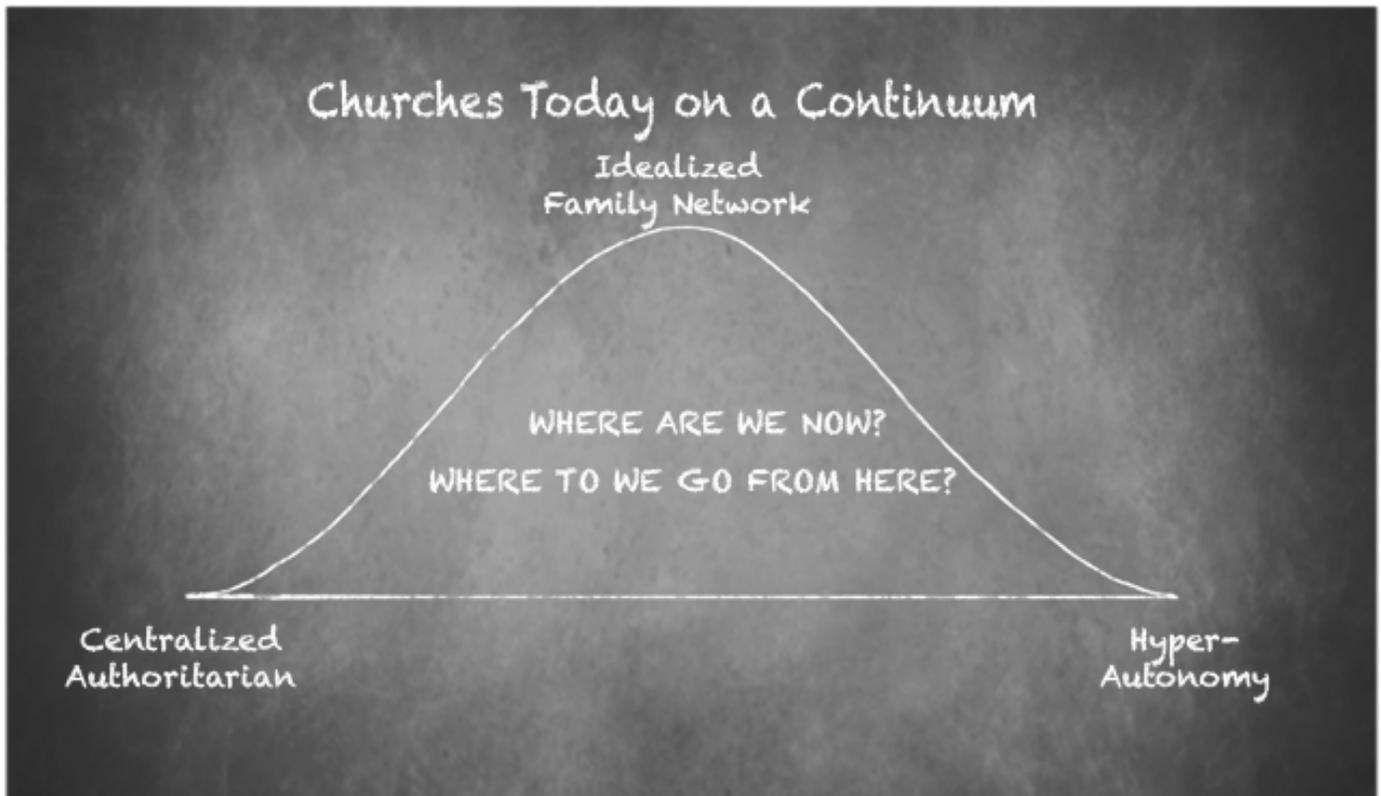

HIERARCHY THROUGH THE AGES

A HISTORY OF THE ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE AND CONNECTION BETWEEN CHURCHES

STEPHEN F. STATEN



This paper belongs to larger discussions, "Forward by Faith: ICOC 3.0 - Dreaming about the Future of our Fellowship," held in Dallas, April 4-8, 2017. Evangelists, elders, teachers and administrators will take part in conversations about a Scripturally defensible and historically trustworthy model for advancing the gospel through the International Churches of Christ.

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INTRODUCTION

There are three indisputable truths about hierarchy in the Christian religion. First, church hierarchy is nearly always viewed more like a tiered pyramid than an interdependent network, like the human body. That paradigm can be traced to, among other things, the influence of ancient models of civic government. Second, the overreactions to hierarchicalism have never led to sustainable unity, health or growth. And third, there is no official overarching structure or organizational chart that has been sanctioned by Scripture—but we do possess relational and organizing principles.

Solutions for a more transformative connection between churches are brought within reach when we ask questions like “What principles can we glean from the Scriptures for collectively preserving our resources and advancing the mission?” and “What can be learned from other Christian groups?”

This paper contains two requested pieces related to the historical practices of brotherhood, as well as some objectives that a resilient brotherhood model would achieve.

PART I—Historical Overview considers turning points of the structure and organization of churches throughout church history that became hierarchical norms, as well as attitudes and reactions to them.

PART II—Where Churches Today are on a Continuum is a graph of where movements are today, including our own family of churches, as it relates to hierarchy, healthy interactions, cooperation and collaboration.

Considerations—a summary of historical reasons for resistance to any kind of structure, and thoughts that come from a health for growth perspective.

***Disclaimer.** During these increasingly post-denominational times the dynamics are changing swiftly, making it difficult when examining Christian bodies undergoing structural changes to determine whether or not the formal organizational setup has lost its effectiveness. This paper will be occasionally updated to reflect the reality.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PART I—Historical Overview

- At its peak, the apostolic church around the Mediterranean from Judea to Italy was more of a decentralized network of strengths-based interdependences than a pyramid of consolidated power at a central location.
- In the beginning, individual congregations were both independent and interdependent, and modern debates for or against autonomy misses the both/and option. The evidence is strong for cross-congregational cooperation, the use of formal agreements, and the sharing of resources that did not injure the self-responsibility of churches.
- Unity was preserved through an ongoing commitment to: 1) core preaching and teaching, 2) the consistent practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper, 3) intentional attitude and pursuit of brotherhood, and 4) singularity of purpose and mission.
- Three primary developments led to the rise of church authoritarianism and a steep hierarchy: 1) the gradual focus on Rome as the center of influence and control, 2) second century emphasis of one bishop/overseer over the other elders, and 3) the imitation of the Roman structure as a model for church government, apparently through the influence of Constantine and Gregory the Great.
- The Reformation did little to address this deviation. Nearly every Protestant denomination followed Rome's highly hierarchical example. However, the last five centuries contain a wide spectrum of resistance to top-down hierarchy, including reactions, evolutions and the transformations of those hierarchies.

