

Wineskins Magazine

Tear Down the Walls

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The Chance to Embrace our Rhetoric

by Rubel Shelly
May – June, 1996

Churches of Christ have always talked a good game; our rhetoric is about Jesus, unity, and nondenominational faith. Our history has not honored the rhetoric; it is filled with issues, division, and sectarianism.

Alexander Campbell moved in a wide circle of denominational associations and used the platform that afforded him to call for the abolition of division among the people of God. We glance backward and honor his memory. When Max Lucado moves in similar wide circles today, a venomous magazine denounces him as a compromiser.

Jesse P. Sewell spoke at Abilene Christian College in 1923 to proclaim “freedom” as the glory and greatness of the plea for New Testament Christianity advanced by his brethren. His name is spoken with respect across the great state of Texas. Yet the echoing of Sewell’s statement at the 1996 Abilene lectures was heard as a call to arms by many who are still buzzing, preaching and threatening the university over it.

David Lipscomb occasionally preached among the Methodists and more frequently still among churches of his own fellowship that used instrumental music. He both advocated and defended such practices in the *Gospel Advocate*. People in my part of the United States still honor the memory of Lipscomb, but Foy E. Wallace, Jr. took control of the *Advocate* in 1930 and committed it to a right-wing agenda that repudiates Lipscomb’s legacy.

T. B. Larimore was popular on the evangelistic circuit, partly because of the duets he and his wife sang wherever he went to preach. People in Alabama still preserve his memory, home, and name with respect. A brotherhood paper informs us, however, that singing other than congregational is unauthorized in Scripture and sinful.

N. B. Hardeman preached in the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville to proclaim the nobility of attempting to be “Christians only” and simultaneously to repudiate the arrogance of claiming to be the only Christians. Hardeman is still called the “Prince of Preachers” by people who gather at the school bearing his name to denounce anyone who says the same thing today.

I can only speak for one, but I am through mouthing rhetoric that belies my actual practice.

Some of my closest friends are men who pastor churches whose history is known to the Church of Christ only because we have had hateful debates with earlier generations of their Baptist or Pentecostal predecessors. They are as embarrassed and apologetic over those debates as most of us are. I pray there will be no more of them and that we will, instead, learn to spend time together in prayer. I pray that the communities in which we live will stop looking for us to have our next fight with the Methodists or Christian Church and begin to expect us to work together to help our towns and cities be better places to live.

Churches of Christ don't have our theology or practice perfected. Neither will ever be perfect! Without abandoning the distinctive things we believe and do, we can still be in constructive dialogue with people from other backgrounds. We can affirm and benefit from enterprises such as Promise Keepers and Community Bible Study without having to make apologies to our own fellowship. We can embrace again the early history of our movement in having positive rather than negative relationships with the denominations around us.

As one Baptist preacher wrote me recently: "God is good at bringing folks together that religious systems have long separated." Want to guess where we met? We had met a week earlier when we both spoke at a conference organized by charismatics!

If people in the Church of Christ have anything worthwhile to contribute to the contemporary religious scene (and I think we do!), we must move outside the circles of our own buildings, schools, and brotherhood. Against the scare-tactic cry that people who do so are leaving our fellowship or trying to say there is no difference that matters among the beliefs of various groups, we must make clear what we are doing. We are simply trying to change our isolationist posture and negative-pugilistic image. We wish to be heard by others, and we try to earn the right to be heard by hearing them—for we have many things to learn. We are willing to worship, study, and pray with anyone who makes the same confession we do that Jesus Christ is Lord—believing that differences in our worship, organization, and the like are less important than our common affirmation that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

In this issue of *Wineskins*, we have chosen to hear from some outside our own walls. We have had other insiders write about their perspectives on the direction our movement needs to go in the future. We share these things not to provide final answers that our time and place in history is searching to find. We are only raising the questions for public discussion and hoping to make a contribution to answering them.

In the things published in this issue, I hear a call for us to embrace the rhetoric we have used for years and to put it into practice. It is high time, in other words, for us to walk our talk. It's a biblical idea whose time has come.

As more and more groups around us are moved by God to affirm the need to break down the walls of religious division, let's abandon the sectarianism of our own recent history and participate in the process.

Three Stages of Spiritual Life

by Mike Cope

May – June, 1996

Stage One of child/parent relationships: “*My parents can do no wrong.*” Ah, those were the days, weren’t they? The adoring eyes, the confident look, the trusting hand. I have a three year old, and what a joy to be in the “if the whole world thinks one thing and my daddy thinks another thing the whole world is wrong” stage! When my first son was at the same early stage, he asked me if Michael Jordan could jump as high as I can. “Why yes, he can,” I smiled, not bothering to add, “at least that high.”

Stage Two of child/parent relationships: “*My parents are so dumb.*” Did I mention that I also have a fourteen year old? This is the stage where we can see our parent’s faults as if they were projected on a jumbotron. The problem is that we parents can’t help it. Our parents were dumb. And so were their parents. We come form a long line of dumb parents.

Stage Three of child/parent relationships: “*My parents have both strengths and weaknesses, and I’m thankful for their love.*” This is the mature view that we parents of adolescents long for, hope for, pray for! (If it doesn’t really exist, please don’t tell us!)

Aren’t these the same three stages many of us have experienced as we’ve come to terms with our heritage in Churches of Christ?

For many years I blindly defended my religious heritage: it could do no wrong. It was the fully restored first century church (a scary thought, if you’ve read the New Testament!). I believed that we and we alone were God’s people. By my early twenties, I was speaking on radio and television to “defend us.” (I hope none of those tapes have survived in some dusty archive.) I published an article in *Contending for the Faith*. (I’m still in there, I understand.)

I’m so glad God wouldn’t let me remain in this stage of under-development. It’s childish. And yet all over I hear people who go ballistic any time our heritage is challenged and prodded. Are we that fragile? Are we really so afraid of rethinking something? Are we alone God’s people?

Then I flip-flopped into the second stage: my religious heritage could do no right. It was small-minded, prideful, and guilty of questionable biblical study methods. I understood those who thought they had to leave Churches of Christ in order to faithfully follow Jesus Christ.

I’m so glad God wouldn’t let me remain in this stage, either. He convicted me of my own self-absorbed, adolescent attitude in many ways. But he especially used a Tennessee minister I’d never met. A little pamphlet he’d written came across my desk in North Carolina, and I consumed it. Here was a man who knew our faults, yet didn’t hate us. He also knew our strengths and our healthy roots. He loved this heritage despite its short-comings.

I made a blind call to him, assuming I probably wouldn't be able to speak with him because of his busy schedule. But even though he'd never heard my name, Rubel Shelly answered. In our brief conversation, he said that he understood my frustrations but encouraged me to reexamine our **strengths**.

Very slowly since then, God has brought me to the third stage. I now can see our weaknesses without despising our heritage. I now understand that every religious group—no matter how wonderful it may look from the outside—has its failings. Until Jesus returns, no one will fully arrive! We are imperfect people whose reading and obeying of Scripture is imperfect. Future generations who may look back on my sermons and writings will find themselves asking, "How could he have said THAT?" just as I've wondered about men and women before me. We are all limited in our understanding.

Now I've also been able to see again the strengths of our heritage. For example:

- We have encouraged people to go back again and again to Scripture, believing that it is authoritative;

- We have focused on the gospel-proclaiming events of baptism and communion;

- We have called for Christians to be united, claiming to be "Christians only, but not the only Christians";

- We have taught the priesthood of all believers, exhorting all Christ-followers to minister in Jesus' name.

Which stage are you in? Are you childishly stuck in the first stage where you can't stand to hear anyone challenge us or mention the "c-word" (change)? Or are you caught in the adolescent stage where all you can see is how "dumb" we are?

Get over it! Then ask God to help you mature. Churches of Christ have a heritage that is a mixed bag (like all groups). But haven't people—maybe someone like YOU! – learned about our Lord in this heritage? Haven't some been immersed into him? Haven't some been encouraged to read Scripture? Haven't some been called to holy living?

May God himself teach us to love our brothers and sisters—living and dead—who share this heritage. And may he guide us to keep growing and to keep being transformed into the image of Jesus.

