

Churches of Christ in the 21st Century: My Response to Five Questions

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I am grateful to Keith Stanglin for inviting me to participate in this issue of the *Journal of Christian Studies*. The five questions generated some angst as well as fruitful discussions among colleagues and friends with whom I shared them in producing this essay. I am delighted to share my thoughts and, hopefully, contribute to the conversation.

Teaching for forty years at the University level among institutions associated with the Churches of Christ, I have witnessed its unfolding story, studied, taught, and written about its history, and participated in its theological journey. My response to these questions is rooted in that experience as well as in my own understanding of God's intent and design for the church in the biblical story.

When I use the phrase "Churches of Christ," I am focused on the historic group that emerged out of the nineteenth century American Restoration Movement (ARM, also called the Stone-Campbell Movement or SCM) in the late nineteenth century, flourished in many ways during the mid-twentieth century, and now experiences decline in the early twenty-first century. It is historically, by any account, the conservative wing of the ARM, and that wing has endured several significant divisions within its own ranks.

At the same time, the Churches of Christ are deeply rooted in and have been shaped by the values present from the beginning of the ARM. Churches of Christ have a history and are thus traditioned in significant ways. Their family of origins has impacted their story. This includes the Puritan and Presbyterian roots of the ARM and the subsequent search for identity as Churches of Christ emerged as a distinct group within the SCM in the late nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, from its inception the intent of Churches of Christ has been faithfulness to God's call for truth, unity, and mission. This three-fold characterization is part of their heritage. It has formed the life of many congregations as they sought authentic unity in truth so that they might proclaim the gospel to the whole world. It has also generated numerous disagreements about the nature of unity and the definition of truth as well as about how to carry out the mission. Controversy has often plagued its history, though it has also had many moments where its "better angels" were visible, and its ministry was wonderfully effective by the grace of God.

This has been our lot, whether for good or bad. We must recognize our historic origins if we are to understand ourselves, recognize our blind spots, and assess what has traditioned us. We cannot extract ourselves from our history; we live within its narrative. Yet, we can acknowledge it, take account of it, and assess it so that we might become more faithful to the divine work among us as we are guided by Scripture. To that end, these questions are a healthy exercise that attends to that task.

Question One: What are the best distinctives of Churches of Christ that should be shared with the wider Christian world?

"Distinctives" seems to ask what is *unique* about Churches of Christ who emerged as a *distinct* group in the late nineteenth century. However, I do not think much is unique about

us. Rather, it is the composite or the total set that is unique. The constellation of theology and practice is itself *distinctive*. It is a mix of catholic, evangelical, anabaptist, missional, and unity commitments. I realize those terms beg for definition, and I will address them latter in this essay.

However, I will first describe the composite that makes Churches of Christ a relatively distinct set of beliefs and practices. None of the particulars are unique (in fact, some are universal, and many are common), but the total set is distinctive. These commitments represent the best within our history. However, we have at times failed to fully embody them, give them appropriate emphasis, and/or majored in other particulars rather than these.

I have identified ten elements of this distinct constellation of theological commitments and practices. My characterization may reflect more contemporary terminology but the essence of each is found in our history.

1. *The Basic Evangelical Message*: the community tells the story of the Creator God who sent the Son in the flesh to redeem the world in the power of the Spirit. Churches of Christ have proclaimed the gospel story of God reconciling the world in Christ through his incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation to the right hand of God. The narrative of the Apostles' Creed, for example, has always been part of the preaching and teaching of Churches of Christ even though there has been little to no explicit use of that creed.
2. *Biblicism*: though this was sometimes—as in any tradition—made to fit preconceived notions, the idea that one can return to the story of God in Scripture to revive faith, renew commitments, retrain convictions, and reorient mission has always been vital. Churches of Christ have always sought to give serious attention to Scripture, learn from it, and find wisdom and guidance there as, at the very least, the primary authoritative resource for congregational life.
3. *Alternative Community*: while rejecting any kind of denominational status that participated in the sectarianism of denominational partyism, Churches of Christ embraced an alternative way of life that resisted identification with the denominational and cultural powers where they lived. They were suspicious of institutions, whether political or ecclesiastical. They intended radical submission to the way of God irrespective of cultural movements.
4. *Discipleship*: affirming believer's baptism as a mark of discipleship, Churches of Christ stressed the importance of obedience to God as followers of Jesus. This emphasis sought to explain what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, live transformed lives, and participate in the mission of God.
5. *Missional Ecclesiology*: while anachronistic, this language expresses the high ecclesiology embraced by Churches of Christ. The local congregation, as a voluntary community of Jesus-followers led by local leadership, is the primary means by which

