

1

Renewal Among God's People

Introduction

The history of humanity tends to be marked by cycles. Nations coalesce over time and then disintegrate. Business organisations boom and then go bust. Families expand with children, then see parents become empty-nesters.

Christians and churches share similar ebbs and flows. While God's eternal kingdom can't be shaken, local churches form and disband. Individual Christians enjoy spiritual peaks and undergo dark nights of the soul. Denominations enjoy their heyday and then decline.

Such is the cycle of renewal and relapse which appears to characterise much of life. It's because of such cycles that this book came to be. As an older Christian who has been part of local churches in several countries, in recent times I sense that the pursuit of discipleship in parts of God's kingdom is at a relatively low ebb. The causes appear obvious. They include increasing secularism, rampant consumerism, and perhaps an undiscerning pluralism where anything goes. Or it may be something deeply personal, such as an unexpected illness, heartbreak, or the death of a loved one. Whatever the cause, it seems that a fresh focus on renewal of discipleship may be helpful.

It turns out that I'm not alone in sensing this low ebb. Others sense it too. So several of us decided to collaborate in order to produce this book. Each has served or is serving on the eldership of a local church. As we conversed and reflected upon our personal experiences as shepherds, we felt that elements of Christian discipleship have been corroded to varying degrees among the churches which we're affiliated with in Australia, Asia, and the

United States – a global fellowship often known as Churches of Christ.¹

Since Churches of Christ are interested in restoring the faith and practices of the 1st century church, it's no surprise that our thoughts on renewal of discipleship are also oriented towards the witness of the earliest Christians. Accordingly, the central question we collaborated on is this: what can we learn from the first Christians that can help inform and shape biblical discipleship in our day?

As a result of our collaboration, this book is structured a little differently than most. I (Benny) wrote the bulk of the book. My original training is in commercial law and I subsequently worked for more than three decades in Asia and Australia in law firms, consulting, and law teaching. My experiences spurred an interest in the practical – rather than theological – aspects of discipleship. This is reflected in the fourfold division of the book. After the first part which explores the idea of renewal through restoration, the next three parts examine (through expanding concentric circles) the personal, communal, and societal aspects of discipleship.

As someone who came to formal theological study later in life, I'm mindful that the Bible can be a minefield for the uninitiated. So I rely on two collaborators: Steve Wilson and Allan McNicol. Steve's an experienced Bible teacher and counsellor based in Brisbane. Allan's an expatriate Australian in the United States where he's an emeritus professor at a Christian seminary in Texas. Steve and Allan offer their contributions at the end of each section of the book, sharing their reflections on the topics discussed. We also invited Everett Ferguson, a church historian, to contribute a chapter based on a speech he gave at Allan's seminary. Everett's speech focuses on Churches of Christ and our yearning to be faithful disciples of Jesus.

In this way, this collaborative effort emits several voices, not just one. The hope is that you, the reader, will benefit from a book that's intended to be more of a dialogue than a lecture. Our hope

1 Concerning Churches of Christ, see: Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Eerdmans, 1996).

is that the ideas presented here will spur deeper reflection and a consequent renewal of discipleship, especially within the Christian milieu we've been privileged to be a part of. If others find our message helpful, then that's a pleasing bonus.

The Gospel and discipleship

Let's begin with the question: what is a disciple? The New Testament word for disciple (*mathetes*) means a follower. This suggests that discipleship at its core is a response. Of course, there's some personal initiative on the part of a disciple who chooses to follow a person or movement (or fad). But the disciple doesn't originate the process. She follows because someone or something compelling has emerged and this provokes a response.

