

Modern History of Churches of Christ

Lesson 4: The Non-institutional Churches: 1960-Present

1. The Pains of Separation: The 1960s-1970s

- A. It is an oversimplification to say that the division occurred over a specific issue, say, supporting an institution. Rather, it gradually became apparent that the two sides no longer looked at the Bible the same way.
1. Passages were being cited to defend certain positions that had no real bearing on the issue. Hermeneutical principles were being stretched to the breaking point to justify practices.
 2. Division ultimately comes when one loses confidence that the other is sincerely seeking to know the truth and do what is right. There was no consideration given to the conscience of the “antis”; no compromise or alternative was allowed. These churches were going to support their beloved institutions regardless, and those who didn’t agree could leave. And they did.
- B. These hardships may have been a blessing in disguise, however, as brethren found themselves in common cause, pulling together, and enjoying unity of spirit.
1. For the most part, the “antis” were not greatly challenged by strife and division over the next couple of decades. Their energies were directed toward establishing themselves and carving out an identity apart from their former ties.
 2. It gradually became apparent that the breach was permanent, that there would be no broad-scale reconciliation. Thus, “... the noninstitutional churches of Christ in the 1960s and 1970s displayed a strong camaraderie as they went about the task of building new churches. They enjoyed two decades of uncommon unity and good will” (Harrell, p. 175).
- C. Not all the fallout from the split was positive, however. When a person or group undergoes the kind of traumatic experience as did the noninstitutional brethren, it is only natural that the experience colors one’s outlook for a very long time. The outward manifestations of peace and camaraderie concealed latent flaws that weakened the noninstitutional churches.
1. For years, Bible study had one main objective: to clarify and reinforce the issues which had brought division. Articles in magazines rehashed the arguments over and over again. Lesson books were published exploring the issues or examining passages only from the standpoint of the controversy that had occurred.

2. Such issue-oriented Bible study, over time, produces general Biblical illiteracy. Brethren learn to answer certain arguments or use passages in a proof-text fashion, but a steady diet of this kind of study eventually undermines a thorough, comprehensive grasp of the Scriptures. Too, such a mindset encourages the manipulation of passages to suit one's argument.
3. Many noninstitutional brethren became guilty of dwelling on the issues to the point of paralysis. Rather than put the controversies and injuries behind and carry on with the present, many sank into unhealthy malaise.
4. A further problem was that churches came to define themselves on the basis of what they were *against* or what they *didn't do* rather than positive accomplishments. A "sound" church came to mean one that didn't support institutions or a sponsoring church arrangement, regardless of its possible "unsoundness" in other areas. This constitutes a sectarian outlook where "we" comes to mean all of us who do not support orphan homes or the "Herald of Truth."
5. There was relatively little effort made in foreign evangelism among noninstitutional churches and preachers during the '60s and '70s. While this may partially have been due to financial deficiency and a focus on rebuilding congregations, some of it undoubtedly was attributable to psychological fallout from division.
6. Another negative effect of such extreme controversies is the exaltation of individuals. Brethren are drawn to their "heroes" or "champions" who have the knowledge and/or courage to stand up and fight for their cause. While some people genuinely studied through the issues and came to their own informed conclusion, many others simply followed their favorite preacher, esteemed elder or eloquent editor.
7. Such fellowship-splitting controversies create a "ripple effect" of related problems that can be felt long after the pebble has hit the water. Noninstitutional brethren have often failed to notice the lingering, detrimental effects of the division. This has been costly, for it is not until a problem is diagnosed that it can be cured.

2. The Emergence of Intra-Fellowship Strife

A. Ed Harrell observes:

"By the 1980s much had changed in noninstitutional churches of Christ that rendered the group ripe for internal bickering and controversy. Those who had opposed institutionalism had lived with an illusion of unity for two decades, even though they disagreed with one another about many significant doctrinal issues. So long as they kept all of their guns trained on the dangers of institutionalism, other differences rarely became targets. Once the institutional division had become a relic of history, as it had by the 1980s, and a new post-division generation filled

the churches, the fighting tradition reappeared, intent on purifying the ranks of the noninstitutional churches of Christ” (p. 352-353).

