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The Church and the Relationships Within It

STEVE BROWN

In this article we will examine the doctrine of “the church” found in the scriptures, and how we have sought to live it out in the International Churches of Christ (ICOC) from the early days of the movement through the struggles of reexamination and reform up to the present.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

The church’s role in the Christian’s life is a foundational concept. At a crucial moment in Jesus’ ministry, Matthew records that he announces it, puts his stamp of ownership on it and promises his protection of it (Matt 16.18). Paul, in Colossians 1.15–18, calls Jesus the head of his body, the church. This makes participation in the church something necessary for a relationship with Jesus—something of primordial import, something critical to the continuing work of Christ. Without the head, the body is lifeless, inert, passionless and purposeless; without the body, the head cannot channel his power to make an earthly difference.

Since, according to 1 Corinthians 12.12–13, we are baptized into the body of Christ, and are therefore “members” of his body, then all baptized believers are part of that body. Christians are to function as part of Jesus’ body in the present. We are his “hands and feet,” commissioned to be his instruments and called upon to represent him in every aspect of life, with special focus on sharing the message with as many as possible. In the ICOC fellowship, the expectation that every member should be involved in the ministry of the church has been a hallmark teaching from the earliest days. The role of leadership in the church is to prepare the church itself, the members, to carry out the actual ministry of the church based on Ephesians 4.11–12. This is reinforced by a seldom-discussed message that God is creating a “kingdom of priests” where everyone fulfills the priestly role (Exod 19.6, 1 Pet 2.9–10, Rev 5.10).

The NT teaching about the body and our role as its members is challenging both personally and corporately. Romans 12.5 NIV says that as members of Christ’s body we “belong to one another.” Certainly for us in the West, this is countercultural. Everything in our culture seems to cry, “It is all about *me!*” “Look out for *numero uno!*” The biblical concept of the church not only involves submission to Jesus as Lord, but also means that we have an obligation to look out for others as well—to surrender our own needs in order to benefit others. Except in isolated cases, this is not an acceptable teaching in the world, and when thoroughly applied has been characterized as “crazy” or, even worse, “cultic.” Certainly, it can become more the latter, when the message about our submission to each other (Eph 5.21) is twisted in order to manipulate others and is used to control rather than to all be servants. However, the scriptural concept of the church calls for far more sacrificial involvement in the lives of others and far more interdependent living than most modern churchgoers have ever imagined.

In our family of churches, we consistently have called people to such involvement, even making it a part of pre-baptismal instruction (because of cultural experiences that would have taught them it was peripheral).

This was a right thing to do, but our failure may have been what we did not teach, and that is that we don't have relationships in order to fix people or control them, but to give them the grace, truth and time needed for transformation.¹

THE FAMILY OF GOD

Another biblical image for the church is that of a family. Ephesians 2.19–22 describes the believers as “members of God’s household.” The most common word used in Paul’s writings for followers of Jesus is the word “brothers.” This designation was not a religious term but a description of the kind of new relationships experienced in God’s new humanity.

In our fellowship, many felt rejected by their physical families when they became Christians, but they found in the church their real “family,” with relationships that were extremely significant in their everyday lives. In most cases a tight community was built, where people really functioned as “brothers” and “sisters.” Those on the outside often misunderstood this dynamic, just as it was, no doubt, misunderstood in the ministry of Jesus (Matt 12.46–50). Without an appreciation for what God is doing in the church, it appears to be a dangerous drift to something sinister, even in a culture that has devalued our own family relationships.

THE “ONE ANOTHER” FELLOWSHIP

Acts 2.42–47 describes the newly established church in its pristine nature. Devotion to the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer were all elements in the new shared life. Those in our movement saw these as pillar concepts. As the scriptures were taught, as the Lord was remembered at the Supper and as prayer was practiced, it was seen that it was devotion to “the fellowship” that put flesh on all these things. At some point, the “one another” passages were “discovered” and then were taught frequently with an expectation that they were to be implemented. The emphasis on body life and “one another” principles were not new with our fellowship, but they were applied more fiercely and laid out more emphatically than any place I had seen.

In our ministries, the “daily” aspect of the fellowship was also emphasized. Christians were taught to “encourage one another daily” (Heb 3.12–13) and to follow the “daily” practices of the early church (Acts 2.46).

As in Churches of Christ, our members were taught that a text like Hebrews 10.24–25 meant making attendance at the services a priority—not to fulfill a requirement, but rather to be there in an encouraging way for each other. Due to this conviction, alternative services were developed for those who worked in occupations that made this difficult, especially those in the medical community and the performing arts. In my present congregation, daytime midweek services are planned for those older Christians who find it difficult to get out at night.

Our churches developed a culture that was permeated with the importance of “one another” relationships. Beginning with “prayer partners” that were part and parcel of the Crossroads ministry to the “discipling partners” in the Boston ministry, the expectation was that every Christian has a one-on-one relationship with another person, with whom they meet weekly for times of prayer, Bible study and confession. Originating in a church seeking the best way to take care of a multitude of baby Christians, the “partner” arrangement was soon seen as a way to help everyone grow; there are many who will testify about the difference in made in their lives. However, over time two harmful mistakes were made: (1) this was seen as the only way to fulfill the “one another” teachings of the New Testament, and (2) a one-over-one mentality developed.

In regard to the first, this arrangement may seem to have many advantages, but you cannot make a case for it being the only biblical way to be involved in each others’ lives.

