

# **Wineskins Magazine**

## **The Church's Quest for Identity**

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## Is It an Identity Crisis?

*by Mike Cope*

*March – April, 1996*

Isn't it terrible that Churches of Christ are having an identity crisis? Well, no — at least according to Alasdair MacIntyre. He claims that a vibrant tradition is one in which people continue to argue about what its identity is.

Could he be right? Is it possible that at least some of our internecine struggles over the past decade about identity have been healthy?

I think so! Religious restoration movements (and there have been many!) begin with a hunger to search God's word, to seek God's favor, and to live as God's counter-culture. They initially have lots of discussion about what will be their "mark" as a movement.

But at some point the "movement" stops. Calcifies. Petrifies. People start assuming everyone knows what their identity is: they are the "true" New Testament Church. They, and only they, through right biblical interpretation have arrived. They have perfectly recreated the "steps of salvation," the "acts of worship," and the "New Testament organization."

This is what Leonard Allen and Richard Hughes called "the illusion of innocence." A generation arises that thinks their interpretation is flawless, that the return to "New Testament Christianity" is accomplished. They live with the illusion that they and they alone, have returned to the pure, innocent wells. At this point their circle of fellowship gets smaller and smaller.

One preacher taught me over and over that we couldn't fellowship anyone who differed from us on a single doctrinal point. That made sense to me (unbelievably, I now think) until our church's most revered traveling interpreter came to town and turned out to be a pacifist! I asked the preacher how we could fellowship this heretic, and he reassured me that "the war question" was a matter of opinion, not of doctrine. (Translation: he's one of our guys, so we cut him some slack!)

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If I had not been right in the middle of these discussions about identity over the past decade, I think I would have enjoyed watching from the sidelines. I would be in wide-eyed amazement as I heard:

- Christians way to the left of me theologically sounding like arch-conservatives as they kept paying homage to tradition;
- Some of the people most infected by secular influence taking the lead in attacking the rampant secularism in the church;
- People who have been "progressives" their whole lives now heralding the glory of the "middle road." (Don't we all think we're in the middle?)

Can all this discussion really be a healthy sign? Yes! A movement must eventually be left alone to die or it must be reborn. As long as God's Spirit is alive, renewal can break out anywhere and at any time!

As I listen to members of Churches of Christ these days I hear healthy signs:

- 1) I sense that we're talking much more about God—the one who has called us by his grace (rather than by our doctrinal functioning) and who has called us to holy living.
- 2) I sense that we're focused more on "Christ and him crucified." In 1986 I finished a sixteen-week series on the cross and had an elder ask when we were going to return to talking about the gospel. But now I hear more people who know that Jesus Christ, the Crucified One, is the core of the gospel.
- 3) I sense that we're discussing more freely the Holy Spirit. We're learning about and experiencing his guidance, his renewal, his conviction. (Our doctrine never got farther off course than when some claimed the Holy Spirit's work is limited to the work of Scripture.)
- 4) I sense that we're realizing that our primary job isn't to master Scripture but to be mastered by it. Scripture isn't primarily there for us to explore, rather, it explores us. It shakes our worldview, jars our easy presuppositions, challenges our idolatries, and demands our obedience.
- 5) I sense that we're admitting that God has many other faithful children than those in our small "brotherhood." We're returning to our wonderful roots: "Christians only, not the only Christians." We long more, pray more, and work more for unity.

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I don't mean to imply that we've finally arrived. Nor do I intend to say that this healthy renewal is coming from a new generation. (Quite the contrary: It is older Christians of courage and deep holiness who have led us!)

Nor would I bury my head in the sand and pretend that everyone likes what's been happening in Churches of Christ. Some will continue to deliver breast-beating jeremiads about how we've left "the old paths." But they're wrong! If anything, we're falling in love more fully with the true old paths.

The test of this new identity quest will be our growing openness to God. Are we growing in prayer? Are we more humble before him? Are we displaying his compassion? Are we letting him use us to build relationships with people who need to hear the gospel? Are we committed to holy living that resists the temptations of materialism and cheap success?

A funny thing has happened in my heart. I've known the faults of my spiritual heritage for a long time. (It's made up of people like me, so it's bound to fall very short of perfection! But I'm beginning to appreciate its strengths more than ever before. I'm realizing that as we continue to talk about our identity, our spiritual heritage has many strong resources to offer. May all the praise and glory of our feeble attempts go to Jesus Christ, who alone can renew us!

## Where is Jesus in all of This?

*by Rubel Shelly  
March – April, 1996*

*We must acknowledge that the Kingdom of God is a larger concern than any one congregation, denomination, or nondenomination.*

It is Monday morning as I write this, and the letter I am about to quote arrived in Friday's mail: "These past couple of years have been the most spiritually devastating to me. What is going on in our church buildings? I have asked myself time and time again and even asked [my older Christian friends], WHERE IS JESUS IN ALL THIS?"

The heartbreaking lament of this sister in Christ is focused on division in her church. Just what "issues" are involved in the two-year ordeal she describes? The matter of biblical authority and Christ's atonement are not at stake. Neither baptism nor the Lord's Supper is in question. The question is a congregation's divided sentiment toward its preacher!

Some believe he is a capable herald of the Good News who is interested in nurturing the church toward spiritual maturity. Some believe he has not been nurturing enough. And the majority simply want to worship the Lord, hear the Word of God, and go to heaven!

Most of the church division I have ever known about is like this. It involves no compromise of the gospel or moral failure. It is someone's obstinate opinion that this preacher is the "wrong man," no Stamps-Baxter or contemporary song will be used in Sunday assemblies, or a proposed ministry either will or will not be funded by the church. The pro-and-con discussion turns into a must-and-must-not contest of wills. The fight begins. The church divides. Christ is held up to ridicule before unbelievers — again.

I understand why Jesus tied the unity of his followers to the ability of outsiders to believe in him. *People have so much division (i.e., sex, race, economics, etc.) in their lives already that the last thing anyone needs is another realm of tension and conflict.* To be separate from evil is one thing; to be divided from my own brothers and sisters is something else again.

We do not need an organizational unity that eliminates distinctives of honest convictions. So let there be a variety of points of view over parachurch ministries to orphans, female participation-leadership in worship and ministry, and understanding of the Holy Spirit's ministry in the body.

We dare not give a leader, school, magazine, or other parachurch ministry a position of papal infallibility among us. Blind loyalty to any human leader takes away our ability to deal with Scripture honestly.

We must not take pride in ever-narrowing fellowship when God's concern is to bring all humankind to salvation. "Soundness" has to do with healthy and orthodox doctrine that brings

people to redemption in Christ—not a narrow and judgmental spirit about topics of secondary importance.

We must acknowledge that the Kingdom of God is a larger concern than any one congregation, denomination, or nondenomination. If God is not larger than the fellowship with which I commune on a given Lord's Day, he is too small to be worthy of worship.

We must pursue the healthy, biblical emphasis on unity that our rhetoric in the American Restoration Movement affirms without fear. While there can be no fellowship between belief and unbelief, there must be fellowship with other believers who see some issues of organization, polity, and doctrinal nuance differently.

The lady whose letter I quoted at the start of this article said she was “having extreme difficulty believing in ‘church.’” She dared to wonder whether there was a place whose “main focus is on a *relationship* and not *religion*.” What a brilliant — and *scriptural* — idea! Yet it is so novel that it scares some who might hear it today.

*Scary* as it may be to some, *challenging* as it may be to articulate, impossible as it may be to realize completely until Jesus returns — it is nevertheless the mandate of Scripture and the passionate commitment of a growing number of Christians.

Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples in the high priestly prayer of John 17. That makes its pursuit a doctrinal mandate. The concerns of a frustrated woman out of a Roman Catholic background whose search for Jesus had led her to the Church of Christ make it a practical necessity.

## **Book Review: Reviving the Ancient Faith – The Story of Churches of Christ in America**

*reviewed by Larry James, Director Central Dallas Ministries  
March – April, 1996*

***Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America,*  
by Richard T. Hughes  
(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. Be Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996)**

Richard T. Hughes, Distinguished Professor of Religion at Pepperdine University, crafts the story of Churches of Christ in America as a fully invested “insider.” Yet, he manages to develop the story of the history of his own folk with the fresh insight and precise analysis of a knowledgeable, yet unaffected historian. Hughes provides heirs of the Stone-Campbell movement within Churches of Christ the first fully developed, critical history of their heritage to be written by a fellow member.

