

Our Identity

Let me invite each of you to the reunion of my mother's family next June. There will be quite a gathering of Moores including all sorts of distant cousins, many of whom I have never met.

Not interested? I didn't think you would be. You do not identify with any of that family, except for some acquaintance with Lea and me. Relationships give us a feeling of identity even though we do not even know all the kinfolk. We can understand why a woman may continue to wear her maiden name along with that of her husband rather than give up her former identity. We have no objection to this, but how does it play in the matter of our religious identity?

The subject of my effort at feeding the flock one Sunday morning several years ago is forgotten. No doubt, it was one of my usual platitudinous preachments. As I stood in the vestibule after the dismissal, a young visitor came by, and without the customary handshake, protested disdainfully, "What you had to say could have been said in the pulpit of any denomination!" He was disturbed because he did not hear a message distinctive to the Church of Christ.

To the best of my recollection, he did not wait for a response, and I gave him none. Being slow-witted sometimes has been in my favor.

In years past many preachers made great use of the radio, and I liked to listen to them. One reason for my listening was to see if I could identify which church the speaker represented. Usually, it did not take long to make the right guess, especially for my brothers in the Church of Christ. We had developed so many key terms, points of emphasis, and mannerisms of speech that I could usually detect that it was "one of us" in a minute or two. Sometimes even the tone of voice betrayed the identity of the speaker. It seemed that no preacher of my persuasion would dare to deliver a message that would not readily identify him with the Church of Christ. He did not speak long without mentioning the right name for the church, the necessity of being in Christ's church which was us, the need of communion on each first day of the week and only on that day, and the absolute prohibition of the use of instruments of music in worship. These were points of identity which readily distinguished us from other groups. As a fowl or beast is able to identify others of its kind by their outcries, so we could confidently identify our partisan kind.

At hand is a four-page mailout concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage. I do not see the name of a church sponsoring it. I see some expressions like *living in adultery*, *lived in fornication*, *adulterous marriage*, *guilty party*, *alien sinner*, *erring child of God* (as though there is any other kind), *cessation of all sin in our lives before acquittal* (as though that were possible), *silence of the scriptures*, and *instrumental music in worship*. Would you hazard a guess as to what group the writers are identified with?

The sad part of the story is that we have too often used doctrines and practices rather than Christian discipleship and fruits of the Spirit as marks of identity. We stressed our differences instead of looking for commonality. We proclaimed those partisan lessons and distributed those tracts on "Why I Am A Member of the Church of Christ" in

efforts to convince people of our correct doctrinal and practical distinction. Thus we converted people to the Church of Christ with less emphasis on conversion to Christ.

In an editorial in his later years, Reuel Lemmons stamped a startling truth on my mind. His exact words were not kept, but his general statement was that *any teaching or practice that distinguishes a group from all others is suspect*.

Is that an unfair assessment? You think so? Then let me ask you a question or two. Think of the unnumbered multitude of intelligent, scholarly, zealous, and devout men through the centuries who gave themselves humbly to intense study to learn the will of God. Have we finally stumbled upon vital truth, or a special assortment of truths, that they were unable to find? Were they all too dishonest, prejudiced, or proud to accept the very truth they dedicated themselves to find? Or have the leaders of various groups over-valued their own insights and points of emphasis as though they had new revelations from God? Our own "Church of Christ positions" were not all hammered out by the most humble, non-judgmental, and scholarly men. So why should we avoid honest reexamination of our identifying marks---except that we fear loss of identity?

Through my reexamination, as I have recorded in my books, I am convinced that our distinctive teachings and practices are not only suspect, but they are divisive when we seek to bind them on others and use them as the standard of truth by which we judge all other disciples. They should be marks of identification no longer.

While I am applying this criterion to us, it also applies to any and all other religious groups. Yet for some strange reason ☺ we can agree that it applies to others more than to ourselves.

In efforts to convince others that we are just the universal church of Christ without any denominational identity, we explain that Christ's church has no distinguishing name. We point out that it is referred to in the scriptures as *the church, the church of God, the church of the firstborn, the household of faith, the kingdom of God*, etc. But then all the king's horses and all the king's men could not get one of our congregations to put *kingdom of God* on its sign, *church of God* on its letterhead, or *household of faith* for its telephone listing. Those terms do not give our distinct identity. Our claims prove to be empty talk.

Once I put a notice in our bulletin that a certain family had been with the church of God in a neighboring city and now wished to be a part of our congregation. It was no surprise that I was reprimanded by an elder. Too confusing! People might think that we accepted people from the Church of God!

Several years ago, I made a supply of *Generic Christian* bumper stickers. I felt sure that our "undenominational" people would be eager to buy them. Don't we claim to be "no brand name" Christians---just Christians only, not some kind of Christians? The sticker has not been a best seller! I have seen more stickers urging *Attend The Church of Christ* and *The Churches of Christ Salute You!* Why? Some people don't like bumper stickers, and some may think *generic* denotes inferiority. But I think the real reason is because *generic Christian* does not identify one with a certain church. Our partisan loyalty to a church is similar to our loyalty to our home town, alma mater, football team, or political party. People want that distinctive identity, so they have no T-shirts with *Support Generic Football!*

The sectarian label enables us to identify others of our kind without our having to look at the persons and to shun those whom we refuse to recognize as disciples without having to consider the individuals. They make us more comfortable with the sins of judgmentalism and sectarian spirit within us. Judging others by their labels relieves the fear of associating with others who may be considered “brothers in error.”

Stripping off the distinctive label may cause one to feel like a wanderer among strangers. Visiting the church on the next block may make you feel like an alien for you do not know its history, its preachers, its universities, etc. But some of us have met with a refreshing surprise. Many of us have attended Bible Study Fellowship, an international, non-denominational study of the Bible, and others are being involved with Promise Keepers. In these associations, all identify with God in Christ and thereby identify with one another. It is amazingly refreshing to be able to associate with people from all churches without anyone mentioning church identity. They are all just Christians joining hands. Church distinctions fade out. We can believe Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and other of our pioneers would have been thrilled to participate in such activities. And I am confident that the Father is pleased to see those whom he has brought into his fellowship join together in such united promotion of his cause.

How wonderful it is that Max Lucado, who works with the Oak Hills Church of Christ in San Antonio, in his far-reaching *Upwords* radio outreach ministers under the banner of Christ rather than the church. It is fitting and exciting that the Baptist General Convention of Texas awarded him the 1996 Texas Baptist Communications Award!

Looking at it realistically, we know that universal dropping of identifying names is a long way off. Working in that direction, however, we can do our little part individually by recognizing disciples of different labels as children of the same Father. Outgrowing our sectarian spirit even while serving in distinctive churches, we can all cultivate an identity with all the children of our common Father and proclaim salvation through a common Savior. How great it is to have such a courageous and humble man as Max Lucado to lead in erasing party labels in this manner. Let us do likewise.

Just as I feel an identity with cousins at the Moore reunion whom I might not have met before, let us feel an identity with all who wear the name of Christ, whether we ever meet them on earth or not.

As for answering the young man who wanted a distinctive message, I should have thanked him for the compliment that I at last had been able to deliver a non-partisan discourse. [ch]