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Thomas H. Olbricht

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# Restoration Churches and Post–World War II Culture

BY THOMAS H. OLBRICHT

Recently I heard a professor from a restorationist university say he believed that our people have largely avoided acculturation by societal changes, but he was concerned that some church leaders have now designated themselves as change agents, and he was afraid that that would result in a departure from our traditional posture. A major conviction among more conservative restorationists for two hundred years has been that, while other religious groups constantly buy into contemporary culture, we are a people who stay on the old paths despite societal changes.

While constancy in the midst of vicissitudes is a desirable goal, we have kept at arm's length from our congregations neither changes in secular culture nor, especially, those of the religious groups around us. Richard Hughes observed:

For most of their history, Churches of Christ had been poor and socially marginal, standing over against other Christian denominations as well as the larger culture and typically viewing themselves as sojourners in a strange and foreign land, but by the 1950s all that had changed—or was rapidly changing. The theme of “sojourner” rapidly gave way to the theme of “settler,” as Churches of Christ settled into their cultural environment and felt increasingly at home in the world in which they lived.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I will discuss the changes that have come about since World War II as the result of metropolitan sprawl, ethnic and religious diversity, internationalization, family deterioration, and emotional (existential) orientation. These changes have affected restorationists, whether acknowledged or not.

## **Metropolitan Sprawl**

In the 1930s most conservative restorationists lived in farm communities and small towns. For Churches of Christ, these persons were located within the region about two hundred miles on either side of a line drawn from Pittsburgh through Nashville to El Paso. For persons from Christian Church/Churches of Christ, the majority were about two hundred miles on either side of a line drawn from Pittsburgh through Indianapolis to Colorado Springs. Another large group of the latter was also found in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>2</sup>

During and after World War II, many persons from these two groups moved to the metropolitan areas of these regions and settled in the new developments and suburbs. Most of the first wave were production workers in the factories, especially during and after the war. In the 1960s as the educational levels increased, those

moving in—as well as the children of the early migrants—became public school teachers, salespersons, and, later, owners of small businesses. Persons from Churches of Christ and Christian Church/Churches of Christ have continued to be upwardly mobile, and as the century winds down, some have moved from middle class to upper-middle class.

It may be, as some seem to think, that these population trends have not changed the biblical approaches and theology in the churches, but they have affected church life tremendously. First, because of the large number of members in a limited area, the sizes of congregations have tripled and more, even though small churches remain. With larger congregations have come full-time ministers, additional church staff such as secretaries and youth, family, educational, and involvement ministers, and programs of various sorts. Church classes for study have multiplied according to topics or age groupings. Increasing use has been made of tapes and videos, even those of outsiders such as Francis Schaeffer and James Dobson. Whereas through the war most congregations studied the scriptures, perhaps with the help of quarterlies, now discussions are being based with some frequency on evangelical religious books. People in the pews have become increasingly better educated, which in turn has placed greater requirements on the educational background of ministers. With the offering of graduate and M.Div. degrees in brotherhood

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colleges and universities, it has become increasingly popular for ministers to hold advanced degrees in Bible and religion.

### **Ethnic, Religious, and International Diversity**

The mix of persons in suburban America now is much different than that of the communities from which our members came in the first half of this century. At that time most persons were of British (especially Scotch-Irish) or Germanic stock, along with some persons of Scandinavian or Slavic backgrounds. But now, depending on the region, additional persons may be found of African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern backgrounds. The cultural effect on foods has been especially important, as seen, for example, in our Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Mexican, and Middle Eastern restaurants.

The complexion of our churches has changed in many regions. Now one may see racial and ethnic mixes in many of our churches. Sometimes even the leadership is ethnically mixed. In some cases congregations of persons employing another language meet in our buildings. The most common groups are Hispanic,

Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and Cambodian. Some congregations have Spanish- and Korean-speaking ministers. Church potlucks are not what they used to be—that is, fried chicken, green beans, and potato salad.

For this reason, as well as various others, congregations are not nearly so homogenous as they were fifty years ago. As churches teach the scriptures and other religious materials, they are paying much more attention to the diverse backgrounds from which people come. Colleges and schools of preaching likewise are opening programs in order to train preachers in non-English languages, especially Spanish. Members, too, are traveling throughout the world and are thus more open to the changes that these newer constituencies have brought about.

