

### *How Do You Make a Church of Christ?*

“I’m so sick of being restrained by stupid traditions!” Terry’s teammate Jeff exclaimed. The room was tense, and the cumulative frustration of multiple team meeting logjams was palpable.

No one could count the number of times team discussions about strategy and belief had come to this very same point. The gist of these frequent impasses went like this: team discussions around some issue flowed in exciting, creative, and compelling dialogue. Inevitably, however, someone would bring up the issue of how this idea or practice gelled with their self-identification as a “Church of Christ” and whether the item under discussion was an authentic expression of the team’s Stone-Campbell heritage and continuing commitment. “Can we really do \_\_\_\_ and remain a Church of Christ?”

When these situations arose, some of the more “progressive” voices on the team would roll their eyes with a “here we go again” look and make a case for an approach that was unrestrained by previous theological traditions. Speaking for this group, Jack said: “Missional churches must always be willing to push the envelope and be prepared at any moment to jettison anything that encumbers the mission of God.” The call, these teammates felt, was to focus on growing vibrant churches and not get caught up in doctrinal headaches. Maintaining relationships with a fellowship that didn’t share that vision was simply not important, “We’re here to plant churches and change lives, not argue theology or pay homage to the dying Church of Christ denomination!”

No one on the team took very conservative doctrinal stances. The more cautious voices rather argued not so much from a conservative theological commitment (i.e., “I think this is the only true biblical way,” etc.) but rather in terms of appropriateness, measured change, and the desire to maintain ecclesial bonds with churches and a tradition with which they felt comfortable and connected (though not without some critical awareness). Yet, one teammate, Sally, did mention a few times that she thought planting churches more akin to franchising. That is, “when we say we are a Church of Christ, we should represent essential Church of Christ characteristics. Just like McDonalds or Starbucks—when you go to a McDonalds anywhere in the world, you get essentially the same food, same quality, same experience. That’s how church should be done. If we wish to change our practices, then we should leave the name “Church of Christ” and call ourselves something else.”

It was interesting to Terry that many of these tensions and basic commitments to extremely divergent positions never emerged in their extensive 1-year period of team training and preparation. Only slowly, after being on the mission field for nearly a year, as the issues became more “real” and urgent did teammates gradually express these deep sentiments. Terry wasn’t certain whether people had held their beliefs close to the vest (unwilling or fearful to reveal what they thought) or they had only recently become aware of these foundational commitments in the heat of team conflicts and exchanges. Regardless, this growing openness about these basic commitments had led to considerable tension among teammates. The questions before them always seemed to

polarize between “progressives” who wanted to press forward, and “conservatives” who argued for caution, reflection, and dialogue with the Church of Christ tradition.

All this gave Terry pause as he wondered, maybe seriously for the first time, what it was that makes any church a “Church of Christ.” Was it a particular set of irreducible doctrinal commitments? It surely seemed that even many so-called “progressive” Churches of Christ today still felt connected to their tradition, continuing many practices identifiable as traditional to the Church of Christ. Perhaps it was, as one of his teammates asserted, more connected to a basic set of unalterable practices (e.g., *a capella* worship, weekly Lord’s Supper, adult immersion for the forgiveness of sins, elder-led congregational polity, etc.). Yet, many of the same congregations who on the surface maintained these basic practices often read the bible in a radically different way than their theological ancestors. That is, these churches were “Church of Christ” in observable practices but were not traditional in how they approached the bible. It didn’t seem that a particular way of reading scripture (a specific hermeneutical commitment) was at the core of contemporary Church of Christ identity. Or was it?

Terry recalled Dr. Christopher, a professor a professor he had in school remarking that one of the fundamental weakness of the Stone-Campbell movement was the pervasive illusion that it had no history. That is, many early Restoration leaders believed that they could start afresh, as if the nearly 2,000 intervening years between the early church and the present were completely disposable. This “illusion of innocence,” the professor explained, led many to think all they were doing was “just reading the Bible” and “planting simple New Testament churches” when in fact they were highly constrained in multiple ways by their own tradition, which functioned tacitly without their explicit awareness.

Terry wondered whether this impulse to be “Christians only” as if yesterday didn’t matter was truly possible or desirable. Moreover, even if we acknowledged that the past always influences to some degree our present thinking and practice, then the question arose just how much we want those traditional ideas and practices to be a part of what we are doing today. What parts of his religious heritage should accompany this new church? What parts of that same tradition were optional or “disposable”? And, most importantly, on what basis would he decide? If the team acted as if it was creating a new church *de novo* wouldn’t they simply be adding a new tradition to populate the already crowded denominational world rather than supposedly escaping the gravity of traditions? Terry was also uncomfortable with many of his teammates assertion that it was possible to “plant churches” and “change lives” over against thinking theologically and discussing important doctrinal issues. Were these so easily separated as his friends contended? Were they mutually exclusive? These questions left Terry in a perplexed state.

The situation was further complicated by Terry’s relationships with his supporters. Most of his finances came from a supporting church while a small amount came from individual supporters. The church was moderately progressive in their opinions but in practice was relatively traditional. Terry worried that a radical move in a non-traditional

direction might have negative consequences on his relationship with the supporting church. Terry felt stuck.

### Guidelines for analysis:

*Please use the following set of prompts as a way to frame your written response. You may of course write on anything you think important but make sure you attend in some way to the various questions below.*

- What are the missiological issues, both presenting issues as well as “under the hood” issues?
- Describe the relational issues involved in the case. What are the various resources, interests, and constraining forces that exist in the relationships in Terry’s situation?
- Unpack the various team positions in terms of theological commitments and approaches.
- Identify some biblical texts and develop a rationale to undergird how Terry’s team might move forward:
- Reflect on how you “do theology” and the proper role of tradition in that process. Make a reasoned case for how tradition functions in a church-plant and how new churches should or should not remain continuous with the Stone-Campbell tradition from which they came. What sources might serve this team in assessing their relationship to the Stone-Campbell tradition?
- What implications might this case have for team church-planting efforts among Churches of Christ? What would your advice about “doing” team be for Terry? What might this case suggest for pre-field team training? On-field discipleship?