God works to renew the world in the image of Christ. The local congregation, apart from extra-congregational institutions, participates in the mission of God through its benevolence, evangelism, and the edification of the community. Discipleship, in other words, primarily happens in community by gathering with other disciples, forming a community of disciples, and participating in the life of that community for the sake of the world.

6. *Priesthood of All Believers*: this invites every disciple to participate in the mission of God and use their gifts in service to God. This entailed an anti-sacerdotalism. Every believer (male, at least in its origins) may baptize and lead the congregation in worship through prayer, reading, exhortation, singing, and communion. The community is led by laity since there are no institutionalized priestly functions. Rather, everyone is fully invested with priestly privileges though they may not all share the same gift.
7. *Divine Action Through Ordinances*: believer's baptism and weekly Lord's supper among the assembled people of God are means of grace through which God forgives, communes with, and nourishes the community of faith for the sake of forming disciples to send them into world for the sake of the world. In their best moments, Churches of Christ have always believed that God *does something* through baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the assembly.
8. *Hope*: the eschatology of Churches of Christ has typically been goal-oriented, no matter what their concept of the eternal state was (whether a renewed earth or a celestial reality) or what their millennial convictions were (whether postmillennial, premillennial, or amillennial). There is a confidence that God is at work in the world to accomplish God's purposes and bring history to its goal, and we confess the resurrection from the dead as our Christian hope.
9. *Unity*: whether by transcending denominational barriers, breaking through those barriers, or deconstructing denominational identities, Churches of Christ have sought to practice a non-denominational unity. The impulse toward unity has been part of its history, though it has often been defined in sectarian ways (e.g., "the Churches of Christ are co-extensive with the body of Christ"). At our best, however, we have claimed that we are Christians only, but not the only Christians.
10. *Music*: congregational singing without instrumental accompaniment has characterized Churches of Christ for over one hundred and fifty years, though this has changed in some quarters in recent decades. It was, in fact, the original practice of the ARM. While the primary defense of this practice was a blueprint patternism based upon the Puritan regulative principle of worship (which many now reject), it also stressed congregational participation, the beauty of the human voice as a sacrificial offering, and the unitive harmony of those voices in the worship of God.

These ten commitments and practices describe the best of Churches of Christ in their most generous formulations. Given congregational autonomy and our suspicion of institutions, this configuration will appear in different ways. Sometimes it is narrower, and sometimes it is broader. Like an accordion, it has an elasticity undefined by detailed creedal strictures, though unwritten creeds were often assumed.

This constellation of theology and practice exists as a distinctive community within the larger Christian tradition. No single item is unique, and it shares much in common with many different traditions in Christianity. However, this specific congregational configuration of the Christian faith is distinctive. It is not the particulars that are distinctive but the combination.

Question Two: What are the most significant weaknesses or deficiencies in Churches of Christ that must be addressed?

Recently, while working through some old paper files as a retired Professor, I discovered the manuscripts of thirty-eight radio sermons I wrote and delivered in 1978-1979 at the request of the Northeast Philadelphia Church of Christ in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was twenty-one years old. As I read them some forty-six years later, they illustrated some of the more “significant weaknesses and deficiencies” of the theology and practice of Churches of Christ. While these radio talks were my own creation, they represented the approach of most Churches of Christ at the time (at least in my experience). They certainly reflected some of the standard catechetical literature available in Churches of Christ including the most widely read book by Leroy Brownlow entitled *Why am I a Member of the Church of Christ?* (published in 1945).

