

Reflections on the Book I Just Want to Be a Christian,
by Dr. Rubel Shelly

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I have been asked to write some extended comments on this book, in preparation for a CDROM that will include, among its many features, the entire text of the book. Owing to the fine cooperation already enjoyed between the producers of the CDROM and The GRAMCORD Institute, with which I have long been associated, I am happy to comply.

The author of the book associates himself with the American Restoration Movement, that movement which has generated such groups as the Disciples of Christ, the Conservative Christian Church and the Churches of Christ. (The built-in difficulty with such nomenclature I shall come to in due course.) This book is a personal reflection on the significance of the Movement, an appeal to outsiders to join it, and an appeal to insiders to restore the Restoration Movement to its pristine foundations. The chapters begin with an essay on "Preliminary Thoughts," which in substance is the argument that the American Restoration Movement recapitulates and recaptures earliest Christianity, which was sadly distorted by the third and fourth and subsequent generations. Under the title "Part One: The Dream," the second chapter attempts to articulate the primary thrust of the Movement, outlining the evils of schism and division, and briefly defending the theology of Restorationism. The third chapter, much longer, under the title "Part Two: The Hindrance," sketches in the factors that Dr. Shelly believes have become a hindrance not only to the full implementation of the Movement's potential but also to the ready acceptance of the Movement by outsiders. The fourth chapter outlines "Some Strengths of Restoration,"

while the fifth and longest chapter details "Some Weaknesses of Restorationism." The first appendix, "Christians Only," is in many respects little more than a summary of Dr. Shelly's argument, with extra bits thrown in, plus a series of "Questions and Answers" primarily designed to answer Dr. Shelly's critics within the American Restoration Movement. All of this material--the five chapters and the first Appendix--comprise 170 pages. Another 100 pages constitute Appendix II, where we have recorded for us a number of "Restoration Documents."

There seems little point in recapitulating Dr. Shelly's arguments in the way he presents them, since the book is readily available from the publisher (20th Century Christian in Nashville), and in its revised form is quite recent (1986). Because much of what I have to say about the book is rather negative, I want to record immediately my gratitude for the irenic tone of the material, and for Dr. Shelly's transparent concern for unity and holiness--both of which are clearly biblical desiderata. The book is also a very helpful insight into some of the best features of the American Restoration Movement. If I must record my dissatisfaction with many of the book's central emphases and arguments, I would not want my appreciation for these valuable points to be lost in the thicket of objections I am about to raise.

The twelve points which serve to organize my thoughts in this extended review are not necessarily in order of importance.

1. **The book suffers somewhat from the fact that the author has chosen to address two rather disparate audiences.** To understand the difficulty it is crucial to grasp the conundrum in which the American Restoration Movement finds itself. In its beginnings, the Movement was concerned to restore unity to Christians by rejecting all forms of

denominationalism. At the same time, it developed a view of baptism which is adopted by almost no one outside the spectrum of congregations represented by the American Restoration Movement. These polarities generate a problem. Even within the Movement, those who greatly stress the importance of their distinctive doctrine of baptism are inclined to think that very few people outside the churches generated by the Movement are Christian at all, except perhaps for those who were baptized by immersion and who did not at least deny the critical interpretation of baptism observed by followers of the Movement. By contrast, those who stress the emphasis on unity find themselves in some anguish over the fact that their brothers and sisters who emphasize baptism have virtually ensured that their own congregations in fact constitute a sect, a distinct group, a denomination, complete with an "in-out" mentality. Dr. Shelly's book is, then, on the one hand, a fairly impassioned address to his fellow-travelers within the American Restoration Movement to synthesize the twin polarities found within the Movement's heritage; on the other hand, it is also an appeal to outsiders to think through questions of unity and fundamental Christian faith with him, in the hope that they too will join the Movement (though, he is quick to add, not necessarily the churches immediately generated by that Movement). The first impetus is found in a sentence such as this: "The overriding thesis of this book is that the attitude which creates a sectarian spirit must be guarded against with conscious effort" (page xvi). The second emphasis is found in sentences like these: "The goal of this book is simply to promote personal study and faith around some very important topics" (page xvii); or, "This book is an attempt to address the important issue of oneness among Christian

from a biblical point of view" (page 12).

