

# **Wineskins Magazine**

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## A Peculiar People

by Rubel Shelly  
April – May, 1997

On February 13, 1997, a British journal called *The Fortean Times* published its finding that the world was 2.9 percent weirder in 1996 than in 1995. Are you surprised?

The monthly magazine published in London pointed to such stories as rumors of a mysterious Puerto Rican goatsucker. These rumors popped up after goat corpses were discovered with the liver and blood sucked out of them. The first report was in Puerto Rico, but now tales have come in from other Latin American countries, Spain, and even Miami.

Other stories reported in the press during 1996 were about sightings of water monsters, weeping statues, strange cults, and the ever-popular UFOs. A high level of interest in weird happenings was also reflected, said the associate editor of the magazine, in the success of films like *Independence Day* and television's *The X-Files*.

The same editor attributes much of the upwards climb of the weirdness index in the Human World—they also index the Animal World (up 4.8 percent). The Natural World (up 3.8 percent), and the Paranormal World (up 1 percent)—to Pre-Millennial Tension (PMT). “PMT is gripping people,” he said. “People get worried near the end of a century, with millennium cults predicting the end of the world.” Even so, he admits, the levels of weirdness in 1993 were still higher than last year.

I'm not sure their number is as high as it ought to be. As best I could tell, the magazine didn't even discuss Dennis Rodman, Madonna, or Timothy McVeigh. Why, the incredibly silly attention given to a Nashville cinnamon roll that is claimed to bear a resemblance to Mother Teresa didn't get factored into the equation!

Seriously, though, Christians are supposed to live with a relatively high Weirdness Index attached to us. Just take a look at these biblical statements.

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God [a peculiar people, KJV], that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Peter 2:9-12).

“For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange

that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.” (1 Peter 4:3-4).

“[Jesus Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own [a peculiar people, KJV], eager to do what is good.” (Titus 2:14).

Mark it down: *Live under the sovereignty of God and you will be weird by the standards of this world.* And I’m just not sure that a 2.9 percent differential from the worldly norm will be enough either to make you noticeably different enough that anyone around you would know you are a Christian or to get you to heaven.

This is not a call for smugness. It is not a plea for holier-than-thouness. I am not talking about self-righteousness. But it is an unabashed appeal for us to take our faith in Christ seriously enough that it makes a genuine and observable difference between our way of thinking, working, relating, talking, and being and the lifestyle of the world.

This sort of separation is mandated by Scripture. Some have confused this mandate, however, with group isolation and a sectarian view of the church. Why?

It is much easier to establish one’s identity within a group, proclaim that group right above all other groups, and denigrate the intelligence and/or sincerity of others than to take seriously the spiritual lifestyle called for in Scripture. It is easier to argue than to love, to judge than to be gentle, and to be defensive than to be peaceable.

The sectarianism for which we—and others (for we have no monopoly on any sinful behavior!)—have been known is less that of lifestyle than denominational rivalry. In fact, we have sometimes claimed undenominational status while doing the one thing that is distinctly denominational—defending a distinct name, distinct polity, distinct manner of worship, etc. It is first-order legalism that discerns a rigid pattern in the life of the church in the New Testament.

In lifestyle issues we have chosen to champion, some of them have been sectarian and legalistic as well. Some of us have fought drinking wine in smaller amounts than Jesus himself drank while preserving both institutional and personal racism. Others have shunned brothers who smoked, sisters who danced, and children who played baseball on Sunday while pursuing a materialistic lifestyle six days a week and gathering on Sunday to congratulate themselves on being the only ones right on the millennium or baptism.

So go ahead. Rate yourself. And I pray that you come out with a substantial number on the weirdness index in lifestyle and a very low one on your religiosity scale.

## Christians Only – Not the Only Christians

*by Mike Cope*  
*April – May, 1997*

Editors' Note: Mike Cope recently delivered a series of messages at the Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas, on the strengths of our Restoration heritage. One of the messages, "Christians Only—Not the Only Christians," has been transcribed and widely distributed by critics. Here we are including the message (minus the introduction and conclusion for the sake of space), choosing to keep it in its original (i.e., oral) form.

Does anybody know what I mean when I talk about "The Lord's Church"? In my upbringing, that was the code word for talking about us. We didn't want to use "the Church of Christ" all the time, because that might make us sound like a denomination and so we would use another phrase, "The Lord's Church." But that was a way of boiling it down so we knew we weren't talking about all the people out there in Christendom anymore. We were talking about the real church, Churches of Christ. And it didn't matter whether you capitalized the first "C" in Churches of Christ or not; we knew that we were talking about God's people and that all others were lost.

That old joke about being in heaven and saying, "Be quiet, they think they're the only ones here," wasn't funny to us. We believe that! There was no humor in this offensive quip.

I remember clearly the night I took my Baptist girlfriend to church and heard the preacher talk about Baptists and Christians as two distinct groups. I wasn't ready for her angry reaction, because I'd never thought of any other option. It made perfect sense to me to speak of it that way.

"The Lord's Church" was insider language to mean, "the Real One," versus denominational groups of people who think they are Christians.

My view of history at that time, and I'm not sure how many share this, was a very simple view. That is, that originally there was this perfect church. (I don't know now which one I was thinking of. There don't seem to be many perfect ones in the New Testament.) And then there were hundreds of years with no church. And then in the early eighteen hundreds, suddenly again there was this church recreated because we went back to the old well.

Now that's a pretty simple approach to church history. It was one that appealed to me because you could ignore about seventeen hundred years in there! (That cut down on what you had to learn in church history class for the finals!)

We emphasized the point by putting cornerstones on our buildings that said the church was built in Jerusalem in A. D. 33. Now people down the road may have a little marker that said it was built in 1893, but that was the problem! They were late-comers! They aren't "first century Christians."

Now I can't even conceive of having believed that. I don't blame anyone for my having believed it, but I did.

But I've learned a lot about that understanding. It is an "illusion of innocence." Movements like ours begin with a wonderful, healthy, vibrant focus. But then another generation comes along and forgets much of what was healthy and vibrant. Calcification and petrification begin. Eventually, we live in this illusion that we're the only true followers of Christ, thinking that if others aren't like us in all ways, then they aren't following God. There have been several historical movements that have gone through the process. We're but one of them.

There was, of course, a lot of security in this for me as a teenager. There was lots of comfort in believing that God has a very select group of people and that I was part of that people (at least if we weren't wrong on some doctrinal issues!).

But I was faced with a couple of problems.

First, I went to Harding University and sat in Jimmy Allen's Romans class.\* A lot of you remember Jimmy from his sermon on Hell. You can remember the temperature as he preached on it! What you may not know is that through Christian history many of the people with the strongest messages on Hell also believe most strongly in the doctrine of grace. And that was certainly true with Jimmy Allen.

I sat in the class with all my presuppositions about being the only Christians—us and no one else. I kept listening to this man whom I admired as he opened the book of Romans and spoke about salvation in Jesus Christ alone and as he talked about undenominational Christianity. Some cracks started to form in my "solid foundation"!

Second, the greater problem was my exposure to other people. If you want to believe that you're the only Christians, you have to be very careful about whom you expose yourself to. It's best to go hide in caves like one group did in the first century. If you keep your distance from others, then you can continue to convince yourselves that you're the only faithful ones.

But what are you going to do with the many wonderful Spirit-filled, Jesus-like, prayerful believers who don't go to church where we go, who weren't baptized the same way we were baptized, and whose doctrine doesn't line up exactly like ours? That was the crisis for me.

As I read church history, I came across people who had given their lives for Jesus Christ, people who had watched their babies be murdered rather than recant their belief in Jesus, People who prayed and wrote books on prayer like Jesus Christ was their closest friend.

And then I started noticing the people who were having such an impact on me.

First, and foremost, Billy Graham in the fervency of his evangelical message and his integrity. Richard Foster and his commitment to prayer and holiness. Tony Campolo and his call for Christian service and resisting the world's influence.

But the biggest challenge for me was a man named John Stott. As I read more and more works by this Anglican preacher, I wanted to be like him in many ways. He's a man with a passion to bring the message of Jesus Christ to this culture.

And then I got to spend three days with twenty men — a little group that included Stott. The closer I got to him the more I saw that everything I'd seen from a distance was even truer up close. He's a man of utter holiness. A man in whom the Spirit works powerfully. A man of prayer. And yet, on the other hand, a man who didn't share my understanding of baptism. Full of God's word. Full of God's Spirit. But different understanding of baptism.

We could earlier in Churches of Christ have called this the "James Dobson problem." Nearly two decades ago, we had churches wanting to use James Dobson's film strips. But what were we to do with the man himself? When we showed Paul Faulkner's videos, we would say, "This is a video series by Christian psychologist Paul Faulkner." But when we showed Dobson's videos, we'd introduce it as "a video series by James Dobson, a psychologist who writes and speaks from a Christian perspective." This kept us from having to say he was actually a Christian. We didn't quite know what to do with him. He was a man of deep holiness and prayer who was trying to save our families.

Then one day it hit me. I needed to come clean on this. Because I believe that these are God's people, even though they're not a part of my little group.

I — not necessarily the people around me — had been like the apostles in Mark 9: "Lord, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop." You can imagine Jesus saying, "Excuse me. You did what? You think it's better to have demons running wild than to accept someone who doesn't have a baptismal certificate with the authentic raised seal?"

Even bigger problems than these public figures are the ones you and I live next to: godly people, some of whom we're in Bible study groups with. People of the word and of the Spirit. Some of you teach with, live next to, and go to school with people of great godliness. I'm not suggesting that we know they're Christians because they work hard for Jesus. I'm not trying to sneak legalism in here. I'm talking about people in whom you see God's Spirit working. I realized that I had been misreading scripture. Scripture never tells us to draw a line of fellowship anytime there is a difference. If we do that, we'll be the most divided people in existence, while Jesus in John 17 begs for a united witness to the unbelieving world.

It hit me that unity can't come by uniformity. We are never going to be united by trying to clone people, by insisting that everyone have the same personality preferences, or understanding of all scriptures. We'll never have unity that way. This brings us back to the first lesson in this series, where I pointed out that if you want uniformity, the thing to do isn't to give everyone a Bible but to hide everyone's Bibles. The church in the middle ages had much better unity of that kind. People then were told by church officials what to believe. The minute you start translating the Bible and giving it to every child and adult saying, "Read this book and follow what it says," then you'd better be willing to accept some differences.