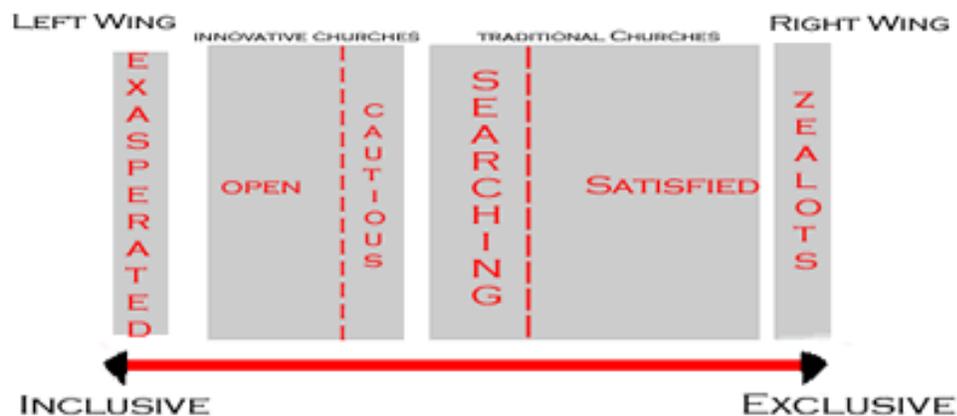
What is Happening to Us?

By Joe Beam

We all try to understand the dynamics causing increasing isolation between brethren and churches in our brotherhood. To help me make sense of it, I developed a model based on observations gleaned as I speak in about 45 church events nationwide each year.

Perhaps brethren skilled in research will develop a clearer and more accurate model. We need a clear picture and common vocabulary so that we can understand the dynamics of our current tensions. If we do that, we can better deal with them.

The Model



The model represents “mainline churches” and doesn’t include noncooperative churches (sometimes called “antis”) or churches not usually considered in our fellowship (such as instrumental Churches of Christ, Boston-related churches, and the like). It does contemplate churches that most people in the brotherhood consider in our fellowship—even if they don’t actively fellowship them.

Traditional churches generally follow the doctrines and practices crystallized in the Churches of Christ in the era of the 1930s to the 1950s.

Innovative churches feel close kinship with Traditional churches but do things Traditional churches question or reject—like using special singing groups or drama in worship.

Left Wing churches feel little connection with the brotherhood but haven’t yet introduced actions or doctrines that would completely sever them from the fellowship.

Right Wing churches not only follow the doctrines and practices crystallized in the era of the 1930s to 1950s but feel great compulsion to attack anyone who questions or differs from those doctrines or practices.

Each of these groups may be more accurately defined but the lack of space prohibits that.

CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE

The six categories of people within the churches explain more about what is happening to us. Exasperateds generally view our brotherhood as denominational and think the negatives of other denominations no worse than ours. Opens want to stay in fellowship with the Church of Christ but put greater emphasis on their own spiritual development than on the judgment of others in the fellowship. Cautious want new and exciting things and are excited about their own spiritual growth, but have enough fear of “innovations” to be uncomfortable and concerned. Searchers feel that changes have to take place to make the church vibrant but strongly fear making changes that may destroy the “identity” of the church. Satisfieds don’t see any need to change and question or attack any change perceived as different from what the church has been during their lifetime. Zealots, like their first century namesakes, make strong attacks against everything and everyone they see as a threat to their culture and cling tenaciously to what they call the “old paths.”

INCLUSION/EXCLUSION LINE

Since typing churches and categorizing individuals always leaves certain gray areas, I’ve included an Inclusion/Exclusion line to help us understand those gray areas.

As a congregation or an individual moves to the right on that line, they become more restrictive in whom they will fellowship and more condemning of those they don’t perceive to be in their fellowship.

Those who move to the left on that line become more open in whom they fellowship. They become less judgmental and more accepting of beliefs, actions, or doctrines that they don’t personally hold.

For example, Zealots don’t hesitate to condemn the Christian Church. Exasperateds openly fellowship the Christian Church. Opens offer limited fellowship to the Christian Church in any matter where they have agreement. Searchers neither accept nor condemn the Christian Church, claiming that God will make those judgments. Many Satisfieds hold Exclusionary judgments about the Christian Church but are less vocal (or honest) than the Zealots.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT US

While there are many more observations than can be written here, I share a few:

General Observations

Traditional or Innovative churches of any size usually have members from each of the six categories.

Because of our fundamental approach to Christianity, each category of people is more readily influenced by the category immediately to its right. For example, Zealots affect Satisfieds more than Searchers do.

Each category believes itself open to the Word without prejudice and that other categories are influenced by powerful, charismatic, or influential people in reaching their theological conclusions.

Image and *Wineskins* tend to reflect the views of some Exasperateds, most Opens, many Cautious, and some Searchers.

Gospel Advocate tends to reflect the views of most Satisfieds, some Searchers, and many Zealots.

Contending for the Faith, *Spiritual Sword*, and *The Firm Foundation* tend to reflect the views of nearly all Zealots and some Satisfieds.

Observations About Traditional Churches

Traditional churches by far outnumber all the other types combined.

Traditional churches tend to have an older membership and, therefore, are usually well financed.

Traditional churches tend to choose new elders who share the beliefs and views of existing elders, thus ensuring the continuing of traditional doctrines and practices.

Preachers in Traditional churches are more likely to PUBLICLY agree with traditional Church of Christ views or positions and to never PUBLICLY question them.

Observations About Innovative Churches

Innovative churches tend to be urban, with young memberships, and some are quite large in number.

Preachers in Innovative churches are more likely to PUBLICLY question or disagree with traditional Church of Christ views or positions.

Innovative churches lose Cautious members to Traditional churches as their congregations become more innovative.

Innovative churches lose Exasperateds to Left Wing churches or denominational churches because the Exasperateds feel they don't move toward innovation quickly enough and are too focused on maintaining fellowship with the Traditional churches.

Innovative churches offer limited fellowship (certain shared activities) to those who have faith in Jesus and hold certain basic doctrines (deity of Jesus, etc.) BUT they ONLY offer FULL fellowship (membership, communion) to those holding these basic doctrines AND who have been baptized as an act of obedience to Christ.

Observations About Zealots

Zealots accept only members of the Church of Christ as saved and reject as lost any others who claim faith in Jesus.

By repeatedly assaulting the beliefs and actions of Opens and Exasperateds, Zealots influence many Satisfieds toward a more Exclusive view by making them afraid of potential apostasy.

Zealots unintentionally drive some Satisfieds toward a more Inclusive position as these Satisfieds react to perceived anger and bitterness in the Zealots.

In their move toward greater Exclusion, Zealots make things into matters of faith the brotherhood generally considered matters of opinion 20 years ago.

Zealots judge a person's faithfulness by his willingness to condemn those not in agreement with the Zealots.

Zealots condemn anyone supporting or attending certain workshops (Tulsa, Jubilee).

Zealots condemn anyone who speaks on a platform with people they've condemned, regardless of the content of the speech.

Zealots condemn anyone writing in a journal they've condemned, regardless of the content of the article.

Zealots often influence Satisfieds in church leadership to make these same condemnations.

Zealots carry their Exclusion message to mission fields. For example, a new convert in Russia, influenced by Zealots, asked a group of American missionaries where they stood on the "Jubilee issue."

Zealots create a vocabulary to label congregations or individuals they reject. They use phrases such as "Jubilee churches" and "*Wineskins* Christians" with disdain.

Zealots and most Satisfieds believe the logic and hermeneutic used to determine prevailing Church of Christ doctrine are beyond question. They view the doctrines determined by those processes as equal to the "doctrine of Christ" and refer to them as the "old paths."

We all try to understand the dynamics causing increasing isolation between brethren and churches in our brotherhood. To help me make sense of it, I developed a model based on observations gleaned as I speak in about 45 church events nationwide each year. Perhaps brethren skilled in research will develop a clearer and more accurate model. We need a clear picture and common vocabulary so that we can understand the dynamics of our current tensions. If we do that, we can better deal with them.

Observations About Exasperateds

Exasperateds tend to be people who feel they've been hurt by the Church of Christ and want to completely change it or, failing that, abandon it. No longer believing Restoration churches viable, Exasperateds are leaving our fellowship in increasing numbers, typically going to community churches or denominational churches.

Current Interaction Between Types of Churches:

Traditional churches whose leaders are Searchers invite Innovative preachers to speak for their churches.

Innovative churches whose leaders are Opens sometimes invite Searchers to speak for their churches. Innovative churches whose leaders are Cautious sometimes invite Traditional preachers to speak for their churches.

Effect on Openness and Honesty:

Brotherhood-sponsored schools and parachurch organizations tend to yield to the views or positions of wealthy Satisfieds (and Zealots whom they fear have the ear of wealthy Satisfieds). Faculty members of these institutions (especially Bible faculty) tend to be wary in their scholarship and teaching in direct correlation to the school's fear of Zealots and/or wealthy Satisfieds. Preachers tend to be wary in their preaching and teaching in direct correlation to their church leaders' fear of Zealots and/or influential Satisfieds. Any leader dependent on the financial or moral support of others to maintain his position of leadership will tend to yield to the views of those who provide the greatest support—no matter what their views are.

