

FREEDOM'S RING

"Proclaim liberty throughout the land" (Lev.25:10).

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Moving Again!!

to

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Modifying The Pattern

While I was growing up on the farm during the Great Depression, my mother and my three sisters had little ready-to-wear clothes to choose from in the local dry goods store and very little money with which to buy clothes. Mom made their clothes. She seldom could afford a pattern but she was creative enough to make her own.

One pattern did not fit the size and shape of each of the four. So they were modified to accommodate each one. This also required enlarging the patterns as they grew.

Since God is the builder of the church, he did not give us a pattern for building it as though that were to be our job. Neither did he set out an outline, pattern, form, agenda, or routine for us to follow when we meet, worship, and work together. Some guidelines and warnings concerning decorum were given in Paul's writings to correct inconsiderate abuses in assemblies, but only by our fallacious logic and the twisting of Scripture can we make those into a pattern. That has not kept us from trying to fit activities into some perceived pattern.

If there is a pattern set forth which we are obliged to restore, at what point can we be confident that we have reinstated it? In my years of acquaintance in the Church of Christ, our procedures and practices have continued to be modified.

Before I came on the scene, meetings were begun in homes in our cotton patch community in West Texas. There were no elders, deacons, or organization. Just disciples meeting, though elders and deacons were selected later. If the little group was serving God acceptably before reaching the point of selecting elders and deacons, then their appointment is no necessary part of a pattern. In all due respect, the elders were not always spiritual giants. After my brother, George, and I graduated from college, he wanted to go (and did) to Africa in mission work. He sought help from our home congregation only to be told by an elder that he needed to stay at home and support his family for those people did not have souls.

In my earliest remembrances, the congregation met only on Sunday mornings – if/when people could get there. My family went five miles by wagon. No one was thought to be forsaking the assembly when meetings were missed. In fact,

there is no Scriptural instruction for us to meet each and every Sunday, as we have thought to prove by our illogic and bound as a legal specification. That does not mean that fellowship with others in gatherings is unimportant. It just takes it out of the legal pattern category. And yes, there were also those "gospel meetings" of two weeks length during the moonlight nights of August when the crops were laid by. That seemed to satisfy the need for assembling back then. Rarely was anyone ever baptized except during those meetings with an imported evangelist, who was advertised sometimes as *Elder* (Name).

With the advent of the automobile and better roads came the idea of having Sunday evening services. Sunday morning Bible classes were initiated with the partitioning of the auditorium by thin curtains hanging from wires crisscrossing the room. Some uninspired literature consisting of a 3" x 4" card with a picture, text, memory verse, and comments began to be used for little children's classes. And then some began to modify the pattern to include Wednesday evening meetings. These were often referred to as prayer meeting services though they were for Bible study, for prayer was not the big thing for us. Evening meetings were always at "dark-thirty" after the farmers had time to milk their cows, feed their animals, and coop the chickens for the night.

It is amazing how quickly this modified pattern became obligatory on everyone under threat of hell, or at least the prospect of loss of some stars from the anticipated crown. When the elders added these meetings, since we are to obey the elders (we were warned), we were forsaking the assembly when we failed to put these meetings in our schedules. Never mind that one's work schedule did not fit; just get a different job in order to put the kingdom first!

In those assemblies, two glasses were used for the communion, and money was *laid by in store* on the *communion table* by the giver or a child during the last song. Eventually, the collection was taken by the servers in close association with the communion. The collection trays were passed without prayer. Call was made from the floor without advance notice for those to lead prayers and serve the congregation. Prayers were memorized with little variation. No one dared to take a chief seat by sitting on the podium. Women had long hair, and many wore some sort of hat as a veil. And only a show-off young song leader would beat time by waving his hand. The song leader always led from the floor rather than the podium, for that was the holy ground of the preacher. The morning sermon was aimed at believers but evening lessons were more for the outsiders. The meeting house bore no sign.

A rather inflexible pattern of procedure developed comprising of three songs, a prayer, a song, the sermon, the communion and collection combined, a song, and a dismissal prayer with very little allowance for informality or spontaneity. The song leader offered no comments more than announcing, "Number 89" or "Let's try singing number 37." No scripture reading. No communion comments. On rare occasions, the

one serving at the table would add some remarks about the preacher's sermon. This practice was disparaged as *half-soling* the sermon.

There was no "placing of membership" or roll of the faithful. Withdrawal of fellowship was unknown. I do not recall the congregation ever having a church social or fellowship meal either in or out of the building. Many families went home with each other for dinner (*lunch* to you uninitiated). The outdoor outhouse and outdoor baptistery were updated into indoor facilities in a later building, along with a water fountain and a kitchen with an area for social fellowship, especially for serving bereaved families.

