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Churches of Christ

*Who We Are and What We Ought to Be**

Everett Ferguson

The title suggested to me was, “Churches of Christ—Where We Are and Where We are Going.” I passed on that. I try to be a historian, and historians, although we are reluctant to admit it, are not good at contemporary analysis and are notoriously poor prophets. I accept responsibility for the present title, but not responsibility to meet your expectations for the title.

This will not be a statistical or sociological report, but a discussion of who we profess to be, what the theological intentions are. The short answer is, “We ought to be what we intended to be and want to be—New Testament Christians, not more and not less, and not necessarily what we are.” But I was not invited here for the short answer. I disappoint those who, like the ancient Athenians, want to hear some new thing. Historians are supposed to live in the past, so indulge me in being reactionary. I still like the Restoration Plea. Hence, I hope to speak words of affirmation and encouragement.

* An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Sermon Seminar of Austin Graduate School of Theology on 22 and 23 May 2001.

Those who are pessimistic about Churches of Christ and a program of restorationism are myopic. We need to send them to the mission fields to see what is happening in Africa, India, and South America. But we want it to be only a visit, so they don't stay long enough to infect those churches with their negativism.

Dangers

Nevertheless, there are dangers we face in this country. Those I select are not necessarily the most serious; they are just those about which I could think of something to say.

(1) One danger is *absorption into American Evangelicalism*. There appeared in 1998 a case study of the Mennonite Brethren, who are now the Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches. It was written by Calvin Redekop, grandson of one of the co-founders of the Mennonite Brethren in this country, who grew up in that church and then chose to leave it, or rather the church left him, as he remained with a church that continued to honor the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage. Redekop contends that the Mennonite Brethren absorbed so much of the American religious culture that they eventually rejected many aspects of their heritage and moved into the amorphous world of Evangelicalism. Practices such as non-resistance, strong identity with a historical heritage within a local congregational context, church discipline, and cultural non-conformity were replaced with a primary emphasis on an individual conversion experience. It was in many ways a shallower theology that de-emphasized a church-centered perspective in favor an individual spirituality and a closer identity with American revivalism.¹

We are large enough that what happened to this small group (about 4,000) is not likely to happen to us, but this is a sober warning. I am not sure

¹ See the review of Calvin W. Redekop, *Leaving Anabaptism* (Telford: Pandora, 1998), by Wes Harrison in *Fides et Historia* 32.2 (2000), 170–171.

in practical terms what the Springfield Presbytery meant in 1804 when they willed “that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large,” but I doubt that Evangelicalism is the equivalent of the “body of Christ at large,” and I question that blending into general Evangelicalism is a worthy goal.

(2) Related to this is *the fear of legalism*. Some consider legalism our greatest danger. Let me warn also against an extreme reaction to legalism. Some are so afraid of legalism they are afraid of obedience and of talk about the will of God. They do not recognize that some of us do what we do because we want to please and honor God and not out of guilt or rule-keeping. There is not a legalist under every rock.

I certainly recognize that there are “weightier matters of the law.” But remember all of what Jesus said in Matt 23:23, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced *without neglecting the others*.”

(3) Another challenge is coming from *a hermeneutics that seeks to explain away uncomfortable texts*. Those of us in biblical and historical studies, when we do not have another source or some outside control to help interpret a text, use a circular methodology. We use clues in a given text in order to reconstruct the situation that the text addresses; then we use the reconstructed situation in interpreting the text. This approach is often the only way we can proceed, and it may produce useful results. However, we need to recognize the limitations of the method. The result is a reconstruction that may or may not be correct. An interpretation that is based on a hypothetical reconstruction cannot be the basis of an assured application of the resulting interpretation to the present. Two errors are made, even if the reconstruction is true: Making the reconstruction of the situation the key to the application of the text; and taking the next step (really a 100 meter dash) and limiting

the teaching to the reconstructed situation. Nearly all the Bible is addressed to specific occasions. Denying that what was addressed to a particular situation can have a universal application will leave us with an irrelevant Bible.

You have heard it said, “Don’t let the text get in the way of a good sermon.” Turn that around: “Don’t let a good sermon get in the way of the text.” A passage cannot mean now what it did not mean when it was written and did not mean for 2,000 years of Christian history.