PART II—A Continuum of Where Churches are Today

- The spectrum between Centralized Authoritarian and Hyper-Autonomy often results in extremes of unanswerable and highly resistant influencers at both ends.
- The middle Idealized Network is an integrated body, where there is all around answerability, interdependency, and respect for local self-responsibility of churches, as well as broad cooperation with resources.
- All movements have both a formal visible and marginal segment. Problems escalate when there are not productive conversations between formal representatives and under-satisfied informal segments within the association, which leads to more and more groups on the continuum.
- Initially, five historical groups were identified for particular strengths but a closer look is needed to understand their overall growth, overhead expenditures for cooperation, missional activity and success, and agencies for resolving problems.

Considerations

- There are three roots of resistance to greater integration and structure for the ICOC: (1) Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* (referencing denominational confessions and creeds), (2) Daniel Sommer's *Address and Declaration* (against para-church mission societies, or other "innovations"), and (3) fear of returning to a top-down structure due to the failures of Kip McKean's World Sector model.
- The "north star" of the idealized future will have three characteristics: (1) Advancing the missions of Christ through a more collaborative approach of matching resources with needs, (2) Preserving churches from the consequences of mismanaged events and unresolved conflict, and (3) Embracing those faithful and peaceable followers of Christ who think differently on issues of structure, method, etc.

PART I HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

This section covers influences and turning points related to hierarchical models, attitudes, influence, cooperation, inter-connectedness, and relationships between churches (and reactive models) throughout church history.

I. The New Testament “Network” Hierarchy of the Early Christian Church.

- a. Leaders Were Servants & Forerunners Providing Oversight— Not Rulers. Jesus cautioned his disciples about ruler-leader mentalities replacing a servant-leader’s heart (Matt. 20:24-28; Mark 10:41-45; Luke 22:24; John 13:12-17). The church is to have high regard for those who “work hard” (1 Thessalonians 5:12) and yield to forerunners, from *hégeomai* (Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24, trans “leaders”, NIV) referring to those who “go before, go first, lead the way,”¹ as opposed to “rulers” from *archó*.
- b. Churches Were Open Systems. The apostles practiced an “open and inclusive” approach to resolving matters that involved careful debate and respectful discussions that considered Scripture, past precedent, new circumstances, information provided by witnesses, and the use of designated spokesmen. (Acts 15:1ff)
- c. Churches Were Distinct, Not Copies
 - Jerusalem—led by the abundance of apostles, elders and early witnesses; until about 66 AD
 - Antioch—the first church success story with Gentiles, impromptu planting of the Spirit
 - Ephesus—esteemed as first among equals in Asia Minor, a strong resource center
 - Corinth—port city to the region and a major case study
 - Thessalonica—pillar church to a region, worthy of imitation
 - Rome—inevitable battle ground because the city was the seat of the Roman empire yet little is known of its structure and ability to meet as one body or in smaller groups due to persecution

The ecclesiastical structures varied by city, probably due to limited resources and the influence of culture. There is no singular ecclesiastical model in the New Testament, and yet denominations, sects and movements tend to build their entire structures based on one example in Acts or one verse or one book in the Bible that seems to support their template. These include elder led, monarchical exalted elder led, evangelist led, pastor led, democratic, team-based, etc.

The letter to the Ephesians, the coverage of the church in Ephesus in Acts 19-20, Timothy’s time with the church there (1-2 Timothy) appears to present a situationally adaptive approach, not a single fixed prototype.

- d. Churches Were Independent—churches were self-governing
 - Early plantings required direct assistance and teaching (Acts 11:19-26), but in time they, like healthy adults, become self-responsible—yet approachable and answerable.
 - Members of maturing congregations selected their own elders and deacons. Hence they were not selected by a remote unseeing authority but appointed from within. There is plenty of evidence that the perspective of the brotherhood mattered on major decisions (next section).
 - The term *autonomous* is practically useless today because some use it to describe isolation, detachment and lack of cooperation but others use it to describe self-responsible or self-governing. It would have been impossible to be governed from afar due to slowness of travel, communication and persecution. See *Autonomy* in the Appendix.

¹ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

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- e. Churches Were Also Interdependent—churches worked together and relied on each other through relationships, established credibility, communication and resources
- The selection and assignments for missionaries and representatives were cross-congregational efforts—spearheaded by credible and capable representatives of Christ (Acts 11:19-26, 12:21-13:3, 15:22-35).
 - For at least a few years there was broad cooperation among churches such as Rome and Corinth with the collection, management and distribution of funds for poor saints in Judea (2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15, Romans 15:23-33).
 - Prominent and respected leaders intervened or spoke out when rogue believers damaged other churches (2 Timothy 2:16-18, 3 John :9-10).
 - Churches shared advisory correspondence (Colossians 4:16), accepted ministers vetted or commended by brotherhood figures (1 Corinthians 4:14-17, Philippians 2:19-30), and trusted extra-congregational emissaries (Acts 15:22-35).
- f. The Greater Church Became Geographically Decentralized—Within a few years after the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 the early church was becoming decentralized. The main nerve centers were anywhere an apostle was ministering or an esteemed leader like James was shepherding. Therefore, Jerusalem, Ephesus and Rome emerged as prominent respected resource and communication centers between the mid-50s through mid-60s AD. The church in Rome and Ephesus, the historical record implies, continued to be prominent after the destruction of Jerusalem (70AD).
- It appears that even smaller regions had their own stronghold churches, such as Thessalonica in Macedonia. Broad (catholic) letters like Hebrews, 1 Peter and 1 John contain no indication of a foremost church over the churches or rivalry between pillar churches.
- g. Unity Was Preserved Through Ongoing Commitment—The following four assessments of unity were established in my Master's thesis, *Was There Unity in the Sub-Apostolic Church? An Investigation of the Tunnel Period*.²

- *Preaching and teaching of core beliefs*— The central beliefs are most evident in the sermons in Acts (2, 10 and 13) and catechismal material of Colossians, Ephesians and 1 Peter.
- *The consistent practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper*—both rites transferred and reminded members of the core beliefs.
- *An intentional attitude and pursuit of brotherhood* (1 Peter 2:17)—evident in reaching out, aiding others in need, communiques, and making travel plans
- *Singularity of purpose and mission*—carrying out the commission that Jesus established after His resurrection (Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 24:45-47, Acts 1:8, 8:14-17)

A separate paper, *A Paradigm Upgrade: Transforming Churches and Charities*, is available for a separate discussion and it cites Scripture and creation to establish that congregations and noble organizations are wise to see themselves more as a network, such as the human body, rather than a pyramid. The same could be said of the church of the apostolic period as it spread throughout the empire.

² Stephen F. Staten, *Was There Unity in the Sub-Apostolic Church? An Investigation of the Tunnel Period* (~A.D. 62-150), Master's Thesis (Wheaton College, 1996).

