# THE TREATMENT OF BRETHREN

**WHEN DIFFERENCES ARISE IN**

**TEACHING, FAITH, AND PRACTICE**

**AMONG CHRISTIANS**

**IN THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT**

# Introduction

The best book relevant to the Restoration is the New Testament. From my perspective, any study of the movement that does not begin and end with the New Testament is an exercise in futility. There is no doubt that cultural enrichment may be gained from studying Restoration history. Certainly a measure of academic satisfaction may be attained by studying the movement as an intellectual objective, as an exhibition of well-disciplined scholarship, or as a purely historical achievement, somewhat like a study of the Roman Empire or Jacksonian Democracy.

Much that passes for Restoration study is of little value to those interested in an actual restoration of apostolic Christianity. It is about like what archaeologist Tom King said about the search for or the fate of Emelia Earhart. “I don’t think this has any redeeming social significance. It’s an intellectually engaging form of recreation.”1 But to those committed to following the apostolic order, a study of the Restoration is not and should not be an end within itself, but rather it is a search for divine truth as it is exhibited in the lives of men and women of the past who were devoted to restoring New Testament Christianity.

I do not mean that enlightened histories of the Restoration Movement by scholars, regardless of their purpose, are not important. In fact, they are essential to those of us who have neither the means, opportunity, nor ability to do extensive research in original sources. But I simply mean that for me a study of the Restoration, or any aspect of it, or to take up your time talking about it, must be constantly weighed in the light of New Testament teaching. In other words, in the light of apostolic precepts, principles, and patterns, as they have been practiced, with varying degrees of success, by men and women of the past who seriously tried to imitate the apostolic order.

Any objective study of the Restoration will show that the movement has been encompassed by controversy from its beginning. Controversy reaches into every generation and touches every aspect of the movement. This is disturbing and disheartening to the apprentice student of the Restoration. It is also unsettling to one who has studied it for a long time. While there are many exhilarating moments in Restoration history, we also find that, as a Texas professor said about history in general, history is “really messy.”

What is most discouraging is to realize that, in spite of its many successes, internal controversy is one of the greatest defects of the movement as a whole. Brethren simply have had great difficulty keeping “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Controversy has become such an engrained part of the movement that some seem to think that if they do not promote some sort of controversy, they are not being faithful to the Lord. I am not sure but that some issues have been manufactured from that premise. I am reasonably certain that some have been raised for purely partisan or personal reasons.

**The Certainty of Controversy**

Yet, controversy within a movement such as this is inevitable. There are several reasons for this.

(1) Christianity itself is a confrontational religion. It is fundamentally a battle between Christ and Satan, and consequently between Christians and the world. While this should be a uniting feature of Christianity, in practice it is divisive because the devil continually goes about seeking whom he may devour, in the church and out. If the church is to maintain its purity, it must oppose all within its membership that is contrary to the will of Christ and there is never a time when there is not an abundance of problems to keep conflict alive.

(2) The Restoration arose among men and women of different backgrounds and even though able to agree on common principles and ideals, it is not possible for people to completely divorce themselves from their past. This was a source of conflict in the early years of the movement, and it has continued to be such among its adherents. Even where brethren are in general accord and fellowship, there are individuals and sub- groups, or congregations, that hold beliefs and practices that create conflicts.

(3) The early restorers rejected human creeds in religion and accepted the New Testament alone as their guide. They also rejected extra-congregational organizations that claimed any authority over churches or Christians. Without any human creed to define teaching and practice, and without any hierarchy to enforce uniformity, or to maintain discipline, there was simply no organic control of churches or individuals within the movement, such as is characteristic of most denominational churches. For this reason, Alexander Campbell feared absolute congregationalism. True, some brethren, editors, and religious journals have attempted to fill this void with what they regard as the maximum and minimum doctrines and practices that are to be tolerated, and have sought to impose their views in any and all controversies. But, thankfully, congregational independence has been stubbornly maintained by a significant number of congregations.

(4) A fundamental and deeply cherished principle of the Restoration, reaching back at least to the time of Thomas Campbell’s “Declaration and Address,” has been every person’s right to read, study, and interpret the Scriptures for himself, and to grow in the faith at his own pace. Even if every Christian should come to a perfect knowledge of the truth, all would not arrive at that point together. But in fact, the frailty of man makes it impossible for all to achieve perfect agreement even when their aims and ideals are of the highest order. And there is no guarantee that every soul will always act with pure motives. Some otherwise good men have been known to twist a passage to establish a point, or abuse one to deny plain truth.

