

Appreciating Our History

NOTE: This article was written back in 2002, prior to the startling changes in what we have called in ICOC. In some ways, therefore, it is somewhat dated. However, the biblical and practical lessons found in it are worth sharing in our present day. In some ways, they may be even more significant. See what you think!

As members of the International Churches of Christ, we are well aware of our emphasis on the brief development of our history as a movement. We remember all about the Gempel's living room on that fateful night in June of 1979. The details of those first church plantings in Chicago and New York City, followed by the first foreign planting in London, and then the first planting in a foreign language in Paris are all a part of our memory treasures. We could go on and on, recalling the glories of such historic plantings as those in Johannesburg, Cairo, and Moscow. We do glory in our history, because we are convinced that God was the one writing history by using our feeble but heroic human efforts to accomplish his divine purposes. Who could ever forget the Jubilee celebration at the completion of the six year plan as those 170 flags were proudly borne high, each representing a nation in which a church was now established!

In our emphasis on our history, we are imitating our Jewish forefathers. Anyone even vaguely acquainted with the Bible is aware of their appreciation of God's hand in their lives as a movement. The sermons recorded in Acts are clear examples of this consistent historical emphasis. Stephen's audience in Acts 7 may have hated the latter part of his sermon, but they were all ears during the earlier part as he traced their history through renown leaders such as Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Solomon. The Jews loved recounting their past, for it demonstrated their tie with God above all other nations of the earth. Our love for the history of God's modern day movement is but an extension of what his people have always reveled in. Indeed, God has done great things among us!

It is important to note that every part of sacred history has been glorious, but the glory of each has not been the same. Certainly in the Old Testament both high points and low points were all included, and to some extent, all appreciated. The low points taught lessons, which led to higher ground as God blessed repentance. 2 Corinthians 3:7-11 says that the old covenant was glorious, but not nearly as glorious as the new covenant of Jesus Christ. The fact that the later was more glorious should not be used to dismiss the glory and appreciation of the former. Whenever God uses his people to accomplish his purposes, it is cause for rejoicing. The accomplishments of our children when they are in elementary school may not compare to their accomplishments in college, but they are precious memories to us nonetheless.

The Israelite movement of God was absolutely essential as a foundation for the new Israel, the church of God. Praise God for the faithful who awaited the coming of the Messiah and his greater kingdom. We thrill as we read of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph, who were graced with seeing God enter the world wrapped in the human flesh of a crying child, Simeon and Anna, whose presence graced the temple and whose prayers of thanksgiving were laced with prophecies about this child who would rule the nations. While it is quite true that most of Israel did not later accept the crucified Christ, they had been pursuing a law of righteousness which should have led them to him (Romans 9:31-32). A

significant minority did follow the OT prophecies right into the church, beginning with the 3,000 on the Day of Pentecost, and continuing with daily conversions in those first days in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41-47).

We often see that early beginning in Jerusalem as one of the most glorious pieces in the history of the first century church, but in some ways it had its limitations. For one thing, the church was filled with racial bigots for a number of years. It took God using a pretty nominal Jew, Peter, who could only be convinced that Gentiles were worthy of salvation through the rebuke of a series of visions. Even then, he later struggled with the application of those divinely revealed truths (Galatians 2:11-21). Toward the end of the New Testament revelation, the Jewish disciples in Jerusalem were amazingly still attached to their Judaic history (Acts 21). Until the destruction of the outward aspects of Judaism in 70 AD at the hands of the Roman army, the intermingling of the less glorious with the more glorious was still a reality. As the writer of Hebrews stated, the old glory that was “obsolete and aging” was soon to disappear (Hebrews 8:13), which it did at the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

What are we saying in all of this? Simply that in spite of the weaknesses in that early church, we still rejoice in all of its glorious history, for it all was the work of Almighty God, from start to finish. What needs to be said further is that we have a very similar lesson to learn regarding our modern day movement. At best, we are failing to recognize and appreciate some of our own history, and at worst, we are guilty of the sins of ingratitude and arrogance. Let’s begin this line of thought by looking at a very relevant but often overlooked passage in Romans 11:11-20.

