

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

- 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.

JONATHAN BAYES *Minister, East Park Baptist Church, Hull*

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

development. And that I wanted to question, because I think its ethical correlates are not in keeping with the spirit of Christ.

I agree that all churches have long been divided, latently if not blatantly, so it is unfair to accuse many restorationists of initiating divisions in Baptist churches. It is a question of the ethics of exploiting church divisions, not of causing them. Jonathan denies that anything improper was done in the case quoted by Walker. How can we judge that? Is there any recognised ethic in the broad stream of evangelical free protestantism about what is proper or improper? There is some etiquette amongst churches in the episcopal traditions and at superintendents' level, but where new religious movements are formed we are closer to the methods of commercial competition, if not the jungle. I wanted us to behave in a more truly Christian way, paying attention to points where our behaviour is shady and trying to see how it should be different. That involves developing a church ethic for our situation (is that taught in our theological colleges?), and leads beyond it into theology, and the psychology of spirituality, with questions like: Why should we find it so difficult as Christians to give up some of our favourite ways of exploiting the divisions that exist in churches?

The problem cannot be met by saying that a 'covering relationship is established only when requested'. These relationships are frequently kept secret from church members who ought to know because they are directly affected. If they are disclosed, there is an immediate uncertainty about loyalty, which exacerbates division. Covering is being accepted from people who as restorationist leaders are aware of 'the poverty of the life of the church to which they [formerly] belonged', and whose normal rhetoric is fairly scathing about other churches. Restorationism produces people capable, without the least trace of irony, of writing to an evangelical journal: 'The house church movement is the only church that has any spiritual leadership... their ministry is life-transforming through the power of the Holy Spirit' (*Third Way*, December 1987, p.32). How can the relation with an ordinary Baptist church be expected to work out, if some of the leaders accept covering within the terms of an ideology like that? Those to whom 'belonging to the Baptist family' means much, though it never gave them the illusion of belonging to the perfect church, will properly ask whether such leaders are able to make a go at that Baptist belonging. It is hard to see how they could, because it is hard to serve two masters. To have a low view of a whole group of Christians (a denomination) and then to be available to cultivate individuals and companies within it, even to the point of leaving, seems an essentially divisive stance in inter-church relationships. I am glad to see signs that house-churches are changing, consulting other churches, joining councils of churches. That must betoken or engender a change in ethic which I would do nothing to delay. The house church scene is variable and as a young movement fluid, so no defence - nor criticism - made at present need apply to every house church for ever.

My criticism of shepherding implies no desire to defend or applaud the pastoral care offered in Baptist churches. I am not impressed by any defence of shepherding which uses a logic like Mr

Nicholas Ridley's when he argues that, because it is widely admitted the present rating system is imperfect, only fools and troublemakers will see anything wrong with his poll tax. I see no reason to accept that we must choose either present Baptist practice or shepherding. There are other ways. An alternative ecclesiological model could be developed in terms of friendship. In friendship there is a non-hierarchical reciprocity which has a very different emphasis from shepherding. Freedom and equality are characteristic of friendship: now one, now the other may be the leading or caring partner. Friendship ruins hierarchies and tidy arrangements, but liberates and supports people for life. When Jonathan puts the best face he can on shepherding, he brings out the points where it is most like friendship. That way of arguing should not be used to bolster an hierarchical and managerial structure but rather show that such a model is unnecessary for the church. He missed my distinction between political and business organisational forms as analogies for understanding how our churches work. They provide a valuable index of the kind of Christianity and humanity we are making for and of ourselves. And I continue to worry about the choices we are making.

Along with many middle-aged Christians, I am intimidated by a sentence like: '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'. There is a truth here ; but there is also an untruth which I refuse to swallow. Yes, I am shamed but I also remember that when I was young I put the middle-aged to shame. The young always do that, and the middle-aged always suffer it, and Christ is not to be identified with one or the other, though he is somewhere around in the strange learning process of life. I do not wish to discourage the young (professionally I spend much of my time doing the opposite), but what in many circles passes for their effectiveness in witness does not always impress me by its spiritual understanding. I am dismayed by their bad theology or complete lack of theology. Churches need more effective spiritual growth, but setting up simple and intimidating contrasts which offer inadequate models will not help.

Jonathan gives a precise account of what restorationists say about democracy and theocracy in church order. My point was a reaction to what some baptistic Christians were saying long before restorationism: the church is really a theocracy because God rules here, or ought to. Thinking thus, they got embarrassed about the church meeting, which is hard to run in an efficient, honest and friendly way without coming to resemble other democratic meetings in our culture - not surprising, since we learned democracy partly through our forebears' church meetings. Some Christians are so hostile to the world and its wisdom, so concerned that the church should be obviously different, that they are prepared to run the church meeting badly, to subject it to clerical manipulation, or even to dispense with it, so as to achieve theocracy without democracy. This syndrome was observable before restorationism appeared; restorationism attracts some Baptists because it seems to realise what they have been looking for. But, then or now, it is not a good development when church leaders cloak directives or demands to the church meeting in terms of what 'the Lord has given us to bring to you', the hearers' choice is to submit or be seen to resist God. It

is a scandalous tactic and evidence of spiritual ill, but it is used. There are enough gullible and vulnerable people around to give the theocrats a following.

Restorationism interested me because it raised afresh long-standing issues in evangelical and baptistic religion, to which we repeatedly give inadequate answers, condemning our children's children to go over the same debilitating ground. These chronic difficulties come because we are still deeply sectarian and do not learn much from other traditions, Christian or secular. We will not risk pluralism. We believe the Gospel is adequately available to us within the evangelical tradition, and we persevere within these narrow confines, regardless of problems. We have Christianity without the benefit of lateral thinking. It is not surprising that we lose people from our tradition, as they find help for living in faith from sources which receive no welcome, recognition or understanding in our churches.

Jonathan suggests that restorationists speak not of theocracy but of 'God's order' for the Church. If I had seen that clearly, it would have made my original argument less complicated, but not altered my worries. There are difficulties about claiming that 'God's order' of 'apostles and prophets' is a church polity based on 'clear principles laid down in Scripture'. Whether there is a clear New Testament model of 'God's order' for all time, expressed in specific offices, is doubtful. Men (and sexism should be a major issue in any discussion of restorationism) acquire titles like 'apostle' or 'prophet', but is the substance the same as in the New Testament? An ecclesiology which appeals to the New Testament not for a model church order but to find the way of the Gospel in Christ has more clear challenge and hope. It involves us, however, in being more agnostic, experimental and pragmatic over details of church order: we must live reverently with the distance between our orderings and God's will.

Jonathan's comments on the implications of being a sect take us into the conflict of world-views. I am sceptical about the very existence of 'the modern western world-view'. Are there not many world-views in our culture? Does the Bible have a world-view? If we should hear and live the Gospel, might we find that it sifts all world-views, including the so-called biblical one. Jesus is hard to pigeonhole in these terms. Could not the living history of Christianity be told in terms of the teasing conversations of Jesus with all sorts of world-views and philosophies? The Bible does not teach one true world-view but it gives us glimpses of the word of God entering into friendly, critical and creative conversations with many sorts of people. The simple contrast between the biblical and the modern world-view may not be so deeply founded in the Bible itself as is often being argued today. The church should not be docile or acquiescent in the contemporary world. One form of wordly acquiescence it should fight is the practice of focusing issues in simplistic and sloganising polarisations.