

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RESTORATIONISM

An Alternative View

I read with much interest the article in the January 1987 issue of *The Baptist Quarterly* by my good friend, Haddon Willmer. The article was perceptive and stimulating; nevertheless there are several points at which I would want to assess the significance of Restorationism differently, and I therefore venture to write the following by way of reply to his article.

Dr Willmer presents us with a helpful and, for the most part, accurate, exposition of Andrew Walker's book, *Restoring the Kingdom*. He makes several criticisms, some valid, and some, in my view, not. I want to begin by making two criticisms of Walker which Dr Willmer did not make, and which underlie some of my questions about his own article. The first relates to Walker's division of Restoration into R1 (the networks in fellowship with Church House, Bradford) and R2, an open-ended category in which Walker locates the John Noble and Gerald Coates axis, the Basingstoke community, and John MacLauchlan's groups. I presume that R2 would also include such networks as the Grapevine Churches and Antioch Ministries. Walker classifies all these together 'simply to avoid the infinite regress of R3 to Rn',⁽¹⁾ and he tells us that he has invented this rubric 'to help our understanding'.⁽²⁾

My first criticism is that it does *not* help our understanding; it is actually confusing. Walker is right to recognise that the network of fellowships relating to Bryn Jones is different from that relating to John Noble. However, the network relating to John Noble is also different from that relating to Derek Brown, though both are in R2. Then the network relating to Bryn Jones is distinct from that relating to Terry Virgo, though both are in R1. Furthermore, the comparison of R1/R2 with the Exclusive/Open Brethren is not only, as Dr Willmer recognises, inexact, it is also unhelpful. The Basingstoke network is, I would judge, far more exclusive than Bryn Jones, although it is in R2. The Restoration movement is a plethora of distinct, but overlapping, networks, and to separate out one grouping from the rest is arbitrary.

My second criticism of Walker is that there is a flaw in his basic perception of Restorationism. It is because Dr Willmer has omitted to take account of this that some of his criticisms require modification. Walker confesses that at one time he thought that 'kingdom' and 'church' were interchangeable terms in Restorationist circles; he then notes: 'Apparently, this is not so'.⁽³⁾ Nevertheless, it seems that his earlier misunderstanding still underlies much of what he says. He expounds Restorationist teaching like this: God 'wants Christians of this last generation to restore the kingdom', here distinguished from denominational Christianity.⁽⁴⁾ He believes that Restorationists see the Church's task as 'to usher in the kingdom of God prior to the historical return of Christ to earth'.⁽⁵⁾ Dr Willmer accepts Walker's exposition: 'Restorationism ... looks for the Restoration of the Kingdom of God before the end'.

This is, however, a mistake. Four points need to be made in

correction. First, Restorationists do not see the Kingdom as in need of restoration. 'The Kingdom of God has come', says Hugh Thompson, not meaning that it was restored in the 1970s but that its 'Grand Arrival' took place in the Person of the King, Jesus, supremely at Calvary and Pentecost.(6) Since then the Kingdom has been continuously present.

Second, what Restorationists believe is in need of restoration is the Church. In my reading of Restorationist writings, I have only once seen a reference to the restoration of the Kingdom.(7) Juxtapositioning of 'restoration' and 'Church' is common. David Matthew writes: 'The church is being restored... We want a full recovery of all that has been lost, a putting right, that is, of the wrongs of Church history'.(8) Terry Virgo speaks of 'restoration in the church',(9) Eileen Vincent of 'the church restored',(10) while Ron Trudinger subtitled one of his books, 'Biblical Principles for Church Restoration'.(11) The restoration of the Church entails an honest embracing of New Testament principles,(12) this may include restoration to a way of life under the Kingdom rule of God, but that is very different from restoration of the Kingdom, an absolute non-necessity.

