

Wishful Thinking:

What Christian Churches Wish Churches of Christ Knew About Christian Churches

By Victor Knowles

I am beginning to feel like Moses. When Moses tried to intervene between two of his fellow Hebrew brethren who were duking it out, he was rebuffed with these words: “Who made thee a prince and a judge over us?” Who made you a spokesman for the Christian Churches? No one. I speak only for myself, but I hope I can portray a fair representation of what many, if not most, of my brethren in the fellowship of independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ wish you knew about them. (Some of them may wish I were not the one doing this presentation!) No wonder Moses was a “basket case.”

You need to know that when I use the term “Christian Churches” I am using only half the name that some of our churches go by. The other term of choice with some is “Churches of Christ.” This is surprising to some in the churches of Christ (a cappella), who are even more surprised when they enter the church and hear the strains of an organ! That will key you up. Yes, there are instrumental Churches of Christ. We have an unofficial listing, published annually, entitled Directory of the Ministry: A Yearbook of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. Listing is strictly voluntary. Some folk good-naturedly refer to us as the “4 C’s Fellowship” (in contrast with you in the “2 C’s Fellowship). All these “C’s” make some C-sick! Sometimes the slash mark (/) is used to divide the names, i.e., “Christian Churches/Churches of Christ.” I don’t prefer the slash mark since I am trying work for unity and not division!

When I say “Christian Churches” I do not mean the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with denominational headquarters in Indianapolis, IN. Though we are tied together in history, we are not in matters of theology and polity. I will say more of this later.

Here are “10 Things I Wish You Knew About ‘Us’” – “us” being the fellowship of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. Some of you already know these things, but other may not. It’s important to know because it’s easy to be down on what you’re not up on.

I Wish Churches of Christ Knew . . .

1. That we are a part of the same Restoration Movement and have a continuing commitment to the Restoration plea. We are all a part of what some now call the Stone-Campbell Movement. The history is well documented, “written in Stone” in Leroy Garrett’s Stone-Campbell Movement, Earl West’s The Search for the Ancient Order, James North’s Union in Truth, and the classic by James DeForest Murch, Christians Only. The record speaks for itself. Only the ignorant or uninformed would deny that we share the same spiritual DNA.

Who are these people called Christian Churches and Churches of Christ? We are a people who number about 1.2 million worshipping in over 5,500 congregations here in America. Christian Standard (our oldest weekly publication, since 1866) recently reported that we have about 70 “mega-churches” – churches that average over 1,000 in attendance each Sunday. Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, KY, is one of the

largest churches in America, currently averaging 17,500 in attendance. Last year this church alone baptized 1,363 people. We have more churches overseas than we do in the USA – perhaps twice as many. The number of missionaries abroad from the “4-C’s fellowship” ranks us in the top five among all evangelical churches. There are over 1,000 “agencies” or “para-church” organizations doing ministry in the US. Just one of them, Good News Productions, International, has missionary projects going on in 103 different nations of the world and is reaching over 6 million people per day with the gospel.

Some 37 Christian colleges, five graduate schools and one liberal arts college train about 10,000 students for ministry. The North American Christian Convention (est. 1927), an annual gathering of Christians for preaching, teaching and fellowship, is usually attended by about 20,000 people. The National Missionary Convention (est. 1948) is attended by about 4,000 people each year. Most Bible colleges hold preaching/teaching conventions, some attracting several thousand. Some states have state preaching/teaching conventions, some attracting as many as 5,000.

Standard Publishing in Cincinnati, OH, publishes Bible school literature, Christian Standard and The Lookout. Other major periodicals published by other ministries include The Restoration Herald, Horizons, and One Body. College Press of Joplin, MO, is also a major book publisher, reprinting many significant works of Restoration literature of bygone years.

2. That we are not the same as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Because many of our congregations use the name “Christian Church” we are often confused with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In response to a question from a reader, Russ Blowers identified 13 differences between “Christians” and “Disciples” in his column in The Lookout (July 10, 1994). These differences range from forms of congregational autonomy to liberal versus conservative theology. James North dates the division between the two groups as 1927, the year conservative leaders started the North American Christian Convention because of the Disciples’ theological and political leanings to the left. In 1955 the aforementioned Directory of the Ministry was started, listing the ministers and churches sympathetic to the conservative cause. A. T. DeGroot in Church of Christ Number Two saw 1955 as the date of division. When the Disciples changed from “Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)” to “The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)” at the 1968 convention in Kansas City, becoming a full-fledged denomination, many saw this as the “final straw.” More than 2,500 churches wrote to have their names removed from the Disciples Yearbook. Most of these no longer supported the Disciples, but their names had not been officially removed from the book.

