Modern History of Churches of Christ

Lesson 2: The Division of the 1950s and 1960s

1. Pre-World War 2 Issues

A. Following the division with the Disciples of Christ/Christian Churches (formally, in 1906), churches of Christ entered a thirty-year period of relative peace. Perhaps this was due in part to the after-effects of the split: few wanted to go through another such gut-wrenching, debilitating experience. Perhaps economic woes and a general malaise which troubled the country contributed to a somewhat muted period. Sketchy statistical evidence indicates a moderate amount of growth in membership among churches.

B. Apart from localized squabbles that always seem to be present among conservatively minded people were three moderately divisive issues that caused trouble among churches of Christ:

1. *The no Bible class/one cup division of 1925*. The major contention was that it was unscriptural to divide the assembly for study. Other peripheral issues which came to the fore in this dispute included the number of cups used in the Lord's supper, the use of fermented or unfermented juice, the use of "located preachers," and the propriety of women speaking or teaching in churches.

2. *The pacifism controversy*. The pacifistic position was not concerned with the taking of life, per se, but was an outgrowth of a larger view. Many restorers, David Lipscomb in particular, viewed all governmental participation as evil including voting, holding office and serving in the military. By WW2 the tide had turned against almost all pacifistic sentiment.

3. *The premillennial controversy*. It may surprise those who are not students of history to learn that a significant premillenial controversy raged among churches of Christ from 1915 into the 1940s. Many restorers possessed what historian Richard T. Hughes calls an apocalyptic vision of the church; that is, they saw themselves separate from all other man-made kingdoms and governments by virtue of their citizenship in the kingdom of Christ. Foy E. Wallace, Jr. was the most vociferous opponent of both pacifism and premillennial theories. His main line of opposition connected pacifism with premillennialism. Hughes notes that "Wallace had sufficient insight to see that pacifism and premillennialism in this movement were often connected" (p. 164), and he moved to destroy the premillennial root that nourished the branches of pacifism.

C. It is at this point in history that churches of Christ, considered as a whole, become susceptible to denominational identification.

1. By "churches of Christ" I refer to the entire mainstream movement, not individual congregations that remain loyal to New Testament pattern and doctrine. The term "mainstream" refers to that core majority of churches that have sloughed off the liberal Disciples of Christ, the sectarian one-cup/no Bible class groups and the radical premillennialists.

2. In the aftermath of WW2, social forces will conspire to push these churches in the direction of denominational cohesiveness and respectability. Looking back from our present-day vantage point, this is precisely what has happened.

3. All that is left to propel the mainstream churches in this direction is to jettison the anti-institutional objectors who will arise over the next twenty-plus years.

2. The Rise of Institutionalism

A. *The Union of Schools and Orphan Homes.* Major shifts of policy or practice among churches usually develop gradually. Mainstream churches of Christ had been undergoing subtle changes in outlook for several decades before WW2. Institutional practices had been accepted without scrutiny and criticism because they had not become a recognized threat.

1. Note the following observation by Ed Harrell:

"In the early years of the restoration movement, some churches financially supported educational and benevolent organizations, including Alexander Campbell's Bethany College and David Lipscomb's Nashville Bible School. In 1936, Foy E. Wallace, Jr., observed that an institutional framework had evolved in the churches of Christ more or less without notice. As the institutions grew in size and number, Wallace became more alarmed: 'The institutional idea is no longer a trend – we are institutional already. No week passes that churches are not circularized by "our institutions." True, "we" did not start them but they were left on our doorstep for adoption, tagged, "your institution, support it." As a doorstep child, the only alternative is adoption or death. Too kindhearted to let any of them die, the "brotherhood" adopts them all'" (*CCTC,* p. 74).

2. Hughes summarizes a vital turning point in the history of churches of Christ in the twentieth century. This turning point involved the schools that had so long dotted the Restoration landscape:

"The massive influx of students after the war, coupled with the postwar religious revival, implicitly raised the question of the extent to which the colleges could promote the growth and maintenance of Churches of Christ, both in the United States and abroad. That question, in turn, raised the critical question of support for these colleges. Should they be funded solely by individual contributions, or

should they be supported by congregations? The former option would inevitably hobble their growth; the latter option would, in effect, render the colleges institutional agencies of the congregations that provided support – a situation that would clearly run counter to the radically democratic and individualistic traditions that had defined Churches of Christ since the early nineteenth century" (p. 223).