Third, what Restorationists look for prior to Christ's return is what Arthur Wallis calls 'the establishment of the Kingdom'.(13) Before 1986 *Restoration Magazine's* statement of principle included a reference to the Church as God's instrument to bring in His Kingdom. We need to be careful to understand what Restorationists themselves mean by such phrases. They do not mean that the Church is commissioned to actualize the universal reign of God; only He can do that. The Church is God's instrument in the sense that it stands in the vanguard of God's work of actualizing His rule, and the establishment of the Kingdom is the Church's fulfilling of its destiny of becoming 'a pure bride ready for the heavenly Bridegroom at His coming', as in the more recent statement of principle of *Restoration*. 'The establishment of the Kingdom' means its establishment in the Church. Dr Willmer is correct when he notes that 'the positive enthusiasm is for establishing a Kingdom people in preparation for the return of Christ to reign on earth'.

Fourth, Restorationists view the present-day restoration of the Church in the context of the 'restoration of all things'. Acts 3.21 is probably the key verse. The process began immediately following the fall,(14) and will culminate when the King returns in glory, an event which will be preceded by the greatest worldwide revival that the world has ever seen.(15) Eileen Vincent writes: 'Following the recovery of all that has been lost, the return of Jesus will unfold a totally new era of unimaginable glory'.(16) That will be the consummation of the restoration of all things. It is not the Kingdom which is being restored; the Kingdom of God is the restoration of all things. In this discussion of Walker's erroneous explanation of the core belief of Restorationism I have already touched on the next topic which I want to address in the light of Dr Willmer's article, namely the relationship of the movement to denominational Christianity and the allegations of divisiveness.

Dr Willmer interprets Walker as seeing Restorationism as

supplanting denominations, since the renewal of traditional Churches is not to be expected. This statement requires qualification: it is the denominational structures which are perceived as ultimately unrenewable, not individual denominational congregations. Denominations may not be in God's plan⁽¹⁷⁾ (and who would not say 'Amen' to that?) but Restorationists look and long and pray and work for the restoration of the whole Church. Terry Virgo once declined an invitation to speak on 'Restoration Churches and the whole Body of Christ' on the grounds that he 'did not believe in "restoration churches" but in the restoration of the Church'.⁽¹⁸⁾ For that reason I do not think that Dr Willmer is right to claim that Restorationists see themselves as 'the saving élite of history'; rather, they see the Church (all of it) as 'the sharp cutting edge' in the outworking of God's purposes.⁽¹⁹⁾ True, it is not always living as if that were so, which is why restoration is necessary, but it is a restoration, not a new departure.

Dr Willmer says that restoration teaching has affected Baptist churches, resulting in division and in a threatening of 'their traditional identity and values'. I suspect that this latter comment is actually irrelevant: the members of Baptist churches who are likely to be sympathetic to restoration principles are those whose self-perception of their identity would be Evangelical and/or charismatic, rather than denominational. As regards the alleged divisiveness of Restorationism, Dr Willmer recognises the truth in Walker's comments that the problem is not all on one side; whether division is perceived as resulting from Restorationism or from resistance to restoration depends on the perspective of the observer. Restorationists make it clear that they never initiate a relationship with a denominational Church; a covering relationship is established only when requested.⁽²⁰⁾ Dr Willmer interprets Walker as arguing that 'Restorationism merely exploits existing divisions', and therefore questions the ethics of division-exploitation. I read Walker rather differently: he concludes his account of the division at Romford like this: 'You could argue that Restorationists typically exploit such divisions. But... the work of division and separation had begun before Brian Smith took over', and he denies that the Restorationists did anything improper.⁽²¹⁾ He therefore recognises exploitation as a possible interpretation, but in the end rejects it.

