

Reclaiming the Point

Churches of Christ in the Present Age

By Brandon Pierce

When I was 18 I got hold of a book that was something of a life-changer. Being a rebellious and snarky kind of guy, it was hard for me to pass up the title: *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel* (by Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo). The book is an exercise in thinking about ways that all sorts of topics in religion seem to have gone astray from their original purpose. That fit my world well first because as a teenager it was easy to see what was wrong around me rather than what was right, but secondly, and more importantly, I was raised in a church that sometimes liked to talk about how we represent the Christianity of the New Testament, before it got ruined and corrupted. In scholarly circles we call this attitude “primitivism” (more on that later).

That book instigated a restlessness within me as I prepared for ministry in college. The more I learned about the Bible, about church history, about theology, etc., the more I felt like the church I came from was very far from the mark; that it was on a long adventure in missing the point. This inner frustration came to a head not in the explosion of a particular moment, but in a general disenchantment with Churches of Christ in my later collegiate years. I had too many bones to pick, and the grass looked greener on the other side. I liked the liturgy and tradition of the Orthodox Church. I liked the intellectual respectability of the Catholic Church. I liked the concern for social justice of the Disciples. I even liked the evangelical non-denominational churches, whose radical autonomy held the promise of an ecclesial blank slate that I could shape according to my own (correct, of course) ideas. I wanted to leave, but I never managed it.

There were some things that happened along the way that kept me in place—stories for another time. But what sealed the deal was an education about our Church of Christ history: discovering the better angels of our ecclesial nature that resonated deep within me.

- I discovered the concern for unity among Christians at the heart of our movement.
- I discovered our heart to dignify all people, not just clergy and scholarly professionals.
- I discovered the deep intellectual roots of our tradition that valued critical study of the Bible.
- I discovered a rationalism that lambasted fake, artificial religious experiences and sought after a true, authentic faith.
- I (re)discovered the beauty of a cappella music as a *communal* event that has and continues to shape my mind and my heart.
- I discovered the ethical heart of our tradition that placed many of our earliest figures at the heart of the abolitionist movement, and which developed inspired criticisms of the materialism and power-hungry ethos of our country that continues to this day.
- I learned a lot of things about our past that is worth bringing forth as sons and daughters into the future. Sometimes people need to convert or change affiliations to find where God is leading them. Other people just need to stay put and discover the beauty of the place they are already in. I was the latter.

This was not just a personal journey of discovery. It was a transformative education that shaped the way I see God and his Church. I am excited about Stamford because I think something incredible is going on there – many things actually. Whether people care very much about the “Church of Christ” label or not (which in many ways is for the better), there is something very Church of Christ-y going on there, but not in the way it is in many other places in our country. But where Stamford differs from its Church of Christ sisters and brothers across the country I think it has stuck to those better angels of our ecclesial nature. It is not a break with our past; it is a faithfulness to the best parts of it: unity, inclusivity, erring on the side of love, and an intellectual seriousness.

Over the next several months I want to discuss these “better angels” at length. I want to talk about the ways they have been lost and the ways in which we can reclaim them. And along the way I want to talk about how this reclamation of the virtues of our tradition will help deepen our own faith and community life, and provide a powerful witness to the world around us.

– Brandon Pierce