



STATEMENT DC600

THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST, THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, THE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

CRI seldom publishes critiques of established Christian denominations which adhere to the essential teachings of the Bible. Normally we prefer to limit our published critiques to cults, heresies circulating among Christians, and controversial new Christian movements. However, the many questions we receive concerning the Churches of Christ, along with the related movements of the independent Christian Churches and the Disciples of Christ, and the confusion that exists regarding the teachings of these groups, necessitates this statement.

HISTORY

These churches stem from the "Restoration" movement (not to be confused with the Pentecostal "Latter-Rain" Restoration movement of the late 1940s) begun by (among others) Thomas and Alexander Campbell (father and son), Presbyterian ministers from Ireland, in the eastern United States in the early 1800s. Neither Campbells intended to found a new denomination, but were rather intent on promoting unity among all Christians. Nevertheless, many Christians, including whole Baptist churches, forsook their previous denominational ties and rallied behind the Campbell's teaching. These "Campbellites," as they were nicknamed (to their dismay), were united in a loose association of autonomous churches known as the "Disciples of Christ." Meanwhile, Barton Stone, a former Presbyterian minister who had been teaching along similar lines even before the Campbells came to America, formed an association of churches known as the "Christian Church." When Stone's and the Campbells' churches discovered one another, they united in 1832 (along with similar, smaller groups), and eventually came to be known by the name "Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)."

As the new denomination solidified, and particularly after the Civil War, divisions began to arise over various issues, especially the establishment of institutions (such as missionary societies) and the use of instrumental music in worship services. By 1906, the movement had divided into two groups, the Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ, the latter of which decried the formation of institutions and generally rejected instrumental worship. These Churches of Christ themselves are subdivided over such issues as whether only one cup should be used in communion.

Later, a second group of churches began to pull away from the Disciples of Christ, primarily in reaction to liberalism and denominational structures. By 1971 these churches were listed separately in the *Yearbook of American Churches* as the "Christian Churches and Churches of Christ." This group is also known as the North American Christian Convention (NACC), a meeting of Christian churches which first convened in 1927 and has met annually since 1951. The NACC is generally "instrumental" (that is, they either favor or do not oppose the use of musical instruments in church). Meanwhile, a large number of churches in the Disciples of Christ (hereafter "DOC") have abandoned the evangelical faith and adopted the liberal theology so widespread in the mainline churches.

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DOCTRINAL SURVEY

Keeping these three main branches of the Restoration movement straight (there are roughly two dozen other, many smaller, divisions) is not easy. All three branches include churches which call themselves "the Church of Christ" or "the Christian Church." There are non-instrumental and instrumental churches in both the Churches of Christ (hereafter "COC") and the NACC (though the former are largely non-instrumental and the latter mostly instrumental). The COC and the NACC both tend to consider baptism as necessary for salvation, though the COC are generally more insistent on this teaching. Because the COC and the NACC value the autonomy of the local church so highly, there is a great deal of diversity in the teaching of the individual churches, and generalizations, though valid and helpful to a point, may not apply in certain cases. With these qualifications in mind, we may turn to an analysis of the doctrines taught by these groups.

The original vision of the movement was that differences of opinion over doctrinal matters were not to become issues dividing

Christians from one another. This did not mean, however, that the new movement did not have its doctrinal distinctives. Basic to "Restoration" theology is the call to return to "New Testament Christianity," the beliefs and practices of the first century Christian church as documented in the New Testament. Only by rejecting everything not specifically found in the New Testament, it was reasoned, could true Christian unity be achieved.

Some Restorationists took this guiding principle further than others. The Campbells and Barton Stone were all agreed that belief in the creeds should not be required of Christians ("No creed but Christ"), and that it was best to preach and teach about God and Christ without reference to words like "Trinity." The Campbells, though, definitely believed that Jesus was God, and their understanding of the doctrine of God was at least roughly trinitarian, though they avoided using trinitarian language. Stone, however, flatly rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, and denied that Jesus was God. In the DOC and a small number of the COC and NACC churches, there is still a tendency to avoid references to the Trinity, although most churches in the latter two branches today accept the Trinity in substance if not in word.

On the basis that they are not mentioned in the New Testament, most of the COC reject the use of musical instruments in church services. Indeed, the issue of instrumental music is the main difference between the COC and the NACC. Again, it needs to be kept in mind that these are generalizations; varieties of opinions are to be found in all three major branches of the Restoration movement.

Also based on the silence of Scripture, many churches in the COC and especially the NACC object to certain denominational structures, such as mission agencies. One segment of the COC has separated itself because it insists on using one cup in communion services. A few take this line of reason to extremes, objecting to Sunday Schools, kitchens in church buildings, and the like.

