

“This We Believe...”

What Conservative Christian Churches/Churches of Christ Believe and Practice. Are they a Mirror Image of churches of Christ?

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*F*ollowing the conversion of Cornelius and his household, Peter went to Jerusalem to explain to the apostles and the brethren what had happened. He concluded his testimony with these words: “So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?’ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life’” (Acts 11:17,18 NIV).

Sometimes we need to step up to the plate and speak a word on behalf of our brethren. I know this text is not analogous to this situation, for I am here speaking on behalf of the independent, conservative Christian Churches/Churches of Christ rather than standing sponsor for them. Barnabas once stood sponsor for Saul when the Christians in Jerusalem would not accept him into the fellowship of the church because they feared him and did not believe that his conversion to Christ was authentic, Acts 9:26,27). We need to stand sponsor for each other.

This assignment fell to me, I think, because many in churches of Christ today are concerned, and legitimately so, about efforts toward unity with those in the undenominational fellowship of Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, sometimes known as “Independents” and other times known as “Conservatives.” It is always easier to move to someone you perceive to be on your right, than on your left. Since we have

long perceived churches of Christ to be on our right, it is easier for us to seek fellowship with you than with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), whom we believe to be to the left of us. Since many in churches of Christ perceive us to be to their left, this explains (at least to me) the hesitancy and difficulty some have in reaching out to us. If they consider themselves to be centrists (which all of us do!) I am not sure who mainline churches of Christ consider to be to their right, unless it would be the non-institutional and non-cooperative brethren within their own fellowship. Is that a fair assumption?

One of the first things I have to do when trying to explain the beliefs and practices of independent, conservative Christian Churches/Churches of Christ is to delineate who we are and who we are not. Since many of our congregations use the name Christian Church, some folks identify us with the denomination known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). A number of our congregations (especially in the upper Midwest and the Mideast) use the term Church of Christ. This creates difficulties sometimes for a cappella brethren who are on vacation and they see the name “Church of Christ” on one of our buildings and enter in – only to be greeted by the sounds of instrumental music. It is much easier to figure out who you are! An a cappella church will never use the name Christian Church or Disciples of Christ – though we trust that all such churches are truly “Christian” and “disciples” in the purest sense of the words! A Disciples congregation nearly always uses “Christian Church” first followed by the parenthetical insertion “Disciples of Christ.” Often their logo will also appear on the church sign: a chalice, slanted slightly to the left, emblazoned with a crimson cross.

Continuing with History 101. As you well know, this year of all years, churches of Christ separated from the Disciples of Christ about the year 1906, although there had

been growing disagreements since the days of the Civil War. About twenty years later, in 1927, conservative Christians, unhappy with the organizational structure and perceived liberal theology among the Disciples, formed the North American Christian Convention. It was held “independent” of the Disciples’ International Convention, hence, the nickname “Independents.”

Several years ago, in 1994 to be exact, Dr. Russ Blowers, longtime minister of the East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis, was asked to explain the differences between the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Christian Churches. In an irenic spirit he sought to outline some of the basic dissimilarities. He stated, “I am not writing this with a ‘good guys-bad guys’ attitude. If you could peer out of my computer screen you might detect some tears” (*The Lookout*, July 10, 1994). He cited 14 basic dissimilarities. As we go through some of these, you may see why I believe churches of Christ to be a near mirror image of Christian Churches/Churches of Christ.

- Disciples: Congregational autonomy maintained within a denomination with tightening centralization. Christians: Strong congregational independence.
- Disciples: General Assembly gathers for denominational business with recognized delegates. Christians: NACC is a gathering for fellowship, worship, and preaching, with no official delegates or business meetings.
- Disciples: Official positions, regionally and generally, with liberal stances at the general level on abortion, homosexuality, women’s rights, and other social issues; tendency to political liberalism. Christians: No official group decisions; tendency to political conservatism.
- Disciples: Unlimited female ordination to ministry and full recognition of all United Church of Christ clergy. Female elders in many churches. Christians: A relatively small number of ordained women [to staff positions, not pulpit responsibilities. – V.K.] Almost all male elders, with few exceptions [could be counted on one hand. – V. K.]
- Disciples: Strongly ecumenical, emphasizing “unity through diversity.” Christians: Limited ecumenism [local ministerial involvement. –V.K.], emphasizing “unity through restoration.”
- Disciples: Liberal theology (but some “moderates”). [1990 survey revealed 80% of members are “conservative to moderate” while 80% of clergy are “moderate to

liberal.” – V. K.] Christians: Conservative biblical theology (but some “moderates”).

