

# CHRISTIANITY: THEN AND NOW

JOHN WADDEY, EDITOR

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## “FORMS AND STRUCTURES”

Those promoting an agenda of changes for churches of Christ often speak disparagingly of our interest in and dependence on "forms and structures." They charge those who refuse their changes with preferring a religion of rigid rules and prescribed beliefs and forms of worship. The champions of change see themselves as liberated from those old fashioned forms and structures held by their fathers. They feel free to embrace for their religion a subjective approach that allows them to follow their heart's desire. (Ps. 10:2-3). They wish to be free to act as they will without being restricted by forms and structures found in Scripture.

The true disciple of Christ does indeed hold to the forms and structures of the along with the heart-felt worship, service and obedience that God expects us to offer (Rom. 6:17). Rather than being a damning indictment of conservative Christians and their congregations, this is a compliment.

Christ has given us commandments which he expects us to obey (Matt. 28:20). Paul writes of traditions he had delivered to the church in Thessalonica which he expected them to honor (II Thess. 3:6).

- The founder of the church has specified the kind of government the local church is to have (Phil 1:1). Qualifications are given for the kind of men to be selected for elders and deacons (I Tim. 3:1-9; Tit. 1:5-9). There is a definite form for church government.
- Of the church universal we are clearly told that Christ is the only head (Eph. 1:22); that the apostles and prophets are a vital part of her foundation (Eph. 2:20). This structure must be honored.
- The worship of the church can be determined from reading the New Testament. The form of her communion is plainly described (Matt.

26:26-29). Her praise is rendered by singing (Eph. 5:19) and making melody in the heart. Our contributions are to be freewill offerings given on the first day of the week (I Cor. 16:1-2; II Cor. 9:7).

- Salvation is offered to all who with true faith (Eph. 2:8-9) "obey from the heart that form of teaching" prescribed by the Lord (Rom. 6:1,7). Scripture clearly mentions faith, repentance, and baptism as prerequisites for salvation (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38). This form is heaven-given.

To attempt to have Christianity without some form and structure is patently foolish. The church of Christ is likened to a human body (I Cor. 12:12). Christ is the head of the church and all of his disciples constitute his body (Rom. 12:5). Imagine a body without form or structure, without a skeletal frame; without the symmetry and design the Creator provided. Such a body would be grotesque and a church without the God-given forms and structures is likewise grotesque!

Note too that God designed a pattern of uniformity for each of the species he created. Each human has the same basic body-design: Two arms and hands, two feet and legs, two eyes and ears, etc. All have a common temperature, all have normal range for healthy blood pressure, etc. Thus our bodies have God-ordained forms and structures and so does the body of Christ!

Those clamoring for religion without forms and structures would be heart-broken if they had a child born without the normal forms and structure ordained by God. Yet they want a church devoid of God's forms and structures. Those who fault us for clinging to those sacred forms and structures are like the Israelites in the era of the Judges. "In those days...every man did that which was right in his own

eyes" (Judg. 21:25). That generation distinguished themselves by their rebellion and folly. So will those of our generation who cast off the forms and structures ordained by Christ. JHW

## ADVICE TO THOSE WHO DEFEND THE FAITH

A tragic war is raging within the kingdom of Christ. An alien spirit has taken hold on the hearts of many brethren. They have left their first love and gone after a new, changed way of serving God.

For some older brethren this is but the latest of many battles to be fought. Like seasoned soldiers, by experience they have learned valuable lessons about the best strategies of battle and mistakes to avoid. As we engage those whose mission is to change our faith, worship and practice, even the very nature of the church, there are some important things to remember.

**I.** We do not want to defend a faulty doctrine or practice. No matter how widely held; no matter how hoary with age, error is error. A misinterpreted verse is wrongly understood and can be wrongly applied. If we have been mistaken on any matter, honor and truth demand that we concede the faulty point and embrace the truth.

**II.** We must never fight over that which is merely a harmless matter of preference. Some things we have long practiced are not matters of faith revealed in Scripture. They are traditional ways of doing things, optional ways we have chosen to fulfil a divine requirement. For example, we have long assembled on Lord's Day morning. Since the hour of worship is not specified, if a group should choose to worship in the afternoon, we should not question them for so doing.