Though Hughes follows the “majority, mainstream tradition of the movement” in unfolding his story, he attempts, using a methodology reminiscent of Howard Zinn (*A People’s History of the United States* and *Declarations of Independence*), to “tell the story of mainline Churches of Christ from the viewpoint of various dissenting streams of this tradition” (p. 1). In fact, Hughes’ book documents the almost continual conflict existing in the Restoration Movement from its inception down to the present day by providing a penetrating analysis of the competing ideas and visions that insured division. In each case, the minority viewpoint or opinion receives careful attention as he unfolds the story. As a result, readers come away with a better understanding of key factors in the movement’s progression (i.e., Barton W. Stone’s influence on Churches of Christ, the enduring impact of Alexander Campbell’s early thought as expressed during his days as editor of the *Christian Baptist*, the importance of premillennial theology to a fragmenting fellowship, the conflict over institutionalism, the viewpoints of the non-class and one-cup churches, the attitudes of African-American members of Churches of Christ concerning racism and segregation in the fellowship, the call for social engagement by younger members of Churches of Christ during the 1960s and 1970s, the tensions and insecurity prompted by a crisis of hermeneutics, and a brief historical overview of the role of women in the churches as it relates to current discussions). The strength of *Reviving the Ancient Faith* resides in Hughes’ ability to unpack and analyze the sometimes radical differences in the faith, opinion, and worldview of the various participants in his story.

Hughes believes that “four major themes have shaped the character” of Church of Christ tradition from its beginning in the early nineteenth century. Those recurrent themes include a commitment to the restoration of primitive Christianity, the evolution of the movement from a sect at the beginning into a denomination during the twentieth century, the importance of two “first-generation leaders” rather than just one, and the radical differences existing between Campbell and Stone regarding how they understood the Christian message and how they “oriented themselves to the world” (pp. 2-3). Hughes returns to these four abiding themes throughout his book.

Especially important to his thesis are the differences in outlook and the theology of Stone and Campbell. The story of Churches of Christ in America reduces itself at many crucial junctures to the demise of Barton W. Stone's *apocalyptic* worldview with its radical commitment to the triumph of the Kingdom of God over everything human and to the impact of Alexander Campbell's optimistic commitment to human progress and to the American experiment. Both Stone and Campbell worked hard to unite all believers in Christ, but from radically different perspectives. Stone, the pietist, believed the surest way to achieve this unity involved a return to apostolic holiness. Campbell, the rationalist, insisted that the New Testament provided a scientific blueprint for constructing the church of God on the American frontier. Stone's motivation flowed from the power of the presence of the Holy Spirit which he had experienced first hand during the extraordinary Cane Ridge revival of 1801. Campbell depended on the Enlightenment philosophy of John Locke, as well as the "Baconian" school of Scottish Common Sense Realism. Stone was pessimistic about American culture and about his age. Campbell maintained an optimism born of his postmillennial perspective leading him to champion the causes of science, technology, and American civilization. Thus, from the earliest days the movement devoted to uniting all believers headed off in two fundamentally different directions making division inevitable.

Still, by 1832, Campbell with his "*rational progressive primitivism*" and Stone with his "*apocalyptic primitivism*" found enough common ground in their shared emphasis on the restoration of primitive Christianity and the importance of the unity of all believers to formally unite (p. 112). As the Church of Christ moved from sect to denomination, members embraced the rational, sectarian view of the "early Campbell" while abandoning the anti-cultural, other-worldly sectarianism of Stone.

The division of thought existing in the Restoration Movement from the very beginning eventually resulted in two distinct denominational bodies. The Disciples of Christ "essentially are the flesh-and-blood embodiment of a denominational ideal that was present in the mind of Alexander Campbell from the beginning of his reform..." (p. 17). Churches of Christ "essentially are the flesh-and-blood embodiment of a sectarian ideal that was present not only in the mind of Alexander Campbell but perhaps even more fully in the mind of Barton W. Stone" (p. 17)

The complexity of the history Hughes attempts to write can be seen in his use of the terms "denomination" and "sect." As used in the book, a denomination is a church that understands itself to be only a part of the universal body of Christ and one that lives at relative peace with the dominant culture in which it exists. On the other hand, a sect is a religious organization that believes it is the entirety of the kingdom of God and that stands in judgment on other religious groups as well as the culture in which it exists. For Hughes, the story of the Church of Christ in America involves the strange and uneven co-mingling of the apocalypticism of Stone with the rationalism of the early Campbell. Then follows the story of the erosion of Stone's radical vision and the steady progress of the movement from a sect standing over against the values of the culture to a denomination embracing its culture, if not the truth of its denominationalism. Hughes concludes that by "the 1960s, the theological house that Churches of Christ had built for themselves in the nineteenth century had all but collapsed" (p. 352). This house rested on twin pillars: the primitive church of the apostolic age and the apocalyptic kingdom of God. By World

War I the apocalyptic pillar began to decay and the movement depended more and more on the defining ideal of primitive Christianity. But this second pillar could not hold the structure as the residents of the house altered their restoration ideals to accommodate the culture in which they found themselves.

For instance, in Chapter 13, “Fragmentation Left and Right,” Hughes links the reform efforts of the younger generation of the 1960s with the sectarian vision of Stone and Lipscomb. Standing against the status quo of American culture and pressing for change in both church and society, these young “rebels” within Churches of Christ actually more faithfully reflected the heritage of the pioneers of restoration thought than their parents who had accommodated themselves to their culture. Hughes concludes, “Therein lies the final irony of the tradition: the older generation characterized the younger generation as deviant, liberal, and subversive when in fact the younger generation upheld many of the sectarian ideals of the nineteenth century, especially the ideals that had descended from the Stone-Lipscomb tradition that their parents had rejected” (p. 308).

Hughes’ book presents readers a masterful narrative of this complex and revealing story. From “The Making of a Sect,” with his careful description of the influence and radicalizing of the thought of Campbell by his later disciples and his helpful presentation of Stone’s apocalyptic worldview, to “The Making of a Denomination,” with his brilliant analysis of the premillennial controversy, modernism, the acceptance of a conservative, American civil religion, and the upheaval and fragmentation of the movement brought on by the social foment of the 1960s and the emergence of a radical shift in hermeneutics, Hughes offers readers the first history of Churches of Christ with interpretive substance beyond the details of historical narrative.

As an heir of the Stone-Campbell tradition, reading *Reviving the Ancient Faith* moved me deeply by revealing several truths I needed to grasp. **First**, the history of my religious heritage reads like that of all other people. Sincere men and women attempted to pursue the vision they felt God had provided for their lives. Their story, like mine, is filled with victory, defeat, discouragement, division, sin, and progress. The beauty and the power of the history I claim as my own can be seen in the lives of individual disciples who devoted their lives to following their Lord to the best of their ability and understanding. **Second**, there is enough error and evil in my story to protect me from the arrogant notion that my people are God’s only people. Hughes’ narrative spotlights the inadequacies of both this hyper-rational, “blueprint” theology and its spokesmen so characteristic of much of the Church of Christ thought and preaching I grew up on. Further, the failure of Churches of Christ across the nation to stand for truth and justice against racial hatred and discrimination during the days of “Jim Crow” and the Civil Rights revolution shame me. **Third**, our current struggle with the issues of identity and hermeneutics make perfect sense in light of the events in our churches and the nation since World War I. A new generation in the lineage of Stone and Campbell ask hard, demanding, honest questions forced on them by their experience and their understanding of history. If our common heritage teaches us anything, it urges us to never stop asking and seeking.

The struggles of Barton W. Stone, the pessimist, and Alexander Campbell, the optimist, led these two pioneers and their followers in radically different directions. The influence of the conflicting worldviews of both live on among our people today. Hughes’ book challenges Church of Christ readers to come to grips with the history and the meaning of their religious experience. The



future well-being and survival of the “temple” in which we reside depends on our honest open struggle with the truth we discover.

