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LEADING MEMBERS TO A CONVICTIONAL UNDERSTANDING
OF THE HISTORIC DOCTRINAL EMPHASES OF CHURCHES OF
CHRIST AT THE CONCORD ROAD CHURCH OF CHRIST,
BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

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To Leola,
who exemplifies a virtuous wife,
and to all the good men and women
who have helped me understand
that theology and truth still matter.

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PREFACE

One look at the title page of my project and many people immediately notice something rather interesting. They see that the goal of my work (as reflected in the project's title) does not exactly “match up” with the academic institution through which the work was done. They rightly assume that my intent to cultivate a convictional understanding of the historic doctrinal emphases of Churches of Christ will promote some beliefs and practices which are at odds with some historic Southern Baptist beliefs and practices.

This disparity may lead many to question the motive behind my project choice; some may suspect that it reflects a personal desire to be a provocative, confrontational, or adversarial apologist for my theology. I can say with a clear conscience that such a thought never entered my mind when choosing this project, and that the motive behind the choice was strictly a function of my academic concentration (Doctor of Ministry in Applied Theology) and my ministry setting.

The community of faith of which I am a part—Churches of Christ—has been in the throes of an identity crisis for several years. While there used to be a general unity of beliefs and practices among Churches of Christ, that is no longer the case as more and more congregations abandon many of the long held beliefs and practices which have historically distinguished us from other church groups. Consequently, one of the most pressing matters facing church leaders in our fellowship in recent years has been deciding

whether or not these historic doctrinal distinctives should be maintained and defended or abandoned.

I am among those who believe that these historic doctrinal positions are biblically-informed convictions which should be maintained, and that now, more than ever, our members need to have their commitment to these doctrinal distinctives strengthened. In my mind, this has been one of the most urgent needs in our fellowship for quite some time. So, when it came time to choose an “applied theology” project which would be relevant and useful to my ministry, there really seemed to be only one choice—a project which would strengthen the doctrinal foundations of the members of my congregation.

I certainly know that the Southern Seminary faculty cannot endorse all of the theological conclusions which are central to my project. I am confident, though, that they do fully endorse my commitment to Scripture as the sole authority in every aspect of church life, and appreciate the charitable spirit with which I try to present my interpretive conclusions.

Because of my non-Southern Baptist background, some have asked why I chose to pursue my doctorate at the flagship theological institution of the Southern Baptist Convention. The answer begins with my desire to broaden my theological education beyond schools affiliated with Churches of Christ. With that said, however, just any non-Churches of Christ affiliated school or seminary would not do.

The ideal school needed to have three features: (1) it would be unyielding in its commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture, (2) it would be widely respected for its academic excellence and rigor, and (3) it would offer a major, or area of concentration, in

which I had a strong interest—applied theological studies being my strongest area of interest. At Southern Seminary I found all three.

After several years of work, I must say that my Southern Seminary experience has lived up to everything I had hoped for and more. Not only have I been challenged to grow academically and spiritually, but I have been treated with the utmost fairness, kindness, and respect despite holding a few interpretive positions which my professors and most of my fellow students do not share, and which places some limitations on the level of our fellowship. I hope that I have demonstrated those same Christian virtues both in the classroom and in all my interactions with the Southern Seminary community.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Jeff Walters for his guidance through the project process. Your voice was the first I heard when I began my Southern Seminary journey in 2009—you were then *Mr.* Walters as you conducted my phone interview which was part of the application process at that time—and the last voice I heard at my project defense five years later. I will forever be in your debt for your input, patience, suggestions, kindness, encouragement, and behind-the-scenes help which were essential for bringing the project to completion.

Daniel Craig Chambers

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2015

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to equip the members of the Concord Road Church of Christ in Brentwood, Tennessee with a convictional understanding of certain doctrinal markers which have historically distinguished Churches of Christ from other church groups.

Goals

The project attempted to accomplish three primary goals. First, it aimed to persuade the members that certain historic beliefs and church practices of the Concord Road Church of Christ are biblically-informed convictions which should be preserved and defended. It is no secret that, generally speaking, doctrine is no longer considered to be as important as is once was in American church culture.¹ Since the Concord Road

¹One of the most prominent evangelical voices in recent years to point out the downplaying of doctrine in contemporary Christianity has been John MacArthur, Jr. More than twenty years ago he observed that "*theology* now takes a back seat to *methodology*" (John MacArthur, Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993], xiii). Another prominent evangelical voice and researcher, Elmer Towns, said, "Formerly, a doctrinal statement represented the reason for a denomination's existence. Today, methodology is the glue that holds churches together. A statement of ministry defines them and their denominational existence" (Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches* [Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990], 249). The fact that this trajectory continues more than two decades later was reflected in a statement by Ed Stetzer, president of Nashville-based LifeWay Research. He was quoted as saying that denominations at one time "believed the same things and did church the same way," but then went on to say, "That's not the case anymore. Denominations disagree over their core beliefs. And local churches don't look alike anymore." As Stetzer described the methodology of two super-sized megachurches which thousands of churches

congregation lives and worships in this cultural context, it has not been immune to these cultural influences.

Two surveys were given to the congregation which assessed the level, or depth, of each member's personal understanding of, and commitment to, a list of specific beliefs and church practices. One survey, a "Beliefs & Practices Pre-Series Survey" was given to the congregation prior to a systematic fifteen-week sermon series on those doctrinal topics, and the other survey, a "Beliefs & Practices Post-Series Survey," was given to the congregation immediately following the sermon series. An analysis of the surveys was then conducted to determine the percentage of survey participants which reported an increase in their understanding of, and commitment to, each of the doctrines surveyed.

A second goal of this project was to equip members with the knowledge to persuasively explain those beliefs and practices to others. After twenty-five years of full-time ministry, this writer's general observation is that many members of Churches of Christ are unable to articulate a well thought out apologetic for many of the distinct beliefs and practices which have historically characterized most Churches of Christ. Generally speaking, the membership of Concord Road is not an exception to this observation.

The same two surveys that were used to assess the depth of membership understanding of, and commitment to, certain beliefs and practices were also used to measure membership confidence in their ability to articulate the "why?" of those beliefs and practices. The post-series survey analysis also determined the percentage of

now follow, he noted that "both downplay doctrines and denominational differences" (Bob Smietana, "Churchgoers Ditch Their Denominations," *The Tennessean*, January 1, 2011).

respondents who reported greater confidence in their ability to explain each of the doctrines surveyed.

The third and final goal of the project was to develop a written resource which would assist in sustaining the first two goals of the project. It would be naïve to think that the first two goals could be sustained long-term by a single sermon series, especially the second goal of equipping people to effectively explain their belief system. This written resource would be a self-published book of approximately two hundred pages which would cover all the material presented in the sermon series.

By making the lesson material available to members in written form, it was hoped that they would deepen their commitment to these doctrines as they had the opportunity to read, reread, and reflect on each belief and practice addressed. It was also hoped that this resource would give members confidence to share their convictions by providing a model of one approach to sharing these doctrinal topics with others.

A short questionnaire was made available to members who read the book by the end of the sermon series to determine their perceived value of the book as both a resource for helping people understand the distinctive doctrines of Churches of Christ, as well as a tool for helping people explain those doctrines to others. In addition, a four-member qualified evaluation board was formed to give their assessment of each chapter of the book, as well as their overall impression of the book as a tool for helping people understand and explain some of the historic doctrines of Churches of Christ.²

²This evaluation board consisted of two college Bible professors from Church of Christ-affiliated universities and two full-time ministers in other Churches of Christ with at least ten years of full-time ministry experience. Each member of the evaluation board was given a copy of the book and an evaluation rubric to make their assessment.

Ministry Context

The Concord Road Church of Christ is located in Brentwood, Tennessee, a suburb of Nashville, located in Williamson County. On average, approximately 500 people attend the primary Sunday worship service each week at Concord Road.

On the list of the thirty counties throughout the United States in which Churches of Christ are most numerous, Williamson County ranks 22nd with thirty-eight congregations. Davidson County, of which Nashville is the principal city, ranks 4th with ninety-seven Churches of Christ. Other counties bordering Davidson and Williamson counties which are on the list are Rutherford County (ranked 10th) Maury County (ranked 11th), Hickman County (ranked 24th), and Wilson County (ranked 27th).³ This means that twenty percent of the thirty counties where Churches of Christ are most numerous in the US are located in the same geographic area as Concord Road.

As with any church group, new ideas and movements occasionally emerge within Churches of Christ which challenge long held beliefs and practices. The location of the Concord Road Church in an area where Churches of Christ are so numerous, and which is also home to Churches of Christ-affiliated Lipscomb University,⁴ places the Concord Road Church at a natural “epicenter” of emerging movements among the fellowship.⁵ This was a significant factor with regard to the rationale for this project.

³Carl Royster, ed., *Churches of Christ in the United States* (Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 2012), 28.

⁴Lipscomb University is a private, coeducational, liberal arts university located in Nashville, Tennessee. It was founded in 1891 and has a current enrollment of over 4,500 students (“Brief[ish] History,” Lipscomb University, accessed November 18, 2014, <http://www.lipscomb.edu/www/Brief-History>).

As a distinct church group, Churches of Christ are a loose fellowship of independent churches which have historically embraced the concept of restoration as a theological principle.⁶ This restoration commitment roots them in a larger religious movement that traces its origins to early nineteenth-century America. Although today this movement is often referred to as the “Stone-Campbell Movement,” after its early leaders Barton W. Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell, it has historically been referred to by adherents as the “Restoration Movement.”

The term “restoration” has been used to describe this movement because the very heart of the movement is an effort to “*restore* the true church” by promoting conformity to the general pattern of beliefs and practices which churches in the New Testament followed.⁷ Of course, such attempts to restore the church does not apply to the

⁵Among Churches of Christ-affiliated universities, many consider Lipscomb to be among those which are less concerned with emphasizing and preserving the doctrinal markers which have historically distinguished Churches of Christ. Wayne Jackson, a prominent preacher and writer among Churches of Christ, recently lamented Lipscomb and their annual Christian Scholars Conference by claiming that conference participants included a “conglomerate of digressives who have surrendered virtually every vestige of interest in the restoration of New Testament religion. ‘Restorationism’ is not merely ignored, it is repudiated emphatically” (Wayne Jackson, “Lipscomb University and the Christian Scholars Conference,” *Christian Courier*, accessed November 2, 2014, <http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/1437-lipscomb-university-and-the-christian-scholars-conference>).

⁶This language is borrowed from the catalog of Harding School of Theology, a Church of Christ-affiliated graduate school in Memphis, Tennessee, and a branch school of Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas. Its “Faith Statement” reads, in part, “As a theological school associated with the Churches of Christ, Harding School of Theology embraces the goals of restoration as a theological principle” (“Faith Statement,” *Harding School of Theology 2014-2015 General Catalog*, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://catalog.hst.edu/content.php?catoid=32&navoid=2085>).

⁷As Jack Cottrell, professor of theology at Cincinnati Bible Seminary, writes, “The concept of restoration is based on four suppositions. First, there is a definite pattern for the visible church revealed in the NT. . . . Second, the pattern for the visible church given in the NT is normative for all ages. . . . Third, advocacy of restoration presupposes that most modern visible church groups or denominations are not conforming to the pattern for God’s church as revealed in the NT. . . . Finally, most restoration efforts assume that even if most visible churches fall short of the NT teaching and should be either reformed or abandoned, nevertheless the invisible church is alive and well” (Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All: Bible Doctrine for Today* [Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002], 441).

“invisible church” as such, but only to the “visible church.”⁸

As a church group, Churches of Christ are not officially structured as a denomination (hence the common self-designation among the membership as a “fellowship” rather than a “denomination”). Therefore, as John Castelein points out, “No one person or delegated group of people can represent their beliefs and practices . . . in any official or institutional manner.”⁹

Historically speaking, though, despite having no officially delegated beliefs and practices, there has been a general unity of beliefs and practices among most congregations who identified themselves as a Church of Christ. This unity of beliefs and practices has focused largely, though not exclusively, on ecclesiological issues such as how one becomes a member of God's saved community (i.e., the church), the activities in the church's public assemblies, and how the local church should be organized and governed.¹⁰

⁸Biblically speaking, the church may be viewed from two different perspectives. On the one hand, the church is defined as all those who are in a saving relationship with Jesus, and God alone knows with certainty who those individuals are. Some call this the *invisible* church because its boundaries cannot be seen by men. On the other hand, the church can refer to specific local congregations made up of believers in a limited area who unite together for mutual edification and service. Some call this the *visible* church because one can *see* whether or not it is conforming to the pattern for God's church as revealed in the New Testament (see Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All*, 440-41).

⁹John D. Castelein, “Christian Churches/Churches of Christ View: Believers Baptism as the Biblical Occasion of Salvation,” in *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 130.

¹⁰A few years ago, the long-time president of Harding University, David Burks, published an article in the university's quarterly magazine emphasizing his core beliefs and commitments. Fourth on that list was, “Christ's church is distinctive and undenominational.” Part of his explanation was that “we must speak boldly and clearly about our Scripture-shaped convictions regarding the church. We continually seek to be the church we read about in the New Testament. While no single congregation today will ever reach perfection—just as no congregation in the New Testament did—we strive toward the ideal that the early church pursued. . . . Our commitment to the New Testament church compels us to teach, with a humble and gracious spirit, such neglected concepts as congregational autonomy, a cappella music in worship, the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, and the distinctive roles of men and women in the

That long-time general unity, however, should no longer be assumed. Many preachers, church leaders, and members no longer consider many of the historically embraced ecclesiological positions that have distinguished Churches of Christ to be doctrines which should be preserved and defended. In other words, many in Churches of Christ no longer believe that many of their historic doctrinal markers really matter. Mac Lynn, a longtime church statistician and Bible professor in Churches of Christ-affiliated colleges and universities, observed,

Many churches are less concerned with historic markers that distinguished Churches of Christ. A half century ago, those indicators of true Christian practice included a cappella music, baptism for the remission of sins, weekly communion, church organization and men in leadership. Today the distinctives are eroding, as the culture impacts the churches. Most of the markers are still in place, but the attitude toward their essentiality has changed.¹¹

The result of this theological shift in thinking among Churches of Christ has been a widely recognized and much discussed “identity crisis” within the fellowship. Some Churches of Christ remain committed to the historic doctrinal markers of their fellowship while others have moved away from some of those markers (or at least changed their attitude regarding the essentiality of them). As voices from both sides of this theological divide continue to advocate their position, the leaders of every congregation face the ongoing decision of which road they will travel, and the ongoing challenge of persuading others that they are on the right road.

In the midst of this ongoing identity crisis, the leadership of the Concord Road

Christian assembly” (David Burks, “Re-examining Our Core Beliefs” *Harding Magazine*, Winter 2006, 14).

¹¹Lindy Adams, “Instrumental Worship: Isolated or Key Trend?” *The Christian Chronicle*, September 2003.

Church remains firmly committed to: (1) the belief that the New Testament contains a general pattern for every local church to follow, (2) the belief that the historic doctrinal markers of Churches of Christ are Biblically-informed parts of that pattern, and (3) ensuring that the Concord Road Church continues to preserve and defend those historic doctrinal markers.

Rationale

A few years ago, Albert Mohler, the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote, “We are reaping the harvest of doctrinal neglect. The urgency of this task cannot be ignored. Baptists will either recover our denominational heritage and rebuild our doctrinal foundations, or in the next generation there will be no authentic Baptist witness.”¹² With the erosion of commitment to the doctrinal markers that have historically distinguished Churches of Christ, the leaders of Concord Road believe that a slightly amended version of Mohler’s oft-quoted statement perfectly expresses their own feelings about the spiritual heritage in Churches of Christ. Here are those feelings with the amended words in italics: “We are reaping the harvest of doctrinal neglect. The urgency of this task cannot be ignored. *Churches of Christ* will either recover our *restoration* heritage and rebuild our doctrinal foundations, or in the next generation there will be no authentic *restoration* witness.”

That statement captures the fundamental reason that this project was deemed necessary. As some Churches of Christ continue to move away from long held beliefs

¹²Albert Mohler, quoted by Jeff Noblit, “The Rise of Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention: Reason for Rejoicing,” in *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2008), 101.

and practices, the leadership at Concord Road believed that now, more than ever, there was a need to teach their members the importance of taking seriously every facet of the New Testament's teaching concerning the local church. In other words, they recognized that now, more than ever, there was an urgent need to strengthen the doctrinal foundations of their members.

Adding to the urgency of this task was, as mentioned earlier, the location of the Concord Road Church. Being at a natural "epicenter" of this movement to rethink and marginalize some of the historic doctrinal markers of Churches of Christ, the members of Concord Road tend to be more directly exposed to those influences than they would be in other settings. For instance, less than four miles from the Concord Road church building is a large Church of Christ (more than 1,200 Sunday worshipers) which is widely recognized among Churches of Christ as a leading proponent of moving away from many of the historic doctrinal distinctives of the fellowship.

If the members of the Concord Road Church are going to be able to resist these influences and remain committed to historic restoration teaching, it is the responsibility of the leaders of the congregation to provide members with regular, systematic instruction on the importance of these doctrinal concepts. That regular, systematic instruction must begin in the pulpit on Sunday mornings (when most members are in attendance) with a careful and thorough examination of the doctrinal tenets which have historically distinguished Churches of Christ. If those doctrinal matters are neglected from the pulpit it will all but guarantee that many members will ultimately change their attitude regarding their importance.

While regular, systematic instruction must begin with the pulpit, the leaders at Concord Road also recognized that it cannot end there. For that reason, a written resource was developed to which members could regularly refer when questions about these issues arise in their own minds, or in the minds of family members, friends, or curious acquaintances. To maximize this resource’s potential for being helpful it needed to be readable, engaging, and sufficiently thorough in addressing each relevant doctrinal issue.

Definitions

A few concepts in this project that may require further clarification for some readers.

Restoration Movement. The Restoration Movement—now more typically referred to as “the Stone-Campbell Movement”—emerged in early nineteenth-century America in the midst of a rekindled religious fervor among the general population and a growing resistance to church tradition among evangelicals. While most evangelicals felt that their inherited forms of Protestant faith just needed to be revived, there were a few voices that went much further.¹³

Mark Noll describes these voices as advocating a “Full-blown Restorationism,” and he describes these movements as ones “in which Spirit-empowered believers professed to ‘read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me’ and which led to the renunciation of all denominational names except New Testament

¹³Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 219.

‘Christians.’”¹⁴ In a nutshell, the heart of the movement is “the notion of the restoration of primitive Christianity—the attempt to recover in the modern age the Christian faith as it was believed and practiced in the first century.”¹⁵

Churches of Christ. Unfortunately, as with most significant movements, different issues began to arise early within the Restoration Movement which created tension and ultimately led to three distinct fellowship groups: (1) “Churches of Christ,” (2) the independent “Christian Churches and Churches of Christ,” and (3) the “Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).”¹⁶

While “Churches of Christ” have both organizational and hermeneutical differences with independent “Christian Churches and Churches of Christ,” these two groups are much more closely related in their theology and ecclesiology than they are with the “Disciples of Christ.” Both “Churches of Christ” and “Christian Churches and Churches of Christ” would be theologically distinguished as conservative and evangelical church groups, while the “Disciples of Christ” would be classified as a liberal and ecumenical denomination.

In terms of membership, “Churches of Christ” have just over 1.6 million members, independent “Christian Churches and Churches of Christ” have almost 1.1

¹⁴Ibid. The quotation cited by Noll is from Alexander Campbell in his reply to an Episcopal bishop who had rebuked Campbell for breaking with tradition (Alexander Campbell, “Reply,” *Christian Baptist* 3 [April 3, 1826]: 204).

¹⁵Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 1.

¹⁶It would go far beyond the scope of this project to explore all the factors which led to division within the movement. For those interested in that subject, the best resource would be *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

million,¹⁷ and the “Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ)” have a membership of around 625,000.¹⁸

Doctrinal marker. In this project the term “doctrinal marker” was used to identify any belief or practice which is viewed by a church group or denomination as a fundamental and essential part of its identity, and which is also viewed as a boundary marker of fellowship on some level. For instance, believer’s immersion and a congregational form of polity would be doctrinal markers of the Baptist family of churches.

The historic doctrinal markers of Churches of Christ which were the focus of this project included the following: (1) baptism by immersion for the forgiveness of sins and kingdom fellowship, (2) a cappella-only praise in corporate worship, (3) observance of the Lord’s Supper each Sunday, (4) male leadership in the assembly, and (5) a congregational form of government in which a plurality of male elders serve as overseers.¹⁹

A cappella-only. The expression “a cappella-only” in this project referred to the musical aspect of corporate worship in Churches of Christ. While the Restoration fellowship group known as the “Christian Churches and Churches of Christ” follow the practice of most modern evangelical church groups by utilizing various musical

¹⁷“Largest 25 Denominations/Communities from the 2012 *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*,” *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*, accessed October 12, 2013, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#largest.

¹⁸Howard E. Bowers, ed., *Yearbook & Directory 2012 of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (Indianapolis: Office of the General Minister and President, 2013), 552-53.

¹⁹See p. 6n10.

instruments in their service of praise, “Churches of Christ” do not use any instruments when they gather for worship.²⁰

Limitations and Delimitations

As with any project of this nature there were some limitations to this project. The first one was the fifteen-week duration of the project. Ideally, when it comes to a church-wide plan to rebuild or strengthen doctrinal foundations, time would be a subordinate consideration to thoroughly covering the subject matter. With only fifteen weeks, however, it was necessary to narrow the topics that would be considered. A second limitation was the subject matter of the book which would be made available to complement the lessons. It had to be limited to the doctrinal topics selected for presentation from the pulpit.

This project was delimited in only one way. Survey participants were restricted to those who would be at least sixteen years old by the time the sermon series began on October 5, 2013.

Research Methodology

This will only be a brief summary of the research methodology; full details will be provided in chapter 4. Members of Concord Road were given two surveys in which they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with seven doctrinal statements, as well as their level of agreement with six statements relating to their confidence in being

²⁰ In some settings and printed resources, congregations within the fellowship of “Churches of Christ” are identified as “Churches of Christ (*a cappella*)” to distinguish them from “Churches of Christ” which identify with “Christian Churches and Churches of Christ.” In the same way, “Churches of Christ” within the fellowship of “Christian Churches and Churches of Christ” are sometimes designated as “Churches of Christ (instrumental)” to distinguish them from their *a cappella* brethren.

able to explain those doctrinal positions to others. One survey—the Pre-Series Beliefs and Practices Survey—was given prior to a systematic fifteen-week sermon series on those doctrinal topics, and the other—the Post-Series Beliefs and Practices Survey—was given following the sermon series.

After both surveys were completed and collected, they were matched and analyzed to determine the total percentage of respondents who reported an increase in their commitment to each doctrinal statement, as well as the total number of respondents who reported an increase in their confidence to explain those doctrinal positions. In addition, the percentage of respondents who reported an increase in commitment and confidence were calculated for the following specific age groups: (1) 16-24 years, (2) 25-39 years, (3) 40-54 years, (4) 55-66 years, and (5) 67 years and up. The findings were then entered into statistical summary tables.

Additionally, the supplemental book which was produced was sent to four individuals (who were not members at Concord Road) with special qualifications for evaluation. The book, titled *Churches in the Shape of Scripture*, contained seven chapters which were essentially the transcripts of the sermons in the series (each chapter contained the content of two sermons). The evaluation board was provided with an evaluation rubric to record their overall impression of each chapter of the book, as well as their overall impression of the book as a tool for helping people understand and explain the distinctive doctrines of Churches of Christ.

A short questionnaire was also made available to the members at Concord Road who had read the book. This questionnaire was intended to assess the impressions of “regular” church members regarding the book’s readability and its potential to help

people better understand and explain the beliefs and practices discussed in it.

Conclusion

The chapters to follow discuss the project's research, implementation, and results. It is hoped that the project will not only be a helpful resource for strengthening the doctrinal foundations of the Concord Road Church of Christ, but for other Churches of Christ as well.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE PROJECT

Introduction

If there were one theological principle which desperately needed to be recaptured in contemporary American church culture, one could make a strong case that it should be the principle of “obedience matters.” It seems that, over the past thirty years or so, the prominent approach to Christianity that has been marketed to both American believers and would-be believers has minimized the importance—or at least failed to emphasize the importance—of trying to obey God with as much precision as possible in every circumstance of life, especially in every aspect of church life.

Mark Dever notes this current cultural lack of emphasis on church doctrine when he says, “A church’s life, doctrine, worship, and even polity—all these are important issues. And they are so rarely addressed.”²¹ Albert Mohler also contends that the church has suffered “far too long” for “its lack of attention to ecclesiology.”²²

This increasingly common view which fails to emphasize the importance of

²¹Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), xiv.

²²R. Albert Mohler, endorsement in Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), ii. While it would be a worthy pursuit to try to understand why matters of ecclesiology are “so rarely addressed” in much of modern American church life, such a pursuit is beyond the scope of this study.

seeking to know and fully follow God’s will in all aspects of church life, however, does not fit the teaching of the New Testament as this chapter will show. It will be demonstrated that the New Testament promotes obedience to God and faithfulness to him in every circumstance as one of the highest goals for not only the individual Christian, but for the local church as well.

This chapter will also demonstrate that a corollary to the theological principle of “obedience matters” is the theological principle of “restoration.” The idea of restoration begins with an acknowledgment that God's revealed will on any particular matter can be lost (i.e., no longer recognized or practiced in a church community). If this happens, the principle of restoration contends that God wants His people to once again discover and begin practicing what He originally commanded.