(5) The Restoration has always been personality oriented. It was in the beginning and is today. Editors of religious journals, popular preachers, and the leaders of church-related institutions tend to develop a following that is overly influenced by them. Many have stood for the truth on a particular issue because of their confidence in certain men who stood for the truth, rather than because of the truth itself. On the other hand, many went along with error because of their confidence in some of those who promoted it. Jesse Ferguson was so popular that he swept along the greater part of the church in Nashville in his day. There is no doubt that some accepted premillennialism, or were favorably inclined toward those who taught it, because of their love and respect for R.H. Boll. Conversely, there is hardly any doubt that some became bitter opponents of premillennialism because of their love and respect for Foy E. Wallace, Jr. at the peak of his influence among the churches of Christ.

(6) Fellowship is congregational and individual. The only means of removing ourselves from error, or of removing the exponents of error from the church, is within the congregation or by individual Christians (2 Thes. 3:6). But neither action is obligatory on other churches and individuals, except as they also see the importance of having no fellowship with the evil-doer. So controversy and conflicts over differences will be with us as long as the world stands.

**The Attitude of Brethren in Controversy**

What attitude should brethren have when differences arise among them? How should they treat one another where differences exist? Most especially, here, what has been the teaching and practice of brethren in the Restoration Movement in this matter? While these questions may be fairly well answered in regard to a particular issue, every issue tends to take on a life of its own. Every conflict between brethren develops its own characteristics in respect to the temper of its disputants, the duration of the controversy, the nature of its progress, and its consequences among Christians. In the last of these, there is the enduring effect it has had on the course of the Restoration, or on a particular faction thereof. If a profile should be done on all the controversies within the movement from the beginning or among churches of Christ within the last one hundred years, they would very likely be dissimilar one from another.

How brethren treated each other in regard to each of the troubling issues that has arisen over the years, also took on a life of its own. Their treatment of one another was colored by the nature of the particular issue at hand, the manner in which the controversy unfolded, and the disposition of the principle personalities involved in it. In short, there is no profile that fits all controversies or differences among brethren. Daniel Sommer wielded a tremendous influence for good in preserving apostolic Christianity from the onslaught of progressive liberalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century. He also took the lead in a break of fellowship among brethren who were otherwise of kindred spirits over Bible colleges. How different might that controversy have been if some other leading light had been at the forefront of the battle. Further, if David Lipscomb had been of the same temperament as Austin McGary, the controversy over the so-called “rebaptism” question might very well have split the churches of Christ in the latter part of the nineteenth century. That controversy probably died down after a few turbulent years simply because Lipscomb said all he wanted to on the subject and quit writing about it. There is no indication that he was converted to the *Firm Foundation* viewpoint.

Since this study is basically concerned with the treatment of brethren when differences arise among them, we are faced with an almost impossible task. This is due to the nature of the church and to the nature of history. The very nature of the Lord’s church, to say nothing of the individual accountability it entails, creates an array of attitudes and dispositions in regard to each issue that is as widespread as the number of congregations and individuals involved. It is simply impossible to know how all brethren treated one another, or even what the prevailing view was among the rank and file membership. We mainly know only where the leaders stood.

History is not what happened in the past, but it is the account or record of things that happened. Unfortunately, history is written by those with access to the means of preserving their take on what happened and by men who select from what is available only that which fits their purpose. Thus, the nature of history makes it difficult to fully know how brethren treated one another over differences. I can learn what the men who wrote in the *Gospel Advocate* said and did, but what I really would like to know is what a little known preacher who never preached much outside the county where he lived, or how an obscure church in his region, felt about the differences. However, even allowing for these limitations, we can gain some information that may be helpful to us today.

In attempting to design a study of this kind, several avenues came to mind. (1) I thought of considering the main controversies we are aware of within a limited period, such as 1906 to 1930. (2) I thought about taking a few selected issues and profile the attitudes brethren manifested toward each other in these. (3) I gave some thought to classifying differences by categories from mild to the most severe and discussing some of each kind. (4) I toyed with the idea of selecting a few key men on the various sides of particular controversies and review their attitudes toward one another. (5) Finally, I decided I would simply take some illustrations of attitudes from the movement of how brethren *should* and *should not* treat those that differ with them, which conforms to the teaching of the New Testament.