Local talent was used for most of the preaching even though the house full of members could have supported a full-time man. During my teenage years, "preacher boys" from ACC came up from Abilene each weekend to fill the pulpit, making full use of N. B. Hardeman's *Tabernacle Sermons*. Use of blackboards and charts by preachers was common, and all Scripture references were quoted by memory rather than being read. Later, *located preachers* were employed, a parsonage was bought to house them, and an office was provided for them.

Fifth-Sunday contributions often went to support a home for orphans, and home-canned foods were collected for pickup when the truck from the home made its rounds.

In those times, we had not picked up on the Catholic concept of a *church* wedding. I never knew of a formal wedding until I was out of college and preaching.

Having no funeral home then, the body of the deceased remained in the home (where most deaths occurred) until time for the funeral. Someone always sat with the body. All singing at funerals was congregational, and usually songs were sung at the graveside also. Songs like *In The Sweet Bye and Bye*, *Shall We Gather At The River*, and *God Be With You Till We Meet Again* still live in my memory as I recall our farm neighbors expressing hope in an earthly farewell. Then in a solemn task the men took turns with spades filling the grave and shaping the dirt into a peaked ridge while everyone watched.

But this is not just nostalgia. We are reviewing the development and expansion of a pattern in our congregations. Just as clothing patterns change to accommodate succeeding styles and changes of fabric in fitting a living, growing person, so change is necessary in meeting the needs of a growing, living body of God's people as their circumstances change.

As I went through my teenage years, the congregation added a young people's meeting before the evening service and a ladies' Bible class during the week. Participation in these was not obligatory, but it was strongly encouraged.

As similar changes developed in various congregations, each adaptation was met with criticism and debate. Brother set himself against brother. Those whose consciences were violated by use of Bible classes, women teachers, uninspired literature, or individual communion glasses felt compelled to separate themselves for sake of conscience. Thus divisions were made involving different combinations of these scruples. As time went on, those who believed in a premillennial reign of Christ on earth and those who opposed cooperation of congregations in supporting projects also left and formed their own groups. These were the sad results of well-meaning efforts to find a specified pattern and to follow it. There is enough blame for these divisions to go around to all parties involved.

As Christ's living body in a changing society on earth has continued, more adaptations have become effective. Now

some groups have vocational staffs consisting of secretaries, evangelists, ministers, counselors, and custodians. Replacing blackboards and charts, dramatic skits are employed to enforce lessons, as are also various kinds of screen projections. Special programs adapted to the level of the children are common. Congregations have outreach by mail, radio, television, printed materials, and the internet. Literature written by women is used, and women are serving in more capacities, even being deaconesses in a few churches. Our preaching has become more Christ-centered and less doctrinal and church-centered. Greater appreciation for grace and less confidence in our works is nurtured. More attention is being given to prayer and praise. Special singing groups upbuild us with inspiring spiritual songs. Some congregations no longer use the American traditional *invitation song*. After generations of formal silence by the audience, *amens*, applause, clapping, and spontaneous outbursts are being heard, and some lift up hands in prayer expressed in word or song.

It would be too idealistic to expect that adaptations in our generation would meet with more favor than those of the generation before. There will always be those who resist any change. Their previous experience and conditioning make some resistant to any adaptations. So they go back to the Scriptures using the illogic of previous generations to find some sort of pattern that is being violated. The Scriptures are ransacked for prooftexts supportive of their contentions.

No one can make a consistent claim that congregations anywhere do all and only what first century churches did. Any effort to reinstate all and only what they did then would make us seem quaint, outdated, and unappealing in our generation, except to those of cultish mind. The emphasis would be on forms rather than spirituality.

Here I will copy some from my third book, *Free As Sons*, page, 75:

"The church was begun and nurtured by persons exercising special spiritual gifts, including the speaking in tongues. Women wore veils while praying and prophesying. Destitute widows were enrolled as special servants. Other women were deaconesses also. Evangelists spread the gospel, while teachers, prophets, and elders taught the saints. Gatherings of the saints were more of a horizontal outreach than vertical. In gatherings, they prayed, sang, communed, and enjoyed fellowship meals. The first church held possessions in common, and the only collections that we read of were for the poor and for evangelism. No mention is made of a budget, a corporate treasury, or of continued, weekly collections. No name was worn to designate the church. Racial discrimination was not tolerated. They laid hands on appointees, and on the sick, whom they anointed with oil. They fasted. The kiss of love was enjoined. Jesus gave both an example and a command to wash feet, which thing was a virtue of the worthy widow. Jewish disciples kept rituals of the Law of Moses. There was no command or precedent for church-owned property, weekly communion, orphanages, corporate trustees, paid congregational personnel (except elders), *placing membership*, the class system of teaching, hymnals, or four-part harmony.

"As you well know, none of our congregations practice all of those things that the early church practiced, and all of our churches practice some things not practiced then. Which of these things are parts of the *simple New Testament pattern*? By which of those marks is the church to be identified today?" Please read that entire chapter.

