

Restorationist Manifesto

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The information age has opened up incredible opportunities to understand Christianity better. With unprecedented and unrestricted access to facts and opinions from disparate religious perspectives, sincere bible students have been increasingly questioning the typical doctrinal packages offered by many Christian groups today. No longer can the church (Roman Catholic or Protestant) control what people think by limiting access to alternative viewpoints or execute those who disagree with tradition. We've returned to the sort of milieu that characterized Christianity for its first three centuries, where believers holding to competing ideologies coexisted and competed for adherents on the basis of persuasion rather than coercion.

In addition to information access, prominent philosopher Charles Taylor has labeled our cultural moment, "the Age of Authenticity."¹ Many of us feel jaded in the aftermath of the repeated scandals of priests and pastors that have invalidated their claims to absolute authority. The great cry of Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) and the humanists, "ad fontes" (to the sources), once again resonates in the hearts of many. People are returning to the bible and early Christian history for guidance. We are entering an age of open and honest investigation of biblical truth like never before. Instead of defending Vatican II (1962-1965), Westminster (1646), or Nicea (325), the battle is increasingly focused on what the bible says about this or that issue. We live in a time ripe for restorationism—recovering authentic New Testament Christianity and living it out today.

Although precursors existed like the Lollards (14th c.) and Waldensians (12th c.), the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century marked the largest wholesale reconsideration of Christian faith and practice in history. The reformers wanted to get back to the sources—the scriptures and the church fathers—even if that contradicted church tradition or endangered their lives. They wanted to peel away the layers of scholasticism and medieval theology to reform Christianity back to its original shape. However, even if they made great strides, they didn't get all the way back to New Testament Christianity. They discarded the mass, celibate priesthood, prayers to saints, transubstantiation, and papal infallibility, scraping away layer after layer of dust that had accumulated on top of the bible. However, they settled for a fifth-century form of Christianity, essentially returning to Augustine of Hippo (354-430) rather than Paul of Tarsus (5-67). That's a 350 year gap! Why did Martin Luther (1483-1546), Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), and John Calvin (1509-1564), along with their successors, stop where they did? They must have had their reasons, but today most of us are no longer in danger of getting burned at the stake, beheaded, or drowned for our beliefs. Today we have unprecedented access to the bible both in translations and the original languages. Now, a half a millennium later, we are poised to take the next step, leaving behind allegorical hermeneutics, Neo-Platonism, asceticism, and divisive councils to recover authentic Christian faith and practice. Simply put, our goal is to evaluate our beliefs and practices in light of scripture, interpreted within its original context and applied to our own situations today.

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 473.

In what follows we'll consider (§1) the primary restorationist values, (§2) the means of restoring authentic Christianity, (§3) advantages of self-identifying as a restorationist, (§4) criticisms of restorationism, and (§5) avoiding pitfalls, before making a final appeal for restorationism as an overarching approach to Christianity.

§1 Restorationist Values

It's important to begin by making plain a number of key values that undergird the restorationist enterprise. Here are six prerequisites to the restorationist approach of recovering authentic Christianity.

1. We believe in biblical primacy.
2. We believe that scripture is intelligible.
3. We believe in biblical cohesion.
4. We deny that an idea's popularity guarantees its veracity.
5. We accept that restoring one doctrine or practice may disrupt others.
6. We believe that truth is better arrived at in community than alone.

1.1 Biblical Primacy

By virtue of God's inspiration, the scriptures have priority and authority over church leaders, creeds, councils, and confessions. Although God has worked with the church over the years, it's not always clear when a particular movement is of God and when it is erroneous. Consequently, the scriptures must be our guide to evaluating what popes, priests, bishops, pastors, and scholars have said. This was Martin Luther's central point at the Diet of Worms in 1521:

Unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of scriptures or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of pope or of councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning I stand convicted by the scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word."²

Therefore, if the bible and a particular tenet come into conflict, scripture always wins. John Wycliffe (c. 1324-1384) likewise thought, "On all domains, of doctrine and in life, the authority of scripture is to be placed higher than all human understanding, for it is God's word and as such the highest authority...It alone, without human traditions and statutes, is the only law that is to rule church...and Christian life."³ We must allow the bible to challenge our doctrines, creeds, traditions, and practices.

