

Mark Matson  
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### Observations of a “Traveler”

The topic which was assigned to me for this evening was “what does a traveler have to teach us?” At first I was not thrilled with the title – primarily because the term “traveler” seemed so distancing. But as I thought more about it, the term “traveler” became more and more comfortable, for it connotes a sense of motion, both geographical and temporal. Movement and change are at the very core of narratives. And it is in the land of narratives that I find my meaning – whether the narratives of the Old Testament, or the narratives of the gospels. Perhaps working with the gospels as my primary scholarly field has made me more sensitive to the normative quality of narratives. Or perhaps my own narrative, my own “traveling,” has made me more interested in narratives than static conceptual ideas or theories. Whatever the reason, I believe narratives do have an inherent quality of power and integrity. So tonight I am going to share a bit of my narrative, and then extrapolate some observations about our movement that have risen from that personal journey narrative.

My own personal journey of faith did not begin in the church; I was not raised in a Christian family. But in high school I had two significantly different exposures to church: on the one hand I began to go to a youth group at the Congregational church with a number of my friends. On the other hand, I went occasionally to a non-instrumental Church of Christ with my girlfriend – now my wife – in order to placate her parents. As I think back to those early church experiences, I do not remember being impressed by the Congregational church services or meetings, except that they were fun. I do remember being struck by the narrowness and rigidity of the church of Christ – the order of service was always the same, the songs were from a small selection that focused on sin and the

cross, and the prayers were formulaic, “guard, guide and direct” being repeated almost as a mantra. But in the process of these exposures to church, I found the Bible. More specifically, I found the gospels. And reading them had a profound impact on me. I was baptized (by sprinkling) in the Congregational church, not because of sin or repentance, but because I wanted to identify with this man Jesus who represented God most completely. It was in this church that Joy and I were married, by a minister who cared deeply for me and who taught me about patience and love. This man preached Jesus, emphasized the mysteries of the faith and the relevance of the Bible; he even characterized marriage as a sacrament -- a literal sharing of the mystery of Christ in the merging of two lives, an idea that I still consider profound and needed in our current context. To this day, when I think about Christ I often put the face and voice of George Lindsay on that image.

After a drought of church attendance in my college days, my wife Joy and I decided to emphasize more strongly our spiritual life. And so we returned to the Congregational church to worship and work. Unfortunately George Lindsay was not there, and instead I found a minister who disliked the Lord’s Supper – treating it with disdain in committee meetings and moving it to only a quarterly observance. He was nervous about the Bible. And when he began preaching from the Nag Hammadi texts as if they were as authoritative as the Bible, my discomfort level rose to the point of finding another place to worship.

This sharp disagreement about the authority of the Bible (imagine that from an unsophisticated initiate) led us to the Presbyterian Church. Here we found a deep and profound respect for the Bible, some very substantial Bible studies in the context of close small groups, and I grew in faith and knowledge. In not many years I was an elder in the Presbyterian Church. And then I discovered a curious thing. This church was not one, but two churches. It seemed that under the radar there existed a “stealth” group worshipping with us – a small group of Disciples who, though without a building or a

separate minister, maintained their own distinctive quality. They worshiped and worked with the Presbyterians in most things. But Sunday evenings they gathered together as Disciples and studied and took the Lord's Supper. Over time I attended more and more of their meetings. I eagerly anticipated the Lord's Supper each week (instead of monthly as in the Presbyterian worship). And I began to discuss theology, and biblical interpretation, and church history with them. From this small group I learned about a church movement that was grounded in the Bible, yet was open to other Christians. I learned about a movement that wanted to achieve unity through careful attention to the beliefs and practices of the early church. I learned that the attempt to codify beliefs into creeds, which are attempts to clarify and amplify the frustrating ambiguity of the Bible into statements of fact, could be more divisive than unifying. And in time I decided to identify more with this movement than the Presbyterians. I was re-baptized by immersion, and became simultaneously a Disciple and a Presbyterian. Curiously, I was still allowed to be a Presbyterian elder, even as my membership shifted to the Disciples. I began attending regional Disciples meetings as a delegate, and was proud to be a Disciple of Christ—proudly displaying the symbol of the Disciples, the chalice with the cross of Andrew, on my car. The regional minister for Northern California gave me a set of the "Panel of Scholars" reports that detailed the past and future direction of the Disciples, and I devoured these books and many others about the history of the Disciples. I was captivated by the Stone-Campbell ideals of unity and attention to biblical authenticity.