¹¹Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. ¹²But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!

¹³I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry ¹⁴in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. ¹⁷If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ¹⁸do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” ²⁰Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid.

By the time Paul wrote Romans, the church was becoming more and more Gentile in composition. The Gentiles were failing to see either themselves or the Jews in a realistic light, out of their own pride. Paul shows them that their inclusion in the kingdom was designed to provoke the Jews to jealousy in hopes of causing them to reconsider their own decisions about Jesus as Messiah. He further tells the Gentiles that they actually stood on the foundation of the

Jewish religion, and that they stood on the basis of faith, not on their own merits. Instead of being arrogant and critical, they should have been appreciative of their Jewish heritage.

What is the application to us? Actually, there are several. Our movement has a history that goes far back before 1979 in Boston. We are built upon the foundation of what we now call the mainline Church of Christ, or by the more descriptive term, the Restoration Movement. The early days of this group were actually pretty glorious. Ministers from many different denominations banded together with the lofty intent of rejecting creeds in favor of following the Bible only. Surely we would all agree that this was, and remains, a noble goal. Many stories could be recounted from the 1800's that are impressive and thrilling. Thousands of people were baptized at the preaching of men who were sold out for their cause, to the point that some of them actually gave their lives for it as martyrs. One of the best known leaders, Alexander Campbell, developed the convictions that led to his leaving both the Presbyterian church and later the Baptist church, and through this process, he became the leading religious debater of his age, widely known and respected in and out of his movement.

Whatever else may be said about this period, it clearly had its glory and formed the foundation for what we enjoy today. Even in the mid-20th century, the churches of Christ were said to be the fastest growing indigenous religious group in America. Although legalism eventually choked out the growth of many congregations, and thus led many of them to a position of being fairly non-evangelistic, lukewarm, and doctrinally compromised, we grew up as a movement out of that root system. Virtually every doctrinal argument I used in my book, *Prepared to Answer*, I learned in that particular group. I appreciate all that I learned, although I did struggle with the persecution I received at the hands of some in that group. However, Paul had received more persecution from the Jews in his day than any of us in our day have received from our persecutors, and we have to keep that in mind. We must be diligent about keeping our hearts humble and appreciative.

Actually, the reason for writing this article is not primarily to help us be less critical and more grateful toward the mainline Church of Christ (although I hope it accomplishes that too). We have another part of our historical root system that is in many ways more important to us as a movement than the mainline background. Of course, I refer to the Campus Ministry segment of our history, which we often call the Crossroads movement. I think that this era was glorious in many, many ways, and yet the comments I sometimes hear regarding it vary from dismissive to derogatory. The claim that we have had a revisionist history regarding the Crossroads days is unquestionably true. The contribution of that era is larger than many among us admit, and the overall lack of gratitude toward it, combined with what seems to be purposeful avoidance of even discussing that period (by some), is very hurtful to those who came from that background. We simply must address this issue in an upfront manner and rectify our shortcomings regarding it.

Sadly, the end of that period was brought about by the sin of the Crossroads pulpit minister, which led to his dismissal by the elders. (Let me add the note that he and his family have done well in the years that followed, and I still consider them to be special friends to whom I owe much.) This unfortunate turn of events led to the demise of the influence of the Crossroads church, and subsequently, of those most closely associated with it. At the same time, the Boston

church was growing in influence, and in a good way, Kip and the elders exerted a noble effort to unify the then current movement by bringing key leaders into Boston for more training and to unify the key leaders into one movement from their various sources. Certainly the movement tracing back to Boston days is the more glorious, but the campus ministry movement blazed some trails without which none of us would be what we now are. Period. Anything bordering on disdain toward that era on the part of any of us who sit upon that foundation is nothing short of sinful, and I strongly encourage repentance on the parts of those who need it.