3. Probably the most emotionally inflammatory issue of the disagreement involved the support of orphan homes. Churches from the early 1920s had been building and supporting orphan homes with little debate as to the Scriptural authority for doing so. Ed Harrell describes what next unfolded as brethren sought a way to fund schools:

   "Colleges had long been suspect in the anti-intellectual atmosphere of the churches of Christ, but before World War II few people questioned the right of churches to support the handful of orphan homes then in existence … In his 1933 defense of church support for colleges, G.C. Brewer sensed that a linkage between colleges and orphan homes provided a powerful defense … In his 1947 defense of church contributions to colleges, N.B. Hardeman seized the orphan home argument, noting that support for colleges and the homes 'must stand or fall together' … Increasingly, those who favored church support for colleges tried to shift the battleground to the orphan homes, understanding quite well that there was much broader sympathy in the churches for orphan homes than for colleges" (*CCTC,* pp. 90-91).

4. The debate quickly took on more ominous tones as rhetoric and invective began to be hurled between the opposing camps. Brethren favoring institutionalization pressed the issue and demanded that their opponents accept the schools or denounce supporting the "poor little orphans." Reasoned discussion and study was often derailed by emotional fervor. "Those opposing contributions from churches to colleges were derisively termed 'antis,' and many progressive leaders were unwilling to let an unreasonable and obstreperous minority block the advancement of the churches of Christ" (*CCTC*, p. 89). When an unstoppable force meets an immovable object, something has to give.

B. *The Growth of Sponsoring Churches.* Richard Hughes observes:

"While a more moderate, progressive theology created a climate in which institutionalization could thrive, World War II proved to be the single most decisive factor prompting Churches of Christ toward greater modernization and efficiency and toward the expansive program of institution building that took place in the 1940s and 1950s. During the postwar period, Churches of Christ identified ever more closely with the values of the dominant culture; by 1960 they had practically completed their long … journey toward full-fledged denominational status" (p. 223).

1. Harrell adds: "It was the potential to evangelize the world that most fired the imagination of church leaders in the 1940s and 1950s" (*CCTC,* p. 89). Ironically, Alexander Campbell was driven by the same goal but for a different reason. The global vision of churches of Christ in the '40s and '50s was devoid of millennial aspirations, replaced by the desire for legitimacy and prominence as a world player on the religious stage. Nevertheless, both the aspirations of Campbell and the post WW2 mainstream churches led to the same place: institutionalism and church cooperation.

2. Following the lead of the Broadway church in Lubbock, Texas, several large churches took it upon themselves to "sponsor" the evangelism of entire countries ravaged by the war. They solicited contributions from smaller churches and exercised total control over receiving, overseeing and distributing funds.

3. As the trend toward centralization continued,

   "… people within the anti-institutional movement grew more and more wary of the mission methods employed by mainstream Churches of Christ. Their concern was not with missions per se but with what they viewed as the mushrooming institutional machinery through which mission work now was accomplished. They objected as well to what they saw as a corresponding interest among many for standing, status, and prestige, both at home and abroad, for a 'denomination' come of age" (Hughes, p. 235).

C. *The Herald of Truth.* The drive to do things in a big way was not limited to foreign fields. At home, two young preachers, James Walter Nichols and James D. Willeford, conceived the idea of a national radio broadcast sponsored by churches of Christ. Thus began the "Herald of Truth" radio program in 1952. In 1954 it expanded into television. "[They] believed that a project of that magnitude would clearly require a 'sponsoring congregation' arrangement. The Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas, assumed oversight of the project from its inception" (Hughes, p. 239).

1. Hughes continues: "Predictably, the anti-institutional wing of the movement registered strong opposition to the prospect of a single congregation controlling both the finances and the content of a project that represented Churches of Christ worldwide. Such an arrangement, they thought, presented the same problems as a nineteenth-century missionary society, deceptively cloaked in the garb of congregational autonomy. The battles over the 'Herald of Truth' raged furiously for the remainder of that decade and helped solidify the division between mainstream Churches of Christ and their anti-institutional antagonists" (*RAF,* p. 240).

2. Hughes continues to criticize the "Herald of Truth" program on other grounds. He charges that the "electronic bishops" of the "Herald of Truth" gradually wa-

tered down the gospel to make it palatable to a diverse national audience.