(4) Related to this hermeneutical danger is *turning decisions over to the experts—scholars and preachers*. This attitude says that if the university professor or preacher says it, it must be true. “Some things are too important to leave to the experts”—like raising children and shepherding the church. There was a time when we faced considerable anti-scholarly sentiment, and in some circles that is still the case; but there is an opposite danger now of too much reliance on scholarship. I do not intend these remarks to be anti-scholars; we need more of them. The problem for the most part is not with our scholars but with our attitude toward them.

A superficial acquaintance with scholarship gives it a great influence. We need to know the issues more deeply before we can transcend the problems. I read a text and on the surface see no problem. I read what others have studied and begin to see difficulties. I go deeper and either find the answers or see the problems in a better perspective.

We should paraphrase 1 John 4:1, “Test the scholars.” With less serious Bible study in our churches, we depend on what others tell us. We need more people who can do their own study in the texts and not simply know what others have said about them. Instead of listening only to the conclusions of our leaders, we need to examine how and especially why they get to these conclusions. In passing I note the phrase “priesthood of all believers” does not mean the right of the individual to study and interpret

the Bible for himself or herself. Nevertheless, we all do have an obligation to study scripture for ourselves.

(5) Another danger is *identifying the Restoration principle with Lockean philosophy and Common Sense Realism*. The Restoration principle is not dependent on this, and rejection of this philosophy does not entail rejection of restorationism. An Anglican friend in Oxford, when I defined the Churches of Christ in terms of a restoration of New Testament Christianity, insisted that this is not distinctive. Every group, she insisted, claims Biblical authority. True enough, but some more seriously than others. Moreover, there have been conscious Restoration movements through Christian history. The principle is found even in the New Testament: 1 John appeals to what was “at the beginning” as the standard of Christian teaching and practice.

Our way of teaching and arguing has been very much shaped by a particular philosophy. We may have to change our apologetics and rhetoric, but not the principle itself. With every change in philosophy in Christian history there has been a reformulation of the way the Christian faith was expressed in the changed philosophical framework. The difficulty has been keeping this from affecting the heart of Christianity.

(6) A further danger is *giving up on the non-denominational ideal*. Whatever the practical realities are, we should think and act in terms of being non-denominational.

Contributions and Viability

I have talked about dangers, as I see them, but I said that I want to be positive and encouraging. There will be more of that below, but let me include now a positive statement about contributions of the Restoration Movement. I recently completed the entry on “Church” for the Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement, being edited by Doug Foster, Paul Blowers, and Newell Williams. Here is my conclusion to that entry:

Despite their divisions, ecclesiology remains an area in which the Stone-Campbell churches have something not only distinctive but also constructive to offer to the larger Christian world. These contributions to ecclesiology include the following points, adhered to with varying degrees of emphasis by all the branches: (1) A strong or “high” doctrine of the importance of the church, balancing the movement’s emphasis on individual liberty. (2) The emphasis on a visible unity of the church and the local congregation as the center of the Christian life. (3) The clarification of the relation of salvation to church membership—what saves also makes one a member of the church. (4) The approach of uniting on what nearly every Christian agrees is right and proper instead of maintaining division over what may be contended for as acceptable but may not be generally accepted.

A scholar friend of mine observed after his doctoral studies in New Testament at a major European university that the arguments given for the position of Churches of Christ often were bad, but the position itself is solid and stood up to thorough, critical New Testament study.

I know for myself that I study the early church with complete confidence. In my study I examine other theological and denominational options. Our problems in Churches of Christ mostly come from human problems, which others also have, and from our misunderstandings of our position. The theological program itself is the key consideration. I have been pleasantly surprised at the acceptance of my historical work across the religious spectrum—Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, historically minded Evangelicals, Mennonites, and Church of the Brethren. That acceptance is in part due to the fact that the historical evidence is largely consistent with our ecclesiastical position.

Those who express astonishment at the considerable number of scholars with a trans-denominational stature and international reputation who not only come from Churches of Christ but are active members reveal more about themselves than about us.

I have four prayers for our churches: a deeper spirituality, unity, an evangelistic and missionary spirit, and faithfulness to the word of God. I am

grateful for the contributions the Sermon Seminar of the Austin Graduate School of Theology makes toward the answering of these prayers.