### **Family Deterioration**

Family deterioration in America and the world has resulted in changed theological perspectives about marriage and a refocus in the church on the family. In the 1940s there were few divorces. Even school districts sometimes hesitated to employ divorced teachers. In the 1950s the ideal family was a *Leave It to*



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*Beaver* family. The father worked at a white-collar job, the two boys went to school, and the mother stayed at home. Today, divorce is widespread. About one-third of American families are single-parented. The numbers of single adults have increased exponentially as the result of fewer and later marriages, divorces, and homosexual relationships. The children produced by estranged families are with some frequency dysfunctional and involved in drugs or crimes. Persons in single-parent families represent the highest percentage in any one category of marital status who live below the poverty line.

These cultural changes in regard to family life have tremendously influenced our congregations. Whereas at one time a rigid position was taken in regard to divorce (and divorced persons were with some frequency disfellowshipped), as the century winds down churches accept as new members divorced persons with few, if any, questions asked. The divorce of well-known members within a congregation may still be perceived as something of a scandal, but the opprobrium soon subsides and after a few years is mostly forgotten.

Larger congregations have approached these matters in various ways. Some years ago a few churches offered counseling—generally focused on marriage and the family—which was often provided by a member of the ministerial team or a part-time counselor who was a member of the congregation. In a few cases, a full-time counselor was added to the staff. One rather unexpected change was that churches began appointing family ministers instead of educational ministers. The family minister might also serve as educational minister, or some unpaid member of the congregation might take over the duties of planning and executing the church classes. Singles ministries were launched, and in a few of the largest congregations, the person in charge held a staff position. Certain of the universities among us launched graduate degrees in marriage and family and were positioned so as to qualify their graduates in nationally accredited counseling roles. At one time it was presumed that congregations would rapidly appoint these certified persons to their ministerial staffs. That has not happened in too many cases—as yet, anyway.

The teaching and class studies in the churches, however, have been greatly impacted. In the 1940s most of the night gatherings of congregations were gospel meetings. By the 1990s a more frequent focus has been the family or marriage enrichment. Considerably more sermons are stressing healthy marriages, the disciplining of children, confronting teenagers in regard to chemical substances, and forces that contribute to dysfunctional families.

It is difficult to see how these shifts in the preaching and teaching of churches can in all seriousness be thought to have little or nothing to do with societal winds of change. In this case, at minimum, something of a shift in theological or biblical position has occurred, if only that sermons no longer focus principally on the church and salvation.

### **Emotional (Existential) Orientation**

One of the largest, and perhaps most subtle, shifts in the American psyche since the 1950s, it seems to me, has been the move away from a rational, empirical, non-impassioned mindset. The influence of Ramist, Lockean, Common Sense, Baconian predilections of continental and British backgrounds prevailed in America from the 1630s through World War II, even though certain periods saw the rise of spiritualism and mysticism. It was in this sort of soil and with this same sort of mindset that our forefathers planted churches and prospered.

That consensus American predilection, however, slowly



eroded after World War II with the result that we have now either resigned ourselves to its diminished presence or tried to change ourselves, moving toward a more emotional (existential), responsive mindset. In either case, it has been a reflex reaction to the cultural climate.

After World War II, restorationist churches in the two wings under consideration grew by leaps and bounds. It was a time for reaffirming the rationality of the forefathers. I have read of several cases in which persons converted to our churches in this period because the sermons and church life reflected structure and reason. Some of these individuals went on to become leading church persons. Thornton Wilder, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and son of a Congregational minister, characterized the postwar period as a retrenchment from activism and a return to a calm, informed reason in his play *The Skin of our Teeth*. In Act III the report is that now that the war is over, Mr. Antrobus envisions a new era in respect to the peace that follows:

He's got all sorts of ideas for peacetime, he says. No more laziness and idiocy, he says. And oh, yes! Where are his books? What? Well, pass them up. The first thing he wants to see are his books. He says if you've burnt those books, or if the rats have eaten them, he says it isn't worthwhile starting over again. Everybody's going to be beautiful, he says, and diligent, and very intelligent.