Romans 14 and 15 speaks about a doctrinal issue where there was a lot of disagreement. Paul is giving them advice. Don't look down your noses at others; don't demand that others agree with you completely. In Romans 15:7 he told both sides to "accept one another just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God."

There is a circle of fellowship. But the circle has got to have a central point and a circumference. The central point is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ alone. That's the center of this fellowship at the Highland Church. We believe that God has revealed himself most clearly through Jesus.

But now, at this point I hear some get sloppy and say, "And that's it." But that's not a circle. That's just a point. That's the critical center of the "circle of fellowship." But scripture also describes a circumference: first, the way we live (You can't live in open rebellion against God!); and second, the way we hold to the central message of the gospel (You can't deny the basic message of Jesus Christ and his saving work!).

You can't live in willful disobedience to God's Word and remain in the church's fellowship. You can't kick him out of your life and be in fellowship with his people. The church is going to bring you back in by loving you enough to say, "You can't do that and be in our fellowship."

Then there are some things that you have got to hold to in your teaching. Not every little matter, but the central tenets of Christianity. For example, if someone said, "I don't believe that Jesus Christ really came in the flesh," that's a big one. That was actually happening when 2 John was written.

Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

Here's an example of this circumference. If someone starts messing with the essence of Jesus Christ and the salvation that is in him alone, there is a breach in fellowship.

But a lot of the issues that come along don't fall under such foundational denial. Disagreements come from honest, godly people grappling to understand scripture.

Now, here's my question this morning: "Do we have to chunk our heritage?" Absolutely not! This is the heritage where we can recognize other believers!

This past year, Promise Keepers hosted the largest gathering of ministers ever in the history of the church, as far as anybody knows, in Atlanta. I didn't get to go, but I heard about it. One evening Max Lucado, former member of this church and now minister of the Oak Hills Church of Christ in San Antonio, spoke on unity. He called on Christians to quit building walls between denominations, but to let those walls come down. To honor one another and to give a witness to the world by the way we treat one another. To quit thinking that we're the only little ones in Christianity. It was a valiant call for unity.

Someone told me that after the sermon a couple Charismatic preachers began laughing. One turned to the other and said, “Isn’t that just like God? Isn’t that just like God? Use a Church of Christ preacher to call us to unity!”

Yes, that is like God. That message fairly represented our heritage. Max wasn’t telling us to take a detour. He was being faithful not only to scripture but also to this heritage he’s a part of.

This is what our people said: “In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, love.” And they also insisted that we be “Christians only, but not the only Christians.” At our best, we’ve been a group that is committed to the ideal of undenominational Christianity. Yet we’ve also understood that in this world this ideal won’t be fully attained. But we don’t quit pursuing the ideal!

Barton W. Stone, one of the great early leaders of the Restoration Movement, said that unity should be our Polar Star. “How do we come to unity?” he asked. He suggested four possibilities.

The first is Book Union. Let someone write a creed and we’ll all sign it. But that won’t work. Who would get to write it?

The second option is Head Union. Give everyone a Bible and expect them to interpret every passage the same.

The third option is Water Union. Make sure everyone is baptized alike, and then we’ll have union by water.

None of these would offer us unity, he insisted. Instead, Stone called for Fire Union. We are united by the fire of God’s Holy Spirit, by God’s presence among us.

Alexander Campbell, another key leader of the Restoration Movement, was asked in 1837 by a woman in Virginia about the people scattered about who haven’t been immersed the way we teach. Are they Christians or not?

Campbell, who at times could sound pretty rigid, replied:

“Should I find a Pedobaptist [which would include someone like John Stott] more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immersed on a profession of the ancient faith, I would not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most....I cannot be a perfect Christian without a right understanding and a cordial reception of immersion in its true and scriptural meaning and design. But he that thence infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he who affirms that none are live but those of clear and full vision.”

These leaders were committed to unity. The prayer of Jesus Christ was ringing in their ears. Does that mean they watered down what they understood? Absolutely not! These people understood that you could call for unity and still keep hammering out your understanding of the scriptures. These aren’t mutually exclusive.

That's where we have gone astray. We think we have to give something up. We somehow think that we can't believe what we studied last week about the Lord's Supper and baptism and still hold to what our movement used to believe about unity. But you can!

At our best we've been a group committed to the ideal of nondenominational Christianity, eager to study God's Word and obey it, while in humility recognizing that we don't have full comprehension of his truth. In gratitude we've recognized that faith in Christ alone is what brings salvation.

Aren't there some lost people in denominations? Someone might ask. Well, yes, there are...just as there are in this assembly this morning. But there are also Christ-followers out there, as well. As the best of our heritage has always known, we can believe this without giving up our deep convictions about scripture, about baptism, and about worship.

Well, as long as I'm hanging out here on a limb, let me tell you a couple dreams I have. The first is a long-term dream. It seems to me that something is happening right now — something from God. Not just in the world but even here in Abilene. I get that feeling from what happened at Promise Keepers this year, and especially from Max's speech.

Also from the speech that Mark Henderson gave at the ACU lectures this year. Mark talked about moving to Boulder, Colorado. Before he went there he could always be with people who were like him; but when he went to Boulder he didn't have that privilege. Only 7% of the people there attend church. It's a different environment, and so he was thankful for a group of ministers who were already meeting—ministers from many different denominations. He had fears as he went in, but then as he heard them pray and saw the power of the Spirit in them he gave God thanks for their friendship and fellowship. I agree with that and wasn't surprised that Mark believed that. But what I wasn't ready for was the affirmation of the people there at Moody Coliseum. They were ready to hear that message! The vast majority stood and applauded afterwards, many with tears in their eyes, because they remembered that this represented who we are. We are the people committed to unity because the Lord prayed for it.

There's a group of ministers like that here in Abilene whom I've been with, and it's powerful to hear their prayers for one another. There's a Baptist church on South 7th that recently sent Highland a note saying they had spent a Wednesday evening praying for us. Where is all this coming from?

My long-term dream is that Highland will lead out in this direction of unity. I would love to have a time when Phil Christopher, a friend who is the minister at 1st Baptist, and I could exchange pulpits. Not to show that we're progressive: I have no interest in that. Not to stick it in somebody's face so they'll be bothered: I'm sure not interested in that! But as an opportunity to express our mutual faith to other believers and to witness to unbelievers through the unity of God's people. Think of the power if Highland leads out in calling all believers to unity in Jesus Christ!

Now, here's my more immediate goal. Maybe this is really the point of this message. Our leaders may or may not decide to do what I just suggested, but I know this: all of that is irrelevant if this

one church isn't itself a model of unity. We are just clanging cymbals if we go out there saying, "Yeah, we ought to build bridges," but then don't show this unity in our own church.

The ultimate point of this lesson is that we must treat one another with attitudes that are godly, with humility, with compassion, and—in our disagreements (like maybe even concerning this morning's lesson!) — with the love of the Lord. "In all things, love."

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\*The author, while wanting to express gratitude for Jimmy Allen's insights twenty years ago, doesn't wish to indicate that Jimmy would agree with all the conclusions in this message.

## The Christ-Centered Church

*by William S Banowsky, delivered at Abilene Christian University, February 21, 1996  
April – May, 1997*

As we close this 78th Annual Bible Lectureship, we want to thank President Royce Money, Chairman of the Board of Trustees Don Crisp, with whom I worship at Highland Oaks in Dallas, and Director William E Young, with whom I served at the Broadway church in Lubbock 35 years ago. I also salute this faculty, the strongest group of scholars and teachers ever to serve here.

I cannot imagine my life apart from Abilene Christian University. In 12 days, it is 60 years since I was born in Abilene. In 1931, Mother and Dad met on this campus and were married by their Bible teacher, Homer Hailey, in the parlor of Zellner Hall. From 1921 until 1939, Granddad Banowsky enrolled all five of his children in this school and, from 1931 until 1940, Granddad Slater enrolled all four of his. Banowskys and Slaters were gratified when President Teague and this institution honored my parents with the “Christian Service Award” for 1988. The next year we lost my mother. At age 85, Dad is blissfully remarried to the former Lazell Lambert, naturally also an Abilene native.

My only brother graduated in 1956. Still in high school, I’d pick up the phone in Fort Worth and the sober voice would say, “This is John C. Stevens, Dean of Men at ACC. May I talk to your father?” To whom he would say, “Brother Wade, I can’t get Dick out of the pool hall!” Thanks to John, Dr. Richard L. Banowsky is now a highly conservative elder in the Lord’s church. I wanted to come here, too, but we had no baseball team and Lipscomb gave me a full scholarship. President Morris pressured Coach Beauchamp to give me a football scholarship but he stuck to his principles. “We have so few,” he implored, “and this guy’s no good!” Let me assure you, Brother Beauchamp made the right call. Ironically, the entire Highland Oaks’ staff is here tonight under the leadership of my esteemed friend, Dr. Gary R. Beauchamp, beginning his 20th year as minister of this congregation.

Wrestling with the 1968 decision to leave the pulpit for Christian education, I coveted most one man’s counsel. We met in a Midland motel room and talked two hours. The wisdom of Don Morris was pivotal in making possible my presidency at Pepperdine University. My mother always regarded my move from pulpit to presidency as a big step backward. When I moved from a Christian to a state university, she knew I was headed the wrong way. When I left education to go into business, she knew I had hit bottom.

Coming back home to Texas into full-time church work, with people one-on-one in their pain, I find a deeply troubled brotherhood. On Monday night, Mark Henderson said from this pulpit, “We are not in danger of dividing, we are in danger of shattering.” Douglas A Foster of your faculty said in his recent book, subtitled Churches of Christ Face the 21st Century, that six separate schisms now threaten our worst division in a hundred years. No man-made plan can hold us together. The one reality Who can hold us together is the Person who has called us together—the Lord Jesus Christ. Some earlier Abilene lecturers pointed powerfully to this reality. Therefore, aside from the Bible, I will quote only earlier Abilene lecturers as we consider

three characteristics of Christ's church: the mystery of Christ, the universality of Christ, and the indwelling of Christ.