Dr Willmer makes several comments on shepherding, which he finds questionable because of its 'paternalism', a word which Walker unfortunately introduces. It is a loaded word. Etymologically it simply means fatherly care, but has developed connotations of manipulation and patronisation. It is more profitable to look at the Restorationist practice of shepherding, which as Walker recognises, is usually quite laudable. Shepherding takes place within the context of a loving relationship, voluntarily entered into.⁽²²⁾ Arthur Wallis believes that any longer-standing Christian may disciple a new believer.⁽²³⁾ Shepherding consists largely in the giving of advice in a context in which questioning is possible.⁽²⁴⁾ Terry Virgo points out that shepherding is not intended to delve into the minutiae of everyone's life, but that Church members 'are grateful to be able to check out major decisions with their leaders'.⁽²⁵⁾ The goal of shepherd is the spiritual maturity of the saints, and part of what that is

increasing independence.(26) It is a system 'open to abuse',(27) but so are a lot of good things. David Tomlinson lists five safety factors for avoiding the potential pitfalls: (1) God's Word is the supreme authority; (2) Leadership is plural; (3) The goal of maturity is kept clearly in view; (4) Dialogue is given a high place; (5) The context is genuine relationship.(28) In my own experience of consulting a shepherding figure, my personal responsibility for 'weighing' whatever is said has been stressed; if, on weighing advice, I have decided not to follow it, the relationship has remained intact and the friendship as supportive as ever. Shepherding could be abused; as a rule it is not: Walker only has seven detailed complaints about the experience.(29)

Dr Willmer asks what kind of humanity is envisaged and produced by any given religious movement. Let me venture one or two answers for Restorationism. Restorationists themselves use two words to portray the kind of humanity for which they aspire - security and maturity.(30) My own observations bear this out; to know that we have a place in a community with those to whom we can look for guidance, encouragement, and correction is to feel the supportiveness of relationship which gives us security, and undoubtedly the love commitment of members of restored Churches to one another is unmatched by anything I have seen anywhere else. Maturity, too, is indeed a mark of this humanity; the spiritual understanding and the effectiveness in witness of a relatively young Restorationist believer would put to shame the silence and ignorance of many Baptists of long years standing. I suspect that the criticism of shepherding from traditional Church sources is actually motivated by embarrassment. For years we have been so inefficient in our nurturing of new converts, so lax in the practice of moral discipline, so laid-back in our training of people for sharing in the ministry of Jesus, that the supposedly Christian humanity which we have produced is actually indistinguishable from the world.

In his discussion of democracy and theocracy, Dr Willmer confuses two distinctions current amongst Restorationists. One is the distinction between democracy and leadership responsibility; the other between theocracy and structures of human devising. By juxtaposing democracy and theocracy he contrasts the democratic procedures of a Baptist Church Meeting with the allegedly theocratic nature of leadership by apostles and prophets. In this he is, to some extent, following Walker, who interprets Restoration teaching in this way - wrongly, it seems to me.

The only place where Walker makes this distinction when alluding to the words of one related to Restorationism is his statement that at Dales 1976 'democratic methods were compared unfavourably with the theocratic arrangements of God'.(31) This, however, is not a quotation but an allusion; and it refers to Ern Baxter, not to a British Restorationist. The word 'theocracy' is in fact very rare in Restorationist writings, and rightly refers to 'God's order'(32) - a far more frequent phrase. Leadership by apostles and prophets is theocratic, not because it is undemocratic, but because it is God's order; that is, it is Church polity based on 'the clear principles laid down in Scripture'.(33) Conversely, Church government by democracy is untheocratic, not because everyone has a say, but because it is of

human invention. Dr Willmer claims that 'Restorationism aims to work with a model of Church as direct and visible theocracy'. However, he appears to have set up a man of straw merely to knock it down again, because he goes on to show how Restorationism sees the rule of God as mediated through apostles and prophets. Restorationism in fact aims at theocracy in the specific sense that it aims to be the Church structured according to New Testament principles; that does not mean the direct rule of God: it means apostles and prophets, which are 'the key foundational ministries of the Church'.(34) This does not mean that leaders are remote or autocratic; as Mike Pusey once said: 'You are not a leader if no-one is following you'. Moreover, Restorationists recognise that every person has to choose his or her own shepherd, and 'wise shepherds will always be listening to their flock'.(35) Dr Willmer is evidently not too happy with the Baptist practice of Church Meeting. Perhaps he would prefer that portrayed by Terry Virgo, which might be described as a consultative assembly for feeding into, and calling in question, eldership decisions.(36)

