

AUTONOMY AND COOPERATION IN THE MAINLINE CHURCHES OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION:

1. Understandably, one of the biggest challenges facing us as a movement of churches is what type of leadership structure we use and how we cooperate to ensure that we are indeed a movement, dedicated to the accomplishment of both parts of the Great Commission.
2. My dear friend Valdur Koha, with his business background, in combination with his work with the Boards of NEEM and the Beam Fund, is giving his input and recommendations about how he sees this working best for our movement — essentially how we balance local leadership, which now functions almost completely in autonomous fashion, and how we cooperate effectively for the greater good in some sort of an effective manner.
3. Valdur and I have discussed this subject at length many times over a period of years, and I can pretty much guarantee that whatever he shared I would agree with.
4. That being said, Ed Anton asked me to address the same subject from the standpoint of history within the Mainline Churches of Christ, which happens to be our own root system.
5. Having been in and around the Mainline churches for $\frac{3}{4}$ of a century and having taught in-depth courses on Restoration History in a ministry training school, I think I can provide an overview that might prove helpful in showing the strengths and weaknesses of the Mainline approaches of leadership and cooperation (which have varied from time to time throughout their history).

BODY:

- I. Early Beginnings
 - A. The Restoration Movement was a gathering of individual leaders and groups under the banner of restoring (not reforming, given the failures of the Reformation Movement) the original church as a way of gaining the unity for which Christ prayed in John 17.
 - B. The two best known groups that essentially merged were led by Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone.
 1. Campbell was a logician, an intellectual, and known as a writer and debater.
 2. Stone was much more of a Holy Spirit focused leader, and some of his movement's activities would seem rather strange to us today (especially their 2-3 week Camp Meetings).
 3. However, since their ideas about, and goals for, restoration were very close, the two movements were able to merge.
 4. Many other leaders and smaller groups merged with them, leading to a movement that gathered momentum rather quickly in the early 1800s.
 5. The common goal of unity based solely on the Bible was enough to minimize their differences and unify their efforts — a lesson for any group.
 6. Without a strong unifying goal, unity and cooperation to reach that goal will be impossible.
- II. Organizational Structure
 - A. Although they began with more of a common movement structure, they decided rather quickly that this approach would just produce one more denominational group rather than unite different groups.
 - B. The doctrine of local congregational autonomy was accepted as the best way of governance.
 1. The approach began innocently enough, based on their reactions to Reformation churches, where a leadership group made decisions that affected everyone in the denomination, whether the local leadership agreed with them or not.
 2. The simple analogy of one bad apple spoiling the whole barrel seemed to encapsulate their thinking, and autonomy was adopted to supposedly stop that from occurring.
 - C. The challenge, of course, was in how a movement of churches could be united for common causes.

1. The overall result was that all efforts of cooperation were optional and dependent on the influence of the ones trying to promote any given effort.
2. Obviously, the greater the influence of the leader promoting the effort, the greater the possibility of unifying the efforts of greater numbers of potential participants.
3. Given the fact that most of the early Restoration days were found in rural settings, the main influence exerted was through writing, and the most influential leaders were those who published a regular periodical of some sort.