1.2 Scripture Is Intelligible

The bible is sufficiently clear as to make correct interpretation possible, even by untrained readers. We must remember that God often chose shepherds, farmers, and fishermen to write scripture. Furthermore, a majority of the bible contains historical narrative, making it accessible to people of all education levels. Even so there are some portions that are more difficult to comprehend. Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) put this position well when he wrote:

For all things [in the scriptures] are not equally perspicuous,⁴ nor is everything alike perspicuous to all persons; but in the epistles of St. Paul, some things occur which "are hard to be understood;" and "the gospel is hid, or concealed, to them who are lost, in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them who believe not." But those senses or meanings, the knowledge and belief of which are simply necessary to salvation, are revealed in the scriptures

² Henry Bettenson & Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 214.

³ John Wycliffe, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, trans. Rudolf Buddensieg, vol. 1, (London: Trübner & Co., 1905), pp. xxviii-xxix.

⁴ Perspicuous means intelligible or clear.

with such plainness, that they can be perceived even by the most simple of mankind, provided they be able to duly exercise their reason. But they are perspicuous to those alone who, being illuminated by the light of the Holy Spirit, have eyes to see, and a mind to understand and discern.⁵

Therefore, the bible is the God's book for all people, not solely educated specialists. God has so inspired scripture that the common person can understand it, at least to such a degree that makes salvation possible. But, even if anyone can grasp the rudiments of scripture, education in the fields of textual criticism, philology, exegesis, hermeneutics, and theology can greatly enhance and nuance one's understanding. Scholars are often a great help in understanding scripture, but they are fallible.

1.3 Biblical Cohesion

The bible has a harmony to it, because the same God speaks throughout it. The God of Ezekiel is not different than the God of Paul. There is only one God inspiring scripture, so we presume he is self-consistent. This means we can chase a doctrine throughout the canon and arrive at a cohesive perspective. This does not mean a doctrine or practice has to remain fixed throughout the history of redemption, but it does assume that the bible will not contradict itself along the way. Contrary to agnostic bible scholars and those who reject the scriptures' inspiration and authority, we believe God has spoken throughout. Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949), one of the fathers of biblical theology, wrote:

Thus, in harmony with the agnostic character of the philosophy of evolution, which claims that man can know phenomena only, the treatment of the science [of biblical theology] has been entirely subjectivized, so that our modern biblical theologians professedly deal, not with the progress of supernatural revelation, in which they do no longer believe, but with the development of subjective religion in biblical times, and devote their labors to the discovery and reproduction of a number of diminutive doctrinal systems, often contradictory among themselves, which they profess to find in the bible.⁶

This tendency among many biblical scholars around the world is at odds with our approach to scripture. We do not believe there are as many theologies as there are authors of scripture. Because there is one God speaking throughout scripture, doctrinal synthesis is possible, whether systematic theology or biblical theology.

1.4 Truth's Popularity

Just because an idea or behavior is in the majority does not determine its veracity. The Reformation could never have gained ground if the size of the movement determined its legitimacy. Already in the fifth century, Christian thinkers found the variety of interpretations troubling. In order to deal with the issue of heresy (i.e. different interpretations), Vincent of Lérins articulated his famous principle of catholicity, the Vincentian Canon in the year 434:

⁵ Jacobus Arminius, *Disputation 8: On the Perspicuity of the Scriptures*, paragraphs 3-5, *The Works of James Arminius*, vol. 2, trans. James Nichols (Buffalo: Derby, Orton, and Mulligan, 1853), pp. 20-21.

⁶ Geerhardus Vos, "The Nature and Aims of Biblical Theology," *The Union Seminary Magazine* 13/3 (February-March 1902): 194-199. R.C. Sproul heartedly agrees with Vos when he writes: "The presupposition is that Paul was not inspired by God when he wrote Galatians and Ephesians, so there is no overarching unity, no coherence, to the Word of God...That is a negative view of the coherence of scripture, and it is the danger when one focuses only on a narrow piece of the bible without at the same time considering the whole framework of the biblical revelation." R.C. Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2014), p. 11.

[W]e hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.⁷ For that is truly and in the strictest sense “catholic,” which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally.⁸

This is quite an ideal, probably rooted in the assumption that God would not let his church go astray *en masse*. However, even Vincent recognized the possibility that “some novel contagion [might] seek to infect not merely an insignificant portion of the Church, but the whole.” His advice is to “cleave to antiquity” and “prefer the decrees, if such there be, of an ancient general council to the rashness and ignorance of a few.”⁹ However, what if a novelty infected the body of Christ prior to the councils? Or, to sharpen the question, what if the early councils themselves contained contaminants? Vincent is not prepared to consider this possibility and neither were the reformers of the sixteenth century. However, as restorationists we cannot stop with conciliar Christianity, we feel compelled to go all the way back to Jesus and the apostles, regardless of what was popular or what now holds sway.

