(*Eric B. Hall has been a member of the Lord's church since August 1973. He graduated* cum laude *from* Rice University *in 1985 with a B.S. in electrical engineering and from* The University of Texas at Austin *in 1986 and 1989 with an M.S. and a Ph.D. in electrical engineering. From 1989 until 1996 he was an assistant professor at* Southern Methodist University. *In 1999, he graduated with high honors from* The University of Texas School of Law. *He is presently practicing law in Houston, Texas.)*

Abilene Christian University's Agenda to Denominationalize the Lord's Church

By Eric B. Hall

In December 1999, I realized that the church that I had been attending was a denomination. Although I thought I had been attending a congregation of the churches of Christ, I know now that I had instead been attending a congregation of the Church of Christ — with a capital "C" in Church. The preachers used denominational language and never indicated in *any* way that "our church" (as they called it) is in any way distinctive. The Great Commission, we were told, applies only to the "unchurched." The "churched" (no matter how or where they are "churched") are in *no* danger. The Lord's church, we were told, is just "our movement" — a "movement" that started in the 1800s. Like the Baptists and the Methodists, we are just another man-made organization of recent origin. I have since left that denomination, and I am now attending a congregation of the Lord's church — a church that is not man-made and that is not of recent origin.

How did this happen to the Lord's church? How did once strong and faithful congregations reach a point where they are now indistinguishable from denominations? One could place all of the blame on weak leaders and apathetic members — and those are certainly big parts of the problem. But I have to come believe that there is another perhaps even bigger part of the problem — we have a Judas among us.

In what in hindsight can only be called a departure from the New Testament pattern for the church, Abilene Christian University was set up by members of the church to educate our children based on Christian principles and produce faithful Gospel preachers. That man-made creation has now turned on its makers. Our children are being taught error, and our preachers are proclaiming error. ACU has an agenda to remake the church, and it is doing all that it can to carry out that agenda.

These are strong charges, but I do not make them without evidence. Indeed, the evidence is overwhelming. The following sections contain actual quotations by ACU professors in which they carefully detail their view of the church and their plans for its future. Remember as you read these quotations — it is to these men that the church is entrusting its children. It is from the classrooms of these men that we are getting many of our preachers. Truly it is time for us to wake up before it is too late. Truly it is time to expose the traitor that now works among us.

A. Leonard Allen

Leonard Allen is an associate professor in the College of Biblical Studies at ACU. He has authored or coauthored a number of books on the Restoration. One of those books is entitled *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World* (2nd ed., 1990, ACU Press).[1] As the following passages from that book show, Professor Allen believes that the church of Christ is a denomination and that it is of a very recent origin.

1. On page *ix*, Allen writes: "I chose the word [cruciform] in hope that this image might become the dominant image by which Churches of Christ speak of identifying the New Testament church." Note how he distinguishes the "Church of Christ" from the church found in the New Testament.

[1] I have all of the books that I quote from in this survey, and I have personally transcribed the quotations that follow, In particular, I have not relied on any secondary sources for these quotations.

2. Note the use of the term *movement* in the following excerpt from page 5[2]

> This attitude toward the past characterized the early movement. ... Propelled by such an attitude toward the past, restoration movements like ours easily develop a kind or historylessness. By this term I refer to the perception that, while other churches or movements are snared in the web of profane history, one's own church or movement stands above mere human history. One's own movement partakes only of the perfection of the first age, the sacred time of pure beginnings. ... This sense of historylessness works in powerful and subtle ways. In the process it creates exhilarating (and damaging) illusions. Among Churches of Christ it often has meant that we simply discounted eighteen centuries of Christianity as, at worst, a diseased tumor or, at best, an instructive failure. And not surprisingly, the same attitude has led many people among Churches of Christ to dismiss their own history as itself irrelevant. For after all, if our origins come entirely from the Bible and our churches are New Testament churches, then we really need not bother ourselves with the recent past.

