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The Cruciform Church: Twenty-Five Years Later

Leonard Allen

I was reared in a small city in central Florida, where my parents were stalwarts at the little Church of Christ. I was baptized at eleven, and grateful—and very fortunate, I thought—to be a member of the one true church. But by age sixteen, I began to sense cracks in the true church edifice that, in my family, was the center of its world. My questions launched me on an intellectual quest through the college years. And they eventually propelled me on a theological career.

I needed to know where the type of Christianity that was so deeply instilled in me had come from. I had been told since early childhood that it came simply from the Bible. Through eight years of seminary and PhD work in Bible and historical theology, I learned that there was much more to the story. The quest for that bigger story was exciting and challenging—but often troubling.

The books I wrote and co-wrote over the next fifteen years—though calm, measured, and understated—marked out the findings of this unsettling journey. A journey, it turned out, that spoke strongly to many thousands of people.

When the first three books appeared in 1988 followed by *The Cruciform Church* in 1990, a door seemed to open. There was plenty of controversy, of course, but there was an amazing explosion of interest. People throughout Churches of Christ seemed hungry for these things. Over the years since, as I've continued to hear from those people, I've realized what those books provided—both for them and for me. For many people it's as if *Discovering Our Roots* and *The Cruciform Church* helped form a kind of bridge—a bridge off the island and back to the Christian mainland.

For many brothers and sisters it was a scary and halting, sometimes angry, sometimes exhilarating journey. Others—especially the millennials—didn't have to make that journey. They were born, as it were, on the mainland. They interact easily with brothers and sisters from other Christian traditions. And they tend to wonder, "Why do I have to keep hearing these old island stories? Why can't we just move on to more important things?" And I grant you—it *is* time to move on, though I would respectfully point out that most of us who minister among Churches of Christ today must still deal, in one way or another, with the legacy of the island heritage.

So for the past thirty-five years I have been immersed in the task of understanding the theological tradition and heritage of Churches of Christ, and then, through writing and teaching, helping insiders come to terms with it and outsiders better understand it.

I've sought to place Churches of Christ squarely in the stream of real human history, to engage the tradition in a critical way, and to place it alongside other traditions. In the late 80s and early 90s that was a new and jolting perspective for most members of Churches of Christ.

When I shared the manuscript of the book with several people in 1990, some encouraged me to omit the word *cruciform* because it was too unfamiliar. But I kept it, as I said in the preface, "in hope that this image might become a dominant image by which Churches of Christ speak of identifying the New Testament Church." In recent years, as you've probably noticed, it's become a cool word, making it into the title of several books.

Some of you have read the book, probably years ago, and some of you haven't. So let me give a quick overview. It is focused on five theological *identity points* that I thought should shape our identity most powerfully:

1. *The way we read Scripture.* The book traces the early nineteenth-century origins of the strict *pattern orthodoxy* that formed the identity of Churches of Christ down through the mid-twentieth century. It shows how, beginning with Campbell, the Bible was naturalized as a “scientific book of facts.” Then, by using biblical commands, examples, and necessary inferences, one constructed an exact pattern for belief and practice, a pattern in which “human elements are absolutely excluded.” This pattern was constructed from Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, which became the functional canon-within-the-canon. In Campbell's dispensational arrangement the Gospels and Acts chapter 1 fall into the Mosaic dispensation. The Old Testament and the Gospels, as a result, serve a preparatory role: thus the Gospels, in short, play a somewhat minimal role when it comes to preaching the gospel or instructing the church about its life together.
In critique I offered four suggestions for a fresh engagement with Scripture: (A) recognize the remoteness of the biblical text and make a commitment to historical interpretation; (B) enlarge our functional canon by making the Old Testament and the Gospels more central in our theology; (C) read scripture as a collection of diverse literature rather than simply a collection of “facts”; and (D) focus on the central, overarching story, thereby distinguishing what is primary from what is secondary.
2. *The way we view God.* I explored the secular displacement and domestication of God and the inordinate human tendency to create God in our own image. Then I pointed to two features that most clearly set the living God apart from the many rivals: (A) the fact that Yahweh does “impossibilities,” thereby shattering our small, narrow, and self-serving conceptions of God; and (B) the fact that Yahweh loves his creatures even to the point of becoming vulnerable to them and embracing their pain and suffering.
3. *The centrality of the cross of Christ.* I first asked, “How have we among Churches of Christ traditionally preached the ‘word of the cross’?” The answer was that there was a subtle but serious displacement of the cross in the preaching of the movement. The cross was a vital historical fact, of course, and one must believe it; but it held little practical value. The surpassing question was “What must I do to be saved?” So the most common traditional formulation of the gospel became: three facts to be believed (Christ's death, burial, and resurrection), three commands to be obeyed (believe, repent, and be baptized), and three promises to be received (forgiveness of sin, the gift of the Spirit, and the promise of eternal life). It was this formulation that K. C. Moser sacrificed his career to critique and reject in the 1930s.
The second question I asked was “How should the cross shape our life together in Christ?” I answered that it provides the dominant vision of what life in Christ should be like. That is, our dominant vision of reality becomes cruciform. Through the cross we see the heart of God revealed most clearly. We see the depths of God's suffering love, suggesting that God's own self is cruciform. Further, the cross provides the model for God's new social order, the messianic community. And so we are baptized into a community where living out the way of the cross begins to make sense in a world with a radically different vision of the good life.
4. *Our stance toward “the world.”* Christians are admonished not to love the world or the things of the world (1 John 2.15). We face a perpetual tension between two biblical imperatives: the call to detach ourselves from worldly values and the call to serve the world in sacrificial ways. In becoming a distinctive set-apart community, the church serves the world in two important ways. First, by being a set-apart community, the church enables the world to see its true plight or *lostness*. Second, by being a set-apart community, the church creates an environment where Christ followers gain the strength and virtues to serve the world in sacrificial ways—that is, to follow the way of the cross. We do this in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, Christ comes alive in us, Christ is formed in us. In the power of the Spirit, we continue Christ's ministry. Through the Spirit we become cruciform people.