1.5 Disruption

Unless we already hold all truth accurately, we should expect to face the possibility that a cherished idea is wrong and in need of refining or jettisoning. Openness to accepting our errors is a prerequisite to the restorationist enterprise. Furthermore, since biblical doctrines are often interconnected, adjusting what we believe about one is likely to disrupt and challenge what we believe about others. For example, if a study group discovers that the bible contradicts the doctrine of eternal security, they may also need to reevaluate their belief in unconditional election.¹⁰ The restorationist accepts the disruptive nature of recovering authentic Christianity, even if it is a painful and disorienting process. Furthermore, we humbly accept that some doctrines may elude us.

1.6 Community

Truth is better discovered and vetted in community than alone. Although it’s certainly possible to investigate and arrive at biblical truth on one’s own, it’s also much easier to veer into error. The scripture encourages cooperation in maturing together:

Ephesians 4.15-16

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

We are all finite and blinded in some areas. Consequently, we need to challenge and correct one another with humility and grace. If an idea is correct, it will be able to withstand scrutiny and criticism. Alas, truth has nothing to fear.

§2 The Means of Restoring Authentic Christianity

Simply put, the restorationist’s goal is to grasp New Testament Christianity and live it out today. We pursue this goal through quality bible study (using the historical-grammatical method¹¹), doctrinal

⁷ *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*

⁸ Vincent of Lérins, *The Commonitory*, chapter 2, trans. C. A. Heurtley, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, vol. 11, ed. Philip Schaff (NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), p. 132.

⁹ *ibid.*, chapter 3.

¹⁰ Unconditional election is the belief that God predestines a select group of chosen people for salvation solely on the basis of his sovereign will.

¹¹ Restorationists use the historical-grammatical method rather than the historical-critical method because of our commitment to scripture as a holy text, inspired by God. Although those who use the historical-critical method desire to recover authorial intent, they often presuppose methodological naturalism and determine authenticity

synthesis (using biblical theology and/or systematic theology), and evaluating competing doctrines (using objective criteria of authenticity) to figure out which better fits with authorial intent.

2.1. Exegesis

Restorationists approach exegesis (bible study) with humility not smugness. We don't sit over the text, but under it. We don't tell it what we want to believe; instead, we listen to it, allowing it to challenge what we already think. We don't change scripture; it changes us. We welcome the bible to mess with our theology, recognizing that what the bible actually says always takes precedence over our tidy systematic theologies. Good exegesis is our best defense against the all too common practice of taking verses out of context while synthesizing doctrine. Furthermore, we invite God into the process from the beginning, believing that his spirit doesn't merely lurk beneath the surface of scripture via inspiration but it also hovers over the words on the page as well, aiding us while we read. Wouldn't it be negligent to read God's book and not petition him for illumination in the process?

Bible study is historical in nature. Although it's important to ask, "What does this mean to me today?" it is not the best starting point. Instead, we need to first sort out how the original audience would have understood a text. This means we need to do the hard work of attuning our ears to hear the words and understand the concepts the way they would have. This may include learning their language, their culture, their geography, their political situation, their history, etc. Our goal is to avoid anachronisms and misunderstandings by resisting the temptation to read from our own contemporary perspective by familiarizing ourselves with the worldview of the original audience. For more specific suggestions for quality exegesis see appendix 1.

2.2. Doctrinal Synthesis

Once again, the restorationist begins with humility. We do not presume that our traditional understanding of a particular doctrine is infallible and then find ways to interpret the bible to fit our mold. Rather, we begin with the admission that we might be wrong and we need God's help to think his thoughts after him.¹² Sometimes scripture resists strict systematic structures; other times, we discover a truth so simple that we can easily express its substance in a short phrase. A particular understanding may even elude us until Jesus returns and we know even as also we are known (1 Cor 13.9-12).

