

Where Are We Headed?

Introduction. The stated purpose of the Protestant Reformation was to reform Catholicism, but it was a failure. Since the days of Luther, Catholicism remains basically the same. However, the reformers accomplished good along with the evil. Evil came in the establishment of religious organizations unknown to the New Testament. Good came from the increased emphasis placed on Bible authority. The close of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries were marked by an intense spiritual fervor and a great revival of interest in religion. Good men and women were beginning to ask questions and to ponder the seriousness of religious division. An earnest desire began to arise to "restore the ancient order."

The Restoration Movement was launched on four basic principles: (1) The acknowledgement of the New Testament as the only authoritative rule of faith and practice; (2) renunciation of all human creeds; (3) the restoration of the apostolic or New Testament concept of the church; and, (4) the union of all Christians upon the basis of truth -- the Bible.

When Christians survey the state of churches of Christ now, they experience something very different. What were the influences that drew us together in those days? Just as there were some factors that pulled us together, so there have been some influences that have produced change among us. What are these? We can study them and be encouraged in the faith.

I. **Where We Were**

A. Distinctive preaching.

1. Perhaps no other activity fashioned and formed us, made us distinct from the world, distinguished us from denominationalism, and strengthened our resolve more than straightforward biblical preaching (2 Timothy 4:1-2). Members of the church knew what they believed and why they believed it. Young people rarely ever grew up in the church and then left to join a denomination.
2. Men are saved by the "foolishness of preaching," not by the "preaching of foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:21). We have an entire generation of young men who know denominational writers and preaching, but they do not know the scriptural basis of New Testament preaching, and it shows in the pulpit as well as in the doctrinal comprehension of many churches.

B. Outside opposition.

1. In the days of the early church, it was said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the kingdom." In other words, the more the church was persecuted, the more it grew (Acts 8:1-4).

2. During the times of the Restoration Movement, some called us "Campbellites," alleging we were followers of Alexander Campbell. Preachers in denominational revivals would poke fun at churches of Christ and amuse their audiences with jokes aimed in our direction.
3. However, when the denominations oppressed us, when the world scoffed at us, and when we had to stand up for what we believed, we were closer, stronger, more zealous, and converted more people. However, there is little reason for us to be persecuted today, and it is manifesting itself in unrighteous ways (cf. 2 Timothy 3:12).

C. Separate identity.

1. The word "church" refers to a "called out" people, and we were striving to be separate from the world. We are "in" the world, but are not "of" the world (John 17:11, 14). Churches of Christ always tried to be "in," but not "of." The old appeal was for people to come out of denominations and be "Christians only" without human creeds, sectarian names, and unscriptural doctrines and practices.
2. In many respects, churches of Christ stood almost alone in the religious world -- no piano, organ, or other instrument in the worship, an emphasis upon the essentiality of baptism as a condition of salvation, and "book, chapter, and verse" preaching that challenged the creeds and doctrines of men. Because of our unique status in the religious world, we tended to stand together, to be united in our efforts, and not to compromise or waver either to the left or to the right.
3. From time to time, there were debates with denominational representatives in which gospel preachers defended the truth face-to-face with their critics. These debates led many to Christ and made the religious world aware of our devotion to the scriptures. The time came when most denominational bodies would not engage us in debate because they could not withstand the truth.

II. **Where We Are**

A. Crisis in the pulpit.

1. Just as there was a time that distinctive preaching rang out from pulpits, so there came a time when the pulpit became soft and generic (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Not much is said from the pulpit that would stir opposition, and this produces a new generation who are not grounded, growing lax and loose in the foundation of their faith.
2. Whereas churches of Christ once stood like a great stone wall against the digressions and innovations of men, one may now find churches of Christ using instrumental music in worship, women taking a leading role in the public assembly, and multiple departures from the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9).

3. We are reaping the harvest of too many decades of indistinct preaching in our pulpits. Brethren should demand this type of distinct preaching. Distinct preaching does not mean being nasty or always running down a denomination (cf. Ephesians 4:15).

B. Material prosperity.

1. The typical American house in 1950 had one floor with 1,000 square feet, two bedrooms, and one bathroom. Nearly half of Americans did not own their homes, and more than a third of homes lacked complete plumbing facilities. We undoubtedly have a higher standard of material possessions now than then.
2. Yet, our material wealth has had consequences. Members of the church join country clubs, play golf with their business associates, and associate with friends at their workplace. These advancements are not wrong within themselves, but there has developed a corresponding desire to "fit in," and not be different. So, some have become uncomfortable with preaching "there is one body" (Ephesians 4:4), or "baptism doth also now save us" (1 Peter 3:21), and therefore doctrinal preaching has receded more and more into the background.
3. Israel was ruled by judges, but they reached the point where they cried out for a king to rule over them (1 Samuel 8:5). They did not want to be different. They just wanted to blend in and be like everyone else. Christians do not have to be harsh or overbearing toward others (Romans 12:18). However, we should not be afraid to "walk in the light" (1 John 1:7), and not compromise our convictions to mimic the world (Titus 2:11-12).

C. Denominational tendencies.

1. There was a time when gospel preachers did not belong to the "ministerial association." They did not participate in "sunrise services" or "unity meetings" with denominational bodies. They did not host "retreats." Now, it is not uncommon to see churches of Christ with the following list of ministers: "Executive Minister," "Pulpit Minister," "Spiritual Formation Minister," "Student Life Minister," "Worship Minister," "Technology Minister," etc.
2. The minister of a congregation is one who serves the congregation. An executive is "one who has managerial authority, the chief officer of an organization." The words "executive" and "minister" do not go together. This title shows just how far some have departed from a sincere devotion to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3).
 - a) Who can imagine the apostle Paul being styled the "Executive Minister" of the church at Corinth, or the apostle John being known as the "Senior Minister" at Ephesus?

- b) Leadership roles have always been areas of danger for the church. The earliest apostasy away from the truth came from within the leadership. Paul warned elders that people would draw away disciples (Acts 20:28). This is why it is unwise to designate one elder as the "Senior Elder" or to exalt the preacher to the status of "Executive Minister."
3. To get away from the tendencies, we have to work to be a "peculiar people" or a "people for God's own possession" (1 Peter 2:9). An old saying goes, "It takes nothing to join the crowd; it takes everything to stand alone."

Conclusion. Many do not realize the departures that have taken place among our own people. We need to be shocked. We need to have our spirit stirred within us as Paul did at Athens in the presence of idolatry (Acts 17:16). We need to have conviction about digression. We have been complacent too long (Romans 13:11-12).

The church was purchased by the blood of Christ. We are privileged to be members of nothing more than people were in the days of the apostles. Many of our own number have come out of denominationalism to become undenominational Christians. We cannot let the church become what they left behind. That should be the prayer of each of us -- to remember the plea for New Testament faith and to stand up for the purity and simplicity of the Lord's church.