**III.** We should never penalize a brother who is exercising his liberty in Christ. Jesus came to proclaim liberty (Luke 4:18). Paul reminded the Galatians that "for freedom Christ had set them free" (Gal. 5:1). He manfully resisted the Jewish brethren who sought to spy out the liberty of the Gentile brethren (Gal. 2:4). In all areas where God has not specified the methods or manner of doing his will each disciple and each congregation has the Christ-given liberty to make their own choice about how to implement it.

**IV.** We must never be found promoting any practice or doctrine that is in any way contrary to God's

revealed will. Errorists are quick to spot our mistakes and flaws. Don't give them the opportunity to neutralize your efforts in defense of the kingdom.

**V.** May it always be our resolve and commitment to do no harm to the church of Christ. In carnal war it is often the case that those who are on the right side of the conflict do great damage to the very city or people they would deliver. Our goal must be to strengthen and build up the church. The mission of the false teachers is to wreck and destroy, ours is to fortify against their assaults and to rebuild what they have damaged.

**VI.** May we never intentionally wound or discourage any brother or sister who is faithfully striving to please the Master. They too are servants of Christ and answer only to him (Rom. 14:4). When we wound those innocent souls, we sin against Christ (I Cor. 8:12).

To avoid these mistakes we must search the Scripture daily (Acts 17:11). We must study to show ourselves approved unto God (II Tim. 2:15). We must weigh every thought, word and deed to be sure they reflect the spirit of Christ (Phil 2:5), love for our brethren (I Pet. 2:17) and love for the Master and his church. We must do these things lest we find ourselves weighed in the balances and found wanting when we stand before the Judge of all (Dan. 5:27). JHW

## A BOOK YOU SHOULD READ

In 1979 Bro. William Woodson gave us *Standing For Their Faith, A History of the Churches of Christ in Tennessee 1900-1950*. The author covers the conflict that led to the separation of Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ/ Christian Churches. The issues then were virtually the same as those that trouble us now. He deals in detail with the issues of instrumental music in worship, premillennialism and failed efforts to restore unity between us and the progressives. He sheds much light on our recovery and growth in that half century.

Since many of our brethren seem not to have learned, or else have forgotten, the painful lessons of our past, this book is of great value. Every leader should read it and learn the lessons from the past lest they repeat the mistakes of that era. The book is long out of print, but copies could likely be borrowed from the libraries of our schools. It needs to be reprinted.

JHW

## T. B. LARIMORE: THE MAN WHO WOULD NOT FIGHT

Bro. T. B. Larimore was one of the great evangelists of the church from 1870-1925. He was loved and respected by all who knew him for his pleasant temperament and peaceable spirit. All change agents cite the example of Bro. T. B. Larimore as they seek to persuade conservative brethren to sit silently while they work to change the church and capture congregations, church buildings and schools. When a similar change movement swept through our brotherhood, following the Civil War, Bro. Larimore chose to devote himself to evangelism rather than taking a strong stand against those who were abandoning the restoration plea and corrupting the faith. He steadfastly refused to condemn their innovations or to break fellowship with those who were introducing instrumental music and missionary societies into the churches. Modern promoters of change usually fail to mention that he did have sufficient conviction to pitch his tent with the conservative brethren of the churches of Christ rather than with the progressives of the Disciples of Christ.

Bro. Larimore faced questions such as, "How should we worship in order to please God? Or are we allowed to tamper with the structure of Christ's sacred church?" Douglas Foster comments, "To Larimore those issues were not worth dividing the body of Christ" (Will the Cycle Be Unbroken? p. 157). This of course is what Bro. Foster wants his readers to conclude about the innovations of the change movement. He does not consider the possibility that Bro. Larimore was naive about what was actually happening to the church of his day...just as many are naive today. Perhaps Larimore's personality was such that he could not bring himself to confront those who were walking away from the ancient gospel standard. It is reasonable to ask if Bro. Larimore's actions reflected a proper spirit for a Christian soldier in the face of hostile enemies (I Tim.6:12)? God does command us to "Contend earnestly for the faith" (Jude 3). Like Paul we are to be set for the defense of gospel (Phil.1:16).

We must ask, if every member of the conservative churches had responded as did Larimore, what would have been the result? Would we even exist today? Would all have been swept into apostasy? Do our modern change agents think such would have been the preferable course? Is that what they want for today? Bro. Foster naively asserts, "if everyone had had T. B. Larimore's attitude, the problems would never have been blown up into divisive issues

in the first place" (Ibid. p. 158). Either he doesn't know or chooses not to mention that the progressive brethren did not have that sweet, passive spirit. They were determined to have instruments in our churches and involve all in their missionary societies. They pushed their agenda and even resorted to stealth to gain control of congregations. If all had passively stood by, all would have been swept away. The same is true today.