II. Rome's Transition to Eminence, Christendom's Transition to Centralized Hierarchical Authority

- a. Rome became the advising church (1 Clement, ~96AD)
 - The letter from Clement to the congregation in Corinth was highly esteemed in the early church.
 - 1 Clement 44:1-2—the overseers/elders were somehow selected through alignment with the apostles, personal example, and consent of the local congregation.
 - The wrongful removal of an overseer brought outside inquiry and proposed corrections.
- b. There was an early push for one bishop-elder over other elders (Ignatius, ~110AD)
 - “It is obvious, then, that one must look upon the bishop as the Lord himself.” (Eph. 6.1)³
 - “Since therefore I have, in the persons before mentioned, beheld the whole multitude of you in faith and love, I exhort you to study to do all things with a divine harmony, while your bishop presides in the place of God.” (Mag. 6.1)
 - Ignatius distinguished an overseer/bishop from an elder and attempted to elevate the role. Such a change took a few decades to become the norm.
- c. The role of oversight of Rome was sought after. The famous heretics Valentinus (~140AD) and Marcion (~144AD) attempted to seize the lead position of the church in Rome, causing orthodox Christians to become serious about the NT canon, and to think about their collective stances.
- d. The church in Rome was increasingly moving from esteem, to acclaim, to authority.
 - Irenaeus of Lyon (Gaul, modern France)—also upholds Rome above other churches in his *Against Heresies* (177AD) — “I can by pointing out the tradition which that very great, oldest, and well-known Church, founded and established at Rome by those two most glorious apostles Peter and Paul, received from the apostles ...” On the other hand, in approximately 190 AD, Irenaeus interceded with Victor, the overseer of Rome, calling him to stand down in his intolerance with other Christians who celebrated the date of Christ’s resurrection differently. Apparently, there were some checks on the bishop of Rome. By the end of the Second Century Rome was either a first among equals or viewed above all others—but not yet a centralized decision-making body.
 - Cyprian of Carthage (~250) promoted the view that the bishop of Rome was the successor to Peter, which had obvious implications.
 - Constantine formed the Ecumenical order of Churches in the 320s AD. The church in Rome was strengthened considerably and took on the organizational features of Roman society. There was still a substantial allowance for diversity among the churches during the emperor’s lifetime.
 - Gregory the Great (590-604AD)—a senator’s son, and himself a prefect (mayor), and an admirable gifted administrator, furthered the ways that ecclesiastical structures were modeled after Roman patterns. He was a major force in establishing patterns that defined Medieval Christianity by bringing churches within the empire under the church in Rome and its head.

The top-down centralized leadership die was cast for the Medieval period, lasting from roughly 600 to the early 1500s. The increasing tensions between the East (Greek speaking) and West (Latin speaking) churches resulted in the formal East-West Schism in 1054AD. Both the Latin and Greek churches continued to be very hierarchical following the formal split.

The Western Church continued to be highly structured and increasingly difficult to influence or reform from within; however, Martin Luther in Germany, led a successful effort to depart from the Papacy. Huldreich Zwingli and John Calvin (Switzerland), Thomas Cranmer (England), John Knox (Scotland), subsequently broke away. Those churches were also very hierarchical and resembled the Roman Church with their ties to the State, heavy top-down authoritarian governance, liturgical conformity, and elaborate confessional documents (Reformed Westminster Confession of Faith).

³ Both quotes from Ignatius are quoted from J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Baker Publishing Group, 1989), The Letter to the Ephesians and Letter to the Magnesians.

III. Main Protestant Bodies Today

The succeeding five centuries have resulted in many splinters. More recently, there is increasing deviation of belief and practice from the official denominational party line. Some of the main bodies have moved from one side of the continuum to the other, between Centralized Authoritarian to Hyper-Autonomous. The ones listed below have global presence.

- **Anglican Communion** (founded in England)—the greater fellowship of 85 million people is the third largest communion in the world comprising the Church of England, Church of Ireland, the American Episcopalian Churches and a dozen other subsets. Each segment has its own legislative process, and overall polity and liturgy, which largely align with the liturgy of the Church of England. There are totally “autonomous” churches but the term autonomy is also used to describe churches that choose to align with the legislative, polity and liturgy yet govern themselves.

“The Anglican Communion has no official legal existence nor any governing structure which might exercise authority over the member churches.”⁴ The Archbishop of Canterbury serves in a supporting and organizational role but the Communion is held together by a shared history, ecclesiology, structures, ideals, and participation in international consultative bodies.

- **Lutheranism** (founded in Germany)—The nearly 80 million members of Lutheran affiliated bodies are broken into many offshoot denominations, conferences and synods. Many of the separate affiliations serve a national or regional purpose, while distinct Lutheran synods represent theological differences related to ministry, women, communion and other areas. The Missouri Synod is the strictest branch, whereas the Evangelical Lutheran Church allows for dissent on areas not related to the Gospel. In North America there are over thirty-five distinct church bodies.
- **Reformed Churches** (associated with Zwingli and/or Calvin)—Dutch Reformed and Swiss Reformed are older variations; newer versions profess reformed theology, such as the Christian Reformed Church and all branches of Presbyterianism, many Evangelical, most Congregational and all Evangelical Free. The best guess, using 2003 data, is that all Reformed believers are over 100 million.⁵ That number is based on the fact that 70% of the world’s reformed members belong to the World Alliance of Reformed Members, comprised of 75 million members, with 218 different bodies using 60 different confessions of faith.
- **Mennonites** (including scattered subsets of the Anabaptist tradition)—The Mennonite World Conference is a global community for about 50 nations on six continents established to facilitate community among offshoots, representing 400,000 members—but only connects 30% of all Mennonites globally. They meet about every six or seven years.⁶
- **Brethren**, aka Open Brethren (1848), consists of 23,000 congregations—“Each assembly (or congregation) is independent of the others in doctrinal matters; yet there is a high degree of communication and cooperation among those who share similar doctrine and practice.”⁷ They do not possess a statement of faith and many congregations do not keep a membership list.
- **Southern Baptist Convention**, aka Great Commission Baptists —15 million members in the US, maintaining a remarkable uniformity in doctrine and practice for a denomination comprised of what they call “autonomous” churches. The churches hold annual conventions by which resolutions are passed. Some of the topics have been proposed name changes, apologizing for racist roots, inclusion of more black members and appointing more African-American leaders, etc. The SBC has an Southern Baptist International Mission Board, although it is not clear how large the movement is outside the US.⁸

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican_Communion

⁵ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/christianity-reformed-christianity>

⁶ <https://www.mwc-cmm.org>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Brethren

