

1-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Huey, Keith (2006) "The Future of the Churches of Christ: Applying Leonard Allen's Essay," *Leaven*: Vol. 14: Iss. 4, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol14/iss4/4>

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The Future of the Churches of Christ: Applying Leonard Allen's Essay

KEITH HUEY

APPROACHING THE SUBJECT

In his essay "The Future of the Restoration Movement," Leonard Allen speaks from the context of the Churches of Christ, but he seeks to address the broader future of the entire Restoration Movement. I am more narrowly focused as I write this essay, and the Churches of Christ will provide both the context and the scope for my reflections as I attempt to look into the future.

I cannot offer any predictions, but we are clearly trending in moribund directions; rumors of our death are frequently exaggerated but they are not entirely fictional. Many of our congregations are ebbing into irrelevance, and countless others are declining into evangelical assimilation. For this reason, several Church of Christ leaders have responded with a written "affirmation" that seeks to salvage our best legacies. They insist that

The path to substantive Christian unity is found in returning to the clear teachings of Scripture and practices of the early church, commonly acknowledged and respected by all Christian traditions. In this light, beliefs and practices characteristic of Churches of Christ are neither novel nor idiosyncratic, nor should they be easily abandoned.¹

It is an intimidating but worthy discussion: to contemplate our heritage's assets, failings, and place in the kingdom of God.

It is already difficult to explain who we are: aside from our persistent theological conservatism, the Churches of Christ embrace a daunting kaleidoscope of conviction. Back in 1979, Joe Barnett posed this question in an evangelistic pamphlet: "Churches of Christ . . . Who are These People?"² In response, Barnett appealed to our Restoration roots and to cardinal doctrines respecting baptism, *a cappella* music, and the Lord's Supper. His summary was not particularly controversial, and the pamphlet was widely distributed. For the past generation, however, those doctrines have been losing their definitive character. Some congregations cling tenaciously to Barnett's landmarks, while others seem embarrassed to publicly own them. We still share a significant publication called the *Christian Chronicle*; aside from that, however, we can scarcely find any solid, common ground. Our unity seems to exist, quite literally, on paper.

In an effort to describe our complicated fellowship, David Edwin Harrell, Jr. has identified our "de facto division" into two evenly-matched camps of "progressives" and "conservatives."³ It is simplistic, of course, to treat confessional disintegration with the language of a two-way split, but Harrell's analysis provides a manageable way to begin the discussion. In a different context, Joe Beam has crafted a list of nuanced

1. "A Christian Affirmation," *Christian Chronicle* 62, 5 (May 2005): 15. It can also be accessed online at <http://www.christianaffirmation.org/>.

2. Joe Barnett, *Churches of Christ . . . Who are These People?* (Lubbock, TX: Pathway, 1979).

3. David Edwin Harrell, *The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 176-218.

categories such as “cautious” innovators and “searching” traditionalists.⁴ These designations are helpful to the extent they chart the complexity of our current situation, but I will apply Harrell’s simpler, two-fold scenario to the primary outlines of Allen’s essay.

THE CHALLENGE OF NEW SPIRITUAL OPENNESS

Allen begins his list of challenges with the rise of a “new spiritual openness,” as postmoderns seek to “restore their shriveled souls.” Allen is not confident that our churches are ready to participate in this movement, living as we do in “the shadow of rationalism.” This point is developed more fully in his book, *Things Unseen*, where he explains that

After modernity, the more “charismatic” or “third wave” expressions of Christian faith will continue to form a major part of the vanguard of the Christian movement around the world. . . . But Churches of Christ have been, and likely will remain, unable to enter into any significant, constructive dialogue with this huge, mission-oriented part of God’s kingdom today.⁵

Allen does not suggest that the Churches of Christ should undergo a charismatic conversion; he beckons us, however, toward a deeper sense of theology, and advocates a trinitarian doctrine of the Spirit.⁶