As I have detailed in this discourse, most of what identifies us in churches of Christ has developed in my lifetime. Now, we ask you who seek to restore a pattern, have we at any

point restored that elusive *simple New Testament pattern* that is supposed to exist? If it has been restored, at what point was it accomplished, and have we modified it more? If it has not been restored, what is lacking in addition to our present state? Is any modifying of it permissible? Have all who have died before it was accomplished been lost? Are all of us who might have restored it and then added other features guilty and hopeless? If you cannot answer these questions definitely and honestly, why make a fuss over it? If restoring a pattern is a life-or-death issue, you surely must know the details of it!

Any perceived pattern one might have deduced from the Scriptures is modified! If continued modification is permissible, it ceases to be a pattern. God could have given in one paragraph in the Scriptures a list of congregational procedures and practices to be followed, but he did not choose to do so. He left it to our wisdom to adapt these things to fit our needs rather than to follow forms to fit a pattern. []

Children In The Ark

Perhaps some of you were brought up with Hurlbut's *Story of the Bible* as was Lea, my wife. Her copy is ragged and musty, a revision of the original edition published in 1904. On page 41 is a picture depicting Noah's offering after the flood. There are thirteen persons in the picture! Now wait a minute! Everybody who has ever been to Sunday School knows that there were only eight souls saved on the ark (1 Peter 3:20).

When I first noticed that picture many years ago, I marveled at the audacity of anyone who would change the story so brazenly. However, time has a way of broadening our insights so that what once seemed so evident may seem less obvious. I have often wondered that there would be three couples of very mature age who were still childless, and yet they would have children later. However, it is true that all stated evidence indicates that there were no children on the ark.

In the beginning days of the church in Jerusalem, the believers were given no identification until Acts 5:14 where it says "multitudes of both men and women" were added to the Lord. There is no record in the Scriptures of anyone designated as a child, teenager, young person, or youth being among the converts! (Years later the evangelist, Timothy, is referred to as a youth.) Were none converted? Just men and women? Excluded by silence when men and women were mentioned?

Many times I have related the account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, always picturing that man going alone, or with a driver, down the Gaza highway reading aloud to himself. The record mentions no one else being with him.

Everyone knows that there were only thirteen people present on the night of the last supper just like Leonardo DaVinci painted it. Perhaps no one else was there, but do the Scriptures say so?

In Matthew 27:59f it is stated that Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus, wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, laid

it in his own tomb which he had hewn in rock, and rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb. Would I be endangering my soul to question that Joseph did any of those things?

What I am illustrating here is the limiting template I have often laid over messages in the Scriptures to which I made the messages conform. Unless definitely limiting statements are a part of the account, there may be allowance for the indefinite. When a narrative concerned a certain person or limited number of them, focus was on them and not on who else might have been there. Unless children were a vital part of the narrative,

mention was not made as to whether children were present and included or not. When we think about the Ethiopian being the Secretary of the Treasury of Ethiopia, we will realize the probability of his traveling with a retinue of attendants to whom he might have been reading. Since a meal was being served to thirteen people at the last supper, it is reasonable to think that a woman or women prepared and served the meal and stood in readiness just past a curtained entry where they could listen and peek. And John Mark could have been listening with them!

Joseph of Arimathea probably did none of the acts mentioned above! Many times it is said that a person did some specific thing when in reality he only authorized it to be done, having others to perform the actions. Joseph was a man of such distinction that he could gain an audience with Pilate, the governor. It is unlikely that he had actually hewn his own tomb, that he individually prepared the body of Jesus, that he personally carried the body of Jesus into the tomb, or that he rolled the great stone himself even though the text attributes those actions to him.

It is to be doubted that a picture of five children supposedly surviving the flood has wrecked the faith of any child. Nor is there anything vital to faith in the other illustrations about our limited perceptions. However, it is hoped that by these examples we will be encouraged to open our minds to a wider view of Scriptural narrative. This is but another way of saying we should take into account as much of the setting as we can ascertain in creating our mental images and practical interpretations. Such an approach may help steer us clear of dogmatic hangups about trivial details. Let me ramble further.

Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* was spoken to *crowds*, rather than a *crowd*. Perhaps, that means nothing, but it may mean that he gave more than one discourse or that parts of his teaching were to different groups. It is unlikely that he let that great throng of people go home with only seven pages (in my text) of teaching. In a huge crowd with its distractions, a terse recitation of the beatitudes would have had little chance of scoring. It is likely that we have only a concise summary of his more lengthy explanations of the points he was making with such impressive authority.

Must we believe that Peter had only three pages of script for his historic proclamation of salvation through the risen Christ on Pentecost? We have only the *nutshell* version. The preaching more likely lasted all day with other apostles participating. After the interruption by convicted hearers, it is stated that "he testified with many other words and exhorted them." Curiosity would make us wish for the full texts of sermons and detailed conversations, but we trust that the Spirit gave us all that is necessary.

