

## A FUTURE PERSPECTIVE

### PART 2

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This perspective on the future is only one person's opinion. These judgments, however, are based on wide experience and careful observations throughout the churches of Christ in the United States. They are offered here for whatever they may be worth.

The most significant development in the recent history of churches of Christ in the United States, in my opinion, has been the controversy that has developed over the discipling movement. This movement was introduced into churches of Christ by Chuck Lucas at the Crossroads church of Christ in Gainesville, Florida, less than twenty years ago. Today this movement is led by the Boston church of Christ where Kip McKean preaches. There are approximately fifty congregations throughout the nation that the leaders of this movement regard as being a part of the movement. There are several other congregations that are marginally identified with this movement, although not fully accepted by the movement's leaders. Growth among the discipling churches in the past decade has been very impressive. Other churches of Christ, in the same period of time, have experienced little if any growth numerically. This has caused many to conclude that the discipling movement is the wave of the future. For the past two years, I have devoted much of my time to a careful study of the discipling movement. This study has led me to the conclusion that the future growth of churches of Christ will not come from the discipling movement.

The strict control that is called "discipling" in these churches does not, in my opinion, contribute to lasting growth. In April of 1985, I conducted a church-growth study of the Boston church of Christ. That study included psychological tests administered to over nine hundred members of that congregation. Results of these tests showed a pattern of personality

change that is not normal or healthy. More than 95 per cent of the members were changing basic psychological-type scores. The changes, however, were not random. There was a clear pattern of convergence in a single psychological type. The discipling methods being used are making members over after the image of the group norm. Other churches of Christ that were studied did not show this pattern. Five mainline denominations that were studied did not show this pattern. But six cults that were studied showed exactly this pattern.

When Christians are pressured to change their personalities to conform to the group norm in ways that have nothing to do with Christianity, that pressure causes some of them to develop serious emotional problems. When I presented the results of this study to the leaders of the Boston church of Christ, it was my understanding that they agreed to make some significant changes in order to correct this problem. Later I learned that the necessary changes were not made. I now see no evidence that the changes will likely be made in the future. I fully expect, therefore, that the Boston church of Christ and the other discipling churches will produce an increasing number of psychological and spiritual casualties. There will be a major burn-out problem. There will be significant defections from their ranks. Indeed, we are already beginning to see a pattern. More and more of the leaders who left other churches of Christ to join this movement are now leaving that movement. They are not able to tolerate its rigid control, arbitrary rules, philosophy, or methods. I expect to see a major exodus as these leaders leave this movement.

The discipling movement, in my opinion, has the seeds of its own destruction in its total commitment to a methodology. This is a very pragmatic movement without the guidance of serious biblical scholarship. What that means is that this movement will go in whatever direction its leaders want it to go. But the span of control of any one leader or any one congregation can be extended only so far. As this movement grows beyond these limits, new power centers will emerge. Fragmentation then is inevitable. That is what will destroy the discipling movement.

Among other churches of Christ, however, there are many

who have gone to a reactionary extreme in their opposition to the discipling movement. They totally reject everything the discipling churches are doing. That is a serious mistake because much of what they are doing is exactly what all churches of Christ need to be doing in order to grow. Their emphasis on domestic and foreign church-planting, local evangelism, small group Bible studies, personal relationships, and their willingness to confront sin in the lives of their members—these things are not wrong. The elders of a congregation in California reflect the error of this reactionary extreme. They told the congregation, "The elders forbid any evangelism in this church except the preaching our preacher does from the pulpit where we can control what is said and make sure it is scriptural." They went on to say that anything else reflects "the Crossword Philosophy"—which shows how much they know about what is going on. Several years ago I was conducting a church-growth seminar for a congregation that has done much to destroy the discipling movement. In that seminar, I urged the use of a small-group-Bible-study approach to evangelism. One of the elders asked, "If we allow the members to study the Bible in their homes like that, how are we going to control it?" Congregations that take this reactionary approach are going to die.

There is a third segment of our brotherhood that is not likely to lead the way in church growth. This is the segment of the brotherhood that is no longer as sure as it once was about the uniqueness and the non-denominational nature of the church, or the necessity of gospel obedience, or the lostness of those outside the church. These congregations have lost their distinctiveness and with it, their motive for evangelism.

The discipling churches are typically made up of college students and young adults. It will be when a significant number of these people get to be around thirty-five to forty-five and hit the mid-life crisis that the psychological problems are likely to multiply. The reactionary congregations are typically made up of older people. They are not making many adult converts, and they have a high drop-out rate among their own children. It is easy to see, therefore, the direction in which they are heading. The more ecumenical congregations that I

mentioned are typically made up of people who are middle aged, upper-middle class, and very well educated. But they are making even fewer adult converts and they also have a high drop-out rate among their children. It seems clear, therefore, that they are also headed for extinction.

These three segments of the brotherhood do not represent the vast majority of congregations or members. The majority do not identify with any of these three groups. They still hold the same beliefs that churches of Christ have held historically. They do not identify with the discipling movement, but they do not totally reject everything the discipling churches are doing. They recognize that there is much that is good in this movement. They also recognize that other churches of Christ, not identified with the discipling movement, are far from perfect and have failed in many ways. They are looking for new and better methods and are willing to sift out the good from the bad in the things they observe. These are the congregations, in my opinion, that will lead us into a period of growth in the 1990s and on into the twenty-first century.