From my perspective, this twofold aim is not very satisfactory. An outsider like myself is intrigued by the many "inside" stories and appeals, a kind of tourist's guide of the current divisions and problems within the American Restoration Movement--interesting, but not very edifying, and somehow making me feel a bit like a peeping Tom. The second strain is so weakly developed that I cannot imagine how it would convince anyone who has genuinely thought through his or her faith.

2. Rather naively, Dr. Shelly treats the American Restoration Movement as if it were unique, especially with respect to its emphasis on unity. More broadly, he ascribes many things to the Restoration Movement and its leaders that are in fact found in many places and people within the history of the church. For instance, on pages xix-xxi, he greatly stresses that the Restoration Movement is a return to a simple, single-eyed commitment to the truth of the Bible. The same could be said for the Puritans, all of the Baptists until the end of the last century, most Presbyterians until the end of the last century, all of the early Anglicans, and for that matter Jehovah's Witnesses and so on and so on. Again, on page 40, he insists that the American Restoration Movement has a right to a high place in the scheme of things because it gives its full confidence to the Bible as the authoritative Word of God. "All we would dare affirm about Jesus is what we can ground in Scripture." On pages 43-44 we read: "Only so long as we remain firmly committed to the Word can we lay claim to being undenominational. For the fundamental thing which separates a restorationalist from a denominationalist is a unique view of the nature of biblical authority for the former versus the recognition of another

authority in place of the Bible or as the correct interpreter of Scripture for the latter." The same sentiment is repeated many times. Dr. Shelly achieves this remarkable tour de force by simply assuming that wherever groups other than his own adopt theological positions which he himself does not find in the Scripture, they are guilty of appealing to an external authority, whether an ecclesiastical figure or mere tradition. He does not seem to recognize that many orthodox Presbyterians, for instance, view the Westminster Confession not as an additional authority, still less an adjunct to the Bible, but as a way of summarizing the truth that they think is explicitly taught by the Bible. Whether they are right or wrong in this assessment is beside the point. The point is that it is historically naive, and even ungracious, to argue that the American Restoration Movement has a unique view of the Bible's authority.

The same sort of naivete is found on numerous other fronts. On page 41, Shelly argues that an "important early contribution to the American Restoration Movement was the recognition of a distinction between the two testaments." I cannot imagine that he has read Clement, Iranaeus, Tertullian, Augustine, not to mention Luther, Calvin, and a host of others. What he may mean is that the peculiar distinctions the American Restoration Movement finds between the Testaments are unique. I am reminded of early dispensationalist claims about their discoveries. It is difficult to imagine how one could adhere to Christianity in any sense without perceiving differences between the Testaments. After all, how many Christians long to offer sacrifices at a temple in Jerusalem, or think it necessary on religious grounds to circumcise their male children? The church has always recognized differences between the

Testaments. The question to be asked, and asked of the American Restoration Movement as of every other movement, is whether the differences between the Testaments that any group or individual articulates are a fair representation of the reality itself, or somewhat distorted in this or that respect.

Again, on pages 44, 45, 47, Shelly greatly emphasizes the right of individuals to study the Scripture for themselves, and to exercise independent judgment as to its meaning. That, of course, was a burning issue in the Reformation, both within the Magisterial and the Anabaptist wings. Although the slogan "In faith unity, in opinions liberty, and in all things charity" is designated "a popular slogan of the Restoration Movement in America," parallels are found in virtually every wing of American Christianity, and beyond. For instance, Pope John XXIII wrote, in Ad Petri Cathedram (his first encyclical letter): "In essentials, unity; in doubt, freedom; in all things, charity." Again, Shelly's attempts to work through problems associated with the "weaker brothers" (pages 51ff.) find parallels everywhere--though his peculiar examples, including the appropriateness or otherwise of musical instruments in Christian worship, will strike many as a remarkably sectarian concern. Interestingly, even that particular issue finds fascinating parallels in some strands of Scottish Presbyterianism.

