

Churches of Christ: Always Evangelical, Still Catholic

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In his provocative and engaging essay, Brad East asserts that churches of Christ were “once catholic”—though insufficiently so—but are “now evangelical.” I think, given his descriptions of catholic and evangelical, churches of Christ have always been evangelical and still are catholic. The historical DNA of churches of Christ, according to East, is “*catholic* rather than evangelical.” In contrast, it seems to me, their DNA has always been and still is, at least in large measure, *evangelical catholic*.

Of course, the terms “catholic” and “evangelical” are begging for definition. More on that momentarily.

But first, why is this claim important? East believes it has explanatory power. It explains, for example, why some have chosen to walk the Canterbury Trail. The liturgical and sacramental spirituality of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglican traditions resonates with their experiences in churches of Christ. The turn to evangelical among churches of Christ, East argues, meant their congregations left them and, consequently, they sought those catholic practices elsewhere.

As congregations increasingly absorbed evangelical spirituality and abandoned catholic commitments, according to East, churches of Christ lost their distinctiveness. Becoming evangelical, members of churches of Christ found evangelical spirituality elsewhere in better and more resourced spaces. If there is no difference between the spirituality of churches of Christ and evangelicals, why remain in churches of Christ?

Consequently, East postulates two significant reasons why churches of Christ are dying: (1) they are no longer catholic and thus have lost those committed to catholic principles and (2)

they have become evangelical, and others do evangelical better. Moreover, the decline of churches of Christ is also connected with how American *Evangelicalism* (note the capital *E*) in the last four decades has morphed into a political and cultural agenda. To the extent that churches of Christ embrace that transformation it contributes to decline. To that last sentence, I say, Amen!

I trust this is a fair articulation of East’s thesis. To assess it we need to focus on those pesky definitions. I’ll get there, but let’s start with the end of his article. He lands in a rather healthy and hopeful place. He describes what “it means to be faithful as a once-catholic, now-evangelical church,” and that description, he rightly believes, “pertains to *all* churches, at all times, of every kind”—whether catholic, evangelical, or evangelical catholic.

Faithfulness is keeping in step with the Spirit: “following Christ,” obedient to Scripture, gathering with believers, loving each other, “bearing witness” to the gospel, worshiping God “in Spirit” and in Truth (who is Jesus; I capitalized “truth”), “proclaiming the gospel,” participating in the sacraments, “catechizing our children,” serving the poor and needy, listening to all saints past and present, and “resisting the siren songs of culture and politics.”

What East describes is potentially an ecumenical evangelical catholic congregation. It can be a non-sectarian disciplined sacramental community. I’m good with that. Indeed, this is how East describes his own work as a theologian: “I want my work to be catholic, evangelical, and ecumenical.”¹ This is essentially, with the addition of a robust sense of mission and other distinctives not encompassed in catholic and evangelical theology, what Mark Powell, Greg McKinzie, and I proposed in *Discipleship in Community*.² Though a proposal for churches of Christ, its intent is catholic, evangelical, and ecumenical. We share East’s conviction that

¹ Brad East, “Theology in Division,” *First Things*, available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2023/04/theology-in-division>.

² Mark Powell, John Mark Hicks, and Greg McKinzie, *Discipleship in Community: A Theological Vision for the Future* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University, 2020).

belonging to Christ's church, "which is never in trouble," is our hope. I deeply appreciate where East ends his essay. At the same time, the way he gets there is somewhat problematic.

Let us, finally, turn to definitions, particularly "catholic" and "evangelical." I will not contest the characteristics East identifies (though I have some quibbles) but point out that both have *always* been (and still are) part of churches of Christ.

First, catholic. East claims it is "more fitting" to describe the DNA of churches of Christ (its origins and historic practice) as "*catholic* rather than *evangelical*." I think that claims too much, but I do agree churches of Christ are "catholic" given his characterization. Essentially, "catholic" refers to a high ecclesiology in which the church is central to soteriology (first three points out of twelve), baptismal sacramentalism (three points), and the assembled liturgical community (two+ points, including weekly communion). [This is similar to Campbell's three positive ordinances of Christianity: Baptism, Lord's Day, and Lord's Supper.³] Further it looks to the "early church" as a "paradigm of moral, spiritual and sacramental faithfulness." As East asserts, "the church simply *is* Christianity as God instituted on earth."