Validity of the Restoration Plea

We have presented some dangers confronting Churches of Christ. But mainly I want to speak an encouraging word. My hope is that, whatever the tensions, a large and broad center is holding. It would be unfortunate if that center accepts a denominational perspective. Even if there is not a center that holds firm, it is important how we respond to problems: with faithfulness, Bible study, prayer, love, and diligence in our ministries. The important thing is what is in our hearts, how we deal with circumstances.

In August, 1973, I published in *Mission* journal an article on "The Validity of the Restoration Plea." I identified the emphases of the Restoration Plea as: to be the New Testament church today; to practice the undenominational unity of the church; and to restore humanity to the image of God.

I offered the following arguments for the validity of Restorationism.

(1) It is *reasonable* to let what was taught at the beginning of Christianity be the standard for what Christianity is. Rationality is out of favor today, and reason has its limitations; but it is preferable to its alternatives.

(2) It has a *theological* basis in Christianity as a revealed, prophetic religion.

(3) It has a *historical* justification as a recurring emphasis in Christian history.

(4) It corresponds to *contemporary* interest in the Bible, and that interest is still present.

(5) It is *practical*. Individuals and groups have come to similar conclusions as ours simply from studying their Bibles. One needs a lot of help to become a Roman Catholic, a Lutheran, a Presbyterian, and so forth; but it doesn't take much outside help to become a New Testament Christian.

Some of us have known individuals who from their reading of the New Testament arrived at a basically similar position to ours and identified themselves with our churches, and our lives have been spiritually blessed from association with those people.

(6) It occupies *ecumenical* ground. It stands for what I might call “common Christianity,” as uncommon as that might be. Our distinctives are for the most part not distinctive. They are mostly items everyone agrees are all right; others only say that something else is all right too.

Strengths

Part of a faithful response in these times is to emphasize our strengths. Oddly enough, some of these strengths are the very things under attack. Let us comment on some of these strengths.

(1) Dedication to the authority of the *Bible* and its careful study by all Christians. This is why a decline in Bible study and Bible knowledge by many members is such a danger. And this is why I say don’t turn the Bible over to the experts.

The slogans “No creed by Christ” and “No book but the Bible” have the limitations of any slogan, but they give us the potential for self-correction. Some of the unrest in our churches now is precisely this process of self-correction at work. Not all is due to that; there are legitimate dangers and concerns that I mentioned in Part I. But some of the changes in attitudes and approach are healthy. Let’s be sure the changes are coming from the Bible and the desire to be faithful to it.

(2) A high doctrine of the *church*. We have correctly stressed the importance of the church in the divine plan of salvation and its necessity for the development of individuals in spiritual growth. The proper doctrine of the church is a necessary corrective to the individualism of current Western society and religion.

Here I would caution against expressing this high doctrine of the church in the language of “incarnation.” If we take the image seriously, it implies too low a view of Christ or too high a view of the church. Jesus was fully human, but “without sin.” There is a high view of the church in Ephesians, but Christ is still “head” of the church.

(3) Centrality of *baptism*. Our position on baptism is now widely recognized as the correct understanding of the New Testament teaching and the practice of the early church. The new liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church gives preference to adult immersion. Some Anglican and Methodist churches are making provision for adult baptisteries in their buildings. We may not be able to take credit for convincing people on this subject, but that does not matter. There is an old Jesuit saying “A lot of good can be done in this world if one is not too careful about who gets the credit for it.” Biblical, historical, and archaeological studies have confirmed our insights on baptism.

(4) The *Lord's supper* as the center of corporate assemblies. Theological interpretations of the Lord's supper still differ widely in the Christian world, but not as much as in the past. But in terms of practice, weekly communion is widely recognized as the norm for Christian worship.

For this reason, my wife and I were dismayed when we visited a church of Christ that had removed its communion table from the front of the assembly hall to the foyer and served from the foyer. The apparent reason was to open up the whole platform area for an uninterrupted view of how much the praise team felt the meaning of the words they sang.

Taking the focus off the word and the supper will be disastrous for us theologically as well as liturgically.

(5) That leads me to another strength: *a cappella music*. Including this as a strength may surprise you, because it seems many consider it a weakness or at least something dispensable. Even people outside our fellowship tell us not to give up on this practice. And I don't know how

many times I hear reports of the delightful amazement of visitors at our meetings when they first hear well-done unaccompanied singing by a whole congregation.