It is only natural that we would tend to overlay the image of the church of our experience when we think of first century congregations. Although present-day churches in Oregon, Ohio, Arizona, and Alabama may seem to have been cut from the same pattern, they may have little outward resemblance to those in Jericho, Beersheba, Nazareth, and Bethel in Palestine, or to congregations in Antioch, Alexandria, Troas, or Ephesus in other lands. Early churches among the Jews were probably more like synagogues than churches in Texas.

The early mention of elders in the Jerusalem church would leave us to suppose that Jewish elders mentioned in the Gospels who accepted Christ retained their recognition as elders in the church rather than being selected because they met Paul's "qualifications" in letters to Timothy and Titus. In Jerusalem the disciples composed a single church though they met in many different groups (as in house-to-house) evidently

under the oversight of the one composite group of elders. The only schedule suggested is *daily* and no *order and procedure of worship* is specified. The only *pattern* that might be detected is that of adaptation of their activities to fulfill their needs as Christ-centered support groups. The Jerusalem church cannot be squeezed into an overlay of the Nashville church.

Grecian Corinth must not be measured in its function by Dallas or Jerusalem. It had its own culture to deal with. Veiled women, for instance, were not forbidden to pray or teach God's message in the assembly until their rudeness (along with that of men) got out of hand and had to be corrected. No criticism of eating the Lord's Supper during a congregational meal was evident until the disciples abused it by dividing it into separate groups based on party loyalty. These are but two illustrations out of the many available ones of how we have adamantly resisted the very *patterns* we have claimed to restore. When we apply our *Church of Christ* cookie cutter to first century congregations, we have a lot of dough left over. Preachers, elders, disciples, and congregations were no more models of perfection then than they are now. Their only claim to excellence was in being in Christ.

Aside from those two illustrations, do you think the Corinthian church was like the one of which you are a part? The women wore veils. Men kissed each other in greeting. No mention is made of a treasury or collections until Paul called for a special one-time collection. No passing the baskets? No mention is made of weekly communion, and since they communed during the meal, there was no "passing the communion." Multiple speakers! No wonder they brought their meal! Although we have tried to impose congregational singing on their scene, the text leans in favor of solos. Some spoke in tongues. I encourage you to read again 1 Corinthians 11-14 and think how much of modern experience is imposed upon the revealed message.

Because my experience has been with small congregations, my tendency has been to picture Biblical congregations as small. When you think of *the church* in Ephesus or Antioch, do you interpret that as *one congregation* in each place? When you read of the Ephesian elders, do you think of elders of one congregation the size of the average Church of Christ? When Timothy labored with the church in Ephesus, was he *the minister* for one struggling group in the city? There were many believers in those great cities.

My misdirection in legalism and restorationism warped my approach to reading of the Scriptures. Unwittingly, I was led to look for minute details of supposed law and pattern to reinforce concepts prevailing in my current religious experience rather than to look for the overall meaning of the text. It allowed me to disregard and obscure some things which did not fit and to try to make current innovations fit. I suppose that no one can ever be entirely free of such preconceptions, but it is heartening to think that most of those quibbles which we have made into issues have little bearing on our relationship with God through Christ. God did not give us a puzzle of truth to solve or demand that we become detectives to search out and piece together elusive clues. We are not rewarded because of being meritorious students.

Well, we could ramble on with other illustrations, but if I have any point in this, surely it is evident by now. As we read the Scriptures with a broader vision, we will become more perceptive, less dogmatic, less judgmental of others who do not see all we see, and softened in our attitude toward all believers. After all, what difference does it make whether there were children on the ark? And who was ever saved by having the right answers to all debatable issues? []

HOOK'S POINTS

Moving again! We thought we were settled for the duration in New Braunfels, but Paul and Mira had different plans for us. Then we thought we were settled for good when we came here over two years ago. But now that I have our new address in most of my books, we are moving again!

Paul works for Intel about ten miles away and the church building is about a mile beyond that. Heavy traffic makes commuting very burdensome. And the kids needed an investment to save on taxes. So they began looking for a more convenient location. Yet they did not want to leave us ten miles away.

They found a spacious house that has a "mother-in-law" apartment diagonally across the street from the church property and less than a mile from Paul's work place. So we are due to move on March 8 to

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Please note that change. We are not sure that our telephone number can be transferred, but perhaps at least a forwarding message can be used for a while. Our e-mail address and website URL will not be affected.

This will be a downsizing for us which is needed due to our age and situation. We will be closer to our family, for our living room will open into their breakfast room. Becoming dependent is a probability for all, but for us it seems more of an imminent inevitability. We are most blessed to have children who are so concerned about our needs.

Although it is a one-bedroom apartment, it will provide all the necessities of life like a fireplace, central H/A, an intercom, and a sauna ☺! Looking out our bedroom window across the all-weather basketball and tennis courts in the back yard, we can see the church building.

With all the distraction of moving, there is no idea as to when the next mailout will be. I am trying to get this to you now so you will have our new address.