⁸ <https://www.imb.org>

- **Church of the Nazarene**⁹— 2,471,553 members in 30,574 churches throughout the world. Holds general assemblies every four years and has a Board of General Superintendents, which is "the supreme doctrine-formulating and lawmaking body of the Church of the Nazarene."¹⁰ The superintendents recently affirmed seven characteristics of the Nazarene body: Meaningful Worship, Theological Coherence, Passionate Evangelism, Intentional Discipleship, Church Development, Transformational Leadership, and Purposeful Compassion. The denomination also has a manual with a brief historical statement of the denomination; its Constitution, that includes 16 Articles of Faith, a Covenant of Christian Character for holy living, policies of church government dealing with the local, district, and general church organization." The next assembly is June 21-30, 2017 in Indianapolis.
- **Methodists**—an eighteenth century offshoot of Anglicanism (John Wesley). "There is no single Methodist Church with universal juridical authority; Methodists belong to multiple independent denominations or "connexions". The great majority of Methodists are members of denominations which are part of the international World Methodist Council, an association of 80 Methodist, Wesleyan and related united and uniting churches, representing over 80 million people. In 1956, the World Methodist Council established a permanent headquarters in the United States at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina." There have been multiple pushes for self-determination, with some schisms and successful peaceful secessions.
- **Assemblies of God**¹¹—a larger international body of 67.9 million adherents in 212 countries, the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world. "The World Fellowship unites Assemblies of God national councils from around the world together for cooperation. Each national council is fully self-governing and independent and involvement with the World Fellowship does not limit this independence. The work of the World Fellowship is carried out by the Executive Council. Executive Council members represent different regions of the world and serve three-year terms."¹² The missions programs for the fellowship of churches are designed to "establish self-propagating, self-supporting, and self-governing national church bodies in every country." The national groupings are "entirely independent and autonomous; however, they are united by shared beliefs and history." The local district churches become autonomous after some point in time, apparently a time of testing. The definition of autonomy is definition two in the appendix.
- **Seventh Day Adventist**¹³— 19.1 million members, worldwide. "The world church is governed by a General Conference, with smaller regions administered by divisions, union conferences, and local conferences."¹⁴ There are four levels in the denomination: 1) The local church. 2) The Local Conference or Local mission, which is "an organization of churches within a state, province or territory (or part thereof) which appoints ministers, owns church land and organizes the distribution of tithes and payments to ministers." 3) Union conference or Union Mission, which embodies a collection of local conferences/missions, regionally. And 4) The General Conference, consisting of 13 "Divisions." The General Conference is headed by the office of the Adventist President.

IV. The American Restoration Movement

Each of the movements belonging to the pursuit of "restoration" trace back to various streams of thought preceding the nineteenth century. A flashpoint within the Presbyterian churches occurred in 1804 when ministers Thomas Campbell, Barton Stone and four others authored the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, at Cane Ridge, Kentucky. Among other things, this document denounced the divisive use of the Westminster Confession of Faith and upheld Scripture as the sole authority.

⁹ <http://www.nazarene.org>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nazarene

¹¹ <http://ag.org/top/index.cfm>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assemblies_of_God

¹³ <https://www.adventist.org/en/>

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seventh-day_Adventist_Church

In 1809, Campbell independently published the *Declaration and Address*. The Declaration was the charter for an association of Christians to serve churches, but it soon floundered, and in 1811 the association became an independent congregation in Washington. The Address consisted of ecumenical statements and hermeneutical principles, intended to establish a non-denominational “unity” platform for uniting all believers. With varying degrees of success and failure, the emerging movement embraced this vision. Even some Baptists signed on for the adventure.

Within decades it became evident that, despite the intentions of Thomas Campbell, his son Alexander, other pioneers such as Walter Scott, and John “Raccoon” Smith, there was no agreed-upon mechanism for examining organized efforts such as mission societies, the issue of slavery in the church, military service during the Civil War, the use of instruments during worship, and many more. Clearly, Campbell’s Address did not contain sufficient unifying or organizing principles. As a result, the churches in the north and south tended toward two extremes. The northern churches were associated with organizational efforts and the southern churches took on “anti” and “non” positions on many issues. The northern churches were more susceptible to liberal doctrinal influences, whereas the south took on conservative, often extreme, positions. The divisions were very clear by the end of the civil war but they weren’t listed as different movements until 1906.

A misinterpretation of Thomas Campbell’s warning about creeds and confessions made it impossible for the movement to coordinate on a written agreement of what they stood for, and offered no solution to silent creeds and authoritarian positions that some took against “innovations.” For more on this dilemma, read *The Three Roots of Resistance to Organization* in the section titled *Considerations*.

The naming customs are not consistent within any of the resulting movements and some churches within one association embrace the name connected with another movement, which can be confusing. Nonetheless, I will trace the main distinctions since the early twentieth century.

- a. **Disciples of Christ/Christian Churches**— In 1906 the Churches of Christ broke into two segments. The Disciples Divinity House in Chicago became a voice for the liberal wing. The Southern Ohio *Christian Standard* publication represented the conservative wing. The breakoff of the conservative wing was slow, and took decades. There was litigation over who owned the buildings—the increasingly organized DOC denomination or the independent churches. By 1968 they became an entirely distinct denomination and have continued their liberal trajectory on doctrine and sexuality. The headquarters for a denominational membership between 500,000-700,000 resides in Indianapolis. The congregations make most of their own decisions but there are nearly a dozen self-governing agencies for missions, benevolence, education, pensions, etc.
- b. **Independent Christian Churches (and Churches of Christ, instrumental)**—the conservative churches gradually left the Disciples of Christ between 1927-1968 by holding their own conventions and breaking away from the DOC agencies. The issues were “open membership” (accepting members regardless of their baptism), over-involvement and compromise with the ecumenical movement, and theological modernism. In 2000, the movement of self-determining congregations had approximately 1,072,000 members with 5,678 churches in the United States. In America this movement is also known as the North American Christian Convention (NACC), convened regularly since 1927 and annually since 1951.
- c. **Churches of Christ**—at the turn of the century the movement was bound through publications such as *Firm Foundation* and the *Gospel Advocate*, often at odds with each other. The movement today varies in flavor—from “anti” and “non” affiliated churches on one hand to those who are affiliated through the individual efforts, through embracing publications, universities and conferences, etc. None of the mainline churches participate in any oversight mechanism to guide churches. The cooperation occurs for the purposes of camps, youth conferences, other conferences, orphanages, and with universities. There is not a global vision or similar coordinating effort to match resources with needs. The bulk of the churches of Christ are described as mainstream, as compared to non-institutional, and one-cuppers. The membership is approximately two million in 40,000 congregations worldwide.

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- d. **International Christian Church** (aka Sold-out Discipling Movement, SODM)—begin in 2006 with about 800 members, and grew quickly, partly from “harvesting” members from the International Churches of Christ. Growth has since tapered off, and membership is about 3,000. The ICC is led in a patriarchal model with Kip McKean as founder and “anointed leader.”¹⁵ The movement began after the dis-fellowshipping of McKean from the ICOC.
- e. **International Churches of Christ**—in 1968 a campus ministry movement based in Texas and Florida became a Crossroads movement with its most prominent church in Gainesville during the seventies. By the early eighties the Boston congregation became the leader of the Discipling Movement (aka Boston Movement). The headquarters moved to Los Angeles, coinciding with McKean’s move to California. By 1992, the ICOC became distinguished by a structure of geographical World Sectors under Kip McKean, officially becoming the International Churches of Christ by 1994. A crisis erupting in late 2002 and peaking in the Spring of 2003 led to much self-reflection, changes, and a complete rethinking of structure. A team of representatives was assembled through a nomination process at a conference in Seattle in 2005 to develop a proposal for cooperation with its approximately 400 churches at the time. It included the concept of delegates for its approximate thirty regions, with the understanding that the resulting structure with delegates and service teams would need to be revisited. By mid-2006 many churches were affirming a Cooperation Proposal. In 2007, nine service teams were established to represent the fellowship based on roles and needs. Today, the ICOC comprises about 684 churches and 109,000 members.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

It appears that the orthodox apostolic churches, as a movement, largely avoided the extremes of individualism and authoritarianism. A close examination reveals that an idealized body of churches would include integration, all-around and up/down answerability, encourage a diversity of approaches, call for relational interdependency on important issues, allow plenty of room for the Holy Spirit, and show up as a cohesive family of churches on urgent matters.