Since Professor Allen is obsessed with our recent past, it follows as a logical consequence of his own statement that he does not believe our origins come entirely from the Bible or that our churches are New Testament churches.

On page 7, he writes:

> In the process we sought not so much to understand earlier Christian movements in all their complexity. We sought rather to decry them or on occasion simply to ridicule them. For they obviously ran in the stream of profane history, swept along by little more than human willfulness and ignorance. But our movement was different. It did not run in any wide and turgid stream. Rather, it gushed directly out of the spring, forming only a crystal clear pool around it. ... It was an exciting story, almost the stuff of epics and legends.

If "our movement" means the New Testament church, then what are these earlier Christian movements that he is talking about here?

4. On pages 11-12 we read:

> As we have seen, a critical attitude toward the past means that we take ***Christian traditions other than our own*** with great seriousness. ... When we view tradition A (our own) alongside traditions B. C, and D, we will begin to see dimensions of tradition A that we probably never saw before. ... The effect of such engagement might best be described as a theological loss of innocence. ... For if we naively assume that we are fresh and pure, that we stand above worldly compromise and spiritual failure, that we espouse only the Truth and nothing but the Truth, then we lose the capacity for self-criticism, for repentance, and thus for spiritual growth.

One wonders how the first-century church was able to experience spiritual growth since they also naively assumed they were fresh and pure and that they espoused the Truth and nothing but the Truth.

5. One page 19:

> First, there is the simple and observable fact that, throughout Churches of Christ, many people are questioning and sometimes rejecting the traditional doctrinal system that for several generations gave Churches of Christ their distinctive identity. Acts and the Epistles as an architectural 'blueprint,' as a rigid 'pattern,' as a collection of case law — these images and the interpretive method they support are steadily declining.

6. On page 23, Allen describes Alexander Campbell as a "pioneer of our heritage." That places a rather late date on the origin of our heritage. I suppose he would consider it naive to trace our heritage back to the first day of Pentecost following the Lord's resurrection.

7. On pages 71-72, Allen similarly dates "our movement":

> Our traditional 'scientific' way of reading Scripture, as we have seen, tended to level Scripture into a body of doctrinal facts. These facts, when inductively assembled into their proper order, all carried about the same weight. As a result, distinctions between majors and minors, between the main plot and various subplots, were lost. [Major doctrines and minor doctrines — now where have we heard that?] ... Throughout the history of ***our movement,*** as a result, we have struggled endlessly with the problem of what is essential and what is not essential. This struggle began with Campbell himself.

Thus, our heritage and our movement began in the 1800s. If that is true, then I suggest the Baptists have been right all along — we really are just Campbellites.

8. On page 72, we read more about the distinction between major doctrines and minor doctrines:

> The problem of essentials has plagued Churches of Christ ever since, leading frequently to rancor and fragmentation. Behind this problem lies the Baconian inductive method where one pulls down the concordance, gathers the biblical 'facts,' then constructs a doctrinal platform with

[2] I have added all of the emphasis in the following quotations. Notice particularly how the phrase "our movement" is used by these authors to distinguish the Lord's church from the denomination they refer to as the Church of Christ.

each plank of virtually equal weight. With this way of reading the Bible, we have simply not been able to follow the biblical plot and thus to let what is theologically central in Scripture function centrally for us.

9. On page 125, Allen dates the origin of this denomination he has been referring to as the Church of Christ: "*For well over 150 years Churches of Christ have been calling for restoration of New Testament Christianity. It has been a powerful ideal. It has shaped our identity as a movement.*" The Lord's church (the church of Christ) was established in the first century, and that is the church (and the only church) of which I am a member. According to Allen, however, I am not a member of that church or just of that church. Instead, I am a member of some human organization ("our movement") that calls itself a church and that began about 150 years ago. On page 174, Allen further distinguishes the "church of Jesus Christ" from the "Church of Christ."

