

The Churches of Christ (Non-Instrumental)

The Churches of Christ (non-instrumental) are a group of churches within the Stone-Campbell Movement (q.v. Christian Churches (Churches of Christ) and Disciples of Christ). These churches especially emphasize a reliance on the New Testament for polity and practice. This effort to focus on the New Testament is often understood as a return to the original form of practice in the earliest church and thus implicitly is a rejection of practices that developed in the medieval and Reformation period. Thus the churches embrace a “restorationist” ideology, and the movement is often called “The Restoration Movement.” There is no central denominational structure for this fellowship; a strong emphasis on congregational autonomy is dominant, although certain standards of faith and practice are maintained through informal mechanisms.

History:

The nineteenth century movement for restoring the New Testament church, which had significant leadership from Alexander Campbell (q.v. Campbell Family) and Barton W. Stone (q.v. Stone, Barton), originated primarily as a reformation movement within Presbyterian churches. This movement, often called the Disciples of Christ, generally named individual churches either a “church of Christ” or a “Christian church.” These churches emphasized a rejection of creeds, a reliance on the New Testament alone for matters of faith and practice, and a call for Christian unity around a return to the original practices of the church.

The movement began to fracture following the Civil War over ecclesiological and sociological issues. The specific ecclesiological issues involved cooperative societies (primarily missionary societies) and instrumental music in worship. Missionary societies, by which multiple congregations banded together to support missionary efforts, were viewed by some as an innovation that could not be supported by the New Testament practice, and furthermore violated the priority of congregational autonomy. Instrumental music was seen as an innovation that was not supported by New Testament practice.

The concern about the introduction of “innovations” in the life of the church culminated in the Sand Creek Declaration in 1889, which stated that nothing be introduced into the practice of the church that did not have a clear “thus saith the Lord” statement from Scripture. Thus the conservative wing of the movement increasingly adopted a restrictive hermeneutical approach to silence of the Scripture: silence on a matter is taken to be a ban on such practices.

In addition to the ecclesiological concerns, sociological differences resulting from the Civil War aggravated a deepening schism in the movement. The churches in the south were often poor and developed a simple perspective to church life, one that viewed the introduction of organs and missionary societies as evidence of a departure from the original emphasis of the movement. The concerns of the conservative wing of the Disciples were originally voiced by Benjamin Franklin in his popular journal the *American Christian Review*, and by David Lipscomb in his journal the *Gospel Advocate*, which continues to this day. These were countered by the *Christian Standard*, founded by Isaac Errett, which took a decidedly progressive stand. Thus these competing journals tended to develop significantly different perspectives on a number of theological and practical issues. By the end of the 19th century the tensions between various factions in the movement had led to a *de facto* split. In 1906 those churches that rejected organs and missionary societies consented to be listed separately in the U.S. census, thus explicitly recognizing the split. Those churches that rejected instruments in worship and societies called themselves simply churches of Christ, often with a small “c” to

indicate their rejection of denominational status.

The Churches of Christ (*a cappella*) grew rapidly during the first part of the 20th century, and rapidly established congregations not only in the South, but also in the West and Midwest. The body tends to be weakly represented in the Northeast. A number of colleges were established by the Churches of Christ, and these colleges have become centers of support for the movement. The Churches of Christ also began to develop strong African-American congregations, especially as a result of the evangelistic efforts of Marshall Keeble and G. P. Bowser, and these black churches have developed their own strong sub-culture, often noted for their strong evangelists.

The Churches of Christ have suffered internal divisions over certain issues that create tension within the body of churches. A minor division within the Churches of Christ took place in the early 20th century over the issue of pre-millennialism. A popular preacher, Foy Wallace, Jr., actively opposed pre-millennial interpretations of the Scripture, and “mainstream” Churches of Christ today oppose such interpretations; a rather distinct subgroup of Churches of Christ are the “pre-millennial” Churches of Christ. There are other subgroups within the movement: some churches resist Sunday schools, others resist any cooperation, others believe in single cups for communion. These subgroups tend to communicate among themselves and resist the main tendencies in the churches of Christ.

