

Modern History of Churches of Christ

Lesson 3: The Institutional Mainstream: 1960-Present

1. From Boom to Gloom

A. The institutional movement is referred to as the mainline or mainstream church simply because the majority of the brethren remained identified with such groups. It is estimated that about one-tenth of the brotherhood adopted an anti-institutional position, a significant number in comparison to the one-cup and premillennial offshoots of the early 1900s.

1. In the aftermath of WW2 and in spite of the distractions spawned by the anti-institutional controversy, mainstream churches enjoyed a period of explosive growth through the fifties and early sixties.
2. Many churches implemented massive building programs; their campuses copied the designs and structure of their denominational neighbors. Church-supported colleges grew. Society at large was drawn to a group of people who now reflected to a greater degree the comfortable standards by which they lived.
3. Richard T. Hughes, in a candid assessment that has inflamed progressive leaders among institutional brethren, notes:

“Through the process of modernization and the development of various para-church institutions, the Church of Christ developed almost everywhere in the United States into a well-established *institution* in its own right. Put another way, the Church of Christ was no longer a sect, much less an informal movement; it had become instead a full-blown denomination, at least in terms of its social standing in the context of American culture. This was the issue to which leaders in the anti-institutional movement had pointed all along” (p. 252).

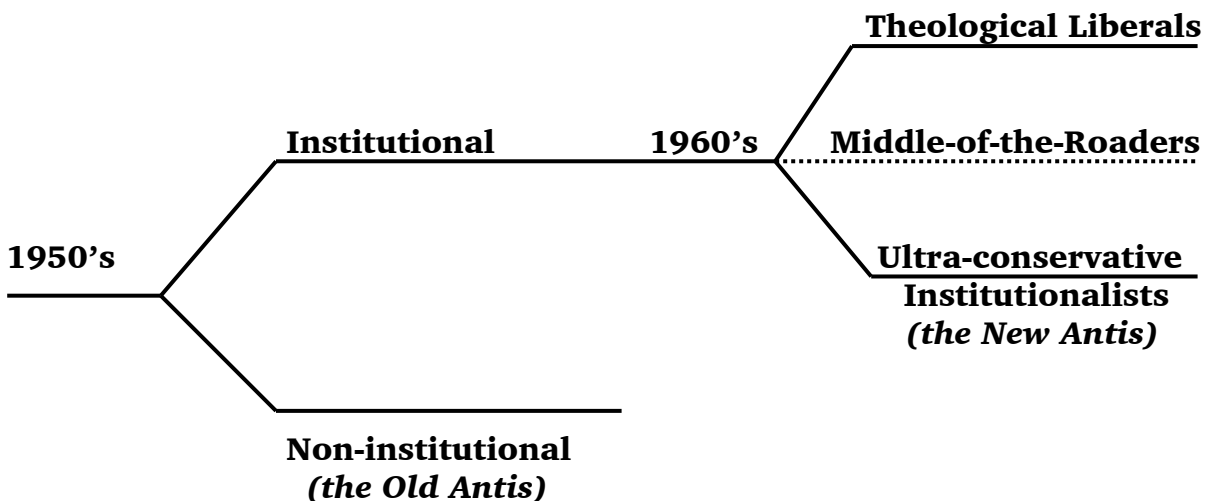
B. Several issues slowly began to erode the euphoria and optimism of the institutional mainstream in the early sixties:

1. The social activism of the 1960s which attacked the “establishment” spilled over into mainstream churches. Leaders were criticized by what historian Robert Hooper calls a “left-leaning insurgency” for their focus on maintaining the status quo rather than caring for the homeless, drug addicts, prostitutes and other of society’s “untouchables.” They also attacked racial prejudice among the predominantly white, middle-class “denomination” and failure to address what they saw as an unjust war being waged by the government.
2. The doors that had been cracked wide enough to allow institutional and social

gospel practices were now being thrust open by theologically liberal influences. The very schools that wormed their way into church budgets, the colleges and universities that institutional brethren felt were so necessary, became a pipeline of liberal theology into the mainstream churches.

3. A general call for a more ecumenical spirit was trumpeted by two men whose names are spoken of in the same breath: Carl Ketcherside and Leroy Garrett. They emphasized a broader concept of grace that allowed tolerance for those of different “traditions”; i.e., fellowship with the denominations. In their view, the restoration spirit of Campbell had been lost. Wherein Campbell had sought unity among believers by abandoning creeds and doctrines of men, Garrett and Ketcherside felt that Churches of Christ had abandoned any notion of unifying with others and were content in their sectarian aloofness. Ketcherside is famous for his gospel/doctrine distinction in which he identified certain core elements as “gospel” and all other covenant aspects as “doctrine.” He contended that as long as the core gospel elements were agreed upon, fellowship should be maintained.