III. History Unfolding

- A. The autonomy structure of local leadership was never really questioned once accepted.
- B. The cooperative efforts varied through the years, with most successful efforts being localized within a given city or perhaps a city and its surrounding region.
- C. Among the events that gained cooperation were the following:
 1. Debates with those in other religious groups. Campbell was quite well-known for his debates, which included the debating of at least one famous atheist, Owen, whose resounding defeat at the hands of Campbell sent him into relative seclusion for the remainder of his life.
 2. Gospel meetings were scheduled meetings nightly in an area for the purpose of inviting visitors, and were in early days quite effective in baptizing large numbers of people. They ended up being primarily congregational, but were in earlier days used to reach out more broadly to a region.
 3. Once Christian Colleges were established, annual Lectureships and similar programs were publicized and attracted members from a number of different states and congregations within those states. This was a type of cooperation, although it didn't involve finances beyond the personal expenses required to register and attend.
 4. World War II exposed soldiers from the Mainline Church to the needs of those outside the United States, and after the war ended, mission efforts grew substantially — with support for individual missionaries coming from various congregations very often.
 - a. The larger congregations would often support one or more missionaries alone.
 - b. Smaller congregations contributed funds for specific missionaries, and in the early days each congregation did this individually.
 - c. In time, it became obvious that keeping track of funds was best done by recognizing of one congregation as a "sponsoring congregation," which served as a conduit to collect and send the funds to a commonly supported missionary.
 - d. Obviously, the mission did bring about some form of unity between congregations, even if it was primarily a structure designed to handle funds appropriately.
 5. Whatever else may be said, Churches of Christ were supposedly the fastest growing indigenous religious group in the US during the 1950s and 1960s.
 - a. The growth had as its driving force the commitment to evangelize, a commitment found within most individual congregations.
 - b. Because of this commitment, existing churches established new congregations in cities or communities in which none were present formerly.
 - c. Sometimes these new congregations were started by one existing church and sometimes several churches in the same approximate locale joined forces to accomplish this.
 - d. Often new groups were started because one preacher wanted to start a "mission" church and asked the leaders of existing congregation to fund his efforts, and in a loose sense, to oversee his work.
 - e. Generally speaking, such oversight would exist only until the new church was able to establish its own leadership group, with elders for every congregation being the goal.
 - f. This approach explains the existence of a "Church of Christ" in almost every small town in the Bible Belt part of our country.

- g. It must be admitted that some churches were started simply because leaders in one church became divided and “solved” their disunity by starting another group. Then they were autonomous and could be at odds — with few even knowing about the history behind the new group, which was actually a division, properly understood.

IV. History As I Observed It

- A. Although raised in a splinter group that called itself a “Church of Christ,” my real involvement with the Mainline Church began in the mid to late 1960s.
- B. By this time, cooperative efforts included the Christian College events, as mentioned above, and also the similar approach to supporting missionaries and planting “mission churches.”
- C. However, for a fairly brief time, other approaches to evangelistic outreach became popular, and it took at least two primary forms.
 1. Area wide evangelistic efforts were patterned to some degree after the Billy Graham Crusades.
 - a. Individual congregations in a fairly large area (Dallas/Fort Worth, for example) would cooperate to conduct a Crusade type effort.
 - b. Usually, one motivated (and motivational) person would serve as the Director of this event and would have a leadership board of some type to oversee what he was doing.
 - c. A man who was destined to become my mentor, J.T. Bristow, directed several such events on a broad scale.
 - d. I was associated with one of these events as a young married person in Shreveport, Louisiana and another as a young minister in the Portland, Oregon area some years later.
 - e. We had printed material advertising the upcoming Crusade meeting, normally held in a very large auditorium, but also offering personal Bible studies in the homes of the people whose doors the church members knocked.
 2. In Shreveport, the five or six congregations appeared to all participate in fairly significant numbers, and certainly attended the final one or two night meetings in the local Colosseum at the State Fair Grounds.
 - a. Several thousand attended to hear an outside, motivational speaker, and quite a number were baptized.
 - b. Obviously, participating congregations had to agree to not only participate in door knocking and attending the big concluding meetings, but some type of agreement had to be reached about financial participation. How they accomplished that, I wasn’t aware.
 - c. Knowing those churches and their strong attachment to autonomy, it is surprising in looking back that they cooperated to the degree they did.
 3. In Dallas/Fort Worth, a crusade type effort was held by the name of “Impact Christ,” and led by J.T. Bristow.
 - a. I wasn’t involved in this one, but J.T. had at one time been a missionary in Wyoming and at another time, a professional motivational speaker.
 - b. Because I worked with him in a smaller version of “Impact Christ” in the Northwest later, I saw all of the materials used in Texas and heard the accounts of what had been accomplished.
 - c. As with the similar program in Shreveport, it is a bit astounding that this much cooperation of all types was able to be accomplished.
 4. The Portland, Oregon version.
 - a. As I said, I was a young minister by this time and a part of the leadership involved in staging this event.
 - b. J.T. led it, but as his co-worker, I was able to have a good eye-witness view of how it all functioned.
 - c. He went to all of the congregations who would let him come, and the large majority did, to “sell” them on the idea, often using the Dallas/Fort Worth version as an example.
 - d. We did knock doors with printed literature, had a week’s worth of prime time TV programs, complete with a film shown and followed by a live panel to answer questions called in on the spot.

