

"Church of Christ" Entities? Hugh Fulford

Bible students are aware of the fact that Christ established His church (Matthew 16:18), and that in New Testament times there were local congregations referred to as churches of Christ (Romans 16:16). Bible scholars of all stripes often speak of the church of Christ, the Christian church, the New Testament church, and similar such designations. In so doing they are not referring to a denomination, but to the total body of people who profess to be Christians. Though they defend denominationalism, with its segmenting of believers into various "fellowships," they nevertheless understand that there was in some sense a single, universal church that originated with Christ.

Students of Scripture recognize that there is no one, patented name for the people of God. They understand that the church is referred to in the New Testament as both the church of Christ and the church of God, as Christ's church and as God's church. They understand that the church is the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ, and the kingdom of heaven. They understand that the church is God's family, consisting of all who have become children of God by faith in Christ Jesus and obedience to the gospel.

A troubling tendency, however, that is occurring with more and more frequency today is that of taking a single descriptor of the people of God (the church of Christ) and using it in an exclusive and denominational sense. "Church" suddenly becomes a proper name and is spelled with a capital "c." "Church of Christ" in turn becomes an adjective to describe congregations, preachers, elders, colleges, scholars, professors, journals, missions and benevolence efforts, as well as a host of other matters. Interestingly, the word "church" is never capitalized and elevated to the level of a formal "name" in any English version of the New

Testament with which I am acquainted. It is only as we have drifted from the Biblical concept of the church that we have, either consciously or unconsciously, moved into thinking and speaking of the church in denominational terms. Some, I am persuaded, do this being fully aware of what they are doing, desiring to present the church of Christ as "a denomination among denominations." Others, being influenced by the denominational concepts of Christianity that are so prevalent in the world, and without thinking about the implications of their terminology, are often guilty of using the descriptive "church of Christ" in a distinctly denominational fashion, though they themselves strongly oppose denominationalism.

When one comes to have the Biblical concept of the body (church) of Christ and its structure, he will understand that:

1. There is no "Missions Arm" of "The Church of Christ"; rather, there are only local autonomous congregations sending out and supporting (perhaps in cooperation with other autonomous congregations) preachers of the gospel to evangelize and establish congregations after the New Testament order. But there are no "Church of Christ" missionaries or evangelists.
2. There are no "Educational Institutions" of "The Church of Christ"; rather, there are individual Christians creating boards to oversee the operation of schools, colleges, and universities in which the Bible is taught and a Christian environment is maintained. Local churches may start such schools of their own to train teachers and preachers. But in reality there is no such thing as a "Church of Christ" school or college, staffed by "Church of Christ" scholars and professors.

See "Fulford," p. 8

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"This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

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Fulford, continued from front

3. There are no "Publishing Houses" of "The Church of Christ"; rather, there is simply a Christian businessman, a Christian family, a group of Christians, or a local congregation publishing journals and study materials designed to set forth Biblical teaching. But there is no such thing as a "Church of Christ" publishing house or a "Church of Christ" journal.

4. There are no "Benevolent Institutions" of "The Church of Christ"; rather, there are individual Christians or congregations creating a means by which the physical needs of others may be supplied. But, there is no such thing as a "Church of Christ" children's home or home for the elderly. The above things are true because there is no organizational structure (local, state, national, or international) through which the universal body (church) of Christ may function. There is no pope, prelate, presiding bishop, or president to dictate doctrine, belief, practice, or policy. The body of Christ functions solely on a congregational level. There are no "Church of Christ" entities, organizations, or institutions of any kind. Every local church is independent and autonomous, though mutual love and fellowship are to characterize all the people of God, with congregations voluntarily cooperating with each other in evangelism and benevolence. There are no dioceses, synods, conferences, or councils. Each local church, when fully organized, will have elders (also called bishops and pastors) to "oversee the flock of God" which is among them (Acts 14:23; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

To throw a lasso around these autonomous congregations and attempt to corral them into a "Church of Christ heritage, fellowship, brotherhood, or denomination" is completely unwarranted by Scripture. To then attribute the origin of these congregations to The Stone-Campbell Movement is to be uninformed regarding Biblical teaching. Such independent, autonomous churches have existed since the first century

(Romans 16:16). Before Thomas or Alexander Campbell ever set foot on American soil there were such congregations in the United States. The Rock Springs Church of Christ in Clay County, Tennessee, has been in continuous existence since 1805, four years before Alexander Campbell migrated to the United States. (Note: Yes, as a legal, corporate entity, it is appropriate to identify a congregation's name as "Rock Springs Church [upper case 'c'] of Christ," but such is not appropriate when referring to the people of God in general).

Yet an unbroken line of faithful congregations does not have to be traced all the way from our time back through the centuries to New Testament times in order to have the New Testament church today. Autonomous congregations of Christ can be planted anywhere anytime by sowing the unmixed seed of the kingdom, the word of God (Luke 8:11). --2892 Cages Bend Road, Gallatin, TN 37066. huford@comcast.net

McCullough, continued from p. 6
2nd century. Most of us are very little, if at all, familiar with Origen. Even fewer of us are aware that the spirit of Origen is alive and well today and threatens the church of Christ with a neo-Gnostic approach to biblical interpretation. In an effort to appeal to the "we can't ever find the truth" post-modern generation, some among us have adopted Origen and his philosophy. Origen taught, among other things that Bible passages have multiple meanings and that each person can perceive these various meanings through a template of their own personal experiences.

As a result, New Testament a capella singing has morphed into head banging rock and roll, the Lord's Day has rolled back into Saturday night and the blood bought church of Christ has become just another denomination . . . according to some among us today.

John wrote: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the

world" (1 Jn. 4:1). If Origen is correct, John, the inspired apostle, must be wrong. In order for us to "test the spirits," we must have a clear, singular meaning and linear standard by which to do the testing.

There are those who look at straight lines and see circles. Many have become confused because they no longer study, care about or practice biblical interpretation. Of course, adherents to Origen's circular and allegorical methods will quickly jump up and proclaim that the Bible does not have anything to say regarding interpretive methods, that each person interprets the Scripture for themselves. But the Bible does teach proper interpretive methods.

Consider 1 Samuel 15 as one such model. The clear word of God was given to Samuel. The same clear word of God was given to King Saul. The word of God given to both men was identical, no variances, changes or exceptions. That word clearly, and without ambiguity, required King Saul to "utterly destroy" the Amalekites.

How could King Saul misinterpret this? God spoke a straight line, Samuel saw a straight line, but King Saul saw a circle. Samuel used linear methodology while Saul used circular. Linear interpretation asks the question, researches the word of God, hears the word of God and comes to a correct and verifiable answer. Circular interpretation, on the other hand, asks the question, brings up life experiences and emotional feelings, filters the word of God through these experiences and emotions, comes up with multiple "truths" and literally manufactures it's own "truth."

Yes, the Bible teaches proper interpretive methods, illustrates said methods, and shows us consequences of changing the word of God. And yet, many among us are turning lines into circles. The greatest challenge to the 21st century church of Christ is this: Are we going to be Samuel or are we going to be Saul? Are we going to hear and obey or are we going to hear and ignore?