Conclusions

- A. More people will become Exasperated and leave our fellowship. This especially will be true of those who refuse to accept something just because it is touted as an "old path." If they are not allowed to exercise intelligence and learning, they will simply go where they can.
- B. As Zealots introduce new tests of faithfulness, more preachers will be forced to make decisions that will preclude their being invited to speak to certain churches.
- C. More preachers will be forced from congregations as they refuse to accept increasingly exclusive tests of fellowship that their elders will adopt from the Zealots. Many of these preachers will either leave our fellowship or leave the ministry. They won't have any pulpit in our fellowship to move to because the number of churches willing to hire them will diminish as Traditional churches continue to move close to Exclusive positions.
- D. If the current tensions continue to intensify, our brotherhood will crystallize into three groups. Left Wing churches will leave our fellowship altogether. Innovative churches will become a group unto themselves with little, if any, formal fellowship with Traditional churches. Traditional churches and Right Wing churches will form a third group with Zealots controlling much of the doctrine and activities of that group through their watchdog mindset and poised pens.

E. If this division occurs,

There will be much pain, division of families and friends, and general turmoil as the division becomes clearer and more pronounced.

Innovative churches will experience a slump as many leave them for Traditional churches where they feel safety and comfort. Freed from the current brotherhood concerns, these churches will grow rapidly after the initial slump as they start implementing the progressive evangelistic and faith building programs they've been dreaming about. Of course, that will only happen if their focus changes from the current one of freeing themselves from constricting traditions to a new one of actively reaching out to the world around them.

Traditional churches will gain dramatically as Cautious leave the Innovative churches to the more comfortable and "safer" haven of the traditions and beliefs they have always held. But after a swelling period Traditional churches will begin to decline as they lose Exasperateds and Searchers who will not be able to tolerate Exclusionary positions the Zealots will force.

This division is now occurring and will be very pronounced within three to eight years unless wise leaders in Traditional churches disregard the Zealots. Neither Opens, Cautious, or Satisfieds are driving this division; Zealots are. They accomplish it through their continually tightening rules of fellowship that Satisfieds are accepting. Of course, they believe the division is caused by Opens who lead their churches to become Innovative. Our greatest enemy isn't going beyond clear New Testament doctrine. It is making laws where God never did and chaining our great brotherhood from its task by those laws.

Tearing Down the Walls

*by Mark Henderson
May – June, 1996*

When I came to the Church of Christ in 1986 from a Southern Baptist background, I was surprised to learn how little the two groups really knew about each other. The Church of Christ in Dallas which loved me and helped lead me out of a life of sinful rebellion before the Lord bore little resemblance to the caricature of Churches of Christ which existed in my mind. At the same time, the comments which my new brothers and sisters made about “the Baptists” often bore little resemblance to the church of my youth. There was some truth in the assessments on both sides. We weren’t totally ignorant; we knew just enough about each other to be dangerous! It is not surprising that we knew so little of each other because we never had any contact with each other. Our self-imposed isolation from each other was what enabled us to assert so confidently what we knew so little about.

It was easier to live with that isolation during my first 34 years, when I lived in Texas. The church was strong there, so not only did we feel that we didn’t *need* anyone else, but in some respects, everyone else was the competition. In that environment, Christian unity was a pleasant, but unworkable, idea which we could leave safely on the back burner while we hammered out our positions on “the issues.” Moving out of the Bible Belt, to Boulder, Colorado, has been a great blessing to me because it has forced me to reassess the basis for Christian unity and to redefine, in biblical terms, my enemies and competitors.

Boulder is a college town, about the same size as Abilene, Texas, but there the similarities end! The people in Denver, which is only 35 miles away, refer to “The People’s Republic of Boulder.” “To get to Boulder,” they say, “you drive toward Reality and take a hard left.” On any given Sunday, only seven percent of the adults in Boulder attend any church. The University of Colorado has more than 10,000 students, but *fewer than 500 of them* are actively involved in any of the campus ministries. Boulder is a hotbed for paganism. Native American religions, New Age philosophies, various forms of Eastern mysticism, and the worship of angels are among the many options here for the people who even acknowledge the spiritual realm. Atheism and agnosticism also abound.

Ours is the only Church of Christ in Boulder and shortly after I moved here, I began to experience a sense of isolation altogether different from the self-imposed, self-sufficient isolation I had known in the Bible Belt. I had barely unpacked my bags before I was hip deep in turmoil over women’s role in the church and contemporary vs. traditional worship styles, among other things. There were also tangible, encouraging signs of the presence and power of God in our midst, but, at times, the conflict had me believing that we were on the brink of disaster. I needed someone who was not involved in our particular situation and who understood the challenges of full-time ministry to remind me to focus on God and his power to accomplish his purpose, because I was often feeling lonely and powerless.

At that time, I believe the Lord led me to the Boulder Ministerial Fellowship. The preacher at a local community church called and invited me to the weekly prayer meeting of the ministerial association. I was a bit hesitant because my prior experience with a ministerial alliance had been less than rewarding. That group had been primarily concerned with offering advice to the local school district, which was trying to learn how to balance the concerns of diverse religious groups. A major task for us was to remember not to say “in Jesus’ name” when we offered thanks for our lunch, because that phrase offended the Jewish rabbis who were part of the group. In some ways, those meetings became another source of aggravation, and I was not eager to add more of the same in Boulder.

I needn’t have worried. The Boulder group was comprised completely of conservative, evangelical pastors. With few exceptions, they were immersionists and without exception, they acknowledged the authority of Scripture and the Lordship of Christ. And when they called their weekly meeting a “prayer meeting,” they meant it. They got right to the business of praying for the mayor and city council, the local law enforcement officials, and those in authority at the University of Colorado. They prayed for the children and teachers in our public schools, and they prayed fervently for each other that God would make their witness for Christ strong and that he would break the strongholds of darkness in our community.

I had never witnessed anything like this, and I was moved as these men and women laid aside their differences to unite with one voice before the Lord for the sake of each other and for the sake of the lost in Boulder. I finally interrupted and told them who I was and what church I was from. I told them of some struggles we were facing in our congregation and asked for their prayers. For the next few minutes all they did was pray for me and for our ministry. Many people said many words, but I will never forget the prayer of a man I later learned was the preacher for the Boulder Valley Assembly of God.

He only knows how to pray at full throttle, and he said in a loud voice, “Father, I thank you for this brother and I pray your blessings on his ministry and his family. Oh, God, thank you for the Churches of Christ and for their commitment to your Word. I pray that you will give them a powerful ministry in this community and that they will reach many souls for Jesus Christ.” Perhaps emboldened by this outpouring of love toward me, another man told us that he had been dismissed by his congregation and that he was concerned for his family and his future in ministry. He was invited to pull his chair out into the middle of the circle, and we all gathered around him, laying hands on him as we asked God to heal the wounds he and his family were suffering and to give him another opportunity for ministry. The entire meeting, which lasted an hour and a half, was an overwhelming demonstration of the power of Christ to unite believers who are willing to set aside their personal agendas for the sake of pursuing his agenda.

I have enjoyed many similar experiences with that group since that first meeting, and I believe I have learned some valuable lessons from them. *First*, I have learned very clearly that my competition and my enemies are not other congregations of Churches of Christ or other believers who are surrendering to the Lordship of Christ to the best of their ability and understanding. Our struggle in Boulder, as it should be elsewhere, is against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms who are holding many souls in bondage and deception. Our competitors are the golf courses, the recreation offered by the nearby mountains, the pagan religions, and an overall

atmosphere of unbelief. In that monumental struggle, my participation in the ministerial fellowship has reminded me of the words of Jesus in [Mark 9:40](#), “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Second, those prayer meetings have served to remind me how easily my focus can be misplaced. When we never venture out from our own four walls, it is easy to spend all of our time and energy dealing with “our issues.” Our ministerial fellowship prayer meetings touch on a variety of subjects—praise, confession, spiritual warfare, etc.—but the singular focus is *always* that the Lord will glorify himself in his church. It is a refreshing and helpful reminder that kingdom work embraces much larger concerns than whether our style of worship is traditional or contemporary.