- e. We invited a well-known speaker in to preach at the large meetings which concluded the whole series of events, and baptized a number of people.
- f. We repeated the program the next year, but had difficulty raising enough funds, which led to the elimination of the TV portion and also led to me being the speaker instead of a better known outside speaker. At that point, I was at best a medium fish in a very small pond.

D. Soul-Winning Workshops

- 1. This was a second type of cooperative effort held in various cities, with participation similar to that of the Christian College Lectureships and similar events.
- 2. The largest such workshop was the "Tulsa Soul-Winning Workshop," which had an attendance of many thousands.
- 3. "Bus Ministries" were popular in many congregations, as children were brought in to the local churches for "Sunday School," with the idea that parents could be reached and the children would become members when they reached an appropriate age.
- 4. The main leaders in the Soul-Winning Workshops were typically those whose congregations had large bus ministries. Although these were thought to comprise the latest and greatest outreach method, they didn't prove to be that and gradually died out.
- 5. However, the large workshops continued, and definitely generated more excitement and evangelism than any College Lectureship ever did.
- 6. In time, perhaps a decade or slightly more, these events also died out except when they spread to the new "Crossroads Movement" and events like the "Florida Evangelism Seminar" (the largest until Boston some years later).

V. When Did the Cooperative Path Turn Downward and Why?

- A. As is obvious, this presentation is a combination of personal experience and knowledge of history. Hence, you have my opinions from this point forward and you will have to decide what to do with them: dismiss them entirely, continue considering them, or accept them (or perhaps some combination of those possible choices).
- B. I will simply examine briefly where things are today in the Mainline regarding the cooperative efforts described earlier, followed by my opinion of what caused the changes.
- C. Debates.
 - 1. I have not heard of the old style debates being held in decades.
 - 2. Because these debates were often conducted with offensive spirits, and because Mainline groups more and more want to fit in comfortably with the evangelical world, there is a distancing from any type of discussion that might be seen as adversarial or confrontational.
- D. Gospel Meetings.
 - 1. I'm sure that some of the more traditional groups still dutifully have these types of meetings annually, although they are likely very short in duration now.
 - 2. I can remember when they were two weeks long, then one week, then a long weekend.
 - 3. How long the ones which survived last is anyone's guess, if any survived at all.
- E. College Lectureships
 - 1. These, and similar college campus based programs, indeed survive.
 - 2. In 2004, four from our group were on a panel interacting with a panel from the Mainline group.
 - 3. The attendance was quite good, although I don't have any way to compare it to the near past and could not tell you whether the number of attendees is going up or down.
 - 4. I can tell you that the evening meetings were comprised mostly of older, white people — almost devoid of young people and people of (any) color.
- F. Foreign Missions
 - 1. I have some personal friends who are still on the mission field, but they are in my age group.

