

LESSON 4

HOW TO APPLY A PASSAGE TO OUR RELIGIOUS PRACTICES (1)

To begin: Today people ask, "How should I worship God?"; "What is His church to be like in the twenty-first century?"; "What about this concept of 'restoration'?" Let us first consider the validity of following the pattern for the first-century church set by Christ and His apostles.

Just as we need to apply biblical teachings to what we believe (theological application) and to how we live (moral and ethical application), we also need to apply the Bible's teachings to what we do religiously. Many wonder how to apply biblical teachings to religious practices today. They ask, "What does teaching found in the New Testament about the first-century church have to do with how we worship, what kind of a church we form, and what we teach about being saved today?"

Throughout these lessons, we have assumed that the New Testament provides a "pattern" for the church to follow until Jesus returns. In fact, that belief has been the identifying characteristic of most churches of Christ for more than a hundred years. Who are the churches of Christ? "We are people," we may reply, "who urge people to go back to the New Testament to discover what it teaches about the first-century church, and then reproduce that church, in every essential, in our own time." We have called this effort "the Restoration Plea."

The need to restore the New Testament church has been doubted. Before we can agree on how to apply the Scriptures to the religious practices of the church, we must consider the validity of

the *idea* of restoring New Testament Christianity. Is this plea valid? This lesson will present and defend the plea for restoration.

PRESENTING THE RESTORATION PRINCIPLE

What is the rationale for the restoration principle? Let us look at some facts behind this movement.

Jesus has all authority, and the apostles taught with His authority. In giving the Great Commission, Jesus said,

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

What the apostles taught, they taught by the authority of Christ. Their message, therefore, was God's Word. First Thessalonians 2:13 says, "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe."

The apostles, by Jesus' authority, established the church in various locations. The inspired apostles, guided into all the truth by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13), following the Lord's instructions given in the Great Commission, went about preaching the gospel. As they preached, people were baptized and added to the church (Acts 2:41; 1 Corinthians 12:13), and those who were

baptized were formed into congregations.

These congregations were established by the apostles according to a certain pattern. Led by inspired men, the local groups of Christians were all organized in the same way. They all worshiped in the same way, and they all taught the same doctrine (see 1 Corinthians 4:17). The fact that they were alike in so many ways testifies to the existence of a pattern followed by the inspired men who planted and led them. So does the fact that inspired men later, after the congregations were in existence, wrote to them and gave them instructions, praising them for keeping the faith or rebuking them for failing to do so. *The fact that the epistles to the first-century churches include praise and blame proves the existence of a standard by which they could be judged.*

The New Testament pattern for the church was not the church as it actually existed in one place. Rather, it was the standard by which each local congregation of the Lord's church was evaluated.

That pattern was intended to be the guide for the church throughout the centuries. Jesus intended for people to submit to His authority until "the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18–20). Paul believed that the message he preached should never be changed; he said that if anyone—even an angel from heaven—preached any other gospel, he would be accursed (Galatians 1:8, 9). Jude described the doctrine revealed to and taught by the apostles and evangelists as "the faith once for all [time] handed down to the saints" (Jude 3).

Just as predicted, people left the New Testament pattern. The apostles predicted an apostasy (Acts 20:29, 30; 1 Timothy 4:1–3; 2 Timothy 4:3, 4; 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4); and after the close of the apostolic age, that prediction came true. In many respects, the church left "the faith."

The aim of restoration is to restore, or bring into being in our period of time, the church in the first century. Because the religious groups around us may be corrupted by apostasy, the goal in restoration is not to reform them; instead, the objective is to look to the church of the first century as our model. That church was built by Christ (Matthew 16:16–19) and was guided by inspired apostles! Those who were saved were added to it. In that church only can we be sure of having God's approval.

The method of restoration is to seek and then fol-

low the pattern for the first-century church as it is revealed in the New Testament. The New Testament is not the pattern for the church; it contains the pattern for the church. Since the first-century church in each location was built according to a certain pattern, *it is possible to discover and follow that pattern by studying the New Testament.*

Not everything related to the New Testament church is part of the timeless pattern for the church. The culture determined some practices—such as greeting one another with a "holy kiss" (Romans 16:16). Other practices were related to the infancy of the church. The first century was a special time when God performed great deeds for the church:

- He appointed apostles to lead it.
- He guided it through men He directly inspired or to whom He gave visions.
- He gradually gave the church an inspired written message, the New Testament.
- He baptized some (the apostles and Cornelius and his household) with the Holy Spirit.
- He enabled some Christians to perform miracles, including speaking in tongues (languages they had not studied).