5. *Our portrayal of Christ-like character.* Scripture emphasizes the quality and character of our lives as a fundamental mark of Christian identity. The church that lives under the cross will consist of people growing in what we could call *cruciform virtues*, that is, the character traits necessary to follow the way of the cross. These include patience, endurance, courage, and hope. Prominent among these virtues is compassion—the ability to enter into the sufferings of another.

The compassionate incarnation of God in Christ stands at the center of the Christian faith. This grand vision draws us out of our narrow and selfish little worlds and into a breadth of mercy and compassion that begins to reflect, however dimly, the compassion of God. It means going further than we had ever considered going in identifying ourselves with weak, suffering, and sinful people.

That's a quick summary of a two-hundred-page book.

So here, twenty-five years later, let me tell you what I see now and how my own theological journey has continued.

Today finds Churches of Christ at a quite different place than they were twenty-five years ago when the book was first released. Some congregations are engaging more and more in the kind of theological rethinking that this book called for back in 1990. A good many congregations are shedding the exclusivist outlook, gaining new appreciation for their heritage, refocusing on the central doctrines of the faith, and entering into new dialogue about carrying out the mission of God in this new time.

That's good. But I think it mostly hasn't hit us yet that we are living in an increasingly post-Christian culture. The cultural status and power that Christianity in America held from about the 1850s to the 1960s is virtually gone. In Christendom, the church occupies a central and influential place in society; after Christendom, it gets pushed to the margins, out of the place of power. And that's where we find ourselves now—more and more at the margins.

Our ways of being Christian in the West have been deeply shaped by cultural establishment. For many centuries the church occupied a dominant place in Western culture. For many centuries there was a state church, upheld by law. And then in America, where church and state were separated, there remained a powerful but unofficial Christian establishment—a cultural establishment.

But let's be clear: any sort of Christian establishment has definitively ended. As David Bentley Hart put it, "We now live in the time after Christendom, among the rapidly vanishing fragments of its material culture, bound to it by only a few lingering habits of thought."¹

Now our context is radically pluralistic and secular. Today all the Christian players have been disestablished and must function as cultural outsiders—though in some places like Nashville, where I now live, it's a little harder to sense that.

The good news is that, over its long history, Christian faith has remained vital—indeed, often flourished—when it occupied the margins. Early Christianity did not come into existence in the midst of public favor. And it did not grow because it was popular and easily accepted.

Here's my key point: Christianity's loss of cultural power in America is waking us up to the reality that we are in a missionary situation in our own culture. And this is forcing us to rethink our mission, our priorities, and how we do church. We are missionaries now. We may have had congregations that *supported* missions. But now we face the challenge of *becoming* missionary congregations.

Such a time calls for further theological recoveries and engagements. One is a more robust eschatology. I believe we need to hear again the New Testament's bold eschatological claim. Robust discipleship is grounded in this bold claim. It was this claim that enabled the early Christians to stand strong and flourish in the midst of hostile pagan religion and state persecution.

So in the 2006 edition of *The Cruciform Church* I added a new chapter on eschatology. Here's how I summarized the NT claim: The claim is that the triumph of God has been revealed. The claim is that in Jesus's death and resurrection all the hostile powers of this present age have been disarmed, that God's kingdom has broken into history and thus, for the believer, brought an end to all other kingdoms. The worldly

1. See <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/08/no-enduring-city>.

powers continue to rage and threaten, but the believer sees that they are doomed, finished, already writhing in their death throes. The believer thus knows something that unbelievers do not know: that Jesus Christ now reigns as Lord of all, and further, that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that lordship.

There's more. Believers not only know by faith how history will end, they also presently participate in that end through the presence of God's Spirit. "We are those," Paul said, "upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Cor 10.11). Knowing this truth and experiencing this power, disciples can follow Jesus in all things, even in those things that don't make sense to normal life in this world.

