
Book Reviews

What on Earth is the Church For?

Martin Reardon

British Council of Churches and Catholic Truth Society 1985

54pp £1.00

This attractive production of large page size (half as big again as *Foundations*) is the study course booklet for Lent '86. It was to be used in conjunction with broadcasts from 50 local radio stations and the whole scheme is only one part of the Inter-Church Process called 'Not Strangers But Pilgrims'. There are clear headings, suggested Bible readings, questions for discussion and a questionnaire for readers to return to register personal views. Photographs illuminate the pages although some will question the taste of the cartoons.

Called a 'resource book', it covers five questions, Why believe in God? What did Jesus come for? Why did the Church begin? Why different Churches? and What now? There is more material than any discussion group could cover in one evening but it genuinely aims to get people thinking and learning. It must be said that much good material is included, as when the 18th century Revival in Wales is said to have 'greatly stimulated the growth of evangelical religion based on powerful preaching, individual conversion and shared subsequent experience' (p.36). The use of the adjective 'cosmic' is an appropriate modernisation for the universal Church. So much of what is said about the

Church is valid and true, if one could assume that it is the genuine body of the redeemed who were being so described.

Evangelicals, however, will be far from happy with the perspective of the approach. Despite extensive reference to and quotation from Scripture the theological interpretations of biblical writers are called into question. They are revered 'like the paintings of old masters but centuries of grime and retouching have dulled their colours'. 'The words of Scripture, which originally helped the reader or hearer to grasp the Gospel, can today sometimes actually obscure it' (p.16). Time and time again biblical truth is stated, only to be qualified and its effect denied. 'Paul claims that we are justified (acquitted, declared righteous) not as a result of our fulfilling all the demands of the Law, but through our faith in Christ.' But a few lines later we read, 'Moreover, this justification is not something outside ourselves, achieved without us' (p.16). Here, too, we find the outright rejection of genuine atonement, 'Through his self-sacrifice Jesus is not propitiating an angry Father' (p.17). Conversion to Christ is said to mean that, '... we become conscious that we have been saved by Christ's life, death and resurrection; and that in response and by God's help we trust him and try to follow him in everything' (p.48). There is no mention of becoming conscious of sin and repenting, instead we become conscious that we have already been saved!

The interpretation of Matthew 16:18 and 19 as referring to Peter personally is said to be accepted by 'Christians generally' (p.21) and the Roman Church of the fifth century to have 'established a primacy of right and jurisdiction over other churches in the West, based on the promises to Peter recorded in the Gospels' (p.31). Roman Catholic churches are, incidentally, fully involved in this project.

It would be easy to find further fault with this glossy guide but for myself I take it as something of a rebuke to those of us who are unlikely to read or use it. How many ministers of churches outside the ecumenical stream would ever dream of putting the last question on the last page to

their members? 'List things you think the churches in your neighbourhood should be doing together' (p.54). The motivation for this course is not academic. Its goal is unity for mission. Its burden is to reach the nation and the world. None of us would want to deny that this is what the Church is on earth for. The tragedy is that whilst ecumenically-minded Christians are putting so much effort, time and money into promoting spurious unity based on an inadequate, if not false Gospel, those who know better do so much less.

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Restoring the Kingdom

Andrew Walker
Hodders
303pp £5.95

This is a fascinating and important book. Subtitled "The radical Christianity of the House Church Movement", it is not an examination of the charismatic movement generally, nor of the whole 'house church' scene, but of that particular part of it which the author identifies as 'the Restoration' or 'the kingdom people'.

Whether or not we have one or more of these churches in our backyard, none of us can afford to ignore this development in the contemporary Christian scene. Even if we might wish to, few of us will be allowed to do so for long. "Not since the Pentecostal movements of Elim and the Assemblies of God

were established in the late 1920s has such a distinctive and indigenous grouping arrived on the religious scene". The present membership is 30,000 or more, and growing fast. Members of our churches, not least our young people, are bound sooner or later to encounter Christians who are committed to it or influences which flow from it. They will be urged to attend their Bible weeks or festivals and to read their books and magazines. Restorationist songs and choruses are prominent in most selections of contemporary material, including those used in, or even produced by, non-charismatic churches. So, at the very least, we need to know what is going on and what is being taught and practiced. Better still, we need to address ourselves seriously to some of the questions raised by the emergence of this movement over the past 20 years.

Not least is this important for those of us in the 'BEC constituency' since some of the basic concerns and emphases are strikingly similar to our own. We need to be clear wherein we differ.

Part of the fascination of this book — and its usefulness — lies in the background of its author. At present director of the C.S. Lewis Centre, he describes himself as a professional investigator of charismatic groups for the past 15 years. He was brought up in a Pentecostal church of which his father was a minister. He is now a member of the Russian Orthodox Church and their representative, for example, of the Inter-Church Programme set up recently by the British Council of Churches as a new initiative to promote Christian unity. Whatever the reasons for his own spiritual migration, it does mean that he has intimate knowledge and sympathetic understanding of conservative evangelicalism, pentecostalism and the charismatic movement. One has the feeling his heart is still where his roots were. We have then an author who can address the subject matter with that measure of objectivity that comes from being an outside observer, yet with a degree of understanding that could only be possessed by an insider.