New subscribers to *Freedom's Ring* are being added all along. That pleases us. It is free for the asking, both by regular mail and by e-mail. Send e-mail requests to Victor Phares at <vic@freedomring.org>. If you wish to receive it no longer, please let us know. Nothing personal. Save money. If you are dissatisfied with its content, we will refund double your subscription price!

your article on instruments. I asked a man (named) what he thought and I was quite surprised to find out you are a false teacher. ☺ Anyway I wanted to forward my response to you that I sent to him. Keep on preaching the Gospel. I have your site linked from my page and so far I am proud of it! -Lyle Marti, <lylem@plinet.com>

"I read and enjoyed *Free In Christ* and am nearly finished with Leroy Garrett's *Stone-Campbell* book. As someone who grew up in the Church of Christ, I have found the material to be very interesting indeed. I feel I could talk a hundred hours or write a hundred pages to you about the things discussed in these books. But don't worry, I won't. (At least not now!)" -<JANY73A@prodigy.com

"Thank you for the *Freedom's Ring* newsletter and for sending me your book, *Free In Christ*. I truly enjoyed them both. I was baptized in the church of Christ at age 14 and began preaching in small rural churches in East Texas at age 15. It

was not until age 26 that I had a real, personal experience with Jesus Christ. How wonderful to know that a message of free grace is coming from brethren in the church of Christ. I will be praying for your ministry. Keep upholding the message of mercy and grace in Jesus!" -Athens, TX <mlhdth@aol.com>

"Cecil, Cecil, Cecil... Why is it that every time I read your writings, I think, 'Yes, this Brother echoes what I believe, he makes sense. Surely this is closer to the heart of Christ than this other.' And then, a brother who also teaches me and gives me strength, *has a cow* over that 'crazy Cecil Hook'? I am of course referring to a year ago when I discovered you. It was only a few months after I had put on our Lord, in submission, in baptism. You were a lesson and an encouragement to me. I e-mailed you and you graciously sent me your books. Then, on the Gospel Advocate List (discovered to me the same time as *Freedom's Ring*) some chap was ranting about how heretical Cecil Hook was. You were the topic of at least one thread for a week! ☺ Impressionable as a child, I put down *Free In Christ*, and sent back your books. I wonder, saint or serpent? Have you the time to talk? I will try to read more, judging the book less by the cover." -<iboden@nts-online.net> [And we wonder why we lose converts! He is reading again!]

"I remember when I was baptized all of the congregation was so loving and supportive of their new member and novice in the word. I was told to study the Bible with an open mind. But, after a while I began to question some of the things we did or did not do as compared to what the Word said. Then the encouragement of an open mind was replaced with *don't ask so many questions and toe the party line for we have much more knowledge than you so just listen to us*. That was OK for a while but the more I studied the more questions I had that just couldn't be swept away by the same standard answers anymore. But slowly I met and became aware of more of my brothers and sisters who felt the same way I did but were afraid to openly express their views. Then one day someone gave me a copy of your book *Free In Christ* and I was so excited that

Although she has little strength or energy for it, Lea is able to move about the house some without assistance. Your expressed concern for her is appreciated.

Our proofreader, Brian Casey, has been occupied with a new job so that he has not been available lately. So all the errors you see are mine, not his.

January was a good month with 159 free copies of *Free In Christ* being sent out. In February, 30 copies have been sent to a worker abroad who will give them to other preachers with whom he has been discussing. Our prayers go with each book that it may find an open heart. We continue to invite you to pass these free books along to others of receptive heart.

Checking our website, you will see that some of *Mission Messenger* and *Restoration Review* are accessible.

Your communications are appreciated. At times I become snowed under and find it difficult to respond to all immediately or with much detail. If I fail to respond to your questions or requests, it is inadvertent. Some e-mail with requests or expressing needs have been replied to, but they are not delivered due to technicalities that I do not control or understand. So please try again. Sending snail mail addresses also can remedy that problem.

Profound matters to ponder (not original): Stupidity got us into this mess; why can't it get us out? Why do we sing "Take me out to the ball game" when we're already there? If you throw a cat out the car window, does it become kitty litter? When it rains, why don't sheep shrink? The trouble with doing nothing is that you never know when you are finished. The

claims levied against O. J. are so enormous that he may turn to a life of crime.

Tim Woodroof is one of the most astute writers among us. He brings fresh meanings and startling insights to familiar portions of Scripture. I am pleased to carry a tiny notice of his great list of teaching materials which are used in over 2000 churches already. It is a gold mine for preachers and teachers. Ask for a fuller list and description.

Interpretation of the Bible

J. James Albert

(Dr. Jim Albert is an educator by profession. He has had a long association with disciples who reject those who use individual communion cups and Sunday School though he himself is free from all sectarian spirit. He offers great insights in his mailout, "California Letter," which you may receive upon request. This essay is from the December 1996 issue, used by permission. P O Box 811, Corcoran, CA 93212. CH)

Recently I was reading a book by an author identified with the Churches of Christ. His *Introduction* was prefaced by a quote from *The New York Public Library Desk Reference* published in 1989. The quote was as follows:

"Church of Christ: Organized by Presbyterians in Kentucky in 1804 and in Pennsylvania in 1809. 1.6 million followers. The New Testament is believed in and what is written in the Bible is followed without elaboration; rites are not ornate; baptism is of adults."