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### **A True-False Quiz for Members of the Churches of Christ**

*The following statements are based on information drawn from Richard Hughes' new history of the Churches of Christ in America. Reviving the Ancient Faith. Select True or False for each statement, then refer [to page 38] to check your answers.*

- 1) Alexander Campbell's chief concern had to do with the establishment of Christ's millennial reign on earth. He regarded unity on the basis of restoration as a means to the goal of Christ's millennial reign. (T-F)
  - 2) It was Alexander Campbell's firm and unchanging conviction that there were Christians scattered throughout the various denominations. (T-F).
  - 3) David Lipscomb envisioned a literal kingdom ruled by Christ on the earth during the coming millennial reign. (T-F).
  - 4) David Lipscomb urged congregations to excommunicate those who tried to refuse church membership to Christians of other races. (T-F).
  - 5) The followers of Barton W. Stone believed that those who took seriously the values of Jesus would refuse either to vote or to fight, would free their slaves, and would turn their backs on wealth, power, and selfish advantage over other human beings. (T-F).
  - 6) Barton W. Stone and David Lipscomb were both pacifists. (T-F).
  - 7) Harding University was once regarded as a “hot-bed” of premillennial heresy. (T-F)
  - 8) The circulation of the 20th Century Christian dropped from 40,000 subscribers to roughly half that number immediately after the publication of the July 1968 issue dealing with “Christ and Race Relations.” (T-F)
  - 9) James A. Harding taught and lived out the belief that Christians should get by on as little as possible materially and give the surplus to the poor. He also rejected the ideal of churches hiring “located” preachers. (T-F)
  - 10) Alexander Campbell spent his later years speaking and writing in support of the goodness of the “common Christianity” of Protestant America versus the threat of control by the Catholic Church. (T-F)
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*The answers to the True-False Quiz for Members of the Churches of Christ [on page 11] are all true, according to information in Richard Hughes' new book, Reviving the Ancient Faith.*

## The Summer of Pat Boone

*by Steve Weathers*  
*March – April, 1996*

That summer, a channel marker floated into our cove. It had somehow left its moorings and, beguiled by tide, grounded on two pilings in a yellow shoal. Buddy and I swam out to the skeletal frame. We climbed aboard and used it for a diving platform all afternoon. But there was a hidden life. At dusk, a white warning beacon began throbbing. It went on until dawn when the timer completed its cycle and clicked off.

We wondered how long the marine battery would last with no attention from the Coast Guard. At supper we glanced out the window and then at each other as if to say, “Bet she don’t make it till morning.” Later, on the back porch, screened in by blackness and mosquito whine, we carried on a silent countdown, a deathbed vigil for the white pulse, waiting for a sign of weakening. But the beacon took all summer to die. And by then it didn’t matter.

That summer Buddy went wrong. In the beginning, when he’d first turned his crab money into secondhand musical equipment, he chorded the old Silvertone electric like Merle Travis. There was an orderliness in the style, so my parents like it—despite their convictions about instrumental music in worship. But one day Buddy gathered tweeters from pocket transistor radios and slit the speaker paper with a razor blade. Wordless, Buddy ducked into the shoulder strap and turned up the amplifier. He struck an open E7. The distorted chord sizzled on the concave black disks. When I looked up, Buddy’s triumphant face had fallen. My mother stood in the doorway with fear-tight lips.

We both knew why. Years before, Uncle Willis had abandoned the fish house for a dance band. The other musicians at first joked that he’d have to play off-stage until he aired well. But after sitting in with them for a few nights, he was hired. At home Willis had always played simple country-and-western ballads. But our uncle, Buddy said, picked up big-band swing effortlessly—like some secret infection erupting on the skin after years of dormancy.

Momma began receiving a stream of letters bearing New Jersey postmarks. With each, she assured herself that Pat Boone had made it big, too, yet had kept his faith. But then came a trickle of superficial postcards. And finally, on a cocktail napkin, a note that Willis was married. He enclosed a strip of photos made in an amusement park. The lady alongside him in the fake gondola was smoking. Momma, Buddy said, had cried over those pictures. She never learned the newlyweds’ address.

Daddy stopped by our bedroom that night. He’d stayed late at the fish house, updating the ledger books, and I knew he longed for bed. But he stayed on and on, talking about the price of red snapper. I knew why he had really come. He wanted to ask Buddy, “What’s this new thing your momma told me about?” He wanted to know, “What does this change mean?” Above all, he needed to be assured. “You’re not planning to jump ship like your uncle did, are you?” But after idling awhile and reminding us to say our prayers, my father left.

That summer Pat Boone spoke in tongues. Pat had always been Church of Christ, like us. He was our city set upon a California hill. Amid Hollywood corruption, the boy wore white buckskin loafers, unspotted by the world. He might be backed by an orchestra on his records, but each Sunday he returned to the a cappella singing of the primitive church. He might fall in love on film, but each night he returned home to Shirley and their four curly-headed girls. As proof of his fidelity, Momma continually invoked *April Love*. Pat had been tempted to kiss an actress atop the Ferris wheel, but when the fat operator shouted, "Hey, I charge extra for that!" and the rabble down below laughed, the boy had shrunk back. "I almost forgot where I was," he said to the embarrassed girl close by him. "He almost forgot where he was," Momma impressed upon us, "but he didn't."

It was vital that two boys being reared around a fish house not forget where they were. Oystermen and crabbers and mulletmen wore white rubber boots, but they sure weren't unspotted from the world. In months with an r, the sunburned oystermen dropped sacks of shellfish at my feet with a clatter like broken pottery. They winked: "Better not eat these, boy, Might make you nasty." In winter, when the female crabs burst out behind in a velvety cluster of orange eggs, the trappers held them up and laughed at me. "Don't ever go out with girls like these, boy!" And in summer as the boats unloaded mullet, as I tallied their weight on the dock, the netters shouted a warning: "Don't eat the red roe, boy. It'll put hair where you never had it." White footwear could be deceptive.

Each Sunday at church the rumors about Pat's defection accumulated. And each week my heart grew sicker, fainter. Behind all the impeccable manners and flawless teeth and unblemished loafers, it seems, there had been this other life: cocktail parties and slow dancing and maybe even dark gropings in some Malibu bedroom. Finally, disoriented and sinking spiritually for the third time and knowing his soul was at stake, Pat had panicked and reached out to the wrong church. And now he was speaking in tongues and singing hymns with a jazz combo. Those Sundays, when we limped home wounded and disheartened, my mother scoured the newspaper's TV supplement, desperately hoping for a summer rerun of *April Love*.

Gradually the evidence became too weighty to deny. Pat was gone. But his moral panic seemed an extenuating circumstance to me. One day I asked my father about it. He was sacking grouper heads to give to a withered Vietnamese woman who came by the fish house begging each Monday. Her husband had been killed in the war. Her son, the family's breadwinner, had shrimped for a while and sold some to us. But he'd gotten into trouble and was now serving a prison sentence at Raiford. My father, I suspected, didn't tell Momma that the heads he donated to the old woman often had the throats still intact — a choice filet in constant demand with local seafood restaurants. That day Daddy hurriedly dropped the slick slabs of meat into the woman's sack and looked at me darkly.

"If you'd been aboard the *Titanic* when she went down," Daddy asked with certainty, "you wouldn't have joined the orchestra in *Nearer My God to Thee*, would you?"

Satisfied by my silence, Daddy continued, "Son, I'd a lot rather Pat have become a skid row drunk than to have abandoned the New Testament pattern of worship."

Daddy pulled the sack's drawstrings and glanced at the tiny figure waiting respectfully in the parking lot. Her rice hat threw a column of shadow in which she stood, safe from Florida's noon heat. "Your Uncle Willis never once dreamed of using an instrument in church. So if he can quit his other foolishness, there's hope for him. But as for Pat..." Daddy's voice evaporated. He handed me the sack and nodded toward the beggar.

Out on the channel marker that afternoon, the platform swaying beneath us, I asked my brother about it. He seemed distracted. Buddy had swum to the marker with a radio in a plastic bag held high over the waves. He had hung the strap over a rusty spike and was not listening to a loud song with a lead guitar solo, raspy like a table saw.

The white light rested. I ran my hand over the beacon's bucket-sized globe, feeling the hot glass pull at my palm. I wondered how many craft had run aground since the marker went adrift. Maybe men had died as a result—men in stylish suits who went down singing a final hymn, wishing it were being performed a cappella but having no time to quibble with the conditions of their death.

Buddy smiled down at the calluses on his left fingertips. His playing was getting faster and faster lately. His riffs often left the familiar territory of the first three frets and rushed far up the neck to places he'd never gone. He looked at me with one eye closed against the slant sun.

"You don't get it, do you?" He studied me, a European examining an aboriginal. "Pat's dead. Just like Merle's dead. So you gotta make a choice: spend your life mournin' corpses, or get out and mix with the living."

Buddy snapped to full height and dived in. I watched his pale streak of flesh glide from the yellow sand into the dark spinach-green where the seaweed began. He surfaced and flung his bangs back off his forehead. He was letting his hair grow longer. He and Daddy had argued about it several times.