- Disciples: Strong move toward universalism and acceptance of other world religions as being equal with the gospel. Christians: Holds the gospel of Christ as the full and final revelation.
- Disciples: Scripture, reason, and tradition often all considered authoritative. Christians: The Scriptures are primary authority; interpretation involved the “common mind” of the church.
- Disciples: Tends to see the era of Christian missions as over; overseas work mostly ecumenical social work. Christians: Overall, evangelistic foreign missions is an active priority [two to three times as many churches overseas as in U.S. – V. K.]
- Disciples: Baptism by immersion not usually required for membership in local congregation. Christians: Immersion required.
- Disciples: Liturgical worship centered in weekly Lord’s Supper. Christians: Non-liturgical worship centered in weekly Lord’s Supper.

In a special edition of the *Christian Standard* (March 27, 2005) “What Kind of Church is This?” Ralph Kinney Bennett, retired senior editor with *Reader’s Digest* and an elder in one of our Christian churches, wrote an article called “Why I Am a Member of the Christian Church.” (In the article he used the terms Christian Church and Church of Christ interchangeably). Bennett appreciates the simplicity and variety of the fellowship of which he is a part. He mentioned things like our “Christians only” stance, the appeal to the New Testament ideal, a lack of hierarchy, participatory acts like baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the rich tapestry of transformed lives, and variety in worship.

In the same issue, Leroy Lawson summarized “Our Position” on who we are and what we are about in ten succinct points.

- A *Christian* church. Our message is that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” We require no other creed. He alone is Lord and Savior.
- A church of *Christ*. The church belongs to him. We have no authority to change the teachings, rewrite the rules, alter membership requirements, or usurp his place. The church is not a democracy. [Implying it is a theocracy. – V.K.]
- A church seeking unity. Like the Campbells and Stone, members of this church seek to be one in Christ with all others he calls his own.
- A church seeking to restore. As much as is possible, we imitate the New Testament precedents. That is why our baptism is by immersion, our Communion is every Lord’s Day, our leaders are called elders, our preaching is about Christ, and our

prayers are in Jesus' name. Even our church name is rooted in the earliest days, when disciples were called Christians and their congregations were often addressed as "churches of Christ."

- An apostolic church. The church, Ephesians 2:20 states, is "built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone." Whatever we know about Christ and the church we learned from Jesus' closest companions, the apostles.
- A thinking church. In the same Ephesian letter, Paul prays that God will give a "Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better...." Christian faith demands the best our minds can give, so we are a studying church, seeking to apply biblical truth intelligently.
- A feeling church. Ours is not a dry intellectual approach to God, however. We rejoice and pray and love and serve from the heart. We are unashamed of the gospel and not embarrassed to let our excitement be seen.
- A sharing church. We share our faith and love with as many as we can reach and our possessions as persons who know that everything we have belongs to God to be used for his purposes.
- A free church. We have no bishops or superintendents or national headquarters to determine local church policies. We elect our own leaders, call and support our own ministers, and decide where our mission money will go. We are not isolationists, though. Our congregations freely associate with one another to accomplish tasks to big for one church alone.
- A growing church. We want to grow, because we are under Christ's commission to disciple the world. We haven't completed the task yet, so Christian churches and churches of Christ are renewing our commitment to go unto the ends of the earth, preaching and baptizing and teaching until the whole world knows the one Lord of all.

The *New York Times* (Sept. 18, 2002) reported on the growth rates of religious groups in America with one million or more adherents. Many were surprised to learn that the second fastest growing religious group in America from 1990-2000 was the undenominational fellowship of Christian Churches/Churches of Christ who had increased their membership by 18.6 percent. If you considered the fastest-growing group, the Mormons, to be non-evangelical, a "cult" if you please, then the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ were the fastest growing church in America in the 1990s. It is significant that the piece in the *Times* referred to them as the "conservative" (not "independent") Christian Churches and Churches of Christ.

