

I grew up in the Church of Christ, with most of its impact in my formative teenage years in the 60s. My father was an elder, and we were what would be called a 'faithful' family, meaning that we showed up at every meeting. While still in that church I spent two years in Italy from 1971 to 1973 on a youth mission program. Thirty five years later, after having left the Church of Christ in 1974-1975, I recently passed a weekend with some of those with whom I was in Italy. Not particularly to my surprise I have had ongoing dreams about that event and much more distant history as well. That occasion is behind this post. While it will be an ongoing process, after a few weeks I think I can begin to evaluate how I respond to the Church of Christ over a distance of thirty years.

It was strange hearing the old hymns in Italian again. Singing and hearing them again after thirty years is rather strange. Every so often I find that one is running through my mind, and I recall all the words in Italian as well. Strange how memory works at times; this recall is other than deliberate cognition.

From the songs that came up that weekend I noticed that some of the newer praise type choruses have been translated, perhaps with a few originals. In general I was disappointed to find that over thirty years later there still is no significant corpus of new music by Italians from within the tradition.

That seems to indicate something of an ongoing American patrimony, which I find not surprising given what I know of those involved. Exportation and enforcement of a particular form of American doctrine and culture is still not healthy for the long run. It does not honor either the Italians or the Holy Spirit to be able to sort out the message of the Gospel within their own context, as Paul and others did in the early church. I am not naive about how that would go, but I don't fear it either. Yes, there will be problems; let them come up and deal with each one as it does. That is why Paul's letters were so different to each church.

It does seem that the Church of Christ defines itself as much by what is not discussed as much as by what is discussed. No one seems particularly inclined to openly acknowledge or address some pink elephants in the room.

A central one is the argumentative fractiousness of so many of the churches. A friend there told me that in the east Texas town of (I think) Mineola, a rather small burg on just about any scale of things, there are five Churches of Christ. Five. All the result of arguments and splits and squabbings.

Traditionally no one seems to much discuss political or social justice. While these can be some of the most corrosive, divisive issues within a church, the tendency as I knew it was to simply not talk about them. Partly one's chosen lifestyle is less threatened by choosing to see and not perceive. More particularly in that setting I think one doesn't have to face situations in which there simply are no sufficient pre-fabricated answers; the rigid doctrinal shell isn't broken if we don't tap too hard on it. (That said, I find it encouraging to know at least peripherally of progressive elements within the Church of Christ that do in fact take these matters seriously and act within their context. Even within my own traditionalist upbringing I remember well that in the mid 60s there was a quiet but deliberate involvement in the poorest areas of the black

community within our city; I went on a number of occasions to gospel presentation studies (Jule Miller filmstrips and clear red plastic LP soundtracks) in some very poor homes, and they have influenced my life in subtle ways since. The prevalent idea of social equity in our context seemed to be to convert everyone to be like us, but I do honor the courage of several men that at least chose to act within what they understood in response to racist separatism.)

No one seems to be able to openly address the reasons for the loss of disaffected young people, of which I certainly am one. Granted, that is in no way limited to the Churches of Christ; it crosses all denominational lines, kids seeing the duplicity, compromise, self-interest and lack of integrity of the adults. Yet, there does not seem to be a public admission that it happens, or an ongoing dialog about why it happens and what might be done about it.

I was profoundly affected by a congregational meeting when I was about 17 in I watched a power hungry preacher turn most of the congregation against my father and his co-elder. After some time, they were essentially left no option but to resign. (The preacher wanted to be an elder, a hotly disputed doctrinal point in the Church of Christ, at least in those times, if it isn't still.) These sorts of ego trips by and large go unaddressed in all churches, at least in my exposure to things, yet these matters of the heart are what God most radically wants to change.

To admit these things openly seems to me to require questioning some foundational matters about the destructive consequence of trying to define rigid, reductive doctrinal positions, and about holding themselves apart from others as if they were unique. Understanding that the Church of Christ is far from a homogenous group, and acknowledging that there is a significant progressive element in some areas, in general it prides itself on this idea of 'restoring' the early faith and practice, without any understanding that were they to be able to observe first hand the practice of the early Christians they would find it more foreign than just any other contemporary Christian practice.

The early church in Jerusalem was thoroughgoingly, liturgically Jewish! Paul himself, while not forcing it on others, was a devout Jewish liturgist; he took the vows, and he deliberately pushed toward Jerusalem in time to be there for the feast; this was what he knew, and it was profoundly significant to him.

Many, though not all, in the Church of Christ seem to approach the whole thing as if no one between the death of the apostle John and the emergence of the Campbell-Stone movement had any sort of genuine Christian heritage. How preposterous... who carried the Gospel through the centuries that there should be a church of any sort around by the time of Campbell, Stone and others? Yet to admit that others could genuinely, intimately know Jesus without having conformed to Church of Christ doctrine and practice is to question the some of their most basic tenets, and that is simply too threatening to personal identity and security.

There were a few odd occasions of encouragement though. On Sunday morning, one of the early missionaries, in recounting a few stories of the early days, used language that I found surprisingly more flexible than I might have expected. He recounted one fellow from Sicily that was teaching a couple who had some statues in their house that he wanted to persuade them to get rid of, and the old missionary's statement was something to the effect that *some* end up

worshipping the statue itself. There was another similar sort of statement about a different situation that had a similar sort of subtle openness.

I cannot reproduce exactly the nuance of what he said, but it seemed clear that there was acknowledgement that not all would in fact worship the statues. I doubt that he could ever admit to the positive use of icons, but at least he did not seem to be dogmatic that all such were evil in all cases. Perhaps I am reading too much into that, and perhaps there was something of this openness thirty five years ago that I did not have the ears to hear, but I found these things to give a bit of hope that the brittle, narrow absoluteness that I knew growing up may be softening. The point is not to push the use or not of icons or physical artifacts; it is more about ascribing to others the mindset that one thinks the other must have in order to act as the other does. I would oppose the superstition that can be attached to such tokens just as they would, but I do not think that superstition is the necessary cause.

In this regard, some time ago I saw this from Abilene Christian University (at which I studied for one year): [http://www.acu.edu/events/news/010302\\_restoration.html](http://www.acu.edu/events/news/010302_restoration.html)

“In 1986 the Center acquired the 200-year old pulpit from the Ahorey Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland, from which Thomas Campbell preached for 10 years before migrating to America.”

Given the typically abhorrence by the Church of Christ toward most of the Roman practice, I doubt that they see the utter irony of what they did. In the desire to stay connected to our roots we look for causally connective tokens that remain of those that we honor. It seems to me that this is *precisely* the sort of practice that eventually led to the panoply of saints, holy items, relics and so forth of the Roman church. In my view that has already begun with the establishment of the “Center for Restoration Studies” mentioned in the above web site. Those that have set this up won’t live long enough to see the same process develop in its contemporary expression; were they to see it in a couple of hundred years, assuming it survives, they might well be horrified at what will have become of it. It will not look Roman, but I fully expect it will have its own unique distortions.

I will say this in closing: I found that I could more easily relate to these friends than at any time since leaving the Church of Christ. I find this healthy, not simply because I have changed such that I do not particularly fear possible critical judgment, rather, though they may not understand it, they seem to accept and respect my decision to live a different Christian practice. I find that hopeful for the further healing and integration of the various Christian practices.

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