Finally, this chapter will demonstrate that the New Testament contains a definite, general pattern for the visible church which is normative for every local congregation in every age.²³ As Jack Cottrell notes, this New Testament pattern for the local church “is not a massive blueprint, as if every detail were addressed and finalized. . . . many decisions are left to the best judgments of God's people through the ages.”²⁴ But while this pattern does not address and finalize every imaginable detail, it is definitely there “both in its [the New Testament’s] didactic portions and in the recorded

²³Biblically speaking, the church may be viewed from two different perspectives: (1) all who are in a saving relationship with Jesus, and God alone knows who they are (sometimes called the *invisible* church because its boundaries cannot be seen by men), and (2) specific local congregations who meet for mutual edification and service (sometimes called the *visible* church because one can *see* if it is conforming to the general New Testament pattern for God's church).

²⁴Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All: Bible Doctrine for Today* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), 441.

practices sanctioned by apostolic approval.”²⁵

Obedience Matters

As Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, explains what life in the kingdom of God ought to look like, he concludes by emphasizing that, as Lewis says, “Obedience, and not empty claims, is the ultimate test of discipleship.”²⁶ Carson similarly observes, “The determinative factor regarding who enters the kingdom is obedience to the Father’s will.”²⁷ Here are the words of Christ:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.” (Matt 7:21-23)

Some have suggested that those who cried “Lord, Lord” were rejected because their faith claim was superficial; that is, they were not genuinely sincere in their claim of having a master/disciple relationship with Jesus. R. T. France, however, rightly points out that there is no suggestion in the context that their emphatic profession of faith and claim to a master/disciple relationship is insincere.²⁸ They are simply, in France’s words, “self-deceived, unaware that their discipleship does not match up to Jesus’ criteria of

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Jack Lewis, *The Gospel According to Matthew, Part 1*, The Living Word Commentary, vol. 1 (Austin, TX: Sweet Publishing, 1976), 115.

²⁷D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 192.

²⁸R. T. France, *Matthew*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 148.

obedience (v. 21) and personal relationship (v. 23).”²⁹ France then boils down the point of Jesus’ statement this way: “‘Charismatic’ activity is no substitute for obedience and personal relationship with Jesus. Nor, indeed, are any other ‘good works.’”³⁰

After Jesus declares that he does not know those who fail to do the will of his Father, he concludes his emphasis on the importance of obedience with one of his most familiar parables—the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matt 7:24-27). The point cannot be missed. The wise person is the one who builds upon a solid foundation by obeying Jesus’ teachings. Clearly “Jesus expects his disciples to take his teaching with utmost seriousness by translating his commands into action.”³¹

Just as Jesus emphasized the priority of obedience at the beginning of his earthly ministry in the Sermon on the Mount, he also emphasized it at the conclusion of His earthly work in the Great Commission:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18-20)

Grammatically, the words “baptizing” and “teaching” are participles dependent on the main verb, “make disciples.” These participles “specify the means by which the ‘nations’ are to be disciplined.”³² In other words, they explain how disciples are made. So, as France points out, “teaching disciples to observe all that Jesus commanded further

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 149.

³¹Larry Chouinard, *Matthew*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1997), 146.

³²Ibid., 511.

specifies what is involved in discipleship.”³³ Clearly, discipleship is “not complete unless it leads them to a life of observing Jesus’ commandments.”³⁴ Also, as Chouinard observes, “Jesus does not give his followers the luxury of selecting portions of Jesus’ teaching which please them, while neglecting the rest. . . . Life in the kingdom necessitates hearing and doing everything that Jesus has commanded.”³⁵

Jesus also emphasizes the primacy of obedience in the “Sermon on the Plain” in Luke's gospel. While many assume that Luke is “reproducing the same sermon as Matthew v, vi, and vii,”³⁶ many others feel that the considerable differences in content imply that the “Sermon on the Plain” is an entirely different sermon. Leifeld, for instance, accounts for the substantial differences by saying, “The probability is that there was one sermon among many that Jesus preached on similar themes that was something like a ‘keynote’ address.”³⁷ Similarly, Morris says, “Preachers usually make use of the same or different matter in different sermons. . . . This habit of preachers seems a better explanation of the combination of resemblances and differences than extensive editorial activity.”³⁸

Fortunately, one need not be able to say with certainty what the relationship is

³³France, *Matthew*, 414.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 415.

³⁵Chouinard, *Matthew*, 512.

³⁶Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 209.

³⁷Walter Liefeld, *Luke*, in vol. 8 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 890.

³⁸Leon Morris, *Luke*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 138-39.

between Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount" and Luke's "Sermon on the Plain" to understand the content of both. And one thing that is easily understood in both is that Jesus calls those who identify with him to surrender themselves to him in full obedience. Here are Jesus' words as recorded by Luke: "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). Clearly this statement answers the question, "What does it look like when one calls Jesus 'Lord'?" That answer is, "One obeys Jesus." Geldenhuys rightly says this about Jesus' statement:

This forms the latter portion of the sermon . . . and in this portion Jesus indicates what a fatal end awaits those who do not obey His words, and on the other hand what a blessed future is theirs who are obedient. It will benefit no one to honour Him merely by word of mouth (verse 46) while they do not do His bidding. . . . Just as surely as a house which is built with its foundation firmly fixed upon a rock will brave all storms, so surely will those whose life is governed by obedience to Christ's teaching emerge triumphantly from all storms . . . in this life and at the end the Last Judgment.³⁹

Still another place where Jesus places obedience at the top of his list of expectations for his followers is in John's gospel when he says, "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him" (John 14:21). If Luke 6:46 answers the question, "What does it look like when one calls Jesus 'Lord'?" then John 14:21 answers the question, "What does it look like when one loves Jesus?" And just as Luke 6:46 reveals that the answer to the former question is, "One obeys Jesus," John 14:21 reveals that the answer to the latter question is exactly the same—when one genuinely loves Jesus, one obeys him.

Morris rightly points out that "Jesus speaks not only of 'having' the

³⁹Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke*, 214-15.

commandments but also of ‘keeping’ them, i.e. to observe them in daily life is more than having a firm intellectual grasp of their content. Obedience is the mark of true love.”⁴⁰

Tenney puts it this way: “Our love for him is manifested in obedience.”⁴¹ Carson describes “the connection between obedience and love” as “explicit,” and says,

The idea . . . is that the ongoing relationship between Jesus and his disciples is characterized by obedience on their part, and thus is logically conditioned by it. They love and obey Jesus, and he loves them, in exactly the same way that he loves and obeys his Father, and the Father loves him.⁴²

This love and obedience connection is equally explicit in 1 John 5:2-3: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.” Here is how Stott sums up John’s point:

It is as impossible to love the children of God (as such) without loving God as it is to love God without loving his children (4:20-21). A family relationship unites the two loves. Love for God has a second inescapable consequence, namely obedience. If we truly love God, we not only love his children, but also find ourselves carrying out his commands. In verse 3 John goes further. So inexorable is the connection between the two that love for God, which in one sense issues in obedience, in another sense may be identified with it.⁴³

While far more could be said about the New Testament’s emphasis on obedience, an expression coined by the apostle Paul will be the last thing considered in this section. In the letter which many consider to be his greatest theological legacy,

⁴⁰Leon Morris, *The Gospel of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 653.

⁴¹Merrill C. Tenney, *John*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 147.

⁴²D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 503.

⁴³John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 19 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 175-76.

Romans, Paul twice uses the expression “obedience of faith.”⁴⁴ That expression serves as bookends, if you will, of this letter which promotes a deeper understanding and appreciation of what it means to be saved by faith apart from works of law.

Paul first uses “obedience of faith” five verses into his letter when he reveals that the specific purpose of his apostolic ministry is “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name’s sake” (Rom 1:5). Then, in his concluding doxology, he again uses “obedience of faith” when he says that the purpose of proclaiming the mystery of Christ is “to bring about the obedience of faith” (Rom 16:26).

Exactly what Paul means by this expression is a matter of some debate but it seems that the suggested meaning of “the obedience which results from faith” is preferable because of its contextual harmony with Romans as a whole.⁴⁵

The Principle of Restoration

A corollary to the theological principle of “obedience matters” is the theological principle of “restoration.” If obedience is at the top of God’s list of expectations for his people, then when any aspect of his will is lost,⁴⁶ the principle of restoration contends that God wants that aspect of his will restored to his community of faith. Nehemiah 8 provides an illustration of how this principle of restoration works.

The activities detailed in Nehemiah 8-10 testify to a spiritual awakening of the

⁴⁴In both instances the Greek expression is exactly the same (*eis hypakoen pisteos*), though for some reason the NIV translates it differently in the two verses.

⁴⁵For a good summary of five suggested interpretations of “the obedience of faith,” see Jack Cottrell, *Romans*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996), 78-82.

⁴⁶As noted earlier, a “lost” aspect of God’s will refers to any belief or practice instituted by God which is no longer recognized or practiced by the community of faith.

Israelite community in the wake of their release from Babylonian captivity by Cyrus, the king of Persia, and their subsequent return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple (Ezra 1:1-3). What is revealed is a renewal of commitment to the covenant with God which begins with a public reading of the Law before the assembled people.

Breneman has pointed out that the phrase “the people” occurs thirteen times in the first twelve verses of Nehemiah 8, while “all the people” is the expression in nine of those occurrences.⁴⁷ With such a focus on the people, Schoville observes that this is a reminder that “revivals are often mass movements sparked by a hunger for God’s word and presence.”⁴⁸

The revival of the people’s heart toward the covenant is seen first of all in their flocking to Jerusalem and their call for Ezra to publicly read the Scripture to them: “All the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel” (Neh 8:1). Their revival of heart is further seen by their willingness to stand and listen to the reading for about half a day, and the fact that they were hanging on every word that Ezra read: “He read from it before the square . . . from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law” (Neh 8:3).

The day following the extensive reading session brought a more intensive period of study for “the heads of fathers’ households” along with the religious personnel

⁴⁷ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, The New American Commentary, vol. 10 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 223.

⁴⁸ Keith Schoville, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2001), 213.

of the temple: “Then on the second day the heads of fathers’ households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law” (Neh 8:13). As the leaders of extended families, these were the men largely responsible for religious instruction and practice in their households (Deut 6:4-9), and as Kinder notes, their meeting with Ezra “shows how seriously the emphasis on Scripture was being taken.”⁴⁹

During this teaching session “we get the impression that the rules for the feast, found in Leviticus 23:39-43, now came as something of a discovery.”⁵⁰ The text states, “They found written in the law how the Lord had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month” (Neh 8:14). The “feast of the seventh month,” of course, is the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths (Lev 23:34).⁵¹

Some have suggested that this indicates that the Jewish community had completely forgotten about this feast. In other words, by this time the feast had completely fallen out of use. Fensham, for instance, says, “We might presume that the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles had been completely forgotten, because now for the first time they became aware of it. . . . The leaders of the Jewish community took immediate steps to reinstitute the feast.”⁵² Similarly, Schoville says, “The fact that they

⁴⁹Derek Kinder, *Ezra & Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 11 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 108.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Another name for this seven-day holy feast was the “Feast of Ingathering” (Exod 23:16) because it marked the final harvest of all the crops in the autumn (Lev 23:39).

⁵²F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 220.

found this information suggests that the keeping of the feast had not been regularly practiced, although its observance is mentioned in Ezra 3:4.”⁵³

Kinder, however, points out correctly that it is precisely the fact that the feast is mentioned in Ezra 3:4 which indicates that the festival itself was still being observed. He goes on to point out that it was the “camping-out element” which had “lapsed or been reduced to a mere token.”⁵⁴ He then explains, “The feast had two sides to it: it was a vintage festival, the ‘ingathering at the year’s end’ (Exod 34:22), but also a memorial of the wilderness, when God ‘made the people of Israel dwell in booths’ (Lev 23:43). It seems to have been this aspect that had fallen into neglect.”⁵⁵ This certainly seems to be the clear sense of these words: “They found written in the law how the Lord had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month” (Neh 13:14).

Kinder then makes an insightful comment to describe how different aspects of God’s revealed will tend to get lost and then rediscovered. He notes, “Custom, as happens so often in religious history, had overlaid and modified ‘the faith once delivered to the saints’, so that the freshly studied Scripture, like a cleaned painting, now revealed some long-forgotten colours.”⁵⁶ The Nehemiah narrative goes on to reveal just how long the camping-out aspect of God’s will had been lost: “The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son Nun to that day” (Neh 13:17). That is a period

⁵³Schoville, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 219.

⁵⁴Kinder, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 108.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid.

of almost a thousand years; for almost a millennium the Jewish community had not been living in temporary shelters during the Feast of Tabernacles as God had commanded.

Now *that* is a lost doctrine.

So what did the community of Israel do when they discovered this lost aspect of God's will? Their response is described as follows:

So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written." So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. (Neh 13:15-17a)

That is the principle of restoration. After discovering a command of God that had been lost for almost a thousand years, they immediately restored it to its original place among the religious practices of the community.

Another illustration of the principle of restoration can be found in 2 Samuel 6, and takes place some 550 years before the living-in-huts discovery of Nehemiah 8. In one of the most familiar episodes in the Old Testament, David decides to make Jerusalem not only the political center of his kingdom, but also the spiritual center. For that to happen, however, it was necessary to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem from Baale-judah (2 Sam 6:2).⁵⁷

Before moving the ark, David consulted with the leaders of Israel (1 Chr 13:1-4), and, presumably, "had their complete consent before initiating this important

⁵⁷Baale-judah was located on the Philistine-Judean border about nine miles west of Jerusalem. It is also known as Kiriath-jearim (1 Chr 13:5) and Kiriath-baal (Josh 18:14). The ark had been in this location ever since the Philistines had returned it to Israel soon after they had captured it in a battle with the Israelites (1 Sam 4-6).

project.”⁵⁸ Thirty thousand men were selected to form an honor guard for the ark of God,⁵⁹ and, in what seems to be gesture of great respect, it was placed on a new cart for the move:

Now David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him to Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God which is called by the Name, the very name of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned *above* the cherubim. They placed the ark of God on a new cart that they might bring it from the house of Abinadab.” (2 Sam 6:2-3)

As the procession moved toward Jerusalem everything was going well until it moved past a rough, rocky threshing floor at a place called Nacon. There “the oxen nearly upset it” and one of the escorts, Uzzah, “reached out toward the ark of God and took hold of it” (2 Sam 6:6). In one of the most shocking moments in the Bible, God killed Uzzah on the spot. David’s joy and hope suddenly turned to anger and despair, and he aborted the mission immediately.

What exactly had gone wrong and warranted such judgment from God upon Uzzah? When David returned to Jerusalem and carefully read through the Law, he discovered the answer. They had not followed God’s prescribed will for transporting the ark. Through the years that the ark lingered in storage, apparently God’s will for carrying it had been lost; that is, it had been forgotten.

Upon discovering God’s original will for moving the ark, David responded precisely the same way that the people in Nehemiah 8 will respond almost six centuries later when they discover God’s lost living-in-huts command. He immediately restored

⁵⁸John J. Davis and John C. Whitcomb, *Israel from Exile to Conquest: A Commentary on Joshua—2 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 291.

⁵⁹Perhaps this 30,000-man force was as much of a protection force as an honor guard to ensure that the Philistines did not oppose the ark’s move.

God's original will. Here is how the Chronicler describes David's restoration of God's forgotten instructions:

Now David built houses for himself in the city of David; and he prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it. Then David said, "No one is to carry the ark of God but the Levites; for the Lord chose them to carry the ark of God and to minister to Him forever." . . . Then David called for Zadok and Abiathar the priests, and for the Levites, for Uriel, Asaiah, Joel, Shemaiah, Eliel and Amminadab, and said to them, "You are the heads of the fathers' households of the Levites; consecrate yourselves both you and your relatives, that you may bring up the ark of the Lord God of Israel to the place that I have prepared for it. Because you did not carry it at the first, the Lord our God made an outburst on us, for we did not seek Him according to the ordinance." So the priests and the Levites consecrated themselves to bring up the ark of the Lord God of Israel. The sons of the Levites carried the ark of God on their shoulders with the poles thereon, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the Lord. (1 Chr 15:1-2, 11-15)

Some seem to suggest that the problem was primarily something other than failing to precisely carry out God's original commands for moving the ark. Hicks, for instance, says that God's wrath did not break out against David personally "because his heart was oriented toward God even though he mistakenly moved the ark in a way that violated God's law."⁶⁰ Uzzah, on the other hand, "was struck because he arrogantly presumed to touch God."⁶¹ Hicks' implication seems to be that if Uzzah's heart would have been "oriented toward God" when he grabbed the ark, then he would not have been struck.

That assessment, however, fails on two fronts. First, nothing in the text suggests that Uzzah's heart was arrogant or otherwise insincere. Second, it does not seem to take seriously David's straightforward assessment of God's judgment to the

⁶⁰John Mark Hicks, *1 & 2 Chronicles*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2001), 148.

⁶¹Ibid.

Levites: “Because you did not carry it at the first, the Lord our God made an outburst on us, for we did not seek Him according to the ordinance” (v. 13). Nor does it seem to take seriously this follow-up report from the Chronicler: “The sons of the Levites carried the ark of God on their shoulders with the poles thereon, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the Lord” (v. 15). As opposed primarily to a heart problem, these statements seem to clearly suggest that the primary problem was a disobedience problem.⁶²

Like Hicks, Selman also seems to find Israel’s failure to be something beyond mere disobedience. He contends that the use of a cart to transport the ark “showed David unthinkingly continuing a Philistine superstition. . . . In other words, Israel got into difficulties because they failed to recognize that worship of the true God meant they could no longer simply follow contemporary pagan practices.”⁶³

While it is certainly fair to question the dynamics of the heart when pondering a case like Uzzah’s, it seems unjustified to assign impure motives where none are stated or implied. Given that no impure motives are attached to Uzzah in the text, Smith’s assessment of Uzzah’s motives seem preferable: “Uzzah’s motives were good. He acted

⁶²By placing the blame more on Uzzah’s motive than his act of disobedience, Hicks seems determined to avoid presenting God as “some vindictive judge who anxiously watches for any technical violation” (Hicks, *1 & 2 Chronicles*, 148). He states, “When Yehweh is pictured as the ‘God of technicalities’ who jumps to zap his people, the nature of God’s holiness is seriously misunderstood. God is not searching for technical law-breakers; he is searching for hearts that seek him” (Hicks, *1 & 2 Chronicles*, 147).

While I agree that God should not be pictured in those terms and images—to do so would be an extremist position—one may reasonably wonder if Hicks is going to the other extreme by suggesting that God really is not concerned with the details of His will. By protecting God from one biblically unjustified image, Hicks might be leading his readers to an equally unjustified notion that seeking to obey God as precisely as humanly possible is a misguided quest.

⁶³Martin J. Selman, *1 Chronicles*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 10a (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 153.

on reflex and without sacrilegious intent.”⁶⁴ The problem then? It is best to base that conclusion on a straightforward reading of the lines of Scripture as opposed to a speculative reading between the lines. And when the lines are read, the inescapable conclusion is, as Smith observes, “In their zeal . . . they neglected to follow the precise stipulations of the law of God which required the ark to be hand-carried by priests (Num 7:9).”⁶⁵ Like the case of Moses striking the rock at Meribah (Num 20:8-13), the case of Uzzah illustrates that God is seeking more than a pure heart; he is seeking those who obey him from a pure heart.

As said earlier, both of these Old Testament episodes—the living-in-huts discovery in Nehemiah 8 and the transporting-the-ark-correctly discovery in 1 Samuel 6 (and 1 Chronicles 15)—illustrate well the theological principle of restoration. To summarize that principle, when any aspect of God’s revealed will is lost, God desires his people to recover and restore that aspect of his will to the believing community.

Taking the theological principle of restoration into the New Testament and applying it to the visible structure of the church is based on two suppositions. First, there is a definite pattern for the visible church revealed in the New Testament, and second, that pattern for the visible church is normative for all ages. Before exploring these two suppositions, however, it is important to briefly address the hermeneutical issue of “prescriptive versus descriptive” passages.

⁶⁴James E. Smith, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2000), 385.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 384.

Prescriptive Versus Descriptive Passages

To suppose that the New Testament contains a normative pattern for the local church raises the matter of “whether biblical narratives that describe what happened in the early church also function as norms intended to delineate what must happen in the ongoing church.”⁶⁶ In other words, are there any instances from Acts, or any other biblical narrative for that matter, “of which one may appropriately say, ‘We must do this,’ or should one merely say, ‘We may do this?’”⁶⁷

The fact that biblical truth can be divided into the categories of “descriptive” and “prescriptive” is a matter on which all Bible students agree. Jack Cottrell, for instance, says, “Everyone agrees that some Biblical references are descriptive only, i.e., they are not normative or binding for faith and practice today,”⁶⁸ and Fee and Stuart note that “all biblical Christians tend to treat precedent as normative to some degree or another.”⁶⁹ “The crucial question is,” as Cottrell contends, “how do we decide whether a given passage is meant to be descriptive or prescriptive?”⁷⁰ and few would disagree with his answer that “deciding which passages belong in which category is not as clear-cut as it seems.”⁷¹

⁶⁶Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 97.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸ Jack Cottrell, *Gender Roles & the Bible: Creation, the Fall, & Redemption* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994), 42.

⁶⁹Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, 97.

⁷⁰Cottrell, *Gender Roles & the Bible*, 42.

⁷¹Ibid., 45

All would agree with Henry Virkler that “contextual analysis is the most valid way of differentiating descriptive from prescriptive passages,”⁷² but no one agrees on the exact same set of guidelines for doing such contextual analysis. Cottrell rightly notes that “identifying the guidelines that help us make this distinction has proved to be exceedingly difficult. Sometimes the suggested guidelines simply beg the question or state the obvious.”⁷³

Recognizing the exceedingly difficult task of trying to identify guidelines to help decide which passages have prescriptive force, LaGard Smith offers these guidelines from a restorationist perspective (Smith suggests, and uses, the term “precedent” to refer to prescriptive examples):

In precedent, as opposed to mere example, we are looking for justifiable reliance. Is there something about a given example on which we can rely for our own spiritual guidance? To start with, an example cannot be seen as normative, or as precedent, unless we can first draw some obvious rule from that example. Put another way, we must first conclude that the example “stands for” something—some rule or principle. If it does, then in most cases we can rely on it in the same way we would rely on any other rule or principle.

Of course, the best way to determine whether an example contains within it a kind of “rule” is to see whether there is already some spiritual law or principle that has been articulated in Scripture independently of the example. For instance, the Lord’s Supper is not only participated in as a matter of occurrence, but there is specific teaching about its theological significance as well as certain practical instructions as to how it is to be observed.

Another rule of thumb is that examples having obvious universal application, rather than limited or special circumstances, are more likely to be precedent. Compare, for instance, the widespread practice of baptism with the special circumstances surrounding Paul’s vow and headshaving. Which is more likely to be just an occurrence-type “example” and which is more likely to be compelling “precedent”?

Universal application can also be seen in examples which represent stability of

⁷²Henry Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 86.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 44.

teaching over time. That's why practices which carry over from Jewish to Christian worship (like prayer and songs of praise) are particularly suitable as precedent.⁷⁴

While never forgetting that it is often difficult to discern which biblical passages have prescriptive force, one must also never forget that such passages do actually exist, and that fact seems to demand recognition that the New Testament contains a definite pattern for the visible church which is normative for all ages. That idea will now be briefly discussed.

A Normative New Testament Pattern

Cottrell makes some important observations to keep in mind when considering the idea that the New Testament contains a general pattern for the local church that every congregation in every generation is expected to follow. First, "this pattern is not necessarily found in any particular congregation that existed in apostolic times; thus we are not seeking to restore the Jerusalem church, or the Ephesian church, or certainly not the Corinthian church."⁷⁵ Second, as noted earlier, "The New Testament pattern for the church is not a massive blueprint, as if every detail were addressed and finalized. The general structure is given . . . but many decisions are left to the best judgments of God's people through the ages."⁷⁶ Third and finally, this pattern is not neatly laid out in one particular place in the New Testament. Instead, as also noted earlier, this general pattern

⁷⁴F. LaGard Smith, *The Cultural Church: Winds of Change and the Call for a "New Hermeneutic"* (Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 1992), 166-67.

⁷⁵Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All*, 441.

⁷⁶Ibid.

“lies in the overall teaching of the NT, both in its didactic portions and in the recorded practices sanctioned by apostolic approval,”⁷⁷ as the following examples show.

With the following words Paul lays down some rules for who could speak to the church assembly at Corinth: “As in all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor 14:33b).⁷⁸ As Mare says, when it came to who could speak to the gathered church, “Paul’s instruction for Corinth is that followed in all the churches.”⁷⁹

Ferguson contends that with these words Paul “countered the tendency of the Corinthians to ‘go their own way’ and ‘do their own thing’ (note his rebuke in 1 Cor 14:36)”⁸⁰ and emphasizes that his speaking-in-church policy “was not something that varied with geographical locations and . . . with local social customs.”⁸¹ MacArthur similarly says that “Paul was emphasizing the fact that the principle of women’s not speaking in church services was not local, geographical, or cultural, but universal.”⁸²

The fact that Paul expected the Corinthians to follow the same rules that “all the congregations of the saints” followed indicates the presence of a pattern to which every local congregation was expected to conform.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸While some argue that this expression is best taken as “the concluding word to these instructions on ‘order’” in v. 33a (Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 697), most commentators now seem to agree that “the second half of verse 33 seems to fit best with verse 34” (John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians in The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1984], 392).