Lynn Gardner notes that Disciple leaders have promoted ecumenism, including involvement with the National Council Churches of Christ and the World Council of Churches and a liberal social agenda, including ordaining homosexuals, being pro-abortion, advocating feminism and even denying the uniqueness as Jesus’ role as Savior. In 1984 a conservative renewal movement sprang up among the Disciples known as Disciple Renewal. They have formed a fellowship of churches in covenant called Disciple Heritage Fellowship. More recently, a dialogue effort called the Stone-Campbell Dialogue has been started in an effort to discuss the differences that exist between the three streams of the Restoration Movement. Participants from Churches of Christ (a cappella) and Christian Churches and Churches of Christ find themselves almost as one in their conservative views.

3. That we hold Scripture, the Word of God, in the highest esteem. If there is one thing we do not like to hear it is the charge, “You people don’t have any respect for the authority of God’s Word.” We have

prided ourselves in being “a people of the Book.” As Lynn Gardner explained in a paper entitled “Who We Are” – “The Bible is completely true and is the inspired word of God written. Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. Isaiah wrote Isaiah. Daniel wrote Daniel. Matthew wrote Matthew. Peter wrote 2 Peter. 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.” The lion’s share of our Bible colleges were started because of theological liberalism which infiltrated the movement. McGarvey Bible College merged with Cincinnati Bible Institute to become the Cincinnati Bible Seminary in 1924. Other Bible colleges were quickly established to provide true-to-the-Bible education for future ministers and Christian workers. In short, we believe that the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God, that is His complete revelation to man, and that it is our only rule of faith and practice. We have no book but the Bible. Having said all this it must be said that biblical illiteracy abounds in some of our churches. We all have those who think Dan and Beersheba were lovers!

4. Why we do not hold “silence” in as high esteem as you do. In 1809 Thomas Campbell stood up in the home of Abraham Altars and said, “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” But long before Campbell, Augustine had said, “Where Scripture speaks, God speaks.” Period. He was silent about silence. Some are quite vocal about things upon which the Bible has nothing to say. Churches of Christ (a cappella) have traditionally interpreted silence as prohibitive. Sometimes it may be. We have usually taken silence to be permissive. Sometimes it may be. But perhaps silence is neither. Perhaps it is passive. To interpret Scripture is one thing. To interpret “silence” is quite another. It is highly speculative, even subjective, nearly impossible. Some “necessary inferences” may really be unnecessary interferences with what God is supposedly saying or not saying!

At Restoration Forum V in Cincinnati, OH, Edwin Hayden, former editor of Christian Standard, shared a great illustration. He told of his helping his wife’s grandfather repair a fence on his West Virginia farm. The old gentleman stood on one side of the fence and hammered the nail through. Hayden stood on the other side of the fence to bend and clinch the point of the nail into the wood. Hayden said this went well until the moment when the grandfather hammered hard but Hayden did not see the nail come through. “Did that one come through?” Grandfather Weaver asked. Hayden confessed that he hadn’t seen it. “That’s all right,” the old man assured Hayden, “it clinched on this side!”

Sometimes we can try to pound an argument into someone, convincing ourselves completely, while the man on the other side never sees the point. The point on the so-called law or authority of silence has never come through on our side of the fence, though it well may have clinched on your side.

5. That we believe in the absolute deity and Lordship of Jesus Christ. He is the eternal and only begotten Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. He lived a sinless life, performed miracles and fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. He is fully God and fully man. He died on the cross, the just for the unjust, and shed His blood for our sins. He was bodily raised from the dead on the third day and ascended into Heaven where He sits at the right hand of the Father and intercedes for us as our great High Priest. Some day He will visibly return in power and glory to receive His own and to judge the quick and the dead. I believe I am safe in saying that virtually all our ministers and churches would hold to these beliefs. We have no creed but Christ. He is the head of the church, “the Speaker of the House.”

6. That we teach the same plan of salvation as do the churches of Christ (a cappella). Like you, we teach

that man was created in the image of God but that image was marred by sin (we were not born as sinners but became sinners by choice). We inherit the consequences of Adam's sin, but not the guilt. Therefore we are in need of salvation that is only made possible by the love, mercy, and grace of God as demonstrated by the vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice of His Son on the cross. We have free will to accept or reject God's marvelous offer of salvation. The New Testament plan of salvation includes confessing faith in the deity and Lordship of Jesus Christ, repentance, that is, a sorrow and a turning from one's sins, and baptism (immersion) for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism is not a work of man but an act of obedience. The Holy Spirit is promised to every penitent, baptized believer and dwells within to produce His fruit in our lives. We do not believe that the Holy Spirit only indwells us through the Word. He is a person, the third person of the Godhead, who dwells within us (Rom. 8:11).