Third, I have learned from my association with these other preachers that the views many of us have held of the denominations really are caricatures—comical distortions of reality. It is no more appropriate to speak of “what the Baptists or Charismatics believe” than it is to speak of “what the Churches of Christ believe.” There is as much diversity of belief and opinion in those groups as there is in our own, so the most meaningful efforts toward unity will occur at the believer-to-believer level rather than at the denominational level. It is easier and safer to talk about “the Assemblies of God” than it is to deal with my friend Bob. I still don’t know much about the Assemblies of God, but, in Bob, I have found a baptized believer who evidences a passionate love for the Lord and his Word and whose life is characterized by those beautiful qualities Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit.” I am grateful that he has not found it necessary to reject me for what he considers my wrong doctrine concerning the work of the Holy Spirit. I extend the same grace of acceptance to him, trusting that he arrived at his conclusions with the same honesty and integrity which I attribute to myself, and we embrace and affirm one another as brothers on the basis of our common commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

I believe it is time for us to reclaim our heritage as a movement devoted to uniting Christians from all the sects. Our recent history in many quarters has been one of building walls around ourselves, isolating ourselves from the denominational world in the belief that there were no Christians among the sects. Or, if there were, they would surely find their way to us. We need to recognize that is an abandonment of our heritage in the Restoration Movement. We have much to teach—and some things to learn from—our Christian neighbors, but that will never happen until we tear down the walls we have erected and get in the business of building bridges. At times, our efforts to reach out and engage in meaningful dialogue with our religious neighbors will be frustrating and disappointing, but I have also learned that there will be times of great joy and fellowship as we experience the psalmist’s affirmation, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” And every time we restore fellowship with a brother or sister we participate in the realization of our Lord’s prayer recorded in [John 17](#): “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” For *his* sake and for the sake of a lost world, let’s do our part to tear down the walls.

We Too are the Bread

A Communion Devotional at Highland Church of Christ Abilene, Texas

*by Darryl Tippens
May – June, 1996*

There's an old saying, "You are what you eat." At the literal level, I hope I don't become what I eat at breakfast, lunch, or dinner. I don't know if it's true, but I do know that the saying is true at the spiritual level. *At the Lord's Table, we do become what we eat, spiritually speaking.*

Jesus Christ is the Bread of Life. He is the sacred Wine poured out for the whole world. As we eat this bread and drink this cup—as we take these elements into our bodies—mysteriously, over time, we BECOME the bread and wine ourselves. We become the bread and wine that nourish the world.

For centuries Christians debated whether or not the bread was mysteriously transformed into the flesh of Jesus Christ. In all the argument, however, they missed the deeper mystery and the greater miracle: that WE are transformed into Jesus Christ! It matters less if this wafer becomes the body of Christ. It matters much more if *I* become the flesh of Christ!

Paul says that we are transformed into his likeness, degree by degree ([2 Corinthians 3:18](#)). As we become Bread, we let the light, the salt, and the truth of Jesus shape us in every way possible. Week by week, we are changed into his likeness.

It is awesome and awe-inspiring to come to the Table of the Lord. Here, we say to one another and to God: "I want to be *taken* by God; I want to be *blessed* by him; I want to be *broken* by him and *given* by him back to the world for sacrificial service" (Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (New York: Crossroads, 1992). Let us become what we now eat and think — bread and drink for the world.

Kith and Kin in Christ: A Southern Baptist Perspective on Churches of Christ

by Marty G. Bell
May – June, 1996

I spent the formative years of my early childhood in rural West Tennessee. Sometimes it has been said that Nashville is the buckle on the Bible Belt. I would advocate that West Tennessee could easily qualify to be the clasp of the Bible Belt. Growing up in that region between the mighty Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers, I saw the Bible figuratively used as a belt drawn as tightly as possible so that those who would live by its words had to suck in and hold their breath while it was fastened around the waist. In those childhood years nobody did a better job of pulling the Bible Belt taut than the Baptists and the Churches of Christ.

My paternal grandparents were inactive members of an independent Missionary Baptist church in which the members proudly claimed to hold to the Old Landmarks. I will spare you the theological details here; in short, they believed that only Baptist churches were the true churches of Christ and that Baptists could trace their New Testament origins through a “trail of blood.” My maternal grandparents were active members of a Church of Christ that in no uncertain terms made it clear that Baptists, Methodists, Cumberland Presbyterians, and all the rest of the “denominations” were bound for hell.

For the first 14 years of my life, my father and mother could not agree on a church, largely because they had been steeped in their respective traditions. Occasionally, my father couldn't resist launching into an attack on the “Campbellites.” My mother's standard response was, “I'd rather be a Campbell with a light than a Baptist in the dark.” Although we did not attend church regularly, I spent a considerable amount of time in Sunday School classes and Vacation Bible School in Churches of Christ and Baptist churches because of the influence of friends and family. Prayer at meals and bedtime and Bible reading were a part of family practice.

As the course of events took place, I ultimately professed faith in Christ as a teenager and joined a Southern Baptist church. A little later I announced to the congregation that God had “called me to preach.” The rest is my personal history. Today I teach courses on the Bible and the history of Christianity in a Baptist-related university. As I reflect on my life, I can see how easily I could have taken a different path and joined the Churches of Christ. In fact, I have friends in the Churches of Christ who had a situation similar to mine involving one parent who was Baptist and one who was a part of the Churches of Christ.

Despite the inflammatory rhetoric I heard from both groups growing up, I always suspected that they had more in common than either typically was willing to admit. As I studied to become a historian of Christianity, I gave special attention to the relations between the Baptists and the Churches of Christ. Today I can say with confidence that they are indeed kin. And there is an increasing number in both traditions that gladly acknowledge the common heritage.

I particularly am grateful that more and more Baptists and Churches of Christ folk are going a step farther and claiming each other as kith. This rather quaint term, which means friends, is

related to the Scottish and North English word “kithe,” which means to make or become known. I have been privileged over the past four years to be part of an annual conversation group that consists of an equal number of Baptist and Churches of Christ ministers and professors. As we have prayed together, sung together, read the Bible together, and have heard each other respectfully regarding a variety of doctrinal issues, we have been “kithing” one another. Deep friendships have formed out of our desire to truly know one another.

As a Baptist who has had a long-term interest in the Churches of Christ, both personally and professionally, I have come to appreciate that many of those within the tradition of the Churches of Christ are facing an identity struggle not unlike that which Southern Baptists have confronted in the last quarter of this century. Although the secular media has paid less attention to what is happening in the Churches of Christ than among Baptists, largely because there is not a national convention among the Churches of Christ which draws attention to itself, it is obvious to astute observers from outside of the tradition that there has been tension within the fellowship of the Churches of Christ.

As one who is outside of the tradition, but interested in its welfare and sympathetic to its emphasis on the Bible as the standard for Christian faith, I have a number of observations to offer regarding the Churches of Christ in the late twentieth century. These are simply one Baptist’s perspective on what is happening. I’m sure that others within my tradition would see some of the following issues differently. However, I also believe that a number of Baptists would have a similar perspective as mine.

When I think about the Churches of Christ, I think of the original nondenominational movement in American Christianity. In the course that I teach on the history of American Christianity, I present Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and the other leaders who are identified with American Restorationism as promoters of nondenominationalism. Somewhere along the line, the message “we are Christians only” got translated to some folk as “we are the only Christians.” In my opinion, an inclusive message was transformed into an exclusive message in the heyday of nineteenth-century sectarianism. In an era in which the various Christian denominations sometimes blasted one another in an attempt to prove that their version of the faith was more primitive and thus closer to the standard of the New Testament, the wing of American Restorationism that became the Churches of Christ fell into the trap it was trying to avoid. Attempting to provide an alternative to Christian sectarianism, ultimately the Churches of Christ became one of the most highly sectarian groups within American Christianity.

Sharing so much in common with the larger body of evangelical Christianity, the greatest challenge and opportunity for the Churches of Christ at the end of the twentieth century is to return to the original emphasis on Christian unity and the tearing down of divisive denominational walls. I believe that there are three major obstacles that stand in the way of a return to the “Christians only” emphasis.

First, the strength and influence of those Churches of Christ that share a perspective similar to that which I encountered as a child in West Tennessee is still quite powerful. And those congregations are by no means limited to West Tennessee. As is true with Southern Baptists, even in the late twentieth century the majority of Churches of Christ are small and located in

rural areas. Change often comes quite slowly. For those who have grown up hearing on Sunday morning and night and Wednesday night that certain ideas are absolutely essential to Christian faith, openness to new interpretations does not come easily.

Second, Churches of Christ do not have an easy time overcoming the prejudices that other denominations direct toward them. This is particularly true regarding those denominations who have flourished in those geographical areas where the Churches of Christ have been traditionally strong. Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and, to some degree, others have caricatured the Churches of Christ. Unfortunately, the bygone era of religious debates in the rural South has left some very negative impressions.

