

Parallels of Division Within the Restoration Movement

by Matthew W. Morine

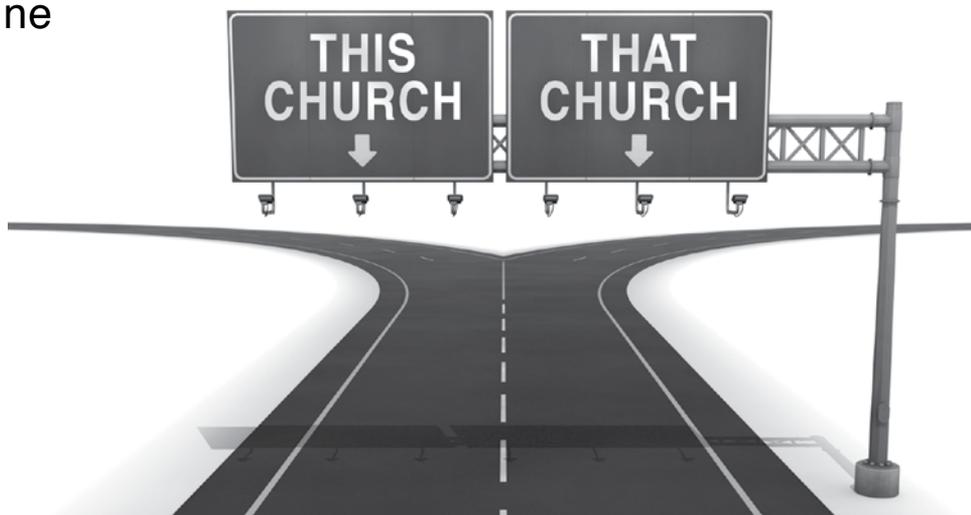
Discussion of divisiveness is not new to those who follow the history of God's people in America. A majority of the books dealing with the history of the churches of Christ include a discussion of the increasing polarization within the movement. Observers of the church have noted an increasing split between two groups.

The churches of Christ from 1906 to 1980 enjoyed a relatively peaceful time of solidarity. Although there were a few minor divergent paths of separation, overall, the church reaped the blessing of a strong core of faithful congregations moving on a united mission. But with the dawning of the new century, a definite split seems to be present within the churches of Christ, and even an utterance of such a truth is filled with reservation.

A History of Division

Related tension in confessing a division within the Restoration Movement is not new. On Aug. 18, 1889, the first clarion call for division was uttered. Daniel Sommer called a mass meeting of the Christians in Sand Creek, Ill., to draw a line in the sands of fellowship. He proposed drawing up a document to advocate disfellowshipping the erring churches. Although David Lipscom originally praised Sommer, he eventually criticized the call for the split as sectarian.

As the tension in the fellowship continued to progress, John R. Williams compiled a list of loyal preachers and churches in opposition to innovation in 1902. Finally, in 1906, even Lipscomb, who desired unity among the people of



God, had to admit that the Restoration Movement churches had splintered into diverse fellowships. The U.S. Religious Census of 1906 had marked the reality that a segment of the Restoration Movement officially left the biblical pattern of the people of God to adopt unauthorized innovations.

Because the churches of Christ are not a denominational body, no official voices pronounce regulations within the church. The separation between the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) and the churches of Christ increased during the 1880s to the 1900s. Another polarization between the conservative churches and the progressive churches occurred from the 1980s to the 2000s. Of course, there was no official pronouncement, but tremors of division could be seen.

A strong example of this division is within the pages of the directory of the churches of Christ produced by Mac Lynn. The *Christian Chronicle* reported in Jan. 22, 2009, that 21 congregations were omitted because of the introduction of the instrument in worship services. As the clock continues to move forward, the chasm between the conservative congregations and the progressive

congregations ever widens.

This phenomenon is not new. The faces have changed, the particular issues have morphed, but the underlining truth is the same. Three foundational principles associated with the split of 1906 are consistent with the present division of this generation.

Forces of Change

(1) Sociological Forces. Some of the fabric of the split within the Restoration Movement could be attributed to the Civil War. Although Moses E. Lard stated that the Civil War never divided the churches of Christ, this tumultuous event contributed to the social tension. The Civil War might not have been the prime motivation for the division, but it certainly created sociological forces that contributed to the increasing gap between congregations.