I have plenty of sins of which to repent, but being critical of the Crossroads days is not one of them. I first visited the Crossroads church in 1981, and my life was radically changed as a result of that one week visit and the later trips to speak on the Florida Evangelism Seminar. How that group was spawned out of the tradition-bound mainline Church of Christ of that day still amazes and thrills me. We may have taken things further in many ways (and we have, by God's grace), but their coming out of their labyrinth is, in my considered opinion, about as remarkable as what we have done since. My purpose is not to create some kind of prideful competitive comparison, but only to cause us to look back at all segments of our history in a way that is both realistic and spiritual.

I glory in the many positive qualities and achievements of the mainline Church of Christ, although my frustration with its shortcomings led to my leaving it, burning bridges in a way that necessarily left scars in my soul. I cannot defend everything I did in that process, by the way. I am grateful to be where I am, and during those many years since I came into our present movement, I have never wished to be back in that old root system. But I appreciate my history as I searched for that more excellent way. Similarly, I glory in the many positive contributions of the Campus Ministry Movement, for without it, we would certainly not be where we are today. Yes, they did some things wrong, but they did far more right than wrong, and my prediction is that we will actually reinstate some of their practices that we have typically deemed wrong in the past. I am grateful that we have all been delivered from that "church within a church" setting that was the case with many former campus ministry congregations, but I do not make light of all that we learned from it, especially the campus ministry part of it, which was not significantly different from what we do today – unless it be noted that their growth in campus baptisms often eclipsed our present growth on most campuses.

As to the specific contributions of the Campus Ministry Movement, many could be noted with but little thought, even by an "outsider" such as me. The insistence of total commitment as an essential component of repentance preceding baptism was a novel idea and sorely needed. The viewing the Bible as a standard for the attitudes and behavior of Christians, instead of simply being an idealistic standard, was likewise so needed. This mindset led to the kind of straightforward authoritative preaching that was all but absent from the pulpits of traditional churches. Discipleship in both its vertical aspect (commitment to Christ) and horizontal aspect (close, open spiritual relationships) was admirably stressed. The later focus on "discipleship partners" at all levels rather than the "prayer partner" arrangement of those days initially looked far better in theory than the practice has ended up, because of the tendency of over/under relationships to be mishandled. The emphasis on relational evangelism, with ample practical teaching about how to develop such relationships, stood out like a beacon for those not thus trained in other settings. Last, but certainly not least, an impressively large percentage of elders

and evangelists in the most influential leadership roles in the movement today trace their roots back to Crossroads or to campus ministries led by those who were trained at Crossroads.

One mistake I often make in generalizing about the Campus Ministry Movement is failing to distinguish between the different commitment levels of churches who had campus ministries. The “church within a church” weakness often noted was generally true, in that the demands of discipleship were not equally applied to members of all ages. However, some churches were much more even handed in calling for and expecting such commitment from its membership, with congregations like Crossroads and San Diego (Poway) being among this number. The amount of persecution each received is a pretty good testimony to that fact. The handling of said persecution by such churches paved the way for responding to later persecution after 1979, for many lessons were learned (positively and negatively). I do not believe that the commitment levels in congregations like these was where it should have been overall, but it should be noted that they were light years ahead of others within the more traditional Churches of Christ. I appreciate their determination and advances as they strove to emerge out of the denominational darkness from whence they came. They came further in many ways from their root system than we have since, for philosophically and practically, they had further to go. I would not want to return to where the better Campus Ministry churches were, to be sure, but I am both amazed and grateful for the progress that has enabled us to build upon their earlier foundation.

I pray that those who read these thoughts are both challenged and helped by them. I am concerned that our present slowdown of growth in the movement is directly related to the sins that are in our camp, one of which is described herein. God blesses righteousness and blocks unrighteousness; he exalts the humble and resists the proud; he rewards the spiritual and confuses the worldly. Let’s be willing to examine our hearts individually and collectively as we seek to become more like the God who loves us. Let’s absolutely and unequivocally appreciate our history, but let’s not leave out any of it. The presence of the more glorious cannot be allowed to invalidate the less glorious, for both are glorious before God, and the greater would not be present without the lesser.

—Gordon Ferguson (2002)