In 1991, Allen coauthored a book entitled *The Worldly Church: A Call for Biblical Renewal* (2nd ed., 1991, ACU Press). His coauthors were Richard Hughes (formerly with ACU, now a professor at Pepperdine) and Michael Weed (professor of Christian ethics at the Institute for Christian Studies in Austin, Texas). The following excerpts are from *The Worldly Church:*

Page 32: "*By sectarian, we mean the belief that the church has been fully restored by our forebearers, that the American Churches of Christ are fully identical to the primitive churches in every significant respect, and that there is now nothing left to do but defend the gains of the past. Surely this spirit has characterized many in our movement. The naivete of this position makes its proponents especially susceptible to secularization. The sectarian mind, after all, is unaware of the enormous extent to which culture moulds lives, shapes faith, and even helps determine the concerns of the church in every age.*"

Page 33: "[The sectarian Christian] *assumes that the church in which he lives has been fully restored, when in fact it may reflect his own cultural interests to a far greater extent than he is aware. The American church historian, Henry Bowden, recently pointed to this very tendency in many restoration movements. ... Bowden's judgment clearly applies to restorationists who claim they have completed their course and finished their search. For the search is never fully done. Paul, himself, was quick to admit that he had not arrived. 'I press on,' he wrote, 'toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus' (Phil. 3:12-14). Restoration must be conceived as ongoing process, not as final achievement.*" Pop Quiz: What was Paul really talking about in that passage? Have the authors lifted that quote out of context as a "proof text" to support their own "doctrinal plank"? That is, have they done exactly what they accuse us of doing?

On page 34 we discover that the Enlightenment was the "***seedbed of our movement***" and that "***our movement was born*** *of the same intellectual currents that launched the process of secularization in the eighteenth century.*"

In 1988, Allen coauthored a book with Hughes entitled *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of the Churches of Christ* (1988, ACU Press). Needless to say, the ancestry they traced did not involve the book of Acts. The following excerpts are from *Discovering Our Roots:*

1. On pages 6-7, the authors outline what they see as the "Profane roots" of the "Churches of Christ." These profane roots include "a scholarly movement called Christian Humanism," the "Puritan movement," the "Baptist movement" (which "helped provide the seedbed *of our own movement*"), the Enlightenment, and the Restoration movement. Thus, "our movement" is merely the product of many other recent movements.

2. Chapter Nine (beginning on p. 101) is entitled "The Birth of Our Movement." Not ones to keep their readers in suspense, the authors make it clear from the very first sentence in that chapter that the "birth" of "our movement" occurred in the "early nineteenth century."

3. Page 155: "What are some of our traditions? An important one, clearly, is the way we conceive the task of restoration itself. As we have seen, Churches of Christ stand in a stream of thought — a tradition — focusing on the restoration of churchly forms and structures. To put it more strongly, we have often proceeded on the assumption that if one did *not focus* attention on biblical form and structure then one was actually neither a restorationist nor biblical at all, and perhaps not even Christian."

Carroll D. Osburn

According to the back cover of his book, Carroll D. Osburn is "an internationally respected New Testament textual scholar" who is the Carmichael Distinguished Professor of New Testament at ACU. In 1993, he published a book entitled The *Peaceable Kingdom: Essays Favoring Non-Sectarian Christianity* (1993, Restoration Perspectives). Professor Osburn is very open in that book about ACU's agenda for changing the church.

On pages 14-15 we read:

> With so many questions flying around and so much uncertainty being expressed in various quarters, what an opportunity for the various faculties of our Christian colleges and universities to help shape the future! These are the best of times to be involved in Christian education! If we are to have a truly significant impact upon the national and international scene, faculties of religion must play leading prophetic roles in channeling and facilitating whatever changes loom ahead. An outdated curriculum from a sectarian past that placed emphasis upon transmitting doctrinaire positions will not suffice if we would engage convincingly the larger arenas of current religious thought. ... Our graduate programs must train students how to think, to investigate the biblical text afresh, to feel the pulse of the world around them, to sense where things ought to go, and provide the kind of experiences that will enable servants to go out into churches and communities and provide direction.