2. In reading publications like "Christian Chronicle," I do know that some foreign work by US citizens is still taking place, but have no idea of the numbers involved.
 3. I do remember reading an article by Gerald Peden, then a teacher in the *Sunset School of Preaching*, back in 1990 (shortly after I had moved to Boston in 1988).
 - a. As best as memory serves (and I think pretty well in this case), he said that the high-water mark of missionary units (a couple or a single) outside the US was in the early to mid-1970's — about 800 units.
 - b. He predicted that the number by the end of the year (1990) was going to fall below 200.
 - c. I started preaching in 1970 and left the Mainline in 1985, and my own experience coincided closely to what Gerald had written.
 - d. What was the cause? A loss of conviction and involvement in evangelism generally, in combination with the rush toward building nicer and nicer church buildings, some complete with gymnasiums for the children of the members (to keep them involved in church).
- G. Church plantings in the US
1. The Mainline couldn't be doing much of this, since their numbers are shrinking in both membership and numbers of congregations.
 2. When I wrote my Second Edition of "Prepared to Answer," which came out in 2010, I quoted a segment from the Christian Chronicle publication, which read as follows (edited slightly):
"In the February 2009 issue, under the heading on the front page, "Church in America marked by decline," an official study identified 12,629 non-instrumental churches with 1,578,281 members. Those figures are said to represent 526 fewer churches and 78,436 fewer members than six years earlier."
 3. Although I don't have recent figures, I do know that colleges which were once attended predominately by young people from Mainline families are so no longer, this being the case with schools like Abilene Christian University.
 4. Further, those who do attend ACU with Church of Christ backgrounds most often attend other types of churches.
 5. Whatever else may be said, we all have to be concerned about the Millennials among us, for they are tiring of traditional ways of doing church.
- H. Crusades.
1. I've not heard of anything like these in decades, for they were a short-lived type of event.
 2. The whole concept of evangelism is seen as outmoded by large segments of the membership.
 3. A leader in one of the larger Mainline groups told me that I would be impressed with what they were doing for the poor and needy, yet when the need to evangelize was mentioned, the common response was, "That's so 80s!"
- I. Soul-Winning Workshops
1. These have disappeared in most places, although Tulsa has or did have some semblance of this program continuing.
 2. However, the name was changed to something not related to evangelism, and the program was aimed almost primarily at meeting the various needs of members.
 3. I shouldn't need to mention the similarity between that shift and the one taking place in our own Conferences.
- J. The "Why" question.
1. This question is easy to answer, since humans are quite predictable in some areas.
 2. First, a general loss of commitment to Christ, his church and his mission.
 - a. Read Revelation 2 & 3, and you can list your own answers.
 - b. All movements tend strongly in the direction of "Man; Movement; Monument."
 - c. At some point in the second and third generations of movements that started with much zeal and effectiveness, almost all movements hit what is called the "tipping point."

- d. At that time, momentum is lost in ever-increasing measure until the group is made up mostly of the older folks like the ones I observed at the ACU Lectureships in 2004.
 - e. On our 51st wedding anniversary, Theresa wanted to visit our hometown and the places that had been significant to us growing up and getting married. The two hospitals we had been born in were no longer functioning as normal hospitals and were virtually deserted. Our Junior High School where we met housed offices for an oil refinery. My two grandmother's homes were now vacant lots, and our childhood houses were rundown and almost unrecognizable. The Baptist Church where our wedding was performed was boarded up and vacant. The Mainline group where our flames for Christ were lit had fewer attendees than our Young Marrieds Class had back when we attended there regularly. The Second Law of Thermodynamics is real, rigid and virtually unyielding.
3. Second, a loss of evangelistic zeal, which results in a lessened tendency to cooperate to carry out the Great Commission.
 4. Third, a fear of cooperation due to a lack of trust.
 - a. Although I didn't mention it earlier, the Mainline went through a movement wide split in the late 1950s and 1960s.
 - b. The split was supposedly over a doctrinal issue, but the insiders I knew explained it as a personality conflict produced by pride and envy. Knowing the situation, I would opt to accept that latter explanation.
 - c. We have also experienced a split for similar reasons, and the leadership dynamics that led up to the split seriously eroded our trust in subtle and non-subtle ways.
 - d. Our fears of returning to some semblance of a non-biblical, highly dysfunctional hierarchical leadership, while unfounded in both fact and logic, are being used mightily by Satan.

CONCLUSION:

1. In conclusion, I have to ask if we are capable intellectually of learning from history, or will we remain blocked by our irrational emotions?
2. It is my conviction based on my knowledge of history and of our movement that we have arrived at that tipping point.
3. While there are many factors involved in whether we go over that edge or not, our willingness to forge a unity of cooperation structurally and financially will play a significant role in determining the answer.
4. One of my older friends who knows all of this history about as well as I do said recently, "We have become our fathers."
5. We can keep that from happening. Let's do it!