Third, as admirable as the “Christians only” message is, what does it mean for the progressive leaders within the Churches of Christ? As one who is outside of the tradition but extremely interested in where all of this is leading, I suspect that the answer is still in formation. Clearly, many within the Churches of Christ are ready to enter the mainstream of evangelical Christianity. But at what price? Some congregations have gone so far as to identify themselves as nondenominational and have practically severed ties with the fellowship of the Churches of Christ. Others have carefully attempted to maintain their identity as Churches of Christ but have found themselves under attack by others within the tradition. Those sounding the theme of Christian unity are facing some of the same problems that their nineteenth-century leaders faced. Sooner or later, a group must define who it is vis-a-vis other groups.

If those within the Churches of Christ who are calling for a return to the original emphasis on Christian unity can continue to explore ways to build bridges to Christians outside of their tradition while maintaining the best of that tradition, the Body of Christ will be blessed. I think that there is much for other denominations to learn and appreciate from the Churches of Christ.

To a larger degree, the Churches of Christ are going through the same experience that most denominations are facing at the end of the twentieth century. We are in a transitional period in the life of the church. That which has been has not disappeared altogether, and that which will be has not come to pass fully. We are dealing with the issue of how to make the gospel relevant to our age without somehow compromising it. I don't know of any denomination that is not struggling with this issue.

In the midst of the confusion of our times, the Churches of Christ find themselves at a significant crossroads. If they reclaim the heritage of Christian unity and the sole authority of the Bible and place these emphases within the context of an authentic and relevant preaching of the gospel, they are posed to influence significantly American Christianity as they did at the beginning of the Restoration Movement. If they retreat into sectarianism and refuse to cooperate with the larger world of evangelical Christianity, they face ultimate extinction.

I gladly claim my brothers and sisters in the Churches of Christ as kith and kin. In the last few years as I have come to be friends with a number of persons in the Churches of Christ, I have witnessed an interesting situation develop. At times I have felt closer in spirit to some of these dear brothers and sisters than I have to some of my fellow Southern Baptists. I think that I can safely say that sometimes they felt the same way in regard to me and others outside of the

Churches of Christ. Undeniably, we sensed the bond of love in Christ. United in Christ and committed to the sole authority of the Bible, we tore down the partition that divided. We have much more in common than we have that is different. May we claim our common heritage and continue to get to know one another more intimately through the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Following God's Scriptural Direction

by Bob Hendren
May – June, 1996

G.C. Brewer reviewed K. C. Moser's *The Way of Salvation* in the *Gospel Advocate* on May 11, 1933. This is an excerpt from his review:

. . . The most pleasing as well as the most striking feature of the book is the author's *faith in and reverence for God's word*. [emphasis GCB]...The whole book is purely exegesis and explanation. The teaching on one passage of Scripture is construed in the light of all else the Scriptures say on the subject. There is no second-hand or borrowed use of a passage to sustain an argument without regard for the real meaning of the passage; no hackneyed or stereotyped citing of passages to prove an "accepted view" or "a brotherhood idea." The author's independence of all denominational views or brotherhood ideas, or of what the "fathers" taught, or what has been "our doctrine" is the most encouraging thing that I have seen in print among the disciples of Christ in this decade.

Brewer continues by expressing his delight that Moser's work "is a hopeful sign...that we still have men who are sincere and courageous enough to make an independent and individual study of God's word." I do not know if G. C. Brewer could write as approvingly of what passes for exegesis in many areas of our brotherhood today.

We see some hopeful signs, though it is difficult to break away from the defeating habits of faulty hermeneutic and the resulting defective exegesis. As a people we have often been unwilling to take the risk of abandoning what has stopped our progress cold and trapped us in ever more virulent circles of self-destructive behavior. Something is radically wrong with the way we have viewed and applied the Scriptures. The question of how we use the Bible is crucial. The poet Robert Frost noted, "Something there is in nature that doesn't love a wall." So, something in the nature of Bible usage spells either the division and disillusion or faith-building, constructive discipleship. Using the Bible in the wrong way causes the sorts of problems we see on every hand, with folks willing to debate at the drop of a syllogism. Wrongful Bible interpretation means wrong-headed congregations, and an increasingly frustrating experience for those who want to grow closer to Christ and to each other.

This is a topic that will not go away. We may go away as a movement, but this question will not disappear. Either we start putting more trust in the text than we have placed in our rules and traditions, or we can only retreat further into even more apathetic dreariness.

Scores, perhaps hundreds, of young preachers are casting about, finding the old hermeneutic inadequate, designed only for the polemics of a day that has long vanished, and yet unsure what approach to using the Bible is best. They have a desire to work for the Lord, but the tools they have been handed are unfit for the task. They see the futility of preaching unity and practicing division. Many are poised to give up or give in. The best will probably give up, and those who

give in will offer a half-hearted, career-oriented loyalty to traditions in order to maintain their livelihood.

Any attempt to move in a new direction must be biblically informed. I personally have no respect for a movement which does not take the Scriptures seriously. The Bible itself must be restored to its rightful place of prominence in the churches. There is simply no point to changing anything unless we have the warrant of Scripture. Introducing this need is crucial, for it is no human project, it is nothing less than what God demands of his people.

Jesus had an ongoing controversy with two leadership elements in Judaism, Sadducees and Pharisees. In both cases the problem revolved around their misuse of Scripture. The Sadducees were “clearly wrong because they were ignorant of the Scriptures as well as God’s power,” Jesus affirmed ([Mark 12:24](#)). The Pharisees were guilty of substituting their traditions for the Word of God: “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!” ([Mark 7:7-9](#) RSV). In similar ways, we have entirely too much biblical ignorance, a massive lack of confidence in God’s power, and the continued affirmation of tradition over Scripture.

Returning to a true reliance on Scripture is the very basis of our adventure of faith. To throw ourselves unreservedly upon the Word of God will require the dismantling of several cherished traditions which have, from long usage, calcified not only our progress, but also dulled the very tools which are designed by God “to demolish arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God” (Cf. [2 Corinthians 10:3-5](#)). We must be ready to heed Paul’s advice to Timothy:

Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us ([2 Timothy 1:13-14](#) RSV).

We must have an openness to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus warned of ignoring the “power of God.” A power shortage exists when God’s Word is seen as a legal brief to be analyzed and applied in proof text fashion. This approach not only nullifies Scripture, it robs it of all its God-given power. We are not naturally gifted in spiritual matters. When we substitute Aristotle or other human philosophical logical systems we make logical hash out of the Bible and reject God’s power which encourages sanity and unity (Cf. [1 Corinthians 14](#), [Ephesians 4](#)). Nor can we rely on a brotherhood “consensus” about texts, as in “we settled that 40 years ago.” This makes the church the norm for the Bible, rather than the Bible the norm for the church.

The Spirit who dwells in us works to guarantee the integrity of the gospel by constantly reminding us of the One who is the center of the proclamation—Jesus! This is why Paul can speak to Timothy, as above, of guarding the gospel “through the Holy Spirit who dwells with us.” How can the indwelling Spirit guard the gospel? By insisting that the center of the gospel remain Jesus! Thus, if one is not teaching Jesus, who is the content of the gospel, then he or she

cannot guard the gospel. Jesus is the key, not only in terms of content, but in terms of interpretation. Thus Paul is bold enough to say, “just as the truth is in Jesus” ([Ephesians 4:21](#)).

One cannot be a custodian of the gospel if the content is not maintained. How foolish it is to think of contending for the faith when one only contends earnestly for questions of ecclesiology or methodology. How different our history would have been during the dark days of contention over evangelistic efforts like the Herald of Truth, the use of church budgets, and understanding “the church as such” if Jesus had only occupied center ground!

Even a defense of a favored hermeneutic is inadequate to be termed “contending for the faith.” This is so, because the hermeneutic will always be a human procedure. While God is logical, in the highest sense, he is not subject to human logical constraints. One could not make God, for example, subject to Aristotle’s rule of the excluded middle. For God indeed might be both A and not A in some areas where we simply lack sufficient understanding. But when one has respect for the Spirit, and understands the Spirit is interested only in glorifying Jesus and convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment to come (Cf. [John 16](#)), then even the hermeneutic will seek to glorify God.

We must be ready to scuttle limiting formats.

Somewhere along the way we invented formats which would enable us to talk and argue among ourselves. If a person was going to have a decent debate over some point or other, some kind of agreement over the rules was necessary. You can’t agree on rules, though, if you don’t have rules. So, an adversarial hermeneutic developed along the line of the minimum we could accept from each other. This is the origin of such formats as, “The Bible teaches in three ways, direct command, approved example, and necessary inference,” or, the usage of formal logical systems like Aristotle’s. The payoff for this procedure is that it enables us to debate one another, getting into some exciting sermonic fireworks. However, you cannot find these formats anywhere in the Bible. Search carefully, but they will elude you, for they are simply not there. Such formats limit our ability to see what Scripture truly has for us. It puts a distorting filter on how God is able to reveal himself to us in the Bible.

