



Conducted by
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“In view of recent divisions in the Churches of Christ, can you still hold on to those ideals and aims of the early pioneers of the Churches of Christ, and those who immediately succeeded them?”

The word ‘you in the question seems to signify to me that the questioner is not a member of the Church of Christ. He is asking me, as an individual, to give a collective answer which involves all members of the Lord’s Body, therefore, I can only answer for myself and pray that my views will correspond with those of other Christians.

The Pioneers

The first point which I **must** make is the fundamental one, i.e., that the Church of Christ must not be viewed as a sect among sects. The 'pioneers,' so called, were not instrumental in the *building* of the Church; their message was a message of *restoration*. It was Christ who built the Church. After Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ, Jesus said to him, "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock (Peter's confession) I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:16-18).

Writing to the Church at Ephesus later, Paul comments on the way in which Jesus had broken down the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, and then goes on, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:13-20). I certainly would not like any reader to be looking to the 19th Century for the *beginning* of the Church of Christ. The Church started on the first Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus, when on that day three thousand souls obeyed the message given by the apostle Peter, "Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." (Acts 2:38,39). That call has come by the Gospel ever since; it will never change.

The truth is plain and unambiguous. Christ is the Head of the Body, the Church. He ought to be. He purchased it with His precious blood. If we **must** talk about pioneers then let us be objective. The Church was pioneered by the Holy Spirit and the Apostles. I am convinced that we would cause less confusion if we forgot all about pioneers and concentrated on the unique plea of the Church of Christ, i.e., to and get back to Jerusalem, to the first century A.D., and to *teach and practice* those Apostolic injunctions which are so plain, in the N.T. particularly.

Those Divisions

The Church of Christ is a unique Body here upon earth. When people say to me, "What church do you belong to?" and I answer, "The Church of Christ," they say, "Oh, I've never heard of that one;" this only proves to me that they have never read their New Testament. If anyone can read the N.T. and find any church other than the Church of Christ then I for one would certainly like to know of it.

If people do not know of the Church then they are unlikely to know and understand Its aims and objectives. It is *not* an exclusive Church in that only a limited number of people can join it; the instruction of Jesus to His disciples was, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved" (Mark 16:15, 16). It is exclusive in the sense that only they who have believed and obeyed the Gospel, and have been immersed into the Lord Christ may claim true identity with Him in His Body, the Church.

There is only one Head of the Body, the Lord Christ Himself. Titular heads such as we see in the denominational world make nonsense of a true appreciation of the New Testament; Paul says, "And he (Christ) is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence" (Col. 1:17,18. But read whole chapter). How different from what we see today!

In matters of doctrine, the Church of Christ refers itself solely and exclusively to the Word of God, the Bible. We have no other authority for what we teach and practice, nor would we presume to look for any other authority; if God was willing to reveal Himself in His Son and through His Apostolic messengers, and if Jesus was

willing to die to bring Salvation to a sin-stricken world, then surely it would be a slight on God, a non-recognition of the work of Christ, and a plain and crude departure from the Gospel message if we had the temerity to add to or take from that Revelation which God has so graciously given.

In matters of organisation, communities of Christians meet and worship in the geographical areas where they happen to reside; hence the origin of that sometimes misleading statement, 'Churches of Christ.' The leadership of each such community is by the scriptural method of Elders and Deacons. Each community is completely autonomous and seeks only to worship God in the way in which He has appointed in His Word, and to promote in their locality the Gospel for which Christ died. By this method, if one community were to defect for any reason whatsoever, then this would be a *wound* to the Body but not a *mortal* wound.

The reason I have explained the position in some detail is to show that 'divisions' in the Church of Christ are not of *recent* origin. It ought to be patently clear to men and women of reasonable intelligence that from the beginning of the Church the situation must have been exactly as Paul described it, "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling: One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:3-6). Can anyone explain to me how Jesus can pray to His Holy Father in Heaven (John 17:11), and yet people can laud and magnify the so-called 'Holy Father' here upon earth? Could someone please explain how some four hundred plus religious groups in the world today, teaching different doctrines and having different heads and governments, can claim to be the one body and the one faith?

We must look a long way into the past in order to see the *real* divisions in the Church of Christ. We must look at the Judaisers, the Gnostics, the Docetists, the Marcionites. We must look to the 3rd and 4th centuries for the exertion of patriarchal rights from Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem. We must look at the great and abiding divisions between the Eastern and Western claims on the Church. We must see the confluence of the temporal power and the ecclesiastical power in the shape of the Roman Emperors and the unscriptural hierarchical structure of the Church. We must see the emergence of a strong and oppressive clergy exerting not only ecclesiastical but also temporal pressure from offices which they had usurped in many instances. We must appreciate the misery and the hopelessness of the so-called Dark Ages, and deplore the wars and intrigues of men in the name of the Christ of Peace. And then we must see the re-emergence of light, and we must place our pioneers in their *true* role in church history as harbingers of that light, pointing people forward, and yet paradoxically back to Jerusalem, to Christianity as it was in the beginning.

And Today?

It is inevitable that there will be differences of opinion within the Church on certain matters, but I am quite sure that any difference of opinion ought to be capable of quick resolution, given love and understanding. Intolerance of other peoples views is, perhaps, one of the greatest difficulties. That does not mean, of course, that we ought to condone error; everything taught and practiced must be measured against the Word, and if it does not measure up to *that* standard then it ought to be rejected. The tragedy is when people can look at the Church and see elements of division, when understanding, and prolonged study, if necessary, ought to be the order of the day. Right from the beginning, the greatest hindrance to the progress of the Church has come from within its own ranks; let it never be said of any of us that we have hindered the glorious work which our Lord and Master commenced. And dear friends, don't write off the Church because *you* think that it doesn't measure up to *your* standard of perfection, but rather see sincere souls struggling upwards,

sometimes immaturely, sometimes imperfectly, often making mistakes, but always conscious of the fact that they have been redeemed with the precious blood of the Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ. Our agreement on the fundamental points of doctrine far, far outweigh any disagreement which we may have. In the words of the old song let us 'accentuate the positive,' and see to it that Satan is never able to exploit the negative.