God into the equation but his book did try to give a coherent explanation for *how* evolution without God could have happened. *Evolution* as a broad theory would go on to infiltrate and influence vast areas of human knowledge and study, including religion.

German biblical scholars began by reacting against Calvinism, specifically that idea that faith is a miraculous gift from God. There had to be an intellectual component to faith. That motivated them to give a strong focus to the role that men played in Christianity and the role that men played in transmitting the message, both OT and NT, to other men. Well, we all believe that God used man to write the Scriptures but the German critics started focusing solely on the role man played and eventually began leaving God out entirely.

You can see how this focus on “man / the individual” led many people to over-emphasize the concept of “liberty.” We all have the liberty to interpret the Scriptures the way we want and that means we have the liberty to create our own churches the way we want. They moved beyond Calvinism but they also moved beyond any systematic presentation of the Gospel, even if that systematic presentation is actually biblical, like the plan of salvation.

Jesus Himself, as the Master and Savior, was too narrow-minded for this mentality. It was sufficient for them that He was a good man and He went about doing good. This is the essence of the so-called “social gospel” and the idea of “social justice.” To these people, the concept of Christianity is bound up completely and entirely in doing good for other people. The plan of salvation is not a pattern to follow. The organization of the church is not a pattern to follow. The avenues of worship is not a pattern to follow. “Christianity’s calling was to express God’s compassion, promote the moral and material improvement of societies as well as individuals, and extend the benefits of...faith and modern Christian civilization around the globe,” (S-C E, 474).

Evolution contributed to the study of comparative religions and these scholars decided that the Jewish religion was not really any different, maybe a little different in forms, but no different in substance from other ancient near eastern religions. That led them to reject the truth of miracles; people only *thought* they were miraculous. If there are no miracles, then, there is no prophecy. The book of Daniel was dated during the Greek Empire, not the Babylonian Empire because if Daniel had lived during the Babylonian Empire as the text says, then he would have predicted future events. But, since Daniel could not have predicted future events, then he could not have lived during the Babylonian Empire. The same reasoning motivated scholars to break up the book of Isaiah into at least two parts but generally three parts. Zechariah is also broken up: Zechariah, Deutero-Zechariah, and Trito-Zechariah.

Evolution motivated people to believe that men *evolved* into being monotheistic. They did not start out as monotheistic as the Bible says. Men were polytheistic as they tried to explain nature around them, they attributed various actions to various gods. But eventually the Jews became monotheistic and then someone put together the book of Genesis to try and

explain how and why the Israelites were monotheistic. Unfortunately, most of these views are the standard view in most theological schools today and, because of that, these views are making inroads in our Christian schools. The views are not at FHU, Faulkner, or Harding, as far as I know, but they are in some of our Christian schools, to some degree.

I have briefly mentioned before that these ideas spurred by German higher criticism made its inroad into the Restoration Movement through the Disciples Divinity House established as a Bible Chair at the University of Chicago and eminently through James H. Garrison's son, Winfred Garrison.

Man has always been tempted to make himself fit his cultural context, to please men, so that he will not feel isolated and alone. Remember what Paul wrote in Galatians 1:10: "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ."

The Disciples Divinity House was established in 1894 to instruct preachers beyond the Bachelor's degree, using scientific and historical methods, apply theological reasoning to modern society, and cultivate a self-consciously Disciples community in academically high-level ecumenical theological institutions. Today, besides the University of Chicago, the Disciples of Christ denomination also have a divinity house at Vanderbilt University, originally a Methodist-oriented university.

I will not pursue the Disciples Divinity House but only insofar as it relates to the churches of Christ and our history. But German higher criticism, largely through the Disciples Divinity House, contributed significantly to the division between the Disciples of Christ and the (independent) Christian Church. That will happen officially by the 1960s and I will not get into those details as we pursue our studies.

But, we will build on this knowledge next week as we examine how the churches of Christ responded to this approach to the Scriptures.

Next week: "The Prophets of Liberalism"