

SIMPLY



CHURCHES OF CHRIST

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IMPORTANT FOREWORD

This little book is about the folk known as the “churches of Christ”, but it is a *descriptive* book not a definitive one. Nobody can speak for the churches of Christ and nobody can define what they believe and practice. I have described them as I have seen them all over the world, but this does not mean that I always agree with what a particular group of them does or believes.

The churches of Christ represent an emerging, living organism, rather than a fixed organization. The central core of universally received but not creed-defined truth is certainly changing its expression with developing needs. All we can do is to show what is happening and not attempt to build fences which can only distort and never confine.

Churches of Christ are firmly based on the Bible which is the sole authoritative basis for faith and practice. On peripheral matters where the Bible is not conclusive, there is ample freedom for personal interpretation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty.”

In areas where the Bible gives no final answer, churches of Christ tend to follow the interpretation suggested by Alexander Campbell who was the most significant leader of the modern expression of the restoration movement. This is the position generally followed in this book. However, it cannot be too strongly emphasized that such interpretations not specifically defined in Scripture are not binding in any way. Neither Campbell nor anyone else has a monopoly on truth.

1

CHURCHES OF CHRIST

The idea of churches without a distinctive name such as "Baptist", "Methodist", "Roman Catholic", goes back to the early days of the last century. Then a group of men of whom Thomas Campbell and his illustrious son, Alexander Campbell, were the most prominent, made the brilliant suggestion that the new nation of America should shed the religious differences of the old world and just be one body under the pattern of the New Testament. They advocated the dropping of all other names except general terms like "Churches of Christ", "Christian Churches", "Disciples of Christ". Individual church members were to be referred to as "disciples" or "Christians".

Large numbers of people from the existing denominations accepted this invitation with alacrity. They still had theological differences but they insisted that this was as it should be as long as all beliefs were based on the Bible. Since creeds were divisive they abandoned them altogether as being unjustified attempts to improve on the Bible and as being straitjackets on personal freedom.

Since terms like "Christian Church" sounded like Pharisaical religious exclusiveness, they were quick to announce that they were "not the only Christians but Christians only".

Of course, the hope that all American Christians would join the new movement proved vain but it was a magnificent attempt at church union long before the modern ecumenical development was seriously thought of. However they did not give up. They felt that God had called them to be a "restoration movement" and their mission was to promote the

resurgence of primitive New Testament Christianity. Curiously enough, a similar movement with identical ideas started at about the same time in England.

During the last 150 years of the history of the movement there has been very little in the way of centralized organisation. Each congregation has had the complete control of its own affairs and its relations with other similar churches has been purely voluntary.

From the start there has been no unanimity of opinion on how strong these associational ties should be. In Australia and other countries other than America, regional "conferences" (usually State) and a national "conference" have played an important part from the first. For the common good the churches have given certain responsibilities to these conferences including the common ownership of property.

In America there are about thirty different groupings of churches of Christ, the biggest of which is "The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)", but there are a large number of churches which do not belong to any group.

Churches of Christ throughout the world have organized a World Convention of Churches of Christ which meets every five years, but this has no authority over the churches or church groupings. It is purely voluntary.

Strictly speaking, you can't "join" a church of Christ. The moment the Holy Spirit enters your heart, you are *automatically* a member of Christ's Church. All the local church does is to recognize this just by welcoming you. Disciples feel that voting you in would be misleading and unnecessary.

All members of the churches of Christ are ministers in one sense. That is, the ordinances of Communion and Baptism may be carried out by any member. Of course, there are trained professional ministers too who operate like any other minister, but they do so because of their training, not because they have any powers that any other may not have.

The minister does not rule the local church. This rules itself. It seeks to find out the will of God through democratic process and generally delegates a group of elders and deacons, which it elects, to act for the membership as a whole. The minister is chosen by the church and operates at its pleasure.

The services of a church of Christ are very informal. The important part is the communion service, at which generally a layman officiates. The sermon is usually given by the minister but not always, by any means. The prayers are extemporaneous and may be said by anyone and often come from the body of the congregation.

There are no fixed orders of service, not even for the Communion. Disciples are great innovators and most individualistic. They seek to develop forms which will best suit the local needs and they happily change for something different when the old forms become unsuitable. They do not have to consult anyone about this except themselves.

