

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



April 15, 2012

What Do Churches of Christ Believe?

Using a collection of churches as a model to follow will result in confusion—or worse. Our teaching must point people to another, more reliable, source of authority.

“But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches” (1 Cor. 7:17).

“But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God” (1 Cor. 11:16).

“For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:33).

At first reading, Paul’s frequent references in this epistle to what other churches believed or practiced seems to be an effort to shame the Corinthian church into conforming to a brotherhood standard: all the other churches adhered to this standard, so in order to maintain solidarity with the Movement, Corinth needed to get with the program.

It sounds reasonable, until we look at the other churches Paul is holding up as models. The churches of Galatia were racked with dissension over the role of the Law of Moses in their belief system (Gal. 1:6; 4:9-11; 5:7-10). The church at Thessalonica was plagued with indolent freeloaders who preferred to mooch off their brethren while awaiting the Second

Coming (2 Thess. 3:6-15). By the time John wrote The Revelation to Christians in Asia, church polity was all over the map (Rev. 1-3). Some were involved in fornication and idolatry—or not. Others were content merely to maintain the status quo, whatever that happened to be.

So out of this mishmash of doctrinal diversity, which churches do you think Paul wanted Corinth to emulate?

The truth is, Paul never held up the churches as a model to be followed. Look again at 1 Cor. 7:17: “And so I ordain in all the churches.” Paul was not pointing to what the churches were *doing*, but what the churches were being *told* to do. There was quite a gap between the two, and Paul was clearly advocating the latter.

The same conditions that existed in the first century exist today. Any effort to hold up a group of churches as some kind of monolithic representation of authentic Christianity is misguided and dangerous. No single congregation is perfect, much less a whole collection of congregations. How then can we point to a group of churches—however we

may define such a group—as the standard to which all must conform?

This principle has a couple of implications for our teaching.

First, it renders suspect any evangelism effort based on what “the churches of Christ” believe. Just as in the first century, modern churches of Christ cover a wide spectrum of doctrinal convictions on a range of topics. Trying to convert people by inviting them to “consider the Church of Christ” will raise more questions than it answers.

Second, trying to browbeat brethren into accepting a position on a given issue by appealing to what “faithful brethren everywhere” or “the majority of conservative churches” believe is nothing more than partisan sectarianism. It is the same mindset that has spawned denominationalism, a sorry representation of the religion of Christ.

Instead of pointing people to the Church of Christ, we need to be pointing people to *Christ*. Get people to respect and follow *Him* and His word, and what happens to the churches will take care of itself.

– David King