As far as I know, God could use the Bible to teach us in hundreds of ways, some of which might involve the conditions mentioned above, but scores might not. How, for example, do we know that God is holy? Are we commanded to know this? Yes, but certainly there is more to it than just obeying a command. Do we infer it? Yes, but it’s far more obvious than a mere implication. Every mention of God contains some hint of his holiness. Do we have an example? Of course, dozens of them, but we also have the responses of people who take God seriously, and we have the tremendous hymns of praise in the Psalms which command nothing, are far weightier than implications, and serve as much more than an example.

One might say that the creation of this interpretative system resulted from an over-reliance on analytical methods. Unfortunately, our devotion to analysis has not been complemented by a similar devotion to synthesis. When I was in the Marine Corps back in the Korean War, I knew how to take my M-1 rifle apart piece by piece. This was necessary to clean it, but it wouldn’t shoot that way, it had to be reassembled. Hermeneutical devices designed only to analyze leave

us textually paralyzed. Worse, they impose so many limits on those thinking through the text, that they simply cannot see the whole for picking among the parts. It is frightening that such creedal articles are taught as though they were to be found in Scripture.

This whole business is a function which we have created out of our cultural environment, and it now holds us prisoner. We must attain a viewpoint which allows us to rise above our culture. As Anthony Thiselton notes, “hermeneutics in the more recent sense of the term begins with the recognition that historical conditioning is two-sided: the modern interpreter, no less than the text, *stands in a given historical context and tradition*.”¹ A compelling point is made by D. E. Nineham: “We must not construct a portrait of Jesus which merely bounces back to us our own viewpoints and assumptions.”²

Can we permit a culturally developed hermeneutic to keep us back from developing a greater appreciation for Bible truth? All the scaffolding which remains of past interpretative systems must stand ready to be exposed to the searchlight of faithful study of the Scriptures. We should not shrink from this task, though we should not approach it as gleeful nihilists. We are not interested in tearing down, but merely in clearing the ground so that greater construction can occur.

We should be ready to cast out the standard topical sermon.

We must return to expository preaching as the normal expression of our teaching. Topical sermons tend to leave us in charge of the text, as we blithely propose subject matter and use Scripture as proof text to validate our previously decided conclusions. This is intolerable for a church which exalts the truth. Exposition of the text leaves God in charge of the Bible, not speakers. I decided to preach through books of the Bible over 30 years ago. It was one of the best decisions I have ever made. It has forced me to deal with Scripture I would gladly have skipped if I had been using the topical approach. Expository preaching compels the teacher to deal with the whole Bible as it exposes those who hear it to the whole range of truth. No longer can we take refuge in a few brotherhood proof texts; we must have a belief that is as wide as God’s Word itself.

Without such a commitment we tend to skate over the surface of our own preferences. What will “wow” them this time? What will be considered “sound” by those who listen for accents of orthodoxy? If you are committed to preach on Romans, for example, you will have to deal with chapters 3, 4, and 5 whether you understand them in a brotherhood frame or not. You will not be able to run off to James 2 in the hope that James will trump Paul’s teaching in Romans. You will have to stay right with the text, and let it stand on its own, as the apostle meant for it to do. You will trust that the Spirit of God will make sense out of what the apostle is saying if you put in an honest job with the text.

Respect for the text will deliver us from the curse of having to look over our shoulders at those checking on our soundness. If the text testifies that salvation is by grace, not human works, we will have to be honest about it, whatever the consequences to our careers. This will certainly expand our appreciation for these texts, and will challenge the listeners to provide more space for God to work in their minds and hearts as well. As a lady said to me the other day, after hearing

an expository lesson on John 6, “The text truly says that it is God’s will for those who come to Jesus for salvation to make it. God is committed to our salvation! He really wants for us to go to heaven!” There will be many such joyous discoveries when the Word is free from human constraints.

We must be ready to let the Bible define our real needs.

Legalists are not the only persons misusing the Bible. Well-meaning ministers and teachers who are more tuned to rapid results than long-range goals can also manipulate the Word (Cf. [2 Corinthians 4](#)). The attention given to felt needs seems to them the only legitimate needs. This often sabotages laying a solid basis of grace, based upon the Word, which will be there whatever need may arise. Of course, distinguishing between felt needs and real needs is slippery business. The preacher or teacher may automatically assume his training and biblical insight qualify him to identify and surface real needs apparently hidden but actually present in the lives of believers. I believe God’s Word is not only the true answer for the real needs that we have, but also is the best aid in identifying those needs. This can be humbling business and will take great patience and prayer.

At a seminar I conducted several years ago, some persons showed up who hoped the seminar would address specific needs they identified in their lives as crucial. I was largely unaware of this situation, and was in the process of developing the biblical texts in a more general way. The local minister, compassionately reflecting the attitude of those persons, who had little if any background in the Bible, asked me if I could focus more on these “felt needs” than the text itself.

Part of me wanted to say, “We must have confidence in the text to do its work, and it will do it.” Still, in my heart I knew these people were in a crisis. They would not wait around for the text to do its work. At that point, perhaps the minister has little choice but to reflect the fruits of his biblical research rather than leading people through the actual process of examining the text.

The long-range attitude of letting the text surface the needs is the most desirable course for those who consider the Word of God to be “living and active”. This approach is akin to the difference between giving someone a fish and teaching him to fish. The crisis of immediate needs often obscures the greater needs. The danger here is that a preacher may find himself even believing these felt needs are the only acceptable topics for preaching. Willimon quotes Harry Emerson Fosdick’s expression of this viewpoint:

Every sermon should have for its main business the head-on constructive meeting of some problem which was puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives, and no sermon which so met a real human difficulty . . . could possibly be futile.³

Willimon believes Fosdick’s “life-situation preaching” had certain weaknesses and the major one was taking cues for the sermon from contemporary life instead of the text. The text, then, is designed by God not only to answer our needs, but also to inform us what our deepest needs are. As Leander Keck notes:

Exegesis becomes fruitful for preaching when the text confronts the exegete, in solidarity with the congregation, with a word that intersects prevailing understandings and loyalties. Responses to this experienced intersection are not pious; they often include bafflement, irritation, or resistance. Instead of feeling guilty about them, one should recognize them as signs that an issue has been located that needs to be worked through, as symptoms that a word is being heard.⁴

We must interpret texts with an attitude of praise.

Doctrine must not be studied just for the sake of mastering dogma. This creates a corps of religious “experts.” We have so much complex dogma that only a religious expert can make his or her way through the minefields of doctrine. This is why we hear people say they can’t “do evangelism” because they don’t know enough arguments. Evangelism is not something you do, evangelism is something you are. Doctrine is not something you do, it’s something you are. Doctrine is given us so that we might have right ideas about God, about ourselves, and our fellow humans.

If our approach to study doctrine is that we must define it with the accepted terminology, so as to guard it from any possible wrong thinking, or in other ways tame it, it will never yield its meaning to us. We’ll be like the group in [John 6](#) who wanted to know what they had to do “to work the works of God,” and are told “This is the work [note the singular!] of God that you put your trust in that Person whom He has sent.” Did they get it? Jesus was saying to them that trust is the only atmosphere in which anyone can possibly grow, and that trust is evident when one makes the Bread of Life his or her entire spiritual diet. They had been more interested in the loaves and fishes than thanking God for the Bread of Life.

This failure to approach doctrine in a spirit of worshipful awe usually results in more arguments and wrangling, all detrimental to our real growth. In Ephesians chapter one, Paul writes of God’s choosing believers “before the foundation of the world” by “designating them ahead of time to be His sons.” This is the biblical doctrine of predestination. If our object in dealing with this passage is to argue with Calvin we shall certainly miss what it has in store for us. If we approach it in a praise attitude rather than a dogmatic attitude, we will see something wonderful about God.

If we go at it to wrangle about the concept, forcing it into what we are comfortable with, using a Procrustean bed technique, we will not understand why Paul begins the section with “Blessed is the God and Father....” Paul is obviously in a praise context, not an argumentative one, so this is the key. “Praise God,” Paul seems to be saying, “because he considered our needs long before we ever thought about them at all. In fact, not only did he think about us before we ever existed, but he also determined that by his grace we would be members of his family!”

How much gentler would our history have been if we had taken the time to praise God more and argued doctrine less. The Bible is interested in making us more like God, not more like those “debaters of the age” Paul condemns in [1 Corinthians 1:20](#). For Paul, a word of praise transcends all; “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord!” ([1 Corinthians 1:31](#)). If we are to be part of a movement that centers on God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we must see that praise is not just a duty, but a way of seeing the truest heart of God.

