

How We See Thee:

How Churches of Christ Are Perceived by Christian Churches

By Victor Knowles

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us

*To see oursel's as others see us!
It wad Frae mony a blunder free us,
And foolish notion.*

ROBERT BURNS (1759-1796)

My perception of the Churches of Christ has changed from 1964, when I was a freshman in Bible college. Perhaps that is because in 1967 I married a lovely lass from one of your churches! This August will mark our 35th wedding anniversary. Unity is possible, pleasant, and productive (as six children and seven grandchildren readily attest).

Two college girls were asked what they noticed first about a man. One of them replied, "What I notice first is whether he is noticing me!" Our perception of "you" is somewhat colored by your perception of "us." Dennis Randall has observed that misconceptions lead to prejudice, prejudice leads to division, and division results in polarization.

Isolation breeds reptiles of the mind.

William E. Paul said, "Each person's perceived understanding will be strongly influenced by where he grew up and what he saw. This depends largely on the part of the country where the perceiving is being done. If he grew up in the rural deep South, the perception may be that Churches of Christ are dogmatic and legalistic. If he grew up in the urban North or West his perception may be that 'they' are quite progressive and tolerant." Geography has a lot to do with perception. Bill Humble once pointed out that 5,500 of your 13,000 churches are located in just four states (Texas, Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas). That is the sum total of all our churches! Yet our total memberships are about the same: 1.2 to 1.3 million. Our perception, however, is not that you are twice as evangelistic. More than twenty churches of Christ in Athens, Alabama, suggests something else is afoot.

"Labeling" has not been a healthy exercise. Boyce Mouton said, "A label robs a man of his humanity and individuality." Churches of Christ are not all alike any more than Christian Churches are all alike. I do not wish to try and lump, label, or libel Churches of Christ in this paper!

How do "Christian Churches" view "Churches of Christ" today? Largely it depends upon how much contact "they" have had with "you." If their contact has been limited and abrupt, it may tend to be negative. If their contact has been more extensive (and more recent), it will probably be much more positive.

It also depends upon "which" grouping of the Church of Christ they have had dealings with. We used to say you were split into two-dozen or more camps. "Physician, heal thyself!" was our cry. When some said to me, "Come join us" I would usually reply, "Which one of 'us' are you talking about? And will you treat me better than you do Rubel Shelly?" In 1994 Doug Foster wrote *Will the Cycle Be Unbroken: Churches of Christ Face the Twenty-first Century*. In it he listed 20 "issues" that threatened to disrupt Churches of Christ at some level. But having 20 issues does not of necessity mean having 20 separate camps. In *The Stone-Campbell Movement* Leroy Garrett narrows it down, identifying six "clusters" of Churches of Christ: mainline, non-cooperative, non-Sunday School, one-cup, premillennial, and black. "Mainline churches" probably account for 80% of the 13,000 Churches of Christ. Most, but not all, of the "bad press" has come from the non-cooperative group. As a rule we have found the other "clusters" to be irenic in spirit, some more than others.

In this paper I am going to try and give you *two* views our people may have of you. I say "may" because I am certainly not omniscient! I say "two" because I think that is the case. One view won't do.

First, there are those who don't know you very well, hardly at all. Their impression of you was forged perhaps 40 years ago with a brief but memorable encounter. Many of our congregations who use the name "Church of Christ" can remember when they were visited by some non-instrumental people who were on vacation during the summer. What they remember to this day, however, is how they stormed out of the service when the first notes of "Blest Be the Tie that Binds Our Hearts in Christian Love" were played on the keys of the piano or organ! (We may know you better because our summer time vacationers visiting in your churches stayed longer!) Or it may have been some "in your face" encounter like the day mild-mannered Edwin Hayden was calling on a lady in the hospital whose admission chart read "Church of Christ." From her bedside she railed on poor Edwin, telling him why he could not minister to her.