These conservative congregations, like a cappella churches of Christ, have “no creed but Christ, no book but the Bible, no name but the divine, no law but love.” Yet they do, like you, have a distinctive set of beliefs and practices. At the 1994 Restoration Forum held at Abilene Christian University, Lynn Gardner and Bill Humble were asked to make respective speeches on “Who We Are.” Gardner is the longtime dean at Ozark Christian College. His remarks were recently reprinted in a book by Sam Stone, *Simply Christians: New Testament Christianity in the 21st Century* (College Press, 2004). In response to the question, “What are the beliefs of those in the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ?”, Gardner replied as follows.

“We have no official doctrinal statement. I cannot speak for everyone. I will state what I believe are the doctrinal convictions of the majority in the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. This is not meant to be a comprehensive statement, but rather a statement of basic convictions.

“God is the eternal, sovereign creator and ruler of the universe. He is our holy, loving heavenly Father. He has revealed himself in Scripture.

“Jesus is God in the flesh. He was born of the virgin Mary. He worked miracles and fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. He died for our sins and was raised from the dead. He will return to earth to be the judge of all men.

“The Bible is completely true and is the inspired word of God written.... The New Testament is the authoritative standard for faith and practice. We have correctly understood the meaning of Scripture when we understand the biblical author’s intended meaning.

“We, as human beings, were created in the image of God and stand, either as sinners in need of salvation, or sinners saved by God’s loving grace. We inherit the consequences of Adam’s sin, but not the guilt. We are sinners because we choose to sin. We have free will to either accept or reject God’s offered salvation. The New Testament plan of salvation includes faith in the deity and Lordship of Jesus, repentance from one’s sins, and immersion for forgiveness of sins. The Holy Spirit dwells within believers, helping us turn from the works of the flesh and produce the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

“The church as the body of Christ is God’s chosen agency to seek the evangelization of the lost and the edification of Christians worldwide. Loving God’s truth includes loving people. Each local congregation is autonomous, choosing its own elders, deacons and minister(s), answering to no authority other than the Word of God. Every Lord’s Day Christians regularly assemble with other believers for preaching, breaking of bread, prayers and fellowship. Practicing the Christianity taught by Christ and the apostles in the New Testament is the basis for unity and evangelism.”

For many years the best-selling book for College Press Publishing Company is Joplin, Missouri, has been Denver Sizemore’s *13 Lessons in Christian Doctrine*. Sizemore taught at Atlanta Christian College for 43 years. The book covers basic Bible doctrines such as God, Christ, the Bible, the church, faith, repentance, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, giving, and the mission of the church. In a sequel, *12 More Lessons in Christian Doctrine*, he writes about Satan, Heaven, Hell, the two Covenants, the evidence of pardon, the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, tongues, and other lessons.

College Press has also produced a 600-page volume on Bible doctrine, Jack Cottrell’s *The Faith Once For All*. I have seen this book advertised by both *Gospel Advocate* and

Firm Foundation, so I know it is considered a reputable work. In 33 chapters, Cottrell, longtime teacher at Cincinnati Christian University, deals with such subjects as God, angels, the nature of man, the nature of sin, Satan, the person and work of Christ, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, justification, regeneration, sanctification, the conditions of salvation, baptism, the assurance of salvation, the nature, purpose, organization, and assemblies of the church, interpreting Bible prophecy, the intermediate state of the dead, the second coming of Christ, the final judgment, heaven, and hell. One would be hard pressed to find a more thorough treatment of biblical doctrines that are upheld by the majority of ministers and members of Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. No fair-minded person would accuse them of not respecting the authority of Scripture or being soft on doctrine.

Many of our congregations put their statements of belief on their websites. Here is a representative one, from the Pathway Christian Church in Riverside, California (www.pathwaychurch.org). Under “What We Believe” are listed what they believe about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Man, Salvation, the Bible, etc. A number of Scripture references are given for each sub-point.

A song I often hear sung in our churches is “Because We Believe.” Its lyrics may be familiar to you.

*We believe in God the Father. We believe in Christ the Son.
We believe in the Holy Spirit.
We are the church and we stand as one.*

*We believe in the Holy Bible. We believe in the virgin birth.
We believe in the Resurrection,
That Christ, one day will return to earth.*

*We believe in the blood of Jesus. We believe in eternal life.
We believe in the blood that frees us*

To become the Bride of Christ.

(Refrain)

Holy, holy, holy is our God.