I crept out of the house that night and, in the luminous film awash between beacon and beach, swam out to the marker. The water was black and cold. About halfway, I began to feel afraid, thinking of ragged-toothed barracudas. But I prayed, and there was nothing. When I heard the waves wallowing in the planks of the marker, I rolled over and climbed up onto the platform. I lay down and waited for an answer.

That summer our family got word that Uncle Willis was dead. He'd been robbed and beaten to death in a public restroom. The telegram came to the office. My father read it and stood staring across the fish house at Momma. She was scooping shrimp into an ice chest and arguing about infant baptism with the Greek restaurateur who waited to pay. The fat man was laughing at the earnestness of the woman before him, pointing heavenward and shaking his head. Daddy told me to go finish filling the order and to tell my mother to come there. When I'd sprinkled ice over the shrimp and sealed his box and accepted the Greek's check, Daddy was guiding Momma out into the sunshine with his arm about her waist. Her body had wilted against his.

Daddy paid to have the body shipped back by train. Willis was placed in the family burial plot. The gondola woman never contacted us. In fact, we never learned her name. A group from our congregation who had grown up with Willis came out and sang unaccompanied hymns at the graveside. Momma had them inscribe the marker: “Blessed are they that die in the Lord.”

The Sunday after the funeral, my mother refused to let anyone relieve her of communion duties. She went early to church and squirted Welch’s from a Tupperware dispenser, just like always. I stood beside her, watching her concentration reflected in the burgundy circles of the fluted cups. Momma closed the burnished aluminum lid, easing it into place by its cruciform handle. Flat slabs of unleavened bread were then laid atop a plastic doily. She sealed the loaves in their tray, placing an identical one on top, face down. Momma now flung out a starched and stainless linen cloth that unfolded like stairsteps in space and gently settled onto the table. Turning to me and smiling, my mother said, “Well, that’s done,” and fainted.

For most of August, she didn’t eat. Each time I visited her room, she seemed to have melted more, the bed slowly absorbing her body. My mother took up a ritual of all day in bed and all night on the living room couch in front of the snowy TV screen. She spoke to no one but Buddy, and no one was allowed to overhear those talks. Often I came into her room with a crayoned get-well card or my own version of lemonade and found them locked in conflict. They both fell silent until I’d left. Outside the door, I could hear the whispered urgency resume. Buddy’s guitar had fallen silent, too. Only occasionally, and then with the power off, did we hear the tinny click of his pick on unamplified strings.

Daddy took on Momma’s duties at the fish house. He assigned my brother and me to weigh in and weigh out. And he got testy — especially with Buddy. The boy need only swing his bangs aside to better read the scales and my father descended on him. Aside from those rebukes, Daddy went about his tasks silently. There was only one person he really talked to. Every Monday he stood with the Vietnamese beggar in the parking lot. She nodded as he talked, and often reached up to pat his shoulder with her brittle brown hand.

One afternoon when I got off work, I went home and tugged my sun-stiff swimsuit down off the line. Buddy had left work earlier, and I knew I’d find him out on the channel marker. I pulled on the scratchy trunks and stopped by Momma’s room, but she was breathing deeply, exhaling slow sighs, and her eyes looked peaceful behind closed lids.

On the bay front, I spied our dinghy bobbing by the distant marker. It wasn’t like Buddy to take the boat, we always swam. But today, for some reason, he had rowed. I hand-visored my eyes. The next instant, I saw my brother stand erect on the diving platform. He lifted his Silvertone high overhead. The pose was like an encyclopedia picture I’d always liked: “Aztec priest offering to the gods.” Suddenly, Buddy pitched the guitar out into the water. Next went the squat black amp. He heaved it like a shot put, and it disappeared.

That night I memorized the ceiling tiles in my bedroom. Then I stared out the window for a while. The beacon’s rhythmic glow was dim and yellow and slower now. When I’d exhausted all my strategies for charming sleep, I finally got up. A gray rectangle of light came from the living

room. I stepped in and found my mother watching the *Tonight* show. Pat Boone sat in the guest seat. Johnny was asking a cynical question about his premarital purity.

Buddy sat by my mother, holding her hand. Their wet cheeks flashed in the TV twilight. Momma looked up and motioned me to her. I sat on the other side and took her free hand. At that moment, my father appeared in the doorway in his jockey shorts, studying us. He came and sat at his wife's feet, leaning back gently against her knees.

Carson wanted to know if Pat had kissed Shirley before they married — if he'd "taken her out for a test spin." Pat laughed diplomatically and said some choices are made solely on the basis of love.

## **Come Holy Spirit**

*by Randy Harris*  
*March – April, 1996*

I resonate with the response of the person who, after having the Trinity explained by use of the account of the baptism of Jesus, replied, “Honorable Father I understand and Honorable Son I understand, but Honorable Bird I do not understand.” I admit that I have grown up with a somewhat impoverished view of the Holy Spirit, a weakness in my theology I am attempting to correct and not a moment too soon!

There seems to be a new “Holy Spirit” movement afoot which is having considerable appeal to members of Churches of Christ. This new movement should not be confused with Pentecostalism or Neo-Pentecostalism (often called charismatic) since it differs in theology and expression from these earlier movements in significant ways. The acquaintance of members of Churches of Christ with this phenomenon comes largely through the ministry of Jack Deere and his book *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*.

Space will not permit me to lay out a comprehensive “pneumatology” (doctrine of the Holy Spirit) here. To be honest, space is the least of my problems. I don’t have the knowledge or ability! I will instead offer a few observations about this new movement and leave the reader to put them in their proper broader context.

### ***Three Movements***

Pentecostalism in its classic expression raises images of wildly emotional services lasting for hours in which the worshipers are whipped into a frenzy and eventually begin speaking in tongues (not to be understood as any known foreign language). This speaking in tongues is seen as a sign of spirituality (or at least spiritual maturity). One who speaks in tongues is seen as spiritually more advanced than one who does not. This presents profound and obvious theological problems. Paul makes it abundantly clear in First Corinthians 12-14 that love, not tongue speaking, is the expression of mature spirituality, and further, that trying to get everyone to attain the same gift is wrong-headed. (“If the whole body were an eye....”) There is the further problem that these gifts are a result of God’s graciousness to the church, not the result of human pursuit.

Although the charismatic movement of the 1960s and ‘70s is sometimes reviewed as warmed-over Pentecostalism, I am convinced there are important theological differences. The emphasis on the “second work of grace” of Pentecostalism has disappeared, where the tongue-speaking is viewed as virtually a second conversion experience. The charismatic movement appears to be more a quest for “spirit-filled worship” where spirit-filled may be expressed by both emotions and tongue-speaking.

I don’t believe the theological problems here are as severe but they are not absent. Paul’s injunction about how the charismatic expressions are to be prioritized are routinely ignored. (No



more than two or three and someone must interpret; the prophet's ability to control his or her own utterance; little emphasis on other gifts.) It is interesting that a number of charismatic churches still have emotive services but tongue-speaking is seldom practiced in the assembly.

The third movement, with which I am currently concerned, differs from the other two. It differs from Pentecostalism in that it has none of the above problems. It differs from the charismatic movement in that it is not driven by the quest for more emotive worship and tongue-speaking is not its primary experience; healing and revelation are.

I merely want to point out that the old theological arguments which can be raised against Pentecostalism, and all the arguments about the nature of tongue-speaking and how to verify it, which were raised against the charismatics, do *not* touch this new movement. (There can be little question about *how* one would verify whether certain kinds of healing take place!)

### *Legitimate Fears*

Nonetheless, there are some legitimate fears which one can raise about this new movement. Let me point out six:

1. Too much focus on physical healing can de-emphasize our spiritual ministry. As Jesus does his miracles in Mark, the most common reaction of the people is amazement. They follow Jesus everywhere so it is sometimes impossible for the apostles even to eat! But from Mark's point of view this is not faith. Faith is expressed by being willing to follow Jesus to the cross. Jesus is not just a wonder-worker. He is the dying Lord. Too much focus on physical healing may draw people to the church building without drawing them to the cross!
- Spiritual superiority. Jack Deere's book works very hard to avoid this problem (I chalk this up to the author's heart and integrity) but not entirely successfully. Since Churches of Christ have a long history of being the ones with the "right answers," I cringe at the notion of another subset of people who, once confused, now see what the rest can't. The subtitle of Deere's book is "A Former Dallas Seminary Professor Discovers that God Speaks and Heals Today." The condescension can hardly be missed.
- Closely related to number one, we may lose sight of what Paul says the fruit of the Spirit is—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The primary work of God is to transform our hearts, not to improve our circulation.