For Christian disciples, that compelling something is Jesus Christ and the Good News (Gospel) which He heralds. I capitalise Gospel because if its claims are true then it's news which radically alters the world as we know it. If it's true that Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected then "*something has happened as a result of which the world is a different place.*"²

If the Gospel is true, then that Jesus phenomenon in an unremarkable corner of Palestine in the 1st century shook not just the Roman Empire of the day, but the entire cosmos. If true, it predicts what will ultimately happen in the future. If true, its implications still ricochet today: it changes my worldview as to what life is about and transforms my behaviour – constraining me to be polite towards a quarrelsome neighbour and fortifying me in the face of a fearsome virus.

What news can be so compelling? The short version of the Gospel (the "news in brief" as it were) is that our badly broken world has had critical repairs undertaken. This was accomplished by Jesus. Now, additional repairs continue through the efforts of His disciples who are empowered by the Holy Spirit. Then, one day this world will be transformed into a stupendous new model – to the glory of God the Father.

2 Tom Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes it Good* (SPCK, 2015) 16, original emphasis.

The longer version of the Gospel is more complex. The backstory, its current outworking, and future conclusion can be viewed as a play with six acts:³

Act 1 begins with Creation: God creates a good world for human beings. Adam and Eve are placed in a garden to cultivate it, enhancing order and beauty in the world as well as fellowship between humanity and God.

Act 2 begins when sin enters the world. Sin corrupts Adam and Eve and, like a deadly germ, infects everyone. Yet God, in His love, doesn't despair over the spoilt creation but instead initiates a plan to restore humanity and the world to what we're meant to be. This becomes the mission of God (*missio dei*).

Act 3 sees God finding a man, Abraham, and promising that restoration will come from his descendants (Israel). Ultimately that restoration centres upon a promised descendant, the Deliverer-King or Anointed One (Messiah).

Act 4 opens with the birth of the promised Deliverer-King – Jesus of Nazareth, a descendant of Abraham – in Roman-occupied Palestine. The climax is Jesus' death and resurrection around the year 30 AD. Shortly after His resurrection and ascension, His kingdom is inaugurated. The *missio dei* enters a decisive new stage.

Act 5 focuses on spreading the Good News of the King. This task is bequeathed to the King's followers, Jesus' disciples. In aggregate, they comprise the universal church. Within local communities, groups of disciples form local churches. Empowered by Jesus' Spirit, disciples and churches participate faithfully in the *missio dei*.

Act 6 will see Jesus return to judge the world as King. At this grand visitation (*parousia*) there will be a final accounting when the faithful are rewarded. Creation will be fully redeemed. The faithful will dwell in eternity with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a new heaven and earth sparkling in splendour.

According to this six-act framework, the core of the Gospel is found in Act 4: the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. These

³ This framework is from Craig G. Bartholomew & Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2014).

events two millennia ago occurred in Roman-occupied Palestine between the reigns of Caesar Augustus and Caesar Tiberius. The events constitute Good News because, if they're true, then certain implications follow.

First, if the Good News is accurate, then the story of Scripture as summarised above tells the “true story of our world”.⁴ It reveals the true state of affairs of the world, providing reliable insights into reality. Of course, the biblical story has to compete with other narratives – including the religiosity of other faith systems, the atheistic communism of Marx, Lenin, and Mao, the nihilism of Nietzsche, and the self-indulgent consumerism of contemporary society. Our responsibility is to consider carefully which narrative offers the best insight into what life's really about.

Second, if the biblical narrative is true, then, as noted by Wright, the Good News is more than “good advice”.⁵ That's because the Gospel has a finality about it. While it brings glad tidings of the beginning of a new order under a new King, it also brings warnings of judgment, reward, and retribution. These warnings are like confirmed pandemic alerts. Once the alert is issued, the pandemic is coming whether we acknowledge or ignore it. That's why the Gospel shouldn't be regarded as insurance against hell. Insurance is typically about contingent events – occurrences that may or may not happen, like experiencing a hailstorm or being hospitalised after falling off a ladder. If Jesus' claims are true then heaven and hell *will* come. They're not contingent at all; they're certain future events.