This freedom brings tremendous diversity. A church of Christ in one town may be very different from that in another. There is little use dropping in to a local church to find out what the churches of Christ are like. It is far better to make up your mind from the reading of the New Testament just what you think a church ought to be and then associate yourself with a group of like-minded Christians in order to put that plan into operation. You won't get all you want because they will have ideas too. But when you are all working together with that aim, you have a true church of Christ.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that a church of Christ is never a building, although the term is often used in that connection. A church is a fellowship of regenerated believers seeking to operate under the New Testament pattern as the Holy Spirit gives them guidance.

Thus there are no sacred buildings reserved for worship alone. The services of a church of Christ may be held anywhere; in a building set apart for the purpose, in a hall, in a barn, or in the out doors. Baptisms may be carried out in baptistries, or swimming pools, ponds, lakes or rivers. Churches of Christ have no altars or other items of sacred furniture.

We place great emphasis upon the fact that God "dwelleth not in temples made with hands", but in human hearts.

2

THE BIBLE

Everything about the churches of Christ depends upon the Bible. Of course, all denominations are based upon the Bible too, but in the case of the churches of Christ, that is all there is, no creed, no binding traditions, no fixed church order.

To us, the Bible is the Word of God and, therefore, its message must be obeyed. The Bible is different from any other book because God took the initiative to speak through the writers in the first place, and in the second place His Spirit still speaks in a unique sense through the sacred Word.

This belief in the Bible comes from three sources: (1) the testimony of Jesus to the authority of the Old Testament (e.g. Matthew 5:17-18), (2) the witness of the Church down through the centuries to the Holy Spirit's attestation of the Scriptures, (3) the recognition of each believer who senses the Holy Spirit in the Bible. This last reason is particularly important. The first two reasons are taken by faith but the last is proved experientially to the believer's own satisfaction.

Just as Christ is the Living Word, the Bible is the Written Word. Both of these revelations of God are alike in that they combine the divine and the human. Just as Jesus is a real man, the Bible is truly a human book. God did not dictate the Bible, for that would have ignored the human element. Instead His Spirit worked through the human personalities of the writers, retaining their enthusiasm, their colour, their personal characteristics, yet preserving the divine message from distortions in the process.

Since the Bible dates, in some parts, possibly as far back as 3,500 years, it would appear that it would have little relevance to our modern life, but in fact, it is vitally affecting the life of millions. The reason is the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the Bible applying it anew to each generation as it comes along.

It is this emphasis on the Holy Spirit that prevents us from thinking of the Bible as a text-book of rules and regulations to be automatically applied. For instance, we do not wash each others feet as commanded in the Bible (John 13: 14) because that particular expression of humility is no longer meaningful, but we do seek to find other ways of putting the principle of humble service into effect. We do not salute each other with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16) but we do show our love and affection for one another in a warm handshake or brotherly conversation.

The Bible is not a text-book of science or history, but yet properly understood, its representation of both of these disciplines is quite sound. However, it is describing these events in the language and background that is far different from that of modern discussions of these subjects. To equate the two, or worse, to place them in apparent conflict is a bad mistake. Yet although the purpose of the Bible is not that of modern science, archaeology has shown that the allusions in Scripture to scientific and historical facts are highly reliable. The great purpose of the Bible is religious, to be the channel by which God speaks to the human heart.

Churches of Christ certainly do not insist that the Bible must always be literally interpreted. Obviously, figurative meanings abound. Jesus is the door, the vine. In the world to come He will be seen as "the lamb that has been slain". The Communion wine is His blood. If our right eye offends us we are to pluck it out. These are obviously intended to be taken figuratively.

However, we do not think it is right to use figurative meanings just because the literal meaning is different, as in the case of miracles. Since the Bible is the story of God in action, miraculous occurrences are to be expected.

It is not always easy to tell whether a passage is to be taken literally or figuratively. The best approach is to try

and determine how the original writer concerned intended it to be taken. When that is obscure, it is a personal matter for the Holy Spirit to apply to the heart of each reader.

Churches of Christ do not insist upon the infallibility of any particular interpretation of Scripture. Of course, we have our share of egotists too, who blast those who disagree with them, but we are all ashamed when this happens. The great principle is: "Where the Bible speaks, we speak. Where the Bible is silent, we are silent."

This means that if a point of view cannot be expressed unequivocally in the actual words of Scripture, we never regard it as obligatory in any sense. It is just that: a point of view.