### **The Mystery of Christ**

It is only natural, living as we must with terrifying uncertainty, to make things as simple as we can. But the mystery of Christ is not susceptible to simplification. Paul stresses this mystery in Ephesians 1:9 and Ephesians 3:9, as well as Colossians 1:26 and Colossians 2:2, where he calls it "the mystery of God, even Christ, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden." "Great indeed," he writes to Timothy, "is the mystery of our religion." Even after the life of Christ, at the end of the first century John still lived with the mystery, writing at Revelation 10:7: "Not until the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel will the mystery of God, as first announced to the prophets, be finished."

There is no greater mystery than the Godhead, which Batsell Barrett Baxter tackled at these lectures in 1958. "When we have said that there is but one God, that the Father, Son, and Spirit is each God, but that the Father, Son, and Spirit is each a distinct person, we have stated the doctrine of the Trinity fully and completely." Yes, perhaps fully and completely, but not transparently. "It is far more important for us to have a right faith in the Godhead," Brother Baxter conceded, "than for us to be certain we understand all the fine points."

For most people the virgin birth is preposterously inconceivable. If a woman claims to be pregnant without sexual intercourse—and occasionally one does—nobody believes her. And the mystery of the virgin birth inspires the greater mystery of Christ's humanity and divinity. That we bow down before Mary's baby as God Incarnate, accepting something so inconceivable as a virgin birth, is possible only by faith. Such faith does not resolve hard questions. But it certainly enriches their mystery.

There are also many practical mysteries. Why is a fetus monstrously deranged by the misalignment of a single chromosome? Why do accidents of genetics predispose millions more to hideous handicaps? Why do West Texas tornadoes decimate life in 30 straight houses, but leave one house in the middle utterly untouched? What if you had been the mother who dropped off her three-year-old at the Oklahoma City day care center only to pick up her body parts in a plastic bag?

We meet Christ in life's inexplicable mysteries. Our faith sustains us, not with easy answers, but through agonizing questions, including especially the loneliness of death which is our inescapable fate. The mystery of death is why the world's most powerful symbol is not a glorious victory flag—it is "an emblem of suffering and shame." Paul confessed he knew nothing "except Christ and him crucified." And in the gospel's most plaintive sentence, Christ finally despaired, "Why hast Thou forsaken me?" Life begins on the other side of despair. Until you come to that fleeting moment when you, too, doubt the meaning of anything, you may not yet have come to the fullest meaning of faith.

Existence itself is the greatest mystery. Christ dumbfounded simplistic Jews declaring, "Before Abraham was, I Am." When Moses implored the burning bush, "What is your name?" the

enigmatic bush answered, "I Am That I Am!" The ultimate mystery is this I Am mystery, the ontological mystery of being itself. The gospel audaciously claims that Eternal Mystery came finally out of the bush inscrutably burning and exposed Himself to us most perfectly in Christ. How can words ever capture the ecstasy of the possibility that Ultimate Being is like this loving Person?

From this Ground of All Being flows the astonishing mystery of your very own life. There has never been another DNA like yours and there never will be. It is possible that you always were and always will be—certainly at least in the mind of God. Never take your unique existence for granted, nor live it out in the beliefs of others. The essential step toward knowing who you are is full appreciation that you are! Existence precedes essence.

This is precisely how Moses got to be Moses. He is revered by three world religions, not because he ever solved the mystery, but because he surrendered to faith. In Hebrews it is written that a thousand years before Christ was born, it was nonetheless the Mystical Christ who inspired Moses "to account the reproach of Christ as greater riches than the treasures of Egypt. By faith Moses endured as seeing him who is invisible." Then the writer adds: "But no man hath seen God at any time." So long as we are in the human predicament the best we can do is "see through a glass darkly." When we seek after God we don't even "know how to pray as we ought." Despite our confident Sunday sermons, we haven't yet figured God out. The closest even a Moses could get was an elusive voice flaming from a quenchless fire. On less symptomatic behavior some men have been diagnosed as clearly schizophrenic. The very best we can say for any man who makes life-defining decisions by seeing someone who is invisible is that he is animated by majestic mystery.

Life literally vibrates with ambiguity. By craving security—as all humans do—and repressing ambiguity—as all humans try—we created a closed system which wraps life up and ties a ribbon around it. But since "faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen," religion without ambiguity is religion without faith. Let us thank God we are saved by the wondrous mystery of "grace through faith, and that it is a gift of God, not of works lest any man should glory." Nothing is more compelling than the honest humility which admits very often, "I just don't know." Life with unrelieved mystery is, indeed, life with unrelieved tension. But such openness is the only way to be fully alive. In 1920, the historic President of Abilene Christian College, Jesse P. Sewell, pled for openness: "Ours is a plea for progress. The importance of our plea does not consist in the particular truth we now practice, but rather in our attitude toward all truth. If we ever allow ourselves to become satisfied our usefulness will be ended. Our minds must ever be kept open."

### **The Universality of Christ**

At the ACC Lectureship in 1926, C. M. Stubblefield supported Sewell's openness by quoting the Restoration Movement motto: "We claim to be Christians only, but we do not claim to be the only Christians." But two years later, in 1928, Hall L. Calhoun described our closedness: "We are called fundamentalists, Pharisees, literalists, and legalists. Some say we were begotten by egotism, conceived in Bibliolatry, brought forth in ignorance, propagated in bigotry, and our

progeny the narrowest of all sectarians. Outsiders describe us as preachers of unity but practitioners of division, loving ourselves while despising others.”

Several speakers said we had even closed in on the name of Christ, thereby undermining universality. Paul pictured sectarianism as separated groups shouting: “I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas, and I am of Christ.” G. C. Brewer said, right here in Abilene, that we are the heirs of that first sect which separated itself from others in the name of Christ. “We have in spite of ourselves,” he said in 1934, “become a sect whose special purpose is to contend against sectarianism.” In the history of our people, G. C. Brewer was the quintessential preacher’s preacher. Quoting virtually the entire New Testament from memory, he was esteemed everywhere. In 1934, Brother Brewer added: “We have sectarianized the name ‘Church of Christ.’ It is so fixed that if we should insert the name ‘Jesus’ it would cause great confusion.”

The problem is not the name. When we broke with the Christian Church in 1906, we had to start calling ourselves something. By great good fortune, nobody else had copyrighted it and we were free to choose the most attractive name in the list of American denominations. But Brewer saw us appropriate this name in his lifetime, right before his eyes. He saw us apply it denominationally. And he saw us exclude other believers. We sectarianize the name, he warned, anytime we use it “to include only a limited number of Christians.” In 1933, Cled E. Wallace, bearer of a legendary family name among our people, said, “first century believers were not distinguished by any name separating them from any of the other people of God.” But as early as 1920, M. C. Kurfees, my wife’s great uncle who wrote the definitive book against instrumental music, said here: “We use the name nowadays to mean only those Christians who believe and worship exactly as we do. We should not exclude other children of God who may make some mistakes in worshipping or working.” As hard as it is to admit, we too make mistakes. E. W. McMillan, who died in Dallas at 101, was for years Chairman of the Bible Department here. With his advanced degree from Baylor, he constantly urged us not to exclude others. In 1934, Brother McMillan warned: “Let us know that we, too, are susceptible to all of the errors religious thinkers have ever made.”

But what about obedience to sound doctrine? As early as 1919 F. L. Young answered at Abilene: “What is sound and what is unsound is hard for us to determine. And who made us the judge? Where did we get the authority to pass on someone else’s soundness? Did not Paul teach, ‘to his own master he stands or falls?’ The man who differs from us because he has learned more than we have we pronounce a heretic. While the man who thinks just as we do is sound, even though he never spent a moment examining the foundation of his faith.” G. C. Brewer agreed: “Even if a man teaches error, it would have to be very heinous to be as great a sin as the sin of division. Those engaged in division always justify it citing doctrinal loyalty. Frequently it is only our opinion that has been disregarded, not the word of God.”

The late Reuel Lemmons started out, as most of us did, with the idea of an identifiably exclusive church. We watched Reuel grow toward the universally inclusive church. Long serving on the ACU Board of Trustees, in his senior years he also served joyfully on Pepperdine University’s interdenominational Board of Regents. Nobody was harder on our sectarianism. Thirty years ago, in 1966, he said here: “When one of us establishes his own code and requires others to subscribe to it, he is guilty of producing a sect. Some have staggered not at carving the body of

Christ into ribbons to satisfy an indomitable ego. It is necessary that we stress the exceeding sinful spirit of a man who would split Christ's church."

Why, then, has our unity movement been so constantly dogged by division? Because sectarianism is always the result of over-simplification. In our effort to control all of life's exigencies, we professed to have all truth in perfectly restoring Christ's church. I know these are attitudes some of you never had, and most of us have outgrown. But we haven't openly acknowledged our growth. And we haven't confessed our self-righteousness to our neighbors, which is what the Bible advises. Until we do they may not know our attitudes have improved, and more than a few may continue to think of us when they read the parable of the Pharisee and the publican "which he spake concerning certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set all others at naught."

Those same egocentric needs, in the guise of racial and national pride, fuel bloody religious wars all over the world. At the core of these conflicts is always the conviction, for which the faithful willingly die, that "God is on our side." At this moment our planet is gravely threatened as nuclear weapons fall into the hands of religious zealots. Like James and John, narrow fundamentalists always pray: "Lord, wilt thou bid fire to come down from heaven and consume them? But Jesus turned and rebuked them." Now is the time for the Christ-centered church to exemplify the universal love of God and the brotherhood of all mankind.

### **The Indwelling Christ**

Finally, we must celebrate the personal indwelling of Christ. To know Christ personally, as opposed to knowing about him historically, is to experience Christ in your heart. Our great director, J. D. Thomas, chose this theme in 1957 when Eugene Clevenger opened the Lectures saying, "our greatest need is a deeper realization of what it means for Christ to be in us." That year many speakers cited Colossians, "even the mystery which had been hid for ages and generations, which is Christ in you the hope of glory."

But 30 years earlier, in 1927, Hall L. Calhoun, who held a Harvard Ph.D., proclaimed the Christ Spirit present in every son and in every daughter of the earth. Everyone is created in God's image, Calhoun taught, and since God and Christ are one, everyone is also created in the image of Christ. The Gospel of John anticipates Calhoun: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God. All things were made by Him. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. This was the true light which lighteth every man who cometh into the world."