With my red pen I underlined "what is written in the Bible is followed without elaboration." Then I leaned back in my recliner and thought about this for a while. That's what I was taught from an early age. "We let the Bible speak for itself. What we 'preach' and teach is not what we are saying, but

what the Bible says. We don't interpret the Bible; it interprets itself." Then I pivoted in my recliner, swinging it around to face the bookshelves behind me. The first thing that caught my eye was the *What The Bible Says About..* series, 42 books written by authors having some connection with that movement organized by those early Presbyterians. Then I looked at the set of commentaries by McGarvey, Lamar, Lard, and others. Next to these was a set by E. M. Zerr. Then my eyes traveled to an as yet incomplete set of commentaries entitled *Contend-ing For The Faith* being written by those associated with the one cup, no Sunday School segment of the Churches of Christ. Finally my eyes scanned a couple of hundred hardback and paperback books written by persons mostly associated with the Churches of Christ. Then I thought of the periodicals up in the hall cupboard to which I either subscribe or are sent to me each month. There's a dozen or so edited and published by Church of Christ advocates. "Yes," I concluded, "the Churches of Christ do follow what is written in the Bible without elaboration." If you believe that, you will believe most anything.

Unfortunately many brethren in the Churches of Christ insist that they do not interpret the Bible. Their elaborations are not interpretations, but what the Bible actually says or the Bible interpreting itself. If you dispute their elaborations or interpretations, they accuse you of not respecting the authority of God and his written word. Further still, they might accuse you of promoting the idea that the Bible cannot be understood by man. I don't believe this, but I certainly felt this way at times after I've read some of the debates between our brethren, or read some of the articles or tracts detailing the rationale for party *shibboleths*.

We do interpret the Bible. Reading with comprehension and understanding is interpretation. Reading is not merely a matter of phonetic pronunciation either in the mind or orally. In the presence of my mother-in-law I once picked up a magazine written in Spanish and decoded orally a couple of paragraphs quite well. She then asked me, "What did it say?" I didn't know; I couldn't comprehend or interpret what I had decoded phonetically.

If we didn't have to interpret the Bible, we wouldn't have to worry about brethren reading and being influenced by the periodicals of those not of our party. Errors would be obvious. We wouldn't have to worry about the rank-and-file going to the meetings of so-called brethren-in-error or digressive brethren. We wouldn't have to constantly propagandize our position(s) from our pulpits. These kinds of worry smack of partyism and confirm that we do interpret the Bible.

Coupled with this false premise over the years has been the assertion that we are the "people of the Book," meaning the Bible. We pride ourselves on this assertion and our denomination is built around this concept. Whether it is true or not that we are faithful to the Book, we, each of our segments, like to think of ourselves as being the only remnant of God's children upon this earth faithful to God's written word. Outsiders see us as making such a claim. We see it as necessary to perceive of ourselves as "people of the Book" and perfectly faithful to it because we think that was the case with the first century Christians.

I deny that any segment of the Churches of Christ represent a group of people that is perfectly faithful to the Bible. Who will say that they know all of God's written word as it is to be known and understood and apply and practice its precepts perfectly? Who among us is/are the official interpreter(s) of God's written word? Who is at the top of the totem pole? Who has the right to demand conformity to his/their interpretations(s)? Who has the authority to judge brethren as deserving of hell because they don't subscribe to the party creed?

In addition to the fact that no segment of the Churches of Christ today represents a group of people that is perfectly faithful to the Book, the premise that they should be "people of the Book" because that was the case with the first century church is a false premise. In the first place they had no New Testament. After the gospel was preached on the day of Pentecost, seventeen years went by until the first epistle was written. During the decades of A.D. 50 and 60, the apostle Paul and others began to write documents that eventually gained the status of scripture. As late as 200 A.D. though there was still no New Testament canon and some "books" we now accept as scripture were still treated as doubtful and some we don't accept now were regarded as being legitimate. It wasn't until about A.D. 367 that there was an accepted New Testament canon of 27 books. It was part of an official letter by a bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt.

Second, few people in the early church were literate. Until as recently as the past three centuries, few have had that ability. Over the centuries by far most Christians have been illiterate. God recognized that and that's why he did not give a book to save the world, but he gave himself in the form of a Person. That Person is the ground of our faith, the source of our hope, and the basis of our unity. If a book could have done it, then Christ would not have needed to die.