Worthy, worthy, worthy is our King.

All glory and honor are His to receive.

To Jesus we sing, Because we believe!

If we have any motto at all, it would be “no creed but Christ.” The word “Christ” is found in both names our congregations go by (Church of Christ, Christian Church). The name “Christian” adequately states who we are. We agree with Charles Spurgeon, who said, “I say of the Baptist name, let it perish; but let Christ’s name last forever.” We say “Amen!” to Martin Luther, who said, “I pray you, leave my name alone. Do not call yourselves Lutherans, but Christians.” We seek to be Christians only. We accept the Bible as our only rule of faith and practice.

Are we a mirror image of churches of Christ? In many ways (some would say most ways), yes. Much of what I have shared thus far about our faith and practice you would heartily endorse. Yet there remain some differences.

Perhaps the greatest difference is in the way we view the silence of Scripture. Not what the Bible says but what the Bible does not say. Does silence prohibit? Always? Is it permissive? Always? Or is it, most of the time, simply passive? When Thomas Campbell said we should speak where the Scriptures speak, and be silent where the Scriptures are silent, I believe he was intimating that we should keep silent about those things of which God has said nothing. But too often we have become very vocal about matters of which the Scriptures say nothing at all. Silence simply means “forbearance from speech.” Silence must always yield to “that which is written.” Silence has no authority at all. We cannot (and should not) speak with any authority where God has not spoken. Where God

has spoken, let us speak that truth in love. Where God has not spoken, let us resist the temptation to speak.

There may be a few theological differences, but these seem to be diminishing. The majority of believers in both fellowships today believe in the personal, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This was not always the case in the past. Though some shy away from the word “Trinity,” I think that all believe in the biblical godhead – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some sing, “God in three persons, blessed Trinity” while others sing, “God in three persons, blessed eternally.”

The most obvious difference, of course, is the use of instrumental music in Christian Churches/Churches of Christ in contrast to a cappella singing in non-instrumental churches of Christ. One hundred years of debating the issue have brought us no closer to a solution, and probably never will. It is interesting to note, however, that some in instrumental churches have discovered a new appreciation for a cappella singing, while some in traditionally a cappella churches are starting to experiment with instrumental music. Both fellowships, however, face the growing challenge of dealing with amplification, not just instrumentation, as well as contemporary and emergent styles of worship versus classic hymns and gospel songs. And this is to say nothing (or am I now saying something?) about praise teams replacing the dying art of congregational singing – whether a cappella or instrumental?

Last year at this event I had a good conversation with Joe Ed Furr, author of *A History of Church Music*. He made the interesting observation that instrumental churches have patterned their worship after the temple (instrumental music, orchestras, choirs, pageantry) while a cappella churches have opted for the more plain worship

style of the synagogue (a cappella music, elevation of the pulpit). I've thought since that even the architecture of the church buildings resemble this dual scenario. Churches of Christ (at least those I have visited), for the most part, do not have flags, banners, or even the Christian cross. Christian Churches have "sanctuaries" while churches of Christ have "auditoriums." One has the "Senior Minister" while the other has the "Pulpit Minister." The former preaches a "sermon" while the other delivers the "lesson." One conducts a "revival meeting" while the other conducts a "gospel meeting." You call it "lectureship" or "workshop" while we call it "convention" or "conference."

But these are peripheral to the real issue. And what is the issue? What think ye of Christ? Whose Son is He? Are we of Christ? Are we in Christ? Do we reflect the spirit of Christ? G. C. Brewer said, "Nothing should separate us from each other unless it is something that separates us from God." David Libscomb said, "If we are in Christ, we cannot help being one with all who are in Christ." Seth Wilson said, "We are brothers if we are children of the same Father, whether we like it or not. God wants us to like it and act like it. If you belong to Christ, then I belong to you."

Marvin Phillips has said, "Let's unite on things specifically taught and be tolerant on things sincerely deducted." T. B. Larimore, when pressured by peers to renounce and disfellowship those who did not understand issues exactly as other understood them, replied, "I prefer to sit on the issues and stand on Jesus Christ!"

God, give us more of Larimore!

Together, let us proclaim the everlasting message of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world!

VICTOR KNOWLES' latest book, *Together in Christ: More than a Dream*, is now available from College Press, 1-800-289-3300 or www.collegepress.com.