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## The Church as I see it Today

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# *The Church* **As I See It Today**

**By Allan McNicol**

The topic I have been asked to address is "The Church Today As I See It." By way of introduction, a couple of points of clarification are in order.

First, when I speak about the church, I refer to the fellowship of Churches of Christ. The Church of Christ, as we know it today in Texas, emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a separate communion of the Restoration Movement. Therefore, it is a product of the earlier Restoration Movement in England and America in the nineteenth century. The general orientation of this movement was to complete the Reformation which started in the sixteenth century. The more immediate goal of this "New Reformation" was to restore the New Testament Church as the basis for the union of all believers in Christ.

Basic to the Restoration Movement was an understanding that Christianity had not succeeded because it had been distorted by human innovations. Such practices as infant baptism, as well as a view of worship as a performance rather than an expression of humble praise, were thought to inhibit the growth of the church and the triumph of the gospel. Founders of the movement believed that if the gospel were only preached in its purity it would have a ready acceptance, and the kingdom of God

would be ushered in with full power.

Accordingly, Alexander Campbell, along with others, worked boldly to implement this vision. Yet by the end of his life — interestingly enough at the end of the Civil War — American Christianity was as sectarian and divided as when he came upon the scene.

Since Campbell's time the plea has been maintained. One group of Campbell's descendants (the Disciples of Christ) emphasized Campbell's call for the unity of all Christians. They sought to implement this vision by being active in the ecumenical affairs of the various expressions of the western Christian tradition. The expressed goal of this communion was not to remain a separate fellowship but to "sink into the body of Christ at large."

Another major group of descendants of the nineteenth century Restoration Movement stressed the need to preach the pure gospel, for the church to live and exist as an alternative community to both a corrupt Christendom and a corrupt world. This, of course, is the part of the movement to which we, the Churches of Christ, belong. At our best we have consistently preached the gospel without compromise and have raised a number of generations who have burned with love and dedication for the Lord. At our worst, the Churches of Christ have become argumentative, sectarian and consumed with trivial disputes about the smallest details in church practice. These are the banes and blessings of our fellowship. This has been our history and if the current situation of Churches of Christ in Austin,

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Texas, is indicative, it remains the same today.

### Contemporary Challenges

Yet, as the years roll by, and we begin to look toward celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of many of the early events of the Restoration Movement, we cannot but realize that the world we encounter is different than the world faced by the Campbells. Our challenges may not be any more daunting, but they are different. Therefore we need to identify them and, by the grace and power of God, set a course to face up to and overcome them.

It is precisely here that we touch base with the story of the people of God at an earlier time. To illustrate the point, we read the account in Numbers 13 of the people of God as they were in the wilderness preparing to enter the land. Men were sent to spy out the land, and they brought back a report of both good news and bad. The good news was that the land was very productive. At harvest time it took two individuals with a pole to carry a single cluster of grapes. It was a very inviting place. On the other hand, there was the bad news. There were giants in the land, and they were formidable! The land presented opportunities, but they could only be seized after great effort. Our situation today is similar.

### A Challenge For Today

As with the people of God in the wilderness who were about to possess the land, our challenge presents exciting possibilities, but if we do not face it squarely we may well suffer severe disappointment. Let me identify that challenge. Today the Churches of Christ constitute a world-wide communion that meets in over 120 different countries of the world. But along with the growth reflected by these numbers comes increasing diversity both at home and abroad. *Our challenge is to maintain our identity and unity amidst this growing diversity.*

For most of this century we have been comfortable with the notion that the greater number of members in Churches of Christ lived in 6 or 8 southern or border states. In these states, far away from the great intellectual centers of the country, most members of Churches of Christ spent the twentieth century. As the descendants of European people we were a homogeneous crowd, and our world was monolithic and relatively secure.

However, after the second world war a major event took place in Churches of Christ—the significance of which we are only yet beginning to understand. I refer to the impetus to expand and broaden our missionary efforts. During the war years so many of our young people went to various places in the world where there was no Church of Christ.

Upon their return, many said, “We have to get some churches in these places.” In response we sent out missionaries.

As you know, in many of these situations, the missionaries we sent were ill prepared. They failed in their work and returned home disillusioned. We now know that some of them were up against great odds. For example, Western Europe and Japan were well on their way to becoming what they are today: the first **post-religion** societies. Little wonder that our missionaries in those places experienced hard times.

But some of our missionaries did make converts and, in some places, the growth was explosive. Suddenly, we find ourselves with churches throughout the world. By the end of this decade there will be a million members of Churches of Christ in Africa, and, because of the great growth in India, a million in Asia. This will surpass the number of members in the U.S.A. Growth in Europe, Latin America, and the South Pacific has been slower; but in all these places Churches of Christ are well established and beginning to develop their own theological institutions and internal networks.