It is true that our churches have been stuck in the modernist mud, and our rationalism has created an obstacle to healthy spirituality. As Allen observes, however, our modernist condition is passing away. He also alludes to the larger, more intractable problem when he pleads for trinitarian doctrine: since the earliest days of our Movement, the Churches of Christ have been reluctant to participate in theological discourse. Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, for instance, were willing to discuss the Father, Son and Spirit,⁷ but they were hesitant to engage the kinds of questions that bedeviled Nicea. Trinitarian vocabulary, they explained, could not be found in scripture, and the issue had been “a subject of endless controversy among theologians.”⁸ The Churches of Christ have inherited this perspective, and now, divorced from the biblical and traditional resources of theological deliberation, we are unprepared to name the God whom we serve.

Ill-equipped to think theologically, we have turned our attention to the external forms of the worship assembly. Hence, our progressive and conservative churches are deeply divided about praise teams, clapping, hand waving, and women who lead public prayers. Our controversies spin perpetually around these kinds of axes, and our acquaintance with the Spirit has been restricted by this narrow focus. Devoid of any meaningful theology of the Spirit, progressives complain of Spirit-less assemblies, while conservatives complain of charismatic excess. Limited to questions of Sunday-morning praxis, neither camp has authentically considered the Spirit. They cannot possibly anticipate the transformative power of the fullness of deity, as it moves beyond the auditorium and empowers us to live in fleshly temples.⁹

If we are to meet this challenge, our hopes might rest with the movements that are sometimes called “emergent” or “missional.” Emergent thinkers (like Brian McLaren) have rejected modernist restraints, and have cleared the ground for some profound theological corrections.¹⁰ This ground-clearing movement, how-

4. Joe Beam, “What Is Happening to Us?” *Wineskins* 2, 12 (May/June 1996): 23-26.

5. C. Leonard Allen, *Things Unseen: Churches of Christ in (and After) the Modern Age* (Siloam Springs, AR: Leafwood Publishers, 2004), 187.

6. Once again, he enlarges on this discussion in *Things Unseen*, 188-96.

7. For example, see Alexander Campbell, “To Timothy,” *Christian Baptist* 4, 10 (7 May 1827); *The Christian System*, 2nd ed. (Pittsburgh: Forrester & Campbell, 1839), 19-22; and Barton Stone, *An Address to the Christian Churches*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, KY: I. T. Cavins, 1821), 6-12.

8. Stone, *Address*, 7. See also the commentary of Nathan Hatch, “The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People,” *Journal of American History* 67 (1980): 557.

9. This confusion about the Spirit is endemic to the wider scope of American Evangelicalism, as observed by D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 164-65.

10. Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

ever, will not conserve the distinctive features that have historically characterized the Churches of Christ. More important, perhaps, could be the missional enterprise, which seeks to be culturally and socially relevant in a post-constantinian context.¹¹ Missional churches could surely provide a hospitable environment for a mature theology of the Spirit; they are derived, however, from a broad ecumenical background, and like the emergent churches, will do very little to solidify anyone's identity with the Churches of Christ.

THE CHALLENGE OF UNITY

Beyond the challenge of the new spiritual openness, Allen also considers the challenge that has been posed by the failure of our original unity vision. To the extent that our forebears were actually devoted to unity, it was, as Allen observes, a lost cause: it hinged on the modernist chimera of an encyclopedic Bible that was laden with factual, easily-digested doctrinal propositions. Only stubbornness or stupidity could prevent the world from accepting our commonsensical creed. With an absurd misapplication of Amos 3.3, we concluded that nobody could walk with us, "unless they be agreed."