In 1942, Jesse P. Sewell defined the Holy Spirit as the Christ Spirit. "Ye know him for he abideth with you and shall be in you." Brother Sewell took strong issue with those who preached, as he put it, "that the Spirit dwells in Christians through the Bible and only so." Prayer, he said, "Is one way the Spirit helps our infirmities in a manner which the word cannot." Brother Sewell did not believe in God because of the Bible. Brother Sewell believed in the Bible because of God.

But growing up in Fort Worth, I remember that our early preachers insisted there was no personal indwelling but that the Spirit was known indirectly only by knowing the Bible. In other

ways our faith was militantly personal and experiential. We rejected any intermediary but Christ, and stressed the universal priesthood of believers. But by deifying the letter of the Bible, we placed paper and ink between us and God, thus inventing our own brand of the mediational separation we so condemned in Catholic neighbors.

But later, other preachers started quoting the rest of the Bible, that we ourselves are “the living epistles of Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. Not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life.” And some even cited the Eternal Word, “that true light which lighteth every man who cometh into the world,” where he plainly said to literalists of every age: “Ye have not this word abiding in you. Ye search the scriptures because ye think in them ye have eternal life. But these are they which bear witness of me. And ye will not come to me that ye may have life.” What may be the Bible’s greatest chapter plainly says, “the Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Only the Lord “adds to the church those that are being saved.”

We can never know everything. But this resolves the dilemma as to how we should treat other believers. Nobody put it more clearly than Earnest Beam at this podium in 1935: “Whether we like it or not, whoever accepts Christ as Lord and gives evidence he is anxious to obey him is your brother in Christ. And happy are you if you have the Holy Spirit, and its first fruit which is love, and exercise it toward that brother.” But how do we concede that Christ may be enlightening others without opening Pandora’s box? How do we join hands with our committed allies in the fierce fight for cultural morality without being so worried about where they worship? How do we preach freely on Sunday from the sermons of hundreds of evangelicals without knowing how to embrace them in the work place on Monday? And how do we honor leaders like Dr. James Dobson who has done so much to save our families—as this courageous university did when he recently packed this arena for his Godly message—without being so diffident to embrace him as brother?

We fear opening the door even a crack lest we have no place to stop. Let us start and stop with Christ! While we defend our door, He said, “I am the door. If any man enter in by me he shall be saved. I am the good shepherd. I know mine own and mine own know me. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold. Them also must I bring.”

Who are these other sheep? Where is this other fold? In our finitude, we must leave enough room for the magnitude and mystery of Christ. We must be a little less fearful and a little more faithful, and simply let Christ be Christ. Fear is the antithesis of faith. The time has come for the courage of our convictions. “And I, if I be lifted up will draw all men unto myself.” We have nothing to fear but fear itself. We have everything to gain and nothing to lose, except a little pride and our illusion of certitude.

Ours is a highly nationalistic tradition and, in our search for certitude, we have trusted our own reason. As a boy, I remember our ridicule of “Holy Rollers” and the Bible verse painted on signs in front of our buildings: “Come let us reason together.” But faith is more a matter of intuition and feeling than of logic and reason. Nobody felt this more deeply than Paul, who called the gospel “the foolishness of God,” and scolded “Jews who ask for signs and Greeks who seek after wisdom.” Intellectual that he was, Paul still made no bones about it. Faith is a trusting leap away

from human reason. Paul's personal relationship with Christ, which changed the world forever, was not faith and reason. Neither was it faith through reason. It was faith not reason! "You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart!" We can no more convey this living reality to the completely rational mind than we can convey the idea of color to a blind man. Or, in Paul's words, to a "natural man who receiveth not the things of the Spirit for they are foolishness unto him, and he cannot know them because they are spiritually discerned."

Even our own brotherhood rationalists, who appear to prefer doctrinal logic, actually end up as we all do in the leap of faith. Beginning with the premise of pure reason, they end up practicing spiritual trust. This is not because of any deficiency in logical acumen, of which they have an abundance, but because their logic presupposes supernaturalism. They do not prove rationally the resurrection of Christ, no matter how many syllogisms they assemble. A man raised from the dead may be central to their practice but it will never work in theory. They receive this mystery, as we all must, as a matter of faith, no matter how much logic they weave around it. Honoring them as brothers, we wish for them enough self-awareness and courage to admit that they, too, are saved by faith. There is no salvation by syllogism. We will not win this fight for faith if we wage it on the basis of reason by the rules of rationalists on their home field. This is the Armageddon battle of irreconcilably opposed world views. In fact, ours is not even a world view. It is an other-world view. Reason sees the seen. Faith sees the unseen.

Pulpits preaching rationalism only magnify hunger in the pews for heart-felt religion. That's why Pentecostalism is today's fastest growing movement. And that's why we currently squabble over the growing numbers of our own people who also hunger for more emotional celebration. Those of us in the majority, who grew up with the stately 19th-century hymns and modulated dignity of the subdued service, should bear the burdens of the weak by conceding that worship style is mostly a matter of not eating meat. Our own personal worship might even improve if we could get out of our heads and open the wells of emotion in our souls. At Highland Oaks, we use both the traditional green song book and an improvised red one with the newer songs. On a recent Sunday, we sang this old song and I let my heart release a floodgate of tears.

Be with me Lord, I cannot live without thee, I dare not try to take one step alone. And when shall come the hour of my departure For worlds unknown, O Lord, be with me then.

No sooner had we finished that than the kids broke the mood with one of their hand-clapping songs. I found that, when I settled down and listened to the lyrics, it too swelled my soul and I actually felt myself swaying just a little.

A tougher question is what to do with all these television preachers. To me they look absurd. But so did Paul to both Jews and Greeks and, on the day of Pentecost, the first Christians looked drunk. Jesus was regarded as an outright nut. Since my religion looks ridiculous to at least half the tenured professors in America, and since I justify it by faith, how do I treat charismatics fairly? Instinctively, I join John: "Master, we saw one casting out demons in thy name and we forbade him, for he followeth not with us. But Jesus said, Forbid him not. For he that is not against you is for you." One thing is certain: as human beings we are not superior to them. We are all in the human condition, victims of finitude, locked in the limitations of our own flesh. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh. But that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. And the

wind bloweth wherever it will. Thou hearest the voice thereof, but knoweth not whence it cometh or whither it goeth.”

## **Conclusion**

A sense of humor helps. In 1934, G. C. Brewer chuckled: “Brethren, I don’t expect you to get this without some suffering, but if we can endure the pain of forcing the needle though the skin by which we get the anti-sectarian serum, our spiritual condition will be better.”

I come tonight, in the spirit of G. C. Brewer, to affirm the Church of Christ. It has given me nothing but love and honor all of my life. An 85-year-old elder, who still teaches the largest Bible class in one of our strongest congregations, listens tonight for the second time. When I practiced on him he sharply disagreed with some but, because he is my father, he took offense at none. The church is my family and, even if we disagree, I sincerely do not wish to offend. I will cherish the church and my family forever, but my relationship with Christ counts most. And the only Christ I can share with you is the one I know. If my experience of Christ is real nothing else is necessary. If it is not, nothing else matters.

We are, indeed, the Church of Christ! But we are not an institution. We are the ecclesia. We are not an organization. We are a relationship. We are not committed to a system. We are committed to a Person. We do not seek to possess Christ. We seek only to be possessed by Christ. We are not a body to be neatly numbered. We are souls all over the earth with Christ in our hearts, brothers and sisters of one another even when we never meet. “We look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are unseen.” The Christ-centered church is an unseen, living, vital, spiritual reality.

In this hallowed place, down through these decades, an anthem pledging allegiance rang every last full week in February for almost a hundred years, its lyrics quoted by scores of preachers, three of whom in 1938 closed with these words:

*All hail the power of Jesus’ name! Let angels prostrate fall. Bring forth the royal diadem And crown him Lord of all!*

## Back to the Bible

by Joel Stephen Williams  
April – May, 1997

Martin Luther always said things in a bold, dynamic way. As a scholar Luther's greatest achievement was his German translation of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> In his preface to the German New Testament, Luther attempted to give some guidance to the reader toward a proper view of the nature of the Bible and the two distinct parts we call the Old and New Testament. Luther knew quite well that if people approached the New Testament with a wrong understanding of its nature, they would read and interpret it wrongly.

Luther said one must be shown “what to expect in this volume, lest he search it for commandments and laws, when he should be looking for gospel and promises.”<sup>2</sup> The Old Testament contained laws and commandments and “the records of men who kept them, and of others who did not. On the other hand, the New Testament is a volume containing God's promised evangel, as well as records of those who believed or disbelieved it.” He then warns: “Beware lest you make Christ into a Moses, and the gospel into a book of law or doctrine.”

Luther was well aware that the New Testament contained concrete instruction and truth. As he put it: “Christ in the gospels, and Peter and Paul in their letters, set forth many doctrines and regulations, and expounded those regulations.” But this does not mean that we are saved by rule keeping or that the New Testament documents are designed to be a code of law. Luther wrote: “It is not knowledge of the gospel if you just know doctrines and rules of this kind. But you will know the gospel when you hear the voice which tells you that Christ himself is yours, together with his life, teaching, work, death, resurrection, and everything that he has, does, or can do .... It is evident that the *evangelion* [gospel] does not form a book of laws, but a proclamation of the good things which Christ has offered us for our own.”

If God had meant for the New Testament to simply be a new book of law, we might ask: “What was wrong with the first law he gave us?” The law which God gave through Moses was a good law. It served well as far as a law can serve the purpose of teaching and saving humankind (Romans 7:7-25). To view the New Testament primarily as law is to imply that God's first law was deficient, not only due to man's weakness, but also due to God's imperfect giving of the law. But the New Testament is not a law of the same character as Leviticus or Deuteronomy. To view the New Testament as a law code is to pervert its nature. This view, which is called “patternism,” leads to a legalistic mindset and a proof-texting hermeneutic.

The plea “Back to the Bible” is a good one, but one must understand the nature of the New Testament for this plea to be implemented properly. Roy Bowen Ward has pointed us in the right direction: “One might attempt to ‘restore NT Christianity’ by attempting to understand NT theology and then apply this theological insight to the present situation. This approach is not to be confused with a simplistic proof-text method or artificial constructions of patterns (where they do not appear explicitly in the NT). It would involve an inside understanding of the life, thought,

and practices of the apostolic churches. It would involve, if possible, finding the central and motivating forces of those churches and restoring these to the present church.”<sup>3</sup>

Consider some illustrations of these two approaches. The approach of patternism will lead to church splits and division over trivial and insignificant matters such as one cup versus multiple communion cups, methods of funding orphan homes, and a myriad of similar matters. The gospel approach will rejoice in remembering the Lord no matter what containers are being used, and will “look after orphans and widows in their distress” whether the work is funded by church treasuries or individuals (James 1:27). The law code approach seeks to justify the individual because right acts are done in right ways, as the law code directs. The gospel approach will justify because faith in Christ and his promises brings salvation into a loving heart which then acts in loving ways toward one’s fellow man.