C. Thus the institutional mainstream began to flow in three different channels during the 1960s as depicted in the following chart:



2. An Identity Crisis Arises

A. *A Period of Inertia.* In Richard Hughes' analysis, the late 1960s found the mainstream institutional churches in the midst of an identity crisis. The progressives wanted more modernism; the ultra-conservatives were suspicious and combative; and the middle-of-the-roaders just wanted everyone to quit fighting.

1. Hughes notes: “By the close of the 1960s, it had become apparent to those who had eyes to see how thoroughly the ‘nondenominational’ Churches of Christ had become a denomination, standing in near-lockstep formation with the conserva-

tive interests of the larger culture ... increased acculturation coupled with doubts regarding the tradition's validity led many to abandon evangelistic activity. Churches of Christ thus entered the 1970s experiencing minimal growth and anxiety over their institutional identity" (p. 351).

2. Flavil Yeakley, a researcher of church-growth trends, made some dire predictions in the 1970s. Robert Hooper observed:

"Of special importance are the two directions churches of Christ are moving. One will stunt growth; the other will leave churches with little substance of life. Said Yeakley, 'The declining growth rate in the church of Christ over the past 15 years has been caused, at least in part, by a trend in the opposite direction – a trend to become conservative in matters of opinion and liberal in matters of faith.' Both extremes will eventually destroy the church. The conservatives 'make their customs into a law in which they bind all others in the church.' On the other hand, the liberals 'treat the word of God as though it had no more authority than the word of man.' Even the large mainstream of churches of Christ is turning to a more devotional literature" (p. 303).

3. Institutional churches were suffering a predictable crisis. Society had dramatically changed from its post-WW2 spirituality to a more cynical, free-spirited, me-centered outlook that wanted little to do with traditional forms of religion.
 - a. But locked into at least a verbal commitment to the authority of the New Testament, there was only so much change that the institutional churches could implement in order to appeal to the multitudes. Something was going to have to give if the mainstream churches were going to recover the numerical growth they had previously enjoyed.
 - b. But rather than remaining firmly committed to the principles of divine truth and letting "the chips fall where they may" in terms of popularity, institutional churches began a gradual transformation, the results of which can be seen today.

- B. *The Crossroads/Boston Movement*. The most significant reactionary offshoot of this mainstream identity crisis was the formation of the Crossroads/Boston discipling movement in the mid-1970s. We should note a common ambition behind this movement and the missionary society of the 1800s and the sponsoring church of the 1900s: *In each case, brethren were convinced that the whole world could be converted if the gospel was broadcast enough*. On the surface this appears to be the most noble of enterprises, and those who criticize it run the risk of sounding anti-evangelistic. But the euphoria of "convert the world" drowned out all desire to examine the propriety of how things were being done. The Boston Movement (now the International Churches of Christ), a quasi-Catholic structure, came from a mindset apathetic to Bible authority.

C. *The New Hermeneutic*. From the mid-1980s to the present, the mainstream churches have been plagued by a call for a “new hermeneutic.” The cultural pressures which have come to bear upon the institutional mainstream through the past five decades have consistently met with opposition. That opposition is how churches of Christ have traditionally evaluated the authority of the Scriptures, even if not always consistently applied. But this constant pressure, coupled with the theological liberalism mentioned earlier, combined over time to create such stress that the call gradually began to be heard for a new way to understand the Scriptures. What began as a timid whisper has grown into a belligerent demand: the progressives (or ultra-liberals) are vociferously lobbying for a “new hermeneutic” which would permit their unscriptural practices.

1. Institutional brethren who are trying to stem the progressive tide, such as Dave Miller (*Piloting the Strait*) and F. LaGard Smith (*The Cultural Church*), have tied the call for a new hermeneutic with the larger liberal agenda in America.
 - a. So much of this agenda is based on what is *felt* rather than what is concluded by *reason*. Of course, this opens the door to believing and practicing whatever one wishes regardless of the facts to the contrary. It is the ultimate form of self-worship.
 - b. Dave Miller states: “The ‘new hermeneutic’ is rooted in subjectivity and relativism in its approach to the Scriptures. It seeks to give man more say in his religious pursuits, while attributing such subjective inclination to the Holy Spirit” (p. 117).
2. Proponents of the “new hermeneutic” attack the “old hermeneutic” (Biblical authority derived from express statements, substantive apostolic examples and necessary implications) as nothing more than human philosophy that has its roots in the English Enlightenment.
 - a. The rejection of rationalism allows these progressives to look at the Bible in such a way that allows them to ignore plain statements that lead to logical conclusions. The call for a “new hermeneutic” is simply a call for no limits, no stifling doctrines, no view of the Scriptures that is objective enough to condemn desired practices.
 - b. It is indicative of the degree to which the subjective reasoning of our culture has infiltrated groups who compromised on the meaning of Scripture when the subject was supporting institutions.
3. LaGard Smith summarizes: “It is not the rational approach of the ‘old hermeneutic’ that we should fear, but rather the kind of intuitive self-will by which all things – including God’s revelation – are judged ... Therein lies the disguised idol-

