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Richard T. Hughes
rhughes@messiah.edu

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Churches of Christ and the Evangelical World: Why Our Preaching Must Take History Seriously

RICHARD T. HUGHES

Recently, I met a man who told me he lives in a part of the country where Churches of Christ are few and far between, and for that reason, he has known virtually nothing about our tradition. He knew of Max Lucado, but beyond that, his understanding of Churches of Christ ran pretty thin.

Then, not long ago, he attended a conference of “pastors,” as he put it. Among the hundreds of preachers at that convention, three caught his eye. They were sitting at a table by themselves, deeply engrossed in conversation with one another.

When the man introduced himself to these three preachers, they told him they were from the Church of Christ. “I’m not familiar with the Church of Christ,” the man said. “Can you help me understand some of your distinctives?”

The three huddled briefly, and then one spoke for them all. “We’re right and you’re wrong,” the spokesperson said. Taken aback, the man replied, “Well, I know Max Lucado is from the Church of Christ. Would he share your viewpoint?”

“He’s wrong, too.”

That’s one story. Here’s another: Richard Mouw serves as president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. In that capacity, he obviously identifies closely with American evangelicalism. Yet, Mouw recently said to me, “I worry about the Church of Christ. I worry that the Church of Christ is on the road to a generic evangelicalism.”

When I questioned Mouw about his concern, he explained that his own denomination—the Christian Reformed Church—is also taking its place in the American evangelical mosaic. But his church has brought to the world of evangelical Christianity its unique theological distinctives— notions like the sovereignty of God and the mandate for Christians to work toward the transformation of human culture into the image of the kingdom of God.

“But what will Churches of Christ bring to the evangelical mosaic?” Mouw asked. “I worry that you will slowly abandon your distinctives and embrace the world of generic evangelical Christianity, lock, stock, and barrel.”

These two stories, I suggest, perfectly frame the dilemma in which Churches of Christ find themselves in the opening years of the 21st century. Some of our churches still practice the legalism and exclusivism that defined an earlier period of our history and therefore refuse to learn from any other expres-



sion of the Christian faith. In their judgment, they are right, and others are wrong, and that's the end of the matter.

Having rejected this posture, other Churches of Christ are running as fast as they can toward a broader expression of Christian faith, but one that is still conservative and biblically based. Almost inevitably, that broader expression means American evangelicalism. But in their haste to abandon the exclusivism of an earlier generation, some churches run so fast that they forget who they are and where they came from. In part, that is what prompted Mouw to worry "that the Church of Christ is on the road to a generic evangelicalism."

But there is even more to Mouw's concern, for Mouw knows very well that in our zeal to identify with New Testament Christianity and to reject the notion that humans founded our movement, Churches of Christ have never acknowledged a history or a theology apart from the Bible itself. We have never come to terms, for example, with Alexander Campbell's pervasive influence on the way we read the biblical text or the way we understand the essentials of the Christian faith. Were we to do so, we might be forced to admit that there are human founders of our movement, just like there are human founders of all religious movements, and that we are finally a denomination alongside other denominations and not the one true church, descended intact from the apostolic period of Christian history. And so, over the years, we have convinced ourselves that we have no theology and no human history apart from the Bible itself.

This is the primary root of Mouw's concern "that the Church of Christ is on the road to a generic evangelicalism." For if we in Churches of Christ refuse to acknowledge our own unique history and theology, how can even the most progressive of our churches contribute anything of substance to the evangelical mosaic? Instead of developing with the evangelical world a mutually enriching relationship, we may

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very well, as Mouw suggested, "abandon [y]our distinctives and embrace the world of evangelical Christianity, lock, stock, and barrel."

The scenario I have described has enormous implications for preaching in our tradition. As David Fler has suggested in this issue of *Leaven*, for most of our history "we were busy continuing a homiletic tradition inherited from Alexander Campbell him-

self, an approach to preaching that had didactic origins and didactic intentions." Of course, we didn't know that this tradition descended from Campbell because we refused to acknowledge Campbell's influence on our churches. From our perspective, the didactic thrust of our pulpit preaching simply reflected the Bible itself.

Didactic preaching, of course, was sometimes dry as dust and often failed to connect with the deepest concerns of our congregations. In that context, Fler quotes Harry Fosdick who observed in the 1920s, "Only the preacher proceeds still upon the idea that folk come to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites."

Recognizing the deficiencies of this homiletic model, many of our preachers today seek to emulate preaching styles they find in the world of American evangelicalism. But as Fler points out, they often embrace the worst along with the best. This uncritical embrace of evangelical preaching leads Fler to ask, "Has our theology of homiletics been so vacuous that we have come to the wholesale adoption of a foreign import without so much as sensing a problem?"

Fler suggests that "we return with Tom Long to Augustine for homiletic mooring." But we can hardly return to Augustine if we refuse to recognize the legitimacy of Christian history between the first century and our own time.

Only a few years ago, one of the most influential preachers among Churches of Christ took a class under Langdon Gilkey at one of America's most respected divinity schools. Gilkey introduced the preacher to

Augustine, and the preacher was intrigued. Indeed, he found much of Augustine's thought attractive. One day the preacher stayed after class to explore with Gilkey some of the themes in Augustine's thought that he found most compelling. After an extensive conversation, however, the preacher finally lamented, "Too bad he wasn't a Christian."

Many in Churches of Christ would still concur that Augustine was not a Christian. Others would reject that conclusion but—steeped in the sense of historylessness that has always characterized Churches of Christ—would not view Augustine as terribly relevant.

David Fleer is right. We in Churches of Christ desperately need to take Augustine seriously. We also need to take Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Kierkegaard, Barth, and a host of other Christian thinkers seriously. Indeed, we need to take seriously the entire history of Christian theology. In this way, we will enrich our pulpits beyond measure. But we cannot and will not take seriously the history of Christian theology until we learn to take seriously our own history and our own theology and until we learn to appreciate the place of our own movement in the larger history of the Christian faith.

When we learn to take seriously the history of Christian theology, we will then be in a position to dialogue with that history. And when we learn to dialogue with Christian history and Christian theology, we will then be in a position to enter into a mutually enriching conversation with the world of American evangelicalism. Such a conversation will enrich our pulpits beyond measure for it will draw on the best from our own history and theology and the best from the history and theology of the evangelical world.

That sort of relationship is the indispensable prerequisite for the kind of preaching that, in the words of Katie Hays, offers "theologically reflective sermons that shape the Christian community by asking them to think deeply about theological propositions."

When our pulpits offer and our churches demand that sort of preaching, Churches of Christ will have moved beyond the "we're right/you're wrong" sort of thinking that dominated an earlier period of our history. In addition, we will have moved beyond the possibility that we might uncritically embrace American evangelicalism "lock stock, and barrel." We will have moved beyond these things to a far healthier sense of who we are as a movement, informed by pulpits that bring the clear word of God to bear on the lives of real people who live in a complex and confusing world.

RICHARD T. HUGHES

Dr. Hughes teaches church history and serves as the director of the Center for Faith and Learning at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California.