Our aim is to arrive at a truly biblical understanding of a particular subject. As a result, we begin by collecting all of the relevant texts on that subject. As we form our understanding, we seek a position that affords the greatest explanatory scope, takes into account developments that occur within the history redemption, and fits with the overall character of God as revealed in scripture. Community is incredibly important in this process. Of course, individual bible study has its place as well, but we would do well to present our ideas to other biblically-committed individuals and groups for analysis and critique. Finally, restorationists are not finished until they apply their understanding to reality. What good is it to arrive at a comprehensive and robust doctrine of forgiveness and then harbor bitterness

based on debatable historiographical criteria while closing their eyes to evidences of divine origin. The practitioner of the historical-grammatical hermeneutic sits beneath scripture while the one employing the historical-critical approach sits above the text, slicing and extracting which parts he or she deems factual. Although, the historical-critical hermeneutic is a type of restorationism, they do not self-identify as restorationists and their presuppositions deny multiple aspects of the restorationist's values in section 1.

¹² If Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), an astronomer, thought of his own research into God's general revelation written on the book of nature as thinking God's thoughts after him, how much more should we who study his special revelation seek to likewise discover God's thoughts rather than merely confirm our own?

towards an enemy? Our goal is not only to recover authentic New Testament Christianity, but also to live it out today by God's grace and in the power of his spirit. For more on doctrinal synthesis, see appendix 2.

2.3 Evaluating Doctrines

Even once we arrive at a particular doctrinal position, it's important to take into consideration both what others have said throughout church history as well as what Christians are saying today. We have to be careful to avoid the genetic fallacy: assuming an idea is worthy or absurd on the basis of its source. We must take care to evaluate doctrinal positions on the basis of their merits and in the light of scripture. This is the true Berean approach: neither accepting nor rejecting a message until we first check it against the scriptures to see if it is true (Acts 17.11).

Here, more than anywhere, restorationists diverge from so many other Protestants. Because we do not define ourselves by a particular creed or statement of faith, we are free to consider alternative theories whereas, a Calvinist, for example, ceases to be such the moment he or she embraces an Arminian view of free will. When comparing competing understandings, it's important to have some set of objective criteria to aid us in our task. Otherwise, fondness for tradition, a desire to prove it wrong, or other emotional concerns could easily guide us awry. These criteria are not likely to be absolute but rather a list of preferences. For example, we should lean towards a particular belief if we find it has advocates earlier in church history, has more supporting verses, has a broader explanatory scope, etc., than the alternative(s). (See appendix 3 for a provisional list of such criteria). These are preferences, because exceptions abound, but at least codifying some set of objective criteria can help avoid subjectivism.

§3 Self-Identifying as a Restorationist

3.1 A Stable Identity

Traditionally, we Christians label ourselves on the basis of our denominations (Catholic, Baptist, Church of God, etc.), meta-group (Protestant, Evangelical, Mainline, etc.), or doctrinal package (Arminian, Dispensationalist, Biblical Unitarian, etc.). However, depending on the starting point, a restorationist is not likely to remain in just one camp for long. For example if a Catholic comes to alter her beliefs about praying to Mary on the basis of bible study, she may join an Anglican church. However, if she comes to reject the notion of the state church in favor of voluntary assembly, she now attends a Baptist church. Now, she continues testing her beliefs against the bible and becomes convinced of soul sleep; she moves on to the Seventh Day Adventists. After a while she comes to disagree with them on keeping the Law of Moses, so she joins a house church that mostly just focuses on practical Christian living. So what is she? She was a Catholic, an Anglican, a Baptist, a Seventh Day Adventist, and now she doesn't have a denomination. Does that mean that the label "non-denominational" encapsulates her religious identity? Throughout her entire journey, she was consistently applying the principles of restorationism, asking the hard questions and judging the various understandings in light of scripture. Throughout it all, she's maintained the same posture towards truth and thus, she would do well to self-identify as a restorationist. This provides her with a stable identity throughout, regardless of what her particular conclusions happen to be along the way.

3.2 Evangelistic Advantages

Sometimes we self-identify as "Christians," "believers," or "Christ-followers." Although these designations are biblical and accurate, their lack of specificity often instigates a second question, such as, "What kind of Christian are you?" Here again the label "restorationist" has an advantage, for it allows us to describe our general approach to Christianity, which can potentially open up fruitful

dialogue. Furthermore, it bypasses denominational prejudices that our conversation partner might have. Here's a brief example of how a conversation might go:

After self-identifying as a restorationist, the other person will ask, "What's a restorationist?"

We can simply reply, "Someone who is on a quest to recover and live out authentic Christianity."

Now their interest is piqued, "What do you mean authentic Christianity?"

"Well, from what I've seen, the church has gotten off track from what Jesus and his apostles taught. I'm trying to get back to the original faith and find ways to live it out today."