Does this describe historic churches of Christ? Yes! At the same time, it also describes Luther and Calvin (except for the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Arminian, and Wesleyan nature of point 9). Indeed, until we are more nuanced, this understanding of "catholic" applies to classic Protestant traditions as well as Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Anglican. For example, one of the most controversial statements in the list might be (especially for American Evangelicals), "Baptism, in short, is necessary for salvation" (point 5). Yet, classic Protestants agree. *The Augsburg Confession* of 1530, which both Luther and Calvin (specifically, *Augsburg Confession Variata*) affirmed, states: "Of Baptism they [the Reformers] teach that it is necessary

³ See my "Stone-Campbell Sacramental Theology," *Restoration Quarterly* 50, no 1 (2008) 35-48.

to salvation.”⁴ Almost forty years ago Richard Harrison, Jr., highlighted the confluence of Catholic and Reformed sacramental theology in the Stone-Campbell Movement in his article, “Early Disciples Sacramental Theology: Catholic, Reformed, and Free.”⁵ The “free” refers to the anabaptist character of the Stone-Campbell Movement, which is missing in East’s article but important for the identity of churches of Christ.

While churches of Christ had their own, often unique, sets of “granular scholasticism” (I like that phrase), every tradition does. It is neither a function of catholicism nor evangelicalism *per se*; rather, it is the nature of human traditions.

So, agreed. Churches of Christ are catholic in their DNA. And, I add, *also* evangelical.

Let’s turn our attention to the second term, “evangelical.” At one level, as East notes, “evangelical” can modify Lutherans, Methodists, Anabaptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Agreed. Alexander Campbell, for example, identified an “*evangelical*” theological core that all Protestants (including himself) confess: Trinity (without using the word, of course), atoning sacrifice, reconciliation through faith, a life of obedience, and the nature of Christ’s kingdom and the new birth.⁶

But that is too broad a brush for what East intends by “evangelical.” He does not use the word in a specifically theological sense. Rather, it refers to “a certain subset of American Christianity.” In other words, though there are some theological commitments embedded in his description, it is primarily a sociological account of a North American, even White, subculture.

Again, I will not dispute the sociological identifiers, though I lament the lack of attention to theological identity. For example, the identity of evangelical theology is *primarily* a witness to

⁴ The Augsburg Confession, Article 9, available at <https://bookofconcord.org/augsburg-confession/>.

⁵ Richard L. Harrison, Jr., “Early Disciples Sacramental Theology: Catholic, Reformed, and Free,” *Mid-Stream* 24, no 3 (July 1985) 255-292.

⁶ Alexander Campbell, “Education,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 6 (2nd series; June 1837) 258

the gospel—God in Christ reconciling the world to God’s self by the Spirit. This is one reason “evangelical” may describe Roman Catholics as well as Anabaptists. Indeed, the “purpose” of the Campbell Movement was to “restore the gospel and its ordinances” and “establish CHRISTIAN UNION upon the basis of a SIMPLE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY.”⁷ The phrase “evangelical Christianity” reflects both ecclesiological and soteriological commitments; it entails, at least for the early Stone-Campbell Movement, the meanings of both catholic and evangelical *theology*.

East identifies the sociological makers in a series of bullet points. These are: biblicism (specifically *nuda Scriptura*), “democratic impulse,” “frontier revivalism,” emphases on preaching, conversion narratives, living faith, traditional ethics, “hermeneutical literalism,” individualism, an “entrepreneurial spirit,” evangelism and missions, and “a *relative* lack of emphasis on structures of governance, sacramental administration, holy orders, and/or patristic-medieval tradition.” I do wonder what “sacramental administration” means. Is that another way of talking about sacerdotalism? I don’t know. And, of course, several particulars are open to diverse interpretations within limits (e.g., there are different forms of “frontier revivalism”).