Finally, Dr Willmer correctly expounds Walker's defence of Restorationism as sect and the Restorationists' own rejection of that label. He goes on to reject Walker's notion that a sectarian form of Christianity is better equipped to stand against the pressures of secularisation, since even sects make some compromise with the world. At this point we are involved in a debate as to what compromise with the world involves; Walker would define it in terms like 'rationalism' and 'moral relativism', whereas Dr Willmer sees the preservation of sacred tradition as an expression of modernity. It is virtually a case of playing different language-games: which side one comes down on depends on one's presuppositions. Here I can but confess my own prejudice and declare my sympathy with Walker; the rationality, which, as Dr Willmer rightly says, God endorses, can so easily turn into the rationalism which is a contemporary expression of what the Bible would call unbelief; conversely, while I find it impossible to defend relativism as true, I cannot deny the fact of relativity. Knowing, then, the provisionality of the modern western worldview, it is at least as reasonable, in the event of a clash with a Biblical worldview, to want to uphold the latter. Some statements made by people in some of what Walker calls 'broad churches' are, to me, scarcely recognisable as Christian at all. There is bound to be some compromise with modernity in Restorationism: that is unavoidable as long as we remain in this world in which we see only in part, but at least Restorationism strives to avoid it where other expressions of Christianity have embraced it all too easily. At least Restorationists take Scripture as their starting-point and final authority and are motivated above all by the desire to be obedient. (Incidentally, I do not attach much credibility to the words allegedly spoken by John MacLauchlan which Dr Willmer quotes, since they are taken from one of the very few scare stories which Walker was able to unearth).

To say that Restorationism accepts the place which the world offers to the Church leaves too many questions unanswered; if it is true, why does Restorationism face so much hostility? The Restorationists certainly see it as the mission of the Church to tackle the world head on: the vision for large churches in the big cities is envisaged as a challenge to the powers of this world,(37) and these

words of Tony Morton do not sound like accepting the proffered niche: 'To leave the Church in an active but isolated corner on Sundays might suit politicians, but it can't suit committed Christians. We are called to stand for justice and truth - racial, sexual, economic, medical and educational justice and truth'.(38)

Dr Willmer's comments on sectarianism lead into an interesting discussion on walking by faith, a needful reminder of the indispensability of humility as we live as sinful people before a holy God in a world in which, as yet, we see through a glass darkly.

At this point I wish to raise three questions. First, is it fair to deny that Restorationists are open to judgement as of now? At an Antioch Ministries conference at which I was present last year frequent frank admissions of past mistakes were made, and Terry Virgo has written: 'Though we rejoice in what we are experiencing there is certainly no room for complacency'.(39) Second, does openness to the judgement of the eschaton undermine the assurance that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus? Yes, the surpassing glory of what shall be will indeed be breathtakingly surprising, but what we already know of the firstfruits of the Spirit is a foretaste of glory divine. Third, does walking by faith remove the need for moral judgement? Dr Willmer suggests that to live by faith is to be released from the need to be right where others are wrong or to be alive where others are dead. It is, of course, true that comparison of ourselves favourably with others is never a healthy exercise. Awareness, on the part of those who are now Restorationist leaders, of the poverty of the Church to which they belonged drove them back to the New Testament in quest of a better and more authentic expression of Kingdom life. The question really is: are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? The question about the best possible expression of the Kingdom in the Church for the sake of the world today is one that is worth asking. The desire to be right and to come to life where once we were wrong and dead, because we have heard the challenging and life-giving Word of God, is laudable.