Moving toward an openness to the Holy Spirit, possessing a willingness to scuttle limiting formats, having readiness to replace the standard topical sermon with thoughtful exegesis, and interpreting texts with an attitude of praise will not move us to where we need to be unless our faith is in God for the long journey. As Scott Peck has noted, I cannot grow in any manner until I am willing to give up a proportionate amount of the old self. I would say, "I must be willing to give up all of the old self, then I can grow!"

Anthony C Thiselton. *The Two Horizons*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980, p. 11.

As quoted in Thiselton, p. 57.

William D. Willimon, *Integrative Preaching: The Pulpit at the Center*. Abingdon Preacher's Library. Abingdon: Nashville, 1981.

Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit*. Abingdon: Nashville, 1978, pp. 63-64).

Poem: Jesus the Mediator

by Ken Cameron
May – June, 1996

Sometimes, somehow,
My guilt and sin—
My own Eden-forged wall—
Creates a bridge to God.

A paradox, perhaps,
And yet, in truth,
Christ's greatest gift.

For as I die
on a self-chosen cross;
As darkness falls
across the godless void;

As guilt and loneliness
engulf death's precipice,
Christ is there.

And when I cry
“My God, Why
have you forsaken me?”
I cry with HIM.

And in our question
there is submission.
And in our protest
there is prayer.

The Scandal of Grace: A Review of *Dead Man Walking*

by Larry James, Director, Central Dallas Ministries
May – June, 1996

God's grace is a scandalous thing. Tim Robbins' powerful film, *Dead Man Walking*, forces viewers to face the scandal as well as the personal cost of truly accepting God's radical brand of tough, compassionate grace. Adapting the autobiographical story of Sister Helen Prejean as reported in her book by the same title, the film *Dead Man Walking* explores the relationship between the nun and an inmate living on death row in the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Prejean (Academy Award winner Susan Sarandon), a teacher and social worker at Hope House in the St. Thomas housing project in New Orleans, lives and works among the poor. Focusing her attention on families and children, her unlikely relationship with Matthew Poncelet (Oscar nominee Sean Penn), a convicted murderer and rapist, develops after she answers letters he had written to another staff member at Hope House. Responding to Poncelet's request for an attorney who could help him file a motion of appeal, Sister Helen is drawn deeper and deeper into his life.

The gut-wrenching film prompts viewers to react, to evaluate, and to think at several levels about a number of important issues including racism, the shocking violence of the grisly murder of two teenage lovers, rape, capital punishment, victims' rights, the criminal justice system, anti-government extremism, white supremacy, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, and the role of the church. These themes move back and forth throughout the movie's plot, as the intense relationship of a passionate, committed nun and a macho, but frightened killer unfold on the screen.

Caught between the criminal justice system, the anguished parents of the dead teens, a seasoned and cynical prison chaplain, many of the African-American residents of the St. Thomas project who take offense at Poncelet's racism, and even her own doubting family on one side and the fear, spiritual need, and lostness of a person living his final days on death row on the other, Sister Helen stands in the middle and suffers.

When asked by the prison priest why she has come to visit such a person, Sister Helen responds simply, "He wrote and asked me to come." Knowing the system better and critical of her lack of experience with prisons, he harshly warns her that the inmates are all "con-men" who will take advantage of any kindness. Counseling her that Poncelet's only hope resides in the sacraments of the church, the veteran priest regards her radical, feminist ways with great disdain. But Helen persists in her concern for Matthew, seeking to find some common ground on which to make connection.

Matthew Poncelet, the product of a "poor white trash" family from Slidell, Louisiana, exhibits numerous characteristics of a dysfunctional life. Proudly racist and politically radical, he holds Hitler in high esteem before an eager horde of reporters. Despising people who fall back on the excuses of victimization, Poncelet refuses to break before the authorities, claiming he did not murder either of the two slain teenagers. Instead, he blames his older, more dominate partner,

Carl Vitello. He attempts to convince Sister Helen that “Carl went crazy” on him because of the drugs and booze both had enjoyed before they found the two young people. Matthew communicates well with Sister Helen because he respects the fact that she came to visit without the “hell fire and brimstone” he expected.

Helen works hard for her new charge, even to the point of neglecting her work in St. Thomas. This perceived neglect, coupled with Poncelet’s radical, racist statements to the press, creates hard feelings toward her among the black families who live in the St. Thomas project. Securing the services of defense attorney Hilton Barber, Sister Helen presses deeper into Matthew’s life. She visits with his mother and brothers. But with her increased involvement comes pressure from the prison priest, the guards, and her own family to reconsider her commitment to such a person as Matthew Poncelet. Her mother reminds her that a “full heart shouldn’t follow an empty head. Your heart is large. Just take care others don’t take advantage of you.”

Dead Man Walking forces viewers to move inside the realities of the criminal justice system as experienced by poor people. Hilton Barber argues that the death penalty is always a matter of poverty. As a poor man, Matthew Poncelet was under-represented by a court-appointed tax lawyer who presided over a jury selection process taking only four hours. His case lasted only five days, during which time his attorney raised but one objection. As the movie’s script draws viewers deeper into the issues of capital punishment and execution methodologies, Poncelet’s relationship with Helen grows more intense.

At an appeal board hearing Sister Helen faces for the first time the parents of the murdered teens. Confronted in a prison corridor by the father of Walter Delacroix, Helen must face the full fury of his anger, hurt, and loss. “How can you sit with him and not visit us?” he asks the stunned nun. Reminding her that an evil man abducted, raped, and killed two innocent children, leaving his family with no living male to carry on his name, Mr. Delacroix vents his deep-seated rage. When Helen offers him her phone number to call if he needs anything, he replies, “Think about how arrogant that is, Sister.” Filled with hate and bitterness, the parents who have lost so much long for justice and vindication for their children. During a home visit with Mary Beth and Clyde Percy, they ask, “How can you sit with that scum?” To which she replies, “I’m just trying to follow the example of Jesus who said all people are worth more than their worst act.”

After the review board and the governor deny clemency, Poncelet requests that Sister Helen serve as his spiritual advisor during the final week of his life. She agrees and immediately intensifies her efforts to lead him to admit his responsibility in the deaths. Assuring her that he and God were “squared away.” Poncelet attempts to turn back her probing questions about the state of his soul. Explaining that it is not that easy, she challenges him. “You have some work to do. Salvation is not a free ride. You have to participate. Redemption is about admitting truth, about guilt, and about personal responsibility. Own up to the part you played in the deaths.”

Sister Helen’s journey with Poncelet through the last week of his life moves him to the point of honesty as he discovers that truth truly liberates. The final scenes overwhelm viewers with powerful emotion and some confusion of feelings. Poncelet admits he murdered Walter Delacroix. He tearfully owns up to the fact that he raped Hope Percy. Asking if he truly takes responsibility for both of the deaths, Matthew replies, “Yes, Ma’am.”

“You have dignity now no one can take away from you. You are a son of God, Matthew Poncelet,” Sister Helen declares.

“No one ever called me a son of God before,” Matthew replies as tears stream down his face. “I never had no love. It figures I’d have to die to find love. Thank you for loving me.”

Two final scenes bring the movie to a powerful conclusion. Just before the guards come for him, Helen counsels Matthew, “The last thing in this world I want you to see is the face of love. You look at me. I’ll be the face of love for you.” Then the guard who leads him to the execution chamber cries out, “Dead man walking!”

Once in the room of death, guards strap Matthew to a table and lift him up vertically before his accusers who sit in rows behind a glass wall. He apologizes to the parents, saying he hopes his death brings them some relief. Stretched out as on a cross, Matthew goes on to offer the opinion that killing is wrong no matter who does it. Lowered now horizontally to table height and attached to the IVs designed to deliver the poisons, Matthew stares into the loving face of his one friend, Helen Prejean. He dies looking into the face of love as the images of the two dead teens appear as a reflection on the glass wall.

Dead Man Walking challenged my faith at a deep, deep level. This story of radical grace and unflinching forgiveness forced me to consider again the basic claims of the Christian system. Like the thief on the cross, Matthew Poncelet lives as a vile, heinous human being who deserved to die. Yet, God’s love and mercy reply. “He will live on in my love.” The message is clear. With God’s grace the price of justice has been exacted elsewhere from someone else’s life. The scandal of the gospel is real. If God’s love can accept and renew a person as evil as Matthew Poncelet, can I really accept it, believe it? What Poncelet received through the hard work of one of God’s suffering servants is exactly what all people need in life and in death, myself included.

Christians fail to heed their basic calling: to stand between the victims of evil and the perpetrators of sin just as Jesus did. Understanding their own need for mercy, true followers of Jesus will expect to be taken advantage of as they carry on the hard, hard work of redemption. *Dead Man Walking* portrays the heart of the truth of the gospel in all of its power, passion, and surprise.

