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The Restorationist Movement in Great Britain (1987)[1]

The Restorationist Movement in Great Britain is part of that broader classification known as the "house church movement." As I have shown elsewhere, however, the so-called house church movement is a hopeless misnomer.[2] It is an inappropriate label that has been attached to churches in houses within existing denominations, and also a number of competing extra-denominational religious structures. To compound the confusion, what began outside denominations as churches in homes have now become full-blown churches with house groups attached.

A number of these churches are entirely independent, and others cohere together in small and declining sectarian movements. The most significant of these are the Chard churches, and the fellowships of Pastor Wally North. By far the most controversial, well-organized, and largest of these many house churches are two groups that originally formed one movement that began in the early 1970s. I call both groups Restorationism, and divide them into Restoration One and Restoration Two (R1 and R2 for short).[3] These groups cannot yet be described as stable or established sects; schism and realignment have so far been an endemic feature of their existence. Nevertheless, I believe that the evidence is overwhelming that these groups,

1. Originally published in *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*, edited by L. Caplan, 199–210 (Macmillan, London 1987).

2. Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom*, 17–20.

3 R2 did not come out of R1, as I incorrectly stated in my article "From Revival to Restoration." I wrote this paper in 1983, but proofs never arrived from the publisher to allow for my corrections.

which number some 30,000 to 40,000 members,[4] are the largest indigenous Christian sectarian formation to emerge in Britain since the Pentecostal churches of Elim and the Assemblies of God were firmly established in the 1920s.

Before attempting to show the social and religious context that gave birth to Restorationists, I want first to examine their beliefs and identify the theological matrices in which they are situated. In doing this I want also to show that Restorationists do not perceive themselves as sectarian or fundamentalist.

Restorationism is a qualitative understanding by church members of the work of the Holy Spirit. They believe that the original church of the New Testament soon became corrupt through apostate doctrines and non-biblical ecclesiastical structures. Denominationalism is a work of Satan, and not in God's original plan for the church. The power of the Holy Spirit was withdrawn (becoming the *deus absconditus*) and the church fell into decay.

The Restorationists wish to return to, or restore, the New Testament pattern (as they understand it) of the early church. Church recovery began, they believe, with the Reformation and was then accelerated under the holiness spiritualties of Methodism and classical Pentecostalism. However, these movements failed to unite the church, and they perpetuated the sin of divisiveness because of a failure to adopt God's own government and plan for the rule of the church. For Restorationists, then, ecclesiology is a central concern. In order for genuine revivals of the Spirit of God to go beyond revivalism and become a true restoration of the early church, there has to be both Holy Ghost power and the rule of God's spiritual government.

This government, Restorationists teach, is based on an interpretation of holy orders outlined by Paul, with Ephesians 4:11–12 being the key text:

> And these were his gifts: some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip God's people for work in his service, to the building up of the body of Christ. (New English Bible)

From this leadership list Restorationists deduct that the church should be run by divinely appointed apostles, prophets, and elders. Furthermore, they hold to a doctrine of shepherding or radical discipleship whereby church members submit themselves to their accepted overseers and spiritual counsellors. Whilst discipleship practices are not logically entailed by apostleship doctrines, Restorationists tend to link the two together.

4. Numbers are notoriously difficult to estimate, but my earlier guesses of 70,000 to 100,000 were certainly too large.

The belief in apostleship as both a theological and an organizational principle, when married to paternalistic social relationships and a rejection of existing denominations, gives Restorationism its cutting edge, and distinguishes it ideologically from classical Pentecostalism and evangelicalism. To say that this distinguishes it also highlights how similar it is in all other respects to well-established Protestant evangelical sects.

The majority of Restorationist teachings are taken from Pentecostalism. The born-again experience is seen as the initiation into the church, and believers' baptism by total immersion is followed as a sign of Christian commitment. Restorationist eschatology is a development of the Adventism of Brethrenism and early Pentecostalism. The doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit with signs following is the same as traditionalist Pentecostalism in North America and Europe.

If Restorationists tend to focus more on demonology than their classical Pentecostalist counterparts, this reflects a growing tendency in the neo-Pentecostalism of the Charismatic Renewal movement (with which Restorationism is often confused).