3. The book assumes too many negative stereotypes of branches of Christianity that do not adhere to the American Restoration Movement. Consider, for example, these words: "[T]hose who decide to stay within [established denominations] are sometimes forced to pick between what they perceive to be (a) dead, cold churches and (b) new-wave evangelistic churches. The former are perceived as funeral parlors

where old people sit around the corpse awaiting a burial; the latter generate excitement but tend to regiment life around one ministry, to judge one's worthiness only in terms of success in recording baptisms, and to leave as casualties a string of people who cannot measure up to group expectations" (page xiv). If this were an isolated sentiment, a reviewer might well agree that many churches do indeed fit into one of those two molds. But the sentiment recurs in one fashion or another so frequently that the overall impression Dr. Shelly generates is that all churches other than those belonging to the American Restoration Movement fall into one of these two groups. Any movement must be taken by its best exemplars, not its worst. I do not find that elementary charity much exercised in this book. I doubt that unity is greatly enhanced by the sentence, "The specter of unity is haunting the purveyors of religious sectarianism, partyism, and denominationalism" (page 11). The rather artificial story of the woman who "just wants to be a Christian" (page 15) pictures her in enormous frustration as she goes to a wide variety of churches and finds only that each one stresses organizational distinctives, different points of doctrinal emphasis, party loyalties and the like. That there are local congregations who are guilty of that kind of sloganeering, both outside and within the American Restoration Movement, few would want to doubt. But I have visited hundreds of churches where such a party spirit, if it exists at all, is rather rare, and certainly remote from the dominant concerns of the congregation and its leaders. In such instances, those peculiar concerns and emphases that do occur are frequently understood by that congregation itself to be mandated by biblical revelation. Whether their interpretation is correct or not is another matter. The point is that the negative

stereotypes created by Dr. Shelly do not contribute to clarity of thought as to why the hermeneutical and sociological differences actually exist.

4. There are many rather painful lapses in historical judgment.

One of the more surprising omissions of the book is any mention of the movement sometimes generically referred to as the Plymouth Brethren. The parallels with the American Restoration Movement are many, but Brethrenism is nowhere introduced. The early Brethren insisted they were not a denomination: they were just Christians, "Christian brothers." Nevertheless, like the American Restoration Movement, they eventually split into a number of definable camps (at least ten in America), and the more extreme branches insisted that they were the only true church of Jesus Christ in this or that particular city.

But more important than these historical omissions are the numerous historical misstatements. For instance, on pages 18-19, Shelly argues that in the first decades of the church there was a "beautiful situation of unity," but that it wasn't long until "human personalities began to emerge." "Sometimes a certain doctrinal emphasis here or there-- sometimes even a departure from that original doctrine--would cause another group to divide itself from the fellowship and distinguish itself by a new name. The next step was to draw up their distinctives in the form of a creed. Now they were no longer simply Christians. They became Christians of a certain variety, or they were Christians who gave particular emphasis to certain doctrines that they considered crucially important above all others. History has proved how long and horrible a mistake that has been." The truth of the matter is that, although some later creeds have been formulated through this process,

most of the early creeds had quite a different impetus. They were attempts to protect the church from outright heresy. That is true, for instance, of the Nicene Creed. Christians were happy simply to follow the Bible, without support of creeds, until some group came along that argued its interpretation of the Bible was correct, and the historical, orthodox one was incorrect. Christian leaders therefore decided to summarize their understanding of the Bible in order to help other Christians distinguish between two quite different interpretations.