The thirty-eight lessons, categorized into topics, were:

- Salvation in the church (3 lessons)
- What Must I do to be Saved (3 lessons)
- Faith Only (2 lessons)
- Baptism (5 lessons)
- Restoration and Unity (3 lessons)
- Shall We Follow Moses (3 lessons)
- Authority and Pattern (5 lessons)
- Church Organization (4 lessons)
- Acceptable Worship (2 lessons)
- The Lord’s Day (2 lessons)
- The Lord’s Supper (2 lessons)
- Singing (3 lessons)
- Acts of Worship (1 lesson)

Some might affirm the need for these lessons and applaud the series as a rather thorough description of the Church of Christ in the New Testament. It serves a polemical need, that is, to carve out a distinct role for Churches of Christ over against the rest of the Christian

tradition. The sermon series focused on identifying the essential marks of the true church in the context of American denominationalism. Therein lies the significant weaknesses and deficiencies. I will identify three.

First, in almost two hundred pages of manuscript material, only one page gave any significant attention to the grace of God in death and resurrection of Jesus. There are scattered references but no intention to explain the meaning of the gospel in terms of the work of God for us in Jesus by the Spirit. My focus in teaching seekers was not God's grace in the person of Jesus but which church they should seek out. I devoted myself to teaching the "plan" of salvation in the sense of faith-baptism, entrance into the church of the New Testament, and the pattern of the church in the New Testament as a standard and condition of faithfulness.

In other words, in a series of sermons intended to introduce people to the saving body of Christ, I had no narrative structure for unfolding the redemptive work of God that does the saving. Rather than telling the gospel story of God in Jesus by the Spirit, my preaching was shaped by the question, how do people obey the gospel and find the right church? Ultimately, this approach tends toward a deficient gospel or, perhaps, an assumed gospel that is rarely explained. More specifically, it does not present the gospel narrative of God's redemptive work through Jesus in the the Spirit.

This deficiency produced several consequences. For example, Churches of Christ, in general, developed an anemic understanding of grace such that many struggle with the question, "have I done enough to go to heaven?" Another example is that the lack of attention to the narrative story generated an underdeveloped appreciation for the work of the Spirit due, in part, to a lack of reflection of the role of the Father, Son, and Spirit in the work of redemption and sanctification.

Second, the primary hermeneutical lens of Churches of Christ is on full display in my series. It was important to distinguish between the covenants, that is, we are no longer under the "old law" but a new one (three lessons on that topic). Thus, nothing in the Old Testament *and* Gospels (at least before the cross) was pattern authority for the New Testament church. It was also important for the congregation to be organized according to the pattern of the New Testament and to worship on the right day with a weekly Supper enriched by acapella singing and other acts of worship (giving, praying, teaching). This consumed one third of the lessons. In fact, practically half of the lessons are directly related to obedience to the New Testament pattern for congregational practices. To put it another way, half of the lessons were about how *to be saved* (faith-baptism), and the other half of the lessons were about how to find the right church *to stay saved*.

An integral part of our hermeneutical strategy was to search the Acts of the Apostles and the New Testament epistles for a detailed blueprint for what constitutes a faithful church. We combed these documents to discover a blueprint for the church from the isolated data scattered throughout them. Utilizing a complex grid of guidelines (does this command exclude its coordinates?), distinctions (is this command general or specific?), categorizations (is this action expedient or binding?), and strategies (how does one recognize expediency in contrast to prohibitive silence?), interpreters constructed a blueprint that did not explicitly exist in Acts and the epistles.

The blueprint, in effect, became the standard of faithfulness as a kind of ecclesial perfectionism. Faithful adherence to the blueprint became the standard of righteousness for any community professing to be a congregation of Christ. Faithfulness to specific ways of being church (especially in gathered community), then, functioned as legal barriers to fellowship with God. One cannot be right with God if one is not in the right church. This is a form of ecclesial legalism.