What is the New Testament? It is not a law code. It is not a detailed, exhaustive pattern of every word we must say and every deed we must perform. Instead it is the good news that God has acted in history for the salvation of mankind. It is a witness to Christ and to the character and nature of God, which form our pattern for truth and life. This latter approach is not bothered by the numerous textual variants present in the manuscripts. It is not bothered by the fuzzy edges to the canon that we will discern if we study canon history carefully. This latter approach dovetails well with the only way that mankind can be saved: by grace through faith.

“Back to the Bible” does not require us to go back to temporary or cultural forms and expressions of Christianity in the first century. It does require us to go back to the pinnacle of history, God’s revelation of himself in Christ, which is revealed in the set of documents we call the New Testament.

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1 E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956) 103-135.

2 All quotations of Martin Luther are from John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961) 14-17.

3 Roy Bowen Ward, “‘The Restoration Principle’: A Critical Analysis,” *Restoration Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1965) 209.

## Memory: The Fuel of Faith

by David Slater  
April – May, 1997

*“With the Bible in my hand I besought the Lord to help me, and declared that during life that sacred Book should be my guide.”—James O’Kelly*

While an affirmation of faith in the bible such as O’Kelly’s is a powerful one, in our age of cynicism it may sound trite to some. But I thank God that in every generation, including our own, there are strong faith-leaders who instill in us a profound trust in “that sacred Book.”

Members of Churches of Christ can be profoundly grateful for an enduring collective trust in the Bible as “our only creed.” Our spiritual ancestors gave us an honest allegiance to the written Word, a simple—but-not-simplistic—trust which has sustained a fellowship of people through many storms.

A landmark passage regarding the Bible is 2 Timothy 3:16, where Paul affirms Scripture as “inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (NRSV). That verse says that the words of Scripture have God’s power in them.

But Paul lovingly reminds Timothy of another empowering gift from God: the gift of memory. The apostle urges his “son in the faith” to “continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the holy Scriptures.” (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

As a child, Timothy was nurtured in the faith by two godly women, his mother and grandmother, even in the absence of a believing father. The two principal women in his life were Jews, while his father was a Gentile. These women taught Timothy to revere and to trust the written Word of God. This fact was important to Paul. At the beginning of this letter, he fondly recalled Timothy’s sincere faith which “first lived” in his grandmother and mother, and now was “alive” in Timothy’s heart as well (2 Timothy 1:5).

Paul was appealing to the sense of memory — a vital but sometimes forgotten type of faith-building resource. Paul knew that restoring steadfast faith to Timothy’s heart was not a matter of new teaching but of recollecting shared values. So even as he urges him to “fan into flame” his spiritual gift, Paul fans any dying embers of Timothy’s commitment with fresh memory.

The memory Paul invokes is not a mechanical recall of information from the past, but a recollection of meaningful stories which shaped Timothy’s identity. In this sort of remembering, the past is made alive and powerful for the present.

I know something of the gratitude Timothy must have felt for his family heritage of faith. My grandfather, Will W. Slater, preached the Word of God in the middle of the Great Depression. He was faithful in carrying the gospel to people who were poor and marginalized by society. He taught countless numbers of people to sing God's praise. Sometimes his "paycheck" for preaching or teaching singing schools was a few plump chickens. Then he would put those chickens in the back of his Model T and drive to the next town, joyfully eager to preach (and sing) the gospel to anyone who would listen.

In the very hour of his death, Will Slater was preaching his heart out, Bible in one hand and hymnal in the other. (He had taught a new song that evening titled, "This Is Someone's Last Day.")

In my office, I have Granddad's sermon book and diary. It's an ancient, musty three-ring binder with brittle, yellowed pages. But for me, there is real power in that old binder of sermons. Why? Because it represents the man's pure loyalty both to the words of the Bible and to the spirit of the Bible. The Bible compelled him to sacrifice the things of this world for a life of preaching. This legacy of faith is the reason I myself am a minister of the Word.

I could go on and on about Will Slater's love of the Scriptures. But my sentimental recollections are precisely the point: There is faith-building power in remembering those who gave us a legacy of faith.

By invoking his past, Paul called Timothy to his own best identity so he could act accordingly. Timothy would be able to "continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed" because he knew its origin. The women in his life taught Timothy the Scriptures, but the women themselves were the living texts which brought the lessons home.

This is a vital consideration for churches, grandparents, parents, and Bible School teachers today. It is important to h=shepherds, ministers, and musicians. It is important for single adults or teens who befriend small children. Many who have gone before have left us a priceless gift: a simple allegiance to the Bible as our guiding star. And it is imperative that we pass it along to the next generation.

God gave us the Bible. Our spiritual ancestors gave us a compelling model of devotion to it. Thank God for the challenge of offering an equally compelling model to those who will follow us!

## Reason and Revelation

*by Phillip Black*  
*April – May, 1997*

**“He that takes away Reason to make way for  
Revelation puts out the light of both.” — John Locke**

We do not have to check our brains at the door when we become Christians! Thankfully, a significant part of our spiritual heritage is anchored in a rational, or analytical, approach to Christianity.

The religious movement of which Churches of Christ are a part bears the unmistakable imprint of Alexander Campbell who was himself heavily influenced by the inductive reasoning championed by such men as Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Isaac Newton. Campbell, along with other luminaries such as Barton Stone, Walter Scott, and John Smith, emphasized a rational process of conversion which was as strange to the religious world of their day as was Newton’s Scientific Method to his day.

It is because of the brave efforts of such men as Campbell, Stone, Scott, and others who were willing to persevere in the face of those who wanted to maintain the status quo that we have become blessed with a “teaching brotherhood.” Many have become Christians because of a logical and orderly teaching process through which people have been influenced to respond to the facts of the gospel. We have understood the teaching of Jesus, that “Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him” comes to him (John 6:45).

While the rational approach to studying Scripture commends itself to almost everyone, emotions do color much of what we see. The extreme forms of Enlightenment Rationalism could not grant this obvious-to-most-of-us fact. And to find the rewarding balance between what our hearts feel and what intellectual honesty demands is most difficult.

The easier road is the familiar one. Consequently, those who have opened new intellectual horizons have usually suffered the opposition of those who are satisfied with driving in the well-worn ruts of orthodoxy. As one lady said in a Bible class that was trying to decide what to study next, “We don’t want to study anything we don’t already know.” But a rational approach to the scriptures demands a mind and heart always open to a reexamination of the judgments which we have already made.

Being open-minded does not mean that one accepts everything he hears but that one is willing to examine evidence as it is made available. This is the beauty of a truly rational approach to Scripture.

Open-mindedness also demands a willingness to become uncomfortable as our searches lead us down unfamiliar paths. Had it not been for courageous men and women before us who were

willing to hack out a rational path through the jungles of accumulated traditions and intellectual stagnation in search of more light, we would be suffering even more from spiritual darkness.

God has graced his people with a diversity of gifts. We have those who bless us with their ministries of personal service, others are good teachers, some inspire us with their artistic abilities in worship music. Some are experts in motivating us to more dedicated lives. Then there are those few who, having prepared themselves academically and spiritually, are true scholars of the Word. And it is this last group which often faces the most opposition. Their rational approach to Scripture demands a willingness to leave no path unexplored. Yet that very willingness leaves them open to being accused of heresy by those who believe that they have all the knowledge they need.

To be sure, we have consistently championed a high view of biblical inspiration. We hold that God's Word is complete and infallible. However, our processes of interpreting that Word are subject to all the frailties of the human mind. Our fallible interpretations, which are often colored by our backgrounds or personal agendas, should never be confused with the infallible Revelation itself. But, in a polarized brotherhood, for someone to suggest that there may be some truths which we have not fully appreciated is to leave himself open to all kinds of accusations which range from being called "liberal" to being accused of trying to destroy the church.

I once saw an epigram which said, "Those who know the least, often assume the most." It is ironic that many of the verbal stones being thrown in our brotherhood are aimed at some of those humble souls who are very learned but have been willing to admit that they do not possess all knowledge and are continually pursuing more of it. The missiles usually come from those who assume that they know it all but who often have less reason to feel that way than the ones whom they assault. However, the rational pursuit of knowledge produces a humility that does not allow such behavior.

We have all seen mob violence influenced by a few who, for their own reasons, incited others to follow their lead. The honesty of the rational approach demands that we not allow ourselves to be dominated nor led by those whose chief concern seems to be in building a fence around the current level of knowledge.

Social, economic, and political movements have historically begun with noble impulses and with a thirst to explore new territory. Then they tend to crystallize into hardened institutional positions which countenance no dissent. The same process is particularly noticeable in religious movements, probably because religion is such a life or death proposition to many. But as critical as our convictions are, we cannot afford to let ourselves become hardened to the further exploration of spiritual knowledge. Thought leaders have historically been pilloried. As John Locke pursued the truth with his rational approach, he so infuriated the "establishment" that he had to hide to do some of his writing. Our brotherhood needs to be careful lest we allow the same reactionary and sectarian spirit to quench honest inquiry. Often we crucify those whose only aim is to make us think.

College presidents regularly feel the wrath of political and economic pressure when their professors are bold enough to introduce fresh and challenging thoughts for consideration. Some

of the most sincere truth-seekers in the brotherhood are assaulted regularly in our “tabloid” papers and bulletins. But we should be grateful to those brave souls who are willing to be modern-day Stephens—courageous enough to point out our frailties. To stand unflinching before a sectarian mindset in order to preserve open inquiry demands uncommon strength.

Spiritual peripheral vision is not to be confused with a lack of conviction; it simply gives one the ability to view a premise in light of everything he can see from all sides. The argument for a particular premise may turn out to be valid or faulty. Regardless, it deserves to be courteously considered without condemning the one who offered it. In fact, religious liberty depends upon the free exercise of rational examination without fear of retribution. A true disciple, the very nature of whom is to learn, is never intimidated by being exposed to more light. The Greek philosopher, Plato, said, “We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.”

