

WHEN YOU OUTGROW YOUR CHURCH

Cecil Hook

A chicken cannot mature in its shell of incubation. It utilizes all that the egg has to offer, but if it is to grow, it must break out of its shell. Its original confinement allows for no eating and exercise for full development. Unless it breaks out it will die.

To compare our association in a congregation to a limiting and confining egg shell may seem inappropriate. At least, no congregation should be like that. But the confining traditional boundaries drawn by the greater number of Churches of Christ definitely constrict spiritual learning, exercise, and acceptance of others in Christ.

An unwritten creed defining doctrine and practice is formed by the sincerest of men as an invisible shield around the disciple intended to guarantee rightness and to protect from misdirection. They presume that full growth is nurtured within their prescribed limits. But the disciple cannot learn, exercise, and grow to the fullest without breaking the inflexible shell of unwritten laws. While great emphasis is placed on study of the Bible, if a student learns some new idea or different practice these must be kept very privately. When taught or practiced publicly, varying degrees of rejection are met usually. The disciple may absorb all that the limiting shell offers and still not outgrow judgmental attitudes or reach full potential.

Many in our congregations of the various groups of the Churches of Christ have outgrown their churches. They would like to remain in them to promote non-judgmental acceptance, but they suffer rejection. So they pip their shells for air and push themselves out into a free world liberated from their sectarian incubation. They have learned to read the Word without being defensive and to accept other disciples without being judgmental. When rejected or expelled for their new concepts, some have been blessed to find a more open Church of Christ nearby with which to begin meeting. So they leave in peace without bitterness or arrogance toward those who sought to restrict them.

What is a person to do when he or she outgrows his or her church? No epistle is written outlining a procedure to follow. As in deciding any issue of life, all principles of holy conduct must be observed. Since each person's situation is different, each person must seek the direction of the Spirit in deciding which course to follow. None of us is qualified to judge the case of the other.

Since my writings have been in circulation, I have heard from thousands of you by visit, mail, and telephone. From you and from general observation I have noted some things which I wish to pass along. These considerations may help you in deciding the course you are pondering.

When You Have Outgrown Your Church: Options

1. Some give up their faith in disillusionment. That is not recommended for it solves nothing. Do not let the limited vision or opposition of others hinder you from traveling onward.

2. Some drop out of organized religion. These are still faithful in heart but have gained relief from the restricting systems we have developed. True religion is personal and can hardly be organized, but neither should it be divorced from supportive associations. Realizing this need, these disciples may meet in small groups. They avoid super-organization, but they are themselves organized, for "Do two walk together, unless they have made an appointment?" (Amos 3:3). The very arrangement of time and place for meeting is organization, but the fewer people involved, the less structure is necessary. As liberating as this concept may be, it actually discourages growth in numbers. I have heard of more such groups disbanding than growing into multiple groups.

3. Being harried, perplexed, disillusioned, and tired of wrangling, some take a sabbatical from associations in order to have quieter times to discern the leading of the Spirit. This time of fasting in the wilderness should not become a way of life. Whatever terms are used to identify God's people, like *congregation, assembly, body, or family*, they all indicate an association of disciples. We are a part of each other; we all need others, and others need us.

4. Where a number feel the oppression of a local situation, they sometimes start a new, liberated group. No one can deny them that privilege if they depart in peace and without rejecting those they leave. If they leave in ill-will, it has become divisive. Some thriving congregations were started by those who had the courage to break out of an egg-shell situation in order to free the spirit. Leadership and planning are vital for such ventures lest freedom becomes the only goal and those liberated become as alien spiritual refugees.

5. The "house church" has been the quiet and refreshing answer for many. This can be a close-knit spiritual family that is supportive, accepting, and open to new ideas. It seems so good just to meet with "our kind of people" without having to tolerate the disagreeable people left behind. But you can see readily that such can be a bit snobbish and it calls for little patience and humility in bearing and forbearing in love. It is easy for freedom to become the goal of such a group; so they may turn inward and lose any evangelistic thrust, as many have done. They remain small and soon find that the thrill of meeting with the same dozen persons constantly begins to fade. One or two who seek dominance in such a small group are more problem than in a

larger group. Children may miss a peer group. So we are not surprised that "house churches" sometimes disperse.

6. Hundreds, or perhaps thousands, have left Churches of Christ and joined other less repressive denominations. There they are received without question to enjoy Christ-centered services and uplifting fellowship free from the rancor and bitterness they have left behind. Transition into such churches is refreshing and easy for some.

Others may find a sort of culture shock. As they become familiar with the whole new relationship, they may find that they traded familiar problems for unfamiliar ones. All groups have problems. Where there are people, there are problems! True, some do not have as many as others. In any group you are likely to disagree with some theology and practices. If these are vital differences, the conscience may be violated.