B. Some of the disruptive issues among noninstitutional brethren include:

1. *Neo-Calvinism*. This label was attached to some tendencies in the 1970s-1980s to broaden the bounds of fellowship to include devout people from among the denominations. This roughly paralleled the Ketcherside-Garrett movement among the institutional brethren mentioned previously. In this controversy arguments were advanced which sought to sustain a level of fellowship on the broader grounds of the deity and atoning sacrifice of Christ and to downplay other doctrinal distinctions as insignificant.
2. *Elders and Located Preachers*. In the late 1970s-early 1980s a controversy arose mainly at the instigation of Charles Holt wherein the authority of elders was challenged along with the practice of “located preachers.” This seemed to be a reaction against heavy-handed elders or those who fancied themselves as nothing more than ivory-tower decision makers. The anti-elder advocates insisted that “elders” in the NT were nothing more than older members with no special “office” or authority.
3. *The Deity of Christ*. One of the most frivolous arguments of the recent past, in my opinion, has centered upon the deity/humanity of Christ. One side claims he was only a man and divested himself of all power and privilege of deity while upon the earth. The other argues that He retained His deity in all respects and acted from His own resources. While these questions are certainly worthy of study and meditation, they are hardly worth rancorous debates and inflated pontifications as if the nature of the Son of God can be documented in three easy steps.
4. *The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit*. Another issue that occasionally thrusts itself to the fore is the nature of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling. Is it a personal, literal residence of the Spirit within the heart and mind of the believer? Or does the Spirit indwell representatively through the influence of His word? Apart from a conclusion that may allow for direct guidance of the believer via indwelling, this question provokes intriguing discussions and spirited disagreements that hardly justify branding one’s opponent a false teacher and worthy of disfellowship.
5. *False Teachers*. Another smoldering fire that has recently been sparked afresh is a disagreement on what constitutes a false teacher.
 - a. Militant brethren strenuously assert that anyone who teaches wrongly, no matter the intent, stands guilty as a false teacher and deserves public censure. Others are more tolerant, noting that various references to false teachers in the

NT carry a qualitative element of unscrupulous motive. While they would not countenance error and let it go uncorrected, they are reluctant to denounce those who may simply be immature, careless or possibly even inept in a particular matter.

- b. While this may seem to be another frivolous fuss, the practical effects are being felt across the brotherhood. There is a growing climate of suspicion and an increasing tendency toward character assassination of preachers thought to be “soft on sin.”
 - c. The danger in this type of subjective outlook is the creation of a sectarian mindset in which faithfulness is defined by those who agree with “us.” Over time a rigid orthodoxy is formed, in defense of which some have even issued doctrinal “questionnaires” (de facto creeds) upon which preachers have been asked to verify or disavow their agreement. Thus, like Campbell, some brethren are blindly repeating the very errors they condemn in others.
6. *Sunday Evening Observance of the Lord’s Supper.* This is a subject that recurs periodically and causes trouble due to the congregational nature of the practice.
- a. Some brethren conscientiously feel that the Lord’s supper is the central purpose of the assembly on Sunday. That this is the case more so on Sunday morning than Sunday evening is evident by the percentage of brethren who partake of it on those respective occasions. These brethren feel that the purpose of the assembly on Sunday evening is not for the congregation to partake but for the exclusive few that were hindered from attending in the morning.
 - b. Those on the other side of the controversy insist that it is still the first day of the week, and it would not be right to *refuse* another Christian the opportunity to partake due to the fact that it is still the authorized day of observance. Thus one side emphasizes the purpose of the assembly; the other side emphasizes the day of the observance.
 - c. This can be a sticky issue for it involves congregational *practice*, not merely a conceptual understanding as in the case of the deity of Christ. When the congregation is engaged in something a member conscientiously opposes, then it can be difficult to resolve the issue satisfactorily.
7. *Divorce and Remarriage.* Though God’s people are to be distinct, uniquely characterized by divine law rather than social convention, all too often this is not the case. As divorce rates in our culture have skyrocketed, Christians have been affected along with everyone else. Ruinously devastating as divorce is, and as stringent as the laws of God are on divorce with the right of remarriage, it is to be expected that this topic will perpetually generate much controversy.

- a. Obviously, the views of Homer Hailey have been central to the modern debate among noninstitutional brethren, for many have found it difficult to toss this esteemed scholar and beloved preacher upon the junk-pile of false teachers.
- b. A multitude of views abound: adultery is covenant-breaking; Christ's law on divorce and remarriage doesn't apply to those not yet Christians; baptism cleanses one of all prior adulterous marriages; the divorce decree must expressly state the cause of adultery; the innocent one is without recourse if the guilty party files first; the innocent party must take back a penitent adulterer; "mental divorce" (i.e., putting one away in intent after a civil divorce has been granted for reasons other than adultery); the adulterer can remarry; no grounds for remarriage at all, etc., etc., *ad nauseam*.
- c. Given the utterly secular orientation of human jurisprudence, and considering man's penchant for getting himself into the most inextricable and complex messes imaginable, there is literally no end of the permutations that can arise over divorce and remarriage.

