

# Restoration of Scriptural Church Government

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The "restoration" of anything is putting it back as it was originally. The word presupposes a departure, decay, destruction, a turning away, leaving the original state. Galatians 6:1-2 tells those who are spiritual to "restore" one who is overtaken in a fault. "Overtaken" in a fault is the return to the state of sin after having been redeemed by the blood of Christ. To "restore" such an one is to bring back to the state of redemption by repentance and prayer, according to the word of God.

The restoration of the government of the New Testament church is putting the local organization of the church back as it was in New Testament days. That local organization was quite simple and unsophisticated. Man strives to bring all things to a single human head and headquarters. The scriptural arrangement is congregational autonomy with no organization above and beyond the local congregation.

## **Prediction of Departure From Local Government**

Soon after the church was established by Christ on the first Pentecost following his ascension into heaven, Satan began his work from among the elders themselves to corrupt the doctrine and organization of the church. Paul said to the elders of the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17): "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). These verses teach us that:

- ▶ Grievous wolves would enter in among the elders, and flock, not sparing the flock.
- ▶ Some among the elders themselves would arise, which means they would take a place and position not given them by the Lord.
- ▶ And they would speak perverse things; things contrary to the gospel they first received.
- ▶ They would draw away disciples after them. To "draw away" disciples would mean that the disciples would be taken from the Lord.

Speaking of the second coming of Christ, the apostle wrote to the Thessalonians: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, and the son of perdition . . ." "For the mystery of iniquity doth already work . . ." (2 Thess. 2:3,7). To Timothy he wrote: "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils . . ." (1 Tim. 4:1). These verses support the statement that departure from the original teaching and practice of the faith began in the days the New Testament was being written, and the departure would develop into full apostasy. We should expect the development of the man of sin, which would include the radical change in the organization of the local church.

## **The Rise of Denominationalism**

By the middle of the second century many churches in the areas where Christianity had become known had a "Bishop" instead of a number of bishops. The irresistible trend of human organization has been to centralize and place power in one man or one committee. In the case of papacy, the

hierarchy of Rome represents the ultimate in central power and usurpation of God's authority. The moral and spiritual corruption is also seen in this church organization.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the rebellion against the Roman Church brought into existence a number of religious bodies with different forms of government. Some adopted a republican or representative form of government, others stayed with a monarchical or single head on earth, as the Roman Catholic Church was. The Church of England was an example. As the various forms of church government developed, and the leadership of some fell into the hands of several, problems of internal unity arose.

### **The Beginning of The Restoration of Christianity in America**

From the last of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century there was a great persecution against churches in America by the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. The very reason why these pilgrims came to America in the first place was to escape religious persecution, but the power followed them to the shores of this country and began anew. But in spite of the strong opposition of the Church of England, the American religious leaders and "clergy" continued to strive to be free from the shackles of the Church of England.

Near the end of the eighteenth century James O'Kelley was established as a preacher in the Methodist Church. John Wesley had appointed Thomas Coke as the superintendent in America. In Methodist doctrine, no minister could be appointed except by a minister who had been ordained by an ordained minister. This form of clergy control by succession went back to John Wesley. Thomas Coke used his power of ordination to make Asbury Superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. The government of the Methodist Episcopal Church is a combination of monarchial and democratic principals; part from the Church of England and part from the ministerial conferences of that day.

James O'Kelley was a Methodist and very much opposed to much of the tactics employed by Coke and Asbury. In 1794 O' Kelley led a committee to create a church government that would do away with all creeds and take the Bible only as the authority. This was in the right direction, but it never got very far because other "conferences" gave birth to more "creeds" of one kind or another.

The Baptist Church was having its trouble with some who insisted upon change from within. Elias Smith was a member of the Baptist Church. He wanted to be a preacher, but was determined to wait until he had some indication from God that he had been called to do so. He studied the Bible diligently and came to the conclusion that the only name disciples of Christ should wear was "Christian" (Acts 11:26). After the turn of the nineteenth century, Smith wrote that he dared to tell the people that the names Baptist and Methodist were unnecessary; only "Christian" was sufficient to identify the disciples of Christ.

Smith also opposed the catechism. He insisted that the Bible was sufficient for teaching and practice. He came to the conclusion that the clergy had developed a system contrary to the New Testament. He later began meeting regularly and established a church, which he called "a church of Christ," and considered themselves only "Christians."

Abner Jones, another Baptist, came in contact with Smith shortly after he established this church. They worked together in establishing "churches of Christ" in Vermont and New Hampshire that were free of human creeds, taking only the Bible as their authority. They called themselves "Christians."

Shortly before the turn of the nineteenth century some unrest appeared in two or three major denominations in this country. The two principal areas of unrest were: their creeds and the call of some to change them, and the governments and administration of power. This unrest developed the challenge of a few to call for a restoration of the church and worship as it was in the days of the apostles.

Shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century at least a half dozen men from among the Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians took an active role in calling for a return to the New Testament pattern of things. Among these men were: James O'Kelley, Barton W. Stone, Elias Smith, Abner Jones, and Thomas and Alexander Campbell.

Alexander Campbell was a Seceder Presbyterian when he came to America. He was involved with the Presbyterian Conferences in which representatives from Presbyterian churches met to conduct certain governmental affairs for that denomination. Campbell was one of several who called for an abolition of the clergy rule and the creed makers. They insisted upon a return to apostolic teaching and practice as taught in the New Testament. Efforts were made to make church government local in nature and function. This plea gained a great following by the middle of the nineteenth century.

However, neither Campbell nor Stone got away from the concept that evangelism necessitated organization above and beyond the local church. Associations and conferences continued to attract their attentions as a means to spread the gospel and strengthen churches. They created them, worked through them, but continued to talk about the local government of the church as the only divinely ordained one. Alexander Campbell was the first president of the American Missionary Society, and continued in it until his death. His effort at a restoration of the New Testament government of the church fell short of its goal.