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Churches of Christ, The Lure of Christian America, And the Loss of the Kingdom of God

RICHARD T. HUGHES

One of the great puzzles in the history of Churches of Christ is how a tradition with such radical beginnings with respect to social issues like poverty and war could have become so conservative by the dawn of the twenty-first century.¹

In the early nineteenth century, large segments of Churches of Christ—especially those that followed the lead of Barton W. Stone—announced their allegiance to the Kingdom of God. They would lead their lives, they said, as if that kingdom had fully triumphed over all the earth, even though they knew its final triumph was still in the future.

That kingdom was one of peace, justice, and righteousness, and their allegiance to that kingdom led those Christians to free their slaves, align the church with the cause of the poor and the dispossessed, renounce violence, reject blind patriotism, and often, even refuse to vote.

In today's Churches of Christ, however, proclamation of the Kingdom of God as a kingdom of peace and justice and a refuge for the poor and the dispossessed is almost unknown.

Obviously there are exceptions to this pattern. One thinks, for example, of Manna International based at the Redwood City Church of Christ, of the Center for International Peace and Justice at Lipscomb University, and other comparable endeavors.

Further, in recent years, one could still find throughout the Churches of Christ a residue of the kingdom consciousness of those nineteenth-century Christians. After all, one seldom, if ever, found an American flag in a pulpit of Churches of Christ since most members of this tradition understood—at least at some level—that loyalty to Christ was one thing, and devotion to country was another.

But a sea change occurred in Churches of Christ on 9/11. Since that fateful day we hear about more and more congregations that easily combine faith in God with faith in the United States; that display the American flag in the pulpit, placing symbolic proclamation of the nation alongside proclamation of the word; or that include patriotic hymns and other forms of devotion to country as part of their Sunday evening or midweek services. Indeed, some congregations have identified themselves not only with American nationalism, but even with partisan political agendas.

The transition toward cultural conservatism had been underway even prior to 9/11. In the mid-1980's, Mel Hailey, a political scientist at Abilene Christian University, surveyed political attitudes of preachers in Churches of Christ and found that 76% described themselves as political conservatives, 74% identified with the Republican Party, and 95% had supported Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election. Indeed, 82% thought "it would be hard to be both a true Christian and a political liberal."²

1. Unless otherwise noted, documentation that supports assertions made in this article may be found in Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

2. Mel Hailey, "The Political and Social Attitudes of Church of Christ Ministers," paper presented at the 1988 meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C. See also Hailey, "The Political and Social Attitudes of Church of Christ Ministers" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas Tech University, 1988).

Most of those ministers were in line with the ACU student I encountered in 1984 who was horrified to learn that David Lipscomb refused to vote. “If all the Christians refuse to vote,” she told me, “the Democrats might win!”

In the 1980’s, most Americans identified political “liberalism” with equal opportunity, with concern for the poor, with the legacy of the Freedom Movement that sought to abolish racism in America, and with broad opposition to military adventures like the one that took millions of lives in Vietnam. When the majority of preachers in Churches of Christ thought one could not be a Christian and a political liberal, they signaled how far they had traveled from the historic roots of their tradition, at least in terms of basic attitudes toward war, poverty, and prejudice.

Twenty years later, little had changed. By the year 2000, 82% of preachers in Churches of Christ described themselves as either “Republican” or “lean Republican,” and 89% voted for George W. Bush in that year’s presidential election.³

By the twenty-first century, a bias toward cultural conservatism had deeply entrenched itself in this tradition. If Churches of Christ in the nineteenth century formed an outpost of the coming Kingdom of God, it might be accurate to suggest that Churches of Christ by the twenty-first century formed an outpost for conservative Republican politics.

Had Churches of Christ formed an outpost for Democratic politics, the problem would be no less acute. The choice for Christians—as David Lipscomb understood as well as anyone in the history of this tradition—is not between one political party or another. The choice is between a concern to preserve power, wealth, privilege, self, and nation—the cultural status quo—and a concern to embrace the agenda of the Kingdom of God. That agenda is both liberal—since it opens us to vulnerability and change—and liberating—since it frees us from concern with self.

Jesus described that agenda when he explained his calling “to preach good news to the poor, [to bring] freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:22)

He enlarged on that agenda when he presented the only criterion for the final judgment that appears in the New Testament.