“Your church is wrong on so many points, especially permitting women to be teachers of men!” Brother Hayden recalls, “Now, we didn’t have women teaching men where I preached, but I surely had one lecturing me that day in the hospital!”

Second, and on a much happier and more positive note, there are those of us who know you a little better because of having more contact with you, intentionally and by design. We have more than chance encounters. These have been healthy, happy, even holy occasions.

Our two views of you are not necessarily the majority and minority views (though they may be in some cases). For the sake of brevity, I will list them together: the first, in italics, being the “old” view; the second, in boldface, being the “new” view. The first view is based largely on “first impressions” (which can be good or bad). The second view, the “new” view, is not necessarily an “improved” view.

1. *Churches of Christ are legalistic, judgmental, and negative. Churches of Christ are now reacting to legalism with a positive emphasis on grace, mercy and love.* It was a revelation to me a few years ago to discover that legalism is not a “Church of Christ” thing. We face it too, as do all Bible-believing groups. The danger is that in our eagerness to move from legalism to love, we neglect such subjects as sin, God’s wrath, and hell.
2. *Churches of Christ are zealously evangelistic and mission-minded. Churches of Christ are not as evangelistic and mission-minded as they used to be.* You were once the envy of evangelicals. We stood in awe of your zeal and accomplishments. The Churches of Christ were once the fastest-growing religious group in the United States, growing at a rate of 135% from 1950-1965. That is no longer the case. Like many of our churches, you have reached a plateau. I would be hard pressed to name a growing “mega-church” in your fellowship. Your “crown jewel,” Madison, TN, has fallen on hard times. According to Mac Lynn, “Over the past decade, Churches of Christ expanded only minimally . . . membership and attendance have declined . . . more of the younger generation appear to be attending other religious bodies than in past decades . . .” (*Churches of Christ in the United States, 1997*).
3. *Churches of Christ think they are the only ones going to heaven. Churches of Christ, because of their increased contact with others, have discovered they are not “the only ones.”* This may explain the loss of aggressiveness in evangelism at home and mission efforts overseas. When you go from being “Christians, and the only Christians” to being “Christians only, but not the only Christians” something’s got to give.
4. *Churches of Christ place a great emphasis on the Bible in their teaching and preaching. Churches of Christ continue to hold Scripture in high regard.* The issue of “inerrancy” has not hit your brotherhood like it has the Southern Baptists. I believe that the move to expository preaching a number of years ago has made all of us more balanced in our preaching and less likely to use certain verses as “proof texts.” The tragedy of our division is that 99% of our people never heard your great preachers (and vice versa).
5. *Churches of Christ are “issue-oriented.” Churches of Christ are moving from “issues” to “matters of first importance.”* Many are emphasizing the “core gospel” and have, with Paul, resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Many a young man’s first sermon was on the sin of instrumental music. My own first sermon was on the evils of television. Why weren’t both our sermons on the goodness of God or the Lordship of Jesus Christ?
6. *Churches of Christ have strong elderships. Churches of Christ continue to be a model to other churches in this regard.* I believe that in the main you take the eldership more seriously (in both their biblical qualifications and duties) than we do. While there are always abuses of the office (even in Ephesus, Acts 20:30), you have done well in this regard.
7. *Churches of Christ believe the use of instrumental music will send you to hell. Churches of Christ, at least some of them, are changing their views on instrumental music.* In *Ministers at the Millennium: A Survey of Preachers in Churches of Christ* (Foster, Hailey, & Winter), while 80% of those surveyed agreed that “a cappella singing is the only acceptable form of music in the public worship assemblies of the church” only 28% of them believe “immersed believers who use musical instruments in worship cannot go to heaven” (p. 96). That is “music” to our ears because we’d kinda like to go there! We have also noticed a switch from some being *anti*-instrumental to being *non*-instrumental. Some are telling us that a *cappella* music is more a part of their heritage than it is their conviction. Most amazing of all, some are now using actual musical instruments in some of the public worship assemblies of the church. I say “actual” because some of us thought you were already using them with voices that mimicked the sounds of instrumental music.
8. *Churches of Christ teach “the 5 steps of salvation” and “the 5 acts of worship”. Churches of Christ still teach the 5 steps and the 5 acts, but not with the same gusto and emphasis that they once did.* The 5 steps and the 5 acts pretty much emphasized what man must do. Do this and you are saved. Do this and you have worshipped correctly. Rightly or wrongly, it was perceived by some as “works oriented.” Today there is a greater emphasis on God, His grace, His mercy, His majesty. Baptism is now explained as being a part of the