"That sounds interesting. How do you go about doing that?"

"We have bible studies and meet together to learn from scripture what it really says. Would you like to come some time?"

In this mock conversation, the restorationist has skipped over all of the hidden mines that could blow up profitable dialogue and invited the other person to join in bible discovery.

3.3 *Ecumenism*

A third benefit for self-identifying as a restorationist is its potential to unify. With over 33,000 denominations in the world, it's hard to read Jesus' prayer for the church, "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17.21). Our divisiveness testifies to the world that Christianity doesn't work. We can't get along with each other. This is undoubtedly one of the hardest objections we face. Why are we so divided? Is it because of creeds, traditions, or is it just the color of the carpet? In a world fraught with **divisiveness** where shouting, fear, and outrage have replaced respectful dialogue, the church has an incredible opportunity to lead the way. As Barton Stone (1772-1844) said:

Why so much zeal in the present day, against authoritative creeds, party names, and party spirits? I answer for myself: because I am assured, they stand in the way of Christian union, and are contrary to the will of God....If we oppose the union of believers, we oppose directly the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, the spirit of piety, and the salvation of the world.¹³

Centuries later, the time is now ripe for an honest and courteous exchange among Christians of differing beliefs. Let us no longer cling to our denominational traditions over pursuing truth in a spirit of brotherly love. Let us no longer accept the old divisions that keep us apart, but reexamine them in light of holy scripture. Let's return to the bible—the one text that unites us all. "The motive behind all restoration movements," writes Rubel Shelly, "is to tear down the walls of separation by a return to the practice of the original, essential and universal features of the Christian religion."¹⁴ Since restorationism is not a denomination but a general posture towards discovering truth, it can easily foster unity without overturning local organizational structures already in place. Let's model a way of doing Christianity that pursues authenticity, facilitates dialogue, and seeks unity in an effort to show the world something beautiful and honest and real, something that testifies that the Father really did send the Son, and something that makes sense of life today.

¹³ Barton Stone. "Of the Family of God on Earth." *The Christian Repository*, June 1829, vol. 1, no. 6, NY, from the *Christian Messenger*, pp. 169-170.

¹⁴ Rubel Shelly, *I Just Want to Be a Christian*, (Nashville: 20th Century Christian, 1984), p. 29.

§4 Criticisms of Restorationism

At a recent conference sponsored by The Gospel Coalition, Kevin DeYoung, a Reformed theologian and pastor, offered the following criticisms of restorationism:

We do not interpret scripture apart from creeds, confessions, and the traditions of the church. It is not *solo scriptura*, meaning scripture and we do not open another book. Some of you may come from churches or perhaps you even think this yourself. You might say there is no creed but the bible. Sounds nice. Sounds spiritual. And it actually sounds like a creed. We believe in the bible and our creed, “No creed but the bible.” No, we are willing humbly to climb on the shoulders of giants and to learn from what those who have gone before have taught and have understood. We ought to put the burden of proof on those who would overturn the historic consensus of the church whether it’s related to sexuality or to the deity of Christ. We aren’t assigning ourselves to utter interpretive chaos. We aren’t claiming to start all over. We are willing to learn and rely on others. This is always the fatal flaw in restorationist movements in church history. Those movements who say, “You know what, I’m just getting back to the bible, just me and the bible, nothing else.” Just zipping back to the first century like nothing has happened in 2,000 years. Like I’m not at all influenced by my own culture. Like I have nothing to learn from Athanasius or Augustine or Luther or Calvin or any of the Christians who have come before. As if the holy spirit has not been at work in the church. “And I’m just going back, me and the bible.” Even if that were desirable, it is not possible.¹⁵

4.1 Restorationists Naïvely Want to Return to an Idyllic Golden Age

DeYoung’s critique, though brief, can serve as an outline of typical criticisms leveled against the restorationist enterprise. We’ll consider several of these objections in turn. First of all, let’s address the issue of when we are seeking to go back to so we can recover authentic Christianity. Should we go back to the 30s when Jesus and his followers all kept Torah? Do we return to the 60s when Paul’s epistles revealed that Gentile converts did not need to get circumcised and practice the Law? Or, do we draw the line with the end of the first century? But then we may have to include the *Didache* or *1 Clement*. Considering how difficult dating the various books of the New Testament is, perhaps it’s best to forget about the exact year and just recognize the inspiration and authority of the historic canon of the New Testament. Our return then is not to a specific community or date, but to the totality of scripture in its final form. This is not such a radical idea. Much of the efforts of Martin Luther during the Reformation pursued the same goal, jettisoning post-biblical developments on the charge of papal and conciliar innovation. Even so, modern Lutherans are decidedly not restorationists today, as evidenced by the following critique from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS):