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Matt 25:34-36)

These are hardly conservative values. Instead, they are values that summon Christians to abandon self in the interest of others, especially the poor and the dispossessed. No one can live by values like these and also seek to preserve (or conserve) power, privilege, and the cultural status quo. Perhaps this is why Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Barton Stone, Tolbert Fanning, David Lipscomb, R. H. Boll, J. N. Armstrong, and a host of other early leaders in Churches of Christ committed themselves to live by the light of these truths. But many ministers in Churches of Christ today—and presumably a large percentage of members as well—think it is impossible to be politically liberal and Christian at the very same time.

How can we account for such a momentous change? One can think of a number of factors.

- Alexander Campbell thought the Christian canon began with Acts 2 and concluded with the book of Revelation, since scripture does not introduce the story of the Christian church until the second

3. Mel Hailey and Timothy C. Coburn, “Churches of Christ” in Corwin E. Smidt, ed., *Pulpit and Politics: Clergy in American Politics at the Advent of the Millennium* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 124.

chapter of Acts. In defining this “canon within the canon” in such narrow and constricted terms, he essentially lopped off those portions of the Bible that deal most pointedly with issues of social justice and how we should treat the poor and the dispossessed—the prophetic books of the Old Testament, for example, and—ironically—the teachings of Jesus Himself. To the extent that Churches of Christ have followed Campbell’s lead in these matters, they have essentially deprived themselves of any prophetic voice related to the coming Kingdom of God.

- Those in Churches of Christ who followed the lead of Alexander Campbell developed from an early date a privatized, otherworldly theology that had little to do with social realities addressed by the biblical notion of the Kingdom of God. Thus, for example, the primary goal of conversion was baptism for the remission of sins so that one might be saved. And the mandate placed on the convert was to baptize others, who would baptize others, who would baptize others, so that they, too, might be saved.

[M]any members of Churches of Christ would not say the words the Lord taught his disciples to pray, “Thy Kingdom come,” for they were convinced that the kingdom had already come...

Seldom did baptism turn the convert’s attention to issues of peace and justice—to poverty, persecution, oppression, and war, for example—in any compelling way. In later years, a second goal of conversion emerged—to place the converted person into the true, restored Church of Jesus Christ, defined not by attention to social realities, but by proper worship and proper organization. In the process, the kingdom-consciousness that defined the lives of so many believers in the nineteenth century—especially

believers who followed the lead of Barton W. Stone—slowly eroded and slipped away.

- The exclusivism that characterized Churches of Christ for many years also contributed to their social conservatism. For in their zeal to demonstrate that they comprised the one true church, members of this tradition began at an early date to identify the Church of Christ with the Kingdom of God. Indeed, many members of Churches of Christ would not say the words the Lord taught his disciples to pray, “Thy Kingdom come,” for they were convinced that the kingdom had already come, first on the day of Pentecost, and second, in the church of the restoration—the Church of Christ. By identifying the kingdom with the Church of Christ, Christians in this tradition robbed the biblical notion of the kingdom of its radical theology, stripped it of its concern for the poor and the dispossessed, and domesticated the kingdom consciousness that had been such a vital part of the witness of members of this tradition in the nineteenth century.
- In the early to mid-twentieth century, key leaders in Churches of Christ launched an all-out drive for social and cultural respectability. In order to achieve that objective, they purged the church of any last remnants of kingdom-consciousness. They drove out the pre-millennial thinkers—those who understood that the Kingdom of God was not a kingdom of our own making, but a kingdom that owed its reality to the power and grace of God. They drove out the pacifists—those who believed that allegiance to the kingdom demanded that Christians reject violence and actively work for peace. And finally, in the anti-institutional purge, they drove from the church those Christians who still thought of themselves as religious and cultural outsiders. By the mid-1950’s, though Churches of Christ would not admit to denominational status, they began to take their place among the various respectable denominations in the American South, if not in the United States. For all practical purposes, the kingdom consciousness that defined Churches of Christ in the nineteenth century was dead.
- Simultaneously with the drive toward cultural respectability, key leaders in Churches of Christ—most notably G. C. Brewer and George S. Benson—began to divert this tradition from its heritage of concern with the Kingdom of God to affirmations of Americanism, support for patriotic nationalism, and

a preoccupation with the threat of international Communism. As David Edwin Harrell observed, “By the end of the 1940’s most leaders in the churches no longer felt a deep sense of alienation from their culture; indeed, they had become breast-beating American patriots.”⁴