⁷⁹W. Harold Mare, *1 Corinthians*, in vol. 10 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 276.

⁸⁰Everett Ferguson, *Women in the Church* (Chickasha, OK: Yeoman Press, 2003), 18.

⁸¹Ibid., 19.

⁸²MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, 392.

Another place in the New Testament where a pattern seems clearly evident is during Paul's first missionary journey in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). In Acts 14 Paul and his co-worker, Barnabas, planted churches in the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:5-7). Later, after moving on to Derbe and planting a church there, they backtracked to strengthen and encourage the churches they had recently planted (Acts 14:20-22). On that return visit Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23).

The fact that Paul appointed elders in "each church" that he planted during this missionary journey, coupled with Luke's report of Paul meeting with the elders in the Ephesian church (Acts 20:17), Paul's acknowledgement of the elders in the Philippian congregation (Phil 1:1), and his discussion of the qualifications of elders with both Timothy (1 Tim 3:1-7) and Titus (Titus 1:5-9) reflect a clear pattern for local church leadership among congregations in the New Testament.

Still another passage which shows that some things were expected to be the same from church to church to church in the New Testament—that is, that there is a general pattern of beliefs and practice to which every congregation in the New Testament was expected to conform—is in Paul's first letter to Corinth: "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come" (1 Cor 16:1-2).

As Morris says, "This is the first piece of evidence to show that Christians

observed that day.”⁸³ Of course, not all agree with Morris. As Mare points out, since Paul does not specifically tell the Corinthians that the money they must set aside each week is to be collected in the church gathering, “some have interpreted the words *par heauto* (literally ‘by himself’) to mean ‘at home.’”⁸⁴ In response to such an interpretation Mare asks, “But then why mention doing it on Sunday, when they could just as well do it regularly at home at other times?”⁸⁵ He then goes on to rightly say, “The meaning must rather be that the Christians were to bring their offerings to church on Sunday, since that was the day they assembled for worship.”⁸⁶

The fact that the Corinthian church and every congregation in the region of Galatia was meeting together on “the first day of every week” suggests either a God-ordained pattern for his people or an unplanned coincidence. Few, if any, argue that it was the latter. Then there is Luke’s reference to the Troas congregation also coming together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:6-7) which simply strengthens the view that Sunday assemblies constitute part of a general pattern for New Testament churches.

Finally, in Paul’s first letter to Timothy he is once again establishing some directives for public church gatherings. One of those directives is, “I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension” (1 Tim 2:8). The first matter of significance is the phrase “in every place.” As Ferguson has pointed out, this phrase was used in somewhat of a technical sense to mean “in every place of

⁸³Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 232.

⁸⁴Mare, *1 Corinthians*, 293.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid.

meaning.”⁸⁷ Schreiner, likewise, says, “When Paul calls on men to pray ‘in every place’ . . . this is probably a reference to house churches. Thus the directives here relate to a public church meeting when believers are gathered together. The words ‘in every place’ refer to all churches everywhere.”⁸⁸

The second matter of significance is the word “men.” As Ferguson points out, Paul “does not employ the generic ‘men,’ meaning ‘human beings,’ but the specific word for ‘males.’”⁸⁹ He goes on to conclude that “this usage shows that only men are expected to provide leadership in prayer.”⁹⁰ MacArthur agrees saying, “‘Men’ is from *aner*, and means men as opposed to women. Men are the leaders of when the church meets for corporate worship. When prayer is offered . . . the men are to do it.”⁹¹ Moss similarly notes, “The most straightforward interpretation of this text would suggest that Paul is providing for male leadership in prayers in the public assembly.”⁹²

Not everyone, however, would agree with that conclusion. Schreiner, for example, contends that “One should not conclude from the call to men to pray . . . that

⁸⁷Everett Ferguson, “*Topos* in 1 Timothy 2:8,” *Restoration Quarterly* 33 (1991): 65-73.

⁸⁸Thomas R. Schreiner, “An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15,” in *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, ed. Andreas J. Kostenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 91. In making his case, Schreiner refers his readers to the article by Ferguson.

⁸⁹Ferguson, *Women in the Church*, 31.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹John MacArthur, *1 Timothy* in *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 74.

⁹²C. Michael Moss, *1, 2 Timothy & Titus*, The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994), 54.

only men should pray in worship.”⁹³ He bases his conclusion on 1 Corinthians 11:5 which, according to him, “clarifies that women are allowed to participate by praying in the public meetings.”⁹⁴ MacArthur, however, observes that 1 Corinthians 11:5 “must be interpreted in light of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, which forbids women to speak in the assembly. Women *are* permitted to pray and proclaim the Word, but not ‘in church’—that is, when the church meets for its corporate worship services.”⁹⁵

This directive for “males” to pray “in every place” indicates Paul’s expectation that there be some continuity between local churches. In other words, as was seen earlier in his directive to the church in Corinth (1 Cor 14:33b), Paul expected some things to be the same from church to church to church. That means there was a general pattern in the New Testament that local churches were expected to follow.

Conclusion

The presence of a general pattern of beliefs and practices for the local church, the primacy of God’s call for obedience, and the principle of restoration all converge in Scripture to exhort the church in every age to fully embrace the pursuit of a biblically-informed ecclesiology, and to never be satisfied with anything less than full faithfulness to God’s Word.

⁹³Schreiner, *Women in the Church*, 92.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, 74.

CHAPTER 3

THE THEORETICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE PROJECT

Introduction

It is no secret that doctrine has been downplayed in American church life for some time now. In far too many houses of worship, deep teaching on the great doctrines of Scripture is a thing of the past, and almost no attention is given to how doctrine must govern the life of the local church. In an increasing number of church settings the teaching emphasis has become almost exclusively moralistic (that is, centered on helping people live good, moral lives), therapeutic (focused on helping people be happy and feel at peace), and generally designed to make the unchurched feel at ease.

This was the conclusion of research conducted a few years ago by Christian Smith and his fellow researchers with the National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.⁹⁶ In 2005 Albert Mohler reflected on the results of their research which “took a close look at the religious beliefs held by American teenagers.”⁹⁷ According to Mohler, “the faith held and described by most

⁹⁶The findings of this 2005 study, the largest and most detailed study ever done on the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers, can be found in the following book: Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁹⁷Albert Mohler, Jr., “President's Journal: More Than ‘Whatever’,” *The Southern Seminary Magazine* (The TIE), Spring 2005, inside front cover.

adolescents came down to something the researchers identified as ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’”⁹⁸ This “faith” consists of beliefs like “God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions,” and “The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about one’s self.”⁹⁹

It should come as no surprise then that more and more professing Christians seem to view the fundamentals of Christianity as little more than, one, having some kind of belief that Jesus saves, and two, doing nice things for others—like generously tipping your waiter, making an occasional donation to your local church or charity of your choice, engaging in periodic community service (particularly service that focuses on the plight of the poor and less fortunate), recycling and going green whenever possible, and for the most part trying to follow that do-unto-others rule.

For many modern churchgoers, all that really matters in a church is that it is warm and welcoming, has a service that brings them pleasure and moves them emotionally, and is making an impact for good in the community. For them, if a local church passes those three tests, the “religious brand” of that church—as well as its doctrine—is largely irrelevant.

Observers of American religious culture have seen this coming for a long time. In 1991, for instance, one of the country’s most quoted religious researchers and pollsters, George Barna, predicted that “by the end of the decade . . . many Americans will further loosen their loyalties to brand names and denominations, be less skillful in

⁹⁸This term, often abbreviated MTD, was introduced by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist in their book *Soul Searching* to summarize what they consider to be the fundamental religious outlook of American youth.

⁹⁹Mohler, “President’s Journal: More Than Whatever,” inside front cover.

keeping friendships and marriages and be more likely to ‘slice and dice’ their religion to suit personal taste.”¹⁰⁰

That prediction has now become the reality, a reality that was recently on full display on the front page of Nashville’s daily newspaper with a headline that announced “Churchgoers ditch their denominations.”¹⁰¹ The gist of the lengthy article was that, over the last forty years or so, doctrines and denominational differences have been so downplayed that many churchgoers no longer consider doctrine or “religious brands” relevant when choosing a church. In fact, it reported that “the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that about 44 percent of Americans have changed religious brands in their lifetime.”¹⁰² Here is how one prominent Nashville pastor, Pete Wilson, described it:

Twenty years ago, the first question was, “Is this church Baptist or Methodist or whatever?” That’s the first thing they wanted to know before they visited. Today they ask, “Is this church making an impact in the community?” or “Does my family feel at home here?” There are a whole different set of questions.¹⁰³

Ed Stetzer, president of Nashville-based LifeWay Research, describes it as “the Willowcreek phenomenon.” Summarizing Stetzer’s point, the article observed that “thousands of churches now follow the methods of two super-size megachurches—Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Ill., and Saddleback Church in Lake

¹⁰⁰Ray Waddle, “Pollster Warns of Church in Crisis,” *The Tennessean*, December 29, 1991.

¹⁰¹Bob Smietana, “Churchgoers Ditch Their Denominations,” *The Tennessean*, January 1, 2011.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid. Wilson dropped his Baptist ties and launched interdenominational Crosspoint Church in Nashville in 2001.

Forest, Calif.,”¹⁰⁴ and it summed up the methods of those two mega-churches this way: “Both stress contemporary music and sermons and services that make the unchurched feel at ease. Both downplay doctrines and denominational differences.”¹⁰⁵

Perhaps best-selling Christian author Max Lucado summed it up best when he said, “It just seems like we're in kind of a post-denominational society that those differences are not as important to people as they used to be. . . . Now, the big issue isn't so much Methodist or Baptist, but Jesus or Buddha.”¹⁰⁶

The church fellowship to which I belong, typically referred to as “Churches of Christ,” has not been immune to these cultural influences. As a result, within Churches of Christ there has been a widely recognized and much discussed “identity crisis” over the last twenty-five years or so.

Almost twenty-one years ago, for instance, LaGard Smith launched chapter 1 of his book *The Cultural Church* with this statement: “Our fellowship is having an identity crisis.”¹⁰⁷ A few years later, in a paper presented at the Lipscomb University Christian Scholars Conference in 1999, John Mark Hicks wrote, “The purpose of this

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Max Lucado, quoted by Bobby Ross Jr., “Best-selling Christian Author Declares: ‘It's Not about Me’,” *The Daily Times* (Maryville, TN), March 6, 2004. Lucado said this in the context of discussing his congregation’s decision to drop “Church of Christ” from their name and to fully embrace some beliefs and practices which Churches of Christ have historically rejected.

¹⁰⁷F. LaGard Smith, *The Cultural Church: Winds of Change and the Call for a "New Hermeneutic"* (Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 1992), 13. Smith was a long-time Professor of Law at Pepperdine University’s School of Law (Pepperdine University is affiliated with Churches of Christ). He also served as “Scholar in Residence for Christian Studies” for five years at Lipscomb University (also affiliated with Churches of Christ), and has authored some thirty law-related and Christian books ranging from devotionals to works on biblical doctrine and social issues.

paper is to survey Calvin's doctrine of the church in the context of his search for the true visible church in order to make some contemporary observations about the current 'identity crisis' of the Churches of Christ."¹⁰⁸ And in 2001 (and again in 2005) David Burks, president of Churches of Christ-affiliated Harding University, wrote an article in the university's quarterly magazine in which he summarized his eight core beliefs. As he discussed his core belief that "Christ's church is distinctive and undenominational" he wrote, "Much is said these days about the identity crisis in churches of Christ. Now, more than ever, we must speak boldly and clearly about our Scripture-shaped convictions regarding the church."¹⁰⁹

The Identity Crisis in Churches of Christ

A fundamental historic belief among Churches of Christ is that the New Testament contains a general pattern of beliefs and practices to which every congregation must conform. Some of the specific details of that general pattern which have historically distinguished Churches of Christ from most other church groups include the necessity baptism for salvation and kingdom fellowship, a cappella praise in the worship assembly, male leadership in the assembly (expressed through men alone filling individual speaking roles¹¹⁰), autonomous local churches which are elder-led, and the

¹⁰⁸John Mark Hicks, "In Search of the True Visible Church: Historical and Theological Considerations," paper presented at the Lipscomb University Christian Scholars Conference, Nashville, TN, July 1999. Hicks is a Professor of Bible and Theology in Lipscomb University's Hazelip School of Theology.

¹⁰⁹David Burks, "Re-Examining Our Core Beliefs," *Harding Magazine*, Winter 2006, 15. Burks resigned from the presidency of Harding University in June of 2013 after serving for twenty-six years in that role. He began his new role as Chancellor the same month.

¹¹⁰See p. 50n28.

observance of the Lord's Supper each Lord's day.

It is now widely recognized within Churches of Christ, however, that many members no longer consider those historically embraced ecclesiological positions to be beliefs and practices which should be preserved and defended. In other words, many members have now concluded that those beliefs and practices are not really important.

When John Ellas, the director of the Center for Church Growth and an adjunct instructor at both the Harding School of Theology and Abilene Christian University (both affiliated with Churches of Christ), was asked his thoughts about the adoption of instrumental praise by a few Churches of Christ in recent years, his assessment was that it is "a small trend" that is tied to a much larger trend.¹¹¹ "A much larger trend," he said, "is the willingness to reevaluate previous theological positions, and a growing number of members are coming to very different conclusions about numerous church practices."¹¹²

In the same article Mac Lynn, a longtime church statistician and Bible professor in Churches of Christ-affiliated colleges and universities, agreed with Ellas. The article reported that Lynn "sees a shift in church attitudes of which instrumental music is only one indicator." As noted in chapter 1, Lynn went on to say,

Many churches are less concerned with historic markers that distinguished Churches of Christ. A half century ago, those indicators of true Christian practice included a cappella music, baptism for the remission of sins, weekly communion, church organization and men in leadership. Today the distinctives are eroding, as the culture impacts the churches. Most of the markers are still in place, but the attitude toward their essentiality has changed.¹¹³

¹¹¹Lindy Adams, "Instrumental Worship: Isolated or Key Trend?" *The Christian Chronicle*, September 19, 2003.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Ibid.

This eroding commitment toward many of the historic ecclesiological positions of Churches of Christ can be seen as influential leaders on both sides of this theological divide lobby for their respective convictions. David Burks, for instance, would represent the thinking of those who believe that the historic doctrinal emphases of Churches of Christ should be preserved and defended.

Twice over a five-year period this long-time president of Harding University published an article in the university's quarterly magazine which emphasized his core beliefs and commitments. Here is how it began:

About five years ago, I wrote an article in this magazine summarizing my goals for the coming year. At that time, I shared my conviction that the most enduring aspects about the University will not be our buildings or our endowment. Rather they will be the spiritual truths we hold and the spiritual legacy we leave behind. . . . the foundation of all we do here must be our faithful obedience to God. In the spirit of that realization, I want to share with you again eight core beliefs to which I am committed and on which Harding University stands.¹¹⁴

The fourth of Burks' eight core beliefs was "Christ's church is distinctive and undenominational." Here is his explanation of what that means:

Much is said these days about the identity crisis in churches of Christ. Now, more than ever, we must speak boldly and clearly about our Scripture-shaped convictions regarding the church. We continually seek to be the church we read about in the New Testament. While no single congregation today will ever reach perfection—just as no congregation in the New Testament did—we strive toward the ideal that the early church pursued. In the face of pressures to become simply one more denomination among the rest, we must continue to proclaim that "there is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). *Our commitment to the New Testament church compels us to teach, with a humble and gracious spirit, such neglected concepts as congregational autonomy, a cappella music in worship, the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, and the distinctive roles of men and women in the Christian assembly.*¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴David Burks, "Re-examining Our Core Beliefs" *Harding Magazine*, Winter 2006, 14.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 15. Emphasis added.

The fifth of Burks' eight core beliefs is that "Baptism is essential," and he explained it as follows:

Baptism, as an essential part of our faith-response to Jesus, is a subject about which there is growing confusion today. While almost everyone among us takes "a high view of baptism," some teach that it is merely an outward expression of an inner salvation already granted. In contrast to that, we believe that baptism is a participation in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:4) and is, consequently, the place where and the time when God declares our sins forgiven (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Galatians 3:27). We do not presume to be the judge of anyone's salvation, but we humbly seek to "speak where the Bible speaks." Though our teaching about baptism has often set us at odds with the religious world around us, we must proclaim it faithfully.¹¹⁶

Another well-known, influential voice in Churches of Christ who would share Burks' commitment to the historic doctrinal emphases of Churches of Christ is LaGard Smith. Best known as the compiler and narrator of the *The Daily Bible* (NIV in chronological order) and its companion volume, *The Daily Bible Devotional*, Smith has spent a lifetime teaching both law and religion at universities affiliated with Churches of Christ. When interviewed by *The Christian Chronicle*¹¹⁷ in 2001, Smith was asked, "Imagine that you have the undivided attention of every member of churches of Christ for 10 minutes. What do you say?" In part, here was his answer:

Hold fast to the absolute essentiality of baptism as a prerequisite for forgiveness, salvation, kingdom fellowship. It's the one doctrinal issue that we have understood in a way that others have not. That view of baptism is unique to us but is true to Scripture. And do not let go of a cappella singing, hymnbooks, four-part harmony, and centuries of majestic hymnody. In one generation, we are about to lose all of those things. I do believe that a cappella singing is God's choice for his children. . . . Finally, I think we need to seriously re-examine whether or not we are restoration people, as we claim. We need to seriously reconsider whether we have

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷*The Christian Chronicle* is, according to their website, a monthly newspaper "which seeks to inform, inspire, and unite Churches of Christ worldwide." Their offices are located on the campus of Oklahoma Christian University in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma ("About The Christian Chronicle," *The Christian Chronicle*, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.christianchronicle.org/about-us>).

truly restored New Testament Christianity. What I'm calling for these days is radical restoration, both in terms of the church and the Christian lifestyle.¹¹⁸

On the other side of the theological aisle have been men like best-selling Christian author Max Lucado. To quote one Associated Press writer,

To millions of readers, he's a writer whose personal anecdotes help connect ordinary Christians to God. To thousands at his church, he's an honest, humble preacher. But to some within the Churches of Christ, Max Lucado is an errant theologian whose positions on baptism and instrumental music have strayed too far from the faith's literalist following of the New Testament. . . . Howard Norton, editor of *Church and Family* magazine, published by Church of Christ-affiliated Harding University in Searcy, Ark., said Lucado is a longtime friend. "He's kind and considerate and generous and all those wonderful things you can say about him," Norton said. "Having said that . . . he has really disappointed a lot of us in the direction that he has taken the church and in some of the things that he has said."¹¹⁹

The article went on to describe how Lucado and the congregation he serves have diverged in recent years from two historic doctrinal positions of most Churches of Christ:

Most Churches of Christ teach that baptism by immersion is an integral part of salvation—and the vast majority believe the Bible prohibits instrumental music in worship services, permitting only a cappella singing. While Lucado views baptism as important, he suggests it's not essential for redemption. His church allows instrumental music in some services. And in October, Oak Hills dropped the "Church of Christ" from its name—an effort to reach people hesitant to attend a Church of Christ.¹²⁰

Unlike Lucado, however, more and more within Churches of Christ are rejecting many of the historic doctrinal landmarks of Churches of Christ while still

¹¹⁸LaGard Smith, "A Conversation with LaGard Smith," interview by Ted Parks, *The Christian Chronicle*, April 20, 2001.

¹¹⁹Bobby Ross, Jr., "Best-selling Christian Author Declares: 'It's Not About Me'," *The Daily Times* (Maryville, TN), March 6, 2004.

¹²⁰Ibid.

wanting to maintain affiliation with the fellowship. One such church, the Richland Hills Church of Christ in North Richland Hills, Texas, was the subject of a recent story in *The Christian Chronicle*. It began:

Each edition of *Churches of Christ in the United States* contains a chart of congregations with the largest weekly attendance. . . . Conspicuously absent from the new directory is the congregation that has occupied the top spot on the list since 2000—the Richland Hills Church of Christ in Texas. In the past six months, the Richland Hills church averaged between 4,100 and 4,200 people combined in its three weekend services But the Texas church was one of 21 congregations omitted from the latest edition of the directory for using instrumental music in at least one Sunday morning service.¹²¹

The executive minister for the Richland Hills congregation, Mike Washburn, said he is concerned that church members will see Richland Hills’ exclusion as a sign that the church has broken ties with its fellowship. But “that’s not the case,” he said, noting Richland Hills’ involvement with a cappella churches, ministries and schools associated with Churches of Christ. He continued, “we have a great love for the people in our heritage. We want to be a part of this heritage.”¹²²

Not only have the historic positions regarding baptism and instrumental music been increasingly challenged and changing in Churches of Christ, but the historic position on men’s and women’s roles in the church assembly is increasingly being challenged and changing as well. Historically, Churches of Christ have understood the New Testament to restrict individual speaking roles in the public assembly to men; they have historically understood the New Testament to teach that God calls men alone to

¹²¹Erik Tryggestad, “Churches in No Man’s Land,” *The Christian Chronicle*, February 2009. Tryggestad reports that 17 of the 21 Churches of Christ who were omitted from the latest edition of the directory “are entirely instrumental” and, quoting the volume’s compiler, “many of the entirely-instrumental churches have cut ties with Churches of Christ.”

¹²²Ibid.

speak to the gathered church as a permanent, visual expression of His will for male headship and female submission among His people.¹²³

Patrick Mead is fairly representative of those whose thinking on this matter is no longer in line with the traditional position. A few years ago this popular conference speaker, blogger and pulpit minister of the 1,000-plus member Rochester Church of Christ in Rochester, Michigan revealed in his evolution away from some traditional doctrinal positions found in Churches of Christ, particularly regarding women's roles in the church assembly and instrumental worship. He wrote,

It took me twenty years of Bible study, listening, prayer, and searching before I was able to move myself and others away from that mindset. By the grace of God . . . I watched these last few weeks as my 24 year old daughter read scripture in our worship. I teared up repeatedly as I watched her sing praises to God with passion and deep, deep faith on our praise team. She is free in Christ. Kid's from all over the Midwest came to be a part of this year's youth rally. Many came, expressly, because they heard there is freedom here. They laughed, played games, and sang their hearts out complete with raucous clapping, shouts, and few twirls now and then. Young girls saw women who weren't afraid to speak, pray, and teach. . . . They worshiped with Salient—instrumental—and with Chris Lindsay and the praise

¹²³Well-known scholar Everett Ferguson, who spent more than half a century teaching in Churches of Christ-affiliated universities, reflected the traditional view of Churches of Christ when he wrote, "What specifically are women's roles in the congregational meeting of the church? In the assembly women do the things commanded of each Christian. These activities would include singing. Ephesians 5:18-20, 'Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (to one another), singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.' These instructions apply to everyone (men are not the only ones to avoid drunkenness) and 'at all times,' so including the times of assembly. Women would join the congregational 'Amen' accompanying prayer (1 Cor. 14:16). . . . The women, therefore, participate in the group activities of the congregation. The principle of joint participation expressed in these verses would cover unison scripture readings, unison prayer (e.g., reciting the 'Lord's prayer' or other set prayer), unison confessions of faith, and other joint vocal expressions. What the whole congregation does together includes women. Individual activities must be evaluated separately. Individual activities are not the same as group participation" (Everett Ferguson, *Women in the Church* [Chickasha, OK: Yeomen Press, 2003], 10-11).

Ferguson goes on to examine two passages—1 Cor 14:33-40 and 1 Tim 2:1-15—to argue that God has prohibited women from filling all individual speaking roles in the assembly. Historically in Churches of Christ, this prohibition has included making announcements, reading Scripture to the congregation, leading the church in prayers, song leading, giving devotional messages, offering testimonies (although testimonies are rare in the vast majority of Churches of Christ), and sharing communion reflections.

team—a cappella. They were equally enthusiastic in both.¹²⁴

Like Mead, many in Churches of Christ are now embracing and celebrating a more inclusive role for women in the church assembly. Individual speaking roles which historically have been off-limits to women when the whole church gathers are now being filled by women—roles such as leading the congregation in prayer, reading Scripture to the church, and presiding over the Lord’s Supper. It is no longer unusual to visit the website of a Church of Christ and find a statement declaring, like Mead, their move away from longtime practices regarding matters such as women’s roles and instrumental praise.

One such congregation is the Maury Hills Church of Christ in Columbia, Tennessee. Concerning “Women in the Church,” their website makes the following statement:

In September of 2010, our church completed a seven week study of this topic. This followed more than two years of study by our church’s leadership. As a result of our conclusions, some of our practices in the worship assembly have changed to be more inclusive of women. Our belief is that women can participate in any activity of the assembly and serve in any capacity of the church with the exception of serving as an elder or senior minister. This position is explained thoroughly in the following resources which include the written versions of the sermons.¹²⁵

And regarding “Music and Worship” the church website makes this statement:

In September of 2013 the shepherds asked Russ to present a 3-part series on the use of instrumental music in worship. Specifically, the series dealt with why our leadership felt that it was time to begin offering both a cappella and instrumental services at Maury Hills. It centered on three questions. Why do we think it's time? Is it Biblical? And how do we make this change while maintaining unity in

¹²⁴Patrick Mead, “If I Die Tonight . . .” *Wineskins*, accessed October 29, 2014, <http://patrickmead.net/?p=282>.