But my activity in the Disciples also led me to a very interesting meeting. Somewhere around 1980 I attended a meeting in Chico, California, called a "Roots Rally" – a grass roots unity forum. I went to listen primarily to Karl Irvin, the regional minister of the Disciples. In attendance also were Frank Pack from Pepperdine University and Bob Fife from the Westwood Foundation in Los Angeles. I was struck by the rigid approach of Frank Pack. Here there was little openness to any difference of

opinion, at least those represented by the other branches. The issues were black and white, right and wrong. If an instrument was used in the church, it was sin. If there was not a strict observance of a pattern of worship, it was wrong. Those who were not Church of Christ were wrong. On the other side was my friend, Karl Irvin. He was equally intransigent about how the other branches had departed from the truth of the movement, defined in terms of cooperation. Those who had left the Disciples at restructure had turned their back on the truth. And then I heard Bob Fife, who patiently urged us to find ways to restore our unity, to love the Lord, to read the Bible, and to see God's activity in ways and places that we might not expect. He did not claim that the others were wrong, but rather that we each had something to offer one another. This calm, loving plea affected me deeply. It led me to a correspondence with Bob Fife, which in turn led me to taking some short courses at Westwood Christian Foundation with Scott Bartchy. And this led me to a decision to be a minister in Christ's church. Along the way I began to explore ways to bring the Disciples group together with the local independent Christian church. I soon was teaching adult bible studies in both the Disciples church and the independent church – one in the morning, one in the evening. And before I left California, I had been an elder in both of these churches, and was ordained in the Christian church but with representatives of the Disciples in attendance.

I moved to Tennessee to attend Emmanuel School of Religion for a divinity degree, and subsequently to Duke University for a graduate degree in New Testament. My journey of faith came to involve new churches and new experiences, each of which was precious to my family and me. In Durham we attended the Cole Mill Road Church of Christ. There I found a spirit of openness and attitude of discipleship that characterized George Lindsay's example and Bob Fife's perspective, each of whom had so influenced me. The minister there, Paul Watson, who spoke last evening, has become another of my heroes in his attention to biblical preaching, yet with openness and a desire for unity. At the Cole Mill Road church, the study of the Bible was wide ranging and active, with no

sacred cows limiting it. I could be as independent in my thinking as I wanted, as long as I could back up my thoughts with Scripture. Here I learned that you can disagree agreeably. Here I had my ideas tested and honed. We explored the Scriptures, we critically examined our worship practices. And I learned to love to sing – *acapella*. From that church experience I grew to know and deeply love people in a wide variety of churches of Christ in local congregations and in their colleges and universities.

Today I am back in a “4C’s” congregation, that is to say a member of the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, which is far preferable to me than saying “independent” Christian church, a term which only invites questions of “independent from what or whom?” I belong to Hopwood Memorial Christian Church on the campus of Milligan College. And I have a position at Milligan College, a college affiliated with the Christian churches. And so when I speak now, I speak from the perspective of the Christian churches. My current “we” is the “we” of the Christian churches. Yet I must confess that while I am comfortable at Milligan and Hopwood, I am not completely at home. In a very real sense I must say that a big part of my identity is still wrapped up in my past: as a Congregationalist, as a Presbyterian, as a Disciple, as a “church-of-Christ.” I desperately long for ways that each of these pieces can be reassembled into a meaningful whole. So I stand indeed as a stranger in a strange land. I am still a traveler seeking rest.

What led me to this Stone-Campbell group of churches, this “Restoration” movement? As I reflect on the issues that attracted me so strongly toward this movement, I would say that it was the combination of the two great impulses that have undergirded the movement from its earliest days: the desire to follow the Bible as the inspired guide in Christian life, and a desire for the unity of Christians. I became a Christian through reading the Bible; in it I found a perspective, a way of describing the world, that was more true than any other representation. The Stone-Campbell approach to the centrality of the Bible was important because it rang true. But contained within

that book was what I saw as a clear message: Christ's followers were called to be one body, to be a community of love and concern. And thus the cause of unity was not simply an option or an embellishment; it stood at the core of the gospel teaching. Campbell and Stone and their colleagues saw two central issues, attention to the Bible and unity, as two sides of the same coin. This was clearly the idea that captivated my attention. I am, you see, a true convert to the message of the Stone-Campbell plea.