This sounds exciting. What then is the challenge? The challenge is to maintain a sense of “brotherhood” amid all this growth, and the diversity which it spawns.

Let me put it bluntly! The Churches of Christ are the only Christian communion, that operates on a world-wide scale, without an authoritative organizational structure beyond the local congregation. In Churches of Christ the elders of the local congregation are the authoritative figures. Inasmuch as any policies are set for the expansion of work overseas, they set them. Although we have nurtured a number of para-church organizations, they only exist at the pleasure of the local churches and their leadership.

Question: How can elders in a local congregation really exercise responsible direction and guidance for the work in whole countries on the other side of the world? What do we do when disputes over interpretation and customs and practices break out as they inevitably do?

In the past we have handled these problems in a special way. If we found fellow Christians out of line somewhere else we simply stopped their financial support. With churches overseas having their own networks and theological training, supported in their own countries, that can no longer be done. Do you know that many missionaries of the Churches of Christ in Ethiopia come from and are supported by other churches in Africa? Likewise, a considerable amount of the aid and personnel for the relief work

in Eastern Europe comes from churches in Germany and Switzerland. Are we really in a position to tell them what to do?

This is not the lament of one who fears losing control. It is a voice of concern. How can we keep up with the increasing demands to provide opportunities for spiritual growth on a world-wide basis? Can we develop and maintain in countries overseas important programs such as lectureships and seminars? Who will supply hymnbooks and teaching materials to assist and nourish local churches? Can we provide theological training and professional development for ministers and other church leaders?

What we have is the potential for tremendous growth far beyond anything we have envisioned in this century. We have also the potential for crisis if we accept no responsibility for the nurturing of our work overseas. As the children of Israel in the wilderness looked at the promised land so long ago, there were glittering prospects and daunting challenges. We face a similar situation. Our response in the next decade to the challenges presented by world-wide growth will be crucial.

### **The Challenge At Home**

But the challenge to maintain our identity and unity does not only exist overseas; we face it at home as well. For example, in the last decade, despite the closing of a good number of rural churches, the number of Churches of Christ in Texas increased by several hundred. Many of these new churches emerged in the African-American and Hispanic communities. Although many of these churches are small, their emergence is an indication of where the potential for future growth rests in Churches of Christ.

The problems associated with a growing diversity apparent among us is not just evident at ethnic and cultural levels. Let me illustrate. For some time there has been a growing restlessness over worship styles in many congregations. In a number of major cities a gap is opening among us in terms of the style and manner of the worship services, especially in the choice of music.

Observers of the American religious scene will recognize that this is our version of the widespread problem faced in American society since the sixties: namely, how does the mature generation hand on to the youth their version of spirituality? Certainly as elders we can decry some of the false gods our youth have sought: hard rock, drugs and New Age. But that will not necessarily make them prefer the "old hymns" and fixed liturgical styles. Surely there is something we can learn from our youth about how

we can offer genuine praise to God. Surely the generations can come to some kind of accommodation on these matters!

I would feel more confident that these matters could be addressed adequately if we approached them from a common theological framework. But here the acids of pluralism have eroded some old verities, and I am concerned that we may treat these things as issues of power (and thus risk division) rather than taking a responsible, loving stand on the basis of the best for our heritage.

Thus, again, the challenge emerges. How do we maintain our unity and identity amid growing diversity?

### **Conclusion**

These matters that we have considered constitute a major challenge to the future of Churches of Christ. In a nutshell I am calling for a renewed awareness on our part for a sense of being a "brotherhood." I have alerted you to a paradox. At the very moment we have become a world-wide fellowship, we find fewer and fewer things that bind us together. We may be on the edge of our finest hour, or we may fracture in an ugly and destructive way. In my view we only escape the latter if we work to recapture something akin to the basic vision of the founders of our movement.

When I was a schoolboy growing up in a rural Church of Christ in Australia I did not have a support group of a large number of friends in the church to encourage me in my faith. When we had Protestant religious instruction the schoolteacher would send me outside with the Catholics and atheists because he didn't know what to do with the Churches of Christ.

But this didn't bother me very much. From time to time preachers would come by and tell of large congregations in other places where every couple of Sundays people were baptized, and the membership went up into the hundreds or even beyond. I was nourished by the dream that the fellowship to which I belonged was greater than that small little group that hardly had enough to pay a preacher.

Since then I have been to many places that I never in my wildest dreams thought I would visit, and I have seen the "brotherhood" develop into a truly world-wide fellowship. We have our challenges. But if we hold on to that love of the "brotherhood"—as something very precious—our greatest days may well be not in the past but before us!

As those people in the wilderness generation crossed into the land and possessed it, we too can accept these challenges and look forward to a vital and hopeful future.