Generally speaking, controversies seem to fall into several kinds relative to the treatment of brethren, and the treatment of brethren develops along certain lines. Much of the conflict that creates divisions among brethren develops in the local congregation and remains local in nature. They are confined to the local church. These are very often personality clashes that have no bearing on doctrine and practice. But the major controversial issues through the years have been those that spread to and affected many churches. While the effect of these was also local in nature, effecting the unity or division of individual congregations, they were so pervasive as to be regarded as “brotherhood” issues. The attitude of brethren generally toward these tended to reflect the attitude of the leaders or principal opponents or proponents of the various issues that arose. These often fell into three broad attitudes, with varying shades in between, and often varying in the same person, depending on the issue at hand. The same man who could be adamant and unbending in on issue could be conciliatory or indifferent in another.

**The Attitude of Preachers in Controversy**

The preachers in the Restoration Movement recognized three elements of their work as proclaimers of the gospel. These apply in controversy as much as in almost all of their preaching, if not all of it, because in some measure all was controversial.

(1) They were concerned about the subject matter or content of their preaching. It was the aim of the true Restoration ideal to declare the whole counsel of God without addition, subtraction, or creedal interpretation. In their view, if a preacher preaches the full gospel, it will involve him in controversy. If he opposes error, his work is controversial from the start. And if he avoids preaching the full gospel and opposing error for the sake of peace, he most likely has no business preaching.

(2) The faithful preachers through the years have not overlooked the importance of the right disposition or attitude in preaching. But this was secondary to the content of their message. However, in controversy, preachers equally committed to upholding the truth and opposing whatever contradicts it, do not have the same attitude toward it. In regard to opposing error, which is the essence of gospel preaching and controversy, David Lipscomb wrote: “Of course, every man has his own way of opposing error. One with a well-rounded character and equable temperament will do it frequently in a smooth inoffensive style. Others of us with more sharp angularities of character and asperity of temper will do it in a rougher and more acrimonious manner, but that work must be done, smoothly or roughly, or the truth of God is destroyed. It is frequently more thoroughly done by a temperament not too suave.”2

(3) The perception that both content of the message and the disposition of delivery have an effect on others will not be overlooked by the thoughtful preacher. However, his concern for the effect his preaching has on his hearer must not move him from the full proclamation of the truth, or from opposing error, or from striving to do both in a manner that is in keeping with the nature of divine truth.

Our primary emphasis in this discussion is on the attitude of brethren in controversy. Their attitude must be concerned with more than just themselves. This includes their attitude toward the truth, their attitude toward themselves, and their attitude to those with whom they are in disagreement. This is true whether the disagreement is with sinners whom they are trying to win, the teachers of error who engage them in controversy, or their brethren in Christ with whom they have significant disagreements. If the first two are properly held, the latter will also be properly administered.

Of course, the condition of the person with whom we have controversy will have a bearing on our attitude in dealing them. Jesus dealt differently with the sinful woman who touched his garment than he did with the hypocritical, self-righteous, and spiritually blind Pharisees. When a well known gospel preacher was being mean-spirited in dealing with his brethren who were opposing institutionalism in the 1950s and 1960s, Brother Harry Pickup, Sr., observed in a Bible class that he supposed the brother had been that way also when he debated with denominational preachers. But that we didn’t notice it as much since the controversy was with sectarians rather than gospel preachers. But should not a preacher’s attitude toward a denominational preacher and his own brethren be the same in so as fair and honest treatment is concerned?

I am particularly interested in this discussion with the treatment of brethren toward one another in their controversies. There are principles of divine truth that govern us in this, but looking at the way brethren have treated one another in controversies can be highly instructive. If I might select a few men whom I believe reflect the broad spectrum of attitudes in regard to controversy in three categories and in three periods as examples, it would be somewhat as follows. The categories are maximal, moderate, and mild, and the periods are pioneer times (1804 to the Civil War), the middle years (the Civil War to 1900), and the first half of the twentieth-century. I am limiting these to men whom I regard as standing for the truth regarding apostolic Christianity. Of course, each made mistakes in their teaching and they were not perfect in their attitudes, but they were committed to the Restoration ideal.