Restorationists believe that they are living in the last days, and that they are in the vanguard of God's church. They believe also that the church—as defined by Restorationist principles—will grow to gigantic proportions. Starting as an alternative to the secular society, the Restoration kingdom—kingdom is a key principle for them—will eventually become a mountain[5] to fill the whole earth. When the kingdom is built on the charismatic guidelines of Restorationism, Christ the king will return to claim his inheritance. The kingdom is not only a spiritual concept, it is the place—the community—where God's reign is acknowledged and his rules obeyed.

This strong authoritarian note, of what I prefer to see as a theocratic or charismatic apostolate, is reflected in the structures of the Restorationist kingdom. Children submit to parents, wives to husbands, all to elders, elders to apostles, and apostles to each other. This covering,[6] as it is called, is not to be understood purely in traditional religious terms. To be covered means that you submit your whole life—religious, social, and economic—to your elders and apostles. Members of the kingdom cannot be part-time members. Commitment is total, and the idea of nominal Christianity is abhorrent to Restorationists.

The majority of Restorationists are biblical literalists, hold to a belief in the inerrancy of Scripture, are scornful of denominations, and tend towards

5. The "mountain" is the stone that smashed the image in Daniel's Old Testament vision (Dan 2:44). Restorationists interpret this as the church.

6. Covering means watching over, or protecting, and Restorationists take the term from the story of Japheth who covered Noah's nakedness (shame) (Gen 9:20–27).

social exclusivism. All this plus their triumphalism (as their opponents see it) seems like an obvious recipe for fundamentalism and sectarianism. Their belief that they live in the end-time and their very ahistorical sense of the church—there was the New Testament church and now there's us—confirms this suspicion. Personally, I am convinced that for now[7] Restorationism fits Bryan Wilson's sectarian category of restored churches.[8] This is so because restored churches act separately to and in competition with existing religious agencies, but in the name of universality and with a search for comprehensiveness that more resembles Troeltsch's notion of church than sect.

In other words, because of their behavior and activities (and some aspects of their theology) restored churches can be classified as sects even though they see themselves as churches, or the church, and seek to bring all men and women to it. Restorationists themselves vigorously deny the sectarian tag. So too did the two historical sects that Wilson cites as prototypical restoration churches: Catholic Apostolic Church and the Christian Brethren.

I cannot go into the close relationship between the earlier nineteenth-century restorationism and its present manifestation, but it is worth noting that Restorationists follow the church order and charismatic apostolate of the Catholic Apostolic Church and the evangelicalism, aggressive baptismal doctrines, anti-sacramentalism, and notion of universality of the Brethren. To be exact, the apostolic doctrines of Restorationists resemble those of the Catholic Apostolic Church, but they are interpreted in exactly the same way as they are by a small Pentecostalist sect, known as the Apostolic Church, that was established at Penygroes in South Wales before the First World War.

Only the shepherding doctrines, which in practice are intertwined with the charismatic apostolate, can be said to be new doctrines in Restorationist theology. They originate in the 1960s from the teachings of Juan Carlos Ortiz, an Argentinian, and his North American counterparts known as The Fort Lauderdale Five. The seriousness of commitment and the notion of covenanted relationships that such teachings entail, evokes the Puritanism of the sixteenth century when all Christians were exhorted to be saints. A phrase that aptly captures Restorationists is Pentecostal Puritans; they have all the fire and excitement of their Pentecostal counterparts, but with a level of commitment and totalitarian control not common in such sects.

7. The "for now" is crucial, for, as I argued recently in a paper at All Souls College, Oxford, restorationist sects are essentially one-generational.

8. Private conversation, but see Wilson, *Religious Sects*, 207.

It is the totalitarian control that has caught the media's eye in Britain and led to charges of brain-washing cult and pyramid structure. Whilst there have been numerous horror stories of aggressive and rough-shod behavior by leaders, it would be more accurate to describe Restorationism as benevolent paternalism rather than outright totalitarianism.[9] Feminists (and misogynists) would be interested to know that Restorationism is primarily patriarchal and all leaders in R1 are men. (Women elders have been known to exist in R2 but it is more tokenism than full acceptance of women leaders.)

