

Why I Left The Institutional Church of Christ By Wayne Goforth

Background

As I was growing up in Memphis, TN, my parents made a claim to Methodism, but never attended. I took a correspondence course from a church of Christ when I was 15, and was baptised thereafter at the nearest church of Christ, which was institutional. I never heard of church orphan homes or the like, and simply wanted to be baptised to be a Christian only. It was not long before I wanted to preach. I began speaking on Wednesday nights, taught Bible classes, etc. while 17-18 years old. When the regular preacher left rather abruptly, I "filled in" for weeks, until a regular man was found. I attended and graduated from Memphis School of Preaching, and was taught some pretty conservative basics there.. they cried against the liberals, showed how to establish authority. They only mentioned "anti's" though in prejudiced ways. Various instructors stated repeatedly "an anti will lie, cheat and steal to prove a point. Don't ever believe an anti on anything." One said that anti's usually meet in houses because they are usually too small and poor to afford a building, and that they were usually just a bunch of old cranks who didn't want to do anything anyway, so this doctrine gave them the excuse they were looking for. They said anti-ism was the answer the Pharisees were looking for when they said "it is Corban" and therefore could not help their parents. They talked about one cup, no Bible class, orphan homes, etc., and lumped all together as "anti." No one knew what an "anti" was exactly, but we knew we did not want to be one because that was bad. We were told no one ever made the "anti arguments" until about 1955, so this was a new doctrine and therefore could not be true.

I then went to Freed-Hardeman College, and quickly saw what liberalism was. in MSOP we were taught that the liberals were in the minority, but at F-HC I saw it was the majority. And yet, F-HC is one of the more conservative of their schools. Most churches where these teachers preached had the church softball teams, family life centres, various social gospel programs, etc. I met my wife to be there (first day of class in fact) and we married while in college. We decided that we wanted to be missionaries to the Navajo reservation of Arizona.

The Sponsoring Church Made Us Uneasy

Being ignorant of the institutional machinery, I assumed that all we were to do was to raise support and go. I asked our professor of missions how to start, and he said we needed a "sponsoring church." Hmm...never heard of it, but it was a church, so I figured it was ok, after all it was a church doing it and we were the "true church". Well, we found a congregation who offered to act as such, and for 8 months I went from church to church every Sunday, with slide projector in hand, asking churches to send my support to the sponsoring church. The elders of the sponsoring church had never been to Arizona...were 1,500 miles away from it! The sponsoring church was 15 years old, while the Navajo church was 25 years old...its just that they could not afford to pay the preacher. The sponsoring church elders constantly told us that when we got to the reservation, we were to do this and that, they even told us we had to use KJV of Bible only (many of the Navajo spoke only broken English!). From Tennessee, the elders talked about possibly even moving the meeting place without once having talked to the Navajo members. We were informed that once a "game plan" had been drawn up by the sponsoring church for the Arizona work, we were to never "circumvent their plan." Which, they told me meant that once they had reached a decision about what the church in Arizona was to do, we were not to change anything ("even if found harmful") until the elders at the sponsoring church approved of it first. (You see, it is not unusual for the sponsoring church to support the "mission work" rather than the "missionary." The sponsoring church is often the one who searches for, hires and fires the evangelist). They would tell us things we were and were not to tell our "supporting churches", saying "We are your elders, not them," because they were the sponsoring church, while the other churches merely sent money. Well, after 8 months, we resigned from that.. I did not know what the answer was, but I knew the sponsoring church was breaking the autonomy of the local church.

The realm of an elderships' oversight is only over the local congregation they serve, Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2.

Just so happened, I read a book called "Steps to the Mission Field", published by Firm Foundation, in which a mission team (institutional) went to Brazil and had what was reported to be the greatest growth rate outside of the NT. They attributed part of it to the fact that the church in Brazil was self supporting from the start. That only the evangelists received outside support, per the biblical example, Phil. 4:15-16. After reading it, I said "That's it! That's how it is to be done!" But I did not know of any churches doing it that way, and knew from experience that the first question in raising support was "who is your sponsoring church?"

The Mis-Representations Made Me Suspicious

Once leaving my full-time fund raising for missions, I advertised in the Gospel Advocate as being available as a youth or pulpit minister. A preacher saw it and responded telling me who he was, that he too had been where I was, and wanted to ask me where was my authority for being a "youth minister." I asked one of my teachers at F-HC if he knew this brother, and he told me yes, he was an anti! That was all I needed to hear! I wrote him back and told him why I believed in multiple cups and why I believed it scriptural to use Bible study aids, and to have

Bible classes. To my shock, he wrote back in agreement! He asked again where was my authority for youth ministers. Well, I was shocked. That's what I thought the issues were all about. That's what they told us at MSOP anyway. Had I been deceived?

By this time, I had "located" at a rather conservative minded institutional church in Missouri. In fact, it had not been too many years before that this congregation had been an old line Ketcherside church (One cup, no women teachers, etc.). Seems Carl preached one of his first lessons there when he was 14. They only stopped using the one cup when one brother had what some thought to be lip cancer! By now they were supporting an orphan home and a couple of "missionaries" with a small amount. We took a barrel of canned goods each month to the home as well.

As I got settled in to my new work, and had more time to correspond, I asked this "anti" who wrote me, what the issues were about. He spoke of the errors of the sponsoring church, benevolence, social gospel, etc. I agreed right off with him concerning the sponsoring church (having been involved with one and witnessing the destruction of autonomy) and about the social gospel, but the orphan homes and benevolence issues took some study.. I seriously disagreed with him, even calling him a "pip-squeak, green horn anti" at one point. I had been so filled with prejudices of the thoughts of little hungry orphans on a church door step for so long, the scriptures just were not able to get through! For over 1 1/2 years, my wife and I studied and talked, and even sometimes disagreed with each other about the issues daily.