When the church's infancy passed, these practices also ceased (see 1 Corinthians 13:8–10).

It would be inconsistent to believe that some of these first-century practices—such as tongue-speaking and healing—remain while others—such as having living apostles to guide the church—have ceased. The miraculous gifts of the New Testament are a "package" (see Mark 16:17, 18; 1 Corinthians 12:8–10); if any of them are available to be used by Christians today, then they all are. Therefore, if Christians can, by the power of God, speak in tongues or heal people in the way that these gifts were practiced in New Testament times, then they should also be able to raise the dead!¹

¹The plea to restore the church of the first century is not inconsistent with teaching against the continuation of the miraculous gifts that were part of that church. (1) Paul predicted that miraculous gifts would cease when the church became mature (1 Corinthians 13:8–10). (2) The means by which such gifts were imparted—the laying on of the apostles' hands—is no longer available. (3) The need for the gifts—namely, to confirm the Word—is no longer present. (4) The gifts are not in evidence; people are not performing miracles as they did in New Testament times.

Since not everything connected to the New Testament church was part of God's pattern for the church throughout the Christian age, the interpreter must use care in putting the restoration principle into practice.

DEFENDING THE RESTORATION PRINCIPLE

Is the plea to restore the church of the New Testament defensible? Five arguments can be advanced to prove its value and validity.²

(1) *The restoration plea is biblical.* It is biblical to go back to the pattern for the church that God gave originally. God is concerned about having His people follow the pattern He has prescribed. He told Moses, "See . . . that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain" (Hebrews 8:5). When God's people left His pattern, He urged them, "Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it" (Jeremiah 6:16a). God is concerned about His pattern, and He wants us to return to it if we have left it.

It is biblical to stress the need to preach and practice only what was taught during the age of the apostles. Paul said that to preach anything else is to invite condemnation (Galatians 1:8, 9). To go back to the Bible is biblical because that book contains the perfect law of liberty (James 1:25); it is complete, and it makes us complete (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). Since it came from God, we dare not alter it (Revelation 22:18, 19).

Certainly, it is biblical to urge men to restore to the church the practices taught in the New Testament. Paul described that church as being "purchased with His [Christ's] own blood" (Acts 20:28). Jesus died for the church; He bought it with His own blood! Surely, then, it is biblical for us to want to restore that church! To one who believes the Bible and loves the Bible, nothing could be more appealing than a plea to restore the church of the Bible!

(2) *Restoration is possible.* It is possible to restore the church of the first century, even in the twenty-first century. Why? The New Testament teaches that God's Word is the seed of the kingdom (Luke 8:11). Further, we read that "the

word of God is living and active" (Hebrews 4:12; see 1 Peter 1:23).

Seeds produce "after their kind" (Genesis 1:11, 12), and they always produce the same thing. A watermelon seed produces watermelons, wherever and whenever it is planted. If it is planted in Australia, America, Africa, or Asia, it will produce watermelons. Such seed, when planted in the first century, produced watermelons; and if it is planted in the twenty-first century—as long as life remains within it—it will produce watermelons.

The same is true of the "word of God," the "seed" of the kingdom. Wherever and whenever it is planted—in any country, in the first century or in the twenty-first—it will produce the same thing: simply the kingdom, the New Testament church! As long as nothing else is planted along with it, the only thing it will produce is the same church we read about in the New Testament!

It is reasonable to believe that the seed of the Word of God will indeed produce today what it produced in the first century. After all, if we do what people then did to become Christians, and if we continue to do what they did as Christians by living and worshiping as they did, will we not be exactly what they were? We will be simply Christians, members of Christ's church—nothing more and nothing less.

(3) *The restoration of the first-century church is desirable.* Primarily, it is desirable because it is biblical. However, in addition to that, it is desirable in that it will promote unity among those who believe in Christ.