Third, if Jesus' claims are true, then He's ushered in a new reality. It's as if His coming two millennia ago has re-set the game. Whereas evil was winning, the flow of the match has turned. It's like the Battle of Midway during the Second World War: that contest was a critical turning point which later led to Allied victory over Japan in the Pacific. Similarly, Jesus' death and resurrection in Palestine during the time of Pontius Pilate and Herod Antipas become the fulcrum of all history. It's nothing less than God's

4 Bartholomew & Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 14.

5 Wright, *Simply Good News*, 4.

momentous intervention into our world in order to reclaim it as His own. It re-shapes the future of the created order.

Fourth, as a result of this intervention by God, disciples play a key role in the *missio dei*. Disciples are individuals who find the Gospel compelling stuff. We receive it with joy. Strengthened by Jesus' Spirit, we participate in the *missio dei* with gladness and, like the first Christians, tell others about the Good News. We accept suffering when it comes, even as we await the glorious denouement which will come with the return of the King.

In summary, Christian discipleship means following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, being empowered by the Holy Spirit, and abiding in the Father's will. Discipleship isn't primarily about obeying a church leader or being part of an ecclesiastical organisation. It's not about taking up a system or concept; it's giving our allegiance to a Person – Jesus.

Granted, discipleship may involve us becoming part of a local church, serving with church leaders, and learning new concepts. But at the core it's about a relationship with Jesus the Christ.

Hence, discipleship is the practice of submitting ourselves to Jesus and helping others do the same. In this way, discipleship yields the precious fruit of knowing who we truly are, our purpose for existence, and the future that awaits us. Discipleship thus leads us to become the person God meant us to be. That identity or personhood is only found in Christ. That's why discipleship is arguably the noblest pursuit for a human being.

Faithfulness – relapse – renewal
History demonstrates, however, that discipleship isn't without its challenges. The American philosopher and Baptist minister, Dallas Willard, notes

Me in Christ & Christ in me

"It is when I turn to Christ, when I give myself up to His Personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own."

"In that sense our real selves are all waiting for us in Him."

"Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
(Geoffrey Bles, 1952) 177, 176, 177.

that individuals of magnificent faith who are on fire for God often leave behind a religious institution or movement which, over time, diverges from the vision of the founder and falls into an apathy which extinguishes that fire or simply allows it to die.⁶ The operations may continue using the same name, says Willard. They may even be “trading in [the] memorabilia” of the founder, but “it isn’t the same operation on the inside, and truthfully its effects are not the same.”

That’s why, according to Willard, in the case of religious movements “nothing fails like success”. I gather that means the very success of a religious movement often sows the seeds of its own decline. Willard says this involves a “subtle shifting of vision, of feeling, and will”. Gradually, the mission becomes the vision: goals take the place of God. For example, instead of focusing on worshipping God, a church aims to double its attendance. Instead of focusing on the grace of God channelled through the death and resurrection of Christ, the emphasis shifts to our accomplishments for Him. Citing Henri Nouwen, Willard concludes that this is when “service to Christ replaces love for Christ”.

In this way, church leaders become enamoured by “the applause and support of sympathetic people” which are generated by the leaders’ accomplishments. Achievements which originally are motivated by deep devotion to God become the very things which reorient us away from God. So we turn idolatrously to focus on ourselves and our triumphs. Such is the seductiveness of success.

Upon reflection, many of us can identify movements and institutions which have diverged from the vision of their founders. Consider universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Chicago. At their founding, each had strong links to the Christian faith. They were established by their respective founders for God’s glory. Today, these universities are largely secular. Some elements within them may even be anti-Christian.

Similarly with the Christian faith. Much like barnacles which overlay and obscure a ship’s hull, it’s sometimes difficult to discern

⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (Monarch Books, 2006) 90-95.

the true shape of church and faith because of denominational encrustations which have steadily accrued over two millennia of church history. The Reformed scholar, Peter Leithart, describes denominationalism as “the institutionalisation of division” among believers.⁷ Denominationalism typically divides groups of believers based on matters like creed, doctrine, name, or governing authority.

