

Are You Ready To Join The Christian Church?

In 1984, the members of the Christian Church (Independent Conservative, not the Disciples) held the first of what would become a yearly "Restoration Summit" in Joplin, MO at Ozark Bible College. 100 preachers from the more liberally minded churches of Christ and Christian Churches spoke concerning an acceptance of one another if not a reunification. Only the more liberal of the mainstream churches of Christ were invited to participate, such as Reuben Shelly, Marvin Phillips, Calvin Warpula, etc. At the time, however, there were enough among the mainstream members of the churches of Christ not yet ready for such an acceptance, that its impact was limited. Some degree of respect for authority and of God's silence was still given at least lip service.

There has arisen since then another generation that "Knew not the Lord" so that the notion of such an acceptance is no longer shocking to most, if not even welcomed by all other than the old guard, more conservative institutionals.

At the 2005 "Tulsa Soul Winning Workshop" (the largest gathering of members of churches of Christ) speakers from both fellowships called for a reunification of the two, with Jeff Walling (institutional preacher from Providence Rd church of Christ in Charlotte, NC) in the forefront.

In Oct of 2004, 350 members of both Christian Churches and Churches of Christ attended a "Ministry Impact" in the Dallas, TX area to promote fellowship and understanding among the groups. Rick Atchley, minister of the Richland Hills Church of Christ, Fort Worth, Texas, called in that setting for a definite goal for the two groups — a *"family reunion" in 2006*, the 100th anniversary of the division. Atchley told conference participants, "The world is too lost and broken for us to be working apart, instead of together." (Christian Chronicle, Nov 2004)

True to Rick Atchley's dream, In February of 2006, speakers from both groups addressed Abilene Christian University in their annual lecture series. Both the President of ACU (Royce Money) as well as the President of the Christian Churches Milligan College (Don Jeanes) spoke on a joint theme: To be Christians Only, but Not The Only Christians.

Dr Money stated that his grandparents could not worship together when he was a little boy. His grandmother attended churches of Christ, while his grandfather the Christian Church. He commented that he didn't understand it then, and continues to fail to understand such. Unfortunately, without a better grasp on the Biblical teaching of authority, he will never be able to understand it. The reason they could not worship together is the same reason the two groups cannot scripturally fellowship one another today, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3) In an interview in the April 2006 Chronicle, pg 20, Dr. Money states that he is not *advocating* the use of the instrument, but rather suggests "stay where you are. Celebrate that tradition" whether you are Christian Church or a member of the churches of Christ. This is the root of the problem. Seeing the issues at hand as a matter of tradition, rather than one of revelation and authority. Why not remain a Baptist (or Muslim for that matter) were that my "tradition?" Paul forsook the "traditions" of his fathers in obeying the gospel. Paul was the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6) yet counted it as nothing to give that up to be right with the Lord (Phil 3:7). At least Judaism had been the true religion of God until Acts 2. Denominationalism, on the other hand, has never been right, apostacy has never been pleasing to the Lord and false worship has ever been in vain.

The reason this year was selected for such a bold push, is that 2006 marks the 100 years since the government census first showed the Christian Church to be a separate group from the Churches of Christ. Many speakers this year made the statement "We didn't create the division, we inherited it." But they also said we can do something about healing such a division. Jesus plea for unity was cited, but Jesus also said HOW we are to have unity...AS the Father and Son have

unity (JN 17:20-21). Do we really think that the Father and Son are divided in their beliefs but accept one another? That the Father accepts denominational baptism but the Son does not? Or Jesus accepting female elders and deacons but the Father allowing them? The Son promoting instrumental music but the Father rejecting such? That's what this type of "unity" would demand. This is not biblical unity, but a human, forced, manufactured attempt towards it... that is called union. The old illustration is fitting here that one could take two cats, tie their tails together and throw them over a clothesline. That's union, but no unity exists between them.

One lecture at ACU consisted of a panel of 8 speakers from both groups, including the 73 year old daughter of Carl Ketcherside. The statement was made "The only two questions that will be on the final is Do you love God, and do you love your fellow man." The entire auditorium, young and old, broke out into applause. Here were elderly men and women, that even 20 years ago, would have labeled such as heresy, now accepting it with open arms. That is what happens when authority ceases to be stressed. Dr Money was certainly correct when he told the April 2006 Chronicle "*What is changing is that more of us in the acappella tradition are not willing to make the use of instrumental music a test of fellowship, and certainly not a test of salvation.*" Cecil May, dean of Faulkner University (operated by members of institutional churches of Christ) stated to the April Chronicle, pg 22 "*There is no question that many in churches of Christ no longer believe that instrumental music is in any real sense wrong.*" Certainly the wide use of an acceptance of Max Lucado is evidence for that.