That bluff has now been called, and even the most traditional Churches of Christ will be forced to acknowledge what Allen calls "the sheer force of pluralism and fragmentation." For instance, we might continue to argue that scripture prohibits instrumental music in the assembly, but it is no longer possible to claim that the issue is clear and unambiguous. In fact, if we are honest we will confess that our position is quite ambiguous (and frequently quirky) for the overwhelming majority of serious biblical interpreters. Likewise, we can maintain our historic interpretation of Acts 2.38, but we are naive indeed if we regard that verse to be the obvious, final word on baptism. Our prior confidence has eroded into a crisis of doctrinal insecurity, as Jack Reese has aptly described it:

While Certainty, at least on the surface, served us well enough in the past—keeping our fellowship together, energizing our zeal for evangelism, inspiring our preaching—it is proving false in our current context. As the continental shelves of opposing cultures slide and crash into each other, as the ground beneath us shakes, and the structures we have long trusted begin to tremble, Certainty seems to have abandoned us.¹²

Some are understandably afraid of this kind of language and unwilling to capitulate to the uncertainties of a postmodern worldview. We want book-chapter-and-verse security, to be assured that our doctrine is the substance of things completely realized, and the evidence of things clearly seen.¹³ Our attitude is the by-product of the rational, scientific spirit of modernity.

Sobered by the deteriorating status of propositional truth-statements, some Churches of Christ have attempted a half-solution: they have tried to stake their souls on an abbreviated list of elementary certitudes. These items are (they hope) beyond dispute, and immune to troubling uncertainties: for this reason, they are called "matters of faith," "salvation issues," "essentials," or "core doctrines." In this way, some of our members have extended fellowship to churches that use instruments in their assemblies (unless they speak in tongues), or to churches whose women lead prayers (unless they sprinkle babies).

These distinctions are the fruit of earnest reflection, but they do not represent the much-needed revision of our modernist perspective: they have only shortened the list of convictions that we must defend as being absolutely, rationally and unquestionably true. They beg new arguments about the "core" of Christian faith and provoke endless debates about the number of issues that might be shoved to the non-core periphery. It is

11. For an introduction to the beginnings of this movement, see Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, eds., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

12. Jack R. Reese, *The Body Broken: Embracing the Peace of Christ in a Fragmented Church* (Siloam Springs, AR.: Leafwood, 2005), 24-25.

13. This philosophy is reflected in the above-cited "Christian Affirmation," which is tragically grounded in the modernist mirage of "clear teachings."

little wonder that many of our churches have been shrinking from volatile questions, and have settled for a generic, illusory unity that feeds on skimpy conviction.

Is there any way to solve this problem without compromising our traditional identity? Allen rightly observes that our new situation demands “a fundamental reorientation,” and he significantly appeals to examples from our own heritage. He is thinking of people like Barton Stone,¹⁴ who presciently repudiated the prospects of a doctrinally-defined unity. Of course, Stone did not anticipate a postmodern world in which the category of “objective truth” would be subject to suspicion; his program, however, is well suited to a generation dissatisfied with modernist pretensions. Stone advocated a “union of fire” that was not based on any particular definition of truth, but rested instead on the “spirit of truth.”¹⁵ Allen is also thinking of Robert Richardson, who similarly spoke of a Spirit-created oneness. Richardson believed that we might appeal to a power beyond ourselves, laying hold of a unity that, as a creation of the Spirit, defies the normal demands of prerequisite doctrinal uniformity.¹⁶ Beneath the Spirit’s influence we could probably discover debate as an act (and not a denial) of fellowship, a helpful supplement to parties and potlucks.

Allen quotes Stone and Richardson because they provide concrete examples from our own heritage. With them, we presumably possess the resources we will need to address the challenge of unity. Stone and Richardson, however, are truly distant voices, and the Churches of Christ have been overwhelmingly dominated by the alternative visions of Walter Scott, Tolbert Fanning, and many other “hard-style” proponents.¹⁷ Moreover, Stone and Richardson relied completely on a Spirit-centered approach, and, as I have already suggested, the Churches of Christ are not prepared for that kind of path. Unless we move beyond our auditoriums and embrace a missional ethos, we are unlikely to trust the Spirit; unless we trust the Spirit, we will never experience the unity of the Spirit.