C. Avoiding unnecessary rancor and division.

1. The "brotherhood" has periodically been troubled by major disagreements which have culminated in schism. These issues don't happen over night. They ebb and flow, rise and subside, until brethren become finally aware that an impasse or a hardening of positions has taken place. Brethren gradually choose different agendas; they adopt certain objectives and become devoted to them. Meaningful discussion stops when one side is unwilling to examine their situation fully and objectively.
2. The trick is to be able to recognize these trends before they escalate into hardened factions. Elderships, preachers, teachers and members of local churches must keep studying the Scriptures and searching for fresh applications to their own circumstances. They must not naively keep looking back to past controversies and think that their soundness is secured because of things that happened 40 or 50 years ago. It is a new world, and Satan is constantly sowing fresh seeds of corruption. *"No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God"* (Lk 9:62).
3. We do need to look back at history, however, for the lessons that we can apply to current issues, for *"there is nothing new under the sun"* (Ecc 1:9). *"Is there anything of which it may be said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been in ancient times before us"* (9:10). Apostasy is like pop music love songs: it's the same themes and lyrics just jazzed up with some different tempos and instrumentation. But as those love songs continue to tug on the heartstrings of new generations, so the tunes of self-will and personal ambition strike the chords of apostasy.

3. Looking to the Future

A. Where are noninstitutional churches most vulnerable today?

1. *Ignorance of God's Word.* The only way that Satan can raise doctrinal issues that divide brethren is if there is a climate of ignorance which allows the false notion to thrive. On a whole, though not true in every case, churches of Christ have become largely ignorant of the Bible. Many have a vague idea of *what* they believe about certain issues, but they falter when pressed to give a coherent rationale for their views. Some have confused an answer to certain false teaching with genuine, comprehensive Bible knowledge. The truth is that brethren are often too busy, too distracted, too materialistic, too disinterested to study their Bibles in any depth. And this includes preachers who waste their days on trivialities and then have nothing to feed the brethren when it is time to preach. Soft, feel-good, psychobabble preaching rather than expository, insightful and substantive preaching may tickle the ears and provoke a few laughs, but it doesn't condition the soul and mind with the sublime truths of God. When enough Christians wallow in intellectual stupor, Satan can have a field day.
2. *Materialism.* Perhaps one of the most insidious ailments suffered by many Christians is materialistic ambition. It is insidious because people insist on measuring themselves and their station in life by other people. As long as others have more, as long as they have what we think we deserve, then we will keep our nose to the grindstone to get even. The signs of discontentment, of insatiable wants, of preoccupation with possessions abound, yet we are often oblivious to them. Our world has become sensory: sights, sounds, entertainment, recreation, fun and leisure dominate our thinking. Meditation, prayer, study and worship are given some attention, but they are often far outweighed by this-world interests.
3. *Lack of leadership.* A vacuum of good leadership has developed among many churches due to these and other factors. A common lamentation heard among brethren is that they need elders but lack qualified men. Further, as was true of Ephesus, sometimes elders *become* the problem instead of solving problems (Ac 20:30). When spiritually mature men are not fulfilling the role of vigilant shepherds, guarding the souls of men, then *no one tends to watch*. The energy and effectiveness of a church is often sapped by endless wrangling in business meetings; teaching programs lack direction and purpose; the congregation is undisciplined in many critical areas. Again, this leaves churches wide open to apostate influences which may come.
4. *Institutional dependence.* A lack of personal responsibility plagues our culture. No one wants to take responsibility for anything which obligates them or makes them accountable. Many Christians have come to see the local church as a service institution for their own benefit. They contribute very little to the overall

health and functioning of the group. The church often represents a comfortable place to worship, supportive friends, a safety net in times of need or crisis, an institutional “we” through which they evangelize (through the local preacher or others supported), care for the needy or otherwise discharge personal obligations. It has always been true that the few do the most, but this ratio can increase until the few can’t do it all anymore. We need to recover a sense of personal obligation to serve the Lord to the best of our abilities. The church is not an institution, *per se*, it is just each of us contributing our time and talents to the Lord’s work.

B. Is there any *good news*?

1. The good news does not lie in the human element of the church of Christ. It lies in the fact that it is *His* church, that we belong to a spiritual body/temple/family that is ruled over from heaven. Jesus is the ultimate Overseer. He makes sure that our human foibles don’t do irreversible damage. He overrides our foolishness and accomplishes His will often in spite of us rather than with our cooperation. Even when we have done the best we possibly can in a given situation, we fall short of divine standards.
2. God be thanked that our weaknesses and frailties will not be allowed to ruin the Lord’s church, and that they will not serve as the basis for our judgment. Praise God that we have redemption and remission of sins, for without His grace and mercy we would be nothing!
3. So what is our contribution? What is our aim? What are we to do? We must be ever studying, learning, growing and endeavoring to serve the Lord obediently and humbly. If we can possibly be of use to Him, pray for open doors and discerning eyes to recognize the opportunities. We can speak kindly to one another unto edification, support and encouragement. We can search for the lost and courageously hold out hope to them in a world that offers precious little of it.

C. ***Finally, we should never allow ourselves to become a source of weakness within the Lord’s church.*** Although history is littered with apostate congregations and churches that gradually dwindled to nothing, the church doesn’t *have* to weaken; it doesn’t *have* to eventually split. Whether or not it does is up to not him, her or them but **me**. It’s a legitimate question: **What would the local church be if everyone was like me?**

***“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable,
always abounding in the work of the Lord,
knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”***

[1 Corinthians 15:58]