While the lectures did not call for a full *merger* of the two groups they were nonetheless advocating an accepting of one another, and joint support for their institutions such as colleges and homes and mission efforts (the merger will then happen on its own). The issue seems to be largely financially driven. As statistics were cited concerning the decline in membership among churches of Christ and Christian Churches, while offering that the combining of efforts of the two would put us back to around the same numbers we supposedly had in the 1950's. After all, they have to be able to pay for the unauthorized human institutions somehow! The tail is truly wagging the dog. Wade Hodges, preacher for the Garnett Rd church of Christ and director of the Tulsa Workshop stated in an AP article entitled *Churches Talk About Healing Century Old Split* suggested "*We can be unified building houses together, drilling water wells in Africa together, doing something with an AIDS clinic in Africa. I think that is more powerful unity than saying, 'We got you to sing with an instrument or lay down your instruments.' It's not an either-or. It's got to be a both-and.*" Yet, Some, according to Bible professor Howard Norton of Harding University, are ready "*to completely join up with the Christian Church and say that by what they are doing by introducing instrumental music, that there's nothing wrong with that.*" (April 2006 Chronicle, pg 22).

An example of this type of joint effort is seen in the 2,000-member Golf Course Road Church of Christ, Midland, Texas, working together with the 1,500-member Mountainview Community Christian Church, Highlands Ranch, Colo., to establish a new congregation in Odessa, Texas.

I am reminded of the incident found in 1 Kings 22 where Ahab asked Jehoshaphat to aid him in taking Ramath Gilead. Though the sins that brought about the division had not been repented of, had not ceased or even been acknowledged, Ahab asked for a "joint, brotherhood project" between Judah and Israel. Jehoshaphat said in response "I am as thou art, my people as thy people, my horses as thy horses" (22:4). Only as an "after the fact" thought, did Jehoshaphat request "Please inquire for the Word of the Lord today." They had their minds made up, and simply wanted God to rubber stamp their projects. But our liberally minded brethren have often "Marched For The Master" before checking to see if they first had marching orders from the Commander of Hosts.

In the Winter, 1987 issue of One Body, then President of Milligan College, Marshall J. Leggett laid this out as a plan towards unity, what we now see unfolding:

"Down the road somewhere our congregations could have a joint evangelistic effort. It would not need to be one mass meeting. Instead, each church could have its own effort, but simultaneous with the others, coordinated, and with joint advertising. It would demonstrate to the community that we fellowship in that which matters most, the saving of souls. Then, way down the road, we might choose a mission field ripe for the Gospel, marshal our resources, mobilize our people, and take that 'Macedonia' for Christ."

Another such discussion as occurred at ACU is set for June 27-30 2006 with the Christian Churches North American Christian Convention to be held in Louisville, KY.

Some might wonder HOW they will be able to assemble together and keep peace? That's where the Community Church movement comes into play. Drop the name on the sign (then we don't have to disagree over whether the designations *Christian Church* or *Church of Christ* is more pleasing to God); Eliminate teaching and instruction (then we won't disagree over premillennialism, denominational baptism, and other doctrinal issues) and instead implement "praise worship" (isn't that redundant, since worship is praise?). And so the apostasy continues. The apostasy will continue to spiral as this will then establish fellowship with yet more denominational bodies which had no commonality with the Restoration Movement. A look at the schedule of Milligan College reveals preachers and members from Methodist to Baptist churches as speakers officially recognized by the school for their "Christian Service." While in the past, Christian Churches recognized any "baptism" as long as it was by immersion, here are Methodists listed who sprinkle.

Not only should we learn a great lesson from all of this in regards to the continued need to teach on such subjects as (1) authority (2) the uniqueness of the church (3) the oneness of the church (4) God's plan for unity, but should serve as a great lesson on the dangers of centralization, whether church funds are involved or not. ACU receives no church funding, yet their influence towards apostasy is obvious.

ACU has in its Restoration Library a little tract entitled "Why I Left The Christian Church" by CLARENCE C. MORGAN from 1932. Reasons he lists in which he left were: Instrumental Music; Choirs; The very name "Christian Church" itself; Unscriptural ways of church fund raising; Fellowshiping denominations, and many other things. What made these wrong in 1932 but right today? Brother Morgan ended his tract by saying: *"Brothers and Sisters in Christ, there is only one way out for those who love Truth, and that is to walk out. Walk out of the unscriptural practices of the 'Christian Church' and stand with the New Testament church on the 'Old Book' and the 'Old Faith'. Rome couldn't be reformed and neither can the 'Christian Church.' "* To which I give a hearty AMEN! To those who wish a merger today, another statement of brother Morgan's tract applies *"Some might call this Christian unity but it looks to me more like Christians drifting."*