THE CHALLENGE OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Allen suggests that we are challenged by “the new awareness of tradition and the role of creeds.” In previous generations, the Churches of Christ were adamant that their convictions came directly from scripture, unmediated by the corrupting influence of human events. We thought, Allen writes,

... our movement was different. It did not run in any wide and turgid stream. Rather, it gushed directly out of the spring, forming only a crystal clear pool around it. Our leaders were larger-than-life figures, religious geniuses, people who had never mixed eternal truth with temporal clay.¹⁸

Concerning the issue of baptism, for instance, Alexander Campbell believed that his mind had been “set loose from all its former moorings.”¹⁹ Undeniably moored in Campbell’s perspectives, we have ironically declared our independence from the doctrinal formulations of the past.

Allen observes that the power of this conceit has been waning. Years ago, Carl Ketcherside was vilified for saying that the Churches of Christ had “constructed unwritten creeds;”²⁰ in the present day, however, his observation is practically cliché. As we move past the hundredth anniversary of our statistical separation from the Disciples of Christ, we can scarcely maintain the anti-traditional myths that largely explained (and

14. He footnotes an entire cast of characters as found in Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1993).

15. Barton W. Stone, “The Retrospect,” *Christian Messenger* 7, 10 (October 1833): 314-16.

16. For his discussion of Richardson, see Allen, *Distant Voices*, 70-75.

17. Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 47-91.

18. C. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World*, 2nd ed. (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1990), 7.

19. Alexander Campbell, “Anecdotes, Incidents, and Facts,” *Millennial Harbinger* 3rd ser., 5, 6 (May, 1848): 345.

20. See, for instance, W. Carl Ketcherside, “Analysis of Heresy,” *Mission Messenger* 23, 7 (1961): 4.

justified) our original existence. Allen says that, "After modernity we are learning that tradition is neither good nor bad."

I wonder, though, if he overstates the case. In my own experience, our churches have acknowledged their creeds and traditions with a rueful smile, as though confessing a bounced check. I am not sure that we have really understood the inevitability and the necessity of our condition. We continue to wish for a tradition-free zone, and many of our members have accordingly moved to community churches that promise "Jesus without baggage." Conservative Churches of Christ have continued to say that they are free from the past, and progressive congregations are refashioning themselves in the image of the community churches. Even "after modernity," very few people have managed to confess the historic dimensions of our faith.

Once again, the emergent perspective might hold some answers. As Robert Webber observes, postmodernism affirms our dependence on history, and he proposes an "Ancient-Future Faith" that might speak to the current situation.²¹ Elsewhere, he asserts that "younger evangelicals" are attuned to this vision, and they understand that "the road to the future runs through the past."²² What Webber actually observes among the younger evangelicals, however, could also be interpreted as a "hip" spirituality that mines the past for golden nuggets (like the Nicene Creed) without really achieving any historical or theological acuity. Only time will determine if the millennial generation can approximate his Ancient-Future proposal; for the moment, it seems to be a wish unfulfilled.

TWO PARTING QUESTIONS

In the past few years, the Churches of Christ have been blessed with some serious reflections regarding the future. In *Things Unseen*, Allen is primarily concerned about our modernist addictions, and, as we have seen, he wonders especially about our view of the Spirit. Other authors, however, have emphasized different issues: for instance, in *The Crux of the Matter*, Jeff Childers, Doug Foster, and Jack Reese are hoping that we can rise above our traditional isolationism.²³ In *Reclaiming a Heritage*, Richard Hughes challenges us to develop a countercultural witness, and to reverse our progress toward the orbit of American Evangelicalism.²⁴

Having read these kinds of discussions, two questions reverberate: first, to what degree would our heritage be changed if we accepted the challenges these writers propose? If we did all these things, would we still be the "Churches of Christ?" Our heritage is most famously known for its *cappella* music; what, then, will become of us, if we exchange our assembly-centered obsession for a missional, theological orientation? We are renowned for claiming exclusive rights to heaven; what, then, will become of us, if we lose our dogmatic certitude? Will anybody be able to recognize us?

This question is not alarming for everyone; indeed, some are convinced that the traditions of the Churches of Christ have been irredeemably narrow and damaging. Consequently, these people are ready to discontinue their affiliation with the "Church of Christ" label, and are resolved that our persuasion should die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large.²⁵ This concept, of course, is consistent with our heritage.²⁶ For that reason, however, it ironically testifies against any effort to wash our hands

21. Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

22. Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 49, 56.