Third, since unfaithfulness to the blueprint excluded one from fellowship with God, it also excluded them from fellowship with the faithful. This produced an exclusive sectarianism where Churches of Christ effectively became co-extensive with the body of Christ. Whatever the deficiency might be (denominationalism, instrumental music, quarterly Lord's supper, etc.), it rendered that community unfaithful. Consequently, the faithful could not remain in fellowship with them. The blueprint was employed as a test of fellowship in all its particulars. Yet, since there was disagreement about how detailed the blueprint is and what it contained, there was division among Churches of Christ themselves. This resulted in separate fellowships. Nevertheless, our conclusions generally admitted little to no doubt, were full of certainty, and constituted standards of faith and practice for the true church.

Exclusive sectarianism resulted in the loss of a major value in the heritage of the SCM. No longer were we engaged in a movement to unite all Christians across the denominations. Instead, we were engaged in a movement to persuade all denominationalists to join us. The desire for unity was suffocated by the rigidity of a blueprint pattern.

Question Three: What is the place of Churches of Christ today in the broader Christian world?

The Churches of Christ provide a distinct witness within the Christian world. Their configuration of theological commitments and practices distinguishes them within the Christian tradition. At the same time, they share much in common with historic Christian traditions. This constellation, embodied in a particular congregation, is catholic, evangelical, anabaptist, missional, and ecumenical (that is, seeking unity through shared commitments and practices). It is:

- *catholic* (the liturgical traditions) in its ecclesiology and in affirming baptism, Lord's supper, and assembly as means of grace.
- *evangelical* in its biblicism, gospel message, and conversionism (revivalism).
- *anabaptist* in its practice of believer's baptism, emphasis on discipleship, cultural sectarianism, anti-sacerdotalism, and voluntary congregationalism.
- *missional* in its commitment to evangelism, the primacy of local congregations for discipleship, and participation in the mission God through the church and our vocations.

- *ecumenical* in its claim that the Churches of Christ are not co-extensive with the body of Christ and seek to experience the unity of the body of Christ among all Christians.

Historically, Churches of Christ are a community of baptized believers in the Free Church tradition. A congregation is a voluntary community of disciples bound together by a shared faith expressed in baptism (specifically, immersion in water) free from both political and creedal restraint.

Theologically, Churches of Christ are deeply shaped by Catholic, Reformed, and Anabaptist traditions. Our baptismal practice is baptistic in terms of believer's baptism but informed by a strong sense of divine action (God is doing something!) rooted in Catholic history and, to some degree, the best of Reformed thought. In terms of the Lord's Supper weekly communion reflects the historic practice on the liturgical traditions (Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican) but often (though not always) the Supper was understood primarily in memorialist terms like Anabaptist communities. Our ecclesiology is baptistic in terms of congregationalism, Reformed in terms of polity (plurality of elders), and Catholic in terms of soteriology.

All this (and more could be added) speaks to the almost eclectic way in which the early leaders of the ARM were shaped by multiple influences. Self-consciously seeking to move beyond the constraints of denominational identity and traditions, they read their Bible interested in finding the doctrine and practice of the early Christians. They attempted a fresh reading of Scripture for the sake of discerning what constituted Christian community and obedience to Jesus Christ. Despite that desire, they were deeply influenced by the surrounding traditions, and, at the same time, they generated a tradition that has its own distinct constellation of commitments and practices.

Where does this place Churches of Christ across the landscape of the Christian world? On the one hand, we have much in common with it, specifically: catholic, evangelical (notice the small case "evangelical"), and ecumenical. On the other hand, our commitments and practices empower more flexible and responsive communities for missional discipleship. It is important to appreciate and affirm both. The former means we participate in the larger Christian tradition, and the latter means we can pivot in practical ways to meet contemporary needs due, in part, to local governance and congregationalism.

To expand on this a bit, we are catholic in our ecclesiology and affirmation of divine activity in baptism, the Lord's supper, and the assembly. We are evangelical in our revivalistic proclamation of the basic story of the gospel (analogous to the Apostle's Creed). We are ecumenical to the extent that we are interested in and call for unity in the one body of Christ. In other words, we belong to the larger Christian tradition even though we cannot be pigeonholed by a specific historic brand (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, or Anabaptist). We are more eclectic and unbounded—a least in our origins—by a particular historical tradition of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, what we share with the Christian tradition locates us squarely within Christianity's main trajectory. This is what Alexander Campbell called the "evangelical core." We are Christians, but not the only Christians.