If his thesis is that churches of Christ moved *from* a catholic *to* an evangelical identity, his description of evangelical involves no movement at all. Churches of Christ have always—from their beginning—had these general characteristics to one degree or another. In this sense, churches of Christ have *always* been evangelical, as East uses the term.

East acknowledges this, sort of. He says those “in the Bible Belt” have “always been evangelical *adjacent*.” Though I see no reason to restrict this to the Bible Belt, the key word is “*adjacent*.” I’m uncertain what this means. Is evangelical an addendum to catholic commitments within churches of Christ but not integral to their identity? Whatever “adjacent” means, it was so

⁷ Robert Richardson, *The Principles and Objects of the Religious Reformation, Urged by A. Campbell and Others, Briefly Stated and Explained*, 2nd ed (Bethany, VA: A. Campbell, 1853) 6-7.

present (perhaps integral?) that the loss of “catholic distinctives” placed churches of Christ wholly within the “evangelical family;” so much so, no one inside or outside can tell the difference. Thus, East argues, churches of Christ, though *once* catholic, are *now* evangelical.

The catholic distinctives, East suggests, kept us “out of step with evangelicals,” especially “American [*E*]vangelicalism” (my capitalization). That is a legitimate point, though the evangelical characteristics listed are not *necessarily* hostile to catholic commitments (e.g., East explains what he means by biblicism in a footnote; it can mean other things as well). Further, I would add other distinctives that are not catholic but anabaptist. Nevertheless, East’s observation is one of the reasons I have focused on sacramental theology in my own writing. I have hoped to explain and deepen those catholic commitments.⁸ To the extent that a congregation neglects or loses its sacramental imagination and practice regarding baptism or Lord’s supper, it is no longer—at least historically or traditionally—part of churches of Christ.

Yet, where are the congregations among churches of Christ that have lost their catholicity? The largest percentage of congregations are still moderately or historically conservative. Their commitment to East’s catholic twelve points is as strong as it was in the 1950s. Ask any number of the large “Church of Christ” groups on Facebook; they’ll tell you.

Most, it seems to me, have lost their sectarianism, and that is a good thing (though some have lamented that loss and are thus attracted to other traditions more sectarian in their catholicism). They are at least ecumenical to the degree that they no longer believe, to the extent that many once did, that churches of Christ are co-extensive with body of Christ on the earth. Losing this sectarianism meant we no longer fall prey to one of the negative aspects of catholic

⁸ John Mark Hicks, *Enter the Water; Come to the Table* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2014).

spirituality, that is, fencing the table to feed only their flock and exclude other believers (particularly Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox).

Whatever the reasons for and the nature of decline among churches of Christ, it is not because churches of Christ are no longer catholic. *They are still catholic even as they remain evangelical.* I think the reasons for decline and potential death lie elsewhere and in many places.

East postulates that churches of Christ have not remained faithful to their original catholic DNA for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the evangelical subculture ultimately overwhelmed those catholic commitments, especially with the rise of American *Evangelicalism* in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. On the other hand, churches of Christ were *insufficiently* catholic from the beginning. What churches of Christ lacked was an “authoritative community” with “authoritative documents and authoritative leaders.” To put it another way, we lacked a set of creeds and a magisterium to interpret Scripture so we could remain catholic enough to avoid the populist call of *Evangelicalism* with its “entertainment evangelism and prosperity preaching.” Perhaps, it could be argued, catholic commitments remained as long as they did within an evangelical subculture because an unwritten creed operated within the Stone-Campbell tradition and influential preachers as well as magisterial-like editor-bishops managed the interpretation of Scripture for the community. Maybe. But that has broken down in the past sixty years, and it was never absolute. We have always also been a “wild democracy” with significant diversity (to use Ed Harrell’s language).⁹ Nevertheless, without creed and magisterium, East suggests, the catholic distinctives disappeared in some places under the influence of *Evangelicalism*. At the same time, a magisterium, while maintaining orthodoxy (though also maintaining slavery, colonialism, and patriarchalism), can also suffocate the movement of the Spirit among congregations.