Between the second and the sixth centuries the visible church slowly continued to develop a steep hierarchy. Centralized authoritarian hierarchy has been the dominant and largely unchallenged model until the nineteenth century. Some affiliations have managed the reactive trend towards hyper-autonomy much better than others.

The movements today that might offer the greatest insight into the balance of oversight and respecting self-governing churches include the Church of the Nazarene, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God. The Adventists appears to have a functional structure but, in my view, the other three groups are much better at managing difficulties and distinguishing unity from uniformity.

Examples of churches that model how to manage an open communion relationship with those of longstanding historical and theological values without disparaging each other, would be the Anglican and Mennonites. Based on my work as a consultant, and the surveys that I conducted with the three-part series, *Renaissance: When Light Cuts Through the Haze*, openness to engaging with Christians in other traditions is more important to many members than it is to some of our most prominent ICOC leaders.

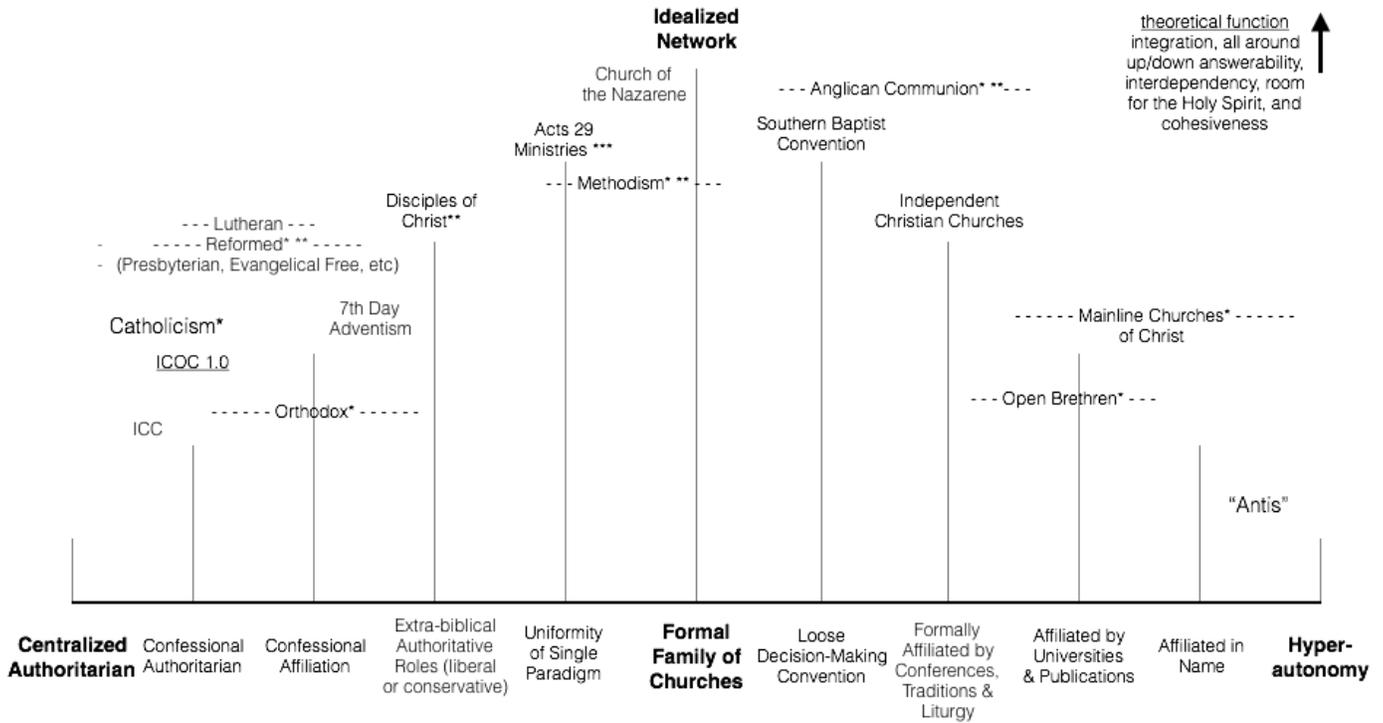
The following categories of questions require a more thorough examination.

1. **Growth.** Which movements are growing? Large churches? Small churches? First, second and third world?
2. **Health.** Which ones have sufficient agency and funds for dealing with problems such as a church that is excessively tolerant (on divorce or scandal, for instance), involved in blatant doctrinal errors, or has an abusive leader?
3. **Missions.** What agencies exist for coordinating resources for missions? How much is spent for missions?
4. **Togetherness.** What contributions are collected from the local congregation for oversight of conferences, leadership development & meetings, benevolence and communications?

¹⁵ For more information on its hierarchical stances, read *The ICC and the ICOC: An In-Depth Distinction*.

PART II WHERE CHURCHES TODAY WERE/ARE ON A CONTINUUM

Church Bodies Today Denominations, Communion, and Affiliations



--- multiple denominations within Communion or Affiliation *** One of many recently formed families of churches.
 * varies internally across a spectrum due to emergent groups and other reasons
 ** fully part of an open fellowship or consortium (National or World Council of Churches) NOTE: This continuum is based on initial "impressions" of mostly reliable sources

Prototypes of the Three Main Structural Paradigms for an Association of Churches

Model	Centralized Authoritarian	Formal Family of Churches	Hyper-autonomy
Control/Influence	Primacy of One Church	Family Equality w/Pillars	Aloof
Visual	Top-Down Pyramid	Decentralized Network (Body)	Separated
Dependency	Directive Dependency	Interdependent & Independent	Counter-dependency
Decisions	Permission Oriented	Cooperative & Liberating	Individualism
System	Closed System	Open System	Many Closed Systems

There are many gradations between these three principle models. Most churches operate as hybrids on the continuum. The further a group is away from the Idealized Network, the greater the likelihood that the large system or the local church will be a "closed system," for which there is no good ending.

It is worth noting that the two extremes on the continuum of intolerant Medieval Catholicism and Sommerite "Antis" are so disparaged, and for good reason, that they barely exist today. Catholicism is becoming increasingly tolerant, even keeping members who disagree with main traditional dogmas. In the Churches of Christ, those who embrace extreme non-institutional positions make up less than ten percent of their overall movement.

Some important observations should be made about changes and nuances. The Anglicans began on the Authoritarian side of the continuum and moved towards the other side, whereas the early Disciples of Christ commenced on the Hyper-Autonomy side and began developing a governing body to control the DOC agenda—moving churches to the left theologically, as well as forming numerous fund controlling agencies. But even that movement allows a wide "freedom" on the issues on doctrinal, so it doesn't completely fit either end of the spectrum.