Also in keeping with the principle of rejecting everything not in the Bible, the Restorationists historically have rejected the use of denominational names not found in the Bible (Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, etc.) and argued that Christians should be known by "Bible names" only. Unfortunately, this stance did not always produce harmony within the movement. In the early years the followers of the Campbells and the followers of Stone disagreed over whether they should be known as Disciples or Christians. This minor controversy eventually resulted in the compound name of "Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)." In any case, the Restorationists did not wish to found another denomination. When, then, it became evident that the DOC had become a denomination, the NACC broke away; and both the NACC and the COC refuse to consider themselves to be denominations.

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The vast majority of members in all of the Restorationist churches reject the distinctive doctrines of Calvinism, especially predestination and the perseverance of the saints (popularly known as “eternal security”). While most in the DOC and the NACC appear to take a moderate view of these doctrines — neither accepting nor condemning — a strong segment (again, how strong in terms of numbers is difficult to gauge) of the COC actually regard the doctrine of eternal security as a damnable heresy implying that Christians have a license to sin.

Restoration churches tend to be amillennial (i.e., they believe that the Millennium of Revelation 20 refers to the history of the church between Christ's first and second coming), although one splinter group of the COC is premillennial (i.e., believing that the Millennium will be a period of Christ's rule on the earth after His second coming). The movement is almost uniformly non-charismatic, and again in some circles of the COC the doctrine is actually anti-charismatic (as also in many Baptist churches).

Perhaps the best-known distinctive of the COC is its strong stance on the necessity of water baptism for salvation, a stance shared by at least some of the churches in the NACC. Most of the COC appear to teach that no one can be saved through faith in Christ who is not also baptized by immersion (pouring and sprinkling are considered absolutely unacceptable) upon confession of faith (infant baptism is also utterly condemned). This teaching, if held consistently, means that all Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and the majority of Protestants, even evangelicals, are not saved. This leaves only Baptist, Pentecostal, and independent evangelical churches, besides the Restoration churches, that are considered Christian. A significant number — perhaps a majority, though this is far from clear — of the COC go even further and teach that those who have been immersed as believers but do not regard baptism as essential for salvation are also not truly Christians. This rules out almost everybody except members of the COC (and some of the NACC churches) as genuine Christians. Thus, although none of the COC (so far as we know) teach that only people baptized in the COC are saved, in practical terms their doctrine of baptism sometimes implies just that. CRI has received numerous letters from members of the COC, as well as testimonies of non-COC Christians, that confirm the prevalence of this teaching.

DOCTRINAL EVALUATION

The key to Restorationism is the teaching that only by abandoning every theological system and religious practice not found explicitly in the Bible can true Christianity be realized and Christian unity be achieved. As innocent and even “biblical” as this approach to Christian unity may sound, in our estimation it is seriously flawed in its understanding of Scripture. The Bible itself never suggests that Christians reject whatever is not found within its pages. Rather, it forbids adding anything to Scripture that would contradict Scripture (Matt. 15:6) or that would imply that Scripture was not itself an adequate guide to salvation and the Christian life (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Theological doctrines which are not firmly rooted in Scripture should not, we agree, be accepted by the church; on this point we agree with the COC and the NACC. But this does not mean that Christians should not use extrabiblical terminology like “Trinity,” “canon,” or even “Bible,” none of which contradict the scriptures and each of which is in fact an expression of biblical truth. Furthermore, in the area of religious practices, whatever the Bible does not forbid (explicitly or implicitly) is not to be condemned or marked as less than Christian. In other words, the Restorationists' motto, “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the scriptures are silent, we are silent,” is actually violated when they speak against those things which Scripture neither mentions nor condemns explicitly or implicitly.

To some extent all of the COC admit in practice that not everything that is not mentioned in Scripture is to be rejected as part of the church's worship or religious practice. Thus, even the most conservative Churches of Christ will build church buildings, use microphones to amplify the preacher's voice, read the Bible in English translation, etc. -- none of which can be found in the Bible. Because those things which are rejected are rejected upon the basis of silence, there is no objective basis for determining which things will be rejected and which will not. Without an objective basis for making such determinations, disagreements and divisions are inevitable, as the two dozen or so splinter groups of the movement attest.

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The depths of error into which this principle of Restorationism can lead is best illustrated by the fact that the early leaders of the movement were prepared to accept Barton Stone as one of them, despite the fact that he denied the Trinity and the deity of Christ. The rationale for not requiring their members to affirm the Trinity was that the creeds did serve to divide orthodox Christians from heretics. Only if Arians or modalists are considered Christians would it make any sense to say that trinitarian creeds divided Christians. The precedent that was set by accepting Stone without any controversy over his doctrine of God is alarming. Indeed, the members of the Restorationist churches are a prime target of the Jehovah's Witnesses because of their weakness on the Trinity.