⁹ John Mark Hicks, “I Stayed for the Wild Democracy,” in *Why We Stayed: Honesty and Hope in the Churches of Christ*, ed. Benjamin J. Williams (Los Angeles: Keledei Publications, 2018) 103-120.

According to East, that insufficiency contained the seeds of an eventual implosion. To maintain a healthy, catholic identity churches of Christ have needed a more *robust* catholicism. Churches of Christ must expand their canon. East suggests *nuda scriptura* is insufficient (and it is); it needs a creedal faith (e.g., Rule of Faith and perhaps the first four ecumenical councils) and the “authority of bishops” to secure the church’s faith (is this the solution?). For East, to remain catholic one needs the creedal tradition of the first five centuries and a magisterium to interpret it. In his *The Doctrine of Scripture*, he argued that “the same level of authority . . . must characterize both the text interpreted and the interpretation itself.”¹⁰ If East is correct, the American Restoration Movement was doomed from the start. It may have had a good run, but its *insufficient* catholicism killed it.

How do we respond to this identity crisis created, in part, by the influence of American *Evangelicalism* and contemporary culture in the last sixty years? We could double down on our catholic commitments and more deeply imbibe their resources and practices (e.g., a magisterium). But those so devoted have mostly left already. Or, we could fully embrace *Evangelicalism’s* theology, the natural waters of its subculture (in which we have swum for two hundred years), and its new 21st century features. But Evangelicals do evangelical better. In either case, churches of Christ die. This is what East thinks is happening.

Are churches of Christ dying? I don’t know. Maybe. I hope not. But whether they are or not, it is *not* because churches of Christ were *once* catholic but are *now* evangelical. To be sure, when we lose the catholic dimension, we are no longer an identifiable historical tradition known as the churches of Christ. However, churches of Christ by-and-large have not lost their catholic distinctives. No doubt, some congregations have. That is verifiable. But the vast majority, as far

¹⁰ Brad East, *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021) 255.

as I can tell, have not. My anecdotal experience is based on teaching sacramental theology and catholic ecclesiology in over twenty countries and forty states to numerous students (over a thousand studying ministry) for forty years in universities associated with churches of Christ. I don't think churches of Christ have irredeemably morphed into a form of American *Evangelicalism* because the catholic commitments are still present. I've been writing about sacramental theology for twenty-five years to affirm and develop those commitments. Moreover, I doubt if the catholic-evangelical dynamic is the main reason some are leaving churches of Christ or Christianity in general in North America. It is much more complicated than that.

Perhaps, in contrast to the above two options, we might intentionally embrace our identity as *evangelical catholics* as we reimagine what that means for the current missiological situation. We can remain churches of Christ while we seek new paths of faithfulness in a new context (a 7th option to add to East's six). I have sought to cultivate this among churches of Christ over the years and recently in *Discipleship in Community*. I see this in many spaces.

Should churches of Christ remain a distinctive tradition? Can it? Is it worth the struggle? Does it contribute to the body of Christ as a whole? Do we offer healthy, unique gifts to the body of Christ? A healthy *evangelical catholic theology* provides balance between personal and communal, between Scripture and tradition, between conversion narratives and catechesis, between evangelism (revivalism) and liturgy, between Word and Table, between emotion and reason, and between freedom and ecclesial governance among other elements.

An evangelical catholic can be sectarian or ecumenical. Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy are sectarian (e.g., they fence the table). Churches of Christ, drawing on our historic call for unity, can serve the body of Christ as an ecumenical, evangelical, and catholic tradition (I would also add anabaptist and missional, if I get to define those terms).

I'm not willing to jump ship to another tradition. Perhaps I will go down with this ship and provide hospice care (which is a holy calling). But I find in churches of Christ a unique theological set that has possibilities for missional engagement in a Post-Christian Western culture. It may not make a big splash, but that is neither the point nor the goal. Rather, it can, and in many places does, provide a faithful and hopeful presence.