CONSIDERATIONS

Despite its substantial deficiencies, the early ICOC had strengths that have not been replicated since the dismantling of the old structure: 1) It was able to view the churches as a whole and consolidate resources such as talents and funds for major accomplishments. 2) It could respond quickly to serious problems. And 3) It could answer the question, “What are we collectively trying to accomplish to save or change the world?”

Whenever one encounters resistance to a concept of recovering a more robust agency for our family of churches, the reasons are somewhat consistent. The objections are usually rooted in three developments from American Restoration Movement history.

THE THREE ROOTS OF RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATION

A Misunderstanding and the Creedalizing of Thomas Campbell’s ‘Declaration and Address’. A common misinterpretation within Restoration history goes back to 1809 and a paper called *Declaration and Address* penned by Thomas Campbell. The early restorationists saw how denominational confession documents, which differed in size and purpose from historical creeds, were used to disassociate with others and keep them from taking part in Communion and other aspects of church life. Campbell, one of the earliest figures, wrote the document to scorn the misuse, not the use, of creeds and confessions. Clearly, many of Campbell’s descendants have lost the original context of his thoughts.

As to creeds and confessions, although we may appear to our brethren to oppose them, yet this is to be understood only in so far as they oppose the unity of the Church, by containing sentiments not expressly revealed in the word of God; or, by the way of using them, become the instruments of a human or implicit faith, or oppress the weak of God's heritage. Where they are liable to none of those objections, we have nothing against them. It is the abuse and not the lawful use of such compilations that we oppose.¹⁶

Campbell never opposed documents that were meant to cultivate cooperation and clearly, from a careful reading of the Declaration, he would not appreciate how it continues to be used as a club much like the denominational confessions were. In fact, his poorly understood document became the non-creedalists’ creed. Hence, when we hear, “I don’t believe in affirming any document but the Bible,” they are usually thinking of Campbell’s *Declaration and Address*, though not as he intended it to be understood.

Of course documents, like the one in Acts 15:23-29, are needed for affiliations and consolidated efforts. And when Christians decide to formally cooperate in a transparent way, with written agreements, the non-participating Christians tend to disparage their effort. Their position is rooted in a misreading of Thomas Campbell’s intent and the real problem that prompted him to write it.

The Nineteenth Century Commotion Over Organized Mission Societies. The Restoration Movement was, among other things, a statement against denominationalism. For some it was against supra-congregational organization of all kinds. Intense debates about mission societies, peaking in the 1840s, created a wedge in restoration history. Alexander Campbell opposed missionary societies because the church itself was a missionary society, and societies preempted the church’s role in missions and allegedly caused divisions. Over time Campbell came to encourage greater cooperation between congregations, and in 1849 he became head of the American Christian Missionary Society (ACMS).

The effectiveness of the ACMS weakened when it took a political stand, siding with the Union during the Civil War. This rapidly accelerated the deepening of fissures that were never successfully addressed. For the most part, the Restoration Movement never had a commitment to any kind of agency or roadmap for resolving problems. Therefore, churches in the South tended to be anti-society and anti-organization, consistent with their confederate roots, and the churches in the North tended to align themselves the more organized branch, the Disciples of Christ / Independent Christian Churches.

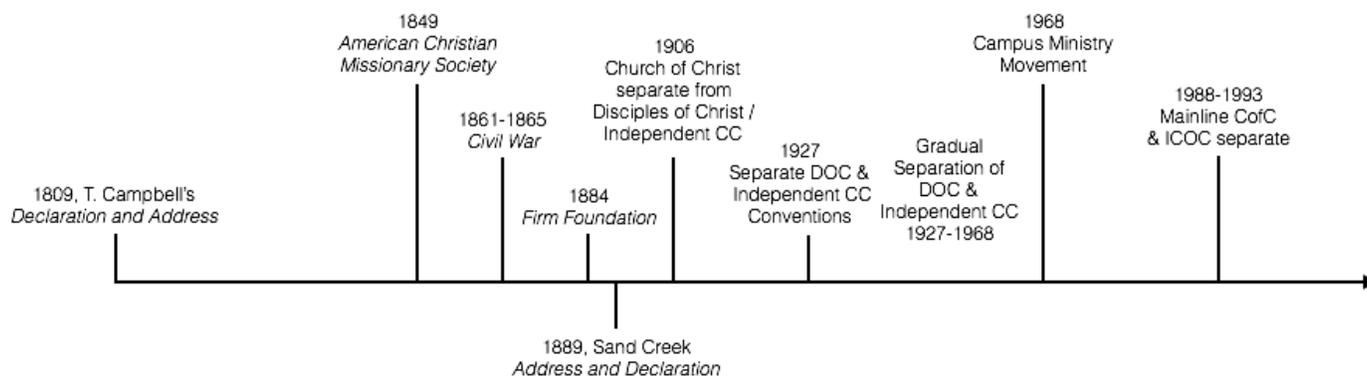
There were exceptions to the geographical leanings. In 1889, Daniel Sommer, delivered a Declaration and Address manifesto to a crowd of 5,000 in Sand Creek, Illinois. He declared war on “innovations” through his warped tribute to Thomas Campbell’s Declaration and his corresponding one hour and forty-minute address. Due in a large part to

¹⁶ Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*.

the influence of Sommer many put a “non” in front of cooperation about things that he called innovations, including instruments, mission societies, Bible colleges, choirs, hired ministers, and anything he did not see in the Bible (though he accepted that “innovation” developed by Gutenberg in the 1440s AD, using it to spread his views via printed publications).

Daniel Sommer was a divisive figure and played an influential role in expanding the fissure between the Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ/Independent Christian Churches into a formal split. Later in life he regretted some of his actions. Overall, Daniel Sommer’s life and influence suggests that highly restrictive mindsets can hurt the church as much as so-called innovations. Churches that embrace Sommerism, aka Sand Creekism, never produced momentous growth or led to multiplication the way we read in the book of Acts; instead, they become divisive. The attitude produced by Sommerism has been described as ‘purifying the church through division.’ Even though the Churches of Christ produced universities, orphanages and church camps, and traveling singing groups to the disapproval of Sommerites, their movement never fully overcame the “non” attitude that Sommers inspired.

In my opinion, we should continue to expunge the extreme “non” thinking from our culture yet stay peaceably connected to those who think differently about this. We still have some sincere “nons” among us and I think that they don’t realize where this line of thinking comes from, its disunifying force, and its ceiling on growth.



The Failures of Kip McKean’s World Sector Model. One of the reasons that we sometimes have difficulty forming any official response agency has to do with baggage from the past about centralized leadership. From the Millennial to the Senior, our historical fellowship has a mixture of the following perspectives about centralized leadership. I think I’ve heard a wide range of perspectives, some of them laden with “attitudes”:

“The world sector leader idea was bad and unbiblical!” ... “The world sector leader idea was good conceptually, but did not have enough controls and became too authoritarian.” ... “We should be completely autonomous and only cooperate when it serves our local interests.” ... “We need a hybrid of all that we have learned, that will provide value that uses a mixture of old and new, young and old voices.” ... “We need strong leadership but the persons should be frequently commended from the ICOC, not just by other leaders, and only serve no more than two consecutive terms.”