When Dr. Shelly goes on to argue that the fundamental reason "why unbelief has grown so much in modern times" derives from the divisions amongst missionaries, based on their distinctive creeds and emphases (page 19), he simply could not be more wrong. He offers a hypothetical example of a missionary who goes to a Muslim country, and who is largely rejected because the Muslim community cannot be convinced by Christians who are divided amongst themselves. Anyone who has lived and worked in predominantly Muslim countries, or for that matter in India, where Hinduism predominates, or in Buddhist countries, knows this reconstruction is a terrible caricature. The vast majority of Hindus in India could not tell one Christian position from another. They are all just Christians, and therefore either to be assimilated or to be judged simply wrong. The number of Hindus who reject Christianity primarily because some Christians disagree about some details is miniscule. Such factors may have a little more force in the West than in countries that are primarily mission-receiving. Even in the West, however, one is more likely to find people being attracted to Christ by, say, an evangelical Baptist congregation cooperating with a local evangelical Alliance or Free Church congregation in practical displays of worship, unity and

outreach amongst the poor, than by merely formal agreements.

Equally naive is the frequent appeal to various protest movements in the history of the church as the proper precursors to the American Restoration Movement. The regular series is trotted out: the Waldensians, the Albigensians, the Anabaptists and so forth (e.g. pages 22, 61, 63). No attempt is made to analyze those groups' peculiar doctrines, doctrines with which the American Restoration Movement would be distinctly uncomfortable; and not one of those groups adopted the Restorationist view of baptism. More importantly, a number of contemporary movements have written their own "history" by appealing to exactly the same history of protest groups. One thinks, for instance, of the book by E. A. Broadbent,¹ who traces the same way to establish the rightness of the so-called Plymouth Brethren; or one thinks of some similar Baptist efforts. In each instance, the historical naivete is rather astonishing. One wishes that each of these sectarian histories would be read by other sectarian historians.

Other misconceptions abound. Dr. Shelly speaks of "the Baptist . . . Church" (page 53). Most Baptists, however, congregationalists to the core, speak of Baptist churches, and for aggregates of churches they prefer to speak of Baptist associations, or Baptist fellowships, or Baptist conventions. They believe that by such nomenclature they are retaining New Testament language; and for the same reason they are inclined to think that they are not a "denomination" but a "fellowship" or an "association." Everything depends on the definition of "denomination." Moreover, many strands of Baptists are as

¹E. A. Broadbent, The Pilgrim Church (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1931).

virilant as the American Restoration Movement in their rejection of the suitability or appropriateness of creeds. Not all Baptists, for instance, would be happy with the Baptist Confession of 1689: indeed, in the present climate very few of them would be. Moreover, whereas some denominational groups elevate creeds to a very high location in their authority structure, those groups that lay most stress on the finality of the Bible's authority universally agree that creeds have no more than a derived authority. They simply outline some of the things that Christians who adhere to such creeds believe the Bible to be truly saying. In that sense, of course, Dr. Shelly himself has a creed. He believes certain things are taught by the Bible, including certain views on human freedom and on the nature of Christian baptism. The fact that he does not have a formal document called "Our Creed" is immaterial: the truth of the matter is that his understanding of what the Bible's teaching is on these matters is in flat contradiction to what others believe. He has only two choices: either he may say that his particular view of baptism is the only allowable one, so that all who disagree with him are not Christians, or he may say that although he firmly believes his view of baptism to be correct, it is possible for a person to be a Christian even if that person self-consciously rejects Dr. Shelly's view. Either way, he has a functioning creed. That he chooses the second of the two ways means that this functioning creed, which he invests with all of the authority of Scripture, forces him to the conclusion that countless men and women whose lives have been savingly transformed by the Gospel across the centuries are not Christians at all--but that is another question to which I shall return.