While the rational approach to spirituality must never become obsolete, neither should it become the shrine before which we worship. An alarming characteristic of the human mind is that it can lose all sense of proportion. One does not have to choose between impersonal logic and spirituality. There should be no tension between the rational approach to truth and a personal connection with the Father of Truth.

Although we value the Father’s words to us, one does not necessarily have a warm relationship with God by simply dissecting his letters. Imagine a baby boy becoming separated from his father. Many years pass and one day he discovers an exhaustive autobiography about his father. He studies it, learns that he is still alive, and memorizes all the facts about his father. He even devotes enough time to its study that he is able to quote passages to his friends. But he never attempts to meet him or establish any kind of personal relationship with him.

We would view such behavior as abnormal. Yet that abnormal situation could be a parable describing the dangers of losing our perspective and focusing only upon the legalistic analysis of Scripture. A rational approach to discovering truth and a warm personal relationship with God are not mutually exclusive, but complementary.

God has communicated to us through language, therefore, it is essential to understand it correctly, using the best methods of inductive reasoning possible. We must take into account the historical and cultural setting in which a text was written. We must recognize poetry, metaphor, and imagery, as well as propositional language and commandments. But the understanding of language, culture, and literary types is not the highest point of our search. It simply leads us to the door of God’s grace where we can walk through in the full assurance of a tested faith and enjoy our life with him.

We neither seek nor glory in a misguided Rationalism that reduces faith to atomized sections of biblical text. We do, on the other hand, celebrate the fact that God has created us in his own image as rational beings. And we rejoice that he has captured our hearts via the avenue of our minds.

As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ has to suffer and rise from the dead. ‘This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,’ he said” (Acts 17:2-3). Reason, explanation, and proof are valuable in the divine process of revelation to lead us to the Redeemer-Christ in whom we have placed our hope.

Reason and revelation are enemies in some schemes—but not in the divine order.

## Restoration Through Jewish Eyes

*by Joseph Shulam*  
*April – May, 1997*

The plea for a “restoration of the New Testament church” is a slogan that is fast catching on in evangelical circles. No one has a “patent” on the idea. It has been around for centuries already. And it continues to surface in dramatic ways.

In Tiberias, just above the Sea of Galilee, there are some 50 Russian families who say that all they want is to be like the first-century church. One weekend I was visiting a dear sister on the Golan Heights; it was a good opportunity to visit these Russian seekers after the Messiah. When I arrived there on Friday about 3:30 p.m., they said that if I came in then I would have to stay there through Saturday evening—because they would have no part of me if I “desecrated” the Sabbath.

These Russians come from a forlorn corner of the former USSR. The story goes that there are whole villages in that region which all desire to go back and be like the New Testament church. They have some things in common with the Western “restorationist tradition,” but in many things they are certainly different. I bring their situation to mind in order to make three points.

- Slogans are a good thing, but they do not guarantee substance.
- Churches of Christ do not have a monopoly on methods and on the restoration of the New Testament church.
- If the process of restoration does not move forward and become “unstuck” and more honest, I believe we will abdicate and capitulate to the general Catholic-Protestant tradition. In fact, I believe we largely capitulated to the strong forces of Western Religious Culture a long time ago.

I say these things by way of introduction. My perspective might be new to many of you, for I am a Jew who believes that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. I have never joined the Churches of Christ. The Lord added me to his church. From the first years of my association with the Churches of Christ in America, I was taught that it is enough if the Lord adds you to his church. I have been taught that the Lord’s church has many names in the New Testament and that to be called by any of these names would be just fine with the Lord. I have been taught that the only way to unite the Body of Christ is to speak where the Bible speaks and to allow freedom on matters of opinion. I took it very seriously at the age of sixteen and a half when I gave my life to God, was baptized, and cast out of home.

For me the Bible was enough. I was not asked to accept a creed, nor was I given a list of doctrines and position papers to read. Since 1962 until now, I have held strongly to those teachings of unity and freedom based on the Word of God.

The American Restoration Movement has its roots in Scotland at the beginning of the previous century. From Scotland it was brought to America. In America it found fertile soil that give the restoration idea a great push forward. The father-son Campbells became important speakers for the restoration of first-century Christianity.

The Campbells were influenced by Scottish Reform and Presbyterian ideas and theology. Many things Churches of Christ hold to today are visible influences of the Reformed background of the American Restoration Movement.

Looking at this movement through Jewish eyes, there are facts that I think have been ignored. That neglect has, in turn, caused the American Restoration Movement to flounder in this generation.

- The New Testament is a Jewish book
- It was written by Jews in the first century A.D. Yes! I know Luke the Doctor, and I know that it is presumed that he was a Gentile.
- The context and historical setting of the New Testament is the Jewish World in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora.
- The leading figures of the New Testament are acting from the framework of Israel's holy history in fulfillment of God's promises to the prophets of Israel.
- The Gentiles were grafted in by the blood of the Messiah. They have no right to usurp the place of Israel in direct opposition to the Word of God.
- A relationship with Israel today and our common heritage in the Bible will give the church a new feeling of urgency for the second coming of the Messiah. It will help restore a lost apocalyptic worldview. We have stopped waiting for him, and all that we are left with in the Churches of Christ is the fear of going to hell. I do not sense enough motivation to live a positive life full of vision and expectation for a better world in our brotherhood. The present state of mind only adds to the feeling of being in a coma.

These points are important for the "restoration of the New Testament church" because the understanding of these points will make the difference on how we interpret the text of the New Testament in its historical setting. In other words, if we do not put the New Testament back into its first-century context, how can we restore the essence of the New Testament church? And if we lose the apocalyptic worldview of the earliest church, how can we preach the message of Jesus with the urgency they exhibited?

Our relationship to Israel in the Scriptures is essential in my opinion to a clear picture of what the early church was like and the substance of their faith in the Messiah. Many have feared to look at what the Bible teaches about Israel because of a paranoia about premillennialism. I am not premillennial, and I do not think that Israel has anything to do with premillennialism. But, the attitude we have taken toward and the relationship formed with Israel and the Jewish people has been a stumbling block from living up to our desire to be like the first-century church. It has helped destroy an apocalyptic world-view among us.

How can we stand in diametrical opposition to Paul's words in Romans 11:1-4 and say that God has rejected Israel? Paul asks the question, "I ask then: Did God reject his people?" He gives the

answer: “By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.”

Notice that Paul describes himself in the present tense. He does not say, “I was an Israelite.” He says very clearly in the present tense that he is an Israelite. In my view, it is very important for Churches of Christ to wake up and see that we have much work to do in the way of restoration, rejuvenation, and revival.

The example of our attitude toward Israel and the Jewish people is just one of many issues that we need to return to the Scriptures and re-study. The fear that we might discover something from God’s Word is the fear the Pharisees had in the first century. That fear kept them from looking into the scriptures and seeing that Jesus is the Messiah.

From what I have seen in the Churches of Christ during the last 25 years, many of our brothers have stopped looking into the Scriptures and have built walls and fences to protect what they have received by tradition.

The Lord has used me to bring a few Orthodox Jewish Rabbis to faith in the Messiah. In every case, the starting point is that I would be willing to change if I am wrong and they have to be willing to change if they are wrong. I want to issue the same challenge to my brothers in the united States. Let us get back to the open-minded study of God’s Word and to the doing of his will and stop defending our tainted heritage in order to see the glory of God in these last days.

The roots of the gospel are in Israel, and we have to restore our relationship with and understanding of Israel if we want to relate to the roots and see the full picture of what the early church was like. Restoration can take place by using the Bible itself and will emerge right from the New Testament, but only if we change our attitude and stop using the Bible as a source of proof texts about our doctrines and traditions. We must be honest enough to see what the Bible has to tell us.

The real issue here is not an “old” or “new” hermeneutic. The solution is not in our neighbors’ yards, as if we could “fellowship” or drop some traditions. The answer will be found in getting back to our first love. Only then will we make the plea to restore the substance and love of the New Testament church with genuine passion.

We need to reaffirm very clearly that we are interested in unity with every believer who wants to follow God and live according to his Word. We need to accept those who are baptized believers as our brothers and help each other correct these areas in which we are lacking. We need to get back to the study of God’s Word with a sense of urgency that the Bridegroom is coming soon.

This might sound simplistic to some, but we have models of restoration movements in the Bible. We have the description of what happened when Ezra and Nehemiah read the Torah to the people of Israel who had returned from Babylonian Exile. Let us learn from our Jewish forefathers.

From Nehemiah 8:8-10, these words challenge us: “They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.””

It is time for us to hear the voice of God challenging us to do the same today.

## When the Text Demands Change

*by Randall J. Harris*  
*April – May, 1997*

I teach in the Bible department at a Christian university, so it was with considerable distress that I discovered that I had become utterly bored with the Bible. I was faced with a career of teaching that in which I had lost interest. To compound my problem, I was also a preacher and it seemed that every other day was Sunday. I continued to be dutiful but there was no way around it—I was bored. How could I make fresh for others what for me was so stale?

This problem, I am convinced, is not unique. In Churches of Christ we are deeply committed to Scripture. I, like many of you, started to learn the Bible before I could read it. I have been in Bible school and Wednesday night Bible study and VBS and university Bible classes FOREVER (if not longer). In Junior High and High School I participated in Bible Bowl and became a repository for Bible trivia over vast sections of Scripture. (Do you know the name of Lot's sons who were born to him by his daughters?) If you start a Bible story I will almost surely be able to finish it. How can the Word of God exercise any transforming power over us when we have heard it all before?

I only want to tell you how I found my way out of Bible boredom and reiterate one of the strengths of our heritage as pointed out by Richard Hughes — we are open to change when the text warrants it. The key for me was reading everything in the bible as a personal challenge to me to change. The point of Scripture is to “transform us by the renewal of mind” so that we can be pleasing to God.

There is an almost irresistible urge to read Scripture in such a way as to confirm our prejudices and prop up the status quo. After all, I like to be right (and, of course, I usually am) and the notion that the Bible would call upon me to change some belief, attitude, or action doesn't set well. Thus I read the Bible to prove I'm right, and then get both bored and cantankerous.