Restorationism appeared to erupt on the British religious scene with the suddenness and mysteriousness of early morning mushrooms. By the late 1970s people started noticing that house churches were everywhere, and almost before their eyes this mycelial structure had taken root in virtually every part of the country. Within a short time, what I call the R1 branch of Restorationism could attract about 8,000 people to its annual presidential event at the Great Yorkshire Showground. The Dales Bible Week, as it was called, was matched by a similar—though smaller—even on the South Downs. The other branch of Restorationism, R2, was holding its own residential "Festival" week at the Staffordshire showground by 1983; over 4,000 people were resident in that year.

Many Restorationist communities in England contain several hundred persons. In Cobham in Surrey, Gerald Coates' (R2) community numbers over 400. Terry Virgo, apostle in R1, heads over forty churches with his "headquarters" in Hove, Sussex, holding meetings every week for 500 people. In Bradford, R1's Bryn Jones' leading church has some 500 people. Several other Restorationist churches can boast 200–300 members.

In June 1985, Bryn Jones became Britain's first electronic evangelist as he beamed the kingdom end-time message around Europe via satellite. The Harvestime organization, which is a commercial enterprise that supports Jones' apostolic team, has an annual turnover of about three-quarters of a million pounds. At just two "special offerings" taken in Wales and Yorkshire in 1985, the Bradford group in R1 raised £300,000.

And so, the question arises, where did this movement come from and how can we account for its great success in just ten years? What makes this question so compelling is that against the grain of most Pentecostal movements, Restorationism is primarily middle-class, boasting a fair sprinkling of the intelligentsia. It attracts a very high proportion of young families and a nearly equal balance of men and women.

9. Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom*, chapter 13.

In order to understand how Restorationism hit the religious world with such vigor and surprise, we need to see it against yet another form of fundamentalism—or reaction to modernity—the Charismatic Renewal movement. That this is part of a worldwide movement is attested to by its appearance in India.[10] In Britain, it was this Renewal (as it usually indexed) that unwittingly shielded the new sectarianism from public view, and also gave it its momentum.

A nascent yet unformed Restorationism had begun as early as the late 1950s. The pioneers, who were mainly from a Christian Brethren background, had become Pentecostalists by experience but refused to align themselves with the classical sects. When the Renewal movement began in the early 1960s, these independent itinerant Pentecostalists at first supported it. However, their outsider status left them out in the cold as far as leadership was concerned.

By the late 1960s, the Renewal movement was firmly ensconced in both Anglicanism and Catholicism. The little no-mans-land of independent churches and communities that had been pioneered by such men as David Lillie, Denis Clarke, Campbell MacAlpine, and Arthur Wallis[11] were not so much swept aside as buried beneath the surge of the Renewal. As the wave of neo-Pentecostalism engulfed whole sections of British churches, slowly, quietly, and virtually unseen, the house churches began to emerge.

Few noticed that as the house churches became partly absorbed into the Renewal—borrowing their liturgical mannerisms and singing their new songs—a new and distinctive Pentecostal movement was on the rise.

The Renewal in America and Britain in the 1960s was partly religious counter-culture, and partly the self-expressionism of hedonism. Like the hippy drug-culture, Renewalism was initially anarchic, and championed non-rational reality as the touchstone of authentic experience. But just as the hippies gave way to yippies, and serious political concern and social action replaced flowers and songs, so too did the Renewal movement attempt to move on from free-wheeling liturgies, singing in tongues, and charismatic happenings to a more theological and social expression of charisma.

This moving-on was not to the taste of the still small and unorganized house churches. Most of the people in these groups were lower middle-class and from evangelical yet sectarian backgrounds. They did not always approve of the style of liberal ecumenism of Renewal leaders. Nor did they feel happy with those who practiced infant baptism and who seemed lukewarm

10. See Caplan, "Fundamentalism as Counter-culture."

11. Only Arthur Wallis has survived in Restorationism from this group. He has never become an apostle.

concerning the inerrancy of Scripture. A number of Catholic Renewalists were neither evangelical nor conservative in their theology or politics. Would the revival disappear, wondered many of the charismatics who became increasingly restless on the sectarian fringes of the Renewal?

By 1970, in the Leprosy Mission hall, a group of leaders from the new (and still unformed) house churches began to meet, and they became known as the London Brothers. Their work, and their self-understanding, was given a significant boost by a political event.