The historical problem becomes acute when Dr. Shelly writes,

"Protestant denominationalism has repudiated the papacy in favor of various confessions, catechisms, and creeds. I want no part of a system where someone else is allowed to think for me. Neither does my opinion of such a system alter if I am allowed to be one of the chosen few who will do the thinking for the masses" (p. 46; cf. pp. 63-65). The reasoning here is simply astonishing. Quite apart from the fact that many Protestant groups operate with no creeds, one must conclude that Dr. Shelly has not appreciated the way creeds, in the best of circumstances (which is the only way to assess an opponent's position), actually operate. Creeds do not constrain or compel belief, or demand that adherents suspend all thought. Rather, they identify what some group thinks the Bible actually says. Those who agree with that understanding of the Bible willingly subscribe to that particular creed: their thought is not coerced. And of course, the groups represented by Dr. Shelly do exactly the same thing. He spends many pages wrestling with the circumstances under which churches springing from the American Restorationist Movement may or may not admit believers who have been baptized in other traditions! He even spends time saying how important it is for those who wish to join the congregation where he serves, but who think it appropriate for Christian worship to be accompanied with musical instruments, to view the matter as not of great importance and therefore to prove willing to cooperate with those who hold some other conviction. The point is that any congregation allows some things and does not allow others. The reasons for the diversity of constraints vary, but few thoughtful people would want to say that each constraint is an instance of forcing people to relinquish their right to think.

5. I must say something about the notion of baptism presupposed and

occasionally defended in these pages. Those who belong to the American Restorationist Movement are very concerned that people be "baptized scripturally"--as in "Is it possible for one to be in the Baptist Church [sic] and be baptized scripturally?" (p. xxi; cf. p. 74, passim).

Probably the strongest statement in the book is the quotation from David Lipscomb in the in-house journal, the Advocate: "The office of baptism is to introduce him who believes in God through Christ and repents of his sins into Christ Jesus, into his spiritual body; by which he becomes a member of the body of Christ. In this active entrance into Christ he puts on Christ; his sins are forgiven; he is consecrated to the service of God; he is born of water and the Spirit; he fulfills the righteousness of God for conscience; is saved from his sins; is translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son. The same act that introduces him into Christ secures to him all those blessings and privileges and others not here enumerated" (pages xxi-xxii). More commonly, one reads sentences like this: "All those who have obeyed the Gospel through their penitent faith in him to be baptized in Jesus' name constitute his spiritual body (i.e., the church) on earth" (page 61).

In the broader Restorationist Movement, some writers merely insist that baptism is the necessary act of obedience after exercising saving faith, an act of obedience so necessary that the reality of the faith is called into question if baptism by immersion does not in fact follow. Dr. Shelly, however, takes the more common view amongst those who belong to the American Restorationist Movement. In this view, not only is baptism the necessary step of obedience that attests the reality of saving faith, it is also the act of obedience, consequent on faith, which is actually the means, by the Spirit, to gain remission of sins and

entrance into the spiritual body of Christ and new birth. The new birth of water and spirit (John 3:3, 5) is repeatedly shown to be understood along such lines (e.g. page 75). The "one baptism" of Ephesians 4 is similarly understood, with the consequence that this particular view of baptism is listed amongst the essential things that bind together all Christians in true unity. Dr. Shelly is therefore required to reflect on the difficult question as to whether or not those who have not been baptized with this explicit understanding are genuinely converted (pages 122ff.). After extended discussion, he concludes that if they have been baptized by immersion, consequent upon genuine faith, without expressly disavowing the significance of baptism as understood in the Restorationist Movement, they may well be converted; otherwise, not. All along, of course, he is assuming baptism by immersion. Apparently no paedo-Baptists can possibly be converted.

It would take me too long to attempt a detailed refutation: that would require quite another essay, if not a book. I know what arguments are used by the American Restorationist Movement in defense of their understanding of baptism, but I remain thoroughly unpersuaded there is much substance to them. I myself hold that in New Testament times believers were baptized by immersion consequent upon their faith. This baptism was not understood to be a second step of grace, nor a means to conversion, still less a second step toward sanctification. It was part of the entire conversion process, the God-appointed sign of entrance into the new covenant, of participation in the body of Christ. In exactly the same way as, half a century ago, people who became Christians under the ministry of Billy Sunday might refer to their conversion as "hitting the sawdust trail," so also, by metonymy, baptism

in the New Testament, being part of the entire conversion process, could refer to the whole. Thus a statement like this, "As many as have been baptized have put on Christ," means something like "As many as have been converted (or saved or born again) have put on Christ." Similarly, I suspect that the "one baptism" language in Ephesians 4 means that all in the new covenant without exception have been converted: there is but one way to enter into this body, this spiritual union, and that is by becoming a Christian (to use the most generic category). I am aware, of course, what Dr. Shelly and other disciples of the American Restorationist Movement would say in response, and how I would respond to them, and so forth; but I refrain from entering those particular lists, and merely record my dissatisfaction with their view. I do not find their exegesis of Acts 2:38 required by the text; I do find that much of what the New Testament says about the nature of faith, grace, forgiveness and the cross-work of Christ (tied up with the work of the Spirit and the nature of the new covenant), stands diametrically opposed to their speculations.

