

The Brown Street Beacon

"...Shine out among them like beacon lights,

holding out to them the Word of Life" (Phil 2:15-16)



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Where Is Liberalism Today?

In the fall of 1973, a young preacher from the University church of Christ in Tuscaloosa challenged me concerning my previous baptism and overall belief system which I adopted from the Baptist church. I opened my Bible and carefully tested everything I was taught and with great joy took a stand to be a Christian only. This stand was simple, obvious and could easily be shared with anyone who wished to follow Jesus.

A few months later my world was turned upside down. When I traveled home to Birmingham, brethren there gently encouraged me to apply the same principles of going back to the Bible to the question of the work and organization of the local church. When I enthusiastically tried to get this young preacher and others to join in such a study, I was shocked to be met with suspicion, anger and fear! The next year was filled with extensive personal study that finally led me to leave the University church.

What I had experienced at that time would later become clear to me—I had been part of a group that was in the process of casting off previously held beliefs for new ones. This group professed to stand for “undenominational Christianity,” but as a whole the members had little understanding about the basics and scope that such a stand entailed. A little over 20 years later this church would become something very different.

In a tract published in 1972 called “The Emergence of the Church of Christ Denomination,” David Edwin Harrell, Jr. wrote about this predictable process and made some significant applications about what was taking place in churches of Christ at that time. Brother Harrell points out that the basic transition is one that moves away from a Bible-centered stand where:

“...their members believe they have “the truth,” they are strict morally, they believe themselves to be “the church,” they are fervent, and exhibit other similar characteristics.”

He also points out that the completion of the transition is a new denomination where members are: “...tolerant of other “churches,” they generally accept the moral standards of the society in which they exist, they are less dogmatic, less active, and more interested in the world around them.” When one examines the work of the apostles and the fruit of their teaching, the kind of faith they instilled in those they taught is apparent. From the beginning at Pentecost, the disciples were taught to abide in the apostles’ doctrine (Acts 2:41-42). When controversy arose they were taught to appeal to what was delivered, received and seen from the apostles (1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3; 2 Thess. 3:6, 15). Just as Jesus taught and practiced only what God gave Him in His ministry (John 8:28-32), His followers, through the words He would deliver to the apostles, would also limit themselves

to teach and practice only what these delivered words would reveal (John 12:48-50).

The people of God will always be characterized by staying in the authority of these divinely inspired words. As the apostle Peter wrote, "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God ... that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:11). It takes a living faith to stand where the apostles stood without compromise over time (Jude 3).

"Now, It Is Different"

For years, Protestant denominations have accepted that they have evolved from the practice of the early church under the apostles. One Baptist creed book in the late 1800's acknowledges this:

"It is most likely that in the Apostolic age when there was but "one Lord, one faith, and one baptism," and no differing denominations existed, the baptism of a convert by that very act constituted him a member of the church, and at once endowed him with all the rights and privileges of full membership. In that sense, "baptism was the door into the church." Now, it is different" (Edward Hiscox, 1890).

This same mindset is found within "mainstream" churches of Christ, with many now describing themselves as being in a "progressive movement" and describing churches as "progressive churches." There are more conservative elements remaining among liberal churches, but their number is dwindling and so is the number of institutional colleges that will still stand against this movement.

"We speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent" – Now, it is different

There have been numerous books written by men from Abilene, Pepperdine and David Lipscomb colleges strongly contending for a rejection of the idea of restoring the New Testament church, calling such an idea "legalism." I will quote from two books that have been widely circulated among brethren, "The Cruciform Church" by C. Leonard Allen and "Reclaiming a Heritage" by Richard Hughes.

The major thrust of both of these books is an utter rejection of Bible authority, contending that we do not need authority for all that we teach and practice as Christians. It was this very thing that made the Lord's church unique from the movements of men and also brought them into conflict.

"It is time to admit that in our churches, a wide variety of people from all walks of life...simply do not find patternism and legalism to be meaningful themes"

"For many in our churches today, the restoration vision is a dead-end street, an essentially useless category" (Hughes, p. 121).

Rather than examining scripture to see what our attitude should be about these questions, these men attribute the writings of human philosophers as the source of how leaders in the restoration movement viewed the Bible. As an example, they claim that Francis Bacon, the man credited with developing the inductive method of reasoning called "the scientific method," is the reason brethren insist on authority for all practices. Today these writers label others as "Propositional Baconians."

"Among Churches of Christ, the effect of the Baconian method was to shut down serious attention to Scripture's historical or cultural settings" (Allen, p. 33)

To this I simply ask this question, “was Jesus a Propositional Baconian?” The approach I take is found in the teachings and attitudes of Jesus as He handled the words of God.

As a result of this rejection, it is becoming common to see churches that now have instrumental services. Some have one eldership oversee several churches calling them satellite churches. More importantly, doctrinal discernment and discussion is rarely heard.

“He that believes and is baptized shall be saved” – Now, it is different

Today, an elder in the church I left years ago boldly claims that we have it all wrong on baptism. He openly attacks churches of Christ as being wrong on the significance of baptism, suggesting we have made it a “sacrament” like the Catholics when we say salvation comes at the point of baptism. Because of this radical transition in thinking, open fellowship with other denominations is now the norm.

When brother Harrell wrote his booklet in 1972, there were many things he said would be realized in the future. In this next quote we can readily see a fulfillment:

“The time will come, no doubt, when the leaders of the denominational movement within the church will accept the responsibility and credit for their liberal leadership. The time may not be too far distant when considerable numbers of Churches of Christ will be proud of their denominational status. When that time comes a whole new set of religious values will become the intellectual justification for a denominational Church of Christ. The same intellectual assumptions that undergird the Methodist or Christian church will be adequate props for the newly-oriented Church of Christ.”

“As in all the churches of the saints, let your women keep silent in the churches” – Now, it is different.

It is now common to hear brethren talk about viewing the Bible as “a story” and not as law. Many are now following well known theologians in proclaiming that a careful application of the Bible would needlessly apply first-century culture to our own. It is said that we should use our imagination and find “truth” for our own “personal story” and we should not bind rules that were never meant for us. It comes as no surprise to find progressive churches pushing to have women openly speak in the assembly.

This approach makes every man a law to himself. The Lord is no longer the head of those who view the Bible this way. Why not let the apostles speak to the churches of today? Hear the apostle Paul:

“If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37).

It has come full circle in my lifetime

It has been a stunning thing to see the church that called me out of denominationalism now fully take the stand to be a denomination! Do these departures mean that the entire concept of restoration has failed? Brother Harrell closes his booklet with this observation:

“Finally, the old seed remains. The fertile idea of “restoration” is as challenging to those people who are of a mind to accept it as it ever was. I have no doubt that it retains the same extraordinary and expansive spiritual force which it has twice demonstrated in the recent history of this nation. I am just as certain that success will ever bring with it problems, tensions, and schisms. Before we

finish the work we can look forward to the struggle of the future. It may be the struggle of my old age, or it may be the struggle of my son or grandson — but if the Lord does not come, it will. It would be trite and anticlimactic to say "history repeats itself." Perhaps it would be proper simply to conclude: "there is nothing new under the sun."

Brethren, the call of our Lord to return to His word will work in any generation it is tried. Let us never be ashamed to give book, chapter and verse for our practices (Col. 3:17)! Men may change their convictions, but we serve a God who never changes, nor does the path He sets before us to follow (Rom. 3:4; Jer. 6:16-17).