

Old New Questions (8): What Is the True Church?

(Matthew 16:16-18)

I. Introduction

- A. We recently received a new copy of *Churches of Christ in the United States*.
1. This is “*directory*” of churches lists addresses, phone numbers, email, etc
 - a. It also lists the relative size and a little of the character of these churches
 - b. The book is helpful to people travelling or moving into a new area
 2. Our largest congregation has 2667 members. In 2006, the largest had 6414!
 - a. Why the difference? Our largest congregation was voted off the island!
 - b. Richland Hills offers instrumental as well as traditional *cappella* services
 - c. To editors of the book, that made Richland Hills one of “*them*,” not “*us*”
 3. Reminds me of the opening of the old Chuck Connors show “*Branded*”
- B. We’ve been looking at “*Old/New Questions*” that everyone once knew answer
1. But the world has changed, now these old questions have become new
 - *Why should I believe the Bible?*
 - *Must I belong to a church?*
 - *Why sex outside marriage wrong?*
 - *Why are Christians homophobic?*
 - *What does God think of divorce?*
 - *Can Christians be pro-choice?*
 2. Our old/new question for today is, “*What church is the true church?*”
 - a. That may make sense only if you’ve been around Church of Christ awhile
 - 1) When I was a kid, we all knew the answer; the true church is us
 - 2) No one was really Christian except us... we worried about a lot of us
 - 3) We were able to maintain that identity largely by isolating ourselves
 - b. In recent yrs, we’ve had increasing contact with believers of other tribes
 - 1) We read books by their authors and attend their events (PK or WBF)
 - 2) We listen to Christian music; we work together in DUCO and PORT
 - 3) I think a big factor was ML—not Martin Luther, but Max Lucado!
 3. Jesus promised the apostles that he would build his church (**Matt 16:17-18**)
 - a. Jesus was to build only one church, not many; He would be its only head
 - b. What does it mean to be that church, the true church today
 4. I’m not going to answer that question, but I will suggest a general direction
 5. But before I can do that, let’s survey the history leading us to ask question.

II. The True Church: Historical Background

- A. Church of Christ began in camp revivals of 2nd Great Awakening (1790-1840)
 1. One of these was at Cane Ridge, KY led by Presbyterian Barton W. Stone
 - a. Revivals were interdenominational; people from all churches were there
 - b. Afterward, people couldn't worship together because of denominations
 - 1) Many practiced "closed communion" (*chip to show good standing*)
 - 2) Stone saw the denominations as divisive, and he called for unity
 2. But how? Stone suggested 4 possible ways to seek unity among Christians
 - a. **Book Unity**: Maybe agreeing on a common creed? (*that was the problem*)
 - b. **Head Unity**: What if we could understand Bible doctrine exactly alike
 - 1) Stone argued this had never happened and never would (*200 yrs ago!*)
 - 2) He saw the danger of making opinions on Bible into *unwritten creed*
 - c. **Water Unity**: Focus on baptism (**Gal 3:28**). "*Too easily dissolved*"
 - d. **Fire Unity**: True unity is found in the working of the Spirit (**Eph 4:3**)
 3. The quest for unity was the focus of Stone's ministry. ("*Our polar star*")
- B. At same time, another Presbyterian was also calling for the unity of believers
 1. Alexander Campbell believed the millennium would shortly come to pass
 - a. He was postmillennial; Christ would come after a 1000 year golden age
 - b. Before that could happen, the church would have to convert the world
 - c. Before the church can convert the world, it would have to become unified
 2. So Campbell saw unity as a means to the end—that of world evangelism
 - a. Like Stone, Campbell struggled with how believers could become one
 - b. He saw unity coming only through "*the restoration of ancient order*"
 - 1) We must aside our creeds and traditions and unite only on the Bible
 - 2) This "restoration plea" can be seen in the slogans of the movement
Where the Bible speaks, we speak; and where the Bible is silent, we are silent
We call Bible things by Bible names and do Bible things in Bible ways
We seek to be Christians only, but not the only Christians
 3. These two unity movements swept across the frontier in early 1800's
 - a. It was when the movements collided that they validated their teaching
 - b. On Dec 31, 1832, two movements merged— *Stone-Campbell Movement*