Each of our three branches has taken these ideals and developed them in very different ways. I see strengths and weaknesses in the way each group has developed them. But overriding the individual strengths and weaknesses is a significant irony: that a movement which sought to produce unity has become divided, deeply divided. It is this irony – no, let me call it what it is, this SIN – which keeps me a stranger in a strange land. I responded to a unity movement, and have found that as long as I claim each of you as equally important parts of my life, I cannot truly “belong” to any of you.

Paul talks about the body of Christ being made up of many members that perform different functions. We need to hear that language with respect to our various branches of the movement. Just as we have much to offer other segments of Christianity, we have much to learn from them. We each have a strength to offer the others, and we each have weaknesses or dangers which the other branches might help mitigate.

So what are our strengths and weaknesses? Let me address these in a non-systematic way, instead simply presenting some observations that have impressed me over a period of time being in and among each of the segments of the movement.

The Disciples of Christ has maintained the greatest dialogue with the rest of Christianity. When I affiliated primarily with the Disciples, I was much more aware of the impulse toward unity. The very fact that I could participate in both the Presbyterian church and the Disciples church simultaneously is indicative of the kind of open dialogue that marks the Disciples. The Disciples group was a leaven within the Presbyterian church – reminding them of ideas about baptism and the Lord's Supper – that often had

been ignored. This dialogue also happens at the national level, where serious conversation with other denominations at least allows for influence, both from them and upon them. It is in this dialogue that the concept of a “movement,” as opposed to a sect, is perhaps best exemplified.

The Disciples’ emphasis on regional meetings, of congregational connectivity, is another example of the focus on unity. These meetings at least underscore the essential relationship that churches should have with one another. There was a time in the early Stone-Campbell movement when the relationship between different congregations was taken seriously. Ministers were ordained with the participation of multiple congregations to ensure that a minister came to serve the whole body of Christ. Church discipline was honored by other congregations. This all requires a sense of connectivity, which the Disciples church puts into practice in their regular regional meetings. The meetings I attended were a real strength of the Disciples, although the penchant for voting on resolutions tended to be disruptive and distracting.

From my perspective, though, the openness of the Disciples to dialogue with other denominations has been paralleled with closure of relationships with other branches of the Stone-Campbell movement. What I have observed is that it is easier to be received by the Disciples regional ministers and colleges if one is a Methodist or an Episcopalian than if one is member of an independent Christian church. There is a deep suspicion within the Disciples – at least at the regional and national level – of the individuals who have been identified with the Christian churches and churches of Christ; they are viewed as fundamentalists and patternists. I know I have felt this in my own effort to maintain a relationship with the Disciples. Thus, openness to dialogue with others seems to be limited to the mainstream denominations, and excludes other Stone-Campbell groups.

At the same time, unity and openness among the Disciples has often come at the expense of an emphasis on the Bible. I recall a very heated debate at a Disciples regional meeting in California over ordination of actively gay men and women. What was

disturbing to me was not the actual decision—though I did oppose that on the grounds of scriptural qualifications—but that there was no interest in exploring or discussing Biblical concepts of leadership attributes. This aspect of the issue was dismissed as either unimportant or wrong; only the question of what was fair to the individuals who wanted to be a minister was considered. Now, I do not necessarily want to take a strictly one-dimensional view of discerning the teachings of the Bible. I have learned that not everyone reads the text the same way. There are serious cross currents within the biblical literature. And we will frequently find that different groups or individuals will have honest and significant disagreements about what the Bible says. But my observation is that the Disciples, at least in my experience in California, are increasingly unwilling to grapple with the Bible as the central text that should define faith and practice. This is a strong statement, and certainly may be an overstatement, but is a major concern I have.

And this marginalization of the Bible as the major source for faith and practice has led to what seems to be a lack of identity. Who are the Disciples? Do they stand for a particular approach that might help strengthen other denominations? Or are they simply a historical anomaly, a group which sprang up in the American frontier and which has some practices that date to the American frontier. Do they have a clearly definable vision for the church? Do we (and I still count myself as a Disciple) have a clear sense of identity as Disciples, one which is based on a well-defined theology or ecclesiology? Or is the identity of being a Disciple simply that of seeking unity with other Christians?

On the other side of this divide are the *acapella* churches of Christ. This group has some significant strengths – and in many areas I identify most closely with them. Perhaps in this group more than the others I have found that the Bible really matters. Bible studies in churches are vital and intense, not simply theoretical, but rather linked to the real life and practice of congregations. Many universities, such as Abilene Christian University and Pepperdine University, hold lectureships which focus on biblical exposition, and large groups of believers attend these lectureships and actively engage

their minds and hearts in the study of the Scripture. This emphasis on the Bible has produced a significant stream of Bible scholars and teachers. In the churches of Christ, honest and deep discussion of the Scriptures is highly valued; what the scripture say clearly matters.