In the latter part of the 20th century a new emphasis within the churches developed called the Crossroads movement. This new group emphasized formal “discipleship” of members by elders, with strong control of individuals by the elders, and a very intrusive pattern of evangelism. This unique group of churches was labeled the Boston Church of Christ because of the dominant role the church in Boston played, a controlling role which violated the central ethos of congregational autonomy of the movement. This new group, which now calls itself the International Churches of Christ, is shunned by the mainstream Churches of Christ and cannot now be considered part of the main movement.

Polity:

Churches of Christ emphasize a strict pattern of congregational autonomy. There is no denominational structure; there are no official conventions or formal conferences to coordinate activities. The local church’s leadership ideally rests with lay elders, of whom there is always a plurality, and deacons, who are also a plurality. Most churches have elders appointed permanently, although some have regular elections. Most congregations have paid ministers who are selected by the local congregations and are always subject to the oversight of the local eldership. In most cases the elders are responsible for the hiring of ministers and key financial matters, although some congregations delegate these issues to the deacons or to a vote of the entire congregation. The paid ministry is increasingly well educated, many at graduate seminaries, although formal ordination is not widely practiced and carries no special status. Increasingly congregations have a variety of paid ministries; youth, education, and worship ministers are commonly found in addition to the senior or preaching minister. Churches of Christ never use the title reverend, and rarely call their ministers pastor, preferring that term for their elders. Most paid ministers are called minister or evangelist. In most Churches of Christ women cannot serve as ministers, elders, or deacons, although a few churches allow women to serve as deacons or on committees with significant ministerial responsibility.

The strict congregational polity generally means that missionary activity and other para-church activities (such as retirement homes, sometimes preaching schools) are sponsored under

the leadership of a single congregation and subject to oversight by elders of that congregation. Under that sponsorship, financial support might be solicited from members of other congregations, although rarely from other congregations as such.

Practices:

Several distinctive practices are consistently found in Churches of Christ. All Churches of Christ practice adult immersion baptism, and do not accept sprinkling or infant baptism as valid. Baptism is available to anyone on a simple statement of repentance and a declaration of faith in Jesus. Rebaptism by immersion of those baptized as infants is common. Local membership in churches is open to all immersed believers, and membership is automatically accorded to a person who is immersed. Most churches have baptisteries in their church buildings, and frequently baptisms take place at the close of worship services following an open invitation to respond to the gospel.

All Churches of Christ celebrate the Lord's Supper each Sunday. The Lord's Supper is usually open to any who want to participate without proof of membership or even baptism, although baptism is usually expected of participants. The Lord's Supper is usually administered by elders and deacons, although often any baptized believer can officiate. Most congregations use individual cups and wafers, although a few believe only a single cup is authorized by Scripture.

Worship services in the churches of Christ are *a cappella* without any musical instruments. Congregational singing is usually a significant part of the worship services. The *a cappella* emphasis has resulted in extensive use of musical parts and harmonies in hymns and songs. Many congregations follow a fairly fixed pattern of worship, although that is not universal. In the vast majority of Churches of Christ women do not participate in leadership or speaking roles, although that is changing in a few congregations.

Beliefs:

In general the Churches of Christ are organized around issues of practice, not theology. The overriding concern is to replicate within the life of the church the worship, structure and community that is believed to have been practiced in the early church. As a result the New Testament serves as a blueprint for practice and beliefs; in particular the book of Acts serves as an important model for church patterns and behavior. No creeds or confessions are accorded any value within the churches, these being seen as later developments of the church. Moreover, creeds and confessions are viewed as potentially divisive. Theoretically at least, members in the Churches of Christ are free to develop theological beliefs as long as they can be supported by Scripture. Thus one can find individuals within the churches who hold to significantly divergent beliefs, as long as these are opinions or conclusions from Scripture and do not violate an express statement found in Scripture. Historically, for instance, the Churches of Christ have used orthodox language to speak of the Trinity, but a minority has held reservations about this concept because it is not expressly addressed in the New Testament. Barton Stone (q.v. Stone, Barton), one of the earliest leaders of the movement, was skeptical of the concept of the Trinity since it was not used in Scripture. There is a strong undercurrent of rationalism within the belief structure of the church, and little interest in the effects of emotion on conversion or practice.