The appeal for unity in the church by restorationists, in the Lutheran view, often reveals a naïve understanding of the state of the early church...Contrary to popular perception, at no period of its history did the external church enjoy some kind of pristine, idyllic unity free of divisions.¹⁶

Indeed, the early church was fraught with controversy over eating sacrificed meats (1 Cor 8, 10), distinguishing gender roles (1 Cor 11), speaking in tongues (1 Cor 12, 14), and accepting resurrection (1 Cor 15), just to name a few. Restorationists do not claim the first century church was perfect, but we do recognize the resolutions contained in scripture are authoritative. We believe we should have much greater unity than we currently have, but we are not so idealistic as to expect total harmony before Christ returns.

¹⁵ Kevin DeYoung, “If the Bible Is So Clear, Why Are There so Many Different Interpretations,” lecture April 4, 2017, The Gospel Coalition 2017 National Conference, Indianapolis, IN.

¹⁶ “Restoration Movement: History, Beliefs, and Practices” Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, December 2005, p. 3, at <https://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=726&DocID=391>, accessed May, 2, 2017.

4.2 Restorationists Skip over Church History

A second criticism is that restorationism is arrogant, because it skips over church history, dismissing it as irrelevant, as if we have nothing to learn from those who came before us, as if God has not been at work within the church over the centuries. Admittedly there are extreme forms of restorationism that hold this position (e.g. Mormons, the Way International, etc.), but this is not the position we've staked out here. In fact, it's just the opposite. We do not believe in a model of complete purity in the first century that suddenly changed to total apostasy at the turn of the second. We could only sustain such a position if we were wholly ignorant of church history. Recalling our method for evaluating doctrines (§2.3), one of the criteria of authenticity is the antiquity of an idea. Generally speaking, earlier is better. If anything, restorationists have a greater impetus to study the history of Christianity, as we analyze doctrinal trajectories, tracing their developments over time, either from the present backwards to their earlier forms or from the New Testament forwards. J. D. Hall put the other aspect of this objection as follows:

Those engaging in restorationism deny the continuity and miraculous nature by which Christ has built his church, and denies [*sic*] the church has been built by Christ, rather assuming the true Church of Christ has been lost throughout history and must be refound.¹⁷

Honestly, unless Hall is himself a Catholic, he shouldn't speak in this way.¹⁸ Restorationists are keeping to the Protestant motto, *semper reformandum* (always reforming), in our ongoing quest to recover and practice authentic Christianity. We recognize that God has repeatedly moved in his church throughout time, however, it's often unclear when a particular movement is of God or merely human. Our only way of knowing this is by comparing what leaders and writers said in light of scripture. In other words, the restorationist enterprise is how we can detect God's fingerprints throughout the eons of church history. We contend this objective standard is much more helpful than simply preferring our own particular historic tradition while ignoring or marginalizing others.

4.3 Restorationism Leads to Interpretive Chaos

Thirdly, as DeYoung put it, restorationism leads to "utter interpretive chaos." He sounds like he wants a magisterium, like, say, the Roman Catholic Church, to control interpretation. Ironically, this was precisely the argument British Latinists made against William Tyndale (1494-1536) when he dared translate the bible into the vulgar tongue. John Piper explains the kinds of arguments the Church of England employed against Tyndale's English translation:

The surface reasons were that the English language is rude and unworthy of the exalted language of God's word; and when one translates, errors can creep in, so it is safer not to translate; moreover, if the bible is in English, then each man will become his own interpreter, and many will go astray into heresy and be condemned; and it was church tradition that only priests are given the divine grace to understand the Scriptures; and what's more, there is a special sacramental value to the Latin service in which people cannot understand, but grace is given.¹⁹

¹⁷ J.D. Hall, "Sub-Christian Teachings: Restorationism," October 1, 2016 at <http://polemicsreport.com/2016/10/01/heresies-restorationism>, accessed March 21, 2017

¹⁸ As it turns out Hall is a reformed Baptist.

¹⁹ John Piper, "Always Singing One Note—A Vernacular Bible: Why William Tyndale Lived and Died," sermon, 2006 Desiring God Conference for Pastors, manuscript and audio available at <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/always-singing-one-note-a-vernacular-bible#what-it-cost-tyndale-to-translate-the-bible>, accessed May 3, 2017.