One tendency among some contemporary denominations is a gradual dilution of teachings. Today there are denominations which affirm practices which their founders (let alone Jesus) wouldn’t have tolerated. Conversely, if their founders were present today, these denominations probably wouldn’t accept them into fellowship because their founders’ views would now appear as narrow, politically incorrect, or even bigoted.

Is this sequence of faithfulness and relapse into worldliness among churches and Christians inevitable? Willard doesn’t think so. He believes that while many succumb, some can avoid or at least postpone it. He offers a practical suggestion for avoiding a relapse into worldliness: passing on the founder’s vision across generations of believers. For churches, this requires humility, reliance upon God’s grace, and an earnest desire to sustain in ourselves and our communities the vision of God.

To do this requires nothing less than timely spiritual renewal. It’s like re-booting a computer to its original settings. It’s akin to the 16th century Reformation call of going back to the sources (*ad fontes*) of our faith. It’s a call to return to the fountain of God’s Word (cf. Psalm 42:1-2) in order to drink from it and be refreshed anew. It’s a restoration of our vision of God, a re-commitment to the *missio dei*. In that sense, it’s a renewal *through* restoration.

Restoration: biblical and theological perspectives

To restore something implies a respect for the past. Are there elements of discipleship among the first Christians – especially in their habits and ethos – which are worthwhile transposing to our

7 Peter J. Leithart, *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* (Brazos Press, 2016) 5.

time? I believe there are. This doesn't necessarily mean a slavish imitation of a bygone era. Rather, it's an acknowledgement that past examples of discipleship contain lessons which can help shape current and future discipleship.

I also believe that renewal through restoration is biblical. At various times, individuals like Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and David undergo personal spiritual renewal by restoring their focus on God. The prophet Elijah, beset by the fear of being a lone voice, receives a revelation from God that seven thousand people are still faithful – a theophany which gives him fresh courage to anoint a new king and lead the faithful (1 Kings 19). In the 7th century BC, the youthful king Josiah precipitates a broad renewal among the people of Judah through the restoration of true worship in God's honour (2 Kings 22-23). Decades later, the prophet Jeremiah calls for a return to the ancient paths (Jeremiah 6:16). On another occasion, God declares to Jeremiah that restoration is His gracious response to human repentance (Jeremiah 15:19).

Similarly, throughout church history there have been examples of individuals and entire communities who seek to reform, restore, or otherwise call people back to the ancient and enduring elements of the Christian faith. In a wider sense, the overarching story of the Bible is a gradual restoration of God's sovereign rule over humanity – through the renewing of a creation soiled by sin into one of unimaginable glory.

This brings us to the theological perspectives underpinning this book. As noted earlier, all four who collaborated on this book are affiliated with Churches of Christ. Although we can't speak for everyone in our fellowship, it's fair to say that many find fresh hope, courage, and a revitalised discipleship by restoring the faith and practices of the earliest Christians.

However, the idea of restoration doesn't appear to be unique to Churches of Christ. Glimpses of the idea manifest themselves periodically in church history. The 16th century Reformation is restorationist to a degree. Individuals like Martin Luther and John Calvin sought to reform the Roman Catholic Church of their day by harkening back to Scripture. Before the Reformation, in 15th century Bohemia (modern Czech Republic) Jan Hus led a restorationist movement nicknamed "Hussites".

In the 16th century, the Anabaptists (dubbed “radical Reformers”) defied both Catholics and Protestants to restore the primitive church. In the 18th century John and Charles Wesley shook a largely moribund Church of England by seeking to restore holiness in daily Christian life, just as Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf ruffled a lethargic Lutheran Church with his missionary efforts and social reforms. In 1920s Germany, Eberhard Arnold founded the Bruderhof community, emphasising the communal lifestyle of the earliest Christians.

