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CHURCHES OF CHRIST: Past, Present, And Future

By Mac Lynn

The Past

Nineteenth century rural America became the setting for a movement that aimed at reclaiming the ideal church. The *Restoration Movement* arose when the secular frontier became receptive to revivalism and Protestant believers disdained their petty differences. By advocating that Christ is the sole creed and the New Testament is the authoritative blueprint for the church, reformers launched an effort designed to produce a replica of the idealized church of the first century.

Before the Movement could mature, its participants parted company because they could not agree on their common task or on methodology. The more conservative reformers tended toward exclusiveness from denominational fellowships because, to them, faithfulness to God could be measured only by the degree that *perceived* biblical mandates were being subscribed. Those mandates would be recognizable where the "silence" of Scripture is observed and when biblical material (principally, the New Testament) is subjected to a "pattern" based on direct command, apostolic example, and necessary inference. Special attention was given to the mechanics of conversion, church polity, and worship. Naturally, human conduct was important, but the

emphasis was on outward forms. The more liberal element, on the other hand, tended toward affinity with the denominations while continuing to call for scriptural beliefs and practices. To them, tenets of the faith were not closely defined by first century "patterns." Differences notwithstanding, the Movement followed a *reasoned* course as opposed to an *experiential* one.

Disputes related to the Civil War, a missionary society, instrumental music, and critical biblical scholarship led eventually to a clearly recognized division. Soon after the turn of the twentieth century, two distinct camps of believers were recognized. Those who were less concerned about patterns established by scriptural silence now used instruments of music in worship and favored church co-operation through para-church structures. They outnumbered their opponents seven to one.

Between 1925 and 1968 another split occurred in the instrumental fellowship. This division centered over a dispute of "restorationism," exasperated over a struggle for power in the missionary society. Thus, three major fellowships have grown out of the nineteenth century Restoration Movement: the Churches of Christ, the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The Present

During the twentieth century, a cappella Churches of Christ have increased in every region of the United States and in many quarters of the world.

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Growth has been most significant in the stronghold of the Middle South and in areas affected by migration fed by the Great Depression, World War II, and economic expansion. Due to the geographic dimensions of division, a cappella congregations in the

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Middle South reflect a much longer history. Middle South congregations tend to have older memberships, with multi-generation roots and strong loyalty to place and customs.

Churches comprised of migrants generally reflect traditional values and customary ways of conducting church activities. Regions with heavy Old South migrants have been less successful in attracting the diverse national population than have churches in other regions, such as the Northeast.

In some ways, the Mississippi River has been a dividing line for Churches of Christ. East-West sectionalism has influenced some practices and outlooks. Perhaps the most noticeable difference in atmosphere and procedure is in the concept of the roles of elders and preachers. Older Middle South congregations tend toward strong decision-making elders and repetitive preaching. Others are comfortable with open style leadership, the "ministry system," and a stronger creative leadership role for the preacher. Whenever inter-church uproars occur, accusations are more likely to be aimed at a large, urban, progressive white church where the preacher has a high profile. Attacks are addressed against a congregation through the person of its local preacher, who symbolizes the church's posture.

During the past decade, there has been a slight advance in the number of congregations, adherents, and members. However, twenty-one states have registered losses in at least one category. The losers were generally in the Middle South, the Ohio Valley,

and the Midwest.

The majority of Churches of Christ are sufficiently alike in teaching and practice that full fellowship exists between them. In a church body which counts over 13,000 congregations with 1,284,000 members in the U.S., one-fourth of the churches (but a smaller percentage of members) are distinguished by some uniqueness in teaching and practice. Ninety-one percent of them cluster into three main fellowship groups, designated Non-Institutional, Non-class, and One Cup.

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Of the 1,200 congregations which have a predominantly black membership, only a few are identified with the "non-mainstream" ideas noted above. Although there are differences between black and white churches (e.g., in the concept of the ministry), these differences have not impaired relationships. Black and white churches simply co-exist.

Differences over interpretation and scriptural application continue to cause waves of after-shock. Contention about the located preacher, Bible classes, communion containers, institutionalism, premillennialism, and the disciplining ministry have produced the greatest disruptions during the twentieth century.

Churches of Christ have emerged from frontier America as the champion of an ecclesiology dictated by a pattern deduced from Scripture. While the cutting edge for the Disciples became increasingly modern critical thinking and ecumenism, Churches of Christ turned toward refinement of doctrinal purity. As the second century of the Restoration Movement draws to a close, the distinctive posture of many mainstream a cappella Churches of Christ has become less clear. A shift in religious interests over the passing years has rendered the original thrust of the Churches of Christ ineffective in evangelism since prime target Protestants have simply lost interest in discussing historic doctrine. Unable to adjust adequately to new settings brought about by urbanization and immigration, the churches have tended to withdraw from the unfamiliar environment.