Regarding the second point, our congregationalism, local leadership, and commitment to obedience (discipleship) provides opportunities like those that Community Churches have embraced. At the same time, our sense of history and long connections with other congregations of Churches of Christ provide historical rootage and larger fellowship than most Community Churches. This means congregations within Churches of Christ have the flexibility to adapt to the missional exigencies of the moment unfettered by denominational or institutional expectations (at least in theory as practice is much more complicated if we want to maintain the loose bonds of fellowship within our own tradition). For example, the house church movement can find a receptive hearing among Churches of Christ as well as the Campus Church movement. With local governance and congregational self-definition, the potential for faithful adaptation and improvisation is great.

Question Four: What principle(s) of the Restoration Movement should we promote; what part of our identity should we pass along in our churches?

Returning to question one, I find those ten characteristics a compelling vision of faith and practice for the contemporary church as well as a valuable contribution to the historic Christian tradition. At the same time, some points are not as fundamental as others, and some should be held (and even practiced) loosely. For example, while congregational a cappella music is a worthy tradition with many positive dimensions, it is not a matter of identity in terms of a faithful Christian community (nor is it a *core* identity of the ARM).

So, how do we think about a faithful identity within the context our family of origins and subsequent history? Do we abandon the tradition and reject any relation to its historic identity, or do we reframe it so that we do not lose what is most valuable within our history—not only for our sake but for the sake of the whole Christian tradition?

As an opening suggestion, I would recommend five points which, it seems to me, would constitute an identity faithful to the Christian tradition and faithful to the best of Churches of Christ as a distinct community within in that tradition.¹

1. The basic evangelical message of God's creation and redemption of the world through Jesus the Messiah in the power of the Spirit is essential for any Christian identity. All Christians confess this narrative, and no one could claim to be a "church of Christ" without embracing it as the story where we encounter and experience the love of God, the grace of Jesus the Messiah, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.
2. The primary resource for understanding and embodying this evangelical narrative is Scripture. Churches of Christ are committed to the serious and attentive study of Scripture because they confess God speaks through it, provides wisdom therein, and encounters us in its proclamation.

¹ See Mark E. Powell, John Mark Hicks, and Greg McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community: A Theological Vision for the Future* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2020) for a similar perspective and for more detail about this sort of vision for Churches of Christ.

3. Living within this narrative, believers voluntarily participate in communal life as a source of wisdom, mutual support, and missional cooperation. They form local congregations of believers who are committed to following Jesus as obedient disciples. These communities, led by gifted disciples, are grounded in a commitment to the priesthood of all believers.
4. As a community, they participate in what God is doing through believer's baptism, Lord's supper, and assembly. These communal moments are transformative encounters and participatory. They are means of grace by which God welcomes us, transforms us, and graces us so that we might have life—a life shared in community with God and each other. Liturgy or the worshipping assembly is participatory through shared prayers, congregational singing (including the value of, though not the exclusive use of, acapella singing), and mutual edification.
5. Though existing as local communities, Churches of Christ have a shared history that connects them with each other (whether by relationships, institutions, events, etc.) that is worth embracing and nurturing because congregations cannot thrive in isolation. In addition, Churches of Christ participate in the wider unity of the body of Christ as one historical witness to the gospel among others. Recognizing this, we may affirm a historic slogan: we are Christians only, but not the only Christians. We may maintain our interest in non-denominationalism while also recognizing that denominational groups who confess the gospel are also Christian.

These five points reflect something akin to the heart of the ARM. The identity of Churches of Christ is not found in its peculiarity or its itemized distinctives. Rather, it is found in a historic expression (ARM) of a particular embodiment of the gospel rooted in the narrative of Scripture. I think these five points are sufficient for both its evangelical (gospel) and traditioned (our history) identity.

Question Five: Have your views on these topics changed over the years? If so, in what ways, and why?

