The Church Today: A Call for Wisdom in an Uncertain Future

Michael Weed

THE CHURCH TODAY

A Call For Wisdom
In An Uncertain Future

By Michael R. Weed

"The original mistake is made when the church which should be calling the world to God lets itself be called by the world" . . . Karl Barth

The last four decades have been a period of accelerated change in American society. They have also been a time of rapid change in Churches of Christ. The following observations attempt to provide a perspective for self-understanding and a framework for reflection. They are provisional and subject to correction and criticism. Initially, they provide comparative sketches of the church "then" (1953) and "now" (1993). Subsequently, observations are made regarding "how we got here" and, finally, on "what the future holds."

Then

An observer looking at Churches of Christ in the United States in 1953 would have noticed a fairly definable religious group. The group was marked by a common way of reading the Bible, common practices of worship (e.g., a cappella congregational

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singing, weekly communion), common hymns, even common prayer phrases ("give our speaker a ready recollection . . . ," "guide, guard, and direct us . . . ," "worthy and well pleasing . . . "), a strong emphasis on preaching, and a common style and content of preaching. An observer would have noticed an emphasis on Bible study and would have found a high level of Bible knowledge. An observer would also have found a high level of commitment to a clearly defined and tenaciously held set of theological and moral distinctives.

Underlying and supporting all of this was a common vocabulary which offered a sense of identity, if not uniqueness (e.g.,"auditorium," not "sanctuary"; "gospel meeting," not "revival"; "added to," not "join"; "obey the gospel," not "receive Jesus"; "preach the gospel," not "share Jesus"). From Bainbridge, Georgia to Lompoc, California, members of large and small congregations unselfconsciously referred to each other as "brother" and "sister." They viewed themselves as members of "the church" and they thought of themselves as part of something greater than their own individual congregations— the Brotherhood.

Supporting this phenomenon were a number of unofficial structures which closely resembled their more official counterparts in denominations. Although Churches of Christ had no creeds, they did have charter documents (e.g., Thomas Campbell's

Declaration and *Address*, Alexander Campbell's *The Christian System*, and his "Sermon on the Law") which provided theological underpinning regarding matters such as the authority of Scripture, principles of interpretation, and biblical doctrines.

Para-ecclesiastical institutions and organizations also evolved and helped maintain and transmit central and distinctive beliefs and practices. "Lay leaders" and ministers were educated in church-related colleges which were also instrumental in maintaining a level of biblical knowledge and scholarship. Equally important, if not perhaps more important, was the fact that Christian colleges, Bible chairs, and campus ministries all promoted endogenous marriages and socialized persons into the church's unofficial culture.

Bible class guides and other educational materials were produced by "brotherhood publishers," and various periodicals addressed perceived issues and helped shape a common outlook. Perhaps most important, however, was the fact that these publications evoked in readers a sense of belonging to the "Brotherhood."

This was the scene forty years ago. Certainly there were very real problems—tendencies toward regionalism, racism, exclusivism, and so on—but sociologically, there was an identifiable something to which one belonged. There was a way of "doing church," a common vocabulary, shared habits, practices, and traditions—an identity.

Now

Comparing the present situation with that just sketched, there can be little question but that the identifiable marks are disappearing and continuity of practice and uniformity of belief are in serious jeopardy. Any sense of belonging to a "brotherhood" is fast disappearing, and with that loss goes any sense of loyalty or obligation to the "church" as an identifiable body.

The once high level of biblical literacy and the common way of reading the Bible are fast being displaced by a common way of not reading the Bible and widespread biblical illiteracy. Recently a preacher observed that the situation is almost like a science fiction movie where the characters suddenly forget everything they are expected to know. Similarly, a campus minister observes that he simply expects incoming college students to know less each year about the Bible and Christian faith.

The once shared vocabulary is disappearing. Designations such as "brother" sound quaint, perhaps rural, and to many are slightly embarrassing. In part the common vocabulary is giving way to a combination of conventional therapeutic phrases

and generic evangelical jargonese. Church classes are as apt to promote the gospel of self-esteem and inter-personal relations as they are to give fundamental instruction in the Bible and exhortation in Christian faith.

Common worship practices are being replaced by a variety of innovations and experiments ranging from "celebrity witnessing" to gospel quartets. Behind this lies not so much an attempt to rethink biblical worship as an attempt to make worship more "relevant" and attractive to moderns. Not surprisingly, one detects in all of this unmistakable marks of TV and the entertainment industry as filtered

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through various television evangelists.