As the North increased in wealth, the South continued to struggle materially. Although the North urbanized, the South continued with a rural perspective. The Disciples of Christ entered the mainstream of the sociological fabric of America, demonstrated when one of them, James A. Garfield, became president of the United States. The churches

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of Christ continued to stand outside of the sweeping cultural forces of American progressivism.

As the liberal element in the church continued to seek acceptance from mainstream America, there were changes within the worship and doctrine of the church with an emphasis on blending into mainstream Christianity. This dynamic continues to be at play since the period of the 1980s.

One of the best-known preachers within the churches of Christ during that time period was Max Lucado. He accomplished a goal that few, if any, preachers within the fellowship ever fulfilled. He became a well-known author throughout modern denominational Christianity. The liberal elements within the church championed him as a success case. He transcended the churches of Christ fellowship to gain broad acceptance in American Christianity.

But with this acceptance came compromise in truth. Within time, Lucado seemed to continue to open himself to new realms of acceptance. No longer did he stand firm on baptism for the remission of sins but continued to advocate fellowship to “all who call on the name of the Lord.” He was a forerunner for the current progressive movement within the churches of Christ.

Among modern progressive leaders, few would deny fellowship or salvation to those who have not been baptized. There is continued acceptance of those who differ radically on the basic question of what man must do to be saved. It has even moved to exchanging pulpits with those who deny the basic bulwarks of the faith. Much of the current division boils down to an inherent desire to be accepted by classic American denominationalism.

(2) Philosophical Forces. One of the strongest forces that caused the division within the Restoration Movement was the influence of German liberalism. The Disciples Divinity House, associated with the University of Chicago, opened the floodgates of liberalism within the

leadership. This organization started to question some of the basic beliefs of the Christian faith.

There was doubt concerning the nature of inerrancy of the Word of God and questions concerning the supernatural aspects of the Bible. This insidious force attacked the faith at the core of truth. Subtly, the sinister liberalism created confusion concerning some of the most basic doctrines of the church. Particularly, one’s view of the Scriptures was shifted from total sufficiency to a spiritual document containing some wisdom on the nature of God.

The spirit of liberalism began seeping through the church. In 1889, R.C. Cave pronounced what had been simmering underneath the fellowship for some time when he questioned the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. In his sermon, he called for preachers to “come out of the closet” and declare their doubts on the biblical text. This was why J.W. McGarvey penned an article on biblical criticism each week for 20 years.

In the same manner, another influence, postmodernism, is creeping through the modern church. One of the basic tenets of this philosophical construct is the denial of absolute truth. Few progressive leaders would fully endorse the denial of absolute truth in churches of Christ, but the influence of this cultural mindset is being felt.

Because the philosophy denies man’s ability to be certain of anything, the leaders of progressive churches refuse to draw lines of fellowship, refuse to take definitive stances, and allow postmodern “I-am-fine-you-are-fine” attitudes to dominate the church. The increased separation between conservative and liberal churches flows from one’s ability to deal with the postmodern perspective.

(3) Hermeneutical Forces. The flash point of division for the 1906 official separation was the introduction of instrumental music and the missionary society. But these two additions to the church were merely

the symptoms of the lack of basic methodology in properly interpreting the silence of Scripture. The basic question concerning silence of Scripture is whether silence is prohibitive or permissive.

When L.L. Pinkerton introduced an instrument at the Midway congregation in 1859, he took a decisive step toward rejecting the regulative principle of biblical interpretation, which states “that which is done in worship must be authorized by the Word of God.” But the basic debate over the silence of Scripture is predicated on “pattern theology.” This means that there is a pattern for the people of God in the pages of the inspired text.

This is one of the major dividing points within the churches of Christ. The progressive segment of the movement has largely rejected the regulatory principle concerning silence of Scripture, even rejecting the idea of a biblical pattern in the New Testament. This dynamic has created two separate styles of congregations: restoring churches and non-restoring churches.

The restoring congregations are those that still seek to follow the pattern laid out in the Word of God; the progressive movement has greatly rejected primitivism. The basic essence of the modern separation between conservative and progressive congregations concerns the desire for restoration of the first-century church within a 21st-century world.

As there was great mourning over the increased divergent paths taken by those who claimed Christ as Lord in the early years of the Restoration Movement, there is also a modern mourning in the church over the increased separation in the fellowship. Although the names and issues have changed, the underlying principles of the division are the same. □

Matthew W. Morine preaches for the Castle Rock Church of Christ in Castle Rock, Colo. He may be reached at mmorine@hotmail.com.