The great aim of the churches of Christ to restore the New Testament pattern is guided by this kind of tolerance. There is certainly no attempt to imitate the New Testament practices in any legalistic sense. We do not sell all our goods to feed the poor (Mark 10:21), we do not have elections by casting lots (Acts 1:26), we do not have apostles who "decree" things to us (Acts 15:19), we do not have bishops (1 Timothy 3:1), we do not use a little wine for our stomach's sakes (1 Timothy 5:23), we do not anoint with oil (James 5:14).

What we are after is an obsession with the *spirit* of the New Testament. We seek to separate its eternal principles from its temporary manifestations and apply these by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to our individual lives and to our church fellowships. We are following the New Testament pattern when we are as controlled by God as they were.

Where there are differences of interpreting this pattern, we try and avoid the sin of pride of claiming infallibility for our own definition. Instead, we seek to follow what we believe is right and lovingly allow our brother to do the same.

But this tolerance must not be confused with indifference or with an attitude that everything is relevant. Churches of Christ strongly believe that their central pattern of belief and practice is attested by Scripture and then invite everyone to go to the Bible and check that these things are so.

3

MEMBERSHIP

If you were to ask any thorough-going member how to *join* the churches of Christ, he would tell you that you can't. He would say that you would have to be *added* to the church, using the language of Acts 2:47.

In making this distinction he would not be just splitting verbal hairs. He would be stating an important principle.

The Church is not a religious club which can be joined at the will of the applicant if permitted by those already in. Instead, membership is determined by a person's own relationship with God and with that the local congregation dares not interfere. It cannot determine. It can only gladly accept and nurture those whom God gives.

When a person becomes a Christian, he goes through an inner change. His conversion is far more significant than a mere reformation or the acceptance of certain beliefs and practices. In the language used by Christ, he is "born again" (regenerated). The Spirit of God has entered his personality. He is joined to God and thus God has automatically added him to His Church.

This Church, sometimes called the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22,23) is composed of all those who belong to God and includes those who have died as well. For this reason it has also been called the Church Invisible, or the Church Universal. Only God knows the membership of this divine body.

The local church is the visible manifestation of the Church Universal at a particular place. But we can never assume that all those in the local church are members of the

Church Universal. Some of the members may not have had a genuine spiritual renewal at all and usually quite a few people who go to the church haven't yet come to the place where they have made the great decision.

Since the Holy Spirit cannot very well govern the church except through the believers in which he is residing, churches generally keep a roll of church members who alone may vote on the affairs of the church. They readily add names of people who have already belonged to a similar fellowship or who give evidence of being a Christian by confession and baptism. The person's own word is sufficient for this. Documentation or examination is not required.

When a church member moves to another area he sometimes takes with him a letter of transfer or else has his old church send it to the new one. But it is a mere courtesy and has no effect on a person being admitted or not. It helps to keep church rolls up to date.

Since, then, local church membership is merely a reflection of a person's relationship to God, the only decisive factor is how to become a Christian, that is, under what conditions will God enter the heart.

At first sight, this appears to be confusing because the various denominations (and even different churches of Churches of Christ) spell it out somewhat differently, insisting on certain conditions that must be fulfilled and certain things that must be "given up".

The New Testament preachers didn't always say the same thing either. Jesus told the Rich Young Ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor (Mark 10:21), to the woman taken in adultery He said, "go, and sin no more" (John 8:11), to the disciples He said "follow me" (Matthew 4:19). Peter at Pentecost called upon the crowd to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38), but to Cornelius he said that the condition was believing in Christ (Acts 10:43). Paul at Antioch called for belief (Acts 13:39), but at Athens to seek God (Acts 17:27).

In addition the New Testament calls for confession by mouth, forgiveness of others, following Christ's commands, restitution for wrong and a host of other things as requirements for salvation. I believe there are over thirty such conditions in the Bible.

Fortunately there is a great over-riding principle which takes in all of these individual stipulations and that is faith: "by grace are ye saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8).

However, this "faith" is not mere intellectual assent which in itself is valueless (James 2:19). It means being so convinced by the mind that we commit ourselves completely to God to do with us as He wishes. Repentance is the negative side of this, in that in turning to God we turn away from sinful self-centred living. God gives Himself to us when we give ourselves to Him.