23. Jeff W. Childers, Douglas A. Foster, and Jack R. Reese, *The Crux of the Matter: Crisis, Tradition, and the Future of the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001):

24. Richard Hughes, *Reclaiming a Heritage: Reflections on the Heart, Soul and Future of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press 2002).

25. Rob McRay, "The Last Will and Testament of the Church of Christ," in *The Transformation of a Tradition*, ed. C. Leonard Allen (Orange, CA: New Leaf, 2002), 35-46.

26. McRay's concept is intentionally drawn from *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery in Observations on Church Government, by the Presbytery of Springfield, to Which Is Added, The Last Will and Testament of That Reverend Body. With a Preface and Notes, by the Editor*, by Richard McNemar (n.p.: 1808), 21.

of the Churches of Christ and to escape our debt to the past. We have learned (hopefully) that whatever we choose to do with the “Church of Christ” label, we have been formed by that tradition and it is an indispensable part of our character.

How do we make constructive use of our past? It is difficult business to sift through our heritage, and to sort the good from the bad. In this vein, Allen has counseled us to maintain our “high view” of baptism and of weekly communion. The *Crux* authors have provided a catalog of concepts worth saving, with special emphasis on Stoneite and Campbellite visions of unity.²⁷ Hughes has advised us to restore the “apocalyptic” perspective of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Churches of Christ.²⁸ The above-cited “Christian Affirmation” would defend our doctrines regarding baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and a *cappella* music.

Despite significant similarities, the priorities proposed by Allen, Hughes, the *Crux*, and the “Affirmation” reflect a scattered range of emphases. Moreover, none of these proposals have experienced a warm reception from our conservative churches, and few of them have experienced a meaningful reception from our progressive churches. Clearly, the task of traditional reclamation will give rise to disagreements (at best, and apathy at worst), and will not secure a unified future for the cherished nomenclature and institutions of the Churches of Christ.

A second question: even if our heritage permits significant reforms, what are the chances that our fractured, unwieldy Movement will have the will and the fortitude to make it happen? Unless the Spirit intervenes, I think our chances are remote. Moreover, remembering Harrell’s “conservative-progressive” dichotomy (and Beam’s range of categories), I think we are destined to see divergent responses. Our most conservative churches will continually mistake their isolationism for counter-culture, and, as their modernist foundations gradually vanish, they will fade into irrelevance. Our most progressive churches will speak (with breathless enthusiasm) about a deeper theology of the Spirit, a broader fellowship, and a “dangerous” witness to our culture; in reality, however, they have already chosen the broad and easy road that leads to pop Christianity. Either way, the future appears rather dim for the “Church of Christ” label.

CONCLUSION

I propose two important caveats. First, we need to remember that most of the Churches of Christ are now located outside the borders of the United States. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, our heritage is growing in astonishing numbers, and it is being poured into previously unimagined wineskins. How, for instance, can traditional African animism be squared with traditional Church of Christ modernism? I cannot possibly anticipate the answers we will give. Second, we must confess that we cannot predict the movement of a Spirit who blows where it chooses. Who could have foreseen the recent missional trends among our young people? Who, at the turn of the nineteenth century, could have forecast the Stone-Campbell Movement? Allen’s conclusion is ultimately mine as well: regardless of the vicissitudes of our particular tradition, I am confident that “the Lamb’s new nation will conquer . . . through a cross.”

We are left to chart a course that steers between self-congratulation and self-loathing. Earthly institutions should have modest expectations, but God has already accomplished magnificent things through our Movement. My great-grandchildren might never be acquainted with a fellowship that is called the “Churches of Christ,” but I think I can live with that prospect. I am thankful for the heritage that has brought us this far, and I hope to recognize and nurture God’s future work among us.

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27. Childers, Foster and Reese, *Crux*, 105-28.

28. Hughes, *Reclaiming*, 132.