III. The True Church and Unity Today

- A. Remember, our old/new question is, “*What church is the true church?*”
1. How does fascinating history lesson answer that? *We’re getting there?*
 2. Stone and Campbell unified ever though they disagreed on major issues
 - a. **Baptism:** Campbell- remission of sin; Stone- sign of working of God
 - b. **Communion:** Campbell- every Sunday; Stone- more infrequent
 - c. **Millennium:** Campbell was postmillennial; Stone was premillennial
 - d. **Holy Spirit:** Campbell was rationalist (thru word); Stone was NOT
 - e. **Trinity:** Campbell was traditional Trinitarian and Stone was NOT
 3. With all of these differences, how did they unite? *They chose to do so!*
 - a. They were so committed to unity, they were able to overlook differences
 - b. Unfortunately, the heirs of their movement were not able to do the same
- B. The Stone-Campbell Movement was both a **unity** and **restoration** movement
1. **Problem:** The goals of unity and restoration are pretty much at tension
 - a. **Unity** is **inclusive**, it calls us to accept one another despite all our flaws
 - 1) In High Priestly prayer, Jesus prays for our unity (**John 17:20-21**)
 - 2) If unity is really our goal, then we’ll accept others despite differences
 - b. **Restoration** is **exclusive**, it calls us to accept only what Bible accepts
 - 1) We are to speak “*as one speaking the very words of God*” (**1 Pt 4:11**)
 - 2) What happens if others don’t follow the Bible as you understand it?
 2. To put it simply, we gave up the quest for unity to seek only “restoration”
 - a. When we could not see eye-to-eye on issues, we divided and splintered
 - b. Truth became very, very narrow; there was no room for differences at all
 - 1) The line of fellowship was drawn in the sand and drawn very small
 - 2) The only true church was the one that believed everything like me
 - c. Our little unity movement splint and splintered over 100 different issues
 - d. And we did so all the while claiming to be the ONE TRUE CHURCH
 3. Several yrs ago, we saw video of Rick Atchley using a chair illustration
 - a. Let’s watch him illustrate why unity will never based on agreement
 - b. BTW, Rick preaches at Richland Hills... voted off the island ([Video Clip](#))

IV. Conclusion

- A. If unity depends on agreement on every issue and doctrine— it’s impossible
 - 1. And if being **true church** depends on getting everything right— impossible
 - a. The one thing every church has in common is that it’s made up of people
 - b. As long as it has people, the church will imperfect... and un-true!
 - 2. We never have agreed on all the characteristics that makes up a true church
 - a. And even if we agreed, we’d never live them out perfectly or consistently
 - b. And we certainly have never agree who is not part of the true church
- B. When it comes to the true church, there is a good news, bad news answer
 - 1. **Bad News:** We’re imperfect in doctrine, service, worship, fellowship
 - a. Whatever if means to be the true church can’t depend on being right
 - b. So if we’re to have fellowship at all, it will be with “erring brethren”
 - 2. **Good News:** While we can’t be perfect at all, Jesus is perfect over all
 - a. Salvation doesn’t depend on what we do but on what He did at cross
 - 1) Yes, we must study and follow His word—as Christians and church
 - 2) Yes, we must speak where Bible speaks and seek Bible authority
 - b. What we must give up is the fiction that we have found it perfectly
 - c. Our best efforts will always remain filthy rags before holy God
 - d. Our righteous, as individuals or as a church, can never make us true
 - 3. The righteousness that saves us is the righteousness of God (**Phil 3:7-9**)
- C. What does it mean to true church? Remember, I’m just pointing in a direction
 - 1. The wrong direction is one that see us as “*church of only one who’s right*”
 - 2. Better direction is to seek to be a church of Christ, one centered in Him
 - a. Our hope, our joy, our peace, and our salvation must rest in **Christ alone**
*In Christ alone my hope is found; He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid ground; firm through the fiercest drought and storm
What heights of love, what depths of peace; when fears are stilled and strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All, here in the love of Christ I stand*
 - b. Our plea this morning is all those who are willing to stand there with us