

# WHO ARE WE II

By Bill Irby

It is impossible to think profitably about the identity of the church without consideration of the context of the question, "Who are we?" By context I mean our own temporal, physical, historical and cultural environment and that of others about whom this question is concerned, now and in the past.

Who are we? In terms of the place in the flow of time called the present we are a group of loosely affiliated congregations known primarily as the churches of Christ. We can trace a historical timeline from today back to the early days of the formation of the United States and find a connection to what we call the Restoration Movement. People like Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell are most well known as early members of the American churches. But there is another timeline that goes back much further. Because we believe that the seed, the Word of God, when planted in good hearts results in the creation of Christians without regard to the passing of time, we can trace our spiritual heritage back to the events of Matthew 16 and Acts 2 (Luke 8:11). In terms of time, then, we are part of a movement that is essentially unbounded by time

But we must pay attention to the effects of time (what I am calling the temporal context) on the question, who are we? We must understand that when we explain what the Bible teaches about the church most folks will not readily understand because they are tied to the present. Temporality must, at least for a little while, be overcome to understand what the church really is.

We must also overcome the constraints of our physical context if we are to understand who we are. Here is what I mean. We meet in the same sort of buildings that all the other churches meet in. We look like we are doing about the same things the others are doing (except, thank the Lord, for the singing). Our benevolent work meets the same needs as that sort of work done by others. We get on planes to do mission work with other folks, some whose theology barely resembles ours. If you don't look too closely you might not be able to actually see much difference.

But there are big differences that are blurred by the physical uniformity life and culture put upon us. When we seek to answer our question we must consciously look beyond the physical similarities and concentrate on the spiritual and intellectual differences. It is difference that makes for distinction. A man may look like he knows the truth...but he may not know it. Just looking at the physical reality of the man's existence will not reveal this crucial difference.

We must also pay attention to the historical context of our own time as well as the times of the formation and development of the Lord's church. An "American" is the product of ideological development since before 1609 until today. Folks disagree about what an American is largely because the American system embraces pluralism by design. A "Christian" arises from a historical context also. But the historical context of what a Christian is a defined thing, in terms of what is taught about the subject in the New Testament. Now, I realize that other groups in Christendom disagree about this. Some include revelation later than the New Testament. Others say revelation (the Bible) matters not at all. For these first, a Christian is what they say it is. For the others, it can be anything at all.

Our own historical context will not allow such meanderings. We are to be what our history (the New Testament specifically, the Bible generally) says that we are. Our identity is prescribed by the pattern revealed in the Text (2 Timothy 1:13). That being understood, we must explain ourselves in a historically cogent fashion (1 Peter 3:15). We do have to tell folks how we got to be where we are. But we must always take our hearers back to the beginning place, which is the Text of the Word of God.

There are more corners to search in this study. We shall continue to do so in upcoming articles.