Churches of Christ have always been insistent that faith must be deep and real, not superficial and formal. Alexander Campbell felt that the heart of faith was obedience. The supplicant sinner had to be willing to carry out all that God commanded in the Scriptures and in conscience, otherwise faith was empty.

To the Rich Young Ruler this meant surgery on covetousness, to the woman taken in adultery, chastity, and so on. God spells out in every heart what is involved and requires the willingness to obey as He gives strength. When the committal is total, none of the requirements can be left out.

There is some difference of opinion as to when God enters the heart: at the moment we become willing, or at the moment when the act of obedience is carried out. For instance, if restitution is involved in repentance, does God save when the convert decides to make restitution for the wrong, or when he actually accomplishes it? The final answer to that, of course, is up to God, for He won't be dictated to. For me, it was the decision of the heart alone that worked the miracle.

When it happens, two things are accomplished: the forgiveness of sins which His blood washes away (1 John 1:7) and the gaining of eternal life (John 3:16).

When a person makes this great decision in a church of Christ, he is asked to confess this publicly since this is stipulated in Romans 10:9. The form is usually similar to Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:16). The minister asks: "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God and your Saviour?" When he says "Yes" the convert is not only attesting his belief that Jesus

is God in general, but in particular that he is making Christ the God of his life. Baptism is a further public confession but this will be discussed in the next chapter.

Since churches of Christ have no statement of beliefs, the new convert is not faced, at this stage, with much theological discussion. Understanding of the things of God is impossible before conversion because only the Holy Spirit can interpret them to the heart and He does not enter until conversion. All that comes later.

4

BAPTISM

Although there is a great deal of disagreement about the method and subjects of baptism, almost all the Christian denominations agree that the ceremony is an obligation upon every Christian. (The Society of Friends and the Salvation Army are the two major exceptions). Churches of Christ have always placed a heavy emphasis upon it.

There has been a great deal of discussion as to whether baptism should be called a "sacrament" or an "ordinance". If "sacrament" merely means "sacred ceremony", there is no objection to it, but sometimes this word is used for rites which are supposed to transfer grace to the participant *automatically*. Churches of Christ would reject this because it appears to be contrary to what the Bible says about "works" (Ephesians 2:9). The word "ordinance" is preferable because it simply means that the ceremony is "ordained" or commanded by Christ.

The word itself is derived from the Greek word, "baptizein", which means "dipped" or "immersed". Baptism was commanded by Christ (Matthew 28:19), and by Peter (Acts 2:38). It was specifically associated with salvation by them, too (Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38).

Baptism today is carried out either by total immersion or by sprinkling. Churches of Christ insist on immersion because this is the only method which retains the New Testament symbolism, which is explained by Paul in Romans 6. He says we are *buried* with Christ by baptism and that this represents both the burial of Jesus and the spiritual burial to

sin of the believer. Similarly the being raised from the baptismal waters represents both Christ's resurrection and the Christian's spiritual resurrection at conversion. Sprinkling does not preserve this imagery.

Apparently immersion was the universal practice by the New Testament Church. One good historical evidence of this is the Greek Orthodox Church (which has unbroken historical connection to the very earliest days) which still baptizes by immersion. Baptism by immersion is the only type of baptism which is recognized as valid by all denominations and, therefore, could well become the basis for church union on this matter.

Churches of Christ baptize *believers* only. The reason for this is that only believers can truly represent the imagery in baptism of death to the old life of sin, and resurrection to the new life in Christ. In the case of infants, this has no meaning. However, contrary to rumour, churches of Christ do not insist on *adult* baptism. Any person of any age who gives evidence of the spiritual change typified in baptism is a candidate for it. Nevertheless, we are very wary of baptizing very young children unless they show unmistakable evidences of knowing what they are doing.

Since baptism is a drama which depicts personal change it can be valid only if it *follows* the convert's decision for Christ. Therefore previous Infant Baptism does not count. Neither would previous baptism by immersion if conversion has not occurred. Baptism is the believer's public confession that he has, in fact, died to the old life and been raised to the new.

Actually Infant Baptism and Believer's Baptism are two completely different ceremonies with quite different meanings. To several denominations Infant Baptism is a symbol of God's covenant with the Christian family and evidence of the parents' vow to bring the child up as a Christian. It has been suggested that the word "baptism" be dropped altogether, and the terms "Christian Immersion" and "Christening" used instead.