Simultaneously, the upward economic and social mobility of the members of Churches of Christ has created a comfortable setting for fulfilling religious rituals. Singing, to a large extent, is rural in character, with greater attention given to Stamps-Baxter music than to other forms. A noticeable change has taken place in the content and delivery

of sermons and in the educational programs in the more "progressive" churches. With little experience in moving across cultural lines, Churches of Christ in America remain middle class, Anglo, and English-speaking. Consequently, while service times have changed over the past forty years, only recently has there been movement to change how those services are conducted.

Among the minor fellowship groups, Non-institutional churches continue a commitment to patternism. Views may vary along a soft or hard line, but they agree that the common foe is "institutionalism." Not only is institutionalism considered wrong, it is viewed generally as a point of departure for all sorts of error—eating in the church building, soft preaching, the social gospel, and modernism. Worship services and activities have seen little change since the 1950s.

Premillennial churches are experiencing tension over trends toward "modernism." Many of their constituency are going to the Christian Church, where more fellowship between the two bodies is taking place. Unquestionably, a major problem which the millennial churches are facing is stagnation.

Within the Non-class fellowship, the more conservative hold onto traditional issues, where there exists considerable tension over the use of a located preacher. However, the less rigid and younger preachers know that the class issue is dead. Weaker opposition to instrumental music is developing. Divorced persons are generally accepted. Three subsets appear to exist among the Non-class brethren: those who either use or permit the use of a located preacher, those who will not fellowship a church that uses a located preacher, and those who oppose the located preacher but hold some tenets of millennialism.

One Cup churches appear to be the most stable. Isolationism shows no signs of breaking down. Neither is there movement among them to fellowship other one-cup groups which differ over the use of wine or over who breaks the bread. They all oppose the use of a "located" preacher.

Mutual Edification groups are diminishing. They are torn over the question of exclusiveness. When opinion leader Carl Ketcherside opted for a more open stance toward other members of the Restoration family, some churches followed, but not all. Some groups possess a very benevolent spirit, but this is not sufficient to lead to strong evangelistic outreach.

A strong characteristic of the opinion leaders among the churches has been an insistence upon rightness of doctrine, an insistence which has led to

parties and exclusiveness. The perennial issue facing the church is not the authority of Scripture but how the Scriptures are to be interpreted for today's world. There is a growing disregard for patternism and increasing interest in experiential faith. Issues poised to challenge a cappella Churches of Christ during the next decade include the woman's role, hermeneutics, and the question of identity and mission.

The Future

As one looks to the future, one is inclined to predict what one wants to see. No one, of course, has a clear view of the future. One can only project along lines of trends or contingencies, i.e., if this, then that.

If the church continues on its present course, one should expect the closing of a considerable number of congregations, especially in the Middle South, Arkansas, the Upper Midwest, and Texas due to a diminishing younger population, and due to the decay of rural communities, inner city neighborhoods, and economically depressed areas. Churches will continue to move to suburbia, leaving a vacuum in the central cities and forgetting the poorer segments of society and the newer immigrants. Many congregations will grow smaller in numbers. Singing will continue to decline in spirit and in life. Those churches which are creating alternative worship services will experience increased tensions; some will divide amidst charges of "heresy" and countercharges of "deadness."

If the new generation of leaders sports a new agenda, the church's direction could be significantly different. If that leadership is well-informed biblically, the church will possess the possibility for worship and action closely based on the Scriptures. The quest is more likely to be for an experiential relationship with God than for dogmatics. To be sure, the church of the future generation will reflect both the mind of its leadership and of the dominant Christian groupings.

If a significant number of churches were to decide to take the inner city and new immigrant populations seriously, the portrait of the church would be quite different. The body would be more representative of society as a whole. It would be dealing more with people who face the threat of criminal activity, drug abuse, and open sexual promiscuity. Anglo leadership style and worship forms would acquiesce and a fellowship with more variety would emerge.

If congregations wander toward a non-descript "community" identity, they may enjoy the success of growth, but they may run out of substance.

If the younger generation continues to exit at the present pace or at an accelerated pace, a leadership crisis will develop which will make change even more difficult and will mean in some instances the dissolving of the eldership in favor of some other form of governance. The church that is left will be older and will become more isolated from the people it should be reaching.

If the charismatic movement gets a hearing, worship and language will change dramatically, as will congregational authority.

Leaders (principally, the elders) will maintain an environment that is either conducive or repulsive to spiritual growth, evangelism, worship, and fellowship. The environment will be set with one of two attitudes: (1) one that aims at producing a relationship with God through a given degree of conformity to perceived biblical mandates or (2) one that aims at producing conformity as a consequence of a relationship with God. May God help us all to seek him and his kingdom above all else.