atry of any 'new hermeneutic' which allows us to replace the authority of Scriptures with our own intuitive idea about what is right and wrong for the church at the end of the twentieth century" (*The Cultural Church*, p. 128).

3. Renewed Emphasis upon the Holy Spirit

A. The growing push for intuitive understanding of one's relationship with God inevitably leads to unbalanced emphasis on the Holy Spirit. In this way one equates his own inner yearnings with the urgings of the Spirit, and thus his own desires are validated.

1. Dave Miller warns: "Both of these streams of thought – Calvinism and Pentecostalism – are exerting a considerable influence upon churches of Christ today. The heavy emphasis in the past upon knowing the Bible and relying upon the objective nature of Scripture has insulated us from the subjective, irrational tendencies of pentecostalism. But as more and more of our younger men have exposed themselves to Calvinistic theology (e.g., Charles Swindoll) and pentecostal practice (e.g., Willow Creek in Chicago), churches of Christ have become victimized targets of spiritual contamination. A rash of books, seminars, and sermons have been unleashed upon the brotherhood that promote pentecostal propaganda" (*Piloting the Strait*, p. 372).

2. Miller offers numerous quotes from church bulletins which reflect the pentecostal "language of Ashdod" among mainstream churches. Phrases like "if the Spirit urges you to join someone who is responding," "be open to the Holy Spirit's guidance in your life," "if we follow through on the leading of God's spirit within our hearts," etc. are a clear indicator of a change of perspective on the role and work of the Holy Spirit.

B. A significant element in the trend toward a subjective connection with the Holy Spirit is preoccupation with contemporary worship styles. The following quasi-charismatic practices have become commonplace among many institutional churches:

1. Entertainment: Instrumental music, praise teams, choirs and soloists, hired worship leaders, drama productions and other "entertainment" activities have proliferated. The emphasis, obviously, is away from reasoned study and toward emotional sensations.

2. Raised hands: As these performances unfold, it is more and more common to see the audience closing their eyes and raising their hands as if to "commune" with the Spirit during worship. Someone may respond, "What's wrong with that? Paul directs men to '*pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands*'" (1 Tim 2:8). This is one of several postures and gestures mentioned in the Scriptures in conjunction with prayer. All depict holiness, purity and reverence as one approaches God. This is

not the nature of pentecostal raising of the hands, which is nothing more than emotional euphoria.

3. Applause: To show approval of the entertainment offered, applause now permeates many gatherings. The reverent “Amen,” a word of agreement with and encouragement of what has been said (1 Cor 14:16), has been replaced with a cultural practice found from football games to political speeches to Broadway plays.
 4. Testimonials: As the drift away from a sound examination of the Scriptures continues, the vacuum is increasingly filled by stories and anecdotes designed to titillate and stir the emotions. This, of course, becomes a self-sustaining cycle before long. The lack of textual preaching breeds ignorance; ignorance allows for unscriptural beliefs and practices; the beliefs and practices are substantiated by more stories and subjective testimonials. One’s experiences become the basis of belief, rather than the other way around.
- C. One would think that men and women would have more respect – yea, even *fear!* – of abusing the Spirit of God in such a self-serving way. But, obviously, they don’t interpret their behavior as such. Could this possibly be a manifestation of the principle Paul mentions in 2 Th 2:11-12? *“And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”*

Conclusion: If we lose our interest in the pure preaching of the gospel, if we become intellectually dull, if we want a preacher who has a better sense of humor than a sense of hermeneutics, if we want to be comforted and entertained instead of confronted and exhorted, *God may give us what we wish for*. I firmly believe that the ambitions and cravings of the institutional mindset have been gratified. They wanted to be more mainstream; they wanted equal respectability among the denominations. And that is exactly what has happened. One would be hard-pressed to tell the difference between the two.