- The star syndrome. Are we preparing to create a new cast of church celebrities who will display their remarkable gifts of healing and revelations, and draw huge crowds to see their wonder-working and will this result in the glory of God?
- Disappointed expectations. Although Deere attempts to argue the point (unconvincingly, in my opinion) that the apostles and even Jesus couldn't always heal successfully, I wonder how people will react to our failures, especially in such cases as AIDS where we truly need some miraculous intervention. Beware lest we wreck more faith than we engender.
- Decentering of the Word. It is always possible that the phenomenon of revelation would cause us to lose our focus on **the revelation**. I recently learned about a claim of the Spirit revealing to a person something he should do. I was fascinated because Scripture had spoken specifically to this issue and gave contrary instruction. The person decided that the Spirit had special plans for him. This raises the concern often expressed that with the Word we have an objective standard, but all of this "experience stuff" is hopelessly subjective.

### ***On the Other Hand...***

A careful reader will note that none of the above criticisms are evidence enough to totally deny the practices. That is, it would be possible to have a ministry of healing and revelation that had *none* of the above problems! In other words, I have thrown up no stop sign but only a caution light. A warning against faddishness is always in order!

But is there a stop sign in Scripture? I can easily say I do not find all of Deere's handling of Scripture convincing. But, how about my own case? I cannot lay out my whole understanding of the crucial passages here, but I do want to say that the theological position I finally come to is the result of *conclusions drawn* from a variety of biblical witnesses and not the result of the clear and unambiguous teaching of a passage (I find the argument for cessation of spiritual gifts drawn from First Corinthians 13:10 unconvincing, but the passage definitely is *not* unambiguous.) There is always the possibility my conclusions are wrong.

This new movement challenges us to re-study and re-think the concept of the reign of God and what that might mean in our day. This challenge ought to be accepted. It is time to open our Bibles and reason together — not scream at each other or impugn each other's faith, motives, or spirituality. Does this ask too much?

I freely admit this movement has no appeal to me, just as the previous two do not. Some have observed that I do not have a charismatic bone in my body. But personal taste aside, I also believe I have a theological case to make about the peculiar function of the miraculous in the ministry of Jesus and the early church. (One's final conclusion as to the validity of any faith expression must be filtered through biblical theology.) I do not, however, wish to tell God what he may or may not do.

I am now left with the uneasy feeling that I have written an article that will please no one. (I can already see those cards and letters coming in!) I have neither jumped on board nor condemned as heresy this new expression. Integrity allows me neither option. Would it make sense to you if I said that as I have gotten older I am both more skeptical *and* more open? In the end my opinion won't matter anyway, for in the fullness of time God will be who God will be....

## Life at Sea on the Good Ship “Fellowship”

*by Max Lucado*  
*March – April, 1996*

Best I can figure the situation reads something like this.

God has enlisted us in his navy and placed us on his boat. The boat has one purpose — to safely carry us to the other shore.

This is no cruise ship; it’s a vessel of battle. We aren’t called to vacation; we are called to service. Each of us has a different task. Some are concerned with the drowning, snatching people from the water. Others are occupied with the enemy, manning the cannons of prayer and proclamation. Still others are devoting themselves to the crew — its feeding and its training.

We are different, but we are the same. We share a common memory. Each can tell of a personal encounter with the Captain. For each has received a personal call. He found us among the shanties of the seaport and invited us to follow Him. Our faith was born at the sight of His fondness, and so we followed.

And here we are. All on one boat. One Captain. One destination. Though the battle is fierce, the boat is safe, for our Captain is God. The ship will not sink. Of that we need not fear, there is no need for concern.

There is, however, concern regarding the disharmony of the crew. When we first boarded we thought the crew was made up of a few like us. But as we’ve wandered these decks we’ve encountered curious converts with curious appearances. Some wear uniforms we’ve never seen. Others speak with accents we’ve never heard. “Why do you look the way you do?” we ask them.

“Funny,” they reply, “we were about to ask the same of you.”

The variety of dress is not nearly as disturbing as the plethora of opinions. Some think once you’re on the boat, you can’t get off. Others say it’d be foolish to go overboard, but the choice is yours. Some believe you volunteer for service, others believe you were destined to be here before the ship was even built. Some feel a storm of great tribulation will strike before we dock, others say it won’t hit until we are safely ashore.

There are those who think the officers should wear robes, there are those who think there should be no officers at all, and there are those who think we are all officers and should all wear robes.

And then there is the weekly meeting at which the Captain is thanked and his ship’s log is read. All agree on the meeting’s importance, but few agree on its nature. Some want it loud, others quiet. Some want ritual, others spontaneity.

The result? Trouble on deck. Sometimes this boat can be an unsteady place. Fights have broken out. Sailors have refused to speak to other sailors. There have even been times when one group refused to acknowledge the presence of others on the ship.

“What do we do?” we’d like to ask the Captain. “What do we do with people with whom we disagree?”

The heart of his answer is found in the Captain’s final prayer. On the last night of his life, Jesus prayed a prayer that stands as a citadel for all Christians.

Father I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who will believe in me because of their teaching. Father, I pray that they can be one. As you are in me and I am in you, I pray that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me (John 17:20).

How precious are these words! Jesus, knowing the end is near, prays one final time for his followers. Jesus asked for their unity. He didn’t pray for their success, for their safety, or for their happiness. He prayed for their unity — that they love each other.

As he prayed for them, he also prayed for “those who will believe because of their teaching” (John 17:20). That means us! In his last prayer Jesus prayed that you and I be one!

Unity matters to God. If unity matters to God, then shouldn’t unity matter to us? If unity is a priority in heaven, then shouldn’t it be a priority on earth? Shouldn’t we, as Paul said, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3)?

That is not to say we won’t and don’t have differences. But if God can tolerate our differences and our mistakes, can’t we tolerate a few from each other? If God can overlook my errors, can’t I do the same with your errors? If God allows me, with my foibles and failures, to call him Father, shouldn’t I extend the same grace?

If God doesn’t demand perfection, should I?

“They are God’s servants,” Paul reminds, “not yours. They are responsible to him, not to you. Let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. And God is able to make them do as they should” (Romans 14:4).

There is a common deck on this boat on which we can all stand. We can “bunk” with whomever we choose—probably those who are like us — but when the Captain calls all hands on deck to battle the enemy, it’s time to leave opinions and personal preferences behind and stand together.

Jesus’ final prayer before his disciples was that we be one (John 17:21). Would he offer a prayer which couldn’t be answered? I don’t think so.

## Seeing God, Seeing Me

*by Charme Roberts  
March – April, 1996*

### ***Jerusalem, 8th Century BCE***

“My son, do not fix your eyes only on what you see. A man’s vision is not clear unless he sees the Lord God. You must see him, and you must see as he sees.”

Though I was accustomed to my father’s warnings, his words confused me. These days the voices all around Jerusalem were mirthful. Life was good. We held the Philistines at bay, and the crops all around Jerusalem were bountiful. Even Egypt envied our prosperity. Why was my father always so serious?

Uzziah had been king for decades. In the minds of the young, his reign rivaled the reign of King David himself. The Lord was with Uzziah; surely we could all see that. The domestic improvements alone spoke the truth. Ornate towers now stood at the Valley Gate and the Corner Gate. At the angle of the great city wall stood another finely crafted tower, this one with beautiful carvings of grapes and pomegranates. Uzziah had even built towers out in the desert, and all around there were new cisterns—water in the desert—surely a sign that God was with us.

The king’s army was the finest among the nations. Our teachers told us of times when the Philistines owned all the weaponry, when no one in Israel could even sharpen his own plow. All the smiths had been in Philistia. But now we laughed at those stories. Every Judean soldier had shields and spears and even helmets and coats of armor. Uzziah had seen to that. He had also made great war machines which could fling large stones and burning arrows. Enemies no longer laughed at the Judean army. Even the bloodthirsty Ammonites brought tribute to Uzziah. Still, my father spoke his words of warning.

My father was Amoz the songwriter, a musician in the king’s court. His compositions were soothing to the ear. However, his real gift was in the crafting of words. No melody was more beautiful than the message of his songs. He wrote of hope in the midst of hopelessness, flowers in the wasteland, and of the Holy One who brought such things about. But even though his songs gave him special favor in the royal house and though family and friends lauded his talents, Father always seemed a bit morose for he feared that no one really heard his message.