- In the 1960’s and 1970’s, in the midst of the greatest moral issues to face the United States since the Civil War, Churches of Christ aligned themselves with the most conservative forces in the nation. For the most part, they supported the war-making policy of the American government and the fruit of that policy—the war in Vietnam—convinced as they were that war was essential to stop the spread of international Communism. They typically viewed anti-war protesters as fundamentally un-American. And they typically greeted the Civil Rights Movement with indifference or hostility, often judging Martin Luther King Jr. as a Communist, subversive of the interests of the United States.⁵ In all these ways, Churches of Christ had come far, indeed, from their forebears in the nineteenth century who rejected war, who had little concern with “the interests of the United States,” who renounced racial discrimination, who freed their slaves, and who behaved in all these ways because of their allegiance to the coming Kingdom of God.
- By the 1970’s, if not before, many in Churches of Christ had crossed the tracks economically from lower and lower-middle class deprivation to middle and upper class respectability, privilege, and wealth—a transition that would accelerate for the remainder of the century. Since theological supports that might have encouraged this tradition to identify itself with the coming Kingdom of God had been stripped away years before, Churches of Christ were now isolated—both theologically and experientially—from the counter cultural legacy that helped to drive this tradition in the nineteenth century.
- Of all the factors that facilitated the transition of Churches of Christ from an outpost of the Kingdom of God to an outpost for conservative politics, none is more important than the institutional amnesia that has characterized this tradition almost from its inception. Because Churches of Christ wished to identify themselves with the primitive church of which one reads in the New Testament, Christians in this tradition have often claimed no interest in their more recent history—that is, their history that dates from Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone. In fact, many in Churches of Christ have actively denied the significance of that history. They reason that if they admit to historical development—complete with human “founders”—they might also have to admit that Churches of Christ are a denomination like other denominations, and not the one true church of the apostolic age. The fruits of this denial have been tragic, for Churches of Christ in the twenty-first century have virtually no saga or story that can inform their sense of identity. Who recalls today, for example, that many in this tradition once rejected violence and embraced the practice of peace making?

Of all the factors that facilitated the transition of Churches of Christ from an outpost of the Kingdom of God to an outpost for conservative politics, none is more important than the institutional amnesia that has characterized this tradition almost from its inception.

Who recalls today that many in this tradition—from Barton Stone to David Lipscomb—identified the church with the cause of the poor? By refusing to tell our story, we have severed almost all connection with those forebears who lived their lives in the shadow of the coming Kingdom of God.

4. David Edwin Harrell Jr., *The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey’s Personal Journey of Faith* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 163.

5. See for example James D. Bales, *The Martin Luther King Story* (Tulsa: Christian Crusade Publications, 1967), where Bales argued that King had connections to international Communism.

- But there is more, for by refusing to tell our story, we have plunged Churches of Christ into an identity crisis of substantial proportions. At one time, our identity—misguided though it may have been—was nonetheless clear. We thought of ourselves as the one true church of the apostolic age, the only Christians, and the sum and total of the church universal. Today, those convictions have badly eroded, especially in urban centers, and Churches of Christ at large are not altogether certain who they are. And so they drift, willy-nilly, into the orbit of American evangelicalism.

There is much in the evangelical tradition one might wish to commend, but there is also much to lament. For no segment of American society more consistently confuses the claims of the gospel with the claims of the nation than evangelicals in the United States. Indeed, it may well be that Churches of Christ find common ground with evangelicals more at the level of that confusion than at the level of serious doctrinal, theological, or biblical understandings.

In the world of Churches of Christ, there are exceptions to these patterns, of course. But on the whole, one must wonder about the future of this tradition. In a world torn by war, rent by ethnic violence, plagued by corporate and national greed, and disgraced by prejudices of almost every sort, a church that has lost its kingdom consciousness may well be part of the problem, not part of the solution. At the very least, that is an issue to which members of Churches of Christ should give careful and focused attention.

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