In the new chapter, drawing on the work of Richard Hays, I spelled out several specific reasons why the church needs apocalyptic eschatology. Here are three of them:

First, the church needs the apocalyptic vision to avoid lukewarmness and complacency. When this vision wanes, we easily become a "worldly church." The passion and sense of mission wanes, and the church easily becomes club-like—safe, separate, and preoccupied with its own internal affairs. Christian life becomes conventional and tame. We grow comfortable and sleepy and bored. We forget that we are engaged in a great conflict, an army against armies.

Second, the church needs apocalyptic eschatology in order to critique (neo-)pagan culture. When this vision fades, the church "loses its critical edge against pagan culture, accepts the politics of this world, and becomes spiritually otherworldly." It hands the control of everyday life over to Caesar, taking refuge in a separate spiritual realm and waiting it out for heaven. Against this otherworldliness, the apocalyptic vision "becomes a diagnostic tool that enables us to recognize that Caesar's power is transient—and thereby to resist the seductions of materialism and violence in the world around us."

Third, the church needs the apocalyptic vision to ground its mission in the world. Both the Gospel writers and Paul portray the mission of the church as the outworking of God's apocalyptic plan for judging and redeeming the world. The Spirit has been poured out, forming the church into an end-time community where God's grace and power is manifest (Acts 2.41–47). God is bringing in the universal restoration spoken of by the prophets (Acts 3.21), and the church is commissioned to be an instrument of God's proclamation, calling people to repent in preparation for the day of God's ultimate judgment (Acts 17.31). Without this grounding, the mission loses its urgency and its focus.

So the apocalyptic vision works kind of like arson. It sets fires. It wakes up distracted disciples. It focuses the mission.

Another engagement we will have a hard time avoiding is the explosion of Christianity in the Global South. This represents nothing less than a revolutionary shift in Christianity's center of gravity. It's becoming clear. The West is becoming increasingly post-Christian, and Christianity is becoming increasingly post-Western. And it seems almost certain that these trends will continue.²

This explosion of new Christian movements was as diverse as the range of cultures they took root in. What do we do with this vast cultural Christian diversity? Let me tell you briefly how I'm learning to think about it.

First, I would say that all expressions of Christian faith are culturally rooted—deeply so. Wherever we are, we come into the faith conditioned by a particular time, place, family, tribe, and society. And not just conditioned—embedded. There doesn't appear to be any other way. It's something of a scandal, actually. Let's call it the scandal of the gospel—or better, the scandal of the incarnation, the Word made flesh.

Christianity is founded in the incarnation of Christ. Andrew Walls, a Scottish theologian who pioneered the study of global Christianity in the late twentieth century, used the metaphor of translation to speak of what happened in the incarnation. In the Christian story, he said, "Christ was not simply a loanword adopted into the vocabulary of humanity; he was fully translated, taken into the functional system of the language, into the fullest reaches of personality, experience, and social relationship."³ And when people from any tribe, nation, and tongue encounter this Christ and experience conversion, they begin to experience the deep opening up of their personalities, intellects, and emotions to this new reality. And as Christianity spreads from culture to

2. See Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

3. Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

culture, it keeps getting translated. This cross-cultural process of translation becomes a kind of mirror of the incarnation itself.

In this process of enculturation there is a deep particularity, but at the same time a universality that may surprise us. On the one hand, there is, what Walls calls the *indigenous principle*: the drive to make the church a place that feels like home.⁴ That is, God receives people as they are—in every tribe, nation, and language. But on the other hand, there is an opposing push, a steady sense that Christians have “no abiding city.” Walls calls this the *pilgrim principle*. God wants to transform believers into something new and more faithful. He wants to turn all of us into citizens of a new kingdom, and not simply leave us comfortably at home in our own place.

So let me say that now, after all these years, I have a much clearer sense of where I am. Over these years I’ve found a solid and soul-sustaining place in the core affirmations of what is sometimes called the Great Tradition. At the very heart of that tradition is the doctrine of the Trinity. In the twenty-five years since *The Cruciform Church* came out, I would say that I have become more fully Trinitarian.

Any good biblicist, of course, believes in the Father, Son, and Spirit. That wasn’t the issue. What made all the difference for me was beginning to see the *function* of Trinitarian doctrine. Or to put it better, the *nature* of Trinitarian life. For me this recast, even revolutionized, my understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

God leads a relational life as Father, Son, and Spirit. That life is characterized by submissive love, as each pours life and love into the other. So abundant is this life that it overflows, and we are invited to share in it. So wonderful and rich that joy permeates it. And so perfect that it reaches down into our very deepest desires. Call it the Trinitarian life. For us, call it the Christian life. Call it life in the Spirit.

Though a deep mystery, the Trinity opens up to us the divine life of perfect love and perfect joy. Through the Spirit, we are invited to partake. To become partakers of the divine nature. And the more deeply we enter into that life, the more we take on the self-emptying or cruciform character of Jesus.

That’s what I’m after. And I think that’s how we become a cruciform church.

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4. Walls, 7.