Certainly there is a book, a glorious and wonderful revelation that tells us of that Person and his expectations of us. We should cherish it, discuss it, study it, teach it, and use it to see Christ more clearly and to be obedient to his doctrine. Unfortunately we have lost sight of Christ in our interpretations

of the Book. Our creed has not been *Jesus is Lord*, but our select interpretations of the scriptures. We are trusting in our own intellectual abilities to save us rather than faith in Jesus Christ.

Over the decades the Churches of Christ have degenerated into a denomination that confuses the text of the Book and its interpretation. In turn they want to make binding judgment relative to those interpretations. In fact, each segment usually has several interpretations that have reached canonical status and you question or challenge them at your own peril. They think of interpretation as an exact science, all the while becoming very emotionally attached to their comprehension of the text. Then these emotional attachments increase the potential for bias and add to the complexity of the problem. We need to believe what God's written word says, but we need to realize that at any point we may misunderstand what God has said in that written word.

The problem of which I write was not unknown to our spiritual forefathers in the American Restoration Movement. Let me close with some quotes from Robert Richardson.

"Men seem to have lost sight of the obvious distinction which is to be made between the Bible and the Gospel."

"It should never be forgotten that the Apostles and first preachers of the gospel had no Bibles, and not even a New Testament, to distribute; and there was no such thing among the early Christians as a formal union upon the 'Bible alone.' Nay rather it was a union upon the Gospel alone."

"Let the Bible be our spiritual library; but let the Gospel be our standard of orthodoxy. Let the Bible be our test of Christian character and perfection, but let the Christian confession be our formula of Christian adoption and of Christian union. In a word, let the Bible be to us everything designated by its Author, but let 'Christ crucified' be not only our peace with God, but our peace with one another." []

WHAT I HEAR FROM YOU

"Glad to see you still on the optimum firing line. Your awakening of souls to the liberty that is in Christ Jesus is refreshing. Keep up the good work!" -Given Blakely, Joplin, MO <GivenB@aol.com> [Given, a profuse writer, publishes an e-mail thought/lesson each day. If you would like to receive it, let him know.]

"I put a link to your chat rooms from my CONSERVATIVE CORNER page. Would love for you to visit my site!" -Melanie Schurr <melsch@webtv.net.>

"I am an Elder at the Southwest Church of Christ in Jonesboro, AR. I am pleased to find this area. The Elders are now trying to study the roles of women in the church." -Joe Stephen Selby <jselby@intellinet.com>

"I first read your theology from your book "Free In Christ." I find your religious views to be based on a particular attitude toward the Bible. You seem to have a low view of Scripture, that is, that it is not the Christian's complete and perfect guide to faith and practice. The church, seems to be in your system nothing more than a human organization, with all the flaws of the human beings who have espoused the Gospel. No wonder you don't like it. I am sorry your reaction to a few obnoxious souls in the church drove you so far from the truth. The enthusiastic disciples of yours, whose copy of your book I read, had a note at the end of it. 'We do not go to worship.' I hope that is not your goal nor the fruit of your labors, but they seemed to think it was. In Christian love, I will pray for you to be

restored to a high view of Holy Scripture and obedience to the Son of God (Heb. 5:8-9)." -Frazier Conley <fconley@texoma.net> [With all due respect to you, my brother, Frazier, I suggest that you read the book again to more accurately reevaluate your assessment of my writing.]

"God bless you, Cecil. You're providing a more valuable service than you'll probably ever know." -Gary Hardy <Ghardy8719@aol.com>

"You have very interesting articles here regarding restoration movements and the present state of churches of Christ." -Leong Peng Chuen, Singapore <leongpc@starnet.gov.sg>

"This is a great page for references on many of the topics I get questions about daily. Thank you for supplying me with the correct tools (words from the Bible) to inform others of the right choices. I am finally really feeling like a true Christian now since I've been studying and praying, utilizing the writings you have here to make it easier to understand sometimes." -Shaun Mullenix, St. Marys, GA <shaun@eagnet.com>

"It's always a pleasure to receive your *Freedom's Ring*. You, along with Leroy Garrett and Carl Ketcherside, have been and continue to be tremendous supporters of my faith. I thank our Lord for putting you there and for your submission to his will. All of you have also 'turned me on' to several other helpful brethren and resources through your writings. When I sit down to write (I'm just beginning to learn type – a month and a half of it so far) I realize the time and devotion, the effort and study, the long hours and sacrifice that you must put in to be able to get your materials out as regularly and faithfully as you do." -<MattMarkM@aol.com>

"I greatly appreciate your devotion to honest truth! It's really not difficult to understand, in fact the simplicity of the gospel and God Himself is very easy to see through eyes that have surrendered to truth. But it's extremely difficult to see God and the simplicity of His purpose when man's arrogant pride refuses to surrender." -<chrismat@newnorth.net>