In the end only one question really matters: is God at work in the Restoration movement? Or better: is God indeed restoring His Church today to the beauty of the bride adorned in readiness for the Bridegroom's coming? Even if we cannot go all the way with Restorationist eschatological confidence, we ought still to face the possibility that it is God's policy to blow apart the structures in every generation and do a new thing, by-passing the monuments to His work in previous generations. It is too easy to dismiss some aspects of Restoration as un-Baptist. Perhaps we ought to measure our cherished Baptist traditions against the touchstone of Scripture; if the emergence of new religious movements is 'a means which the Holy Spirit uses to promote aspects of truth that have been lost or neglected',(40) maybe we are the people who need to heed Dr Willmer's plea for openness to judgement; surely openness to judgement entails readiness for change.

NOTES

1 A. Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom*, 1985, p.25.

2 *Ibid.*, p.22.

3 *Ibid.*, p.128.

4 *Ibid.*, p.22.

5 *Ibid.*, p.128.

- 6 H. Thompson, 'The Kingdom of God Has Come', *Restoration*, Jan/Feb 1986, pp.2-7.
- 7 In G. Coates' song, 'Being myself in the Lord', *Songs and Hymns of Fellowship*, No.35.
- 8 D. Matthew, *Church Adrift*, 1985, p.226.
- 9 T. Virgo, *Restoration in the Church*, 1985, p.38.
- 10 E. Vincent, *Something's Happening*, 1984, p.74.
- 11 R. Trudinger, *Built to Last*, 1980, 1982.
- 12 Virgo, op.cit., p.155.
- 13 A. Wallis, *Rain from Heaven*, 1970, p.124.
- 14 Matthew, op.cit., p.43.
- 15 B. Jones, 'Suddenly All Heaven Broke Loose!', *Restoration*, Jul/Aug 1983, p.19.
- 16 Vincent, op.cit., p.176. 17 Walker, op.cit., pp.22,261.
- 18 Virgo, op.cit., p.146.
- 19 P. Greenslade, 'The Sharp Cutting Edge', *Restoration*, Mar/Apr 1985, p.8.
- 20 Walker, op.cit., p.162; Virgo, op.cit., p.138.
- 21 Walker, op.cit., p.271
- 22 Walker, op.cit., pp.136, 146, 151-2.
- 23 A. Wallis, *Living God's Way*, 1984, p.7.
- 24 Walker, op.cit., pp.152, 173. 25 Virgo, op.cit., p.88.
- 26 Walker, op.cit., pp.105, 173; Virgo, op.cit., p.87.
- 27 Walker, op.cit., p.175.
- 28 D. Tomlinson, 'Is Discipling Biblical?', *Restoration*, Jul/Aug 1980, pp.3-4.
- 29 Walker, op.cit., p.285.
- 30 Virgo, op.cit., p.87; Vincent, op.cit., ch.11; Trudinger, op.cit., p.142.
- 31 Walker, op.cit., p.80.
- 32 B. Jones, 'Apostles Today - For Tomorrow's Church', *Restoration*, Sept/Oct. 1985, p.31.
- 33 A. Wallis, 'Springs of Restoration', *Restoration*, Jul/Aug 1980, p.22.
- 34 D. Brown, 'The Prophetic Ministry', *Towards Leadership* 9, p.2.
- 35 Virgo, op.cit., p.94. 36 Ibid.
- 37 W. Richards, 'God on the Move', *Restoration* May/June 1987, p.27.
- 38 T. Morton, 'Empires and the Kingdom', *Restoration* May/June 1987, p.26.
- 39 Virgo, op.cit., p.157. 40 Walker, op.cit., p.213.

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Haddon Willmer's response

I am grateful to Jonathan Bayes for his response to my article on Restorationism and to the Editor of the *Quarterly* for inviting me to say something further. A number of Jonathan's points I would readily accept, but some of his distinctions do not affect the critical points I was pursuing. There may, for example, be a difference between restorationists seeing themselves as 'the saving élite of history' and seeing all the church, of which they are the signally restored part, as the 'sharp cutting edge of God's working' in the world. Under both wordings, however, the church puts itself in the centre of historical