God wants all believers to be united (John 17:20, 21; 1 Corinthians 1:10). Those who believe in Christ are striving for unity in a variety of ways—through large interdenominational organizations, denominational cooperation, and church mergers, for instance. However, such efforts can never achieve the kind of unity which God wants, the kind of unity for which Christ prayed.

How can the church throughout the world become genuinely one in a way that pleases God? The only way people can achieve that kind of unity is by agreeing to be guided by the Bible alone. When we all go to the Bible to determine what we should believe so that we can be one, it is not our opinions that count. It is God's teach-

²This section was adapted from Coy Roper, *Our Plea*, tract # 127 in the "Flip-Top Tract" series (Ft. Worth, Tex.: Star Bible Publications, n.d.), 7–12. Used with permission.

ings. When we are willing to hear what God says and to follow His Word, no one has to give in to anyone else; we all simply give in to God and agree to let Him have His way in the church. If we will do this, we will all be one, united in Christ, united by our common obedience to the Word of God!

(4) *The restoration of the New Testament church is essential.* The necessity of restoration can be seen in both positive and negative terms.

From a positive standpoint, the New Testament teaches that in order to be saved, one must believe in Jesus (John 8:24), repent of his sins (Luke 13:3), be willing to confess his faith in Christ (Matthew 10:32), and be baptized (or immersed in water; Mark 16:16) for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). The one who does these things is saved. In this way, he becomes a Christian and is added to the church (Acts 2:47). Christ is the Savior of the one body, the church (Ephesians 5:23; 4:4; 1:22, 23). If we want to be sure of our salvation, we need to be in the church that Christ saves—and that church is the New Testament church!

From a negative standpoint, the New Testament warns, in no uncertain terms, against departing from the New Testament pattern. It prohibits “teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” (Matthew 15:9). It also speaks against going too far and not abiding in the “teaching of Christ” (2 John 9), against preaching any other doctrine than that preached by the apostles (Galatians 1:8, 9), and against failing to do the will of God (Matthew 7:21). To avoid condemnation, one needs to make sure that he understands and obeys God’s Word; if he does, he is involved in the restoration of New Testament Christianity.

The New Testament tells of wonderful blessings which came to Christians in the first century: remission of sins, peace of mind, the hope of heaven. However, the New Testament also speaks of a church, of a way of life, and of commandments that must be obeyed. The trouble is that many today want the spiritual blessings without being in that church, without living that life, without obeying those commandments! It cannot be done! The blessings promised in the New Testament are inseparably connected with the church described in the New Testament! To have the blessings, we must be in the church!

(5) *The restoration plea is practical.* The proof of the practicality of trying to restore New Testament Christianity is that it has worked before! Restoration has occurred in many times and in many places.

Years ago, a preacher in Spain named Juan Monroy told how he had gone to the New York World’s Fair and had discovered that some congregations in America were following the New Testament pattern, just like the ones he had helped to plant in Spain. He had assumed that those few Christians in Spain were the only people in the world striving to restore the New Testament church. He spoke of the joy of discovering that he had millions of brethren in the US and all over the world working toward the same end. The US brethren knew nothing of a restoration movement in Spain, and the brethren in Spain knew nothing of the restoration efforts in the US; but when they discovered one another, they found that their aims and doctrines were virtually identical!

The same thing has happened around the world. Restoration movements have sprung up, independent of one another, in England, Scotland, America, Canada, India, Ethiopia, and Poland. In these cases, when men have gone back to the Bible to restore the church of the New Testament, they have come to the same conclusions concerning the worship, organization, and doctrine of the church!

The restoration principle works; it is practical. It has happened again and again, and it can continue to happen. If people will go to the Word with open minds and seek to restore Christ’s way as they find it there, the result will be what it has always been: New Testament Christianity.

CONCLUSION

The application of biblical teachings to religious practices today should involve restoring the essential practices of the New Testament church. Determining which practices of that church need to be restored may involve some careful interpretation, which is the subject of the next lesson. However, when people commit themselves to the restoration principle and consider the scriptural evidence, they generally arrive at the same conclusions about what the church should be like today. Coy Roper