"I love the church I attend (named, in Texas), but as a grad student in the college group I see a lack of true worship in our group. The singing is beautiful and I know that people's hearts are all for God, but it is as if we can't get excited about God. We can't clap unless it is at a devotional, we can't lift our hands in praise, etc. for fear that it will distract others in their worship. Isn't that underestimating the power of God? Isn't he big enough to take care of distractions if that is what the spirit leads you to do in your worship? I have the opportunity to worship in another college Bible study that is 'non-denominational' each week and that is where I see true worship happening. I know we have to start somewhere in the C of C, but I am really struggling with this whole issue. How can we let people know the power of God and assure them that hand raising or clapping isn't 'getting out of hand' when the spirit is leading the worship? As a worship leader this is hard for me right now." -<upton@tamu.edu>

"Brother, you have written with compassion and wisdom. I am very grateful for your voice since mine is not as eloquent on these matters. Through recent years I have developed a working definition of idolatry as *creating God in man's image*. It's more than an effort to be *politically correct* on homosexuality. Our society is being overrun by other *politically correct* topics which are nothing more than saying that the individual is the center of the universe and the standard of right and wrong. The 'Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem' passage comes to mind. People cannot find joy with that false doctrine yet even with my convictions I struggle against the same idolatry. You encourage me. Thanks." -<gcasella@juno.com>

"I don't know if you have heard of a gentleman by the name of Don DeWelt, but to me this man was a 'true' man of God. I've been in several seminars and classes that Bro. DeWelt taught and was so impressed with his knowledge of God's Word and his ability to 'feed' those who would listen those precious words. This man captured a very personal spot in my heart and I've loved him as I would a father, though my personal relationship with him was nowhere near that. I say all that, Bro. Cecil, to say to you, that you too are finding a very personal spot in my heart. I love the way you deliver God's Word. I'm more interested in how you have opened a floodgate of truth from the words that others have used to hold us captive. Those who would condemn you for showing the way to God's grace are foolish within their own teachings. I'll not ramble, but I did want you to know how much of an influence you've had in my life and in many decisions I've made. Thank you for taking a stand for the truth, although I know there have been times it hasn't been the 'easy' road to travel. I failed to ever send Bro. DeWelt a note of this nature and I've regretted it ever since his death. I made a promise to myself that I would not be so lazy in the future. Thank you again and keep up the fight – it's well worth it." -Jimmy Johnston, <jimmyj@rouge.net> [Jimmy, that is a treasured note! Thank you. Yes, I knew and admired Don as a great promoter of unity. But I am not of his stature! He wanted to publish my first book, *Free In Christ*, when no one else dared, but he was not permitted. But that is another story.]

"I am a fan of your writings. Thank you for opening my eyes and allowing me to rethink some of my past ideas and rituals. I am the webmaster for the Stillwater Church of Christ in Oklahoma. The address for our web page is: <<http://www.fullnet.net/np/cocsw/>> and I would like your permission to link *Freedom's Ring* from our sight." -Travis Weber, <weber@fullnet.net> [Great! Thanks!]

"I do not know you. I have read some of our work. I was in a discussion on the GA-LIST and I told people to read someone had put into book form answers to so many of the questions and concerns that I had about what I saw as inconsistencies of the church of Christ. Thank you so much for your efforts in encouraging true unity as well as making published materials available. May the blessings of our God bless you in every way." -Mt. Vernon, TX. [I am thrilled by these and other letters from you sharing your feelings of joyful liberation. Hundreds of others who read them will share your joy also.]

"Restoration" and Renewal

Edward Fudge

An inquirer asks, "Can spiritual renewal and 'restoration of the NT church' go hand in hand? What is God doing in the Churches of Christ these days? Is it business as usual?"

It all depends on what one thinks needs "restoring." If restoration focuses on the inner elements of NT Christianity – the core gospel, the Christ-centeredness, the supernatural power, holiness, ministry to the world in divine strength – certainly it can allow, encourage, and stimulate spiritual renewal.

However, if the desired "restoration" primarily revolves around externals, and particularly if the restoration of those externals becomes an end within itself, then it will regard spiritual renewal as a threat and will reject it whenever it appears.

The great "restoration" will be God's own accomplishment at the End (Acts 3:21). Even now, however, God gives us "times of refreshing" to sustain us as we wait for his great "restoration" (Acts 3:19). That is what "renewal" is all about.

What is God doing in Churches of Christ today? I would not presume to claim a definitive answer. But I venture to say that part of what God is doing in COC today (and in other parts of his universal church as well) is turning us into Churches of CHRIST – people who talk about Jesus, preach Jesus, measure doctrines and priorities by the example and teaching of Jesus, and who trust in Jesus for salvation rather than in our success at restoration or our feeble efforts to be obedient.

Part of what God is doing in COC is opening us to the reality of God himself and to his personal, powerful presence in the Holy Spirit. Part of what he is doing is showing us not to depend on our own resources – whether intellectual, spiritual, physical or financial. Part of what he is doing is showing us that we are not alone in his kingdom, after all, but that we are privileged to be included. I would say that is NOT “business as usual.” Praise God from whom all blessing flow! [Edwfudge@aol.com]