In 1971, Peter Hill, himself a member of a house church, organized what Malcolm Muggeridge called the Festival of Light. This massive demonstration against the permissive society, and pornography in particular, attracted the house church people in droves. Many charismatics kept away from the Festival because they were wary of its right-wing political support, but the house church members came in great numbers, and began to realize just how many of them there were. Two leading apostles in R2, John Noble and Gerald Coates, insist that the 1971 demonstrations were a major stepping stone to the emergence of Restorationism.[12]

By the early 1970s the optimism of the 1960s had turned sour for religious and secular groups alike. There was a growing interest in the occult, and the successful return of the devil in such films as *The Exorcist* gave the charismatics—emerging from their anarchic phase—the sense that the world was irredeemably evil. The house-church Pentecostalists, with their roots (unlike many mainline charismatics) in evangelical Adventism, saw violence and sex as the marks of Satan's kingdom. What were the holy signs of God's kingdom, they began to ask?

It is unfashionable in anthropological and sociological circles to overstress the importance of charismatic personalities. This is sensible if we want to see charismatic authority as the truly social phenomenon Weber identified. Nevertheless, given the optimum conditions, and the openly expressed needs and fears of perturbed people, it is remarkable how often powerful leaders present themselves at the right time. This is what happened to the house churches in 1971. Shortly after the Festival of Light, under the urgency of an outbreak of Adventist enthusiasm, prophets and visionaries, who could discern the signs of the end-time, took over the leadership of the house churches. These men saw themselves as apostles and God's delegates in a new, glorious, restored church. Their self-selection was confirmed by inner conviction, and the outer signs of prophecy. Known originally as the Magnificent Seven, and later augmented to the Fabulous Fourteen,[13] it was

12. Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom*, 51–53.

13. Restorationists may be Pentecostal Puritans, but they are quite capable of

this oligarchy that gathered together the scattered house churches and took them forward into an organized and successful religious movement.

By 1974, the principles of Restorationism were almost complete, and for a time there was a generic Restorationist organization under the leadership of the fourteen. The fact that this organization divided in 1976 to form what I have called R1 and R2 does not detract from the success of the movements. They have continued to attract many disaffected Renewalists from the mainline churches; many of these people were middle-class, and included amongst their numbers significant defections from the Baptist Union, Evangelical Free Baptist churches, and the Christian Brethren.[14]

The fact that I have sought to understand Restorationism in relation to Renewalism should alert us to the possibility that taken together these movements are both a modern and middle-class mode of fundamentalism. Exclusivity, however, has not been a major feature of the Renewal, and R2 increasingly shows signs of abandoning it. The principle of inerrancy has not only been weak in the Renewal, but leaders in R2 have themselves been debating the issue and show some signs of relinquishing it.

As resistance movements to modernity, the Renewal and Restorationism would seem to share two similar characteristics, which I will call the need for certainty, and a search for catholicity. Restorationism, the most radical of the two movements, adds a further dimension missing in Renewal. This aspect of resistance I will term a call to community.

Protestant fundamentalism arose in the 1920s as a response to Darwinian and historical criticism. Renewalism and Restorationism have been a reaction to liberalism in the churches made popular by the publication of J. A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God* in 1963 and brought to a head by the debate concerning the incarnation and resurrection of Christ. But Restorationism in particular has also been a resistance to the social and moral changes wrought by the permissiveness of the 1960s.

The problem of neo-Pentecostalism is that instead of standing against social and religious disorder by falling back on rationalism and apologetical defense of Scriptures, it has swum with the tide of the 1960s' mood of authentic experience and the primary acceptance of non-rational reality over propositional and credal truths. Certainty, in short, resided in supernaturalism. The somber mood of the 1970s and 1980s has reawakened millennialism and the need to return to the Scriptures to test all things. In this respect, the developments of Restorationism more closely resemble the fundamentalism of the 1920s than the Charismatic Renewal. Both Renewalism

self-deprecation and satire.