Clearly, the effects of Kip McKean’s model of World Sectors on churches led to varying degrees of allergic reaction to anything formally organized out of fear of a return to that structure. I question the lack of custodial spirit with ICOC 2.0 and the actual basis of fear of returning to 1.0. Having talked to five of the past world sector leaders of the ICOC 1.0, I found that none of them believe in a sequel to World Sector Leaders, for a variety of the reasons they expressed: 1) It became a way to consolidate power and resources wherever its leader was located, 2) There were not checks on its leader, 3) It was heavily top-down and disputes favored those in higher levels of authority, 4) It wasn’t transparent, and 5) Decisions were made autocratically. Of course, some decisions were in those days more thoughtful and benevolent than others.

The question is not a matter of a choice between centralized leadership of the past and the present lack of guidance. A decentralized global leadership that respects the local governance of churches yet entrusts capable servants to establish global priorities and help us think and act in a wholistic¹⁷ manner should be on the table.

¹⁷ Yes, “wholistic” is becoming a common word to describe thinking of the whole as a sum of its parts. Similar to holistic, first used in 1926, usually referring to philosophy of medicine, wholistic was first used in 1941 to as a cross between holistic and whole to describe the interconnection between things. The apostle Paul was expressing wholistic concepts when he penned the words of 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Romans 12:3-8, Ephesians 4:11-16.

THREE THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN AN IDEALIZED FUTURE

As we examine an idealized future with an idealized network, I propose that we keep the following three factors in mind: Advancing missions, preserving our current investment, and embracing nuance and diversity.

Advancing Missions. Due to the sober truth that my specialty is not world missions, I will be brief; however, this area is a primary concern. Consider the following facts:

- *An Easy One Page Way to Know Our Progress* (The ICOC has only grown 1.5% for each of the past two years and no church grew over 100), *What Works/and Doesn't*, *Great Case Studies* (from the ICOC and Other Groups).
- *Pray and Plan for the Unreached Zones.* The so-called 10/40 window, which defines people in or bordering “the rectangular area of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia approximately between 10 degrees north and 40 degrees north latitude”¹⁸ is an area comprising nearly 5 billion souls, with sixty percent unreached by any form of Christianity. These facts can help wake church members up to the greater needs.
- *Reach and Relevance.* Very few churches or Christian movements do much to respond to globalism and its consequences, or develop formal cross-cultural or diversity training—yet nearly every successful and sustainable international company makes these topics part of the training towards developing relationships in non-western nations.
- *Inspiration.* A comprehensive plan and vision for twelve mission societies is capable of inspiring many more people than twelve visions of twelve disconnected mission societies. A grand vision that connects the visions of twelve societies could enthuse older members who remember our earlier audacious visions.
- *Connection.* Many disciples prefer to give to the missions in their ancestral homeland rather than to a place they feel less of a connection. For instance, over the years many Southside members in Chicago have asked that their contributions go to African missions. They might scrape up two-thousand dollars for the missions to their home nation but only seven hundred dollars to the general mission's bucket.

These kinds of priorities will help mobilize our brothers and sisters can help rekindle a commitment and renewal to God's eternal purpose and earthly mission.

Preserving Our Current Investments. Nearly every week, I receive an inquiry that requires on-the-ground attention. I often hear of calls and emails to other possible helpers that sometimes go unanswered. Some of our best responders have fulltime careers outside ministry, or are confined by demanding ministry roles, or are retired and aging. Some responders are great with mediating interpersonal conflict but don't comprehend systemic issues. And usually there are few funds.

The looseness of our affiliation, a blind spot in the Cooperation Agreement and a void in preparing Delegates and Mission societies means that, for the most part, we lack “a culture of prompt, orderly and just response” to flashpoints and firestorms. Even when there is sufficient help and funds, an unhealthy church can simply resist accepting the remedies. It has happened that ministers have not accepted an arbitrated outcome recommended by skilled and impartial elders and specialists, wasting much energy and resources.

An appropriate appeals process was developed by elder Walter Evans (Philadelphia) in 2010 that isn't widely known and doesn't have the sufficient support of funds or personnel to respond. As a result, problems swell, and individuals lose faith in their leaders and issues simmer or ignite without reconciliation.

The following scenarios currently have no meaningful objective mechanism in many regions of the ICOC.

Individualism. River Valley Church has on-again and off-again associations with the churches, with many great members and respected leaders, but has serious commitment issues, and deviations on biblical issues. One elder is “alpha” on all decisions, keeping the church from formal cooperation. There have been outcries over the years over lowering standards of morality, favoritism towards certain individuals and other sacred cows. The RVC is listed on the official Disciples Today website, which confuses members about where the church is in reference to the larger body of the ICOC.

¹⁸ https://joshuaproject.net/resources/articles/10_40_window

There has been behind-the-scenes talk of planting another church, but prominent leaders are sentimental about their connections to the RVC and stop the conversation.

Closed System Church. The Amber City Church has had some growth relative to other churches in that country, but has been hemorrhaging longstanding members for years and has gained a reputation for many rules, emphasizing compliance, an aggressive form of discipleship, and favoring leaders in conflicts. Outside intervention results in a hands-off attitude. Multiple attempts of speaking to the parties, meetings, phone calls, and partial inquiries have been a waste of time and money and have polarized longstanding relationships from a few different near and far away countries. Finally, a series of bad behaviors has led to a schism. Now there are two churches in Amber city.

Holy Quagmires. The Emerald City Church is close to thirty years old as a congregation. Some of the longstanding members completed a study, which revealed that certain demographics are very underrepresented in the congregation. Members from one of those demographics, Millennials, believe it is partly about location of the meeting place and the nature of the worship dynamics that repel this segment of the population. The leadership believes in everyone being together on Sundays, while the underrepresented group wants to have alternative locations with new approaches. The relationships between all the parties are historically good, but they found themselves in a quagmire about following sincere leadership with a poor track record with diversity in the ECC and a risky approach that could affect their finances and risks a multi-church situation, bumping up against a one-church-per-one city dogma.

I've uncovered recurring themes with failed mediations and major disruptions similar to the game of Bop-It approaches to managing conflict—whereby the player pulls handles, twists cranks, and toggles switches to make the given situation not happen again. There is often a lack of impartial investigation and almost no training from within or from the outside.

It is time to reexamine our assumptions about how we allocate money, provide training and how we will respond to issues as they arise. Based on the systems that Jethro and Moses envisioned¹⁹, research for my Master's thesis on unity in the early church, and the problem-solving measures I've studied other Christian religious bodies, I believe that we badly need a widely supported agency comprised of well vetted individuals and basic funds, driven by an expectation that legitimate cries for outside help will be answered and that under-equipped leaders will have someone to call who will begin an ongoing conversation.