7. That we believe in the New Testament church (and no, we do not have women preachers or elders). We agree with Thomas W. Phillips, who wrote in *The Church of Christ*, "The church of Christ is a divine institution and is the means by which God is saving the world." P. H. Welshimer, long-time minister at First Christian Church in Canton, OH, said, "Our aim is to build a church of Christ without denominational name, man-written creed or other barrier to Christian unity, whose terms of fellowship shall be as broad as the conditions of salvation, and identical with them." This we believe and endeavor to practice. The church is the body of Christ. It exists to evangelize the lost and edify the saved. Each local congregation is autonomous, choosing its own ministers, elders, and deacons, answering to no authority other than the Word of God. The Lord's Supper is observed on a weekly basis. We believe in the unity of all believers, based upon the authority of God's Word and the deity of Jesus Christ, for the purpose of reaching the world for Christ.

8. That we accept you and brother and sisters in Christ. J. D. Thomas entitled one of his books *We Be Brethren*. That is taken from Genesis 13:8, where Abraham pleaded with Lot for unity. "Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee . . . for we be brethren." The NIV has "relatives." We are more than cousins. We are kin. We are kith. It is time to "kith" and make up, for we (most of us I believe) consider you our brothers and sisters in Christ. Not half-brothers or half-baked. Carl Ketcherside said, "Where ever God has a son our a daughter there I have a brother or a sister." Brotherhood is based on Fatherhood. Fraternity is determined by paternity. We might have a few that would consider you "brothers in error" but they would be in the minority.

9. That we are struggling with some of the same issues that you are. I hope I have not left the impression with you that those of us in the fellowship of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are perfect. "On every family there tree hangs at least one horse thief." We would like to forget that Sidney Rigdon came from the ranks of the Restoration. We are struggling with some issues, some of them the very same ones you may be struggling with. Some of the "hot spots" include: baptisms part in the salvation process; worship styles (contemporary vs. traditional, loud vs. quiet); Saturday night worship (is it all right to miss Sunday a.m. and can one take the Lord's Supper on Saturday p.m.); the place of the Lord's Supper in worship (a few do not offer it so as not to "offend" visitors); cooperation with evangelicals (does some association mean blanket endorsement?); the role of women in the church (some help serve Communion); use of the term "pastor," etc.

10. That for a number of years we have been doing some good things together. We are learning to get along with each other and cooperate with each other. Since 1984 we've been meeting regularly in what is called the Restoration Forum. Our 20th meeting will take place Oct. 20-22, 2002, in Lubbock, TX. We've

come a long way, baby, from that first meeting in Joplin, MO, Aug. 7-9, 1984. Understanding has been enhanced. Attitudes have been improved. Fellowship, at least among most of those present at the first meeting, has been restored. College Press Publishing Company has been printing books of interest to all in the Restoration Movement since 1959. More recently they have undertaken a unique project: The College Press NIV Commentary. Roughly every other book has been written by a brother from the other side of the keyboard. Covenant Publishing, launched in 2001, is a joint effort and is now publishing writers from both sides of the keyboard. Howard Publishing recently published *When God Builds a Church* by Bob Russell, minister of our largest church. One Body, Christian Standard, Leaven, & New Wineskins publish articles by writers from both fellowships of churches.

Several of our colleges and universities have shared professors and have entered into joint educational exercises. Milton Jones, minister of the Northwest Church of Christ in Seattle, teaches at Puget Sound Christian College and most of the faculty attends his church! Marvin Phillips conducts about one-third of his meetings in Christian Churches. He invited not one but three of us from the instrumental churches to speak at this year's International Soul Winning Workshop in Tulsa, OK. Jerry Rushford and the Pepperdine Bible Lectures have been a model in openness in this regard for several years. The North American Christian Convention has featured Rubel Shelly as a main speaker and will have Max Lucado as closing speaker in 2003. Overseas there have been several encouraging stories of missionaries joining forces. In Kenya, Africa, for example, there has been remarkable progress cooperation between the Quaker Avenue Church of Christ in Lubbock and Good News Productions, International, in Joplin, MO. GNPI has also participated in a number of projects with brethren from a cappella concerns including a huge effort to educate people on the AIDS issue. For years our people have used the Jule Miller filmstrips to win thousands to the Lord. Monroe Hawley's Bible correspondence courses have also been used. Many of our people have participated in World Bible School as teachers. Prayer ministries like the Calhoun School of Prayer and Prayer Matters (a cappella) have recently joined forces with Harvest Prayer Ministries (Christian Churches). When our prayer warriors unite, look out world!

On the local level, there has been much good accomplished. Christians from both sides of the keyboard are working side-by-side in Crisis Pregnancy Centers, fighting the gambling, liquor, and pornography industries, feeding the hungry, and cooperating in other vital social concerns. Some churches have even merged with each other. Our young people seem to be getting along with each other. My children and your children are not going to fight the same battles we fought with each other in the past. I believe that together they are going to join forces and fight the real enemy – the one we should have been fighting together all along. God speed the day.

Mark Twain said, "Travel is fatal to prejudice." Those who have left their comfort zone and reached across the aisles have found this to be true. May we all have the courage and the conviction and the compassion to do just that so that we might never again have to engage in "Wishful Thinking."

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