As we know, ACU has not been very successful in teaching their graduates "how to think" — but they have been quite successful in sending those graduates forth to "provide direction" for the church.

In the previous excerpt, Osburn mentioned our "sectarian past." On page 5, he tells us what he means by that term:

> Sermons on the 'identifying marks of the church' were given in terms of selected issues. Books were written on 'What is the Church of Christ?' with chapters concentrating on those issues. Although the issues differed from place to place, enough consensus existed to provide thrust for a movement along those lines in the thinking of many during our recent past. Sectarian disdain for unity dominated.

Thus, we are being "sectarian" when we attempt to distinguish the Lord's church from the denominational morass that surrounds it. This attempt to distinguish the true church is what the ACU graduates are being sent out to change — and unfortunately they have been quite successful.

Has the New Testament church been restored or are we still trying to restore it? ***If the New Testament church has not been restored, then we are not members of the New Testament church.*** If we are members of the church that Jesus promised to build and if our congregation operates according to the pattern that Christ left for his church to follow, then the New Testament church has been restored. Instead, if the church has not been restored, then it follows that we must be members of a denominational movement, which is of recent, human origin. Osburn says the following on page 14 with regard to this issue: "*There is no point in time at which one can say that the church was restored and that now all we have to do is preach it.*"

On page 137, he discusses the need to develop a "*fresh definition of church.*" What's wrong with the Bible's definition? If the New Testament church has not been restored, then what is the church of Christ? If we are not the church that we read about in the New Testament, then how is "our movement" differ-

ent from any other church on the block? Perhaps this explains why our focus across the brotherhood is rapidly shifting from "saving the lost" to *"reaching the unchurched."*

On page 11 we read:

> We must sort out very carefully what is biblical and what is cultural about our religion, and not bind the latter. Divorce and remarriage and women in the church remain unresolved, but such must remain mere issues and not be allowed to shape our emerging identity. Instrumental music will remain an issue, but it certainly is not deserving of center stage, and never was. There is something grossly distorted about a religion which depends for its cohesiveness upon paltry issues that kill the spirit.

On pages 90-91 we are treated to his views on Christian fellowship:

> There should be room in the Christian fellowship for those who differ on whether more than one cup in communion *is* acceptable, whether the communion bread is to be pinched or snapped, whether one can eat in the church building, whether funds can be used from the church treasury to support orphan homes, whether the Lord's Supper must be taken every Sunday, or whether instrumental Music is used in worship. There should be room in the Christian fellowship for those who believe that Christ is the son of God, but who differ on eschatological theories such as premillennialism, ecclesiological matters such as congregational organization, or soteriological matters such as whether baptism is 'for' or 'because of' the remission of sins."

Thus, Osborn lumps the necessity of baptism and the "one cup" issue together in that category of "minor doctrines" that should not interfere with our quest for unity. How can we call someone a "brother" or "sister" in Christ when that person has not become our brother or sister through a new birth? If baptism occurs after remission of sins, then why does anyone need to be baptized at all? Why does a person who *is* spiritually alive need to be *buried* with Christ in baptism? According to Osborn, there is "room in the Christian fellowship" for those who differ on this issue.

Royce Money

Dr. Royce Money is the president of ACU. In connection with the 75th Annual ACU Lectureship in 1993, Dr. Money delivered an address entitled "*On This Rock I Will Build My Church.*" A transcript of the address was widely published by ACU, and was even included as a paid advertising insert in the May 1993, edition of the *Christian Chronicle*. The following excerpts are from ACU's published transcript of Money's address:

1. "Often I have read this passage [Matt. 16:13-18], and every time I find myself wondering what Jesus had in mind when he said 'church.' When Jesus promised to build his church on the confession of his Lordship, I wonder what he envisioned for his people, when he referred to 'my church.'"