14. Working-class members have also joined from Elim and the Assemblies of God.

and Restorationism share a desire for catholicity: the return of the Spirit is seen as necessary for the whole church. Unfortunately, for Renewalists, not all their fellow denominationalists see things this way, and therefore neo-Pentecostalism has been resisted and contained within the existing mainline structures. Anxious not to create a new sectarianism, Renewalists have opted to form grassroots interdenominational organizations: they meet in retreats, conventions, and conferences. It could be argued, of course, that this impressive inter-denominationalism is a barrier to true ecumenism and may be a sectarian implant in the heart of the historic churches.[15]

The Restorationists, as we have seen throughout this paper, have rejected reformism, and have burst out of the periphery of the mainline churches and other sectarian groups to try and build simply the church. Their search for catholicity, which is quite genuine and was a major motivation of the whole movement, was doomed to failure from the start, however. Indeed, the tragedy of Restorationism is that it is predicated upon contradictory goals: not only a desire for catholicity, but also a search for purity and certainty. The second goal traps and frustrates this catholicity leading to goal displacement. Like the Christian Brethren before them, Restorationist ideology turns out to be in practice the establishment of a voluntaristic and separatist movement.

Nevertheless, Restorationism has tapped a latent desire of Christians unreached by the Renewal movement. It offers not only (greater) certainty than the Renewal and an illusive catholicity: it creates community. No wonder that R1 and R2 are replete with young isolated nuclear families from the lower-middle and middle classes. In Cobham, for example, such young families form the dominant group. Restorationism offers nuclear families extended members, as the charismatics move next door to each other. And communities emerge (paradoxically) by association as kingdom people take over whole streets and share their lives together in relative isolation from the world. Crèches, doctors, insurance agents, skilled workers—a virtual service industry—are available to all members of the kingdom.

The communities promote camaraderie and a real sense of identity and belonging. Unlike many evangelical circles, divorcees are welcomed and able to remarry. Such a communal structure will only have a minority appeal in Western culture, where the myth of total autonomy and individualism is so strong. Nevertheless, as long as apostleship and the concomitant discipling methods continue as a form of paternal benevolence, most Restorationists

15. It remains to be seen whether the Renewal has a long-term future within the mainline churches. "Moving on with God" so often, in practice, means moving out of the institutional churches.

seem willing to cope and anxious to serve the leaders. An endemic problem of Restorationist discipling is that benevolence is never guaranteed.

CONCLUSION

If we wish to be worldly wise (and weary) no doubt we could simply say that Restorationism, and perhaps even the Renewal, is mere fundamentalism. For while I could clearly make out a good case that Restorationism loops back to the classical fundamentalism of the 1920s, I think it of greater significance that we should look at the sociological sensibility of Restorationism's resistance to modernity. It may be true that social scientists have overplayed the secularization thesis, but clearly while implicit religiosity abounds, institutional religion in the West seems unlikely to halt its decline. It is not the sects that are really under threat from the disengagement of broad churches from the arenas of political, economic, technological, and social life; it is the churches themselves.

Ever since Weber and Troeltsch saw the universal and comprehensive churches embracing the world, it could be argued with equal force that we have witnessed the world embracing the churches. The sacred and profane have become confusingly intertwined; theologians have adopted the secular tools of critical analysis, liturgy has become theatre, and a once anthropomorphic yet holy God has become simply *anthropos*. The fragmentation of the sacred world of Catholicism and early Reformism into a myriad of relative truths hardly seems a recipe for long-term survival in modernity.

The great historical and national churches of Christendom were created and established in organically functioning communities. Their cultural embeddedness can no longer be assured in the social and geographical mobility of industrial society. Sects, many of which are themselves a feature of modernity, see what a policy of open arms has done to the churches as they surrender to modernity. As sects seek to resist the merciless pressures of secularization and secular ideologies, they opt to shut out the world, ignore it, or re-affirm it in order to transfigure it.

The New Religious Political Right in North America is having to face the consequences of adapting the theological certainties of traditional fundamentalism to the vagaries of *realpolitik*. They would like to re-create the world as sect, but without the discipline of Islam and its purer vision, they seem to be fumbling like the Founding Fathers towards a new Jerusalem that is as safe and dull as a New England town.

For Restorationists in Britain, hovering between a pre-sectarian institutionalism and the establishment of a first-generational sect, their vision of

filling the whole world with the restored kingdom of God looks an even less likely bet than the establishment of "that old time religion" as the Puritan theocracy of the United States of America. But they are already too secure simply to blown away, and they will adapt their sectarian responses to modernity as circumstances dictate.

Perhaps the central question sociologists of religion and anthropologists should be asking is not will Restorationism and other new sects survive modernity? The question is: will the churches?