6. Dr. Shelly's stress on Christian unity is in many ways a happier thing; but on close inspection it turns out to be severely hampered by the doctrines peculiarly associated with the American Restorationist Movement. On pages 17-18, and elsewhere in the book, Dr. Shelly sketches in how the terms "church" and "churches" are used in the New Testament, and how Christians are referred to in sweeping generic categories. From this he concludes that there were no denominations in the New Testament. Therefore, he argues, the church must avoid denominationalism, and should be made up of people who are "just Christians." He spends little enough time on such classic texts as John

17 or John 13:34-35, both passages of which speak to various aspects of the nature of Christian unity. Instead, he devotes a great deal of space to Ephesians 4:1-6 (pages 81ff.), arguing that this is the crucial text for establishing just what Christian unity consists in. Since he has his own exegesis for the "one baptism" in that passage, everything else in the American Restorationist Movement program follows easily enough. He is well aware that not every doctrine should be made a test of fellowship (pages 101ff.), but insists that his peculiar understanding of baptism is part of the "irreducible minimum." "One who has not received the one baptism has not yet been born into the family and has no child-status with God which permits brotherhood and fellowship" (page 109). Doctrines of lesser importance emerge from the recent history of his Movement. He produces some sad stories from within the American Restorationist Movement regarding groups that have "disfellowshipped" other groups on the basis of peculiar distinctives such as holding to premillennial eschatology, supporting institutional homes for orphans, or allowing musical instruments in public worship. All of these, he feels, are beliefs "which are capable of being held as private opinions" (page 112). He is more than happy to make a "distinction between receiving one as a brother and approving everything that brother does" (page 115).

In short, some of his arguments for unity within the American Restoration Movement are sound enough, and constitute exactly the sort of argumentation that other denominations use to appeal for unity within their own contexts. Occasionally there are lapses in exegesis along the way, as in the treatment of the argument of Galatians (pages 48ff.). But the overwhelming weakness with Dr. Shelly's development of the unity

theme is the inevitable entailment of his doctrine of baptism. Despite all his protestations, Christian unity turns out to be nothing more than an appeal for unity within the American Restoration Movement, to which are added those who have been immersed, consequent on faith, and who have at least not disallowed or disavowed the Restorationist's view of baptism. All other unity cannot be Christian unity, for the simple reason that the people involved are still not really Christians at all. Perhaps I may be excused for thinking that this is the most sectarian form of appeal for unity that one can find anywhere.

7. The same sort of criticism applies to Dr. Shelly's handling of the doctrine of the church. In several passages, notably pages 16-17, 77-79, Dr. Shelly treats the use of terms like "church" and "churches" to argue that the church is made up of saved individuals. The emphasis on the church as an aggregate of individuals who have been converted is extraordinarily strong. Most evangelicals (and I use the term without embarrassment, since he is able to use a sweeping "in-out" term such as "Restorationists") would want to say much the same thing. Indeed, at their best, they enjoy common worship, deep fellowship, and profound commitment to various forms of ministry and mission precisely because they share certain common distinctions, such as a commitment to the truth of the Bible, the need for regeneration if people are truly to be "saved" and readied for heaven, the foundational importance of justification by grace through faith, and the entailment of justification in obedience and sanctification. Thus, despite the variety of labels associated with denominations, many of us have prayed with, worked with and preached in churches, groups of believing Christians, in extraordinarily diverse settings and structures around

the world.