Growing up in these prosperous times had been a delight for a young boy. My school friends and I hurried through our morning lessons and our early afternoon chores so that we could spend the rest of the day roaming the streets, playing boyhood games and hoping for a glimpse at the lovely neighborhood girls who carried water pitchers to and from their houses. There was little to worry about.

But as I dallied in the streets of Jerusalem, my father’s teachings often haunted me. Friends teased me for my concern for the beggars at our gates. “Isaiah, your father’s complaining about

injustice to the poor is getting to you. Let the priests worry about the beggars. Lighten up now, or your beard will be as gray as Amoz's before you even grow one!" For a moment I pondered their words about the responsibility of the priests and thought of my father's devotion to providing for the poor, but in the carefree manner of youth, I laughed as we went on our way.

We often stopped by Eliab's father's produce business. Acaliah was a wealthy man who enjoyed the profits of Uzziah's emphasis on agriculture. The fields were full of farmers, and Acaliah's pockets were full of their money. I had learned that my father's suspicions about Acaliah's integrity were well founded. Once I had seen him tip the scales in his own favor as he measured a poor farmer's grain. The farmer was uneducated and didn't seem to notice that he had been paid much less than the agreed-upon price. When Acaliah caught me staring at him through the lattice dividing the weighing room from the rest of the store, his black eyes flashed a warning. His usually smooth tongue stammered something about the poor quality of the grain he had just received, implying that he had done the man a favor to pay him at all. Acaliah turned his back on me and counted his money. He placed it in a small box that had a figure of Baal on top of it. Eliab said the idol meant nothing to his father. "He just likes to feel like all the holes are plugged." I knew what my father thought about this.

The years passed, and Jerusalem continued to prosper. As I passed from boyhood to manhood, I felt more and more confused by the tension between what my father said and what my eyes could see. The vats brimmed with wine, and women of the city wore the finest dresses this side of the Nile. Yes, there were poor people, but what could I do about them? The idols I had seen from time to time concerned me, but I always felt that my father was unrealistic to expect that people wouldn't be a little superstitious about the gods of the Amorites. Besides, the Lord God was with us, and Uzziah's successful reign was witness to the fact.

Uzziah's reign had been almost flawless. Once there had been rumors about his contracting leprosy, and some had even said that he had profaned the temple in some way. But the royal court recorder had issued a proclamation which had quieted the rumors. The good king was sick, and his son Jotham would manage the affairs of state until the king was well. No one needed to worry about anything at all. As we stood in the street that day talking about the proclamation, Amoz, my father, stroked his gray beard and stared at the horizon looking like he knew more than he was willing to say.

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My father dressed in his mourning robes as he had done for the past several days. After 52 years on the throne, King Uzziah was dead. Amoz and the other musicians would again lead the procession of mourners and sing the songs of lament. This day Jerusalem would bury her king. The funeral procession took a detour enroute to the burial ground to a field nearby which was owned by the kings. Uzziah would sleep near his fathers, but not with them, for he died a leper. Father feared for the priests who had revealed the truth of the king's condition. The Lord had struck Uzziah some years ago when he tried to burn incense in the temple, a privilege reserved for the consecrated priests of Aaron. Many of the priests had been courageous enough to stand against Uzziah's sacrilege, but it had not gone well for them. Father said that for every God-

fearing priest there were two whose faithfulness wouldn't fill a libation cup. "Judah is full of thieves and murderers," he said, "and the priests love bribes more than righteousness."

Trying to deter my father from another sermon, I asked about Uzziah's achievements. "Father, isn't it true that Uzziah's successes were from the hand of the Lord? Don't we enjoy more wealth than ever and aren't our borders safer than they have been in years? Surely God is with his people!

"Yes, my son, God has given the king and all of us these good things, but how have we responded? Uzziah grew proud. I saw with my own eyes his change in demeanor. Many of our people respond to God's goodness with greed and idolatry. The Lord's patience may grow thin. We must humble ourselves."

He picked up his lyre and went to join the funeral procession. I followed him, taking my place among the mourners.

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Several weeks of ritual mourning followed the funeral of the king. I made frequent visits to the temple during that time. Though I had grown up in its shadow, the magnificence of the structure always awed me. Two bronze pillars outside the temple porch stood strong and sturdy, gleaming in the morning sun, almost boasting of the glory that was ours. The splendor of the bronze sea and the statues of the bulls it rested on was like nothing else in Jerusalem. The gold and silver on the walls and beams and the intricate carvings of cherubim and pomegranates were truly a feast for the eyes.

The priests went about their regular business of morning prayers and daily sacrifices. A few worshippers milled about in the courtyard, and I, still gazing at the beauty of the furnishings, wandered slowly into the outer temple court near the altar of burnt offering. This massive bronze structure about fifteen feet high and seven and a half feet wide symbolized for me the strength and stability of Judah.

Suddenly I felt the floor begin to shake. Without warning, smoke filled the room, and there was a deafening noise, louder than I thought I could bear. I struggled to keep my balance and to shield my ears from the roaring, relentless sound. I fought to see through the smoke, anxious to find my way out, yet helpless to know which direction to turn. A stifling, controlling presence filled the place. I could scarcely move, yet I continued to feel as if I would lose my balance at any moment. Where the other worshippers were, I had no idea. The noise grew louder and louder, but I was at last able to distinguish the sound: voices chanting over and over,

*Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty.  
The whole earth is full of his glory.*

The smoke never subsided, but somehow I was able to see the creatures as they repeated their chant. These frightening creatures, winged seraphs, flew around and around, high and low, commanding the air that I was trying to breathe. As suddenly as they had appeared, they



suddenly gathered in the rafters of the tall ceiling, hovering without perches, their voices stilled. Their great wings touched each other so that they formed a circle. Did the circle include me in whatever was going on or did it shut me out? I could not fix my mind on this question or any other, for even though the noise had stopped, I still felt a loss of equilibrium—I think my feet were still on the floor but I lost all sense of up and down. Time seemed to have no meaning.

I had lost all control but suddenly the light of stark realization pierced the darkness of my confusion. But the blessedness of light in darkness was not yet mine. I was stunned by what I saw. The vision forced me to my knees. *I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.*

The image shook me, and I strained to comprehend. I saw just his train, in essence only the lower half of his body. How could he be so large? Where was the rest of his body? Where were the temple furnishings? Dare I even wonder? I now understood Solomon's query so many years before. *"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"* Though these questions assaulted my mind, they were forced out by a more terrifying question—how could I live another moment in the presence of such power?

In a flash, all of the sinfulness of my heart was brought to my mind. All of the presumptuous notions I had about myself and our chosen people were forced into my awareness. All the apathy toward his holiness and insensitivity to the heart of his laws which lived in my heart seemed to be written all over me and the Holy One could read every letter. I felt as if my body might burst open for fear or shame or for the mere ugliness of myself. His presence was like a reflecting glass and my own image was despicable. Though I was afraid to even speak, I could not keep silent. So frantic to confess, I found myself screaming, *"Woe to me. I am ruined for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King the Lord Almighty."*

With this confession barely leaving my lips, one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal from the altar. He touched my lips with the burning coal and pronounced my sins atoned for and my guilt taken away. The dizzying effect of all I had seen about the King and about myself was matched by the incomprehensible forgiveness and healing I was granted. I had seen his glory—and its greatness could only scarcely be described in human words of seraphs and smoke and his great train! My sinfulness was so devastating in the light of his glory that I despised my own life. I knew that I neither had the power nor the desire to approach his holiness, and yet he had let me live!

Solomon's confession and my own were the same. When I pondered God's greatness I was forced to admit that he cannot be contained. I now knew my own smallness and abject poverty before him. And yet he had called to me! This new understanding would guide my life for the rest of my days.

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That day the Holy One gave me a fearful work. I must preach to his people a message of destruction. The cities we all love will lie in ruins and the only survivors will be those who are willing to see God as he is and return from their blind pride and deaf arrogance. My countrymen must learn to confess as I had. But none of us can merely speak the right words and hope to survive. Our lives must confess that God reigns—he must be seen in all of our affairs. The scales in our shops, the bracelets on our ankles, the plows in our fields must speak the glory of God. Only the foolish put their trust in chariots and horses and weapons of war or alliances with foreign kings. Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, the Redeemer will come to Zion to those who repent of their sins.