The resultant book is, so it seems to me, something of a model. If you are looking for something that will leave the Restoration in tatters, you'll be disappointed; maybe even angered. But that will be your fault not the author's. In seeking to provide a critical assessment of the movement he has done his homework well, not least by having a very

considerable amount of personal contact with its leaders with whom he seems to have established relationships of mutual respect. He is well aware of some of the accusations made against some of these men and the movement as a whole. But he does not go in for hearsay or exaggeration. His researches have indicated to his satisfaction that some of the charges cannot be substantiated. Others he thinks may be but he has discussed them with the leaders concerned before going into print. He is clearly concerned to be rigorously fair. He is willing to commend as well as to criticise. "Restorationists have not persuaded me that their song is one I want to sing but I have been deeply impressed by many of the singers. They won my respect by the quality of their life". Those of us who stand closer to, and feel more threatened by, restoration churches may find it hard to be so dispassionate. But we have much to learn from Dr. Walker's basic attitude and approach and, not least, his distinction between people and issues. Dr. Lloyd-Jones used to tell us to be tolerant towards people, intolerant towards their false ideas. We have often not done well at heeding his advice.

The very spirit of the author gives the greater weight to such criticisms as he does offer and the facts he relates without comment. He does not attempt a detailed theological or Biblical critique of Restorationism and nor shall I. His book is descriptive rather than prescriptive. It provides a situation map and will enable many of us to put together the main features of the jigsaw puzzle of which we may have picked up any number of separate pieces over the past few

years. The movement is traced from its beginnings in the 1960s to its blossoming in the 1970s. It is also related to its roots (as Walker sees them) in Irvingism, Brethrenism and Pentecostalism. We are given thumb nail sketches of many of its leaders — Arthur Wallis, Bryn Jones, John Noble, Gerald Coates, George Tarleton (one-time apostle now no longer associated with the movement) and many others. At times the story suggested to me that the law of the jungle has operated within it. But would evangelical independency fare any better under similar investigation?

The use of the term ‘the movement’ by this review would be one the author would not altogether accept. Since a major split in 1976 he sees the Restoration consisting of two main groups of churches which, for convenience, he dubs R1 and R2. R1 is the more structured as well as the larger of the two and consists of churches that relate to Bryn Jones, his 500-strong church at Bradford and his fellow apostles including Terry Virgo and Tony Morton in the south. R2 is used to cover churches with a looser association with one another, yet recognising the leadership of such men as John Noble, Gerald Coates and David Tomlinson. Although the churches and leaders of R1 and R2 have at present little to do with, and are openly critical of, each other, both share and propagate certain distinctive emphases and outlooks. They see themselves as called to establish the Kingdom of God on earth in readiness for the imminent return of the King. Hence the triumphalism in the songs and that strange phrase “kingdom authority”. Denomina-

tions are not in God’s plan. If we want to be where the action is (that is, where God is working) we need to be amongst the Restorationists. Vital to the fulfilment of their task is a return to New Testament church order, including as they see it, apostles, prophets and elders. The apostles are in a different category to the 12 disciples but in the same one as Paul. Arising from this, but also very much as a result of American influence, is the emphasis on submission, shepherding, discipleship and delegated authority. Everybody must be ‘covered’ by somebody. According to Dr. Walker this is not quite the pyramid it sounds like. I wonder. The importance of spiritual gifts in worship and church life goes without saying.

All of this brings us to the points at which the concerns and the emphases of the Restorationists appear to touch ours within the B.E.C. We too have heard the call to scrub church history, return to square one and re-form the church on a New Testament foundation and pattern. We also claim that the Bible is our sole authority for church life and relationships no less than for any other aspect of Christian belief and practice. Many of us, like them, insist that the true church consists of the regenerate only. When we read “to become a restorationist is to adopt a total way of life” we surely react by saying that that is **our** understanding of living a consistent Christian life; we don’t want to settle for anything less. We too are concerned for true church unity, for a unified testimony to the Gospel, and see the fellowship of which we are part as the proper focus for that unity; on occasions people have even been urged to

leave their denominations to join us. Yet, despite all this in common, and only partly because of differences with regard to the possession and exercise of spiritual gifts, most of us feel poles apart from Restorationism. Indeed we might feel, especially if we have attended some of their gatherings, that we live in a different world. Even the air we breathe seems to be different. Why is this? Is it fact or fantasy? Is there room for rapprochement (some leaders in R2 seem to be seeking this) or is there reason to build our defences higher? What are the really important differences between us? And is there any sense in which this movement has arisen because of our failure? What can we learn to emulate or avoid?

This book will not answer these questions — but it will be a powerful help in thinking about them. Let me suggest a few lines of thought. Firstly, for many of us at least, the contention that there are modern day apostles appears both unbiblical and dangerous. Ephesians 4:11 (to which Restorationists turn for support) must be understood in the light of Ephesians 2:20. *Foundations* may be published often but they only need to be laid once! Whatever the disclaimers, this particular claim along with the prominent place given to prophets and

prophecy has led some to question the uniqueness and sufficiency of Scripture. It harmonises well with the frequently heard distinction between God's 'now' word and his 'then' word. That of course is not unique to the Restorationists. But their particular emphasis on apostles reinforces it. In the restorationist system it is also closely linked with the shepherding doctrine which seems to sail perilously close to putting subjection to man in the place of subjection to God. In their view the former is but an outworking of the latter. But, in practice, is not the impression given that if someone further along, or higher up, the way is in closer touch with God than I am, then I simply have to do what they say? Shades of Roman Catholicism and Exclusive Brethrenism! Furthermore, the insistence on the acceptance of a particular form or church order and of particular church leaders as a basis for unity is a totally different view to that accepted among us.

But I am getting into a review of Restorationism rather than this excellent book about it! Read it for yourself and do your own thinking.

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The end of all particular churches is the edification of the church catholic, unto the glory of God in Christ. And that particular church which extends not its duty beyond its own assemblies and members is fallen off from the principal end of its institution; and every principle, opinion, or persuasion, that inclines any church to confine its care and duty unto its own edification only, yea, or of those only which agree with it in some peculiar practice, making it neglective of all due means of the edification of the church catholic, is schismatical.

John Owen
Works, Vol.16, p.196