The person who goes into another church because of the exciting emotional highs in its assemblies must be reminded that emotional highs do not last for twenty or forty years. The life of trust and patience is steady and enduring.

In going into another denomination, one must be prepared for rejection of friends left behind and for strain on family ties. When one leaves any group, he or she can no longer have influence in reforming that group. If you feel that you are not called to reform the Church of Christ but that your service can be more effective in another group, we do not judge you. Even with much rejection, I decided to remain with my heritage and work for reform, but I do not try to bind my decision on you.

7. What about just starting over, as it were, by forming a non-sectarian, non-denominational group not called a Church of Christ? Sounds great, doesn't it? Formerly I wanted to do that. But isn't there already one or more non-denominational groups in your city? Why don't you join one of them? "Well, we investigated them and found that they teach and practice some things we disagree with." Then just how non-sectarian are you? You still reject others in Christ and want to form your own shell, somewhat expanded though it may be!

If you start a group that does not wear the *Church of Christ* name, be prepared for loss of identity. When you move to another city, you will have to start over again. If you try to "place membership" with another Church of Christ, a confession of error may be demanded of you! Be prepared for rejection by disciples you left. Our mentality makes it hard to love someone who leaves our doctrinal positions. Expect some grief among your kin.

No Simple Solutions

Perhaps I have played the devil's advocate in all these options except the first one. My purpose is to point out

possibilities and expectations. There are no simple solutions. Although some may be much more desirable than others, no group has everything in its favor. All have problems. All have identifying beliefs and practices which make them distinctive, even exclusive, from all others. All think they have the inside track which justifies their existence as a separate body. Some are not as narrow, authoritarian, rejecting, and arrogant as others. No doubt, there is much variation from congregation to congregation in any denomination. In any course mentioned above except for the abandonment of faith, I do not judge you. You alone can discern the will of God for you in your particular situation. As much as I might wish to be at times, I am not your judge! You are free in Christ! You are my brothers in error even as I am yours!

A Support Group

If your situation is growing less tolerable, yet you wish to stay with your heritage in the Church of Christ, here is a suggestion for help. A support group filled a great need for some of us. Ours met only monthly. It was primarily a study group, but yours could be expanded to meet other needs that you may have. Our bridge club of about twenty persons agreed to change our sessions into open-minded study of new concepts. Many of the chapters of *Free In Christ* were developed in those meetings.

There were several rules laid down and followed closely. They worked so effectively, I am passing them along to you.

1. There will be no talking about people. None!
2. There will be no talking about the local church. No church bashing.
3. No topic of study will be made into a personal issue. Each may express ideas, however unorthodox they may seem. Subjects may be left open-ended.
4. Outside the class no one will speak disparagingly of what another said in the class.
5. Knowing the tendency of others to look upon private study groups as clandestine, we will all be discreet about mentioning the class to anyone outside it.

These sessions continued for more than two years during a trying time within the congregation. They gave us the will and strength to tolerate a lot in the assemblies. At the same time we had exciting non-defensive studies which expanded our understanding more than we had ever dreamed.

You may be able to collect a few people for such a support group to aid in growing toward maturity. Your agenda may include prayer and praise. With refreshing help during the week, you may find more patience and power to deal with congregational situations and to help work for reformation. At least, such fellowship may save your

sanity.

Why Remain?

Why would I be concerned to work for reform? Does the Church of Christ deserve perpetuation more than any other denomination? The Stone-Campbell Movement offered much to the religious scene in America. Its message brought a fresh approach to unity and met wide acceptance. Its simple plea to be Christians only without denominational status made sense. It was understandable that *we are free to differ but not to divide*.

Then the aims were muddled by legalism, patternism, and restorationism. By the time you and I reached the scene the motto would sound more like *we are free to divide but not to differ. Unity in diversity has lost out to perceived unity by conformity in our time*. Our unity movement has become a divisive movement.

But the Spirit is working great changes among us. Even many of the older generation are recapturing the vision of our pioneers. A rising new generation is throwing off the shackles of legalism. Our younger people are eager for our pulpits to proclaim freedom in Christ. The System is resisting but it cannot defend its walls forever. We are in the dawn of exciting change. So let us work to hasten its day.

This is a stressful time for the Churches of Christ not unlike the painful uncertainty a teenager experiences. With the help of dedicated, intelligent people, our group will become a mature unity movement again. I hope that God will work through you to facilitate it. I will not live to see the new day but I am pleased to detect the early dawn of it.

When you outgrow your church, it needs your patient help! []