As the movie closes, Walter Delacroix’s father attends the funeral of his son’s killer. “I don’t know why I came. I have lots of hate. I don’t have your faith,” he tells Helen. “It is not faith, it is not that easy. It’s work,” she replies. “Maybe we could help each other find a way out of the hatred.” In the final scene Sister Helen and Mr. Delacroix kneel in a rural church building somewhere near Slidell. They are hard at work in prayer. Together they battle the hate.

The message of this amazing movie casts helpful light on the essence of the gospel for a church struggling with the pains of renewal and change. Our energy should be spent in efforts to plumb the depths of the amazing grace lavished on us by a God of great surprises. Our ministries should be guided by the radical example of the suffering Messiah who leads us into the death chambers of the earth for the sake of murderers and rapists whom he loves every bit as much as he loves us.

The Mentally Healthy Geographer

by Steve Weathers
May – June, 1996

I'm perhaps closer than ever before to pinpointing exactly what constitutes mental health in a geographer. And the most recent clue came from an unexpected source—a painting.

Recently, the National Gallery of Art in Washington hosted an exhibition of 21 paintings by Johannes Vermeer, the 17th century Dutch artist. I became interested and bought a copy of *Smithsonian*, which was running a rich photo spread on the show. Interestingly, one of the works reproduced was titled *The Geographer*.

In the painting, Vermeer depicts a scholar bent at the waist over an open chart. But he has captured his geographer at a strategic moment—the moment when the cartographer's compass has been lifted from the paper and now lies limp in the man's hand, the moment when his eyes have risen and drifted from the artist's representation before him. At the very moment when, with thought-tilted head and a vacuous stare, the geographer seems to have apprehended with his inner eye the reality beyond the map.

Studying the picture, I couldn't help but reflect on that knotty question I'd been struggling to answer: What constitutes mental health in the geographic profession? Vermeer's painting spoke clearly: A geographer is at the peak of mental health, his inner life absolutely robust, at the very moment when the map to which he's devoted such time and attention no longer satisfies. At the moment when he looks past the two-dimensional representation to the reality beyond.

The painting spoke again. A map, Vermeer seemed to say, has performed one of its highest functions when it cultivates within us, not an appetite for more map reading—for more longitude and latitude, for more color-coded countries, for more topographical symbols—but when it cultivates within us an appetite for that exotic, tropical, spice-laden land only inadequately depicted in the cartographer's chart.

The painting spoke much-needed truth. Because we've all known geographers, I suspect, whose mental health was ... well, questionable.

We've all known geographers who seemed so enamored of map reading itself—the technical thrill of tracing clean straight lines to their discrete point of convergence; the intellectual mastery one feels when he's committed all mountain and river systems to memory; the subtle and delicious pride one feels in knowing, “Whoever else may be lost, I possess the sure coordinates to my position and a foolproof course to my destination!”—we've all known geographers so enamored of the mere act of map reading itself that they showed no serious desire to travel. They never seemed to lift their eyes from the chart to stare with heartsick longing at something the map could never do justice to.

From appearances at least, geography had become an end in itself for these unhealthy individuals: an arena for demonstrating one's technical expertise, a stage upon which to display one's intellectual prowess, or—worse still—the basis of a subtle supercilious disdain for less accomplished practitioners of the trade. But Vermeer's painting said it's when those things don't matter anymore, it's when the map reader's eyes have drifted dreamily to the window, that we're witnessing the apex of the geographical experience.

Let's guard against a misunderstanding. There's nothing wrong or abnormal about loving a map. On the contrary, it's natural, isn't it? When you've fallen in love with a foreign country or some distant city and yet you know that you'll likely never get to visit it—no, not in this life—it's natural to fall in love with the map as a surrogate of sorts.

There's a charming anecdote told about Branwell Bronte, the lesser known brother of those famous sisters responsible for so many Victorian novels. Like his sisters, Branwell was brought up on the bleak moors of Yorkshire. But at an early age he fell in love with London, that distant city of light and life. He consumed travel literature on London. He devoured maps. He memorized street names. And he lived between doubt and hope that one day he'd actually set foot in the unseen metropolis.

The story is told of a Londoner who stopped overnight in Haworth, the rural Yorkshire village in which the Brontes lived, and of the local tavern keeper who immediately sent for Branwell. A cosmopolitan visitor, the taverner felt, would expect refined table talk, and Branwell was the only male in the village well-read and well-cultivated enough to provide it. So a runner was dispatched, Branwell summoned, and the boy sat with the visitor to provide dinner conversation. In the course of their talk Bronte spoke of London fashions, amusements, points of interest, short-cuts—displaying, in effect, a thorough familiarity with all things Londonish. It was only at the conclusion of his meal that the astonished visitor discovered that this youth had never actually been to the city—that all of his knowledge was derived from reading.

Such knowledge is not to be despised. There's something natural and laudable and even beautiful in the devotion one feels to a map when he knows that, more than likely—not in this life—he'll never set foot in that distant city of his dreams.

Another misunderstanding must be avoided. It's not surprising in the least that a person should come to reverence a map, the physical artifact itself, when that map has rescued him from dangerous disorientation.

If you've ever taken a wrong exit ramp off the interstate in a strange city at night and found yourself in what was obviously "the wrong part of town," you know how it feels to snatch up the road atlas and flip desperately to the appropriate page. And if there (praised be Rand and McNally!) you discover an enlarged street grid of the very neighborhood you're lost in—almost as if the cartographers knew how easy it is to be fooled by that wrong exit, almost as if they knew how serious it is for a naïve tourist to stray into this area, almost as if they'd somehow anticipated your personal ostness and fear—you know how natural it is to drop that road atlas by a bookbindery and pick it up two weeks later, now covered in tasteful calfskin, a silk ribbon

sewn into the spine, the pages gilded and thumb-indexed, your name now monogrammed in gold in the lower right-hand corner.

Who could blame such a response? There's something natural and laudable and, yes, beautiful in treating the source of one's rescue with due reverence.

But a map is a map.

Its beauty and inspired artistry may tempt us to make it a wall hanging. Its vision and uncanny accuracy may prompt us to decorate it in reverential awe. But a map is, ultimately, a map. And maps are made for travelers.

So a map lover had best ask himself on occasion—preferably in the quiet of his study, far from the headiness of the geographers' annual conventions—if he's in earnest about traveling. He'd do well to ask himself regularly, in fact, "If I had my choice today, would I gladly fold the cartographer's compass, push aside the parchment, drape the globe, and go there?"

AfterGlow: Common Denominators

by Phillip Morrison
May – June, 1996

I have happy, small-boy memories of walking with my maternal grandfather the few blocks to the church building, smelling his bay rum shaving lotion, and swelling with pride when he was asked to lead a closing prayer. Though he was a preacher for the Church of the Nazarene, he would plan his visits to our home when he could attend the Gospel Meeting at the Church of Christ. Papa certainly didn't agree with everything he heard at those services, and the people at that church assuredly didn't endorse his preaching. But they both understood that people of good will could benefit from the contributions each made to a serious study of the Word. It was a happier time in our history—a time when we were more willing to reach out to people of different religious views.

It all stopped when a visiting song leader took exception, treated my grandfather with disdain, and made him feel unwelcome. He never again set foot in a Church of Christ building, not even to hear me preach.

My home church also hosted some community singings attended by people from various churches. They lasted until someone complained about a Methodist leading a song. What's a Methodist song leader supposed to do at a community singing? Some may think we were better once freed of those "corrupting denominational influences." I don't share that feeling.

As a college history major, I discovered that much of the restoration history I had learned from childhood needed to be unlearned. We tend to know something about our recent history but little about our early history. Almost forgotten are the ecumenical efforts of early restoration leaders who would hardly recognize the church in our time. From Alexander Campbell to Barton W. Stone to David Lipscomb, they would be denied pulpit privileges and even fellowship in many of our churches. The point of all this is not that we need to rewrite our history, but that we need to be concerned about the direction the church will go in the present and the future.

Time magazine cited a study by the University of Akron which described "Evangelical Protestant as the most common religious self-identification in the U. S. (26%), followed by Catholic (23%) and mainline Protestant (17%). Beliefs closely associated with Evangelicalism—that salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ, and that the Bible is inerrant, or utterly truthful—are held by almost half of all Americans." I have never known a time when there was so much interest in Bible study or so many were determined to be people of God. Issues of eternal import are being joined in the arena. We in Churches of Christ must not spend our time beating up on each other in practice-field scrimmages.

The opportunities we have now are the ones we have worked for and prayed for throughout the American Restoration period. God has heard our prayers, but he will not be pleased if our main contributions are to watch and criticize.