"The late 1950s … brought subtle changes in sermon content. To understand those shifts, one must recall the kind of piety that dominated American religion throughout the 1950s. During that decade, practically all major denominations promoted the role religion could play in fostering peace of mind … In such a climate, messages that extolled the 'true church' and that condemned 'the denominations' for their 'false doctrine' were not likely to develop a significant following beyond the ranks of the faithful … And so as the 'electronic bishops' increasingly focused on issues pertaining to self-esteem, anxiety, marriage and the family, and the like, pulpit preachers throughout the fellowship of Churches of Christ quickly followed suit. By the late 1970s, especially in large congregations in urban centers, one could listen to preachers in Churches of Christ for weeks and months on end and never hear anything remotely approaching the traditional sectarian message that had defined the tradition for a century and a half" (*RAF,* pp. 241, 243).

3. To go beyond Scriptural authority in any area invites unanticipated changes. Those who vociferously defended the pooling of funds for such projects as the "Herald of Truth" never envisioned that such a "policy decision" would eventually have an impact on the *content* of what was preached. To reach as many people as possible with the gospel is a good thing; to do so on a scale that surpasses the resources of a local church becomes its own evil.

3. The Inevitable Split

A. The schism that developed among churches of Christ was not as clean and surgical as it might appear from our vantage point some fifty years later. Brethren's intentions came out gradually, an article here, a statement at a lectureship there, behind the scenes maneuvering to marginalize the obstructionists, etc. Misgivings turned into name-calling; disagreements turned into debates; and brotherly kindness turned into rancor and ugliness of spirit.

B. The role of the publications:

1. Much of the debate that occurred surrounding the issues was carried on in papers circulated among the brethren. Though there were relatively few subscriptions in comparison to the total number of Christians, there was enough influence via preachers and other influential members to crystallize thinking in the minds of many – one way or the other.

2. The noninstitutional position was championed by the *Gospel Guardian,* edited by Fanning Yater Tant. Other magazines such as the *Preceptor* and *Truth Magazine* filled their own niche in trying to warn of the dangerous flow of the mainstream.

These brethren saw themselves as "defending the old paths" against the onslaught of modernism, progressivism and liberalism.

3. The institutional cause was powerfully promoted by the *Gospel Advovcate,* published by J.C. McQuiddy and B.C. Goodpasture. Robert Hooper says that Goodpasture "was, according to many on both sides of the issues, the most powerful person within churches of Christ from the late 1940s until his death in 1977" (*A Distinct People,* p. 212). The *Firm Foundation* was a more moderately liberal paper edited by Reuel Lemmons, and the *Spiritual Sword* was militantly anti-"Anti." [Ironically, the *Spiritual Sword* has for a number of years been fighting against the ultra-liberal movement among mainstream institutional churches; i.e., *they* have become *the Antis!*]

C. The quarantine issued by the *Gospel Advocate.*

1. Looking back on these issues, it is particularly disturbing to see the raw political power exercised by brotherhood publications. One may argue that doctrinal correctness of a private enterprise providing teaching via magazines, but at the same time one must also admit the potential misuse of such a vehicle for destructive ends. When a publication crosses the line between legitimate edification and a de facto denominational platform, it has become an instrument of evil.

2. Exercising his aforementioned power as the editor of the *Gospel Advocate,* B.C. Goodpasture brought the crisis to a head in December, 1954 by publishing a letter calling for a "quarantine" of all preachers of the anti-institutional persuasion. This seemed to crystallize the two sides and transformed controversy into confrontation. Churches and families were divided, preachers had meetings cancelled and pressure was brought to bear upon many to "pick a side."

3. No man would have the power that B.C. Goodpasture wielded if not for brotherhood publications serving as a vehicle for such power. The error is dual: it rests with men whose personal ambitions lead them to seize the power of the pen and attempt to use it divisively, and it also rests with the mindless public who look to the publications as their shepherd and "rallying point." While churches of Christ pride themselves in their nondenominational structure, many of them utilize informal denominational machinery. When a journal, school, eldership, preacher or any other entity wields undue political power over the Lord's people, it occupies a sinful position. And the results are predictable.

Conclusion: For those of us under fifty, it is hard to imagine such widespread turmoil among churches and even families. Feelings ran powerful and deep – and over what? How the church is structured and what a local congregation can or cannot do with its funds, and extra-congregational organizations like schools and orphanages created and

sustained by congregations. On the surface these things do not seem volatile, but when personal ambitions arise, even small issues are magnified out of proportion. It is significant to note that great apostasies seem to arise from the troubled waters of organizational corruption. We would do well to learn the lessons of history. ***Anything which tends to compromise the local autonomy and self-directed work of a congregation should be looked upon with great suspicion.*** If churches had contented themselves with operating according to their own ability, these issues would not have occurred.