(1) The maximal attitude in controversy in pioneer days is characterized by Alexander Campbell (in his *Christian Baptist* years) and Jacob Creath, Jr., especially as seen in his opposition to the missionary society. James A. Harding, Austin McGary, and Daniel Sommer come in the middle years. Sommer also extends well into the twentieth century, and ranks, in my judgment, along with Foy E. Wallace, Jr., in his battle against premillennialism. I would add John T. Lewis in the last period.

(2) Possessing a moderate attitude in controversy, in pioneer times were men like Thomas Campbell and John T. Johnson. In the middle years, we find David Lipscomb and J.W. McGarvey. In the early nineteenth century, we would name F.B. Srygley. R.L. Whiteside, and H. Leo Boles.

(3) The milder reaction to controversy finds expression in Barton W. Stone and Walter Scott in earlier times, and in the middle years by E.G. Sewell and T.B. Larimore, both of whom carried their influence well into the twentieth century. Other twentieth century men are G.H.P. Showalter and E.A. Elam.

If I should be permitted to select a few men whom I believe reflect what I believe to be the ideal attitude in controversy with their brethren among churches of Christ over the whole period, based on what is known of them, it would have to include David Lipscomb and F.B. Srygley. I do not select these men because I think I am like them in temperament and style, I most certainly am not—far from it. Nor do I hold them up as the standard I am trying to follow because there is a higher and nobler example for us to imitate. But in my opinion these men in their devotion to the truth, in their behavior toward brethren in controversy with them, and in their concern for those with whom they disputed, manifested the spirit that is greatly needed by the church today.

I would like to call attention to what these and some others have said that has a direct bearing on the treatment of brethren in controversy with one another. This must begin with the preacher’s attitude toward himself as a preacher. W.E. Brightwell said: “In the army of the Lord the preacher is but a private in the rear ranks. He holds no official position.” (1934.) B.W. Johnson wrote: “A godly preacher will hid himself behind the Master and be forgetful of himself so that Christ is honored.” (1886.) Alexander Campbell said: “But alas! Most men see their own virtues in a concave mirror, and their brother’s in a convex one. Hence, their own are exaggerated and their brother’s diminished.” (1853.) Brightwell also said: “It is rather startling, when we reflect upon it, how much of the trouble between men is traceable to taking themselves too seriously.” C.R. Nichol adds: “When we start out on a faultfinding expedition, we do not explore our own lives.” (1933.)

Behavior in controversy also is influenced by a preacher’s concept of his duty as a preacher. We sometimes get into positions and activities the Lord never intended. R.L. Whiteside said: “The Lord has never delegated police powers to preachers.” (1934.) Behavior in controversy also includes the attitude one has toward the adversary in his disputes. David Lipscomb said: “I have no compromise of truth, but ‘skinning’ the sects and fighting them is well calculated to make sectarians of us.” (1910.) The same is true in regard to conflicts among brethren in which “skinning” is sometimes the name of the game. John T. Hinds wrote: “Rejoicing at the afflictions or downfall of others indicates a bitter, revengeful spirit. Even our known enemies deserve some credit for what good they do. Great hearted persons cheerfully give it.” (1935.) When our controversy with a brother leads us to where we have lost all feeling of brotherhood toward him, surely we are in a realm that is unapproved by the Lord. An unforgiving spirit often pervades the spirit of controversy. Cled E. Wallace said: “A man who gets joy out of rebuking and pain out of forgiving is unfit for one and incapable of the other.” John Rogers observed that: “Extremes beget extremes and meet in their consequences.” (1861.) A scarcity of common sense is often apparent in controversy. Benjamin Franklin said: “Learning is a great and good thing and greatly to be desired, but no learning can supply a deficiency in plain common sense.” John Rogers said: “That very much mischief has been the result of rashness and too great rigidness and haste in matters of discipline must be admitted.” (1861.)

One aspect of controversy carried to extreme is the factionalism that it causes. There tends to be some groups that are held together largely by their common bond in the controversy. F.D. Srygley said: “Folks are not always in harmony with God when they are in concord with each other, nor do people necessarily draw nigh to God every time they huddle themselves together.” Often the leaders in controversy vaunt their learning or scholarship as a point on their side. “There are too many who think they have had a divine call to furnish the brains for the kingdom of God, to do the planning, to hatch out the schemes for somebody else to work.” (W.E. Brightwell.)