One of the intriguing features of Dr. Shelly's treatment of "church" and "churches" is his apparent unawareness of the similar handling of these themes in Brethren, Baptist and Presbyterian circles, to name but a few, where similar arguments are used to develop support for regenerate membership and their own peculiar ecclesiastical forms. Dr. Shelly nowhere attempts to justify the correctness of his conclusions over against the conclusions of others. Nor does he attempt to establish an even broader New Testament framework for the richness of the notion of "church," the Messianic community. For example, he does not work through in any detail the relationship between the church and the people of God in antecedent ages; he does not touch the church as understood to be that group of people who are "sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2).² But the most notably distinctive feature of Dr. Shelly's treatment of the church turns once again on his understanding of baptism. Because only those who have been "scripturally baptized" (in his understanding of the expression) have truly been regenerated, the aggregate of regenerate individuals turns out to be remarkably small, and associated primarily with the American Restorationist Movement.

8. It must be this complete conviction that his own group is right,

²C.f. especially the essays by Edmund P. Clowney, "The Biblical Theology of the Church," and Peter T. O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," in D. A. Carson, editor, The Church in the Bible and the World (Exeter: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pages 13ff., 88ff.

exclusively right, on these points that enables him to insist, again and again, that neither the American Restoration Movement nor the "streams" that emerge from it, such as the Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ, can properly be called denominations. He insists on the point so many times that it would be counter-productive to list all of them. At first reading I confess to some indignation at his distinction between "the sectarian churches," by which he means everybody else, and "the nonsectarian churches," by which he refers to those "streams" that have emerged from the American Restoration Movement. In fact, the mentality is easy enough to understand: it is exactly the same as that found in the Roman Catholic Church. Conservative Roman Catholics do not view themselves as a denomination. They think of themselves as the one, true, holy, apostolic church. For them, Christian unity does not have to do with getting denominations together on an agreed basis of faith and conduct, still less on regional cooperation at the practical level, but on returning to that one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Roman Catholics of this stamp will happily acknowledge that there may be some genuine Christians outside the fold, but the solution to the unity problem is to return to the one fold. That is exactly the stance that Dr. Shelly takes, only in his case the fold is the American Restoration Movement. When on page 29 he argues that to be Christian only, it is necessary to work apart from denominations, since denominations perpetuate the very divisions he condemns, it turns out that he concludes that to be truly faithful to the New Testament what Christians really ought to do is to side with the American Restoration Movement. It would be as unfair to apply terms like "bigotry" to Dr. Shelly's stance as it would to apply them to the Roman Catholic Church. The root

issue in both instances is whether they have properly identified who real Christians are, and what the church really is. In both instances, though for different reasons, the answer must be negative.

What is perhaps more shocking, when one looks at the American Restorationist Movement and its claims in the light of parallel claims in Roman Catholicism, is the extraordinarily narrow focus of the former. It turns out that the sum of the redeemed is a much smaller group than anyone but a Restorationist could have thought.

9. It is this combination of dogmatic certainty about the rightness of their own peculiar, doctrinal "minority report" that so blinds American Restorationists, including Dr. Shelly, that they do not see how much their "in-out" language sounds extraordinarily sectarian and "denominational" to everyone but themselves. The evidence piles up that this is a sectarian book. Virtually everyone who is quoted is a significant figure in the American Restorationist Movement: David Lipscomb, Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell, E. G. Sewell, Barton Stone, M. C. Kurfees, F. D. Srygley and others. The only other sources turn out to be things like BAGD, along with one or two references to Luther and Wesley. The journals that are quoted are in-house organs: the Gospel Advocate and the Standard. The fact that so many documents can be listed in Appendix 2 shows that, although there may not be formally adopted "creeds" that are actually labeled such, certain documents in the heritage of the American Restoration Movement form a loose collection of reasonably authoritative writings for the Movement's adherents. There is frequent use of language that any outsider would say betrays the presence of a sect at worst, a denomination at best: e.g., "Within the restoration heritage, we . . ."; "I have never heard a

restorationist deny . . ."; "I stand in the historical heritage of the American Restoration Movement." It is not surprising that Dr. Shelly can provide some statistics for the Movement (pages xxiii-xxiv). Although Dr. Shelly can on page 78 speak of the "correct usage" of expressions such as "church of God," in fact he cannot stick to it (e.g., page 144). It must be said most emphatically that this is not a massive, built-in contradiction in Dr. Shelly's system. Rather, it is the entailment of his view that only he and those like him within the American Restorationist Movement have the correct view of who is saved-- and that view is powerfully bound up with his distinctive doctrine of baptism.