Historically, many of today’s Churches of Christ can be linked to a similar “back-to-the-Bible” renewal movement which sprouted during the 19th century Second Great Awakening in frontier America. Leaders like Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and Walter Scott called for a restoration of the church of the New Testament. Seeking to avoid denominationalism, they attracted scores of people with similar ideals from Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and other backgrounds. At times they were called “Reforming Baptists”, “Disciples of Christ”, “Christians”, or, more disparagingly, “Campbellites” and “Stoneites”. With smaller groups paralleling them in Britain and Australia, they later came to be known as the American Restoration Movement or Stone-Campbell Movement (see Appendix).⁸

Today, Churches of Christ are typically viewed as an heir of this movement. These churches continue to highlight the faith and practices of the first Christians as norms for contemporary discipleship and church life.⁹ They eschew denominationalism in favour of a visibly united church as the one body of Christ. They place a strong emphasis on believer’s baptism as an expression of

⁸ See generally: Douglas A. Foster et. al. (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, Churches of Christ* (Eerdmans, 2004); and Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: The Story of the American Restoration Movement*, rev. ed. (College Press, 2002). See the Appendix for a brief historical note about Churches of Christ in America and Australia.

⁹ For a biblical and theological rationale for these practices, see: Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Eerdmans, 1997).

saving faith and partaking the Lord's Supper weekly. Other key practices include *a cappella* singing in public worship and a vigorous congregationalism where each church is led ideally by a plurality of local elders. While maintaining a broadly complementarian view of gender roles, they uphold the biblical view of marriage between male and female as honourable and life-giving.

Although Churches of Christ as a fellowship experience the ebb and flow common to all religious groups, their call to restore the New Testament church has resonated across the world. Today, in virtually every nation there are congregations actively pursuing the goal of restoring the 1st century church. As individuals with a shared spiritual lineage in this fellowship, our collaboration on this book is based on a similar motivation: we seek practical guidance from the earliest Christians to discern what following Jesus ought to look like today.

Yet, while our shared roots in a common fellowship connect us in various ways, in another sense our primary commitment isn't to a specific religious movement. After all, every movement – while possessing high ideals – is also prone to foibles. Rather, we seek to echo a more ancient and persistent chorus, one which calls for restoring the primacy of God's Word as the sure foundation for a rejuvenated life of discipleship. We seek a renewal that makes us truly a church *of Christ* (cf. Romans 16:16) – a congregated people who belong to Christ.

An uncommonly narrow path?

One final point amounts to a caution: the path to spiritual renewal appears narrow. We're reminded of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: "The way leading to destruction is wide" (Matthew 7:13). Renewal demands sharpness of focus and dedication to discipline. It requires sacrifice and a change of heart, resulting in altered attitudes and habits. It calls for effort and commitment – because true discipleship isn't a leisurely stroll. Discipleship obliges Christians to become part of a contrast community whose values and practices may appear odd, irrelevant, or objectionable to contemporary society. Discipleship is intentional – and costly.

All this typically leads to a narrowing (not widening) of priorities, interests, and practices. Some may find this challenging.

It can be particularly provocative in an age of pluralism when the prevailing mantra – at least in Western nations – is more about inclusivity than exclusivity. In these nations (which some describe as WEIRD: Western, educated, industrialised, rich, developed) the narrow path is often dismissed as ignorance, intolerance, or dogmatism. In other words, the uncommonly narrow path of discipleship isn't for the fainthearted.

Yet, this “narrow path principle” doesn't appear restricted to Christian discipleship. Over several decades of working in the legal profession, academia, and commerce, I've noticed that the path to success is often narrow.¹⁰ Success requires focus; and focus is inherently limiting, not expansive. Successful businesses typically feature similar attributes: a passion for the goods or services produced, a disciplined dedication to delight customers, plus fairness and integrity in treating employees and other stakeholders.