When the vision ebbed away, and as I felt my legs and feet supporting me again, I began my new life. But the newness was not just in beginning the task of preaching. Now I see the foolishness of humanity as we try to make our own way, shaping and reshaping our gods, making rules of the heart that bring sorrow and bloodshed to our streets. I see myself as a woefully inadequate creature halting between good and evil, easily tempted to trust myself for deliverance. My salvation is in seeing myself in this true light, in learning to confess who I am and who he is, and in awaiting his healing.

## Where Do You Stand? The Six Feet of a Novice Elder

*by Dan G. Blazer*  
*March – April, 1996*

“Where do you stand?” I anticipated, and was not disappointed, that once my name was placed before our congregation as a candidate to be an elder I would be asked where I stand on any number of issues. Psychiatrists are not accustomed to answering such questions. It’s not that we have no opinions or beliefs, it’s that we respond to questions with questions. For example, if a patient asks me where I stand regarding a certain approach in psychotherapy, I usually respond, “Why do you ask?”

As a novice elder, I can no longer turn questions asked of me back upon the persons who asked the question. I must be willing to “take a stand.” Where do I stand? After some reflection, I realized that I have at least six feet, two feet in my study of Scripture, two in my congregation, and two somewhere in relation to “the brotherhood.”

### *The Scriptures*

I have my first foot firmly planted in the Bible. This timeless revelation of God’s mighty works, especially sending his son to us in order that we might be saved, is truly a remarkable book. It breathes the very being of the otherwise incomprehensible God. Unlike any other book I know, the Bible speaks directly to my daily struggles as well as providing meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence.

On the other hand, I have a second foot planted outside of Scripture to assist me in understanding Scripture. This second stance may appear strange coming from a novice elder in a church of Christ. Surely the Scriptures should be totally comprehensible to me if I but sit and absorb them. No! I need all the help I can get.

Many years ago, when I first entered medicine, a wise professor told me that the perfect textbook is the patient. That is, everything I need to learn about diabetes can be learned by a thorough study of a patient with diabetes. I can listen to the patient’s symptoms, perform a physical examination, explore blood and view x-rays, trust the patient with the medication insulin, then observe the patient over time. No textbook can teach me about diabetes so perfectly as the study of a diabetic patient.

On the other hand, I would be a foolish doctor if I only spent time talking with and examining my patients. I read textbooks, I talk to my colleagues, I attend conferences, I gather every available piece of information related to my patient. None of this information completely explains what is happening with my diabetic patient, yet these bits and pieces of information keep me honest. I am, and always will be, a novice physician. That is why physicians “practice.” I never get it absolutely right, I have never read the perfect textbook. My practice improves, however, when I take advantage of the experiences of other persons, persons who have engaged in the practice of medicine for thousands of years.

Should I approach the Scriptures any differently? I think not. I am a novice Christian, not to mention a novice elder. I have practiced and will continue to practice at being the best Christian that I can be. Now I will practice at being the best elder I can be. I need all the help I can get.

Therefore, I will keep one foot planted in commentaries, historical works, and devotional writings, virtually whatever I can place my hands on which will assist me to become a better elder. I don't apologize for seeking these study aids. My need for assistance from books and from colleagues in performing my work as an elder is the inevitable consequence of being a fallible individual encountering the perfect and transcendent God through Scripture. It's all there (or at least all I need) in Scripture, but I can't get it out by myself.

### ***Congregation***

My third foot is planted among those persons in my congregation who are my closest friends. My closest friends have always been members of the Lord's church wherever I have worshipped. I need these friends. I enjoy these friends. I cannot imagine that, as an elder, my relationship with these friends will change. We will pray together, laugh together, study together, and play together. Naturally, my closest friends are persons who are most like me, persons who understand me and share my culture.

My fourth foot, however, is planted among those persons who are most different from me. I have been fortunate for many years to attend congregations that are diverse, "racially and ethnically mixed" to use the politically correct term. We have had among us the educated and less educated, persons brought up in the church and persons who are new Christians, persons with liberal and persons with conservative political views. I believe God wants me to keep this fourth foot firmly planted among those persons within our congregation who are most different from me. I must learn to appreciate and accept them so that I do not impose my own cultural, political, and economic standards upon them. I will show them we love across boundaries and they will return that love and acceptance. I often don't understand them, but I cannot justify changing them because they are different than me.

Paul encouraged me, I believe, to be "all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). Even so, it is somewhat difficult to be all things at once, I believe that I will best approach Paul's example by planting two feet at the extremities. If I can learn to be with those who appear most like me and among those who appear most unlike me, then filling in the gap should be less difficult.

What do I expect to learn? For one, I expect I will learn that I am unique, that no one is just like me, and I at times (perhaps frequently) will feel that I am an alien even among those who are my closest friends, my closest brothers and sisters in Christ. Elders do appear to be lonely persons at times. At the same time, I will learn that I have more in common than I first thought with those who appear so different. When I listen to those so different from me describe their aspirations, their fears, their beliefs and hopes, they do not seem that different from me, regardless of the color of their skin, the country from which they derived or the political party with which they affiliate. The church should be a melting pot and at times that melting pot may be becoming a boiling cauldron given the tensions which derive from the diversity of its members. Yet my

congregation is my home, my family on this earth. It's not a perfect family, not the family I would create if I could. Yet it is the family God has given me. It's good enough for me.

### ***Brotherhood***

I grew up in the Church of Christ. I love this "brotherhood of believers" (1 Peter 2:17). I can walk into any Church of Christ in the United States and find someone who knows someone I know. As I strike up a conversation, I remember that I am planting my fifth foot firmly in the brotherhood. I read the brotherhood papers, I attend lectureships, I gather with my brothers and sisters in Christ throughout North Carolina, and I have even been so bold as to write for brotherhood publications.

The brotherhood of believers, a brotherhood even more diverse than my own congregation, has much to teach me as a novice elder. I must learn what works in other congregations so that I might help apply those techniques to our congregation in Raleigh. I must learn what is straining other congregations, for I hope we can avoid these strains in our congregation. I must be informed of the controversies within the brotherhood (even though I would prefer to ignore them). Why? Those controversies will necessarily visit in Raleigh, for we are a transient congregation and members of the Lord's body are constantly moving to the Triangle from areas throughout the country. If I am ignorant of the concerns and tensions which they confront, then I can be of little value to them. I have much to learn from good friends throughout the brotherhood. For example, Carl Mitchell, Dean of the School of Religion at Harding University, has been a close friend for nearly 20 years. I never hesitate to call Carl if I have a question or concern, and Carl has not hesitated to call me when I could be of help to him. Relationships such as these are extremely important if I am to be an effective elder.

Even so, I must plant my sixth foot outside the brotherhood. Specifically, I cannot permit myself to be constantly looking over my shoulder at what is going on in the brotherhood. Frankly, the brotherhood can become most distracting. As the Brooks Avenue congregation in Raleigh is the largest congregation among the Churches of Christ in the Carolinas, there is no way we will not be talked about and written about. This is not a doctrinal but a sociological phenomena. "Big" attracts controversy. Yet my responsibility is primarily to the members of my congregation. If I listen too frequently to the brotherhood, I will not listen enough to the needs and motivations of the members of our congregation, not to mention the Scriptures.

How can I keep one foot out of the brotherhood? Paul provides me with an excellent example. I cannot read his letters without recognizing that he was constantly reflecting upon congregations, praising them at times, criticizing them at times, yet keeping his distance at all times even as he relied upon and loved the members of those congregations. This is no better illustrated than in Paul's approach to the church in Corinth, a church which he loved yet a church that caused him much pain and hardship. If Paul had looked over his shoulder too frequently at Corinth, his ministry would have been crippled. Rather, Paul states that "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ [not the church at Corinth] I appeal to you" (1 Corinthians 10:1). Paul goes on to say that Corinth had to work out its own problems with Christ. "I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived

by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:2-3).

As a novice elder, I have six feet. They will serve me well if I let my mind guide my feet. I strive to "have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). I learned in Anatomy 101 that the mind guides the feet. Where do I stand? I stand on these six feet, not always correctly, yet seeking Christ's mind to guide these feet in paths of righteousness.

## Reforming the Church of Christ in a Post-Modern Age

by Larry Bradshaw  
March – April, 1996

Five hundred years ago a Renaissance and Reformation in thinking broke out in reaction to a period of stifling conformist thought we called the Dark Ages. Some are arguing that the Third Millennium is ushering us into a Second Reformation. Scholars are writing of the post-modern period of history. By post-modern they mean a time of transition and change so profound that our beliefs, our values, and even our thinking patterns are being altered.