¹²⁵“Women in the Church,” Maury Hills Church (Columbia, TN), accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.mauryhills.com/#1womens-role/cwk5>.

our families and the church? The text version of each message is below and the audio can be accessed by clicking the link in parentheses.¹²⁶

In March of 2014 their website proclaimed the “huge success” of their “new instrumental worship experience” with this statement: “It has been a long road but our new instrumental worship experience began on March 23. It was a huge success! This is an exciting time for our church and for our community.”¹²⁷

As far as women’s roles in the public assembly among Churches of Christ is concerned, there is now a website owned and maintained by a member of a Church of Christ which actively promotes egalitarianism by providing an up-to-date list of “Gender Inclusive and Egalitarian Churches in the Church of Christ Heritage.”¹²⁸ Currently there are fifty-seven “Churches of Christ” on the list (in the United States), among which are several large, influential congregations. The introduction to the list, and criteria for being included, is as follows:

The churches listed below have all become more inclusive to participation by women in the worship, leadership, ministries, and teaching. Each congregation has decided through much study how inclusive they would like to be. Some congregations are inclusive only in the worship and teaching ministries while others have removed all barriers to women being able to use the gifts they have received from God. Some of the churches listed are churches with a strong Church of Christ

¹²⁶“Music and Worship,” Maury Hills Church (Columbia, TN), accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.mauryhills.com/#!music-and-worship/cq93>. The website goes on to explain, “Maury Hills comes from a long tradition of a cappella (voices only) worship. This tradition is deep and allows for the human voice to express praise and love for God in worship through deep and very rich harmonies. Many in our community value and prefer this style of worship. We also know that a large part of our own church and the community better expresses their love and worship to God with instrumental praise. Maury Hills is a church that truly believes that we should allow the Gospel to be irresistible to all and so we worship God in various ways.”

¹²⁷“Huge Success,” Maury Hills Church (Columbia, TN), accessed November 7, 2014, <http://www.mauryhills.com/#!attend-worship/c1b1v>.

¹²⁸“Gender Inclusive and Egalitarian Churches in the Church of Christ Heritage,” Where the Spirit Leads, accessed November 12, 2014, http://www.wherethespiritleads.org/gender_inclusive_churches.htm.

tradition, who associate with Churches of Christ, but do not have Church of Christ in their name.

The guidelines developed for listing these churches are as follows. If the answer to one or more questions is YES, then I will happily include congregation in my directory.

a) Are women welcome to use their gifts in leading public worship (leading prayer, giving communion talks, leading singing, and/or reading scripture)?

b) Are women welcome to use their gifts in proclamation by preaching from the pulpit?

c) Are women welcome to use their gifts and knowledge in biblical instruction, to teach all age groups regardless of gender in bible classes?

d) Are women welcome to serve in leadership positions such as pulpit minister, worship leader, deacon, and elder (*not including positions such as children's minister or women's minister)?

e) Does the church publish a clear statement of purpose to be an egalitarian church or gender inclusive church on their website?

*We prefer not to list churches where the only position for a woman is the children's or women's minister; though this often represents a small step forward, many churches that presently have these staff positions do not allow women to serve or participate in any other part of worship, teaching, or leadership, and thus cannot be characterized as gender inclusive, equal, or just.¹²⁹

At the moment, most Churches of Christ on that list follow the Maury Hills model. That is, while they have opened up most speaking roles in public worship to women, as well as many leadership positions, they still limit the role of an elder and pulpit preacher to men. For instance, the "Minister of the Word" at the Rochester Church of Christ in Rochester, Michigan recently released this statement:

Rochester Church is committed to nurturing and empowering every disciple to most faithfully utilize their gifts in service to Christ, Christ's Kingdom, the church, and the world. To this end, women regularly use their gifts in our worship assemblies by reading scripture, leading prayer, giving communion talks, leading singing as a part

¹²⁹Ibid.

of the praise team and in solos, and participating in dramas. Within our adult Bible classes, women serve as part of our teaching teams, and regularly teach adult Bible classes of both genders. In addition, women are regularly invited to co-preach alongside the Minister of the Word. While women do serve as Ministry Leaders and Pastoral Care Ministers (we do not have “Deacons” as an office currently, although, were it added, women would certainly be included in that office), *as of now (Sept, 2013) women are not given the role of Shepherd (elder) or Minister of the Word.* While not fully egalitarian at this point, we are committed to justice and inclusion and growth as we live out the gifting and blessing of God together (emphasis added).¹³⁰

Similarly, this announcement was recently made by the Senior Minister of the Woodmont Hills Church of Christ in Nashville:

Woodmont Hills church announced a policy change today . . . *They now allow women to serve in all roles other than elder, pulpit minister, worship leader.* They can be other types of ministers, serve as deacons, lead prayers, read scripture, speak and give devotional messages, serve communion, serve on praise team, teach adult bible classes.¹³¹

Along the same lines, the Preaching Minister of the East Sunshine Church of Christ in Springfield, Missouri recently shared their policy on gender roles:

At this time, East Sunshine's leadership has determined that elders and the preaching minister will be roles for males, while all other ministries and leadership positions include both men and women. . . . At East Sunshine, men and women pray; read Scripture; share reflections and pray at the communion table; serve communion; participate in praise team, dramas, testimonies, and announcements, etc. We have women ministers, ministry leaders (our term for deacons), and Bible class teachers/facilitators, and women have participated in the same kind of teams/committees that men have been a part of.¹³²

As monumental as this current shift in women’s roles is among Churches of Christ, an increasing number of members—and congregations—are not satisfied with being more gender inclusive but still restricting the roles of elder and preacher to men.

¹³⁰Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹³¹Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹³²Ibid. Emphasis added.

Mark Love, for instance, is an influential voice among Churches of Christ who has recently taken a public stand for full-blown egalitarianism.

Love, who serves as the Dean of the School of Theology and Ministry at Churches of Christ-affiliated Rochester College in Rochester, Michigan, began a personal blog on October 23, 2013, with these words: “I am for full gender equality in congregational practice. Period. Everything. Preach. Teach. Eldering. I sojourn within a tradition where this is far, far from the normative practice.”¹³³

While few in Churches of Christ have joined Love in such an open promotion of full-blown egalitarianism, it seems likely that many, if not most, who advocate for being more gender inclusive are on a theological trajectory that will end at full egalitarianism. This seems to be a reasonable conclusion based on the language used by many churches to announce their more gender inclusive policy in church life.

For instance, as noted above, the representative for the Rochester congregation said “as of now [September 2013] women are not given the role of Shepherd [elder] or Minister of the Word.” The words, “as of now” seem to clearly suggest that just being a gender inclusive congregation is not their final destination.

Also, the wording of the representative of the East Sunshine congregation, which was also noted above, seems to suggest the same thing: “At this time, East Sunshine’s leadership has determined that elders and the preaching minister will be roles for males.” The phrase “at this time” seems to clearly suggest that their two present exceptions in their gender inclusive policy are not written in stone.

¹³³Mark Love, “Why I don’t leave,” *Dei-Liberations Blog*, October 23, 2013, accessed October 19, 2014, <http://dei-liberations.com/2013/10/23/why-i-dont-leave-even-though/>.

Those three words in those two policies—“as of now” and “at this time”—seem to make it clear that when the time is deemed right, these congregations will take that final step into full-blown egalitarianism.

Another signal that a full-blown egalitarianism seems imminent in more and more Churches of Christ is the fact that Lipscomb University has recently accepted their first female preaching major. Patrick Mead, who was referenced earlier as a leading proponent of greater gender inclusion in the corporate assembly, recently made this public announcement: “Just agreed to serve as mentor to a preaching major at Lipscomb this fall. The first and only female preaching major in their history. I’m stoked. Freedom is sweet but it isn’t free. Let’s do this.”¹³⁴

Conclusion

For several years now organized religion has been in flux all across the American church landscape. In most denominations and church groups there was, at one time in their history, a doctrinal consensus that mattered to both leadership and membership; that is, most congregations within a particular denomination or fellowship generally believed and practiced the same things, and they taught their members and their children that those doctrines mattered.

The current cultural reality, however, as this chapter has shown, is that there is often significant disagreement over core beliefs in most denominations, and local churches in the same denomination or fellowship often look very different. As this

¹³⁴Mead posted this announcement on his personal Facebook page on April 13, 2014, accessed November 1, 2014.

chapter has also shown, this current cultural reality is playing out in Churches of Christ with the same intensity as it is in virtually every other church group.

Many members of Churches of Christ today are less concerned with many of the doctrinal markers that have historically distinguished Churches of Christ from other church groups. Those markers include baptism as essential for the remission of sins and kingdom fellowship, a cappella-only worship in the corporate assembly, male leadership in the church assembly, and elder-led autonomous congregations. The result has been a much publicized and much discussed identity crisis within the fellowship.

For church leaders in Churches of Christ who still embrace the validity of restoration as a theological principle, and who consequently are convinced that those historic doctrinal markers are biblically-informed conclusions which still matter, there is a real sense of urgency to strengthen the doctrinal foundations of their members and recover their restoration heritage. If this task is not vigorously pursued, many believe that authentic restoration voices will seldom be heard within a generation.

CHAPTER 4

ELEMENTS AND SUMMARY OF THE MINISTRY RESEARCH PROJECT

The ministry research project consisted of two parts: (1) a fifteen-week sermon series which explored several beliefs and practices which have historically distinguished Churches of Christ from other church groups, and (2) a self-published book to supplement the sermon series. The book was essentially a collection of transcripts of the sermon series.

The elements of the project consisted of a Pre-Series Beliefs and Practices Survey (henceforth referred to as the Pre-Series Survey), a Post-Series Beliefs and Practices Survey (henceforth referred to as the Post-Series Survey), a short Book Questionnaire for members to give some general impressions about the supplemental self-published book, and an Evaluation Rubric for a qualified evaluation board to assess the supplemental book.

These elements were based on the project's three goals: (1) to persuade the members that certain historic beliefs and practices of the Concord Road Church of Christ are biblically-informed convictions which should be preserved and defended, (2) equip members with the knowledge to persuasively explain those beliefs and practices to others, and (3) develop a written resource which would assist in sustaining the first two goals. Each of the elements helped to measure the effectiveness in achieving these goals.

Scheduling of the Elements

The sermon series began on September 15 and continued through December

22. The timeline for the project's elements was as follows:

1. September 1, 2013 – Distributed the Pre-Series Survey
2. September 2, 2013 – Mailed the self-published book and Evaluation Rubric to each member of the evaluation board
3. September 15, 2013 – Deadline for returning the Pre-Series Survey
4. September 15, 2013 – Began the sermon series
5. December 22, 2013 – Ended the sermon series
6. December 22, 2013 – Distributed the Post-Series Survey and made available the Book Questionnaire
7. December 31, 2013 – Deadline for the evaluation board to return the Evaluation Rubric
8. January 12, 2014 – Deadline for returning the Post-Series Survey and the Book Questionnaire

The total duration of the project, from the distribution of the Pre-Series Survey until the deadline for returning the Post-Series Survey was nineteen weeks.

Distributing and Collecting the Pre-Series Survey

Two Sundays prior to the start of the sermon series (September 1, 2013), the Pre-Series Survey was distributed to the congregation by volunteers at the conclusion of the Sunday morning service. The purpose of the survey was to assess two things among members sixteen years old and up—their level of commitment to selected beliefs and practices which have historically been taught in Churches of Christ, and their level of confidence in being able to adequately explain those beliefs and practices to others.

The survey consisted of a single 8 ½ x 11 page with survey items on both front and back. Thirteen statements were made on the survey, and participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement according to the following Likert item:

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
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Here are the thirteen statements with which participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement:¹³⁵

1. Immersion in water is a necessary condition for receiving salvation.
2. A cappella-only praise is God's plan for His church when they assemble for worship.
3. Only *male* Christians should fill individual speaking roles when the whole church assembles.
4. Every congregation of God's people must assemble *every* Sunday.
5. Every congregation should observe the Lord's Supper *every* Sunday.
6. The Lord's Supper should be eaten *only* on Sunday.
7. God desires each congregation to be led by a group (more than one) of spiritually mature *male* Christians called elders, shepherds, or overseers.
8. I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that baptism by immersion is necessary for salvation.
9. I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that *a cappella*-only praise in church is God's plan.
10. I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that only *male* Christians should fill individual speaking roles in the church assembly.
11. I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that God's people must assemble together *every* Sunday.

¹³⁵See appendix 1 (p. 98) for the full Pre-Series Beliefs and Practices Survey.

12. I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that the Lord's Supper should be observed *every* Sunday and *only* every Sunday.
13. I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every church should be led by a group of *male* Christians usually called elders.

To ensure that there was sufficient time to distribute, explain, and promote participation in the survey, while also ensuring that worshipers would be dismissed at the normal time, the regular activities of the assembly were abbreviated by approximately fifteen minutes. I chose to distribute the surveys while the congregation was still assembled because I felt more members were likely to participate in the project if the survey was placed directly in their hands as opposed to simply telling them where to pick one up.

For those not in attendance, copies of the survey were made available at different locations throughout the building, and follow-up announcements containing details about the survey were published in the church bulletin for the next two weeks. There were also brief reminders about the survey from the pulpit during each Sunday morning service, Sunday evening service, and Wednesday evening service between the initial distribution of the survey and the beginning of the sermon series.

When the survey was distributed to the congregation, the purpose of it was explained, basic instructions for filling it out were given, and the deadline for dropping it in a designated survey box (September 15, 2013) was announced. At the same time, some important information was passed along which I hoped would encourage participation, such as the very small time investment required to fill out the survey and the complete anonymity of participants.

Participants were told not to write their names on the survey since people are

more likely to give honest answers to sensitive questions if they can remain anonymous, and asking someone to disclose their views concerning long held beliefs and practices of a church group with whom they identify can be very sensitive. Questioning long-held beliefs and practices can be very risky. It can make one susceptible to being viewed with suspicion, or even result in a person's being ostracized from a group. The pressure to conform, then, can easily prejudice people's answers about the teaching of their own church group if their identity is not protected.

Potential survey participants were then told that they would also be asked to fill out a second survey following the fifteen-week sermon series—a Post-Series Beliefs and Practices Survey. They were told that the second survey was intended to see if their perceived level of commitment to certain beliefs and practices had changed as a result of the sermon series. The second survey was also used to see if their perceived level of confidence in being able to explain those doctrinal positions to others had changed as well.

Since no participant was to write his or her name on the survey, it was explained that the way each person's Pre-Series Survey and Post-Series Survey would be compared is through a three-digit survey number which appeared in the upper right corner of the Pre-Series Survey. Members were told that this survey number was uniquely theirs and they would need to write it on the second survey—the Post-Series Survey—after the sermon series was concluded.

Members were then offered three suggestions to help them keep track of their unique survey number, and were strongly encouraged to follow one of these suggestions. First, on each survey was a small Post-it note on which the survey number was written.

Members were encouraged to immediately remove that Post-it note and place it in the front of their Bible or in their wallet. A second suggestion was for members to immediately take a picture of their survey number with their cell phone. The third and fourth suggestions were for members to immediately take their cell phone and either enter their survey number as a December 22 appointment on their calendar (the date of the last lesson in the sermon series) or make a memo of their survey number using their memo app.

Distributing, Collecting, and Analyzing the Post-Series Survey

On the day the sermon series concluded (December 22, 2013), volunteers distributed the Post-Series Survey to the congregation at the conclusion of the morning assembly. Unlike the Pre-Series Survey which consisted of a single 8 ½ x 11 page, the Post-Series Survey consisted of *two* 8 ½ x 11 pages with survey items on both front and back. The extra page was necessary to accommodate an additional question which appeared after each of the thirteen statements on the survey. More will be said about this additional question in a moment.

When the survey was distributed to the congregation, instructions for filling it out were given, and the deadline for dropping it in a designated survey box (January 12, 2014) was announced. Surveys were also made available at different locations throughout the building, and follow-up announcements were made from the pulpit and published in the church bulletin until the deadline for returning the survey.

Two items were especially emphasized when the congregation was given instructions for filling out their Post-Series Survey. First, members were told that they

must write their unique three-digit survey number in the space provided in the upper right corner of the survey. It was stressed that any survey submitted without this number could not be used and would have to be thrown away. Members were then reminded that this three-digit number should be in one of four places: (1) on a small Post-it note in the front of their Bible or in their wallet, (2) as a saved photo in their cell phone, (3) a saved appointment on December 22 on their cell phone calendar, or (4) as a saved memo in their cell phone.

The second item that was emphasized during the congregational instruction phase of the Post-Series Survey was the presence of the aforementioned mentioned additional question that was not on the Pre-Series Survey. The attention of members was directed to this question which appeared after each statement in the survey and which was highlighted through the use of a red font. That question read as follows: “If you ‘Strongly Agreed’ with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel your commitment to that belief is stronger after the sermon series or remains about the same?” Directly below that question, participants were given two options from which to choose: “Commitment is stronger” or “Commitment remains about the same.”¹³⁶

The rationale for including this additional highlighted question after each statement was as follows. As survey participants filled out their Pre-Series Survey, I assumed many would strongly agree with many of the doctrinal statements on the survey. After the sermon series, however, I assumed that some may actually feel more committed to some of these same doctrinal statements. Without this additional question on the Post-

¹³⁶On the section of the Post-Series Survey intended to assess one’s confidence in explaining

Series Survey, there would have been no way for participants to express their increased commitment since strongly agree was the highest evaluation of each doctrinal statement on both surveys. This additional question, in other words, allowed participants who circled strongly agree with certain statements on the Pre-Series Survey to acknowledge that they grew in their commitment to those same doctrines or practices as a result of the sermon series.¹³⁷

On January 12, 2014 the completed Post-Series surveys were collected, matched with the corresponding Pre-Series surveys, and then assessed to determine the total percentage of respondents who reported an increase in their commitment to each doctrine which was studied, as well as the total number of respondents who reported an increase in their confidence to explain those doctrinal positions. In addition, the percentage of reported increases in commitment and confidence was also calculated for the following specific age groups: (1) 16-24 years, (2) 25-39 years, (3) 40-54 years, (4) 55-66 years, and (5) 67 years and up. The findings were then presented in statistical summary tables.

The Supplemental, Self-Published Book

I wrote and self-published the supplemental book prior to preaching the sermon series. Titled *Churches in the Shape of Scripture: Churches of Christ and the Quest to be*

these beliefs and practices to others, the wording of the question was slightly different: “If you ‘Strongly Agreed’ with the previous statement in *both* surveys, do you feel *more confident* in your ability to explain this belief after the sermon series or is your confidence about the same as it was before the sermon series?” And the two options from which survey participants could choose were “More confident” or “Confidence remains about the same.”

¹³⁷See appendix 2 (p. 101) for the full Post-Series Beliefs and Practices Survey.

More Than Just Another Evangelical Church, the book consisted of seven chapters with the following titles:

1. “New Testament-Shaped Churches”
2. “Salvation and Church Membership in the Shape of the New Testament”
3. “Musical Praise in the Assembly in the Shape of the New Testament”
4. “The Lord's Supper and the Lord's Day in the Shape of the New Testament”
5. “Gender Roles in the Assembly in the Shape of the New Testament”
6. “Church Organization and Leadership in the Shape of the New Testament”
7. “Myths and Misconceptions about Churches of Christ”

I wrote the book in a conversational style, keeping the tone informal and vocabulary colloquial. In other words, the chapters, by design, do not read like an academic paper or report. Finally, as pointed out earlier, the book was essentially a collection of transcripts of the sermons which were presented. With the exception of the chapter dealing with salvation and church membership, each chapter's content was covered in two sermons; the salvation and church membership chapter was covered in three sermons.¹³⁸

Distributing and Collecting the Book Questionnaire

The day the sermon series was completed, an invitation was extended from the pulpit for members who had read the supplemental book to anonymously fill out a very short Book Questionnaire concerning some general impressions about it. They were told

¹³⁸See appendix 5 (p. 111) for a sample of the book *Churches in the Shape of Scripture* (the appendix contains the first two chapters of the book).

how long the questionnaire would take to fill out (five minutes or less), where they could pick one up, where to turn it in, and the deadline for turning it in (January 12, 2014).

This questionnaire was intended to assess the impressions of “regular” church members regarding the book’s readability and its potential to help people better understand and explain the beliefs and practices discussed in it. Participants were asked to answer the following four questions using each question’s corresponding Likert item:¹³⁹

1. How would you describe the readability of the book?

Very Hard	Somewhat Hard	Neither Hard nor Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy
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2. How helpful do you feel the book is in clearly explaining the historic beliefs and practices of most Churches of Christ?

Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	Not so Helpful	Not at all Helpful
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3. How helpful do you feel the book will be as a tool to help you explain the historic beliefs and practices of most Churches of Christ to others?

Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	Not so Helpful	Not at all Helpful
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4. How likely are you to recommend the book to others?

Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Neither Likely nor Unlikely	Not so Likely	Not at all Likely
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Distributing and Collecting the Evaluation Rubric

While the sermon series was being presented, the supplemental self-published

¹³⁹See appendix 3 (p. 105) for the full Book Questionnaire.

book which had been developed and produced was sent to four individuals for evaluation. These four individuals constituted an evaluation board and none were members of the Concord Road congregation. Two were college Bible professors from Churches of Christ-affiliated universities and two were full-time ministers in other Churches of Christ who held at least a Master of Divinity and had been in full-time ministry for at least ten years.

Each member of the evaluation board was given an Evaluation Rubric with which to assess both their overall impression of the book as a tool for helping people understand and explain the distinctive doctrines of Churches of Christ, and their overall impression of each chapter. To assess their overall impression of the book they were asked to answer the same four questions which were asked on the Book Questionnaire. To assess their overall impression of each chapter, they were asked to rate the following five questions for each chapter as insufficient, requires attention, sufficient, or exemplary:¹⁴⁰

1. Has the author addressed the most pertinent biblical texts on this subject?
2. How would you rate the author's engagement with the Biblical texts which he addresses?
3. Is the flow of the author's arguments logical and appropriate to the subject being addressed?
4. How would you rate the thoroughness of the author's discussion of this subject?
5. How would you rate this chapter as an apologetic for the subject being addressed?

¹⁴⁰See appendix 4 (p. 106) for the full Evaluation Rubric.

Sermon Series Topics, Titles, and Content

The title of the sermon series was the same as the title of the supplemental book: *Churches in the Shape of Scripture*. The fifteen sermons in the series covered the following general topics: (1) the theological principle of restoration, (2) the meaning and purpose of baptism, (3) vocal-only praise in the church assembly, (4) weekly Sunday observance of the Lord's Supper, (5) male leadership in the church assembly, (6) church organization and government, and (7) myths and misconceptions about Churches of Christ. The individual titles of each sermon and a brief description of the content of each sermon were as follows:

1. "New Testament-Shaped Churches (Part 1)"—this lesson introduced the theological principle of restoration and emphasized its validity through multiple illustrations of the principle found in Scripture.
2. "New Testament-Shaped Churches (Part 2)"—this lesson explored the idea that the New Testament contains a general pattern of beliefs and practices that God expects each local congregation to follow.
3. "Salvation and Church Membership in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 1)"—this lesson began to examine what one must do to in order to be saved and added to God's covenant people (i.e., the church). The focus of this lesson was on the historic belief among Churches of Christ that baptism is the time when, and place where, God meets a penitent sinner, forgives his sins, gives him the Holy Spirit, and adds him to God's saved community (i.e., the church).
4. "Salvation and Church Membership in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 2)"—this lesson continued to examine what one must do in order to be saved and added to God's covenant people. The focus of this lesson was a close examination of the link between baptism and salvation that is found in the following New Testament passages: Matt 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:35; Acts 22:16; Rom 6:3-4; Gal 3:26-27; Col 2:11-13; and 1 Pet 3:21.
5. "Salvation and Church Membership in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 2)"—this lesson concluded our examination of what one must do in order to be saved and added to God's covenant people. The focus of this lesson was on the relationship of faith and baptism, immersion as the only proper mode of bible baptism, and believers as the only proper candidates for baptism.

6. “Musical Praise in the Assembly in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 1)”—this lesson began an examination of the historic practice among Churches of Christ of *a cappella*-only praise in the assembly. The focus of this lesson was on the evidence of church history which shows that vocal-only praise was the general practice of Christians for approximately the first twelve centuries of Christian history. The views of the Church Fathers, theologians from the early middle ages, the Reformers, and the Puritans were presented.
7. “Musical Praise in the Assembly in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 2)”—this lesson concluded an examination of the historic practice among Churches of Christ of *a cappella*-only praise in the assembly. The focus of this lesson was on the theological evidence for maintaining the historic Christian practice of vocal-only praise in the assembly. Principles from tabernacle worship, temple worship, and New Testament worship were discussed and applied.
8. “The Lord's Day and Lord's Supper in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 1)”—this lesson began an examination of the historic practice among Churches of Christ of meeting each Sunday and eating the Lord's Supper each Sunday (and only on Sundays). The focus of this lesson was on the importance of Sunday as the day on which God calls His people to meet together for worship and mutual edification. Both biblical and historical evidence were examined which supports the practice of Sunday worship.
9. “The Lord's Day and Lord's Supper in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 2)”—this lesson concluded an examination of the historic practice among Churches of Christ of meeting each Sunday and eating the Lord's Supper each Sunday (and only on Sundays). The focus of this lesson was on taking a close at the pattern of primitive Christianity to meet on the first day of every week, and to eat the Lord's Supper during those meetings. The lesson also focused on the meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper so that it will not wind up being a thoughtless Sunday ritual that neither pleases God nor blesses worshippers.
10. “Gender Roles in the Assembly in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 1)”—this lesson began an examination of the historic practice among Churches of Christ of male leadership in the church assembly. The focus of this lesson was on the biblical principle of male headship and female submission, and on one way that the New Testament seems to clearly teach that those principles are to be reflected and expressed among God's people—the practice of men alone speaking to the gathered church.
11. “Gender Roles in the Assembly in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 2)”—this lesson concluded our look at the historic practice among Churches of Christ of male leadership in the church assembly. The focus of this lesson was an examination of New Testament passages which seem to limit speaking roles in the church assembly to men as a visible, concrete sign of the principle of male headship.