As one recognizes weaknesses and deficiencies views do begin to change as the search for more fully embodying the life of God continues. A commitment to the biblical narrative, communal discernment, and the wisdom that comes from living before God moves us along the path of growth and change. Sanctification is progressive, and it is also communal. Consequently, we might expect our views to change over the years in some ways, but not necessarily in every way. In my own experience, the five points noted under question four underwent development and deepening but remained firm and solid (for example, my understanding of baptism, Lord's supper, and assembly). On other questions, change involved significant shifts. I will identify three significant shifts in my own understanding.

First, my understanding of hermeneutics changed. I shifted from searching the data of the New Testament (especially Acts and the epistles) for a specific blueprint for the church to probing the theological story of the whole of Scripture to discern the pattern of God's activity so that I might imitate it. I rejected the former because it was a Puritan construct

rather than a New Testament expectation, and I embraced the latter because this is what I found the authors in Scripture doing. I have outlined this shift in my book *Searching for the Pattern* (2019).

Second, my understanding of the nature of restoration has changed. Whereas once I understood restoration as primarily the reproduction of the church as it appears in the New Testament, I have shifted toward a broader—and, at the same time, deeper—understanding of restoration. Restoration as reproduction is too narrow and inferential (e.g., there is no call to restore the church in the New Testament). However, there is a restorationist agenda. At one level, it is the restoration or renewal of God’s intent for creation. The creator and ruler of the universe invited humanity to participate in the emergence, development, and care of the creation. This is our vocation. We are co-workers with God, and we partner with God in the renewal (restoration) of the world. At another level, one of the historic marks of the church is apostolicity. We are devoted to the apostles’ teaching (Acts 2:42), and this devotion means its maintenance. Where the church has abandoned such, we seek its renewal, reformation, or restoration. Yet, the teaching of the apostles is not a grab-bag of unknowns or inferences. On the contrary, it is the sermons in Acts, the mystery of Christ revealed in the epistles, the story of Jesus in the Gospels, and the story of God in Israel. It is a theological story that grounds ethics, exhortations, and practices. In this sense, restoration is not the reproduction of a blueprint pattern but the renewal of God’s story in our lives as we imitate the pattern of God’s life in our own lives and in our congregations.

Third, the definition of the “the Faith” has shifted for me. It is no longer a matter of defining the blueprint and executing the plan. “The Faith” is no longer an inferred creed of blueprint particulars and practices. Rather, “the Faith” is the basic evangelical message of the gospel as part of the story of God in Jesus empowered by the Spirit. It is the narrative of God’s acts: creation, redemption, sanctification, and glorification. In its most basic form, it is the Apostles’ Creed, or in a fuller narration what the early church called the “Rule of Faith.” These amount to little more than re-narrations of summaries in the biblical text. Whether it is the “canon” (or rule) by which we walk in Galatians 6:16, or the summary of the gospel acts of Jesus in Acts 10:35-43, or the gospel summary in Romans 1:3-5, or the credal statement of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, these synopses of the story (there are similar ones in Israel’s story too) provide the narrative frame, name its theological significance, and provide its emphases.

Moving away from blueprint patternism and embracing a broader notion of restorationism in the light of what constitutes “the Faith” means moving beyond denominational sectarianism and finding common ground in the narrated gospel with believers across the landscape of the Christian faith. This has enlarged my fellowship. It has returned me to one of the original impulses of the ARM—the unity of believers through faith in the gospel.

Consequently, I can do two things at once. On the one hand, I find space to welcome my sisters and brothers in other historic Christian traditions because we find common ground in our confession of “the Faith” (e.g., something like the Apostles’ Creed). On the other hand, the distinctive constellation of theology and practice described in question one is convicting to me. I can do both. I can receive fellow believers in the gospel, and, at the

same time, I can advocate for and share with others the values of my distinctive tradition that enrich the practice of “the Faith” as part of the broad tradition of the Christian Faith.

The future of Churches of Christ may find a place in the coming generations by affirming its distinctiveness while also embracing a gracious acknowledgement that while we seek to be Christians only, we are not the only Christians.