Churches of Christ differ a great deal on what baptism accomplishes. Our theologians generally have tried to do justice to the Biblical association of the act with salvation

and yet at the same time avoid the Bible's denunciations of salvation by works.

The explanation which is mostly followed is that of Alexander Campbell. He felt that baptism was an implication of faith. Faith is the total committal of the life to God, therefore, obedience has to be part of it. Thus if a seeker were not willing to obey all the commands of Christ such as forgiveness of others, restitution, repentance, baptism etc., his faith would not be real and he could not be saved. To Campbell this critical element in baptism was the *obedience* rather than the act itself.

Campbell was once asked whether Christians in other churches, not baptized by immersion, would be saved. He answered that only God could make such a judgement, but he felt that this depended upon whether or not they had *knowingly* disobeyed God.

Campbell was realistic enough to recognize that there would be certainly something seriously wrong with a theology that denied that great men like Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Booth, were not Christians simply because they had not been immersed. The fact that God so mightily used them shows what God thought. The decision as to whether a person is saved or not cannot be made by man. It has to be made by God. This is known to us by the "fruits", the evidence of the Holy Spirit working within.

Churches of Christ are often accused of "baptismal regeneration", which would mean that baptism does the saving. This is not true at all. Regeneration can only come from the Holy Spirit and "the blood of Jesus Christ . . . cleanseth us from all sin". (1 John 1:7).

Baptism is *for* the remission of a debt. Baptism is our God-commanded visible confession that our debt of sin has been remitted.

Apart from Romans 6, the Bible does not discuss the significance of baptism. It only alludes to it, or commands it. As a result there are great differences of interpretation among the churches of Christ. Some, indeed, do infer from the Scriptural passages that baptism is such an ironclad condition of salvation that no one can be a Christian until it has taken place. But that would not be true of the main streams

of thought.

Most members of the churches of Christ would not dream of dogmatically stating how God will or will not judge in specific cases. "There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?" (James 4:12).

Baptism is essential for the Christian, not because of what it does, but because it is a commandment of the Lord. Since it is His command, only He may make exceptions. The attitude of true faith is to carry out His command without question. Thus the churches of Christ strongly emphasize the necessity of baptism but leave all possible exceptions up to God. No man has the right to violate the sovereignty of God in either disallowing His express command or fixing the divine penalty for such action.

5

THE COMMUNION

The ordinance of the Communion, or Lord's Supper, goes back to the Last Supper when Jesus stopped in the middle of the meal to perform a little ceremony. As explained by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 it went something like this. Jesus took some bread, gave thanks, broke it and offered it to the disciples saying: "Take, eat: this is my body which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me." Then He did the same with the "cup" or wine-container, saying: "This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me."

Since this is a direct command of Christ, almost all churches consider the observance of this ordinance as a Christian obligation. Churches of Christ regard it as an essential part of worship and, in fact, in common with the Roman Catholic and Anglican services, seldom have worship without it. It is considered to be the essential part of the worship service and the real reason for worship. The sermon is merely a rather secondary appendage.

The obedience to Christ's command on this point is so important to our church members that communion is made available at the Sunday evening meeting, or after it, for those who cannot attend in the morning.

It is difficult to tell how frequently communion was observed in New Testament days. Many scholars think that it was a part of the main meal of the day, something like we have grace now. The early churches, of course, were essentially home fellowships, anyway. Churches of Christ

celebrate it once a week and sometimes more frequently when special occasions demand.

The essential meaning of Communion is that it commemorates the death of Jesus and also His entry into our hearts by faith. The "wine" represents His shed blood, and the "bread", His broken body on the Cross. When the elements become part of our bodies as we consume them, they remind us that in a spiritual sense we have also come into union with Him.

That is, we take the words "this is my body" as being meant figuratively.

Since it is the meaning of Communion that is important rather than the symbol, churches of Christ are not very interested in the discussions as to the nature of the elements. At the original ceremony the bread was probably an unleavened wafer and the wine was fermented. Actually the use of fermented wine caused some problems with drunkenness with some of the converts new out of raw heathenism. The concern about a similar danger today has caused the almost universal use of grape juice instead, but occasionally other liquids are used.

For hygienic reasons, the wine is now dispensed in tiny glasses rather than in a communal chalice. Departures from the original like this are not considered to be significant.