12. “Church Organization and Leadership in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 1)”—this lesson began an examination of the historic practice among Churches of Christ of having a congregational form of church government, and congregational oversight by a plurality of male elders. The focus of this lesson was on explaining the different types of church organization and government found in the larger Christian community, and showing that the congregational model best fits the teaching of the New Testament.
13. “Church Organization and Leadership in the Shape of the New Testament (Part 2)”—this lesson concluded our examination of the historic practice among Churches of Christ of having a congregational form of church government, and congregational oversight by a plurality of male elders. The focus of this lesson was to take a closer look at how each local congregation in the New Testament was organized and governed. The particular emphasis of this lesson was on the two “offices” of the local church: elder and deacon. Both the work and qualifications of elders and deacons were explored.
14. “Myths and Misconceptions about Churches of Christ (Part 1)”—this lesson began to examine some of common things people may hear about Churches of Christ. The focus of this lesson was answering the following “charges”: (1) “Churches of Christ believe they are the only one going to heaven,” (2) “Churches of Christ are a cult,” (3) “Churches of Christ teach that a person is saved by works,” and (4) “Churches of Christ believe in baptismal regeneration.”
15. “Myths and Misconceptions about Churches of Christ (Part 2)”—this lesson concluded our examination of some of the common charges leveled against Churches of Christ. The focus of this lesson was answering the following charges: (1) “Churches of Christ are legalistic churches,” (2) “Churches of Christ treat women as second-class citizens,” and (3) “Churches of Christ are a denomination.”

CHAPTER 5
EVALUATION OF THE MINISTRY
RESEARCH PROJECT

Introduction

This chapter will evaluate the ministry research project primarily by evaluating its purpose and goals. In addition, strengths and weaknesses of the project will be assessed, and reflections—both theological and personal—will be offered. Finally, the question, “What would you do differently if you were to do the project again?” will be considered.

Evaluation of the Project’s Purpose

The purpose of this project was to equip the members of the Concord Road Church of Christ in Brentwood, Tennessee with a convictional understanding of doctrinal markers which have historically distinguished Churches of Christ from other church groups. In other words, it was to strengthen (or in some cases rebuild, or even build) people’s doctrinal foundations. More specifically, it was to strengthen their commitment to certain ecclesiological beliefs which have historically been emphasized among Churches of Christ as being essential to covenant faithfulness.

Did the project accomplish what it set out to do? The answer to that question is a resounding “yes,” and that conclusion is supported by the survey data which clearly shows that the specific goals of the project were not only met, but significantly exceeded.

Those goals, and the data which show they were met, are presented in the next section.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

As pointed out in chapter one, to accomplish the general purpose of strengthening doctrinal foundations, three specific goals were set: (1) persuade the members that certain historic beliefs and practices of Churches of Christ are biblically-informed convictions which should be preserved and defended, (2) equip the members with the knowledge to persuasively explain those beliefs and practices to others, and (3) develop a written resource which would assist in sustaining the first two goals.

Evaluation of the First Goal

To recap how the first goal was measured, members were given two surveys in which they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with seven doctrinal statements. One survey was given prior to a systematic fifteen-week sermon series on those doctrinal topics, and the other was given following the sermon series. An analysis of the surveys was then conducted to determine the percentage of survey participants that reported an increase in their level of agreement with each doctrinal statement following the sermon series.

There were 153 valid surveys collected. A valid survey was one in which a participant completed and submitted both the Pre-Series Survey and the Post-Series Survey. The Pre-Series Survey was completed and submitted by 283 members, which means that only about half of those participants (54 percent) completed and submitted the second survey. While it would have been desirable to have a higher percentage of

members complete and submit both surveys, the 153 valid surveys significantly surpassed the goal of having at least 100 valid surveys to analyze.

As was stated in the project proposal, the goal of strengthening the members' commitment to these particular doctrines would be considered met if an analysis of the surveys found that at least twenty percent of participants reported an increase in their level of agreement with each doctrinal statement on the Post-Series Survey.

With that said, the data in tables 1-6 (on the next six pages; pages 75-80) show that, as was said earlier, the first goal of the project was overwhelmingly met. The most significant numbers in each table are the numbers in the "Percent Change" column. These numbers represent the percentage of respondents whose level of agreement with the doctrinal statements on their Post-Series Survey was stronger than it was on their Pre-Series Survey.

As the summary tables show, not only was the first goal overwhelmingly met overall, but it was also overwhelmingly met within each age group. The age groups were broken down and analyzed as follows: (1) 16-24 years, (2) 25-39 years, (3) 40-54 years, (4) 55-66 years, and (5) 67 years and up.

The summary tables show that only one doctrinal statement had less than 20 percent of respondents report an increase in their level of agreement on the Post-Series Survey. That one doctrinal statement was "Every congregation of God's people must assemble every Sunday," and it was found among the 55-66 year old age group where only 10 percent of respondents reported an increase in their level of agreement. It is also significant to note that, beyond this lone exception, no less than 25 percent of respondents in all age groups indicated a stronger level of agreement with each doctrinal statement on

the Post-Series Survey.

Table 1. Commitment level change (all surveys)

<i>Doctrinal statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
Immersion in water is a necessary condition for receiving salvation.	153	54	35
A cappella-only praise is God's plan for His church when they assemble for worship.	153	78	51
Only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles when the whole church assembles.	153	59	39
Every congregation of God's people must assemble every Sunday.	153	39	26
Every congregation should observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday.	153	52	34
The Lord's Supper should be eaten only on Sunday.	153	53	35
God desires each congregation to be led by a group (more than one) of spiritually mature male Christians called elders, shepherds, or overseers.	153	62	41

Table 2. Commitment level change (16-24 year olds)

<i>Doctrinal statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
Immersion in water is a necessary condition for receiving salvation.	7	5	71
A cappella-only praise is God's plan for His church when they assemble for worship.	7	4	57
Only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles when the whole church assembles.	7	4	57
Every congregation of God's people must assemble every Sunday.	7	2	29
Every congregation should observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday.	7	4	57
The Lord's Supper should be eaten only on Sunday.	7	2	29
God desires each congregation to be led by a group (more than one) of spiritually mature male Christians called elders, shepherds, or overseers.	7	5	71

Table 3. Commitment level change (25-39 year olds)

<i>Doctrinal statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
Immersion in water is a necessary condition for receiving salvation.	27	7	26
A cappella-only praise is God's plan for His church when they assemble for worship.	27	17	63
Only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles when the whole church assembles.	27	9	33
Every congregation of God's people must assemble every Sunday.	27	9	33
Every congregation should observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday.	27	9	33
The Lord's Supper should be eaten only on Sunday.	27	11	41
God desires each congregation to be led by a group (more than one) of spiritually mature male Christians called elders, shepherds, or overseers.	27	12	44

Table 4. Commitment level change (40-54 year olds)

<i>Doctrinal statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
Immersion in water is a necessary condition for receiving salvation.	42	15	36
A cappella-only praise is God's plan for His church when they assemble for worship.	42	25	60
Only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles when the whole church assembles.	42	16	38
Every congregation of God's people must assemble every Sunday.	42	11	26
Every congregation should observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday.	42	15	36
The Lord's Supper should be eaten only on Sunday.	42	15	36
God desires each congregation to be led by a group (more than one) of spiritually mature male Christians called elders, shepherds, or overseers.	42	19	45

Table 5. Commitment level change (55-66 year olds)

<i>Doctrinal statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
Immersion in water is a necessary condition for receiving salvation.	20	6	30
A cappella-only praise is God's plan for His church when they assemble for worship.	20	7	35
Only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles when the whole church assembles.	20	5	25
Every congregation of God's people must assemble every Sunday.	20	2	10
Every congregation should observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday.	20	6	30
The Lord's Supper should be eaten only on Sunday.	20	5	25
God desires each congregation to be led by a group (more than one) of spiritually mature male Christians called elders, shepherds, or overseers.	20	8	40

Table 6. Commitment level change (67+ year olds)

<i>Doctrinal statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
Immersion in water is a necessary condition for receiving salvation.	44	14	32
A cappella-only praise is God's plan for His church when they assemble for worship.	44	19	43
Only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles when the whole church assembles.	44	18	41
Every congregation of God's people must assemble every Sunday.	44	12	27
Every congregation should observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday.	44	14	32
The Lord's Supper should be eaten only on Sunday.	44	15	34
God desires each congregation to be led by a group (more than one) of spiritually mature male Christians called elders, shepherds, or overseers.	44	13	30

Evaluation of the Second Goal

The project's second goal of equipping members with the knowledge to explain the historic doctrinal distinctives of Churches of Christ was measured using the same two surveys. On those surveys, six statements were made to assess each participant's level of confidence in being able to adequately explain each of the doctrines which were examined in the sermon series. Following the sermon series, an analysis of the surveys was done to find the percentage of survey participants who reported an increase in their level of confidence to explain each doctrine.

As was stated in the project proposal, the goal of strengthening the members' confidence in their ability to explain these doctrines to others would be considered met if an analysis of the surveys found that at least 20 percent of participants reported an increase in their level of confidence to explain each doctrinal statement on the post-series survey.

With that said, the data in tables 7-12 (on the next six pages; pages 82-87) show that the second goal of the project, like the first one, was overwhelmingly met. Far exceeding the 20 percent threshold necessary for meeting this goal, more than 50 percent of all respondents indicated greater confidence in explaining each of the doctrinal distinctives of Churches of Christ after the sermon series was concluded.

When the surveys were analyzed according to age groups, the data shows that the second goal was also overwhelmingly met within each age group. Within every age group, no less than 43 percent of respondents indicated that, following the sermon series, they had more confidence in their ability to explain the doctrinal distinctives of Churches of Christ than they had before the sermon series.

Table 7. Confidence level change (all surveys)

<i>Statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation.	153	83	54
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that a cappella-only praise in church is God's plan.	153	100	65
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles in the church assembly.	153	97	63
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every congregation must assemble together every Sunday.	153	87	57
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that the Lord's Supper should be observed every Sunday and only every Sunday.	153	88	58
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every church should be led by a group of male Christians usually called elders.	153	88	58

Table 8. Confidence level change (16-24 year olds)

<i>Statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation.	7	5	43
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that a cappella-only praise in church is God's plan.	7	4	52
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles in the church assembly.	7	5	52
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every congregation must assemble together every Sunday.	7	5	43
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that the Lord's Supper should be observed every Sunday and only every Sunday.	7	5	48
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every church should be led by a group of male Christians usually called elders.	7	4	48

Table 9. Confidence level change (25-39 year olds)

<i>Statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation.	27	16	59
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that a cappella-only praise in church is God's plan.	27	23	85
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles in the church assembly.	27	20	74
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every congregation must assemble together every Sunday.	27	20	74
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that the Lord's Supper should be observed every Sunday and only every Sunday.	27	19	70
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every church should be led by a group of male Christians usually called elders.	27	18	67

Table 10. Confidence level change (40-54 year olds)

<i>Statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation.	42	25	60
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that a cappella-only praise in church is God's plan.	42	31	74
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles in the church assembly.	42	31	74
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every congregation must assemble together every Sunday.	42	29	69
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that the Lord's Supper should be observed every Sunday and only every Sunday.	42	28	67
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every church should be led by a group of male Christians usually called elders.	42	27	64

Table 11. Confidence level change (55-66 year olds)

<i>Statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation.	20	9	45
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that a cappella-only praise in church is God's plan.	20	10	50
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles in the church assembly.	20	12	60
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every congregation must assemble together every Sunday.	20	9	45
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that the Lord's Supper should be observed every Sunday and only every Sunday.	20	9	45
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every church should be led by a group of male Christians usually called elders.	20	11	55

Table 12. Confidence level change (67+ years old)

<i>Statement with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement</i>	<i>Number of valid responses</i>	<i>Number reporting increased agreement</i>	<i>Percent change (%)</i>
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation.	44	19	43
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that a cappella-only praise in church is God's plan.	44	23	52
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that only male Christians should fill individual speaking roles in the church assembly.	44	23	52
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every congregation must assemble together every Sunday.	44	19	43
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that the Lord's Supper should be observed every Sunday and only every Sunday.	44	21	48
I am confident that I can adequately explain to someone the belief that every church should be led by a group of male Christians usually called elders.	44	21	48

Evaluation of the Third Goal

The third and final goal of this project was to write a quality book which would assist in sustaining the first two goals. This third goal was measured two ways: (1) a short, anonymous questionnaire for members, and (2) an evaluation rubric for a qualified evaluation board. Both measurements were intended to assess the members' and the board's perceived value of the book as a resource for helping people understand the distinctive doctrines of Churches of Christ, and the willingness of both groups to recommend the book to others. As with the first two goals, this third goal would be considered met if twenty percent of members and twenty percent of the evaluation board indicated that the book is "very helpful" or "somewhat helpful" in explaining the doctrinal distinctives of Churches of Christ, and if twenty percent of both groups indicated that they were "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to recommend the book, or give it, to others.

Thirty-seven members filled out the short questionnaire about the book. When asked, "How helpful do you feel the book is in clearly explaining the beliefs and practices of Churches of Christ?" thirty-five circled "very helpful" (95 percent) and two circled "somewhat helpful" (5 percent). And when asked, "How likely are you to recommend or give the book to others?" thirty-six circled "very likely" (97 percent) and one circled "somewhat likely" (3 percent).

When the four-member evaluation board was asked, "How helpful do you feel the book is in clearly explaining the beliefs and practices of Churches of Christ?" three circled "very helpful" (75 percent) and one circled "somewhat helpful" (25 percent). And when asked, "How likely are you to recommend or give the book to others?" two

indicated they were “very likely” (50 percent) and two indicated they were “somewhat likely” (50 percent).

Strengths of the Project

I believe the primary strength of the project was that it addressed a desperate need. Albert Mohler’s often quoted diagnosis of recent doctrinal neglect among many Baptist churches is a diagnosis that many Churches of Christ share. Consequently there has been a significant identity crisis among Churches of Christ for almost three decades. Now, more than ever, many leaders in Churches of Christ recognize the urgent need to strengthen our doctrinal foundations and preserve our restoration identity. This project addressed that urgent need.

A second strength of the project was the breadth and depth of the material covered. By beginning with an exploration of restoration as a theological principle, then continuing on with an exploration of specific doctrines which have historically been emphasized among Churches of Christ as necessary for covenant faithfulness, and finishing up with a look at some of the more prominent myths and misconceptions about Churches of Christ, enough material was covered to sufficiently educate people as to who Churches of Christ are, what they are trying to do as followers of Christ, and what distinguishes them from other church groups.

Not only was a wide variety of theological principles and church doctrines examined, but the examination of these principles and doctrines was anything but superficial. While readily recognizing that no subject was examined exhaustively, each subject was examined in enough depth and detail that listeners (and readers) could clearly

understand how members of Churches of Christ have arrived at their doctrinal conclusions.

A third and final strength of the project was the book. In fact, it could be argued that this was its primary strength. By putting the material in written form, and writing it in a very accessible style, members have continual access to it. Not only will that help sustain their personal convictions into the future, but they can share the material with others who might have questions about the historic doctrinal emphases of Churches of Christ. If the project would have only consisted of the sermon series, its influence would have been far more limited.

Weaknesses of the Project

Among the weaknesses of the project, perhaps the biggest was the length of time between the surveys. As mentioned earlier, 283 members completed and submitted the pre-series survey while only 153 completed and submitted the post-series survey. In other words, only about half of those who participated in the pre-series survey participated in the post-series survey (54 percent). While multiple factors no doubt contributed to a decline in participation in the second survey, I suspect that the sixteen week gap between surveys—about four months—was a major contributor.

A second weakness of the project is the fact that most members would have missed some of the lessons in the series. While I consciously tried to schedule the sermon series during a four month period that would minimize absences, the mobile nature of our society means that few people are home every weekend over a four month period. Of course, members who were out of town on any given Sunday were encouraged to stream the Sunday morning service live online, and if that was not possible

they were encouraged to watch or listen to the sermon online at their earliest convenience. Despite having this availability to the sermons, indications are that most members who were absent on any given Sunday did not go back and view, or listen to, the sermon(s) they had missed.

A third and final weakness of the project was the absence of interaction with the members during the presentation of the lessons. By this I mean that sermons are, by nature, a one-way presentation of information. The congregation listens. They are not given an opportunity to make comments, pose questions, or seek clarification. However, the nature of the material being presented would have especially benefited from being presented in a context that was interactive—like a classroom.

What I Would Do Differently

As I think about what I would do differently if I had to do the project again, four things come to mind. First, I would take advantage of technology and make the surveys available online. This does not mean that I would make it an exclusively online survey, but I would add an online option for filling out and submitting the surveys. This option may increase participation among the membership.

Second, I would explain some of the survey statements more clearly. Some statements which I assumed were very clear, apparently were not as clear to some of the participants. For instance, the doctrinal statement, “Every congregation of God’s people must assemble *every* Sunday” was misunderstood by several survey participants (based on some marginal notes made by participants on the surveys). My intent was to simply say that every congregation should schedule a time to meet together each Sunday. Several participants, however, took it to mean that individual Christians are never

allowed to miss a Sunday church meeting for any reason including sickness and employment requirements.

Third, I would probably add a place for comments to the surveys. Several survey participants added marginal notes to their surveys, and some even suggested a place for comments. Although the overwhelming majority of respondents neither added marginal notes nor suggested a place for comments, given the fact that several did has made me conclude that a space for comments on the survey would be helpful.

Fourth and finally, I would strongly consider using the material in a Bible class setting as opposed to presenting it as a sermon series. While choosing the Bible class over the pulpit would have its disadvantages—like fewer people being exposed to the material, training additional teachers to teach the material, and the differing ability levels among the teachers—the ability for members to interact with the material in a classroom setting would be very advantageous.

Theological Reflections

As I reflect on the project and its outcomes, I recognize that a major outcome was that many important theological truths were more deeply imprinted on my mind and in my heart. The first being that the church belongs to Jesus Christ and He is its head; He is in charge.

It seems that Christ is increasingly viewed among professing Christians as little more than a loving personal Savior who is almost exclusively interested in my personal happiness and well-being. Little thought seems to be given to His position as the head of the church and what that means.

Believers need to hear more frequently that Christ is not just their personal Savior, but that He is also the head of every organized community of His people. They need to remain conscious that He not only has authority over them personally, but also over the congregation of which they are a member. And they need to be taught that taking seriously Jesus' headship of the church means that His will must be sought and embraced in all aspects of church life—doctrine, terms of membership, worship, polity, work, etc.

Another theological truth that the project reinforced was the absolutely authority of Scripture. The Bible is constantly under attack. Often those attacks come from opponents of Christianity and come in the form of defiant challenges to the Bible's claim of being a God-book. But increasingly those attacks are coming from professing believers who are not even conscious that they are attacking Scripture.

One of the most subtle attacks is the increasingly prevalent notion that spiritual intuition trumps revelation. It works like this—if I strongly feel that something is okay, then Scripture must be interpreted to reflect my strong feelings. This approach is frequently seen today in discussions of human sexuality, particularly homosexuality. Under the influence of modern culture, more and more professing Christians have concluded that homosexuality is not a practice that God opposes. Armed with that conclusion, they then manipulate the straightforward condemnation of homosexuality in Scripture to support their conclusion.

This intuition-trumps-revelation perspective can also be seen in corporate church life. For instance, our egalitarian culture has influenced many Bible believers to conclude that the Bible cannot be promoting a complementarian view of men and women

despite a seemingly clear New Testament emphasis on male spiritual headship.

Consequently, they confidently reinterpret Scripture to support their personal feelings.

The church needs to mount an aggressive counterattack against these attacks on Scripture. More and more Christians need to be re-indoctrinated on the meaning of Biblical authority. They need to be reminded what it means to allow Scripture be the rule of faith in their personal lives as well as what it means to allow Scripture be the rule of faith in corporate church life.

A final theological truth that the project reinforced for me is that church doctrine is important. There are many practical questions that Christians are confronted with when it comes to corporate church life—determining how to organize and govern themselves, determining what activities will be in their assemblies, determining how one becomes a member, and the list goes on. Although more and more contemporary Christians consider these matters to be minimally important, the Scriptures clearly speak to these matters.

As some have said, the Bible certainly does not teach us everything on these matters, but neither does it teach us nothing. The fact that the Bible teaches on these matters shows that these things matter. It should be the desire of every congregation, then, to seek to discover these things and submit ourselves to them.

Personal Reflections

As I look back at the investment of time and energy into this project I can honestly say that it was one of the best spiritual investments I have ever made for several reasons. For one thing, it kindled a passion within me to revive theological knowledge in the church. This is not to suggest that I had been unaware of such a need prior to the

project. Obviously, my interest in pursuing the project indicates my sensitivity to the need for it. I simply mean that it fanned a consciousness for the need into a passion for pursuing it.

It also helped me to see for the first time in twenty-six years of full-time ministry just how important the ministry of preaching and teaching is to the church. Again, this is certainly not to imply that I was not previously conscious of how important teaching and preaching is to the health and growth of the church. I am simply saying that quantifying in some way the results of a sermon series helped me see in a way that I had never seen before just how powerful preaching is to shape ideas.

Being able to see the power of preaching in a quantitative way also reinforced my commitment to preaching as the primary medium of instruction for the gathered church. The trend in recent years to downplay, or even discard, preaching in American church life has been one of the most troubling trends in church history. It certainly cannot be biblically justified, and based on the clear persuasive power of preaching which can be seen quantitatively in projects like mine, it cannot even be justified from a purely pragmatic perspective.

Then, of course, the success of the project reminded me that great Bible doctrines—including ecclesiological doctrines—must be preached over and over again if they are to be embraced and preserved by every generation. Most of the members of the congregation I serve grew up in Churches of Christ, and, as a result, have been exposed to the doctrines presented in my sermon series. And yet a significant percentage of every age group expressed a deeper commitment to those doctrines after the sermon series. This shows that preaching doctrine once is not enough. As Peter told his readers, “I will

always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them, and have been established in the truth which is present with you. I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, . . . And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you will be able to call these things to mind” (2 Pet 1:12-14).

Of course, the success of the project also made me stop and reflect on how the power of preaching and teaching can have just as much of a negative effect on the church as a positive one. False teachers can be persuasive as they twist the Scriptures (2 Pet 3:16). For me, then, the project caused me to ponder even more soberly James’ warning, “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment” (Jas 3:1).

As I look back on the project I also realize that it is more important than ever to become captive to God’s Word as we seek to be His church. So many Christians are shaping the church to the demands of culture while still giving lip-service to their commitment to the Word. It is not enough to speak highly of the Word. We must be captive to it. That is, we must allow it inform all we do as a congregation even if that means we must walk out of step with both the secular culture as well as the larger religious culture of our day.

Finally, the project reminded me to approach the Word of God with humility. It reminded me that I can hold to my personal convictions and conclusions tightly, but at the same time with humility and charity. I must never forget that I am finite and I am sinful as I seek to lead other to a more complete understanding of the will of God.

Conclusion

“Could you tell me something about the Church of Christ?” “Could you tell me the difference between the Church of Christ and the _____ church?” Most members of the Concord Road Church of Christ have been asked questions like these. This project was designed to help them answer those questions, and I am very satisfied with the number of members who walked away from the sermon series more confident in their ability to answer such questions.

Then there is the fact that some members of the Concord Road congregation are not quite sure why we believe and practice some of the things we do; and some are not even convinced that these things really matter. This project was also designed to convince them that these are biblically-informed beliefs and practices that should be embraced, preserved, and defended. And I am very satisfied with the number of members who walked away from the sermon series with stronger commitment to these beliefs and practices along with a renewed conviction that being a New Testament-shaped church is a goal still worth pursuing, and that doing things God’s way really does matter.

APPENDIX 1

PRE-SERIES BELIEFS AND PRACTICES SURVEY

Survey Number _____

Agreement to Participate: The research in which you are about to participate is designed to measure: (1) the level of your personal commitment to certain beliefs & practices which have historically distinguished churches of Christ from other church groups, and (2) the level of confidence you have in your ability to explain these beliefs and practices to others. The research is being conducted by Dan Chambers for the purpose of a doctoral ministry project at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. *Participation is strictly voluntary and completely anonymous.*

I. Please circle the age range in which you will fall as of September 1:

- a. 16-24 years b. 25-39 years c. 40-54 years d. 55-66 years e. 67+ years

II. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement by circling the appropriate answer.