2. "We must decide what is the driving *force* behind the restoration of New Testament Christianity. Is the process of restoring New Testament Christianity a relentless and continual search for God's truth? A process? Or is it accomplished fact? Have we restored everything in the New Testament church, or do we need to continue to search God's Word for a better glimpse of the truth?" Of course, one possibility he omits is that we have restored the New Testament church and that we (like the first century Christians) must nevertheless continue to search God's Word. That is, just because we continue to search God's Word does not mean that the church hasn't been restored. Again, if the church has not been restored — that is, if restoration of the church is not an accomplished fact — then we are members

of a denomination. How can the church of Christ be the New Testament church if restoration is not an accomplished fact?

3. Money continues: "*If you believe that the restoration of New Testament Christianity is an accomplished fact — that we have the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, the last thing you want is people going around trying to think and examine and search and question.*" Thus, according to the president of ACU, not only has the restoration of New Testament Christianity not occurred, but those of us who think it has occurred are doing our best to stifle all of the great minds at ACU who are trying to lead us out of the darkness by thinking, examining, searching, and questioning. Of course, in reality, it is we who constantly tell people to study their Bibles and test what they hear. The ACU position is that people are incapable of understanding the Bible without expert help. These ACU professors have all the answers about the church, and they (as Money's condescending statement shows) are here to remedy our ignorance. If these ACU church historians are really so interested in studying and examining the Bible, then why do their writings about the church spend so much time quoting Restoration leaders and so little time quoting the scriptures?

Douglas A. Foster

Douglas A. Foster is an assistant professor of church history and an assistant director of the Center for Restoration Studies at ACU. In 1994, he published a book entitled *Will the Cycle Be Unbroken: Churches of Christ Face the 21st Century* (1994, ACU Press). The premise of his book is that there are cycles through which "all religious movements tend to move" [p. v] and the "Churches of Christ" are moving through these same cycles.

1. The source he used for this idea is a book by Richard Niebuhr entitled *The Social Sources of Denominationalism.* On p. v, he describes this cycle as follows: "*A period of initial fervor and exclusivity is followed by a stable consolidating phase. Finally, the body settles into a respectable position in the larger religious world, but without its early vibrancy and success. The final stage involves decline that could ultimately lead to the body's death. Are Churches of Christ locked into this seemingly inescapable pattern?*"

2. On p. vii in footnote 1, he writes: "*I know that some are uncomfortable with terms like 'our heritage,' 'Restoration Movement churches,' or even 'Churches of Christ.' That fear is legitimate — we cannot equate our immediate heritage or anyone else's with the universal church of God in all times and places.*"

3. On page xi we read: "*Nostalgia has definitely set in among some of us. Many long for something that used to be, for better days, now seen as slipping away, when 'we stood for something.' What is that 'something'? Is it the proud confidence that we were 'right' and the 'only ones going to heaven?' Is it our reputation for knowing the Scriptures better than any other religious group? Is it the certainty that 'denominationalism' was wrong and that we were not a denomination? Is it the conviction that we had restored the church of the New Testament?*"

4. As for "our movement" and its origin, on pages 8-9 he discusses the "vibrant new movement" that was begun by Barton W. Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell. "*With their own leaders and slogans and a new zeal for standing for what they saw as the true basis of the original Stone/Campbell movement, the Churches of Christ took shape in the late 1800s and early 1900s.*"

5151 Edloe Street #14401
Houston, Texas 77005

(Editor's note: Thank you brother Hall for doing the research and bringing together in summary some of the problems confronting the restored church. We need to know these things — and we should want to know who is responsible.

> Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away (from them). For if the word spoken through angels proved stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation? which having at the first been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed unto us by them that heard; God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to his own will.)

FF