In the churches of Christ, any member may officiate at the Communion. At the original ceremony, Christ presided, so that pattern cannot be repeated, except in spirit. There is no reason to assume that this should be the prerogative of ministers only.

With most other churches, churches of Christ, insist that there is no magic in Communion *automatically* to transfer spiritual value. Unless the participant's heart is in tune with God and fixed on the meaning of the ceremony, nothing happens whatsoever. The value of the ordinance depends completely on the attitude of the believer.

The present day ritual is simple. The "president" issues an invitation to "all those who love the Lord" to partake. He gives a short word of exhortation and reads some Scripture. He asks someone to give thanks for the bread which is then dispensed to the congregation and usually eaten right

away. Then another person gives thanks for the cup, which is then distributed and usually held until all have been served, when it is drunk together. In large churches, especially in America, both prayers are said first and then both elements are served at the same time and consumed as soon as received.

It has often been asked whether the frequency of Communion in the churches of Christ robs it of its value. Not so. To devoted people it could never lose its significance even if observed every day, any more than prayer does. The Lord's Supper is one of the most satisfying elements in our faith.

6

CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Church government in the churches of Christ is very flexible and not subject to set rules. Each church is free to set up its own system. But all are guided in what system they set up, by their desire to be led by the Holy Spirit in all that they do.

At the basis of all this is the belief that at conversion the Holy Spirit becomes resident in the heart of the believer. Hence, provided that the Christian is open to the control of the Holy Spirit, the will of the Holy Spirit will be made known through his thinking. Needless to say, this is such a human channel that the possibility of error is very great. However, if the whole church fellowship confers on what each individual concludes is God's will on any issue, the possibility of error is greatly diminished.

Thus churches of Christ government is not democracy, (people rule) as is often assumed, but theocracy (God rule). The democratic part of it is simply the way in which the will of God is determined. The system does mean that the local congregation is the sole source of authority from the human point of view.

The extent to which this principle can work will depend upon the spirituality of the congregation. God has not delegated the Church to speak on His behalf. He has merely given it the opportunity to find out what His will is. If, therefore, a church fellowship descends to bickering amongst themselves, each trying to get his own way, theocracy becomes a mockery. Each member has a deep responsibility to earnestly

seek the mind of God.

But because the authority, or power, is vested in the congregation this does not mean that the congregation *rules*. Where the church is of any size this would be ungainly and impractical. The church, therefore, appoints a much smaller number of people, "officers", to act on its behalf. But it is always made clear that each officer remains subject to the congregation which can remove him or veto his decisions at any time.

These appointments are made at a general meeting, usually once a year. Once again the members, as they go about this task, seek to find the will of God. The decision is made by election. These appointed can assume that they are selected by God, but this gives them no divine rights, only divine responsibilities.

There are three types of officers common in churches of Christ: elders, deacons and deaconesses. Elders are people who, through considerable Christian experience, have emerged as stable, responsible Christians who can take the responsibility for the overall spiritual oversight of the Church. Their duties are seldom clearly defined and usually there are only two or three per hundred of membership. They are generally men, but in recent years, women elders are becoming more common in some countries.

Deacons in the churches of Christ are responsible for the material welfare of the church but their duties are by no means confined to that. Deaconesses are women of the church who minister to the social needs of the community, especially the sick, the suffering and the bereaved.

It is recognized that apart from the deaconesses, these officers do not correspond very closely with their counterparts in the New Testament. It is felt that the pattern should not be a slavish adherence to the primitive set-up but the development of such a system that will help to bring about Holy Spirit government in the present day circumstances.

These officers comprise a Board which meets usually once a month to direct the affairs of the church. This Board itself has officers who are usually chosen for it by the con-

gregation. In America the chief executive officer is the Chairman of the Board, but in other countries it is the secretary. In America, the details of the church administration are carried out by the minister, elsewhere by the secretary and the minister.

Great difference of opinion exists among the churches of Christ on the question of the association of churches. In the first days of the movement in America any type of centralized organisation was vigorously repudiated as being "denominational" and contrary to the principle of local church autonomy. However, it soon became clear that co-operative effort was desirable for more effective outreach. This resulted in conference and conventions.

The extent of this co-operative effort is still hotly debated, especially in America. In that country there are great numbers of independent churches who have spiritual associations only with one another, and then the "Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)" which does have a central organization. However, even in the Christian Church, the local churches are perfectly free to manage their own affairs.