But curiously, the application of Scriptural study and analysis often founders in the church of Christ on a bigger issue: tradition. Let me give an example. In many churches of Christ with which I had contact, a significant group, maybe even majority, would agree, based on a study of the scriptures, that instrumental music is not a sin. It is not a salvation issue. For most, then, the argument for *acapella* music is based on some very sound reasons which are not a “thus saith the Lord.” First of all, *acapella* music sounds good when done well. But most importantly, *acapella* music emphasizes the full participation of the congregation in worship, which seems to me to be very theologically sound and compelling. So *acapella* worship is positively grounded in an aesthetic and a theory of worship. Yet while denying that instrumental music is wrong, there is still a strong resistance to even consider joint services with churches that use instrumental worship. While such worship is thus not viewed as wrong, the tradition of never participating in such a worship service seems an overwhelming force—a force which resists efforts at unity. Without the possibility of reciprocal worship services, no real substantive contacts with other segments of the movement can be made, let alone other denominations.

One of the reasons that such “tradition” has almost a normative quality is the fear of any schism in the churches. The minority that opposes any change from church of Christ traditions often holds a trump card: if you do this, you have departed from the “true ways” and we cannot fellowship with you. Even if biblical study might lead a congregation to move in surprising ways, tradition puts a compelling brake on this process.

A strength of the churches of Christ is its emphasis on local church governance,

especially its attention to the role of elders and deacons. Elders and deacons are usually chosen with careful consideration to leadership qualifications. Many churches have made a clear distinction between the duties of the elders and deacons, with elders focusing on spiritual oversight, while deacons focus on practical matters of budgets and getting things done. Although in many congregations this attention to elders and deacons is based on a rather simplistic effort to duplicate the New Testament “pattern,” quite frequently local church governance is the result of deep theological thought based on the scriptures, and moves beyond patternism to a reflective and functional system that is uniquely biblical and not based on external concepts of organization or management.

One aspect of local church involvement and governance which is a problem within the churches of Christ is the role of women. And again one of the problems faced here, in my experience, is the overwhelming power of tradition and the aversion to make changes that might lead to schism. Even in churches that have, after study, decided that women could participate more significantly in service – whether as deacons, or at the Lord’s table – the tendency is to avoid giving women meaningful roles because that is not the tradition within the churches of Christ. As a result many gifted women leave the church, or fail to use their gifts in service of the church, which is a problem both for the women and for the church. Who knows how many Phoebes, Lydias, Priscillas and Junias have been ignored or silenced by this rigid approach? This is a personal concern for me. My daughter is only now re-exploring a connection with the church after feeling completely marginalized in the church of Christ. This has hurt her, and me.

The biggest concern I have for the churches of Christ is that their strong sense of identity resists real efforts at producing unity. Many of the churches remain sectarian in their perspective: they are right, and others wrong, and the only solution is for those who are wrong is to change. This, then, replaces the Stone-Campbell ideal of a movement, in which dialogue among churches leads to greater unity, to a firmly established position that allow no movement or influence. Simply put, if one is not a member of a church of

Christ, then one is an outsider. While in Durham, at Cole Mill Road Church of Christ, I began teaching some short courses at Abilene. I continued that for a while when I moved to Milligan. But because I no longer worship at a non-instrumental church of Christ, I am no longer invited to teach, simply because I am now an outsider. I don't think any differently, I still consider myself a member of the church of Christ; but I crossed across the bright line between "us" and "them." From this perspective, the only flow of thought and influence can be out. It cannot be a reciprocal relationship. And this does not promote unity, but only hardening of established positions.

The independent Christian churches – the 4 C's churches (Christian Churches and Churches of Christ) – stand in the middle of many of the positions that I have outlined above. And it is because they stand in the middle of these two poles that I find it much more difficult to categorize this group of churches with any sense of clarity. In many ways it is a growing and vibrant group of churches which evidences significant diversity, and I think such diversity is good. Such diversity shows that local Christians can study and formulate their pattern of congregational life based not simply on tradition, but on a variety of factors. But there are some issues within the 4 C's churches that concern me. I will organize these thoughts under three headings: ecclesiology, worship, and theology.