One can say that the prevailing approach within the Churches of Christ is Arminian. In general the churches believe that all people can respond to the gospel by belief and baptism. There is broadly skepticism about predestination and of the role of the Spirit in leading

individuals to accept the gospel. Salvation in the Churches of Christ is inextricably tied to baptism, which is linked directly to the confession of Jesus as the Christ. The act of conversion is thus defined as a process that includes belief in Jesus Christ, public confession of this belief, repentance, and baptism. All of these are considered part of a single act of conversion, and efforts to distinguish the point where salvation occurs in this process are rejected. Few accept any idea of the impossibility of apostasy; just as an individual can come to believe, he or she can fall away from belief or from salvation. The role of the local church in sustaining an individual's belief is important. The importance of baptism and church involvement could be seen as emphasizing a form of "works" righteousness, but this is firmly rejected by the churches. Instead salvation is viewed as a gift of grace, but it is received when one believes and demonstrates that by confession, repentance, baptism, and subsequent involvement in the local church.

There is no official recognition of clergy in the Churches of Christ. In concept every believer is a "priest" and has equal access to God through prayer and communion. This rejection of clergy as having a special status means that local churches often have significant involvement by members in the worship services. Members often lead singing, lead prayers, officiate and serve at the Lord's Supper, or even preach and baptize. This broad participation in the congregational worship is usually restricted, however, to male members; women generally do not have leadership roles in the worship service based on the passages in the New Testament that a woman should keep silent in the assembly. There is usually a distinction, however, between the formal worship assembly and other meetings of the church where women are allowed significant, albeit informal, roles.

Connective ties in the Fellowship:

While the Churches of Christ have no formal denominational structure, there is a fairly well established system of connections that ties the local congregations together and provides a remarkable consistency across the movement. The formative mechanisms for these linkages were magazines and journals, and these still remain influential. However the role of colleges supported by members of the Churches of Christ has superseded the importance of the journals and now provides the primary mechanism for connectivity.

In the early stages of the movement journals such as the *Gospel Advocate* helped develop and accentuate the Churches of Christ's attitudes and beliefs, often in distinction from other segments of the Stone-Campbell movement. In fact the late 19th and early 20th centuries could probably be seen as a period of competing journals that shaped emerging groups within the Restoration Movement. Other journals and magazines, such as the *Firm Foundation*, were also very influential, especially in the early part of the 20th century. A variety of smaller journals, often espousing divergent editorial stances within the movement, continue to be published but these have less significance than previously. *The Christian Chronicle*, a newspaper published by Oklahoma Christian University, has wide distribution and serves to present news about the Churches of Christ.

A number of directories of the churches of Christ have been published, most notably *Churches of Christ in the United States* compiled by Mac Lynn. These listings are often a way of determining whether a church is considered part of the Churches of Christ (*a cappella*) or outside this circle of churches (e.g. an instrumental Church of Christ). Many of these listings provide information about sub-groupings within the churches (e.g. one cup, or premillennial).

Colleges and universities in the Churches of Christ undoubtedly provide the major source

of linkages between congregations today, both through their education of members and ministers and through lectureships. A high percentage of members of the Churches of Christ send their college students to colleges affiliated with the body. Most of these colleges strongly emphasize the practices and beliefs of the movement; many require that all faculty members belong to the Churches of Christ. The primary colleges serving the movement are Abilene Christian University, David Lipscomb University, Freed Hardemann University, Harding University, and Pepperdine University. There are, however, a number of additional colleges that are clearly affiliated with the Churches of Christ. Some of the colleges, such as Abilene Christian University and Pepperdine University, host lectureships where members from churches across the country come to listen to preachers, attend workshops, and worship, thus providing a strong sense of cohesiveness to the churches.

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