But gradually, a change came over the American psyche. Some of the harbingers were the beat generation, the counterculture era, and the rise of the neo-charismatics. The beat generation is best remembered through the coffeehouse poetry readings often accompanied by guitar. The gurus were Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Some of their inspiration was drawn from the French existentialists, especially Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. This form of existentialism questioned the hegemony of reason and opted for a more subjective vision of reality. The importance of individual preferences and emotive needs became the *raison d'être* of the counterculture

The result was a different style of teaching, preaching, and church worship. The teaching now became not so much structured reasoning as emotional response to what biblical texts meant to one personally. People in church classes often ended up relating their testimonies concerning their conversions and healings: The preaching likewise became more emotive, more focused on personal narrative, and less inclined to explore doctrines or denominational preferences. A new style of worship began to pervade these churches, a worship that was more free, arousing, and intentionally structured to create emotional surges and climaxes. These new modalities were projected to

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movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s, producing both flower children and the Children of God. The religious outcroppings of these cultural shifts were ostensibly manifest in the rise of neo-charismatics, with Dennis Bennett of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Van Nuys, California, leading the way. Of course, old line Pentecostals preceded Bennett, but it was he who was the mainstream harbinger of the neo-charismatics in mainstream American churches, including the Roman Catholics.

Americans, whether or not they were church persons, through television programming that itself was more a medium for drama-oriented, stream-of-consciousness, bite-sized discourse and disclosure. Early purveyors of these cultural religious shifts were Oral Roberts, Jim and Tammy Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, and Pat Robertson.

While most leaders in our movement ignored or remained silent about these shifts (although sometimes decrying them), pockets

of members in various congregations were watching the media presentations and discussing them in Bible study groups, church classes, and home settings. Some congregational leaders attempted to prohibit home sessions, but not always successfully. The result was that several persons in restorationist congregations expressed a conversion away from the older rationalism to a warmer, more heartfelt faith. These persons sometimes included preachers, elders, and leaders.

Beginning in the late 1970s, these new modes cropped up here and there in Churches of Christ and Christian Church/Churches of Christ congregations. Sermons began to move away from structured, reasoned arguments to points in a text that were amplified by stories of the type found in bulletins or, later, by personal narratives, especially from family experiences. Classes in churches sometimes devoted themselves to the class participants' telling of their own stories of conversion and religious life.

These changes affected worship. Various leaders considered themselves change agents, especially in regard to worship. The argument was that without adaptation to the newer modes,

Restoration churches would become marginalized. The growing churches were independent, charismatic megachurches that put forth lively, upbeat devotionals and, especially, contemporary Christian music that borrowed from milder forms of rock beat and instrumentation. A few leaders and preachers in Churches of Christ argued that Churches of Christ would not survive in this new climate unless they were willing to—on occasion, anyway—include instrumentation. Within the last three years, the International Churches of Christ (formerly, the Boston Church movement) has officially declared that instruments may be employed in some services and settings. This is in part the result of the conviction that hypercharged music with a beat and plenty of decibels attracts. Some congregations have now gone to two services, one retaining the older modalities and music and the other these newer modes.

### Conclusion

It is not fully clear as yet how these cultural changes will finally impact our churches, but the main contours seem obvious. To a people under conviction that we have not changed, these new modalities and forms seem life

threatening. But down through the ages, Christianity has always accommodated and adapted to the cultures in which it has found itself. The faith of Israel and the church in the Old and New Testaments clearly reveal shifts that came about as the result of cultural winds reversing directions.

But in the midst of all these changes, our God is the same God who appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and is at the same time the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the loving God who gave up his only begotten Son, and he calls us to confess the Son's death, burial, and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. These are the constants. They remain and shall prevail regardless of the cultural shifts.

**THOMAS H. OLBRICHT** is Distinguished Professor of Religion Emeritus, Pepperdine University, and resides in Berwick, Maine.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of the Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 224.

<sup>2</sup> Based upon demographic maps in Peter L. Halvorson and William M. Newman, *Atlas of Religious Change in America* (Atlanta: Glenmary Research Center, 1994).