Does DeYoung wish for us to return to a Latin bible so only qualified scholars and ecclesiastical hierarchy can interpret it for the rest of us? Restorationists accept the danger of misinterpretation with trepidation and humility. It is precisely our recognition of our own fallibility that leads us to challenge long-held and cherished beliefs in the light of scripture. If God inspired scripture and illuminates it via his spirit when we read it in faith, then why should we presume the result would be “utter interpretative chaos?” If we honestly survey the various denominations and sects of Christianity today, we have already arrived at interpretative chaos. Reading scripture honestly is the only way out.

4.4 It's Impossible to Embody Primitive Christianity

Lastly, I want to consider the objection that it's impossible to return to first century Christianity, because too much history has happened in the interim and our world is too different today. They didn't have electricity, the internet, or calculus. They lived on another continent, spoke different languages, and dealt with Roman imperialism. Even if we took our cue from the Amish, we would still have a hard time erasing our modern mental sensibilities about time, individualism, human rights, and egalitarianism. Thankfully Christianity is not limited to a particular *Sitz im Leben* (culture and setting). In the first generation of the Jesus movement, the faith spread to people with different languages, geographies, and political situations. For example, Paul's epistles to the Corinthians work through issue after issue where people's ideology and methods had to change in light of the gospel. The truth of scripture doesn't conform to a particular culture; rather believers must be transformed by the renewing of their minds to get on board with God's will (Romans 12.2). Our goal is not to embody the world of New Testament Christianity, but New Testament Christianity itself. Thankfully, the faith transcends particularities like language and technology. To those who say this is impossible, we reply, “Watch us.”

§5 Avoiding Pitfalls

5.1 Absolute Restorationism

Restorationism if applied in an absolute manner is too sharp a knife, for it cuts off not only all of the other branches of the tree of faith, but even the one we sit upon. If our goal is “no creed but the bible” and to limit ourselves to what the primitive church thought, then we cannot even self-identify as restorationists, since they themselves didn't. Thus, even the name “restorationist” is self-defeating. However, this is only a problem if we say we reject all knowledge other than what the bible teaches. Such absolutism has in the past plagued the American restorationist movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Upon reading the New Testament and noting the absence of musical instruments and missionary societies, they decided to forgo them both in their quest for authenticity. However, they did not reject pews or eye-glasses, which are likewise left out of the bible. This kind of negative restorationism bars more than is necessary. If the bible doesn't forbid something, then we need to use what the bible does teach to evaluate it and accept it or reject it.

5.2 Prescriptive vs. Descriptive

Another pitfall of restorationism is failing to distinguish between texts that are prescriptive and descriptive. Some charismatic groups who use the name “apostolic” are restorationists seeking to recover the supernatural ethos of early Christianity. However, we need to be careful when reading biblical narratives such as those in Acts. We need to distinguish between what the bible prescribes and what it describes. For example, when Peter condemned Ananias and then Saphira, resulting in their sudden deaths, does that mean we should likewise seek divine execution of those who misrepresent their offerings today? Because Peter and John healed the beggar at the temple, does that mean that walking past a homeless man today without commanding him to stand up in the name of Jesus is a sin? Should we all take collections and send them to the church in Jerusalem like Paul did on his missionary journey? These all occurred in Acts, but they are not prescriptive, they merely describe what the first

generation of Christians did. This is tremendously helpful in that it provides an example and shows us some possibilities, but we need to be open to God's leading us today, just as they were in their day (i.e. Peter visiting Cornelius).

Final Appeal

Restorationism is not a newfangled idea, but an impulse seen throughout the history of Christianity from Vincent of Lérins to John Wycliffe to Martin Luther to Joseph Marsh to Alexander Campbell to William Seymour. Evaluating our beliefs and practices in light of scripture should be as noncontroversial as attending a church service. However, we tend to erect artificial boundaries around interpretation, hemming ourselves into certain "orthodox" perspectives. However, most of these boundaries resulted more from politicking and rhetoric than from solid exegesis and open dialogue. Taking a stroll through major theological decisions of the past, we observe divisiveness and exclusion rather than a pursuit of truth or harmony. Alexander of Alexandria used the Council of Nicea (325) to condemn Eusebius and Arius; Cyril manipulated the Council Ephesus (431) to usurp Nestorius; Chalcedon (451) split off Alexandrian Christians (known today as the Coptic Orthodox Church). Protestantism didn't do much better. The Peace of Augsburg (1555) allowed for only two options: Catholicism or Lutheranism, excluding the Anabaptists. The Westminster Confession (1646) came about amidst the British Civil Wars as a power play to force the Church of England to accept Puritanism. Over and over again, these major decisions did not occur in an atmosphere of mutual respect, hearing both sides, and sober biblical, historical, logical, and experiential analysis (cf. Wesleyan Quadrilateral). Rather, those who shouted the loudest or who held the most power won the day. But, we can do better! We need not condemn ourselves to go on repeating the same mistakes, generation after generation.