It is not only the principles of rejecting everything not found explicitly in the New Testament that is the cause of the many divisions in the movement. Also contributing to the problem is the emphasis, especially among the NACC and COC, on the absolute autonomy of the local church. This doctrine was actually inherited from the Baptists, which have also suffered numerous divisions in its history for the same reason. But it is the combination of this local autonomy with their "New Testament pattern" principle that has resulted in the fragmentation especially of the COC. Christian Research Institute does not condemn or even reject the Baptist and Restorationist belief in the autonomy of the local church. We simply point out that taken to an extreme, and combined with a disregard for creeds and confessions of faith, the potential for disunity is high.

Moreover, we are particularly concerned that there are some in the COC which regard any ecclesiastical structure not only as undesirable but even anti-Christian. It is becoming increasingly recognized today that the New Testament does not mandate any one system of church government. The three main types of church government are the episcopal (in which bishops preside over groups of churches and the bishops meet together periodically to ensure unity), Presbyterian (in which churches are semi-autonomous and are governed by elders), and congregational (in which the local church is completely autonomous and is governed by the entire body of members). It is arguable that elements of all three approaches can be found in the New Testament, and that the Bible never actually commands one system or condemns any of them. While we freely grant that the COC and the NACC have the right to adopt whatever system they choose, we are concerned about those extremists who regard all other systems as damnable.

The anti-denominationalism of the Restoration movement is, among its more moderate representatives, perfectly understandable and acceptable. The more extreme variety, however, according to which denominations are not truly parts of the church, is actually divisive. The Restoration movement did not set out to become a denomination; but the historical fact is that it is now a full-fledged denomination along with a number of splinter movements which are denominations in reality if not in name. The word "denomination" simply refers to a group of churches that associate together under some common name. This means that not only are the Baptists, Lutherans, and Methodists denominations, but also the various for a group of churches to have a hierarchy to be a denomination; nor is it necessary for them to have an "unbiblical name" (e.g., the Church of God is a denomination, its "biblical name" notwithstanding). Any group of churches which has identifiable distinctive doctrines and practices is a denomination. Of course, the existence of so many divisions in the church is lamentable. But the solution is not to denounce all of the different groups and start a new one! The fact is that very few of the many Protestant denominations started out with the intent to form a new division. Rather, they were "just Christians" who felt it was important to take a stand on certain issues. Also, in most cases their "unbiblical names" were nicknames that became so ingrained that they were more or less stuck with them. This is certainly true of "Lutherans" (who are known simply as "Evangelicals" in German-speaking countries), "Methodists" (so-called for the Wesleys' methodical approach to religion), and even "Baptists" (so-called for obvious reasons).

The rejection of instrumental music in church is another matter in which moderates simply choose to adhere to the principle while extremists make it an essential doctrine. Opponents of the use of instrumental music in worship have noted that instruments were not used in worship until the late Middle ages, and that so respected a Protestant theologian as John Calvin denounced the use of instrumental music in church. However, this historical argument

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gives no real weight to their position on instrumental music. A similar argument gives no real weight to their position on instrumental music. A similar argument could be formulated in defense of infant baptism, for example, a practice which the Restorationists reject. As for the biblical argument, at best it is fallacious (since it is based merely on the silence of the New Testament) and at worst actually contrary to the New Testament. The apostle Paul specifically approved the use of "psalms" in church worship (1 Cor. 14:26; cf. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16); and the word accompanied by musical instruments. Admittedly, it can refer to noninstrumental singing as well, but there is no reason to restrict its meaning to exclude all use of instruments. It is also true that the word is used with reference to the Old Testament book of Psalms; but since those psalms were generally sung with instruments, this usage confirms the basic meaning of the word. Therefore, the utter rejection of instrumental music in worship is quite mistaken, even though so great a theologian as Calvin made this mistake.

The extreme position on water baptism held by many (if not most) of the COC is also unwarranted by scripture. There are other Christian communities which regard baptism as more or less integral to the salvation process (Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, and Lutherans, for example), without holding that absolutely everyone who is unbaptized since Christ's resurrection or ascension is lost. And it is certainly wrong to hold, as some do in the COC, that even those immersed as believers are not Christians if they regarded their baptism as merely symbolic of their salvation, rather than an essential pre-condition of it. The Bible simply does not support such extreme positions.

As to whether or not the New Testament makes baptism essential for salvation, it is impossible in this statement to offer a complete exegesis of all the biblical passages relevant to this question. A place to begin on this subject is our statement, "Baptism and Salvation."

Finally, we do not consider the issues of charismatic gifts and eternal security to be matters essential to Christian faith. However, we strongly oppose the extreme condemnation of the charismatic movement and of the doctrine of eternal security by some in the COC. Those interested in pursuing these subjects further can contact CRI for additional references.

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