The religion editor of *Time*, Richard Ostling,<sup>1</sup> whose background is in the Reformed tradition, has attempted to peer into the crystal ball of the 21st century and describe what he thinks will happen to the church in the post-modern period which we are now entering.

The implications of his “vision” speak directly to the future of the American Restoration movement of which we are a part.

First, Ostling sees growth for Catholicism and other “ritual based” churches. The illiteracy of post-modern man will weaken an appeal such as ours which, since Locke, has been based on linear-print logic and scriptural evidence. Ostling says, “The post-literate era [will be] especially difficult for Protestantism, which depended so heavily upon rationalism and reading.” The use of biblical authority with proof-texting will be less and less effective in persuasion and evangelism when directed “to a world in which few bother to read.” Our failure to learn the language of graphics-based non-linear media may mean that our message will carry connotations of an old-time quaint group rooted and locked in an earlier era. As Carroll Osburn<sup>2</sup> suggested, we are in danger of becoming “the Amish of the 21st Century” as far as public perception is concerned.

Professor Richard Campbell<sup>3</sup> of the University of Michigan has identified seven characteristics of this post-modern age, which he says we have already entered. An understanding of those principles will provide us with insight into the challenges facing the church beyond the current decade.

### ***Principle One, Boundary Blurring***

Aristotelian categories expressed in print made it easy for modern man to see imaginary boundaries between ideas and between groups of people. However, a religion which tries to maintain those strict boundaries in the post-modern age will find that non-linear-based thinkers will have difficulty seeing rigid categories. Campbell cites the example of Oliver Stone’s “JFK,” a movie which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. He also points to Michael Jackson, the number one entertainer in the world, who blurs the boundaries of black and white, male and female, young and old. This boundary blurring is often offensive to older generations because it fails when tested against linear-truth-based standards, but younger generations are not offended since they have rejected those word-based categories to begin with. The “us-them” rigid

definitional approach to determining who is a Christian will make us appear narrow, bigoted, and confusing to post-modern man.

### ***Principle Two, Triumph Over Conformity***

Campbell says the emphasis on conformity brought on by the shift from highly individualistic rural dwellers who moved to the cities in the mid-20th century is disappearing with post-modern man. The hideous ethnic-cleansing movement of Eastern Europe is a reaction against the trend toward individualism and a breakup of monolithic states. The strident right-wing attack on the church is a parallel reaction against change, adaptation, and relevancy and a last-ditch attempt to enforce conformity.

### ***Principle Three, A Critique of Neutrality***

Following the scientific model of objectivity, the 20th-century church has stood aloof, appearing impotent and apathetic when faced with the great moral issues of the 20th century such as racism, poverty, and abortion. It has said, "We are neutral observers." The New Age movement shows us that post-modern man is turning to mysticism, myth, and meditation believing the scientific method insufficient to answer what philosophers call the First Order Questions. A church clinging to the scientific model of objectivity and neutrality will appear irrelevant when faced with the new epistemologies and the great moral debates of the next century.

### ***Principle Four, Questioning Authority***

The post-modern age is rejecting the old reliance on experts. Tabitha Soren of MTV is now on a par with Dan Rather as a political reporter. The neighbor down the street takes on the aura of an expert because he tunes in to Rush Limbaugh. A cardinal component of the popular media is satire directed at all authority. David Letterman and The Simpsons have set the tone. A church relying on clergy, academicians, authors, or editors will find it has less and less impact on a society taught to distrust "expert authority."

### ***Principle Five, The Limits of Individualism***

The "I am on my own" thinking of modern man is being replaced with a new emphasis on cooperation and group dynamics. Complex contemporary challenges require highly trained individuals developing a teamwork approach to problem solving. Our emphasis on personal salvation will need to be supplemented with messages clarifying how Christianity relates to diverse work groups, age groups, and economic groups. This will require individual church members to lay aside petty differences of interpretation on minor doctrinal issues in order to foster group cohesiveness.

### ***Principle Six, Growth of Self-Criticism***

Campbell says the modern age was characterized by a lack of self-reflexiveness. We were generally unwilling to examine critically our ideas and our movements. As a matter of fact, any criticism of our religious movement brought charges of "heresy." How dare we question the



status quo? But in the post-modern age, there will be considerably more emphasis on analysis and criticism. Any church which continues to forbid honest evaluation of methods and approaches may squelch the heresy but at the expense of valuable introspection.

### ***Principle Seven, The Limitation of Traditional Historical Methodologies***

Campbell says modern historians have concentrated on examining the views of a few leaders of movements. But post-modern man has developed forums and technologies which allow an exploration of the views of members of those movements. Sophisticated polling and interviewing techniques now enable us to explore the views of the members of congregations, not just the preachers and writers. Because our theology has often ignored the contributions of women, this new approach will revolutionize the church of the 21st century. For the first time the Great Silent Majority of the church can and will be heard.

What are the implications of Campbell's seven principles as they relate to the coming decades? These principles raise troubling questions: How can we maintain an adherence to truth when the society in which we live believes there is no such thing as truth? How can we communicate revelational principles to a culture saturated with situational thinking? How do we communicate a sense of hope and optimism to a world whose cynicism is trumpeted on its bumper stickers? Do we have the courage to change methods which we saw working in the early part of our lives, but which no longer are effective? Will we have the good sense to give up demanding that every member of the church in whatever age and in whatever culture see minor issues in exactly the same way as we do? Can we allow the Lord to determine the boundaries?

If we can grasp the exciting and terrifying changes facing us in the post-modern age, we have a chance to speak contemporary messages which provide answers to the yearnings of 21st century men and women.

What must be obvious is that the process of church reform will necessarily continue. Reformation is not a one-time event of the Renaissance. It is a continuing process enabling us to speak credibly to changing cultures and changing times.

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1 Richard Ostling, "Kingdoms to Come: Faith Will Survive, but What Shape Will Religions Take? A Look at 2092." *Time*, October 15, 1992, pp 61ff.

2 Carroll Osburn. Speech to Abilene Christian University faculty, January 5, 1992.

3 Richard Campbell, "And That's the Way It Was: The Decline of Modern Journalism in a Post-Modern World," paper delivered to The Old News, The New News and The First Amendment, a conference sponsored by the Seigenthaler Chair of First Amendment Studies, College of Mass Communication, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, February 26, 1993.

## AfterGlow: Impressing God

*by Phillip Morrison  
March – April, 1996*

We exchanged pleasantries once each week. Robert was a middle-aged postal clerk, determined to strictly enforce every rule in his thick book. I was a brash young preacher, dutifully mailing the 200 copies of the weekly church bulletin fresh from the hand-cranked mimeograph.

One of my youthful ambitions was to be a truly nondenominational Christian. I was comfortable with our Church of Christ label—after all, it was scriptural—but so were other designations. Armed with biblical precedent, I was determined to make a statement about our undenominational character. One week I would put “Church of Christ” in the return address space, another week “The Lord’s Church,” yet another week “Family of God.” No one seemed to notice—no one but Robert.

There came that fateful Thursday when Robert took the bundle from me, glanced at it, and asked, “What is the name of this church, anyway?” Completely ignoring the danger signal in his voice, I proceeded to enthusiastically describe the nature of Christianity. The more I talked, the more puzzled Robert looked. Then, with a slightly condescending smile, he said, “I don’t know what in the world you’re talking about, but if you want to continue mailing these bulletins at the non-profit bulk rate, you’d better decide what the name of this church is. And it had better be the same as the name on your permit.”

I surrendered on the spot. Right there in the lobby of the United States Post Office in Sumter, South Carolina, “Church of Christ” appeared in the proper place every week thereafter.

Though I capitulated to the demand of a postal clerk nearly four decades ago, I have struggled all these years to define and describe the church’s identity and character. Jesus thought enough of the church to purchase it with his blood and claim it as his own, but didn’t think it necessary to give it an official name.

Jesus had no time for quibbling about the exact wording of the name on the building or the bulletin. He was more concerned about how well his church lived out its mission and how it represented him.

In Matthew’s chapter 24 preview of the Judgment, Jesus wants to know whether we have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, ministered to the sick, comforted the afflicted, encouraged the prisoners. The very things we prize—orthodoxy in minute matters—are the things that do not impress him.

Is it possible that our desire to impress others with our soundness has become more important to us than winning His favor? God forbid.