1. Immersion in water is a necessary condition for receiving salvation.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
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2. *A cappella*-only praise is God's plan for His church when they assemble for worship.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
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3. Only *male* Christians should fill individual speaking roles when the whole church assembles.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
----------------------	----------	----------------------	-------------------	-------	-------------------

4. Every congregation of God's people must assemble *every* Sunday.
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
5. Every congregation should observe the Lord's Supper *every* Sunday.
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
6. The Lord's Supper should be eaten *only* on Sunday.
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
7. God desires each congregation to be led by a group (more than one) of spiritually mature *male* Christians called elders, shepherds, or overseers.
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
8. ***I am confident that I can adequately explain*** to someone the belief that baptism by immersion is necessary for salvation.
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
9. ***I am confident that I can adequately explain*** to someone the belief that *a cappella*-only praise in church is God's plan.
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
10. ***I am confident that I can adequately explain*** to someone the belief that only *male* Christians should fill individual speaking roles in the church assembly.
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
11. ***I am confident that I can adequately explain*** to someone the belief that God's people must assemble together *every* Sunday.
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Disagree Somewhat | Agree Somewhat | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|

12. ***I am confident that I can adequately explain*** to someone the belief that the Lord's Supper should be observed *every* Sunday and *only* every Sunday.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
----------------------	----------	----------------------	-------------------	-------	-------------------

13. ***I am confident that I can adequately explain*** to someone the belief that every church should be led by a group of *male* Christians usually called elders.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
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APPENDIX 2

POST-SERIES BELIEFS AND PRACTICES SURVEY

Survey Number _____

I. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement by circling the appropriate answer.

1. Immersion in water is a necessary condition for receiving salvation.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
----------------------	----------	----------------------	-------------------	-------	-------------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel your commitment to that belief is stronger after the sermon series or remains about the same?

Commitment is stronger

Commitment remains about the same

2. *A cappella*-only praise is God's plan for His church when they assemble for worship.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
----------------------	----------	----------------------	-------------------	-------	-------------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel your commitment to that belief is stronger after the sermon series or remains about the same?

Commitment is stronger

Commitment remains about the same

3. Only *male* Christians should fill individual speaking roles when the whole church assembles.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
----------------------	----------	----------------------	-------------------	-------	-------------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel your commitment to that belief is stronger after the sermon series or remains about the same?

Commitment is stronger

Commitment remains about the same

4. Every congregation of God's people must assemble *every* Sunday.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel your commitment to that belief is stronger after the sermon series or remains about the same?

Commitment is stronger

Commitment remains about the same

5. Every congregation should observe the Lord's Supper *every* Sunday.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel your commitment to that belief is stronger after the sermon series or remains about the same?

Commitment is stronger

Commitment remains about the same

6. The Lord's Supper should be eaten *only* on Sunday.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel your commitment to that belief is stronger after the sermon series or remains about the same?

Commitment is stronger

Commitment remains about the same

7. God desires each congregation to be led by a group (more than one) of spiritually mature *male* Christians called elders, shepherds, or overseers.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel your *commitment* to that belief is stronger after the sermon series or remains about the same?

Commitment is stronger

Commitment remains about the same

8. *I am confident that I can adequately explain* to someone the belief that baptism by immersion is necessary for salvation.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel *more confident* in your ability to explain that belief to others after the sermon series or does your confidence remain about the same?

More confident

Confidence remains about the same

9. *I am confident that I can adequately explain* to someone the belief that *a cappella*-only praise in church is God's plan.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel *more confident* in your ability to explain that belief to others after the sermon series or does your confidence remain about the same?

More confident

Confidence remains about the same

10. *I am confident that I can adequately explain* to someone the belief that only *male* Christians should fill individual speaking roles in the church assembly.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	-------------------	----------------	-------	----------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on *both* surveys, do you feel *more confident* in your ability to explain that belief to others after the sermon series or does your confidence remain about the same?

More confident

Confidence remains about the same

11. *I am confident that I can adequately explain* to someone the belief that God's people must assemble together *every* Sunday.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
----------------------	----------	----------------------	-------------------	-------	-------------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on both surveys, do you feel more confident in your ability to explain that belief to others after the sermon series or does your confidence remain about the same?

More confident

Confidence remains about the same

12. *I am confident that I can adequately explain* to someone the belief that the Lord's Supper should be observed *every* Sunday and *only* every Sunday.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
----------------------	----------	----------------------	-------------------	-------	-------------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on both surveys, do you feel more confident in your ability to explain that belief to others after the sermon series or does your confidence remain about the same?

More confident

Confidence remains about the same

13. *I am confident that I can adequately explain* to someone the belief that every church should be led by a group of *male* Christians usually called elders.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree
----------------------	----------	----------------------	-------------------	-------	-------------------

If you think you circled "Strongly Agree" with the previous statement on both surveys, do you feel more confident in your ability to explain that belief to others after the sermon series or does your confidence remain about the same?

More confident

Confidence remains about the same

APPENDIX 3

BOOK QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions regarding your perception of *Churches in the Shape of Scripture* by Dan Chambers

1. *How would you describe the readability of the book?*

Very Hard	Somewhat Hard	Neither Hard nor Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy
-----------	---------------	-----------------------	---------------	-----------

2. *How helpful do you feel the book is in clearly explaining the beliefs and practices of Churches of Christ?*

Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	Not so Helpful	Not at all Helpful
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3. *How helpful do you feel the book will be as a tool to help you explain the beliefs and practices of Churches of Christ to others?*

Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	Not so Helpful	Not at all Helpful
--------------	------------------	-------------------------------	----------------	--------------------

4. *How likely are you to recommend or give the book to others?*

Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Neither Likely nor Unlikely	Not so Likely	Not at all Likely
-------------	-----------------	-----------------------------	---------------	-------------------

APPENDIX 4
EVALUATION RUBRIC

Name of evaluator _____

Section One:

This section seeks your overall impression of *Churches in the Shape of Scripture*. Circle the answer which best describes your perception.

1. How would you describe the readability of the book?

Very Hard	Somewhat Hard	Neither Hard nor Easy	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy
-----------	---------------	-----------------------	---------------	-----------

2. How helpful do you feel the book is in clearly explaining the beliefs and practices of most Churches of Christ?

Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	Not so Helpful	Not at all Helpful
--------------	------------------	-------------------------------	----------------	--------------------

3. How helpful do you feel the book will be as a tool to help you explain the beliefs and practices of most Churches of Christ to others?

Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful	Not so Helpful	Not at all Helpful
--------------	------------------	-------------------------------	----------------	--------------------

4. How likely are you to recommend the book to others?

Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Neither Likely nor Unlikely	Not so Likely	Not at all Likely
-------------	-----------------	-----------------------------	---------------	-------------------

Section Two:

This section contains a five-question evaluation rubric for each of the seven chapters of *Churches in the Shape of Scripture*. As you evaluate each chapter of the book,

indicate your response to each question with a check in the appropriate box.
Comments are optional.

The following questions relate to the chapter “<i>New Testament-Shaped Churches</i>”					
1=insufficient 2=requires attention 3=sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Has the author addressed the most pertinent biblical texts on this subject?					
How would you rate the author’s engagement with the biblical texts which he addresses?					
Is the flow of the author’s arguments logical and appropriate to the subject being addressed?					
How would you rate the thoroughness of the author’s discussion of this subject?					
How would you rate this chapter as an apologetic for the subject being addressed?					

The following questions relate to the chapter “<i>Salvation and Church Membership in the Shape of the New Testament</i>”					
1=insufficient 2=requires attention 3=sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Has the author addressed the most pertinent biblical texts on this subject?					
How would you rate the author’s engagement with the biblical texts which he addresses?					
Is the flow of the author’s arguments logical and appropriate to the subject being addressed?					
How would you rate the thoroughness of the author’s discussion of this subject?					
How would you rate this chapter as an apologetic for the subject being addressed?					

The following questions relate to the chapter “*Musical Praise in the Assembly in the Shape of the New Testament*”

1=insufficient 2=requires attention 3=sufficient 4=exemplary

Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Has the author addressed the most pertinent biblical texts on this subject?					
How would you rate the author’s engagement with the biblical texts which he addresses?					
Is the flow of the author’s arguments logical and appropriate to the subject being addressed?					
How would you rate the thoroughness of the author’s discussion of this subject?					
How would you rate this chapter as an apologetic for the subject being addressed?					

The following questions relate to the chapter “*The Lord’s Day and the Lord’s Supper in the Shape of the New Testament*”

1=insufficient 2=requires attention 3=sufficient 4=exemplary

Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Has the author addressed the most pertinent biblical texts on this subject?					
How would you rate the author’s engagement with the biblical texts which he addresses?					
Is the flow of the author’s arguments logical and appropriate to the subject being addressed?					
How would you rate the thoroughness of the author’s discussion of this subject?					
How would you rate this chapter as an apologetic for the subject being addressed?					

The following questions relate to the chapter “*Gender Roles in the Assembly in the Shape of the New Testament*”

1=insufficient 2=requires attention 3=sufficient 4=exemplary

Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Has the author addressed the most pertinent biblical texts on this subject?					
How would you rate the author’s engagement with the biblical texts which he addresses?					
Is the flow of the author’s arguments logical and appropriate to the subject being addressed?					
How would you rate the thoroughness of the author’s discussion of this subject?					
How would you rate this chapter as an apologetic for the subject being addressed?					

The following questions relate to the chapter “*Church Organization and Leadership in the Shape of the New Testament*”

1=insufficient 2=requires attention 3=sufficient 4=exemplary

Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Has the author addressed the most pertinent biblical texts on this subject?					
How would you rate the author’s engagement with the biblical texts which he addresses?					
Is the flow of the author’s arguments logical and appropriate to the subject being addressed?					
How would you rate the thoroughness of the author’s discussion of this subject?					
How would you rate this chapter as an apologetic for the subject being addressed?					

The following questions relate to the chapter “*Myths and Misconceptions About Churches of Christ*”

1=insufficient 2=requires attention 3=sufficient 4=exemplary

Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
Has the author addressed the most pertinent biblical texts on this subject?					
How would you rate the author’s engagement with the biblical texts which he addresses?					
Is the flow of the author’s arguments logical and appropriate to the subject being addressed?					
How would you rate the thoroughness of the author’s discussion of this subject?					
How would you rate this chapter as an apologetic for the subject being addressed?					

APPENDIX 5

SAMPLE OF THE SUPPLEMENTAL BOOK *CHURCHES IN THE SHAPE OF SCRIPTURE* (CHAPTERS 1 AND 2)

CHAPTER 1

NEW TESTAMENT-SHAPED CHURCHES

I picked up the phone and took the transferred call with my usual, somewhat terse, “This is Dan.” On the other end, a pleasant female voice responded with her own introduction and a brief explanation of why she was calling our church office. She said she was new to our area, was looking for a church home, had noticed our building while driving around town, but had to admit that she really wasn’t familiar with churches of Christ. Then she got down to business: “Could you tell me something about the church of Christ?”

“Sure,” I replied, “I’d be glad to.” But before I could launch into my “who-we-are” speech, she tossed this follow-up question at me: “Could you tell me what the difference is between the church of Christ and the _____ church?” and she named a very large, very prominent denomination. What followed was a twenty minute or so conversation in which I tried to give her a glimpse of what churches of Christ are all about and how we differ from other church groups.

She wasn’t the first person to ask me about churches of Christ, and I know she won’t be the last; and, in case you’re wondering, I *never* get tired of answering people’s

questions about my church family. More than anything, and most importantly, I love to tell people about Jesus and what He did for them on the cross. But I also love to tell others about what we in churches of Christ are trying to be and do as His followers, and that's exactly what I want to do in this book—I want to tell you about churches of Christ.

Before I get rolling, though, let me make it very clear that I'm not presuming to speak for every member of every church of Christ, nor am I presuming to speak for every congregation that calls itself a church of Christ. I want to emphasize that for a couple of reasons. First, since churches of Christ aren't actually a denomination, nor do we want to be (I'll tell you more about that later), nobody can represent the beliefs and practices of churches of Christ in any "official" sense. Second, when it comes to the beliefs and practices of churches of Christ, the simple fact of the matter is, there's probably more diversity these days than ever. I can assure you there are plenty of members of churches of Christ who won't be buying this book as a stocking stuffer for friends and family next Christmas. And with equal assurance I can say there are plenty of churches of Christ that won't be using this book in their teen or adult education programs . . . *ever*.

Despite this diversity, however, I'm convinced there's still a general unity among churches of Christ when it comes to their basic convictions. In other words, I think the majority of churches of Christ are still committed to the same basic package of beliefs and practices. It's that majority, and that same package of beliefs and practices, which I'll be describing in this book. So, if I say "we" or "us" to refer to churches of Christ, keep in mind that I really mean "*most of us in most churches of Christ.*"

With that out of the way, I'm now ready to get down to the business of helping you understand churches of Christ a little better . . . maybe even a lot better.

Not Just Another Evangelical Church

While flying home from Israel a couple of summers ago, my wife, Leola, and I found ourselves seated next to a really nice, and really talkative, twenty-something. He had the window seat, I was on the aisle, and Leola was sandwiched between us. While I was lost in a loaner book from my brother on the history of Major League Baseball, Leola and our new friend were getting to know each other.

I don't have a clue what they talked about most of the time, but I do know at some point the subject turned to the kind of church group we were traveling with because Leola woke me from my baseball-concentration coma with an elbow and a "Hey," and then asked, "Are we an evangelical church?"

When people who aren't familiar with churches of Christ are trying to get a handle on who we are, that's one of the first questions many of them ask: "Are churches of Christ evangelical churches?" So why don't we start with that question. Before I can answer it, though, I need to make sure we're on the same page when it comes to understanding what most people mean when they refer to evangelical churches. After all, even Leola wasn't quite sure what one was. In her defense, though, you just don't hear the word "evangelical" a whole lot among churches of Christ.

Over the last several years the word "evangelical" has become a little more slippery and therefore a little tougher to get a good grip on. I still think, however, when most people use the word "evangelical" to describe a church, they have in mind a church that's rock solid in its commitment to a few basic beliefs, one of which is that the Bible is literally God's book.

While evangelicals know it was red-blooded human beings who actually

dipped their quills into the ink and put the words on the original pages of the sixty-six “books” of the Bible, they’re also convinced God Himself supervised the writing in such a way that makes Him the actual author of every word of Scripture.

Another belief most evangelicals are tenaciously committed to is the belief that salvation can be received only through faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, evangelical churches teach that putting one’s faith in Jesus isn’t merely *a way* to eternal life, but rather it’s *the only way*.

Finally, most evangelicals are equally unwavering in their belief that a person’s life must change when he or she becomes a Christian. More specifically, they believe every Christian has an obligation to shape his or her thinking and behavior according to the will of God which is found in the Bible.

Now that we’re on the same page in understanding what an evangelical church is, let’s go back to the original question: “Are churches of Christ evangelical churches?” Based on my description, it’s fair to say that most people would put us in that category. After all, most of us in churches of Christ are diehard in our belief that God is the ultimate author of the Bible. We’re convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Holy Spirit in some way supervised the writers of the Bible so that the words they originally wrote were the exact words God wanted written (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:21).

We’re equally diehard in our belief that Jesus is the only way to eternal life. We don’t believe there’s the slightest bit of wiggle-room in Jesus’ statement, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). Of course, in a culture where diversity seems increasingly championed above almost everything else, we realize this one-way message doesn’t endear us to our more

politically correct friends and neighbors. Nevertheless, we embrace this one-way message without reluctance or apology.

Finally, we in churches of Christ are just as passionate in our belief that Christians must live transformed lives. It's not exactly breaking news that a lot of folks want God in their lives, but they're not really interested in changing their lifestyles. Nor is it breaking news that plenty of churches seem to offer salvation without total moral transformation.

We, however, reject the notion of salvation without transformation with every ounce of our being. When God calls His people to change how they live—that is, to repent—we believe it's a non-negotiable command, not a recommendation we're free to opt out of if the idea of being transformed doesn't really make our heart race (Col 3:5-10; 1 Pet 1:14-16).

Now back to the airplane for the rest of the story. Even though most of us in churches of Christ tend to shy away from putting ourselves into categories (that's one reason you don't hear the word "evangelical" used that much among us), I knew exactly what the young man was looking for. He just wanted to know if we were one of those churches that believe the Bible is literally God's Word and that Jesus Christ is the only way to be saved. So, I leaned forward to by-pass Leola, smiled at our new friend, and said, "We sure are."

Even though, in most people's minds, our basic convictions put us squarely in the category of evangelical churches, and even though I usually don't hesitate to say "Yes" when someone asks if we're evangelical, I want you to know that we don't consider ourselves to be just another evangelical church. We believe there are some

pretty significant differences between us and most other evangelical church groups, and you're about to find out what some of those differences are. First, though, let me tell you what being different doesn't mean.

Different Doesn't Mean . . .

When I say we in churches of Christ are different than other church groups, it doesn't mean we think we're more zealous or more passionate about serving God than others. We don't believe that for a minute.

And when I say we're different, it doesn't mean we believe we're more sincere, more devoted, or more dedicated in our quest to obey God than others. We don't believe that for a minute either.

Nor does being different mean that we have more respect for the Bible as God's Word, or have purer motives, or are more Christ-like in our thinking and behavior than those in other church groups. We know none of those things are true.

So what do I mean when I say churches of Christ are different than other church groups? The difference begins with a radical idea.

The Radical Goal of Restoration

I think I can say with a good bit of confidence that most churchgoers have heard of the religious movement which swept through Europe in the 1500s called the Reformation (or Protestant Reformation or Great Reformation). They may not know a whole lot about it, but at least they've heard of it.

I also feel pretty sure that most churchgoers have heard of the man usually credited with starting the Reformation, Martin Luther. Like the Reformation itself, they

may not know much about Martin Luther, but at least they've heard of him.

The term "reformation" is used to describe this movement because the goal of men like Luther was to *reform* the morally and doctrinally corrupt Catholic establishment of their day. When Luther strolled up to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517 with a mallet, a nail, and a document known as his "ninety-five theses," unbeknownst to him, it was game-on for the Reformation, and the world would never be the same.

Martin Luther just happens to be one of my personal heroes, and I praise God for him and others like him who put their lives on the line to get the quest for spiritual truth moving in the right direction with their radical ideas of reform. But while the Reformation was definitely a huge step in the right direction, most of us in churches of Christ believe it fell just a little short in terms of the ultimate goal. As a result, we take the idea of reformation a step further. We embrace the idea of *restoration*. We claim to be part of a *restoration movement*.

We use the term "restoration" to describe this movement because our goal is to actually *restore* the true church of Jesus Christ in our day by *restoring* the beliefs and practices of the church in the New Testament. You can hear our passion for this goal when you hear some of us occasionally refer to ourselves as "New Testament churches." For instance, I might ask a fellow member, "Is there a New Testament church in that town?" or I might ask him, "How many New Testament churches are in such-and-such county (or city, or state, or country)?"

From time to time I hear people encourage others who are looking for a church home to find a "Bible-believing church." In other words, find a church that believes the

Bible is literally God's communication to man, and is the ultimate authority for life.

As you've already seen, most churches of Christ are definitely Bible-believing churches. But most of us aren't satisfied with just being Bible-*believing* churches. We're just as passionate about being Bible-*shaped* churches. More specifically, we're trying very hard to be *New Testament-shaped* churches. Every noticeable difference between churches of Christ and other church groups springs from this radical goal of restoring Jesus' true church by restoring the beliefs and practices of His church in New Testament times.

Why the Goal of Restoration?

Why are we so intensely committed to this goal? First and foremost, it's because we believe *restoration* is an idea that's strongly endorsed in the Bible. Let me explain and then show you what I mean. We'll start with what I believe are a few indisputable facts, and I think most Bible-believers will agree.

For one thing, it's an indisputable fact that the God of the Bible has always given His people instructions for life. Whether we're talking about His Old Testament people, Israel, or His New Testament people, the church, God has always instructed them in matters like how they're to be organized and governed, how they're to approach and worship Him, and how they're to morally and ethically live.

It's also an indisputable fact that God has always demanded complete obedience from His people. He repeatedly pounded into the heads of His Old Testament people the need to be fully obedient (Lev 26:14ff; Deut 30:15-20; Eccl 12:13-14; Isa 42:24-25), and He pounds the need for obedience into the heads of us New Testament believers as well (Matt 7:21-27; Luke 6:46-49; John 14:21-24; 1 Cor 14:37-38).

Still another indisputable fact is that people don't always obey God. While some are defiant in their disobedience, the fact is, sometimes the will of God on a particular matter simply gets "lost," and as a result people just fail to carry out the true will of God. This is where the concept of *restoration* enters the picture.

When a doctrine of God is lost, most of us in churches of Christ are convinced that God wants that doctrine *restored*. In other words, He wants His people to once again start doing what He originally told them to do. Now let me show you a couple of examples in the Bible that I think teach the importance of *restoring* God's original commands if they're ever lost. If you've got a copy of the Old Testament handy, you may want to take a look at these stories for yourself after I give you the thumbnail sketch.

You'll find the first example in Nehemiah 8, and I'll quickly set the stage. The world of the Israelites fell apart in 586 B.C. when the Babylonian war-machine rolled into Jerusalem and leveled the place. Of course it was God who orchestrated the whole thing because Israel stubbornly refused to trust Him and live in obedience to His will. Most of those who were "lucky" enough to survive the Babylonian blitzkrieg were marched back to Babylon where they lived under the thumb of their conquerors for the next seventy years or so.

In Nehemiah 8 the nightmare of this captivity is finally over. Thanks to the Persians, the Babylonians became a footnote in history almost overnight. Suddenly, with a new superpower on the block, God's people were allowed to return to their homeland to resurrect their beloved Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of God.

The most exciting thing of all, however, is that a spirit of revival was sweeping over the land and people were flocking to Jerusalem hungry for God's Word. That

spiritual hunger is on full display in this chapter as Ezra is publically reading the Law of Moses (Neh 8:1), and the people are hanging on every word . . . for *hours* (Neh 8:3).

Now let's pick up the story on day two of this public Bible reading marathon (Neh 8:13).

While Ezra is reading, something incredible happens. A discovery is made. It's discovered that God had commanded His people to live in temporary booths, or huts, made out of tree branches during the seven-day Jewish festival known as the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh 8:14).¹⁴¹ A few verses later we're told that no one had been doing this "from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day" (Neh 8:17). Exactly how long had that been? Would you believe almost a thousand years? Imagine that—God's people had not been carrying out His living-in-huts command for almost ten centuries! Now *that* is a lost doctrine.

Then what? What was their response to this discovery? Hard as it may be to believe for us modern worshipers, apparently no one said, "Look, this isn't that big of a deal. We're still observing the Feast of Tabernacles and that's all that matters. If this hut-stuff were really important, don't you think people would have been doing it for the last thousand years? The fact that nobody's been doing it for a thousand years ought to tell us something, like quit sweating these minor details." And apparently nobody said, "Listen, before we rush into this hut-building-thing, I think we need to ask ourselves, 'Is this really a salvation issue?'" And apparently no one chimed in with this: "Hey, let's not get all legalistic about this."

¹⁴¹The Feast of Tabernacles is also known as the Feast of Booths (Lev 23:34). These booths were intended to remind the Israelites of the temporary structures in which they lived as they wandered in the wilderness during the exodus from Egypt (Lev 23:39-43).

These people were so committed to obeying God that they looked at each other and said, in effect, “Wow, that’s enough Bible study for today. We’re supposed to be sitting around in little huts while observing this feast. Let’s go gather some sticks and get these huts built.” Here are the actual words which describe their reaction to this discovery:

So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, “Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written.” So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing. (Neh 8:15-17)

That’s a great example of *restoration* in living color. After discovering a command of God that had been lost for almost a thousand years, they *restored* it to its original place among the religious practices of the community.

Another classic example of *restoration* took place about 550 years before the living-in-huts discovery in Nehemiah’s day. You’ll find this one in 2 Samuel 6, and playing the lead role in this drama is none other than the man after God’s own heart himself, King David.

David hadn’t been wearing the crown long when he started thinking about the ark of the covenant. You see, years earlier, way back in 1 Samuel 4, it was carted off by Israel’s archnemesis, the Philistines, as part of the spoils of victory after they had given the Israelites a beatdown on the battlefield. After holding onto the ark for about seven months—seven very long, very miserable months during which time they stayed on the business end of God’s wrath—the Philistines shipped it back to Israel where it essentially

remained in storage collecting dust for the next few decades. Then came David's coronation.

Unlike his predecessor Saul, David was on fire for the Lord, and he was determined to make his new capital city, Jerusalem, the center of worship for the kingdom. If that was going to happen, though, he knew he needed to get that piece of sacred furniture back in its rightful place in the tabernacle. After all, the glory of God rested upon that gold-covered chest. And that brings us to 2 Samuel 6—moving day for the ark of the covenant.

For David, when it came time to move the ark to Jerusalem, two men and a truck just wouldn't do. Since it represented the presence of God, moving it had to be a national event and all stops had to be pulled out. Step one was to assemble a 30,000 man honor guard and protection force to escort it the seven or so miles from storage to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:1). Step two included putting together musicians for the royal procession and celebration (2 Sam 6:5). And then, of course, there was the incredibly important matter of how the ark would actually be transported.

I'm guessing there was quite a bit of discussion and deliberation over this matter of how to move the ark, and the text informs us that they settled on using a brand spanking new cart. I don't know about you, but that impresses me. They obviously put thought into this move, and what an incredible gesture of respect and reverence they came up with. This was the ark of the living God, so putting it on a used cart was simply out of the question (2 Sam 6:3).

When the big day rolled around, things started off without a hitch. The ark was loaded on the shiny new cart, the musicians started doing their thing, and "all the house

of Israel were celebrating before the Lord” (2 Sam 6:5). For a little while, things chugged along according to plan. Soon, however, the plan was blown to smithereens by one of the most shocking moments you’ll find anywhere in the Bible.