faith response to the grace of God (but not *apart* from faith). While a few of your brethren may not emphasize baptism in the plan of salvation, I believe that the vast majority still do. Baptism is not a work of man but an act of obedience.

9. *Churches of Christ have to be right on everything. Churches of Christ, while still emphasizing right doctrine, are also concerned with right relationship.* Some people would rather be right than righteous (in both fellowships of churches). But those who “know it all” can’t grow at all in the knowledge of Christ. Don DeWalt once told me he was going to write a book and call it, “Agree With Me or Go to Hell!” But then he decided Someone had already written The Book! Carl Ketcherside’s life was turned around when he realized that the Living Christ desired to have a relationship with him. I believe those who thought they were right when they taught that the Holy Spirit dwells only in the Word were wrong. This could explain why some did not manifest the fruit of the Spirit in some of their debates and preaching. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us (Rom. 8:11).
10. *Churches of Christ know who they are. Churches of Christ today are in search of their identity.* Listening to your debaters, preachers, and indoctrinated members of bygone years, one thing was sure. Those people know who they are and have the courage of their convictions to tell the whole world who they are and what they believe. Today I see a much more genteel, even cautious people. Where once you may have been rigid, now you are changing. Where once you may have been critical of others, now you are introspective. In *The Crux of the Matter: Crisis, Tradition, and the Future of Churches of Christ* (Childers, Foster & Reese), the authors have a chapter entitled “Our Current Crisis.” It is worth quoting here.

“Once we had a strong sense of our identity. We sang the same songs, used the same Bible school literature, read the same papers and knew the same ‘big’ preachers. Through articles, sermons, and lectures we at least knew what the accepted positions were on most doctrinal issues. That sense of stability and certainty from the early and middle years of the twentieth century is largely gone. Our papers have polarized, lectureships attract increasingly narrow audiences, and preachers who are influential in one segment of the churches are often unknown or demonized in others. While there is still an amazing consensus on many teachings and practices, you can never be sure about what you’re going to get when you visit a congregation in another place. Today our churches reflect a wide range of positions on all the issues. Some are threatened by what they see as an abandonment of our core Identity, a tossing aside of the good and true things that have made us who we are. Others believe that the real danger to our existence is in holding blindly to ways of the past. Our traditionalism, they insist, is preventing us from being relevant to a culture desperately in need of relevant Christianity. We are in crisis.” (p. 130)

To a large degree, some of these same things could be said about us in the fellowship of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. It only points out why we need each other. Together, perhaps we can come together and reason together how we can be the people God wants us to be in the twenty-first century.

Sam Stone recalls a TV documentary he once saw on the return of the Jews to Israel. They came from all around the world. They spoke different languages, wore different clothes, ate different food. One of the told the interviewer, “What we have in common is so much more important than what makes us different.” We have some things that make us different, even separate us. But what we have in common is so much more important!

Oscar Wilde once visited the wild and woolly town of Leadville, Colorado. What he saw there moved him to write this memorable line: “*Please do not shoot the pianist. He is doing his best.*” Please do not shoot us. We are doing our best. One of Marvin Phillip’s books has this arresting title: “*Don’t Shoot! We May Be Both on the Same Side.*” Of that there can be no doubt. We have the same spiritual and historical DNA. We be brethren.

I started with Robert Burns and will now reference him once again.

*“But to see her was to love her,
Love but her, and love for ever.”*

When we see each other as we are, we will love each other as we should.

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