10. It is this same unqualified belief in the essential and exclusivistic rightness of his Movement's principles that enables Dr. Shelly to comment on the numerous divisions within the American Restorationist Movement, and yet to concede no more than "the possibility that some have become sectarian" (cf. pages 136-137). To his credit, Dr. Shelly tells us again and again how splintered, divided and weak the "Churches of Christ" really are. He is candid about the things that have divided them, candid about the way some of them are inclined to "disfellowship" others, and so forth. But they are all safely within the camp, since they hold to the doctrine of baptism of which Dr. Shelly approves. If some of them have become "sectarian," in their case it does not place them outside the camp, but simply makes them less than wholesome exemplars of the unity the American Restorationist Movement publicly mandates.

11. Perhaps the fundamental weakness of the entire stance is its extraordinary hermeneutical naivete. It is true that once or twice Dr.

Shelly talks about hermeneutics, as for instance on page 42 when he refers to the Restorationist heritage of appealing to command, example, and necessary inference--though even there, cast in somewhat more sophisticated language, one can find something of the same principles worked out in Charles Hodge and many other authors who would not be included as Christians according to Dr. Shelly's lights. More important, Dr. Shelly apparently transfers the authority of the Bible, upon which both he and many of his opponents agree (though he fails to acknowledge the fact), to the set of essential doctrines that he finds in Ephesians 4--including his understanding of baptism. Anyone who is an honest interpreter, anyone who upholds the Bible must, in his view, come out with his conclusions. When I charge Dr. Shelly with hermeneutical naivete, I am not simply saying that he has not apparently considered the difficult questions raised by the new hermeneutic; I am saying something much simpler. Dr. Shelly has not even advanced to the place where he recognizes that there are millions of people in the world with exactly his view of Scripture who have come out with quite different interpretations than his own. He has not thought through why this should be so, how it might be rectified (if at all), what the governing hermeneutical grids might be that are controlling the discussion, how one can detect them and reform them, and much more. In short, like most sectarian stances, his is characterized by a certain hermeneutical parochialism. And the effect of this, sad to say, is that his system effectively writes off as non-Christians millions of people throughout the world, in this generation and others, who have to any careful observer been savingly transformed by the Gospel, who confess Jesus as Lord, who trust his finished cross-work as the sole basis for

their acceptance before God, who understand that they are saved by grace through faith and have been regenerated by the Spirit, and whose lives and deeds attest the presence of the transforming power of God. Shall all the paedo-Baptists be eliminated--the entire Korean church, the immense paedo-Baptist wing of the Puritan movement in the seventeenth century, the entire Princeton tradition in the last century, and so forth? Shall we immediately insist that Anglicans such as J. I. Packer, John R. W. Stott and Peter O'Brien cannot possibly be regenerate? Shall we write off all the Baptists and Brethren and Christian Alliance folk, and millions of others, who expressly or implicitly disallow Dr. Shelly's understanding of baptism?

12. There are a few other nagging difficulties with the book, but they need not detain us long. For instance, the book is immensely repetitious. The heart of the argument could have been articulated in one-third the space. Or again, it is somewhat annoying to read the incessant digs at various denominational "names," without finding any real understanding of how they were derived (for better or for worse), and to sense no self-awareness of the fundamental inconsistency when the author speaks in such glowing terms of the American Restorationist Movement (appropriately capitalized) and of its "streams."

But enough, or I shall fall into the trap of vain repetitions myself. The chief value of the book lies in the transparent candor with which this particular representative of the American Restorationist Movement discusses his heritage and its implications. For his candor he is to be thanked; what his candor has produced means, as far as this reviewer is concerned, that he is not to be followed.