When the cart rolled over a rocky, rough threshing floor at a place called Nacon, it started bouncing around, and something unthinkable began to happen—the ark of the covenant was on the verge of tumbling off the cart. Luckily, though, there just happened to be a quick thinker by the name of Uzzah who was helping lead the cart, and he did what anyone in his right mind would have done. He reached out and grabbed it to keep it from hitting the ground. That *is* what anyone in his right mind would have done, right? I mean, who’s going to just stand by and watch the ark of God slide off the tailgate? In most people’s book Uzzah would have been a hero. If it were up to most people, his picture would have been on the front page of Jerusalem’s newspaper the next morning under a headline that went something like, “Quick Thinking Uzzah Saves the Ark of the Covenant.”

But that’s not even close to what happened. Uzzah made the paper alright, but it wasn’t the front page; it was closer to the back, in the obituaries. What happened was “the anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence and he died there by the ark of God” (2 Sam 6:7). With a corpse at his feet, David suddenly got very angry and very scared—I’m thinking more scared than angry—and he decided to scrub the rest of the mission right then and there (2 Sam 6:8-11).

What in the world went wrong? Would you believe they were carrying the ark wrong? Believe it. A few centuries earlier God had actually given Moses detailed instructions for how the ark was to be moved from place to place. Unfortunately,

however, it seems those instructions had been lost (i.e., forgotten) while the ark had been sitting in storage all those years.

After God's wakeup call, David went back to Jerusalem, pulled out the Bible (the Law of Moses), started doing some homework, and discovered God's original instructions for how to move the ark. He discovered that God had specifically said it was to be carried by the Levites, and they were to carry it on their shoulders with gold-plated poles which were slipped through rings at the base of each corner of the ark (Exod 25:12-15; Num 4:5-6, 15).

Three months later, David *restored* that practice and finally brought the ark back to where it belonged. Here's how the Bible describes his restoration of those lost instructions:

Now David built houses for himself in the city of David; and he prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it. Then David said, "No one is to carry the ark of God but the Levites; for the Lord chose them to carry the ark of God and to minister to Him forever." . . . Then David called for Zadok and Abiathar the priests, and for the Levites, . . . and said to them ". . . consecrate yourselves both you and your relatives, that you may bring up the ark of the Lord God of Israel to the place that I have prepared for it. Because you did not carry it at the first, the Lord our God made an outburst on us, *for we did not seek Him according to the ordinance.*" . . . The sons of the Levites carried the ark of God on their shoulders with the poles thereon, *as Moses had commanded according to the word of the Lord.* (1 Chr 15:2, 11-15)

Whatever you do, don't miss the two statements which I italicized in that passage. In the first one, David confesses that when they tried to move the ark in round one, they didn't do it God's way. His words: "We did not seek Him according to the ordinance." In the second, he acknowledges that, for round two, they *restored* God's original plan. They did it, he said, "as Moses had commanded according to the word of the Lord."

There you have it—a couple of Biblical examples of *restoration* in action. We could look at more, but I think these two get the point across. I think they give you a good sense of what we in churches of Christ mean when we talk about *restoration*. I also think they help you understand why we're convinced that the idea of restoration is so important.

Now let's take this idea of restoration over to the New Testament and focus our conversation on the church.

That's a Pattern

To help you begin getting your mind wrapped around our goal of restoring Jesus' true church, I think the best place to start is by telling you that we believe the New Testament contains a general pattern of beliefs and practices that God expects every local church to follow.

But don't bother looking through your New Testament for the place where all the details of this pattern are neatly laid out. Don't bother because it's not neatly laid out in one particular place. Instead, it's found in the overall teaching of the New Testament. Let me show you a few examples of what I mean.

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul lays down some rules for who could speak to the church assembly at Corinth. He begins his instructions with these words: "As in all the congregations of the saints" (1 Cor 14:33b). When it came to who could speak to the assembly, the Corinthians weren't allowed to do their own thing. Paul required them to follow the same rules that "all the congregations of the saints" followed. Paul expected his speaking-in-church policy to be the same from church to church to church. That's a pattern.

Now to Acts 14. While on his first missionary journey in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Paul and his co-worker, Barnabas, planted churches in the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Later, after moving on to a place called Derbe and planting a church there, the missionary duo decided to backtrack so they could strengthen and encourage the churches they had recently planted (Acts 14:20-22). On that return visit, the Bible says, “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church” (Acts 14:23). Don’t miss the words “in each church.” Paul wanted “each church”—that is, each congregation—to have elders (see also Phil 1:1; Acts 15:2; 20:17). That’s a pattern.

You’ll find still another piece of this pattern in 1 Corinthians 16 when Paul tells the church at Corinth: “Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made” (1 Cor 16:1-2). Notice that Paul gave the church in Corinth the exact same instructions that he gave all the churches in the region of Galatia, which happens to be several hundred miles east of Corinth.¹⁴²

All these churches were meeting on the first day of every week, and all were told to take up a collection on that day in order to meet a need. By the way, in Acts 20 you’ll see that the church in Troas¹⁴³ also met together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:6-7). The fact that all these churches met together on the first day of every week is either an unplanned coincidence or a God-planned pattern. We believe it’s a God-

¹⁴²Corinth was in modern-day Greece while the region of Galatia was in the central part of modern-day Turkey.

¹⁴³Troas was located on the northwestern coast of modern-day Turkey.

planned pattern.

Let me show just one more piece of this pattern. In 1 Timothy 2 Paul lays down some more rules for church assemblies. One of those rules is, “I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissention” (1 Tim 2:8). Notice that his command for male Christians¹⁴⁴ to pray was to be carried out “in every place.” Bible scholars have pointed out that this phrase was used in somewhat of a technical sense to mean “in every place of meeting.”¹⁴⁵ In every place where Christians met to worship God and encourage one another, Paul wanted men whose lives were characterized by holy living to lead the congregation in prayer. Paul expected this command to be carried out “in every place.” That’s a pattern.

Maybe you’ve never really thought much about it before, but now can you see that there really is a general pattern in the New Testament that God wants His people to follow? In other words, can you see that God wants some things to be the same in every congregation? If you can see that, then you’re seeing the foundational belief that motivates us in our quest to restore Jesus’ true church. But there’s more. There’s also a second important belief that helps drive us toward this goal.

The very fact that we’re calling for a *restoration* of New Testament beliefs and

¹⁴⁴The Greek word translated “men” in 1 Tim 2:8 is *aner*, which specifically means “a male person.” In other places, even in this same chapter, Paul speaks of “men” in the general sense of “mankind” or “all people” (1 Tim 2:2,4,5 in the NASB or the NKJV). When Paul means “men” in this general sense, he uses the Greek word *anthropos*, which means “a human being.”

¹⁴⁵Everett Ferguson, “*Topos* in 1 Timothy 2:8,” *Restoration Quarterly* 33 (1991): 65-73. Tom Schreiner cites Ferguson when he says, “When Paul calls on men to pray ‘in every place’ . . . the directives here relate to a public church meeting . . . The words ‘in every place’ refer to all churches everywhere . . .” (Thomas R. Schreiner, “An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15,” in *Women in the Church: An Analysis and of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, ed. Andreas J. Kostenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], 91).

practices means we believe many of those beliefs and practices have been lost. In other words, we believe most church groups today have lost some important parts of God's revealed pattern for His local church. Some groups are definitely closer to conforming to that general pattern than others, but, unfortunately, we feel most church groups fall short of conforming to it in some significant areas.

When I say this, though, I want you to know that I have the utmost respect for my denominational friends and neighbors. When I point out that most of them aren't conforming to certain parts of God's original pattern for His church, I can assure you there's not a single holier-than-thou thought in my head. Nor are there any delusions of perfection in my mind concerning churches of Christ. I'm just acknowledging the reality of what we've seen, and that is that God's original instructions can very easily be lost.

To sum it up and put it in a nutshell, most of us in churches of Christ truly believe the New Testament contains a general pattern for every local church to follow, and we're totally sold-out in our commitment to do just that. We want to conform to that pattern as fully as we possibly can. We also hope that others who want to follow Jesus will see the importance of conforming to that pattern as well, and will want to unite in a properly restored New Testament church.

Not Just Another Denomination Either

Earlier I told you that we don't consider ourselves to be just another evangelical church. Now it's important to tell you that we don't consider ourselves to be just another denomination either. Do you remember earlier in the chapter when I told you that we don't want to be a denomination, and I said I'd tell you more about that later? It's later now, so let me tell you a little bit more about that.

Simply put, we don't want to be just another denomination because being a denomination doesn't conform to the New Testament model of Jesus' church. From the first chapter of the New Testament to the last, you won't find the first reference to different denominations. The true church of Jesus Christ was *pre-denominational*. In other words, Jesus' church existed long before denominations began to emerge in the wake of the Protestant Reformation.

What you'll find in the New Testament is that followers of Christ simply considered themselves to be members of the church which He built and which belongs to Him (Matt 16:18). And what you'll find in the New Testament is that Jesus' church was just a loose fellowship of independent, local congregations which were expected to conform to the same general pattern of beliefs and practices. Following that clear New Testament model, that's what churches of Christ are—we're just a loose fellowship of independent, local congregations committed to following the same general pattern of beliefs and practices that congregations in the New Testament followed.

In her book *The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church*, Carmen Renee Berry rightly says that churches of Christ “have no central headquarters with no overriding organizational structure—at all.”¹⁴⁶ She goes on to say, “I respect the way they have translated their beliefs into action. They believe the original church was organized around local congregations. Other groups agree with this idea but go right ahead and organize denominations anyway.”¹⁴⁷ She then says churches of Christ are

¹⁴⁶Carmen Renee Berry, *The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 238.

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 239.

“more consistent in living out their beliefs, in my opinion, than any other in this regard.”¹⁴⁸

In the back of her book, you’ll find a list of thirty-five church groups with their official website. “Churches of Christ” is the only one of those thirty-five groups with “no web site.”¹⁴⁹ And in her chapter on churches of Christ, she mentions how, in spite of no formal organization, they’ve done things like create several colleges and establish homes for abandoned children and the elderly. She then says, “Not bad for a group that can’t be called up on the phone.”¹⁵⁰ Why does she say churches of Christ “can’t be called up on the phone”? Because there is no denomination called “the Church of Christ.” Again, we’re just a loose fellowship of independent congregations.

When we refer to our home congregation as “a church of Christ” we don’t mean we’re part of a denomination called “The Church of Christ.” We simply mean that we’re trying to be a congregation—a local church—that belongs to Christ. We’re trying to use the term “church of Christ” the same way Paul used it when he told the church in Rome that “all the churches of Christ send greetings” (Rom 16:16). When he said that, he wasn’t referring to a denomination called “The Church of Christ”; he was simply referring to every congregation that belongs to Christ.

Non-Denominational? Yes and No

“Obviously, then, this means churches of Christ are non-denominational

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 348.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 238-239.

churches, right?” The answer to that question is actually both “Yes” and “No.” Since every congregation in our fellowship is 100% independent, and since there’s absolutely no formal organizational structure beyond any local congregation, every church of Christ definitely embraces being non-denominational as part of its identity.

However—and this is an important *however*—churches of Christ are *not* non-denominational in the same sense that others claim to be non-denominational. Most churches that identify themselves as non-denominational actually see nothing wrong with the concept of dividing God’s church into different denominations. While they choose to be non-denominational themselves, they genuinely believe God is equally pleased with or without denominational structures in His church.

We in churches of Christ, however, are not just non-denominational, but we’re also *anti*-denominational. Of course this doesn’t mean we’re opposed to the people in denominational churches. I love my denominational friends and neighbors. Most of them are wonderful, God-fearing, Bible-believing people trying their best to serve God with a sincere heart. When I say we’re *anti*-denominational, I just mean we’re opposed to the whole concept of dividing believers into different denominations. We actually wish no denominations existed. We genuinely believe God is *not* pleased with dividing His church into different denominations.

Why are we so opposed to the concept of denominations? For one thing, as I pointed out earlier, different denominations are conspicuously absent in the New Testament. I think that’s a pretty strong piece of evidence that God doesn’t want His people divided into different denominations.

For another thing—and I’m convinced this explains why there are no

denominations in the New Testament—there’s the New Testament’s appeal for unity and its condemnation of division in God’s church. For instance, the apostle Paul rebukes the church in Corinth for beginning to divide and identify themselves by different names.

Here’s what he wrote:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? (1 Cor 1:10-13)

Then, of course, there are the words of Jesus Himself which are surely relevant when considering whether it’s appropriate to divide God’s people into different denominations. Just a few hours before His arrest and execution, He prayed, “My prayer is not for them alone [the apostles]. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-21). Can anyone seriously argue that dividing Jesus’ people into different denominations honors His expressed desire for oneness among them?

Among the membership of most churches of Christ you’ll discover that many are former members of various denominational church groups. Both of my parents and my wife’s parents fall into that category. Many made the difficult decision to leave their respective denominations when they came to see the importance of conforming to God’s revealed pattern for His church. When, among other things, they learned that dividing people into different denominations wasn’t a part of God’s New Testament pattern, they decided to live out that belief. They were determined to make whatever changes were

necessary in order to more fully conform to the same simple pattern that every church in the New Testament was expected to follow. In churches of Christ they sure didn't find perfection, but they did find that same determination.

Now that you know about our goal of restoring the beliefs and practices of the church in the New Testament, I'm ready to show you how that goal has led us to embrace a few beliefs and practices that distinguish us from most of our evangelical neighbors.

CHAPTER 2

SALVATION AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN THE SHAPE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The first Pentecost in Jerusalem after Jesus walked out of His tomb began like every other Pentecost. It looked like Pentecost. It smelled like Pentecost. It sounded like Pentecost. But it sure didn't end like every other Pentecost. When this one was over, this centuries-old Jewish festival would be more closely associated with Christianity than Judaism because it was on that day, in that place, that God first began offering salvation in the name of Jesus Christ to every person on the face of the earth.

Thanks to Luke, you can read the dramatic details of that day in Acts 2, and one of those dramatic details is that God saved about three thousand people and added them to His church (Acts 2:41). Luke then closes the chapter a few verses later with this announcement: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

With Luke's incredible evangelism reports firmly in mind, I'd like you to ponder a few questions. What conditions did those three thousand converts on the Day of Pentecost have to meet before God saved them and added them to His church? And in the days that followed Pentecost, when new people were being saved and added to Jesus' church every day, what conditions did those people have to meet before God saved them and added them to the church? And what exactly do we have to do before God will save us and add us to Jesus' church?

Our answer to these questions reveals the most important difference you'll find

between churches of Christ and most evangelical church groups. It's not the *only* important difference, but it is, as I said, the *most* important difference.

Our answer begins with a confessed belief. Before the Lord will save us and add us to His church, we believe the Bible teaches that we must be totally convinced of a few fundamental truths, like these:

1. Our sins have placed us under the wrath of the infinitely holy God, and our destiny, as sinners, is eternal separation from Him in hell.
2. Despite our sins, God loves us, doesn't want to send us to hell, and He alone can change our lost condition; we're completely powerless to save ourselves.
3. God can save us because He punished Jesus in our place. God put all our sins on Jesus and poured out on Him all the holy wrath that our sins deserve by nailing Him to a cross.
4. After Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for us, His body was taken down and buried, but three days later He came back to life by the power of God.

It's not enough, though, just to be convinced in our mind that these things are true. We also have to be willing to verbally confess our conviction that Jesus is the crucified and resurrected Savior of the world. Frankly, though, this part of our salvation-answer doesn't distinguish us from most evangelicals. Most evangelicals are on the same page as far as this condition of salvation goes. Obviously, then, there's more to our answer than just a verbally confessed conviction about the nature and work of Christ.

If we want God to save us and add us to His church, we also believe the Bible teaches that we must stop living in sin, and surrender ourselves to a life of obedience to God. The Bible calls this *repentance*. But this part of our salvation-answer doesn't really distinguish us from most evangelicals either. A lot of evangelicals also believe repentance is necessary for salvation. This means, of course, there's still more to our answer.

In addition to a confessed belief and repentance, we also believe God has mandated baptism as a condition for receiving salvation and being added to His church. With a heart full of faith in Jesus' saving work on the cross, and a firm commitment to live life God's way, we believe God forgives our sins, gives us His Holy Spirit, and adds us to His church the moment we're baptized into the death of Christ and raised in the likeness of His resurrection. Baptism, in other words, *completes* our response of saving faith.

Our full and final salvation-answer, then, *begins* with a confessed belief, *continues* with repentance, and is *completed* in baptism.

It's where our salvation-answer is completed—in the water of Christian baptism—that the road forks between those of us in churches of Christ and most of our evangelical neighbors. As passionately as we embrace baptism as a necessary condition for salvation and church membership, most of our evangelical and Protestant friends passionately reject the notion that it's necessary for salvation.

The “Pick Your Battles” Challenge

We've all heard the phrase “pick your battles,” and I'll admit those words have been some of the best counsel I've ever given . . . and received. Those three little words just seem to have a magical way of forcing us to pause in the middle of an intensely emotional moment and ask ourselves, “Is this really an issue, or a belief, that I need to dig a foxhole and fight to the death over? Or is it something I can compromise on?”

What about this belief of ours that baptism is absolutely essential for salvation? Are we in churches of Christ stubbornly clinging to a belief that we should be willing to move away from for the sake of deeper unity with our Bible-believing friends who don't

share that belief? I've actually pondered that question quite a bit, and I've concluded that it really is a foxhole-and-fight conviction.

Don't let that language throw you though. I don't mean "fight" in the sense of being ungracious, unkind, and harsh in defense of it. I hope my defense of this belief, or any belief for that matter, will always be done with a gracious spirit. I just mean, if God has joined baptism and salvation together—and I'm convinced He has—then we simply cannot allow them to be separated, even for something as desirable as closer fellowship with others who seek to honor Jesus as their Lord.

Let me show you why I believe this and I'll start by pointing you to one of the most terrifying passages in the Bible—at least I think it's one of the most terrifying.

Early in Jesus' ministry, as He was winding down the Sermon on the Mount, He dropped this bomb on the crowd:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." (Matthew 7:21-23)

With those spine-tingling words, Jesus made it impossibly clear that people can actually believe they're saved, but in reality be lost . . . people who not only genuinely believe He's their Lord, but who also are active in serving Him and promoting His cause. Now *that's* scary.

If you ask me, those words should be enough to make anyone want to revisit their salvation while they're still breathing. I'm definitely not suggesting that we should walk around every day with a big question mark dogging us about our salvation, but Jesus' words definitely suggest that we shouldn't take our salvation for granted either.

Why did Jesus say *many*—His word, not mine—who acknowledge and serve Him as Lord in this life will be lost on the day of judgment? In a word, the reason is *disobedience*. To use His words, it'll be because they failed to do “the will of my Father.” Jesus then followed up this attention-getting announcement with an exhortation to take obedience to God very seriously, and He did it with one of His most memorable parables, the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matt 7:24-27). If your Bible is in arms reach, it wouldn't hurt to take about thirty seconds to flip to that passage and read those four verses.

With this obedience-wake-up-call ringing in our ears, I want to throw out a couple of Old Testament stories for us to think about. The first is the familiar story of Jericho in Joshua 6.

On D-Day of the Israelite invasion of the Promised Land, the first target was the walled Canaanite city of Jericho, and God's plan of attack was a bit unorthodox—the army of Israel was to march around Jericho for seven consecutive days. For the first six days, God ordered them to march around the town once a day while seven priests each carry a ram's horn in front of the ark of the covenant. On day seven, He ordered them to march around the town seven times, after which the priests were to blow their rams' horns and the people were to shout as loudly as possible. God promised that the walls of the city would collapse the moment His orders were carried out, and Jericho would be theirs for the taking (Josh 6:3-5).

Here's a question for you now: What if the Israelites had done everything precisely as God commanded *except* for one simple thing? What if, on the last day, they had marched around Jericho six times instead of seven? Do you think God still would

have brought down the walls? I've asked that question to quite a few people throughout my life and ministry, and if you're like 99.9 percent of them, then you're thinking, "Of course not." And if that's what you're thinking, then your thinking is right on target. Nothing in the Bible leads us to believe that *close* obedience would have been close enough during that Jericho mission. The clear implication of the text is that Israel had to meet *every* condition that God attached to His promise to bring down those walls.

Our second story is probably a notch or two lower on most people's scale of familiarity, but it's still one of the well-known stories in the Old Testament. It's found in 2 Kings 5, and the leading man is an Aramean general who was eaten up with the horribly disfiguring disease of leprosy. His name is Naaman and, in search of a miracle, he packed his bags and headed south into Israel looking for the prophet Elisha.

Cutting right to the chase, Elisha told Naaman to "go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you and you will be clean" (2 Kgs 5:10). The story then closes like this: "So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean" (2 Kgs 5:14).

Here's your next question: Do you think Naaman would have been healed if he had stopped after the sixth dip in the Jordan? I don't think I'm going out on a limb to assume you're thinking, once again, "Of course not." And if that's what you're thinking, then, once again, I'm convinced you nailed it. Just as close obedience would not have cut it on the Jericho mission, it would not have cut it in Naaman's case either. The clear implication of the text is that Naaman had to meet *every* condition that God attached to His promise to heal him.

Stories like these are very instructive, and one of the most important lessons they teach is that it's critical to meet *every* condition that God attaches to a promise. By the way, insisting that all of God's conditions must be met is *not* a sign of legalism . . . it's a sign of faith. Stay tuned for a few more words about faith a little later, but for now let me give you this verse to chew on: "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days" (Heb 11:30).

Like God's promise to give the Israelites victory at Jericho and His promise to heal Naaman of leprosy, His promise to save us from our sins through the blood of Christ comes with conditions attached. And if He made baptism one of those conditions, then no one has the authority to dismiss it . . . for *any* reason.

That, of course, is precisely where we in churches of Christ stand. Since we believe baptism is one of the conditions that God has attached to His promise of salvation, we just can't dismiss it anymore than Israel or Naaman could have dismissed any of the conditions that God had attached to His promises to them.

Church "Yes," Salvation "No"?

In the rest of this chapter I'm going to do my best to show you that our belief fits the teaching of the New Testament, and I want to start by going back to the last statement I made in the first section of this chapter. Here it is again: "As passionately as we embrace baptism as a necessary condition for salvation and church membership, most of our evangelical and Protestant neighbors passionately reject it as a necessary condition for salvation."

Did you notice I said we believe baptism is a necessary condition for salvation

and church membership . . . and then I said most evangelical and Protestant church groups reject baptism as necessary for salvation . . . *but I didn't say they reject it as necessary for church membership?* That omission was no oversight on my part. I purposely left that last part out because many church groups that reject baptism as necessary for salvation actually teach that it *is* necessary to be a member of the Lord's church . . . *and* to participate in the Lord's Supper.

With the utmost respect for my Bible-believing friends who hold this view, I'm convinced that it's biblically impossible to insist that baptism *is not* necessary for salvation, and at the same time insist that it *is* necessary for membership in God's saved community—the church—and for participation in the Lord's Supper.

Simply put, being saved and belonging to God's saved community are not separated in the Bible. In other words, the notion that a person can be saved and still *not* be a member of Jesus' church is completely unknown in the New Testament. Just take another look—a slow, deliberate look—at Luke's last statement in Acts 2: "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

Notice that, according to Luke, the Lord was saving people and adding them to His saved community at the exact same moment. May I suggest that if being saved and being added to God's saved community happens simultaneously, then whatever conditions are necessary for one are necessary for the other. That means, of course, if baptism is a necessary condition for church membership, then it's also a necessary condition for salvation.

The same is true of the Lord's Supper. The notion that a person can be saved but still *not* be allowed to come to the Lord's table with the Lord's people to eat the

Lord's Supper simply doesn't fit New Testament teaching. The New Testament assumes that every person who is in *covenant* with God (i.e., saved) will regularly gather with the *covenant* community (i.e., the church) to eat the *covenant* meal (i.e., the Lord's Supper). So, whatever conditions a person must meet in order to eat the covenant meal are the same conditions a person must meet in order to be in covenant with God. And that adds up to one thing—if baptism is a necessary condition for eating the Lord's Supper, then it's also a necessary condition for salvation.

A Little Help From History

As I continue to build a case for our belief that baptism is necessary for salvation and church membership, I want to offer up as evidence the fact that this was the unanimous belief of Christianity for its first 1,500 years—give or take a few years.

Hopefully you remember my blurb in the first chapter about the Protestant Reformation and men like Martin Luther who led that reform movement. Another man at the point of the Reformation spear was Huldreich Zwingli, and in the early 1500s he came to the bold conclusion that every Bible teacher before him had been wrong about baptism. Specifically, he concluded they had been wrong in their belief that baptism is necessary for salvation.

Just listen to Zwingli's own acknowledgement that he was going against 1,500 years of agreement: "In this matter of baptism, I can only conclude that all the doctors have been in error from the time of the apostles. . . . For all the doctors have ascribed to water a power which it does not have and the holy apostles did not teach."¹⁵¹ He went on

¹⁵¹Huldreich Zwingli, "Of Baptism," in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, vol. 24 of *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. and trans. G.W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 130.

to say, “The Fathers were in error . . . because they thought that the water itself effects cleansing and salvation.”¹⁵²

These statements seem to make it crystal clear that there was a consensus about the meaning and purpose of baptism from the time of the apostles until Zwingli, and that consensus was that baptism is the time and place that God forgives and saves.¹⁵³

I’ve often heard supporters of “infant sprinkling” and supporters of “believer’s immersion” square off over which of these two views has “historical precedent.” That is, did the earliest Christians sprinkle infants, or did they immerse only those who first expressed faith in Christ? A completely honest look at church history reveals that “believer’s immersion” wins that argument.