But what if we come at the text in another way? What if we start with the predisposition that the text is more likely to challenge our thinking rather than confirm it? For me, this has made all the difference. I am mostly convinced that the people in our churches really are willing to change if and only if God calls them to do so through Scripture. We have no right to call for change on any other basis.

But openness to change on the basis of scriptural warrant demands, first of all, not an openness to change but an openness to Scripture—a willingness to hear some new thing from literature with which we are very familiar. As I have, over the last several years, read Scripture in this way the Bible has come alive in my life. I still take a certain academic joy in trying to ferret out the meaning of an obscure or difficult text, but the real work is trying to bring my life into conformity with the clear (but hard) demands of the gospel.

I will simply illustrate my point with a single example that could be endlessly multiplied. Consider the following text:

A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’”

“All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.

When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?”

Jesus replied, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.”

Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you!”

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life” (Luke 18:18-30, NIV).

This text has no real exegetical difficulties. One could enhance understanding by comprehending a background of Deuteronomistic theology but even that is not necessary. The real question is how will we respond to the challenge of this story?

Do you know that when I poll my classes to find out if they think Jesus really intends for this man to sell all that he has, fully half of them will say no, despite the clear instruction in the passage. Now that’s resistance!

While I would not suggest that this passage requires that every disciple must do what Jesus calls this man to do, the question is, what does this text require that I change about how I live or think? Only when we are prepared to ask such questions with seriousness, and then change as the text confronts us, will we be true to our best heritage. The call of God’s word is always a call to change.

## **An Authoritative Gospel in a Humble Personality**

*by Tim Curtis*  
*April – May, 1997*

On the last day of 1944, Hiroo Onoda, a young lieutenant in the Japanese army, arrived on the island of Lubang, about 75 miles southwest of Manila. His assignment was to conduct guerrilla warfare against the American forces who were expected to attempt a landing on Lubang and the rest of the Philippines within the coming weeks. When the Americans did mount a successful offensive on Lubang about a month later, something which to them was little more than a “mopping up” operation, Lieutenant Onoda led a small group of soldiers into the jungle and began the mission for which he had been trained: to conduct a covert operation of disruption against American forces for as long as possible.

Onoda was a man of exceptional valor and loyalty. Like many Japanese soldiers in World War II, he was prepared to take his own life rather than surrender, but in his case, specific orders were given not to take his life. He was to stay alive as long as he could in order to do maximum damage to the enemy. As he made his way to Lubang, he recalled the promise of his division commander: “Whatever happens, we’ll come back for you.” Onoda vowed to himself, “I will fight till that day comes.” It did indeed come... 30 years later. On March 10, 1974, on the orders of his former commander, Horoo Onoda formally surrendered to the Philippine authorities. For 30 years he had manned his post, unaware that the war had ended just six months after he had gone into the jungle. Two others had been with him for portions of that times. One died after 10 years, and the other was killed in a gun battle with Philippine police about a year before Onoda surrendered. At the time he was found, Onoda was making plans to survive another 20 years in the jungle.

One of the most remarkable things about Onoda’s story was that several attempts had been made to find him and bring him home to Japan. Once Japanese officials learned that Onoda was continuing to fight a war that had long since ended, search parties spent months at a time trying to locate him. Leaflets and newspapers were dropped from helicopters. Loud speakers blared messages from several family members, including his father. Onoda, convinced that Japan would never surrender, misinterpreted these attempts to find him. He even twisted things around to believe that the Japanese army was using these efforts to secretly encourage him to stay in the jungle, the very opposite of what they were trying to do. In his autobiography, *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*, Onoda wrote that he and his two comrades “developed so many fixed ideas that we were unable to understand anything that did not conform with them. If there was anything that did not fit in with them we interpreted it to mean what we wanted it to mean.”

As a people with a history of making a stand based upon a rather peculiar method of interpreting the Bible, that ought to get our attention. I know of no more graphic illustration of the waste that inevitably comes as a by-product of a mind too confident of its own ability to discern truth. That certainly is not to say that truth is always cloudy and indiscernible. An “anything goes,” “your interpretation is just as valid as mine” mentality is equally destructive. But Onoda’s honest

confession does teach us the need for caution in reaching definitive conclusions, a caution born out of humility.

When Isaiah's contemporaries had the limitations of their understanding indelibly imprinted upon their minds by the Babylonian exile, and were understandably confused about what God was up to. God taught them this lesson in humility:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways, my ways,” declares the Lord.” As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8,9).

A man once told me that he could not accept the changes in biblical interpretation some were advocating in our brotherhood because of where it would lead. In his mind, it would be just a matter of time until we started using instrumental music, stopped baptizing people for the forgiveness of sin, and had women preachers. (Those three always seem to go together!) In other words, he could not accept the validity of a certain way of thinking because it would be disruptive to what he already held to be true. That still seems somewhat dishonest to me. To say that something can't be true solely because of the conflict it would cause with another truth we hold doesn't appear to be in harmony with the spirit of our heritage.

One of the greatest attributes of our movement has been our emphasis on biblical truth. Has any other religious group more frequently asked, “What does the Bible say?” That is one of the qualities that has attracted thousands of people to our fellowship over the years. But the vice that inherently lies around the bend from such a virtue is the notion that we have found all truth, and if someone reaches conclusions other than the ones we've already reached, they obviously have been blinded by the devil.

What foolish arrogance it is to think that God can be fully captured by our finite minds, that we mortals can examine the expanse of his word and have the correct answer for every question that arises from it. Worse yet, that we even know all of the right questions. Does God ever smile and shake his head at our attempts to boil his word down to formulas, equations, and patterns that fit neatly into the logic of our minds? Tom Olbricht wrote in *Hearing God's Voice*, “The old, old story is not a page from the textbooks of logic. It is a page, rather, from the life of the living God, who so loved the world that he gave his only son.”

Lest we misunderstand, let's be quick to recognize that the answer to such pride isn't a spineless, watered-down, “thus suggests the Lord.” Instead, we need, as P. T. Forsyth declared in 1907, “an authoritative Gospel in a humble personality.” John Stott, in *Between Two Worlds*, wrote that the metaphors used to describe the expression of the word of God, such as sower, herald, and ambassador, all remind us that one who speaks for God “is a servant under someone else's authority, and the communicator of somebody else's word.”

A few years ago I studied the Bible with a man who wanted to be a part of our fellowship but was held back by his roots in the Seventh Day Adventist church. Like a lot of people, he wasn't really sure why he believed what he was supposed to believe, so he contacted his pastor for some backing in Scripture, and we studied the Bible together. After a while it became apparent to both

of us that the only reason he interpreted certain scriptures the way he did was because he had been taught to interpret them that way. There was no way for me to escape the question, “How much of my interpretation of the Bible has the same weakness?”

At that point in my life I became more convicted than ever that I wanted to let the Bible speak for itself without making it jump through the hoops of my preferred hermeneutical method. As I recall the history of our movement, that is exactly how we got started. Do we now have the courage...and the humility...to return to that spirit?

## Strengths of Our Heritage

by Richard T. Hughes  
April – May, 1997

Recently, my family and I visited the William Tyndale exhibit, on loan from the British Library in London to the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. We know Tyndale, of course, as the first Christian scholar to translate the New Testament from Greek into English. The first edition of that New Testament appeared in 1526.

What a thrill it was to see the very first New Testament printed in the English tongue, and then, in another display, the first complete English Bible. As I looked at those exhibits, I recalled how Tyndale and his colleagues paid the ultimate price for their commitment to place the Bible in the hands of the English people: in 1536, Tyndale was burned at the stake.

As I went from exhibit to exhibit, I could not help but contrast Tyndale's commitment to the Bible and the eagerness with which the English people greeted its appearance, with the hundreds of thousands of people in our modern world for whom the Bible is nothing more than an ancient, obscure, and irrelevant book. And I was grateful for my heritage in the Churches of Christ.

### A People of the Book

I am grateful, first, that we have been a people of the Book. Clearly, there are ways in which one can read and understand the Bible that are less faithful to the core biblical message than others, and we in Churches of Christ have sometimes read the Bible from skewed and distorted perspectives. Still and all, our allegiance to the Bible has encouraged us to focus our lives and our faith on God and on the redemption he has provided for us through Jesus the Christ. For that dimension of my heritage, I am profoundly thankful.

### Open to Change

Second, I am grateful that in our best moments, we in Churches of Christ have not been bound to inflexible creeds and opinions but, instead, have remained open to a change in perspective if we find that change warranted by the biblical text. I vividly recall my high school days when I sought to convert my friends to the Church of Christ. My mother, a life-long member of the church and a woman loyal to her heritage, nonetheless advised me that I should be willing to change, myself, if my friends could show me evidence in the Bible that I had not considered. When she offered this advice, she meant it, and I took it to heart.

Years later, when I undertook a study of the history of our heritage, I found that many, especially in the early years of our movement, embraced the same attitude of openness to change that my mother urged on me. John Rogers is a case in point. The preacher for the church in Carlisle, Kentucky for many years in the early nineteenth century, Rogers charged that the *fatal error* of all reformers has been that they have too hastily concluded that they knew the whole truth.... We

have no reason to conclude, we know all the truth,” he argued. “We have nothing to lose in this inquiry after truth. We have no system to bind us to human opinion.”

### **A Rational Approach to the Bible**

Third, I am grateful that we have embraced a rational approach to the biblical text. This has not always been the case. In the earliest years of our movement, especially among the followers of Barton Stone in Kentucky and Tennessee, Churches of Christ behaved more like Pentecostals than like the churches we know today. Joseph Thomas, for example, visited many of those congregations in 1810-1811 and reported that these “Christians have an exercise... amongst them called the JIRKS. It sometimes throws them into the fire, into the mud, upon the floor, upon the benches, against the wall of the house, &c.” And the dentist-evangelist B. F. Hall recalled that “the religion of those days consisted principally of feeling, and those who shouted the loudest and made the greatest ado, were looked upon as the best Christians... We would clap and rub our hands, stamp with our feet, slam down and tear up the Bible, speak as loud as possible and scream at the top of our voices, to get up an excitement. I often blistered my hands by clapping and rubbing them together, and my feet were made sore by repeated stamping.”

When Alexander Campbell’s dominance over the Stone movement commenced in 1823, the extreme emotional aspects of our movement slowly began to disappear.