In short, Churches of Christ are in a serious situation. A resurgence of sterile traditionalism is countered by a vapid anti-tradition innovationism. Indications are that innovationism is winning the day. Recently a friend, on returning from a Methodist seminar calling for church renewal, reported coming away with the impression that Churches of Christ are like children running behind a wagon excitedly picking up all the worn out gimmicks and junk that the denominations are discarding in their own efforts to become more biblical.

How Did We Get Here?

A thirteen-year-old pickup may drive well at 35 miles per hour. At 55, however, one sees that the wheels are out of line and a number of other problems appear. My impression is that a number of factors have combined to expose and exploit some very real problems with the way we have been trying to "do church."

The last forty years have been a period of rapid and unprecedented change in American society and culture. Television, Vietnam, political assassina-

tions, technology, "situation ethics" and the New Morality, Roe v. Wade, 30 million legalized abortions, AIDS—form part of a head-swimming stream of images marking the cataclysmic social and moral changes from 1953 to the present.

In the first instance, the sheer speed with which these changes occurred made it difficult to identify, much less responsibly address, the problems they represented. Second, the church was ill-prepared to respond even under the best of circumstances, having become dependent on the "friendly," quasi-Christian environment provided by the "Bible belt." Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterian neighbors all contributed to making the public schools into what were, in effect, Protestant parochial schools.

Ironically, this false security gave Churches of Christ the seeming luxury of ignoring the common faith, i.e., those basic beliefs shared by all Christian groups (e.g., Incarnation, Atonement, Sanctification) and focusing on more marginal concerns. Tragically, many came to know more about idiosyncratic issues than about basic Christian beliefs. Consequently, no comprehensive understanding of the Christian faith was being passed on; much less was there a coherent theological framework for addressing the various problems being thrust upon the church by its fast-changing environment.

From the late 1950s on, many among Churches of Christ began to "discover grace," a discovery which would lead some not only to reject legalistic distortions of the Christian life but also to shun the disciplined life and moral obligation per se. In a distortion of Paul's teaching, grace was reduced to a lessening of standards and expectations. Reacting to real abuses and tired of trying to be religious overachievers, many simply "accepted themselves" (with the aid of the "therapeutic gospel") and equated mediocrity with spiritual maturity.

Consequently, grace was all too often trivialized and allowed to clear the way for sporadic church attendance, social drinking, and various forms of self-indulgence previously proscribed by perceived legalism. Not surprisingly, this shift coincided with (and perhaps played a role in legitimating) a quantum leap in social status, as members of the Churches of Christ "stormed across the tracks" and increasingly began pursuing the good life in the acquisition of life's goods.

Thus Churches of Christ, armed with a thin gospel of grace as mediocrity, turned away from their

past (of which they were largely ignorant) and increasingly began to embrace their culture—just as the culture was turning sharply away from its traditional Judeo-Christian roots.

What the Future Holds

I am not optimistic about the future; from a sociological perspective there is little reason to envision a renaissance of faith. In fact, there is every reason to think things will get worse. Sociologist Clifford Geertz has noted that at the point when traditions fail and people and institutions begin to flounder, we may expect to see the appearance of opportunistic ideologues and ideologies. At present it appears that Geertz is correct. Demagogues from the "left" now attempt to lure the church into a generic "Protestant evangelicalism," while schismatic ideologues from "right" call the church to "old paths" that are in fact merely the extension of factious and divisive egos. Many, understandably confused and uncertain, are presently being seduced by these voices.

Although I am not optimistic, I am hopeful. I believe the only way out of this morass is a recovery of biblical faith. That is, only with an understanding of biblical faith and biblical theology can we learn to think responsibly about how to react to the various challenges to faithful living. For too long, Churches of Christ have substituted a theology about the Bible for a biblical theology. Only a true awakening to biblical theology can guide us between the brittle Scylla of traditionalism and the amorphous Charybdis of innovationism. Christian leaders must not be forced to choose between the casuistically established alternatives of what is required and what is not prohibited. Wise leaders will view requirements in light of their underlying purposes; they will also know that everything not prohibited is not necessarily suitable or appropriate. Wise leaders, steeped in knowledge of biblical faith, will only adopt practices which are fully congruent with biblical faith and appropriate to maintaining and promoting faithful churches and faithful lives.

"Scripture . . . can again become a summons to this church also in the power of his Spirit, telling it that it need not be afraid, that there is real comfort for it, that sure of its cause it can live in his service."
Karl Barth