Successful marriages tend to be those where spouses are limited by their promises of faithfulness to and exclusivity for each other. Successful families tend to demonstrate the same set of virtuous relationships – ones characterised by love, forgiveness, and generosity. Successful nations feature similar habits of self-restraint including clean (not corrupt) government, a sensible combination of freedom and responsibility, and the rule of law. In other words, the road to success generally seems more about discipline than permissiveness, more about the narrow path than the broad thoroughfare.

If this is correct, then the narrow path principle isn't only true for Christian discipleship but for a successful life generally.

Costly grace & discipleship

“Grace is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light.’”

“Costly grace was turned into cheap grace without discipleship.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (SCM Press, 1959) 37, 41.

¹⁰ I'm indebted to Harold Shank who helped me think through some of the ideas in this paragraph.

Interestingly, diverse individuals throughout history (from Aristotle to Jesus Christ, from Tolstoy to Chesterton) appear to have reached a similar conclusion. Below are snippets from them:¹¹

Aristotle: "...it is possible to fail in many ways...while to succeed is possible only in one way...; for men are good in but one way, but bad in many." *Nicomachean Ethics* (4th century BC)

Jesus Christ: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." *Gospel of Matthew* (1st century AD)

Leo Tolstoy: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." *Anna Karenina* (1877)

G.K. Chesterton: "It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands." *Orthodoxy* (1908)

Is the narrow path principle supported by research? I don't have a definitive answer. However, the popularity of Stephen Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, seems to affirm it.¹² Additionally, a chance conversation I had also suggests that the narrow path principle is more likely true than not.

Some time ago, while ruminating over Tolstoy's first sentence in his monumental *Anna Karenina* (above), I asked a psychologist – who happens to be a fellow Christian – whether Tolstoy's proposition is borne out among the cases he encountered in his private practice. He was unfamiliar with Tolstoy's line. However, upon hearing it he concurred without hesitation.

Based on his clinical experience, dysfunction within individuals and families manifested itself in myriad forms. People tended to be

11 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II:6, David Ross (trans.), rev. Lesley Brown (Oxford University Press, 2009) 29; *The Gospel of Matthew* 7:13-14; Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Rosamund Bartlett (trans.) (Oxford University Press, 2014) 3; and G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (WaterBrook Press, 2001) 149.

12 Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Free Press, 1989). The book has sold over 25 million copies in 40 languages.

unique in their neuroses, phobias, and other disorders. In contrast, those with good mental health often shared a common set of wholesome habits. In fact, my friend wondered whether the praise for *12 Rules for Life*,¹³ a book by Canadian clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson, signalled a realisation that following a short list of sensible rules could help bring order and success to otherwise chaotic lives.

Summary

Essentially, then, this book is about God’s call and how we ought to respond to it in obedience. In a time when committed discipleship is waning in some quarters, we call for a renewal of discipleship based on restoring the practices and ethos of the first Christians.

We do so because of our conviction that biblical discipleship leads to transformed lives and human flourishing. Meanwhile, the overall arc of God’s dealings with humanity shows that our individual journeys find their true meaning only if we form part of God’s story. That’s why my wife (a wonderful disciple in her own right) exclaims with equal pride and humility: “It’s my journey – but it’s God’s story!”

In that sense, eternal life is to know God now as we experience life anew and participate in the ongoing story of His marvellous cosmic adventure. Conversely, Scripture speaks of eternal damnation as a journey away from God, drifting out of His story into a desultory drama of our own making – increasingly pained, diminished, and lost.

And so, as it was in the beginning with Adam and Eve, it is for us today. God created us for His greater glory and our greater joy. In the reverential words of the 17th century *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: “[Humanity’s] chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”¹⁴

I believe that authentic Christian discipleship is the path to that end.



13 Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Penguin, 2019).

14 The Westminster General Assembly 1647, *Westminster Shorter Catechism – with Proof Texts (ESV)*, Robert B. Balsinger (ed.) (CreateSpace, 2010) 10.