Granted, in the intervening years, we have grown so committed to a rational faith that we doubtless on many occasions have been guilty of quenching the Spirit. At the same time, in other ways our rational approach to the biblical text has served us well. It has freed us, for example, from extremely subjective ways of reading the Bible that allow the text to mean whatever I want it to mean, given my frame of mind at the moment. Instead, it has encouraged us to discover what the Bible means by discovering what the Bible meant in its original setting. This approach has not guaranteed that we would discover the core message of the Bible and, to be sure, there have been times when we have majored in minors and missed the Bible’s central meaning. But at least it guaranteed us a fighting chance.

### **Christians Only, Not the Only Christians**

Fourth, I am grateful that the heritage of Churches of Christ includes a rejection of the proposition that we are the only Christians and a clear recognition that there are genuine Christians in all the sects and churches of Christendom. Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and virtually all the luminaries of the early years of our movement gladly acknowledged this point.

While many have concurred with this proposition over the years, no one put it better than F. D. Srygley, a turn-of-the-century preacher and staff writer for the *Gospel Advocate*. When the editor of the *Firm Foundation* claimed that “the law of Christ is a wall of separation between the church of Christ and all other religious bodies of whatever name or faith,” Srygley objected. “In the midst of all the denominations that beset this age and country, it would be absolutely miraculous if some Christians did not get into some of them occasionally,” Srygley wrote: “If there are no Christians in any denomination, it is the only place except hell they have all kept out of.” Moreover, there were Christians “in saloons, on the race track, at the theater, in the

ballroom, around the gambling tables, in the calaboose, behind the jail doors, and in the penitentiary, and on the gallows.” Why, then, he asked, should we be surprised “If a few of the meanest specimens of them should occasionally be found temporarily in the most respectable and pious religious denominations of the desperate and God-forsaken country?”

In this marvelous passage, Srygley points to a fundamentally biblical theme that, while often forgotten in the course of our movement, has never been far from our movement’s heart and core. This theme is the recognition that all human beings—even Christians—are finite and therefore flawed and susceptible to gross imperfections. The apostle Paul put it best when he wrote in Romans 3:10-12:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;  
there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.  
All have turned away, they have together become worthless;  
there is no one who does good, not even one.”

Those in our movement like Srygley who internalized this biblical teaching were reluctant to claim perfection for Churches of Christ while judging harshly faithful men and women who labored in other corners of the Kingdom. They knew that even in Churches of Christ, “there is no one righteous, not even one.” That confession prevented them from making extravagant and exclusive claims regarding their own religious heritage.

Closely related to this, I am grateful that the heritage of Churches of Christ calls for the unity of all Christians. In the early years of our movement, there were few who claimed that the Church of Christ which centered in Middle Tennessee was the one true church outside of which there was no salvation. There were many, of course, who claimed that one could not be saved outside the church of Christ, by which they meant the universal Kingdom of God. This recognition inspired a genuine search for Christian unity that unfortunately was relatively short-lived among our people. Instead, a growing number from an early date began to confuse the Church of Christ with the church of Christ. Still, it comforts one to know that many of our people down through the years have worked passionately on behalf of the unity of all Christian people.

### **A Sectarian Spirit**

Fifth, while I am grateful for the unity impulse in our movement, I also am grateful for the sectarian dimensions of our heritage. It is here that I am most likely to be misunderstood. How could I possibly celebrate the ecumenical thrust of Churches of Christ while applauding at one and the same time our sectarian agenda? Aren’t these two themes polar opposites?

The answer to that question depends on how we define “sectarian.” One can certainly be sectarian by claiming that his or her church embodies the fullness of God’s salvation and that all other churches are impostors and usurpers. One can think of this version of sectarianism as the true church versus the denominations. I have already made it clear that in my judgment, that kind of sectarianism stands fundamentally opposed to the gospel message which demands that we take seriously our own frailties and imperfections.

But there is another brand of sectarianism which squares wonderfully well with the gospel message. We can best understand this version, as the church versus the values of the world. How many New Testament passages call us to conform our lives to the values of the Kingdom of God, not to the values of our culture? One thinks immediately, for example, of Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Unfortunately, many in Churches of Christ have allowed the sectarian dimensions of our movement to become misdirected. They have spent their time opposing other churches instead of resisting the principalities and powers of this world. But the abuse of the sectarian ideal does not invalidate that impulse. It is still a biblical theme, waiting to be reclaimed by those in churches of Christ who seek to conform their lives to the values of the Kingdom of God.

The truth is that many in Churches of Christ, especially during the nineteenth century, embraced the sectarian spirit in its biblical sense. Here one thinks of a long roll call of the saints, running from Barton W. Stone to David Lipscomb to James A. Harding to J. N. Armstrong to R. H. Boll, among many, many others. To a person these people embraced simplicity instead of ostentation, advocated non-violent solutions to human conflicts, shunned material wealth, resisted racism, and risked their own well-being for the sake of their neighbor’s good.

Finally, I am grateful for two powerful themes, central to our heritage, that have sustained this biblical form of the sectarian spirit. The first of these themes is the restoration vision. I am fully aware that many in Churches of Christ today have lost faith in the restoration vision, believing it to be inherently divisive. There is ample justification for their judgment in this regard, but those who reject the restoration ideal on this ground risk throwing the baby out with the bath water.

The truth is, the restoration ideal has been a powerful stimulus to counter-cultural thought and action throughout the course of our movement. It focuses our attention on biblical faith and allows us to judge the world in which we live by that standard. It sustained Barton Stone when he freed his slaves long before the abolition sentiment was popular in the American South. It sustained David Lipscomb when he counseled Christians to refuse to fight in wars but to find peaceful methods to resolve human conflict. And by consistently pointing us to the Prince of Peace and his ethic for our lives, it can help sustain us even though we live in the midst of an unbelieving culture.

It is certainly true that we can misdirect the restoration vision and take our stand on biblical minors instead of biblical majors. But our own failures in this regard in no way invalidate the vision itself.

The second important theme in our heritage that has sustained a biblical form of the sectarian spirit is the theme I called in *Reviving the Ancient Faith* the “apocalyptic worldview.” I mean by that phrase an outlook whereby we seek to live our lives as if the final rule of God were fully present in the here and now. Such a vision calls for radical and counter-cultural living, since the Kingdom of God inevitably stands in judgment on the kingdoms of this world.

The beauty of the apocalyptic orientation is the way it encourages us to focus the restoration vision on the major themes of the Bible, not on minor notes and obscure details. If the final rule of God were really present in the here and now, for example, would we spend our time quarreling over the number of cups that ought to be used in communion? Would we spend our time sparring with those in other Christian traditions? Or would we dedicate our energies to living out the ethical mandates of the Kingdom of God?

Most people in Churches of Christ today have no idea that an apocalyptic worldview fueled a wide spectrum of Churches of Christ in the nineteenth century. We find this vision especially in the tradition that runs from Barton W. Stone to David Lipscomb and, finally, to J. N. Armstrong. After World War I, the apocalyptic worldview slowly declined among Churches of Christ and is now hardly discernible in our communion at all. But it is a priceless dimension of our heritage and one for which I am immensely grateful. It is also a dimension of our heritage that we need to reclaim.

## **Conclusions**

Some years ago, during the upheavals of the 1960s related to both race and war, some wished to sweep the problems that plagued the nation under the rug and speak only of what was right with America. Many of us will recall a bumper sticker popular in those days that counseled our cultural dissidents: "America: Love It Or Leave It." That approach was singularly unhelpful. It does little good to celebrate the goodness of our culture while refusing to rectify the problems that beg to be addressed. At the same time, it does little good to harp on what is wrong with our society and refuse to take responsibility for needed change.

The same holds true for the church. We know the problems that have plagued Churches of Christ. Critics have pointed them out time and again and there is no need to rehearse them here. At the same time, there is no need to pretend they don't exist.

It is helpful, however, to acknowledge the many strengths of our heritage upon which we can build for the future. It is my prayerful hope that members of Churches of Christ can approach our past with loving criticism, that we will strain out the dross but refine the gold, and bring our communion more fully under the cross of Christ and into greater and greater harmony with the will of God.

## **AfterGlow: A Basket to Put that In**

*by Phillip Morrison*  
*April – May, 1997*

There was nothing unusual about our daughter's Sunday night phone call; long-distance replaced letter writing years ago.

She and Keith were fine; the academic and athletic feats of the older grandchildren were remarkable; the antics of the younger ones indescribable. It was all so familiar, so reassuring, so comforting, so ... ordinary.

Extraordinary was a conversation that had taken place at church that morning. The wife of one of the pastors had come up to Bryn in a hallway. Full of compassion and understanding, she said, "Oh, Bryn, I just learned this week that your father is a Church of Christ preacher, and I can imagine the consternation and conflict it caused in your family when you became a Baptist."

"I haven't become a Baptist," Bryn replied.

"But ... But ... I thought you taught in our Sunday School."

"I do, and Keith also teaches, but we're not Baptists."

"You're not? I don't understand ... what are you then?"

"Well, Bryn said, effectively ending the conversation, "I'm just what I've been since I was 10 years old; I'm just a Christian."

The excitement in her voice was not diminished by the distance. "Daddy, that poor woman didn't know what to do with my claim; she just didn't have a basket to put it in!" "Why should that surprise you?" I asked. "You've been going to church all your life with people who don't have a basket to put that in."

When I related this true story to a friend, he said, "Be careful where you tell that; people will accuse you of thinking that it doesn't make any difference where people go to church!" Yes, it does matter where people go to church, but it matters even more that people determine to be just Christians wherever they go. I must lay aside my pride and personal preference and be glad our children come from a heritage that values being Christian more than being a particular brand of Christian.

It's sad, but not surprising, that in a competitive world like ours, churches have gotten in on the act. The declaration that one is just a Christian will be followed by the persistent question, "What kind?" Let the conversation go on for a while and we'll sound like car salesmen trying to explain why our brand is better than the one down the street.

The car guys may talk about gear ratios, types of fuel injection, foot-pounds of torque, etc. Those may be important subjects, but they are lost on people who don't want to buy a car. Church folks may debate endlessly such things as what will happen when Jesus comes again, which version of the Bible is best, what women can and cannot do in church, etc. But people who are not shopping for a church have no interest in these intramural debates.

I've spent my life trying to build churches, but I sometimes wish I had the power to destroy all the churches. If we could forget brand loyalty and start all over, maybe we could all learn how to be just Christians.