Embracing Nuance and Diversity. The current reality is that not many of us have learned how to manage dissent well, or collaborate with committed adventurers who want to pilot programs, or learn from other religious movements whose churches are similarly committed but having greater growth and community impact.

It is hard for some of us to see God outside of the Restoration movement. If we were to hear of a Catholic congregation that rejects traditional tenets of Roman theology and is baptizing only adults by immersion, our traditional answer would be to call them to join us. But these surprises have in fact happened and are likely to become more frequent. Perhaps God is “doing another thing” with others. Can we hit reset with our assumptions?

Roger Lamb recently wrote the following thoughts in an email:

Just as the Reformation Movement was a reaction to the Catholic Church, the Restoration Movement was a reaction to the denominationalism of the day. In 2017, the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing the 95 Theses on the Wittenburg Door, denominationalism is irrelevant. What if our focus and call was “Authentic Christianity” or something similar? It speaks to the younger generations and avoids the call to patternism.

Roger is correct, I believe, because brand loyalty among Christian religious groups is becoming a thing of the past, especially with younger people. But if our call was towards authentically following Christ, rather living up to (or against) any page in our two hundred years of restoration history, then our longer legacy would include reversing sectarianism. The focus on authentic Christianity allows us to maintain the ideals of orthodoxy, biblical conversion, true discipleship and relational connection, while shedding our own reactivity.

¹⁹ *The Page Turner: The First Implementation of the Jethro Principle (Exodus 18:17-23)*

Even though this paper proposes that we head towards a more integrated arrangement, we should not set up structures that exclude us from participating with the next wave of Christianity with other sincere seekers of truth and authenticity. Prayerfully it will be a less reactive wave this time.



In closing: In my paper *Renaissance: When Light Cuts Through the Haze, Part III—Integration*, I propose a concept called *Integrative Vision*, described as follows:

God intended for His churches to comprise the prominent integrative and interdependent features found in healthy families and nature’s ecosystems, rather than rely on the simplistic top-down manner of the military model, the production orientation of corporations, and score mentality of sports teams because the Creator himself established a strong correlation between the interworking of spiritual community to creation and a thriving household.

Therefore, “strong leadership” should signify, from now on, the ability to cultivate the greater integration and engagement of its many members, aligned in suitable roles in order that the church flourishes to God’s glory.

I pray for a network-oriented and relational understanding of hierarchy within our churches and as a movement, for greater cooperation and collaboration, and for our growth and health, as well as for Christians in the kingdom outside of our family of churches.

If you are interested in learning more about the development of denominations, in May I will begin conducting “Legacies” church history workshops in anticipation of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation next October. We will discuss ...

... *The Great Schism (1054 AD) and Its Legacy*

... *The Reformation (1517 AD) and Its Legacy*

... *The Restoration Movement (1809 AD) and Its Legacy*

I hope to see you at one of these events.

STEPHEN F. STATEN

ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH CONSULTANT

www.bridginginternational.com

www.stephenfstaten.com

steve@bridginginternational.com

APPENDIX

Autonomy is used in two very different ways in the secular world, which makes it a troubling word for this discussion. Those different definitions are used in Christian circles as well. The ancient Greek words *auto* ("self") and *nomos* ("law") combined are understood to mean "living by one's own law".

The first common meaning "refers to the capacity of a rational individual to make informed, uncoerced decisions," and to accept responsibility for one's own actions—self-governing or self-responsible. Most larger groups such as Anglicans, Congregationalists and Southern Baptists use it this way. When an ICOC figure follows this definition he might say, "Our congregation is autonomous and makes its own decisions but we want outside input, to mutually share resources and information, so that we can do what is best for both us and the brotherhood."

The second frequent usage means, "freedom from external control or influence." This is common among the mainline Churches of Christ and it is frequently used in a context of antagonism or what is against. When a brother in the ICOC says, "I don't ever want to be part of an autonomous congregation ever again. Autonomy is rooted in American pride," he is using the second definition. These two competing definitions are ways that Christians talk past each other. In this document I use terms such as self-responsible and self-governing to describe the first intended usage and hyper-autonomy to describe the second meaning.

A great example of the importance of this distinction comes from reading *The Breaking of the Strong Man: How Autonomy is Killing the American Church*. The author, Russell Traweek, a Southern Baptist minister, rightly takes a sound position against the dangers of self-reliance and independence that has so damaged American Christianity. Clearly, he is dealing with the second definition and will not easily win people to the Idealized Model of the New Testament. Although he is so adamant about exposing the dangers of one end of the continuum, he has not one word to say about organizing principles, a model, or a proposal to avoid going to the other end.

On the other hand, Charles Simpson's diatribe, *Inside the Churches of Christ: Reflection of a Former Pharisee on What Every Christian Should Know About the Nondenomination Denomination*, poses real challenges to hyper-autonomy. The tenth chapter, Everything in the Universe Is Organized Except for the Churches of Christ, cites Scripture-based arguments of the need for some hierarchy. While it is obvious that the Baptist author has strong attitudes born from his own experiences that do not represent the entire CofC movement, he rightly appeals to a responsible model for organized cooperation.

Structural organization as it relates to Christians is not an un-Godly thing, as the Churches of Christ would have us believe. In Matthew 25:14-30 Jesus gives the parable of the talents. While there are many lessons to be gleaned from this parable, it is clear that God expects us to use the gifts with which we have been entrusted. God did not create us as robots. He gave each of us free will and the incredible ability of creative thinking. Collectively, God gave us the gift of organization. Ignoring our gifts and the positive impact that they have upon spreading the Gospel would be tantamount to burying our talents. Mainstream Christianity has long recognized the value of organization in sustaining the integrity of the Gospel, evangelism, and benevolence.²⁰

Simpson's argument for thinking about organizing our God-given gifts for great purposes is compelling, and has Old Testament precedents (Exodus 35:30-36:7, Deuteronomy 1:9-18, Nehemiah 3). It is my belief that we can invite more churches from outside the ICOC into the family of churches, or part of an "extended communion" with us if we argue for creating something (not being against something) and uphold healthy versions of independence. Scriptural autonomy, as in self-mobilizing, self-organizing, self-responsibility has never been the problem. Hyper-autonomy—thinking as an isolated "part" without thinking of the "whole" family—has been the real vice.

Extended Communion. I have been working with numerous churches and/or individuals on the fringe of our fellowship. As I see the situation, we have many variations related to affirmed and practicing cooperation: affirmed and practicing cooperation, non-affirmed but practicing cooperation, affirmed but not practicing cooperation, partial cooperation, split on full cooperation within the same congregation, multiple churches in one city at various phases of cooperation. Paths to a better future can be navigated in all of those cases. One key ingredient is to not draw lines in the sand about fellowship with true Christians, but create maps for pursuing further integration.

²⁰ Charles Simpson (2009-02-11). *Inside the Churches of Christ: The Reflection of a Former Pharisee On What Every Christian Should Know About the Nondenomination Denomination* (pp. 191-192). AuthorHouse. Kindle Edition.