

Book Review

The Heart of the Restoration Series

Douglas A Foster, series editor, ACU Press, 2002-2005



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This series serves as a commentary on Churches of Christ in the USA around 200 years after the Restoration Movement began. It is also a challenge to critically evaluate the way churches from that heritage have evolved and to reflect on their future direction. Each volume in the series has two or three authors with nine authors over the series so far. The authors are all faculty members of the College of Biblical Studies at Abilene Christian University (ACU), Texas.

ACU has been influential among Churches of Christ for over 100 years through its contributions to our theology and the ministry of thousands of its graduates. These days some regard ACU as too liberal. However, agree with them or not, the series is a unique and influential review of how the Restoration Movement is moving along. As such, it should stimulate healthy conversations within congregations about their future direction.

This series sets out to make a continuing contribution at a time of 'crisis' and 'transition' among Churches of Christ in the US. The context is most thoroughly canvassed in the first volume. It identifies the American Restoration Movement as one shaped by modernity, but now having to come to terms with postmodernity. The changing culture is apparently impacting our American brethren in several ways: declining numbers; growing diversity; less certainty about doctrine and identity; a more inclusive attitude toward other believers. In varying degrees, these trends are also being experienced by Churches of Christ in Australia.

So far four volumes in the series have been published. *The Crux of the Matter* (2002) reflects on the American Restoration Movement heritage of Churches of Christ. *God's Holy Fire* (2002) focuses on how we read Scripture. *Unveiling Glory* (2003) examines the identity and transforming nature of Christ. *Seeking a Lasting City* (2005) dwells on the story of the church. The final volume on worship is still to be published. Each volume includes a Study Guide with discussion questions, congregational scenarios, biblical case studies, teaching notes, and recommended reading.

As the title suggests, the first volume urges a greater focus on 'the core' of the Gospel, identified as the cross of Christ. Past division is characterised as the outcome of too little transformation by the cross and too much attention to peripheral matters. Put another way, the Restoration Movement has tended to be more concerned about the form of the church than transformed lives and right behaviour toward each other. But the authors are also concerned that postmodern influences may swing the pendulum of emphasis so much that the distinctive identity of Churches of Christ may be lost through excessive tolerance and inclusion. In the final chapter they nominate five doctrines and practices they believe are at least part of a non-negotiable 'core' that should be

maintained in the midst of change. These core doctrines are: baptism of believers by immersion for the forgiveness of sins; encountering the cross of Christ in baptism leads to changed behaviour in the world; our commitment to be holy and Christlike is expressed in behaviours like worship, study and prayer; the implications of the cross are most visible within the church; weekly participation in the Lord's Supper serves as an ongoing covenant to be people of the cross.

The second volume reconsiders the nature and function of Scripture in the context of a declining biblical literacy within Churches of Christ. In response to the loss of biblical literacy, much of the book is devoted to an overview of the historical background, content, genre and hermeneutics of Scripture. Special emphasis is given to the Old Testament in order to correct past tendencies to discount or neglect it. Bible study is reoriented from trying to answer our own questions to listening 'to the voices in Scripture, making its questions our own'. This involves greater emphasis on textual rather than topical studies. More controversially, their way of dealing with the inerrancy of Scripture is to shift the focus to its total sufficiency for God's purposes rather than its scientific accuracy in every detail.

Unveiling Glory is a Christological study orientated towards the significance of Jesus for faith and life today. It is essentially a detailed explanation of the Gospel. Just as the incarnation was an unveiling of the glory of God, so God's intention was to unveil glory in our own lives as we grow in Christlikeness. This volume is a crucial part of the series because it calls our attention to what will really change our churches for the better: Christians who are being fully transformed into the image of God.

Seeking a Lasting City is an appropriate sequel to *Unveiling Glory* as it traces the journey of God's people in the story of God. The authors' declare this fourth volume to be a 'narrative ecclesiology'. By that they mean that they have approached the subject of what it means to be a church that pleases God from the perspective of the biblical story of God's plan to foster community with people. This expands the usual, more focussed, consideration of the New Testament church, with the goal of steering churches away from self-preserving maintenance toward a sense of mission - from a focus on issues to the kind of lives we are living.

Throughout the series, the authors try not to be prescriptive. They try to stimulate reflection and conversations within churches. If the books are approached with this in mind, those parts that might otherwise trouble you should rather serve to get you thinking and discussing them with fellow Christians. Despite the fact that the authors are from academia, the books are easy to read. They don't assume too much prior knowledge on the part of the reader. This makes them worthwhile reading for every Christian. □