Honorable treatment of opponents should be at the top of the list of how brethren should behave toward one another in controversy. When men resort to innuendo, slander, character assignation, and outright lies to carry their issue, they are serving the cause of Satan, not the cause of Christ, however right they may be in the issue at hand. When brethren resort to such tactics, the real issue becomes lost in personalities and turf battles unworthy of those who serve the meek and lowly Nazarene. R.L. Whiteside said: “A man who deliberately misrepresents one man will misrepresent another, if it suits his purpose to do so.” (1946.)

One’s attitude toward brethren in controversy involves five things that are worth noticing.

(1) Feelings. All too often our feelings get in the way of fair and honest treatment of opposing brethren. When we make a stand for the truth or against error a matter of our personal feelings, we are apt to lose sight of the truth involved. One in error should not take it as a personal matter when someone points it out to him. Controversy should be engaged in as objectively a possible. Each should be willing to be corrected. F.B. Srygley once said: “If I fall asleep at the switch I am willing to be awakened.”

(2) Position: where the person stands. Some issues are more serious in nature, far-reaching in influence, and intrusive on the faith and practice of others. The teaching of premillennialism has a far greater bearing on New Testament teaching than whether a brother presiding at the Lord’s Table should break the bread before passing it to the congregation. The use of the missionary society was more pervasive than the Christian’s relation to civil government. The use of an instrument in the worship is more intrusive than the members’ attitude toward carnal warfare. Some issues naturally call for stronger and more persistent opposition, and hence controversy, and are more susceptible to the fellowship issue. Any doctrine that questions or undermines the fundamentals of Christianity certainly cannot be tolerated. A teaching the tampers with the triune nature of the Godhead, the gospel plan of salvation, the apostolic order for the church, or the inspiration of the Scriptures is beyond the pale of endurance. Clearly immoral teaching and practice cannot be acceptable to Christians.

The heat generated in controversy involving the treatment of brethren on opposing sides has generally been commensurate with the seriousness of the issue. The teaching of premillennialism undermined the whole fabric of the church and demanded strong opposition. The so-called “rebaptism” controversy never created a serious division among the churches because rebaptism was not the real issue. The issue was what must a person know when he is baptized. Neither side questioned whether baptism is essential to salvation. The issue was bitter for a while because personalities and religious journals, and perhaps feelings, got involved in the battle. It faded as an issue because both sides came to see that there was no real difference between them. The claim that the “rebap-tizers” won the controversy is overblown by some historians.

(3) Real motives. Sometimes controversy is kindled by matters other than a desire to stand for the truth. “Many preachers are so filled with jealousy and faction that they lead the people to hate other preachers.” (H. Leo Boles, 1935.)

(4) Treatment. The wrong treatment of others can have a bad influence on us. Lipscomb, as noticed before, said: “I favor no compromise of truth, but ‘skinning’ the sects and fighting them is well calculated to make sectarians of us.” (1910.)

(5) Fellowship. The final issue in any controversy is whether fellowship will be broken over its teaching or practice. While Bible fellowship involves local congregations and individual Christians, there is often a domino effect brought on by influential preachers and churches, so that it often creates enclaves or “brotherhoods” of Christians and churches that hold to common beliefs relative to the issue in dispute. But there cannot be, in keeping with the New Testament, a wholesale disfellowshiping of brethren over issues, although some seem to agitate for such. We very often preach congregation independence, but practice brotherhood action. “It is wrong to make anything a condition of fellowship that is not essential to salvation.” (F. D. Srygley.)

**Conclusion**

In this study, we have attempted to discuss the attitude that brethren have, or should have, when differences arise among them in regard to teaching, faith, and practice. We noticed the certainty of controversy among brethren and some reasons for it. We called attention to the attitude of brethren in the past over controversies that arose among them. And we paid special attention to the attitude of preachers in controversy. The latter is especially important because of the preachers’ influence on the church. While we can profit greatly from a historical study of this kind, the true standard for the treatment of one another in times of controversy does not rest with the restorers in Restoration history, but with apostles of Christ in the New Testament.

**Notes**

1*U. S. News and World Report*, July 24, 2000.

2*Gospel Advocate*, Feb., 18, 1875.

Earl Kimbrough, November 2004