But there’s another view that has even more historical precedent than “believer’s immersion,” and that view is “believer’s immersion *for the forgiveness of sins*.” Historians who specialize in early church history will not only confirm that the earliest Christians immersed believers only, but they’ll also confirm that they immersed them *for the forgiveness of sins*.

What’s my point? The point is that a good history check provides an important way to test our interpretation of the New Testament. If we come to a conclusion about

¹⁵²Ibid., 156. “The doctors” were theologians, and “the Fathers” were the influential Christian teachers and writers who lived from roughly A.D. 100 to A.D. 500.

¹⁵³In all fairness to those “doctors” and “Fathers,” Zwingli’s charge that they all believed “the water itself effects cleansing and salvation” is just not true. Most, if not all of them, believed it was the blood of Christ that cleanses and saves; they just believed that God saves people through that blood at the moment of Christian baptism. Please don’t think, however, that I’m giving “the doctors” and “the Fathers” a free pass concerning everything they thought and taught about baptism. I too believe that a lot of them got a lot of things wrong about baptism. For instance, replacing immersion with sprinkling, and doing away with belief and repentance as prerequisites for baptism, are two things that many of them got terribly wrong. I’ll have more to say about these things later in this chapter.

what the New Testament teaches concerning a particular subject, but then discover that our conclusion goes against long-held Christian beliefs, then we really should take a closer look at our interpretation.

Of course I'm not suggesting that church history should determine our understanding of the Bible. Hear me well—church history must *never* be our ultimate authority when it comes to determining our beliefs and practices. That role is reserved only for the Bible. My point is, as one writer put it, “long-held traditions in the church should not be jettisoned casually or without careful reflection, for we are all liable to the chronological snobbery of the modern age and apt to dismiss the contribution of thoughtful Christians who have preceded us.”¹⁵⁴

With that said, the fact that the earliest Christians believed that baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, and the fact that every Bible teacher believed the same thing until Zwingli came onto the scene in the early sixteenth century, should make us want to take a good hard look at the popular, contemporary belief that baptism is *not* for the forgiveness of sins.

Let me take you back to Zwingli for a moment because there are still a couple of blanks in this story that need to be filled in. The first blank is what Zwingli came to believe about baptism after he rejected the 1,500 year consensus that it was the time and place that God forgives and saves. To make a long story really, really short, he taught that baptism has two basic purposes.

¹⁵⁴“Epilogue,” in *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, 2d ed., ed. Andreas J. Kostenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 175.

First, he taught that it's essentially a public announcement which is mostly for the benefit of the church. According to Zwingli, it's a person's announcement to his fellow Christians that he or she is joining them in their commitment to serve Jesus. This is where the popular belief that baptism is a "public testimony" or "public witness" comes from.

Second, he taught that baptism is simply a sign that one belongs to God's new covenant community, the church. In other words, Zwingli taught that baptism was the new version of Old Testament circumcision. He argued that just as circumcision was the outward sign that a person belonged to God's old covenant community, baptism is now the outward sign that a person belongs to His new covenant community. By the way, Zwingli came to this particular conclusion while developing his rationale for infant baptism.¹⁵⁵

The second blank that needs to be filled-in is what happened in the aftermath of Zwingli's proposed new meaning of baptism. Zwingli didn't live long after he formulated his new doctrine of baptism, but his view was adopted by another influential Reformer named John Calvin and it became part of a doctrinal system called Reformed theology. That system of doctrine was then adopted by most denominations that emerged from the Reformation. And that's why most who trace their spiritual roots to the Reformation still reject the idea that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. It really all goes back to Zwingli.

¹⁵⁵For a very thorough and very well documented discussion of Zwingli's understanding of baptism I strongly recommend Jack Cottrell, "Baptism According to the Reformed Tradition" in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective*, ed. David W. Fletcher (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1990), 39-81.

Baptism and Salvation: A Clear Connection

Now the question I want you to think about is this: Why did every Bible teacher for the first 1,500 years of Christian history believe that baptism is necessary for salvation? The answer is pretty simple. They believed it because the most natural, most straightforward meaning of so many New Testament passages link baptism and salvation together. Incidentally, that not only explains why *they* believed baptism is necessary for salvation, but it also explains why *we* in churches of Christ believe it too.

With that said, though, I sure don't expect you to just take my word that the New Testament repeatedly links baptism with salvation. It's important for you to see this connection for yourself, so let's take a look at a few New Testament passages. As we do this, let me encourage you to let the words of these passages just say what they say. In other words, just accept the most natural, most straightforward meaning of the words. If you'll do that, I think you'll have to admit that the connection between baptism and salvation is glaring.

Acts 2:38

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

First, some background. We're back to where we started this chapter—on the Day of Pentecost and the very beginning of the church. We're back to the very moment when forgiveness of sins through Jesus was first offered and first received. And here we find the apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, preaching the very first gospel sermon.

When that Pentecost crowd believed everything Peter told them about Jesus, their hearts melted, they asked him and the other apostles what they needed to do, and

they heard these words come out of Peter's mouth: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

From time to time when I'm studying the Bible with someone, and we're discussing salvation, this is one of the verses we'll read together. After we read it, I always ask, "What does Peter tell the crowd that they must do in order to have their sins forgiven?" Without exception, the reply has always been, "Repent and be baptized."

Why do you think people always reply that way? Why do you think they always say, "Repent and be baptized"? It's because they just let Peter's words say what they say. That is, they just accept the most straightforward, most natural meaning of his words, and the most straightforward, most natural meaning connects baptism with the forgiveness of sins.

Acts 22:16

"And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name" (Acts 22:16).

Here's the background of this verse. A blind, guilt-ridden Saul (soon to be the apostle Paul) had asked the risen Jesus, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10). Jesus told him to go into the city of Damascus and someone would tell him what to do. He goes. He waits. He fasts. He prays.

Three days later, a man named Ananias pays him a visit. During that visit, Ananias miraculously heals Paul's blindness, informs the ex-persecutor that he's been selected to be an apostle of God, and then says to him, "Why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name" (Acts 22:16).

Does Ananias say, “Arise and be baptized to symbolize that God has already washed your sins away”? He doesn’t, does he? Does he say, “Arise and be baptized as a public testimony to your fellow Christians that you are now one of them”? He doesn’t say that either, does he? He says, “Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins.” Doesn’t the most straightforward meaning of those words link baptism with the washing away of sins?

Matthew 28:19-20

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19-20).

This is the first mention of Christian baptism in the New Testament, and most people call these verses “the Great Commission.” Here Jesus gives His apostles their marching orders, and those orders are to “go . . . and make disciples of all the nations.”

Jesus then tells them how to actually make a disciple, and He summarizes the process in two steps: one, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and two, teach them to observe everything that Jesus commanded.

If you accept the most natural, most straightforward meaning of these disciple-making orders, can you really say that a person can become a disciple—that is, a Christian—without being baptized? You can’t really say that, can you? Doesn’t the most natural, most straightforward meaning of Jesus’ words link baptism with becoming a disciple?

Mark 16:15-16

“And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned’ (Mark 16:15-16).

These two verses are part of a larger section—Mark 16:9-20—that not everyone believes was an original part of Mark’s gospel. That’s why most translations put brackets around this section and add a footnote which says something like, “Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include 16:9-20.” Personally, however, I don’t think the case for rejecting these verses is an open-and-shut case.¹⁵⁶ In fact, at this point in my studies, I believe Mark really wrote these seventeen verses. For arguments sake, then, I’m assuming Mark was really quoting Jesus when he wrote: “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved.”

This is another one of those passages where people always say the same thing when I ask, “What does Jesus say that a person must do to be saved?” The answer is always, “Believe and be baptized.” Why do people always say that? Again, it’s because they just let Jesus’ words say what they say. In other words, they just accept the most straightforward meaning, and the most straightforward meaning connects baptism and salvation.

Romans 6:3-4

“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus

¹⁵⁶If you’re interested in exploring the question of whether or not Mark 16:9-20 was an original part of Mark’s gospel, I’d recommend David Alan Black, ed., *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark: Four Views* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008).

have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:3-4).

In the first part of Romans 6 Paul is explaining to the Christians at Rome why they can’t purposely live sinful lifestyles. The reason is because each of them had died to their old life which was controlled by sinful desires, and each had been given a new spiritual life.

And that brings us to verses 3 and 4. In these verses, Paul reminds them of the actual moment they died to sin and received new life. That moment, according to him, was when they were “baptized into Christ Jesus.” Again, here’s what he said: “Or do you not know that *all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that . . . we too might walk in newness of life.*”

Notice that Paul doesn’t say they died to their old life and rose to a new life when they “asked Jesus into their heart” (as some Bible-believers teach). And notice that he doesn’t say they spiritually died and rose again when they “said a sinner’s prayer” (as others teach). And please notice that he doesn’t say their baptism was just a symbol of their spiritual death and resurrection which really took place at some earlier time (as many teach).

If we just accept Paul’s words “as is,” he points directly to baptism as the actual time and place when two incredible things happen. It’s the time and place that a person actually dies to their old sinful life, and actually rises to a new redeemed life. And

if baptism is the actual moment that a person dies with Christ and is raised to walk in a new life, aren't baptism and salvation connected?

Galatians 3:26-27

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27).

“Baptized into Christ.” If that expression sounds familiar, it's because you just saw it. In Romans 6:3 Paul tells every Christian in Rome that they were “baptized into Christ,” and here he tells every Christian in every congregation throughout the province of Galatia that they were “baptized into Christ” as well.

If you accept the most natural, most straightforward meaning of that expression—“baptized into Christ”—what does it sound like Paul is saying? Does it sound like nothing actually happens at the moment of baptism? Not exactly, does it? Does it sound like baptism is just symbolic of some earlier time—maybe a week earlier, or a month earlier, or even a year earlier—when God united us with Christ? It doesn't sound like that either, does it?

Doesn't the most straightforward meaning of those words suggest that, in our faith, God actually places us in Christ at the moment of our baptism? We are all “baptized into Christ,” Paul plainly says. But there's more. He adds, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ *have clothed yourselves with Christ.*”

That's an incredibly vivid image. Christ is compared with clothing that we put on and begin to wear. Surely this image is meant to convey the idea of being in union with Christ. When we put on Christ in baptism, we become a part of Christ. When we put on Christ in baptism, we become one with Him. When we put on Christ in baptism,

we belong to Him. And if baptism is the actual moment that we're clothed with Christ, aren't baptism and salvation connected?

Colossians 2:11-13

“And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions” (Col 2:11-13).

Here's another vivid image. It's the image of God performing spiritual surgery. Just as a doctor removes physical flesh in the operation of circumcision, God removes spiritual flesh (i.e., sin) in a spiritual operation. The question for us, of course, is when does God perform this operation on a person?

If we accept the most straightforward meaning of these verses, Paul says God does it *“in baptism”*—not *before* baptism or *after* baptism. And not only that, he says *“in baptism”*—again, not *before* or *after* baptism—we are *“raised up with Him [Christ] through faith in the working of God.”* Let's read it again: *“And in Him you were also circumcised . . . in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”*

If we take these words *“as is,”* then baptism is the actual moment when God meets us in our faith and cuts away our sins. And if we take these words *“as is,”* then baptism is the actual moment when God meets us in our faith and raises us up to a new,

forgiven life. And if baptism is the actual moment that God removes our sinful flesh, raises us from spiritual death, and makes us alive together with Christ, aren't baptism and salvation connected?

1 Peter 3:21

“And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 3:21).

This is the last passage we'll look at, and in it Peter compares baptism with the flood, through which eight people—Noah and his family—were safely brought through water. It's an extraordinary statement.

Now look at these four words again: “baptism now saves you.” If we accept the simplest, most straightforward, most natural meaning of those words, I don't know how it's possible to deny a connection between baptism and salvation. If we accept the most natural meaning of Peter's words, don't we have to concede that baptism has a real role in God's plan to save people?

What About Faith?

“But doesn't the Bible teach that we're saved by faith alone? If it does, then nothing else is necessary—including baptism.” This is probably the number one objection to our belief that baptism is a necessary condition for receiving salvation.

Let me begin by saying that the Bible absolutely, positively teaches that we're saved by faith. Paul, for instance, says, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1). Then there's

the most well-known verse in the New Testament, if not the whole Bible, which says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).¹⁵⁷ And we could go on and on.

However—and this is another huge *however*—a statement like “baptism can’t be necessary if we’re saved by faith alone” signals a major misunderstanding of faith. Many who make this kind of statement have been taught that faith is essentially nothing more than believing in your mind that something is true. Consequently, they’ve been taught that having faith in Christ simply means being convinced in your mind that He’s the crucified, resurrected Savior.¹⁵⁸

In the Bible, however, faith is more than just an intellectual conviction that something is true. In the Bible, the word “faith” is often used as a single-word summary to describe a response to God that combines conviction *and* action. In the Bible, genuine faith only happens when a person believes what God tells them (conviction) *and* obeys the commands He gives them (action). That’s why James says, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (Jas 2:17). He simply means that real faith doesn’t exist without obedience. And Paul was saying the same thing when he coined the expression “obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26).

¹⁵⁷English translations of the New Testament use the word “believes” in places John 3:16 because English doesn’t have a verb form of the word “faith.” Since we can’t say “whoever *faiths* in him should not perish,” we have to say “whoever *believes* in him should not perish.” In the New Testament, then, being saved through “faith” in Jesus is exactly the same thing as being saved by “believing in” Him.

¹⁵⁸It’s hard to escape the conclusion that the main culprit behind this misunderstanding of faith is the fact that we use the English word “believes” in places like John 3:16. Since our word “believes” basically means “to accept something as true or real,” it’s easy to see how people would read that meaning into John’s thinking.

This faith-obedience connection really stands out in the book of Hebrews when we're reminded that many of the Israelites who came out of Egypt weren't allowed to enter the Promised Land. The writer of Hebrews says, "To whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient" (Heb 3:18). Then he says, "So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief" (Heb 3:19). Notice that verse 18 says they weren't allowed to enter because they were "disobedient," but verse 19 says it was "because of unbelief." Which was it, disobedience or unbelief? Take your pick because they mean the same. Where there is genuine faith, there is obedience. Where there is no obedience, there is no genuine faith.

Now watch it all come together in the verse I gave you to chew on earlier: "By faith the walls of Jericho fell after the people had marched around them for seven days" (Heb 11:30). Did the walls of Jericho fall by faith? Was marching around those walls for seven days, precisely as God commanded, absolutely necessary for them to collapse? I'm assuming you're thinking "yes" to both those questions.

But how could it be both? The answer is because genuine faith includes obedience. For the Israelites, faith that would bring down the walls of Jericho included obeying every command that God issued in the battle plan. For the Israelites, putting their faith in God happened when they carried out His command to march around the city for seven days. That's why the writer of Hebrews can say that the walls fell "by faith," and also say that they fell after the people carried out God's orders to march for a week.

Our salvation works the same way. In some places the Bible can simply say we're saved "through faith" (Rom 5:1), and then in other places it can say, "repent and be baptized . . . for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). But how can it be both? The

answer is because genuine faith includes obedience. Faith that saves us includes obeying every command that God has issued in His plan to save us. Putting our faith in Christ happens when we carry out His command to “repent and be baptized.”

Paul does a great job showing how saving faith and baptism go together when he says, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:26-27). According to Paul, do we become children of God “through faith”? Of course we do. And, according to him, do we put on Christ, like putting on new clothes, when we’re “baptized into Christ”? Of course we do. What’s the difference? There really is no difference. Paul is saying the same thing in two different ways, and he can do that because, for him, baptism is not separate from faith, but rather a part of it. For Paul, putting one’s faith in Christ happens when one obeys God’s command to be baptized into Christ.

Paul’s understanding that baptism is a part of one’s faith response to the gospel can also be seen in the book of Acts when he asked a group of men, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (Acts 19:2). When they said “no,” his response to them was, “Into what then were you baptized?” (Acts 19:3). He clearly expected them to receive the Holy Spirit when they “believed” *and* when they were baptized. He expected that because, for him, baptism isn’t something separate from belief, but rather a part of it. For Paul, believing in Jesus happens when one is baptized into Christ.

Let me sum up by repeating what I said a moment ago. In the Bible, the word “faith” is often used as a single-word summary to describe a response to God that combines conviction *and* action. Scripture clearly shows that genuine faith only happens when we believe what God tells us (conviction) *and* obey the commands He gives us

(action). When we apply this to our salvation, it means that faith includes obeying every condition that God has attached to His promise to save us through the work of Jesus.

Do we in churches of Christ believe we're saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ? Absolutely! Do we also believe repentance and baptism are essential for salvation? Absolutely! While that may sound contradictory to some people, for those who understand what biblical faith really is, and know what it really looks like, there's no contradiction at all.

Immersion Only

Our conviction that baptism is necessary for salvation is not our only foxhole-and-fight conviction about baptism. We're equally tenacious defenders of immersion only. In other words, we believe only immersion counts as New Testament baptism.

Our number one reason for believing this is the simple fact that the Greek words for baptism in the New Testament *mean* immersion. If you look in any reputable Greek lexicon (a Greek dictionary that defines New Testament words) you'll see that the verb *baptizo* (from which we get our word *baptize*) is defined with terms like *immerse*, *dip*, *plunge*, *sink*, *submerge*, and *go under*.

Actually, though, you don't really have to spend much time in the reference section of a theological library to discover that "baptize" in the New Testament means immersion. All you really have to do is just take a close look at the New Testament.

As you read through the New Testament you'll come across statements about baptism that only make sense if it's an immersion. Mark, for instance, says Jesus "was baptized by John [the Baptist] in the Jordan" (Mark 1:9). He doesn't say Jesus was baptized *beside* the Jordan, or *at* the Jordan, or *near* the Jordan, or *with water from* the

Jordan. He was baptized “*in* the Jordan.” No one is sprinkled *in* a body of water.

Immersion is the only mode of baptism that happens *in* a body of water.

Mark then continues his report on Jesus’ baptism by saying, “And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove” (Mark 1:9-10). Did you catch the words “when he came up out of the water”? Nobody “comes up out of the water” when they’re sprinkled. Only immersed people “come up out of the water.”

Then there’s this statement in John’s Gospel about the baptizing ministry of John the Baptist: “John was also baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there” (John 3:23). If baptizing can be done just by sprinkling or pouring a little water on someone’s head, why did John the Baptist need to find a place where “water was plentiful”? The only mode of baptism that requires plenty of water is immersion.

Finally, there’s Luke’s report of the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion. After Philip told the eunuch “the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35), the next verse says the eunuch spotted some water and asked if he could be baptized (Acts 8:36). Here’s what happened next: “And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they *both went down into the water*, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when *they came up out of the water*, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away . . .” (Acts 8:38-39). Again, people who are sprinkled don’t “go down into the water” and “come up out of the water.” Those things only happen when a person is immersed.

Some people wonder if we go too far when we insist that it’s important *how* we’re baptized. In other words, do we go too far by insisting that only immersion is true baptism?

Obviously, I don't think we go too far, and here's why. If you start reading through the Bible, it won't take long to see that God cares about the details of His instructions. Whether it's Nadab and Abihu and their unauthorized-fire fiasco (Lev 10:1-3), Moses and his whacking-the-rock blunder (Num 20:2-13), or David and his transporting-the-ark-the-wrong-way debacle (2 Sam 6:1-10), the message comes through loud and clear that God expects His people to respect the details of His instructions. And that's what we in churches of Christ are determined to do—respect the details. That means, of course, we won't shrug off His specific command to be *immersed* into Christ, and we'll keep begging others not to shrug it off either.

Believer's Immersion

There is one more foxhole-and-fight conviction concerning baptism that I need to tell you about, and that's our belief that God doesn't save anyone at the moment of baptism unless they first believe and repent. As I said at the outset of this chapter, salvation is *completed* in baptism, but it *begins* with belief and repentance. If sincere belief and repentance are missing-in-action when a person steps into the water, then the only thing coming away from that baptism is a couple of very wet people and a couple of moderately damp towels.

As we've already seen, Peter's Spirit-filled message to the convicted Pentecost crowd was, "Repent *and* be baptized . . . for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Repenting was just as necessary for receiving God's forgiveness as being baptized. Plenty of other passages in the New Testament also clearly show that true baptism is always preceded by actions like listening to the gospel, believing Jesus is the risen Lord,

repenting, and confessing faith in Christ (see Acts 8:12-13; 16:14, 31, 34; 18:8; Rom 10:9-10; Col 2:12).

What this means, of course, is that we in churches of Christ don't recognize the practice of infant baptism as true baptism. Babies and small children simply aren't capable of understanding the gospel, believing in Jesus Christ, repenting of their sins, or confessing their faith in Jesus . . . which would seem to explain why you can't find a single baby or small child being baptized in the New Testament.

With that said, though, I have to point out that some people still actually insist that there are examples of infant baptism in the New Testament. Of course they can't actually show an infant or young child being baptized, but their "proof" that it's there is pretty ingenious. In step one, they point to passages that refer to a "household" being saved or baptized.¹⁵⁹ In step two, they say these households *must* have included infants. And in step three they bring it all together like this: Since these households *must* have included infants, then infants *must* have been baptized too. Voila, infant baptism!

When you take a close look at these household-conversion passages, however, you'll see that the members of these households did other things too. They feared God (Acts 10:2), they listened to the gospel message (Acts 10:44; Acts 16:32), they believed (Acts 16:34; Acts 18:8), and they rejoiced in their salvation (Acts 16:34). Frankly, I haven't met a baby or a small child yet who can pull off any of those things. It seems obvious, then, that when the New Testament speaks of a "household" being baptized, it's referring only to those in the household who were capable of hearing the gospel,

¹⁵⁹Acts 11:14 (the conversion of Cornelius' household); Acts 16:15 (the conversion of Lydia's household); Acts 16:33 (the conversion of the Philippian jailer's household); Acts 18:8 (the conversion of Crispus' household).

believing it, repenting, and rejoicing in their salvation.

What About Those Baptized Differently?

After this discussion on baptism you may be wondering about the spiritual status of the millions of people who haven't followed the biblical model of baptism—*believer's immersion for the forgiveness of sins*. What about those who were sprinkled rather than immersed? What about those who were only “baptized” as infants? And what about those who were immersed as believing adults, but they weren't immersed for the purpose of receiving the gift of salvation and beginning a new life?

First of all, I agree with Jack Cottrell, a professor of theology at Cincinnati Bible Seminary, who observed, “It is obvious that human traditions have seriously distorted and limited the light of Scripture concerning baptism, and many sincere people have responded in good conscience to what light they have.”¹⁶⁰

Second, since final judgment is God's territory, I simply can't say with absolute certainty how He'll judge every single person who sincerely responded to inaccurate teaching regarding baptism. I can say, however, that I'm very content to let Him have the final word on who is and isn't saved, and that I truly hope His grace will cover many who were unintentionally baptized improperly.

Third, I can't preach what I *hope* God will do. I can only preach what He has clearly revealed in His Word. With that being said, I have to say that only those who have followed the clear Bible pattern of baptism can be *absolutely, positively sure* that God has forgiven them and added them to Jesus' church.

¹⁶⁰Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All: Bible Doctrine for Today* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), 373.

Maybe you haven't followed that clear Bible pattern, but you're still convinced in your heart that God has forgiven and saved you. If that's the case, let me encourage you not to trust your feelings. Feelings can be incredibly deceiving. Feeling saved isn't a guarantee of being saved. Don't forget the terrifying announcement of Jesus that we looked at earlier:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." (Matthew 7:21-23)

Instead of trusting your own feelings, I want to encourage you to trust only the plain teaching of the Word of God. Be like the Psalmist who said, "I trust in your word" (Ps 119:42). So, if you haven't followed the New Testament pattern of baptism, I hope you'll want to make absolutely sure that you're right with God by doing the exact same thing that Peter told the people on Pentecost to do—with a heart full of faith, I hope you'll "repent and be baptized [immersed] . . . in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38).

If you think you want to do that, but you're not quite sure where to turn, or maybe you just want to talk about it a little more, why don't you contact a church of Christ in your area? I know they'd love to help you.

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ABSTRACT

LEADING MEMBERS TO A CONVICTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE HISTORIC DOCTRINAL EMPHASES OF CHURCHES OF CHRIST AT THE CONCORD ROAD CHURCH OF CHRIST, BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

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This project seeks to rebuild the doctrinal foundations of the Concord Road Church of Christ. Chapter one introduces the Concord Road Church and the theological identity crisis among Churches of Christ. Chapter two provides a biblical and theological rationale for promoting obedience to God in all aspects of church life as one of the highest goals for the individual Christian and the local church. It also seeks to biblically establish the validity of restoration as a theological principle. Chapter three amplifies the current theological identity crisis in Churches of Christ with a discussion of specifics. It also connects the crisis to the larger contemporary American church culture which seems to downplay doctrine more so than previous generations. Chapter four explains the process used to implement the project. Chapter five analyzes and evaluates the results of the project.

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1988-91.
Education Minister, Old Hickory Church of Christ, Old Hickory, Tennessee,
1991-92.
Preaching Minister, River Road Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee,
1992-95.
Preaching Minister, Lebanon Road Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee,
1997-03.
Preaching Minister, Maryville Church of Christ, Maryville, Tennessee,
2003-09.
Preaching Minister, Concord Road Church of Christ, Brentwood, Tennessee,
2009-