In the British Commonwealth countries the conference, or co-operative element, has been strong from the first. The churches delegate certain powers to the conference for the common good, but never the right to interfere with the local church affairs.

The conference, where it exists, serves a specified geographical area and meets usually once a year. It is composed of delegates appointed by the churches. Sometimes these are instructed by their churches how to vote on certain issues, but most often the delegates are given discretionary powers. Decisions are not binding on individual churches but mostly conference concerns itself with co-operative efforts anyway, such as social services, missions, church extension, theological training.

The chief officer of the conference is the President, usually elected for the year. He is generally a chairman and does not have much executive power. Often the official with the most authority is the Executive Secretary, especially if he is salaried and full-time as in America; but his are delegated powers only, not in his own right. Conference may appoint

other salaried officials too, called "directors" and these administer the various co-operative efforts. They are subject to committees or departments appointed by conference.

The continuing work of conference is carried out by the Executive, appointed by Conference. It meets periodically throughout the year.

In British countries it is usual for the Conference to hold the title deeds to the property of constituent churches. This prevents alien groups taking over small churches and pirating the property. Normally the conference would not dream of interfering with a local church's property in any way.

7

THE MINISTRY

Churches of Christ theology on the ministry is really a development from the principle of the priesthood of all believers. This means that the soul can make direct contact with God and does not need any intermediary. The Holy Spirit dwells in every believer's heart and this makes him a priest of God.

Thus there are no religious functions which may not be carried out by any believer. He may baptize, preside at Communion, conduct funerals, officiate at weddings (if the state will allow), preach, teach and counsel, in fact, anything that a minister of a denomination might do.

In actual practice, very few members would exercise this right, largely because many of these functions require a training and experience that they do not have. But anyone who cares to go to the trouble to learn these skills would have his right recognized to act as a minister provided he were fitted in other ways such as in his spiritual life and character.

In fact, nobody could stop him anyway. He could go out and build up a congregation and minister to it as he thought fit. In the early days of the movement, the leadership consisted almost entirely of ordinary laymen, farmers, butchers, merchants etc., who directed the churches in a part time capacity and were usually unpaid.

As the years passed by the practical disadvantages of this system became obvious. The needs of the Kingdom of God demanded full-time servants and the deepening life of

the church required more than the acquisition of basic skills. It called for solid learning in the Scriptures and in Christian thought and practice. This in turn brought about the first theological colleges or seminaries.

Now almost all churches of Christ ministers are trained professionals and their qualifications are not at all inferior to those in the other church groups. However, even now, a capable layman occasionally becomes elevated to the professional ministry but in today's world, without training, he is at a serious disadvantage.

A recognized minister in the churches of Christ is generally a man who has given evidence of his divine call and who has successfully completed a prescribed course of training. Sometimes he is formally "ordained" and sometimes not.

But never is ordination or any other service considered as automatically conferring religious powers on the young minister. He receives his call directly from God. Ordination is never more than a recognition and dedication service similar to Acts 13:3. Often the ordained receives a certificate which attests his fitness as a minister and commends him to the brethren everywhere.

The churches of Christ minister is not subject to any higher authority. No one tells him what to do or where to go. If a church wants him as its minister it issues him an invitation which he may accept or reject at will. Often in British countries the term of service is for a specified period usually renewable, but in America it is normally for an indeterminate time. Both minister and church reserve the right to terminate the arrangement unilaterally as long as proper notice is given.

The powers of the minister are always vested in the congregation or its officers. Generally speaking this does not limit his initiative to any practical extent. The church gives him plenty of rein to operate for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God. But he is expected to consult with them about any changes he contemplates and he must sell them on any new programmes he would like to put into effect.

Generally the minister does most of the administration, preaching, baptizing, marrying, burying, counselling and visitation. Communion is usually presided over by a layman but in America it is just becoming a ministerial function.

Most ministers in the churches of Christ are pastors of churches but occasionally they enter specialized ministries such as chaplains, theological college teachers, conference directors, ministers of music, education and visitation. Multiple ministries in one church are much more common in the United States.

In summary, the churches of Christ concept of the ministry is that all members are ministers. Each member is equally responsible for evangelistic outreach and the general work of the Kingdom of God. Any development that would transfer that responsibility to a professional class would be considered a denial of the primitive Christianity of the New Testament. Professional ministry in the churches of Christ is based purely on practical considerations, not theological. The minister is simply an agent of the church chosen and trained to make the church's mission more effective. Beyond this framework, the idea of the ministry has no meaning.