Restorationism is not only the key to the past, but it is also the way to the future. This approach helps us arrive at historic biblical truth and it provides a way forward for Christians of various denominations. We are not calling anyone to leave their group, but to be an agent of change from the inside (if possible). Rather than starting a new denomination, let's infiltrate the existing ones to challenge them to get back to the bible. Each one of us needs to read the bible on our own, but we also need to gather in groups to test out our ideas. Sadly, good models for disagreeing constructively are rare. Even so, let's find a way to do this. Let's hold debates and really listen to both sides. Let's write books that genuinely engage multiple perspectives. Let's hold gatherings where advocates for differing perspectives can argue it out in a spirit of Christian love. Let's show the world that Christ-followers are different than the politicians, celebrities, and ideologues. If only we could learn to have open dialogue across doctrinal, denominational, and traditional lines, the Church with all of her sects and divisions could move closer and closer to truth and unity—towards *Christianismi Restitutio* (the restoration of Christianity).

Appendix 1: A Suggested Approach to Exegesis (Bible Study)

Here is a brief list of suggestions for quality exegesis:

- Ask God for help to illuminate scripture through his spirit.
- Establish the text. Check for manuscript variants. It is best to read in original languages, but if this is not possible, then compare multiple literal translations.²⁰ Good translations will footnote any significant differences.

²⁰ If time doesn't permit for learning Hebrew and/or Greek, then one can work from a good literal translation with footnotes indicating when the translators had difficult decisions to make like the ESV, NET, NASB, NRSV, HCSB, and NAB.

- Exercise humility. Don't presume what you've always thought a text means is actually what it means. Sit under text not over it. The goal is to draw the meaning out of the text, rather than reading your ideas into it.
- Read charitably. Assume the author is not self-contradicting or proposing an absurdity.
- Be honest. Let the bible challenge your theology and sensibilities.
- If possible determine the author(s), occasion, and audience.
- Interpret the text according to genre (law, history, poetry, etc.)
- Interpret within the biblical context. How does this verse fit within the paragraph, the chapter, the section, the book, the author's corpus, and the canon?
- Interpret within the historical context. Familiarize yourself with the world of the author so that you hear the text like the original audience.
- Look for quotations and allusions of the Old Testament and see what function they play in the New Testament.
- Consult good commentaries. Watch out for overly skeptical commentaries that focus on criticizing rather than understanding the bible. If possible read multiple commentaries to see what various scholars say about a text.

Appendix 2: A Suggested Approach to Doctrinal Synthesis (Biblical Theology)

Here is a brief list of suggestions for formulating a cohesive doctrine:

- Ask God for help to illuminate scripture through his spirit.
- Be willing to change if the preponderance of the biblical evidence turns out to challenge what you currently believe. The truth has nothing to fear.
- Don't insist on figuring everything out. It's better to live with uncertainty when it comes to a particular doctrine or practice than to force yourself to adopt a position that you know is flawed.
- Collect all the verses on the subject. This is best achieved by reading through the entire bible with your particular doctrine in mind. Alternatively, the internet or bible software can aid you in discovering the relevant texts.
- Take into consideration the history of redemption. In other words, don't insist that something must remain unchanged from an earlier part of the bible to a latter section.
- Work to arrive at a position that has the greatest explanatory scope.
- Include others in your study. Invite criticism of your position. Iron sharpens iron (Prov 27.17).
- Figure out how to live this out today. What good are beliefs if we don't apply them to our lives?

Appendix 3: A Suggested Approach to Evaluating Competing Doctrines

A doctrine or practice is more likely to be authentic if it

1. is multiply attested (i.e. has more supporting verses)
2. can be derived directly from scripture
3. leaves fewer difficult texts to be explained
4. coheres with the historical context; rejects anachronisms
5. is older (newer ideas are less likely to be genuine)
6. has a broader explanatory scope