My friend and former student Jeff Childers writes about ACU students in their year-abroad class in Oxford hearing the Greek Orthodox bishop Kallistos (Ware) explain the eastern orthodox practice of unaccompanied singing and their reasons for it. The bishop made these points: This was the way the first Christians sang; it is connected with the doctrine of creation—the human being is the ideal worship instrument; it expresses unity; and it focuses attention on God in worship without mechanical distraction. I am mainly known for my work on the historical argument for *a cappella* music, but I have been giving more attention lately to such theological reasons that provided the basis for the historical practice.

(6) The cultivation of *personal holiness*. Again, a strength is under attack. I will mention two areas. The assault on marriage in our culture and the ravages of divorce have affected Christians.

The culture of war and violence has desensitized us. We need to pay more attention to our calling as peacemakers. We don't talk about this much nor teach our members how to give peace a priority in their lives.

Place of Patterns

Pat Harrell, a formative figure in the Bible Chair at the University of Texas that has become the *Institute for Christian Studies* and now the *Austin Graduate School of Theology* had a unique way of making his points. I would like to quote from one of his bulletin articles when he was preaching in Houston.

Once upon a time there was a tailor—a very fine tailor—who specialized in making shirts.

His craftsmanship was superb. The cloth employed was of the finest quality. The sewing was exceptional, the buttonholes were precise, in short, each shirt was a work of art.

The only difficulty was that the tailor insisted on making each shirt with three

sleeves. Admittedly, in this he was rather arbitrary. But he felt the two sleeve model was too old fashioned and lacking in aesthetic values.

This peculiarity was interpreted differently by prospective customers. Many thought it only a minor flaw, stressing the fine craftsmanship. Others were willing to ignore it because of the reasonable price for which they were sold. Only a few, while admiring the quality, insisted the shirts were valueless because the tailor's pattern was wrong.

While this may be an unlikely story as far as tailors are concerned, it is fairly common in religion.

Many people in "shopping" for a church fail to realize that the most basic requirement—the essential factor that takes precedence over all other considerations—is the pattern or total system.

It is easy enough to find good qualities in all churches. One may excel in dedication, another in good works, still another in devotion, but these commendable characteristics only increase the ultimate frustration if the system is wrong.

The church was designed by Jesus and patterned to fit the nature of humanity. While the style may vary from time to time, there is no need to change the pattern until human nature changes.

Patternism is out of favor, and certainly the idea can be abused and made to say too much. However, the principle of having a pattern is not a bad idea.

Our Response

What should we be doing in the present situation? Groups grow because of the commitment and sacrifice of their members. Most of the suggestions about how to increase our numbers are cosmetic changes, and some not all that tasteful. We need to go deeper.

And we need to concentrate on basics. An Anglican bishop in Canada had a wonderful insight. The Native American nations in Canada were allowed by the Canadian high court to proceed with a class action suit against the four major Christian denominations in that country "for a century of cultural abuse." Even if the plaintiffs lost, the defendants would be completely bankrupted by legal defense costs. There was an interview with

a senior bishop of the Church of England in which the journalist tried to get him to panic, or at least to say something inflammatory about his church's plight. He coolly observed that "the church of Christ can do everything it has to do with a Book, a table, a bottle of wine, and a loaf of bread; all the rest is not really necessary." We might want to add a pool of water to the bishop's list, but the point is that we should focus on the fundamentals.

No matter how dismal the situation becomes, we don't need much to be faithful and to do our work. Nice buildings are just that—nice. Strong institutions are useful, but they can lose their usefulness.

We can decide the direction we want to go. But we do not know what the Spirit of God will do. There is a wonderful line in the movie "Rudy," about a young man without great physical attributes but an overwhelming desire to play football for Notre Dame. As he visits with a Roman Catholic priest, the priest says, "I have been engaged in religious studies for thirty-eight years, and I have learned only two truths. The first is, There is a God; and the second is, I am not he."

I have tried to reaffirm some basic principles and bring a hopeful word. You may accuse me of whistling in the dark. I don't think the situation is as dark as some do. Even if it is, I had rather whistle than tremble. One of the things I remember about my father is that he whistled a lot, and he whistled joyfully. He lived through hard times, and he didn't mind telling others about it. But mostly, I remember that he whistled.

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