As I studied, I realised these were not new issues, in spite of what they had taught us! The questions of church co-operation were discussed and disagreed upon during the restoration movement. They were later hashed out in the pages of the Gospel Advocate in the 1920Æs and 1930Æs again...more misrepresentation. Then, upon purchasing a copy of a church directory that listed type of church (non-institutional, mainline, etc.) and size, I was able to see that instead of anti churches drying up on the vine, as my teachers had expressed, they were actually growing, and in many parts of the country these churches actually were in the majority (Alabama, Florida, parts of Kentucky, etc.). I was disappointed in my brethren.

I ordered debate books on the issues and read them. I would read one chapter and say "he's got the truth on it" then in the next chapter of the debate I would say "No, he's got the truth on it." It was frustrating not knowing what to preach on this for that long. I would call many of my old friends and ask them to study it with me, or to explain it to me, no one wanted to. The only ones willing to talk about it was the "anti's." I wondered why no one would study with me if we had the truth? Finally I called Guy N. Woods at Gospel Advocate, and explained that I was confused, that it seemed that the anti's were doing a better job presenting their case than our brethren had, and asked him what he suggested. Well, he just sounded upset and said "So you wanna be an anti huh? If an anti ever had a logical point I never heard it." I further explained that I did not want to be one, but simply wanted to know how to answer the arguments. He suggested I buy Warrens book on Orphan Homes and Co-operation. I knew Warren was real logical on marriage, divorce and remarriage, Christian evidences, etc. so I figured this would settle it...I went through that book with a fine tooth comb, highlighted, marked, etc.. and saw he was wrong from the very first premise! Well, that did it, I knew we were wrong.

The Practices Opened My Eyes

During that 1 1/2 year search, many things began to open my eyes. The church gave a check to an atheist in the community when his house burned, though he never requested it. They argued "The Bible says do good to all men." We had been taught in the school of preaching that church benevolence is limited in some degrees, i.e. .."If a man worketh not, neither shall he eat" so was it possible it was further limited to believers only? As I began to study, I found all New Testament examples of collective church benevolence was to Christians (Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-37, 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-27; 2 Cor. 8-9; 1 Tim. 5:3-16).

Then, the church in the town next to us was supporting "Medical missionaries." I had never heard of those before. They were nurses and dentists being supported by and overseen in their medical work to go to Africa. I called the director of my old school of preaching and asked him if he knew about this stuff, and why wasn't that the social gospel they had taught us against, and his reply was "Well, its benevolence isn't it?" I asked in disbelief "It is?" He said "Yes I think so" then asking one of the other instructors in his office, "Brother Curry, don't they say the Christian hospitals are benevolence?" With hearing an affirmative response in the background, bro. Cates then related that yes, they were indeed cases of benevolence. This was the same school that taught us you had to have a direct command, approved example, or necessary inference for everything. They could see it as it applied to the instrument and missionary society, but not when it affected their pets. It' all a matter of whose ox is being goaded. I then called Garland Elkins, a very conservative institutional preacher, who made this observation that became somewhat of a turning point for me. Brother Elkins said, "Such would be commendable for individuals, but is not the work of the church." He was one of the first to teach me that there was a difference in what the church collective could do, and what individual saints could do in the realm of benevolence! Here he was selling out Roy Deavers' argument that "whatever the individual could do as a Christian, the church collective could do, because the church is made up of individual saints." He actually disarmed one of the institutionals biggest arguments!

The argument runs that whatever the individual MUST do as a Christian, the church collectively can do, because the church is made up of individual Christians.

However, 1 Tim. 5:16 reveals there is often a separate work for individuals from the collective church.

Wanting to Be Right Made Us Stand

Finally, when we could stand it no longer, I began taking each of the elders aside one by one, and asked them if they knew how our missionaries were being supported. They assumed it was going straight to the evangelist. When I drew my circles and showed each of them the sponsoring church arrangement, they all stated it was wrong. They were shocked when I told them that the men we were supporting had their checks being funnelled through another church. They said they would talk about it among themselves and get back with me. In the meantime, Curtis Cates, director of my old school of preaching was holding a meeting across town. The elders went to talk to him about this. His reply was "Well, he's turned anti on you, you'd better get rid of him." So, the next week, these elders came in my office and told me they would not be able to tolerate what I was believing. I asked them, "I thought you said we would study it?" No one said anything for a few minutes, until one exclaimed, "Its not open to study...your dismissed." We were living in the preachers house next door...the elders told me that they did not want me back at services for someone might ask questions, and that if I told anyone I was fired they would kick us out of the house. Here they claimed I was "taking all the love out of the church" yet they were putting me on the street? They could support an atheist but not me? I was shattered.

Conclusion

That was in 1986, I left and have never looked back. Yes, conservative brethren may be divided over and argue over many issues, but I am happy to be associated with brethren who are that concerned with being right.

In the past 10 years now after leaving, the liberals have gone farther than many of them are willing to go. These old school institutionals are themselves beginning to be called "anti's" by many of their peers. They are called "neo-anti's" and "anti's who refuse to go all the way." The new line of liberals are wanting (and some have) women preachers and elders. Gymnasiums, drug treatment centres, etc. Those I associated with are denouncing this as liberalism, not being able to see they opened the flood gates for it. You cannot open the flood gates with one hand, and try to stem the tide with the other. This will most likely be the last generation of conservative-institutionals, those we have a chance of reaching, because we have a common understanding of authority. The new line up do not understand the nature and need of authority, and thus we have no common ground with them.