During the controversy, Bro. Larimore held a lengthy gospel meeting for the church in Sherman, Texas. Dr. Foster mentions that the progressives of the church in Sherman were meeting at separate times from the conservatives so they could worship with their instruments (Ibid. p.152). This is similar to the "alternative services" modern change agents use to get a foot hold in a conservative church. A year later he notes that the "pro-instrument faction withdrew to form what they called the First Christian Church" (Ibid.). If our change folks cannot take the property, you can expect them to leave in order to worship as they wish.

In time of war, every patriotic citizen does his part to help his nation through the conflict. Some produce food, others produce war materials. Some are warriors, some are medics. Some drive supply trucks, others fly bombers that rain death on the enemy. Some plan strategies, others process the paperwork. But all who faithfully do their part are good citizens who together serve their nation. So it is in the church. While we do not fault Bro. Larimore's passive stand, but neither should we fault Tolbert Fanning, David Lipscomb, Jacob Creath, Jr., Benjamin Franklin or the other noble men who fought valiantly to save a remnant from the apostasy that confronted them. We are much indebted to them for the survival of the church and our existence today. JHW

## A TRIP TO JERUSALEM

Christianity began in Jerusalem. It's birthday was the Pentecost Sunday following the resurrection of Christ. The sacred historian, sketched us a thrilling picture of those early days in the Book of Acts of Apostles. If we could visit the church in Jerusalem in the first century we would see pure, unadulterated Christianity as it came from the hand of Christ. It bears little resemblance to much of what is seen today.

- You would find only one kind of church, Christ's church (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 12:12-

13). No denominations existed. No one wore the names of great preachers, particular doctrines, notable cities or nations. The disciples were called Christians (Acts 11:26).

- You would find no pope nor patriarch, no president nor general overseer presiding over the church. Christ was head over all things to his church (Eph. 1:22).
- You would find no infant members. Only those who believed received baptism (Mk. 16:16).
- You would see no baptismal founts for sprinkling because in those days baptism was administered by immersion. Converts went down into the water, were buried with Christ and then raised up in the likeness of his resurrection (Acts 8:38-39; Rom. 6:4).
- You would see no women preachers or bishops in that church. The apostles suffered not a woman to teach nor have authority over the men (1 Tim. 2:12).
- There would be no images, incense, prayer beads or holy water in that church. Such things came many years later after the apostles of Christ were all dead and gone.
- There would be no bands, or professional musicians to entertain, nor musical instruments in their worship. Eleven hundred years would pass before instrumental music became accepted in churches. They sang and made melody in their hearts (Eph. 5:19).
- There would be no reverends or holy fathers. Jesus forbade his people from wearing such religious titles (Matt. 23:8-9). They were all brethren.

Our commitment is to find and restore that original Christianity today. JHW

## DO WE HAVE A CHOICE?

"Join the church of your choice" say our religious neighbors. This expression is contrary to God's Word. There are a number of things in Christianity about which there can be no difference of opinion. Paul names seven of them in Ephesians 4:4-5. There is:

- One Body or church (Eph. 1:22). It is the church of Christ (Rom. 16:16) for He purchased it with His blood (Acts 20:28) and built it (Matt. 16:18). We have no more choice of churches to be members of, than of Gods to believe on.
- One Spirit that dwells in the heart of every saved person (Rom. 8:9).
- One Hope. The same hope is held before all men. It is heaven and eternal life therein (John 14:1-3).
- One Lord Jesus Christ. Only He can save you.
- One Faith or system of doctrine that must be accepted, believed and followed. This faith is the Word of God which is able to save our souls (Jas. 1:19). There is but one source of the one faith, that is the Bible (Rom. 10:17). Hence there cannot be different creeds and beliefs to choose from. We must accept the Scripture as the only authority in Christianity.
- One Baptism, which is a burial in water (Rom. 6:3-4, John 3:23), for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). There being only one baptism, we cannot choose concerning sprinkling or pouring or Holy Spirit baptism.
- One God who is over all. You must believe in Him exclusively (Heb. 11:6).

***Do we really have a choice? There is only one way to heaven (John 14:6). Our only choice is to accept Christ and obey his commands, or refuse Him, thus choosing everlasting punishment (Heb. 5:9). JHW***