8

CHRISTIAN UNITY

No movement has ever put as much emphasis on Christian unity as the churches of Christ, and yet probably no church group has been more reluctant to enter into church merger negotiations. Yet this is not as contradictory as it seems.

As has been shown in the first chapter when the modern movement known as "Churches of Christ" first started it was Alexander Campbell's dream that it should be the nucleus that would attract people from all denominations in a new unity under the New Testament pattern of primitive Christian faith and practice. He hoped that now that the European roots of the denominations had been severed by the American Revolution, these traditional groups would wither and die.

He felt strongly that Christ's Church should be one, and that denominationalism was the enemy to this unity. His theory was that denominations arose because of the departures from the New Testament pattern, and therefore, could become obsolete when there was a return to that example.

He argued that one of the chief obstacles to unity was centralization because this developed a hierarchy, or bureaucracy, which then had a vested interest in perpetuating the separate denominations. Thus he was insistent that the new movement should have no central structure. But when the hoped-for dissolution of denominations did not occur, practical considerations made some association necessary, but this

has always been a bone of contention and still is.

Nothing could have been further from the mind of the brethren in the new movement than denominational mergers. They had no denomination to offer in union and they certainly did not want to take in others. Their plea was for other Christians to come into the restoration movement as *individuals*.

This plea was by no means passive. The churches of Christ preachers were insistent that denominationalism was wrong and that, therefore, other Christians should leave their churches and unite with the new movement.

The desire to promote a new kind of unity was also at the basis of the refusal of the churches of Christ to take on a distinctive name. They felt that such names were separatist and tended to develop loyalties other than loyalty to Christ. With the passage of years, it became evident that the unity dream was not going to be realized, and gradually "churches of Christ", a descriptive term, became "Churches of Christ", a distinctive name. Several churches of Christ groups have evolved into outright denominations.

The new ecumenical movement in which denominations are seeking to unite *as denominations* has put churches of Christ on the spot. The big problem is that the union being sought for by the ecumenicalists is first union at the top, bureaucratic merger, while the traditional churches of Christ aim has been unity of the brethren at the grass roots. Thus the promoters of the ecumenical super-church are battling to evolve a suitable common creed and an acceptable centralized structure. But no matter how agreeable the final product is, by its very nature, it will be contrary to churches of Christ policy.

The inevitable result of the ecumenical movement will be a worldwide Church similar to that existing before the Reformation. But since it is highly unlikely that such a structure will suit all needs, separatist movements are also inevitable bringing about a repetition of atomistic denominationalism. Many churches of Christ groups, therefore, find themselves unable to get enthusiastic about the whole denominational approach, ecumenical or otherwise, seeing it as a false lead.

There are other groups, for example, the "Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)" which have frankly given up the dream of an uncentralized denominationless Christianity as impractical, and plump for an ecumenical Church as the only alternative to the present separatist chaos in Christendom. They see this as bringing about such enormous advantages in co-operation and elimination of competitive waste that in comparison the theoretical or idealistic loss is negligible.

However, to many of us, the old dream is possible. The real work of redemption is done at the local church level, anyway, and the central bureaucracies do not effect this very much. The Roman Catholic Church, with the most elaborate structure of all is in process of decentralization. There is a great deal to be said for the co-operative functions, such as missionary societies, theological colleges, publishing houses, to be independent entities dependent for their existence only on their effectiveness to meet developing needs.

But all are agreed that the Spirit of God is calling for greater co-operative effort on the part of all Christians. Whatever the solution of the organic union problem turns out to be, we must all work together on the task of redemption entrusted to us. Ecumenical "dialogue" is no substitute for this. The real test is whether we are winning people for Christ and deepening the work of Christ in their hearts and their communities. All else is "overhead", anyway.

For this reason churches of Christ laymen and ministers are active in the great inter-denominational efforts. You will find them as Christian Endeavour presidents, Billy Graham Crusade promoters, Keswick Conventions speakers, Gideon Bible contributors, Christian Business Men's Committee supporters, local Council of Churches members.

This is the logical result of our belief that the churches of Christ goes far beyond any churches of Christ conference. Unless we are prevented by conscientious reasons, we are most anxious to get behind any move that is aimed at the extension of the Kingdom of God.

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