Contrasted with church of Christ's rather clear vision of a strong local leadership centered around elders and deacons, it seems that many, if not most, Christian church congregations have a very muddled view of local leadership. Elders and deacons are often merged into a governing board in which biblical distinctions between these offices are lost. The influence of American corporate models of governance seems to hold sway, and much of the focus of these boards is on pragmatic business issues: budgets, building, money. The task of shepherding is left to the minister, who often has an ambiguous status. Some ministers become Chief Executive Officers, more bishops than ministers or elders. Others are left in a status of hirelings, subject to the whims of local boards – expected to minister without being part of the deliberations.

This corporate governing model fits well another trend within many of the Christian churches – that of an overemphasis on growth, to the exclusion of theological reflection. Such a major focus on growth leads to an emphasis on pragmatics: a focus on what will bring in new members, without sufficient focus on a clear biblical model for what the central role of the church is. New programs are often added to meet perceived “needs” of the congregation, but these programs can often overshadow the central role of spiritual growth and worship.

Worship, as a result of this growth model, is often geared toward entertainment rather than being conceived as a time which invites full participation of the congregation or which urges spiritual growth. Special music can replace congregational singing. Modern musical styles are adopted, not by virtue of how they might help more people actually engage in the worship, but because people like such music; congregational singing, in which the worshiper can actually voice and recite theological reflections that might shape one’s life, is replaced by simple choruses with little theological value and with loud instruments and irregular beats that actually discourage singing. The Lord’s Supper can be reduced to an efficient distribution of elements, rather than the central focus of the weekly worship. The sermon becomes more important, but preachers often avoid difficult texts for fear of offending or troubling the worshipers. And the Bible is often heard in proof texts that support the sermon, rather than the public reading of scripture being a central component of the worship service. Underlying all of this is a failure to really grapple with what worship is supposed to do. Is it to entertain and attract new members, or is it to help believers grow in their faith and gain a firm basis with which to live their lives, both individually and corporately?

Probably most troubling to me is that many Christian churches do not have a clear sense of who they are, similar to my critique of the Disciples. The theology and practices that are prevalent in many of the Christian churches, instead of offering a distinctive voice for the rest of Christianity, are merging with Evangelical thought and practice. We

still practice immersion baptism and offer the Lord's Supper each week. But we don't know why. We increasingly think of faith as a somewhat private act, an individualistic relationship between a believer and his or her Lord, not a reflection of a community that is committed to growing together in knowledge and practice. Serious Bible study is less the norm, perhaps because the single instance of "salvation" is more important, and growing in the Lord is less important. Our publications do not provide many articles in which real theological issues are engaged – perhaps in order to avoid controversy. And the net effect is a "dumbing down" of our congregations. The Stone-Campbell background of continually reexamining practice on the basis of the Bible is slipping away, in part because so few really can discuss the Bible with any facility.

My observations about the Stone-Campbell movement are by no means exhaustive or scientific. They are simply based on my own experiences. And of course generalities cover a wide variety of permutations. Within each of the three branches of our movement substantial variations exist: there are many Disciples congregations that are focused on the Bible and have a clear sense of their identity; there are church of Christ congregations that have active involvement of women; and there are Christian church congregations that have a developed concept of elders and deacons. Perhaps my journey across these three segments of the Stone-Campbell movement has led me to be overly critical; I hope I have been critical without being overly-critical. But let me make one thing clear. I love this movement. I would choose it again. I do choose it over other segments of Christianity. We have, I think, a significant view of the church and of the Bible to offer the rest of Christianity.

But by being divided into these three camps, we have allowed these weaknesses to develop and grow. If only we could have more cross-pollination of ideas and practices!! We in the Christian churches are weaker because we don't have the emphasis on unity that the Disciples provide. We are weaker because we don't have the strong sense of identity that the church of Christ has. But we have much to offer the other

branches in our greater tolerance for diversity within the brotherhood. The Disciples are weaker because of the loss of attention to the Bible, but the Disciples have much to offer in how to have greater connection both within the movement and outside it. The church of Christ is weaker because of its tendency to see itself as separate from the rest of Christianity, even from other Stone-Campbell churches. But we have much to learn from their strong sense of local church governance and a focus on participation in worship. We each have much to offer one another and we will only gain by testing our faith and practice against one another. My prayer is that we can learn from one another. But that can only happen if we actually find ways to share our lives together: in worship, in study, in mission, and in service.