In regard to the second, in a mentoring situation with a new Christian, you obviously will have one

1. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Making Small Groups Work* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 123–125.

who is more experienced and knowledgeable, but as people grow there needs to be much more mutuality in relationships, and often, that adjustment was not made.

Additionally, “one another” relationships became more and more organized, with each leader responsible for his “discipling tree.” These relationships became more and more “ordered,” with one person being designated the “discipler” and the other the “disciple.” The healthy “corporate” focus on body life developed rapidly into a more “corporate” focus as the organizational structure of the churches began to resemble a corporation more than a body.

Because of these mistakes and understandable reactions to them, as well as overreactions, recent years have seen us seeking to regain what had been our strong suit. Without the structure and with many people distrustful due to bad experiences, it has often been difficult to get the church back into a “one another” mode. However, the conviction about the need for this to happen would still seem to be there. For example, wide use has been made of a book that Tom Jones and I recently coauthored, *One Another: Transformational Relationships in the Body of Christ*.²

THE COLONY OF HEAVEN: THE KINGDOM AND THE CHURCH

Biblically, there is a vital connection between the kingdom of God and the church, though they are not the same. As the Boston ministry grew in influence, kingdom terminology became prominent, along with the idea that the church was the kingdom (a concept carried over from Churches of Christ). As we followed still further in the steps of our Restoration ancestors, it was not long before the Boston Movement identified itself as “the one church” or, more frequently, “the one true church.”³ From there it was a logical and easy step to describe the movement (and eventually the ICOC) as “the kingdom.” Sadly, a rich biblical concept was diminished and used in a thoroughly sectarian way.

Now there is a revived emphasis on the biblical theology of the kingdom,⁴ with more focus on the church as the fellowship of those committed to the kingdom. The church is seen as a colony of the kingdom, an outpost of God-centered living in this self-centered world. The church is to be a fellowship of those whose “citizenship is in heaven” (Phil 3.20), an alternative community with a genuine concern for all men of all nations.

The church is like an invasion by God into our time and space. That invasion was first seen in the person of Jesus, but we continue that work, as his body still on the earth. In contrast with the remnant theology of the Old Testament, here we see our job in terms of ever increasing expansion, as we reach more and more people with the “good news of the kingdom.”

In the ministry of Jesus, this good news of the kingdom was specifically expressed as good news for the poor and oppressed (Luke 4.16–30). The role of the church as the fellowship of the kingdom means that a concern for the poor and needy is a priority. In the ministry of Jesus there is no conflict between preaching the good news and caring for the poor, nor should there be in the church today.

The kingdom life is thus about living out the principles of heaven here in our world. We become as it were, aliens from the future, who do not seem to belong here, yet have a mission to fulfill on this planet. It is a mission to spread the message to every person in the whole world, but also to live out those kingdom-centered principles in a way that will develop a society (the church) that is governed by God rather than the world around us.

2. Thomas Jones and Steve Brown, *One Another: Transformational Relationships in the Body of Christ* (Spring Hill, Tennessee: DPI, 2007).

3. The focus was placed on being “the only Christians” and not just “Christians only.” This thought pattern is not unique to our movement. We have shared this struggle with various other groups in the history of the Restoration Movement. In recent years a much more balanced view of this issue has been taught among us.

4. Some of us are finding much common ground in books such as *Mere Discipleship* by Lee Camp, *Kingdom Come* by John Mark Hicks and Bobby Valentine, *The Kingdom that Turned the World Upside Down* by David Berco, and several books by N.T. Wright, for example, *The Challenge of Jesus*.

WORLDWIDE NATURE

The very nature of our churches was changed drastically by the success that characterized our development. The remarkable growth in numbers outside the United States rapidly changed not only the demographic of our membership but the needs of the leadership as well. Many new leaders from all over the world, not only non-English speaking but with different cultural backgrounds as well, provided huge challenges for leadership training and development. The upheaval caused by the removal of the worldwide structure had disastrous consequences on churches in third-world countries, which were often in a dependant position on first-world churches for leadership and financial support. While some foreign churches were left to fend for themselves, other families of churches banded together to see that financial needs were met. For example, in my personal experience, the churches in Tennessee, Kentucky and Alabama have worked together to provide financial support and ongoing leadership training for churches in Venezuela, Colombia Ecuador and Peru.

Over the last four years, there has been a concerted effort to return to a spirit of cooperation among the churches. With a healthy respect for each individual congregation's leadership, churches have joined together to meet local needs and to take care of the third-world churches. The planting of new churches, pretty much on hold for a number of years, seems to be resuming.

Relationships with churches outside our fellowship have remained limited and have largely been based on the renewing of old ties and relationships. Although theoretically the attitude toward a wider fellowship has significantly changed, there seem to be limited practical steps to bridging any gaps. There are some exceptions to this but they remain just that—exceptions. That is one reason we welcomed the generous offer to share these thoughts with *Leaven* readers.

CONCLUSION

In our experience, the church has been the focal point for the extension of the message into the world. It has been the “fellowship of the kingdom” and has thus served as a “support group” for the disciples of Jesus as they struggle to live out the call of the kingdom in this time and place. Of course the problem with God's perfect plan for the church is us, the imperfect people in it.⁵ That however is the incredible thing about God's plan: from the beginning it took “us” into account and gave us the tools, like humility and forgiveness, to be able to overcome whatever obstacles we face or even cause, for that matter.

The commitment to these “one another” principles remains strong as we continue to strive to live out the lifestyle of the kingdom in this present world.

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5. Thomas A Jones, *God's Perfect Plan for Imperfect People: The Message of Ephesians* (Spring Hill, TN: Discipleship Publications, 2001).