

HOW TO ARGUE LIKE A CHRISTIAN

Lesson 1: Thinking clearly

Before I delve into the doctrines that divide us, I begin with a series of lessons on how to argue. Not “argue” in the sense of being angry or hateful! Rather, I mean “argue” in the sense of a mathematical proof or an attorney’s brief or closing argument.

We in the Churches of Christ have forgotten how to argue as gentlemen and gentle-women. We are commanded to be gentle and not to quarrel—

(2 Tim. 2:24-25) And the Lord’s servant **must not quarrel**; instead, he must **be kind to everyone**, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must **gently instruct**, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth¹

And yet our internal disputes are often incredibly heated and even hateful.

Even when we are arguing with the right attitude, we are sometimes guilty of mistakes in our logic that bring into doubt all we claim. And so I’ll also mention a few very common errors. But notice this! Just because we point out that someone’s argument against instrumental music, for example, is logically flawed, we are criticizing his methods, not his conclusions.

We can’t persuade the world of the truth of our claims through sloppy, lazy arguments, as though no one will notice. Nor can we defend relying on loose logic because of our correct conclusions. To effectively persuade and to be taken seriously in the community of thoughtful people, we have to discipline ourselves to reason carefully and truly, even when a looser, more casual approach to truth might be more persuasive to some.

This is because the truth is just too important to be treated otherwise. Our goal is not to win—and certainly not to win at any cost. Our goal is to be true to our calling as Christians. Our goal is to be righteous, holy, and Christlike—and this means that our “lips [may] speak no guile” (1 Pet. 3:10 KJV). Jesus often failed to persuade, and yet he never compromised the truth.

When we adopt faulty reasoning to prove a point, we open ourselves up to heresy down the road. Once a given argument is sold as being sound, then we have to accept the soundness of the argument when applied to other issues, and a flawed argument will inevitably at some point lead to error. Therefore, we have to carefully avoid the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible passages are quoted from the New International Version (NIV). “KJV” indicates the King James Version.

temptation to gain the cheap victory through flawed inference. The dangers of being wrong are far too great to speak otherwise.

If we tell our classes and congregations that such-and-such line of reasoning is true, it needs to be absolutely true—both the conclusion and the reasoning—because we tell the people who rely on us that the conclusion and the reasoning are both true. The ends don't justify the means; the conclusions don't justify the reasoning.

Lesson 2: Words, Part 1 **Labels**

(Psalm 19:14) May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.²

Words matter. Words can bless and words can curse. Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead for their words. Jesus forgave the sins of the thief on a cross for his words. God created the universe with words. Jesus is the Word. Words matter very much indeed.

And yet we in the Churches of Christ have a tendency to be very careless about our words. To persuade others of our views, we often slander our brothers and sisters by calling them names and falsely stereotyping them. We often judge the motives of our opponents without justification. Much harm has been done, and great sin committed, through the careless use of words.

As I embark on an effort to reconcile warring factions within the Churches of Christ, we can easily frustrate our purposes by using words wrongly. Therefore, in my internet writings, I will try to use words very cautiously, “as though speaking the very oracles of God” (1 Pet. 4:11 KJV). Indeed, we are commanded to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15).

As I've considered the many issues that surround our divisions, I've quickly come to realize the Churches are so divided we don't even know how to describe the fact of our division. For example, if we call some congregations “conservative,” must we refer to others as “liberal”? While “conservative” is usually not an insult, “liberal” almost always carries a negative connotation in Church of Christ circles. Just so, if some churches are “institutional” or “cooperative,” are others “anti-institutional” or “anti-cooperative”? In Church of Christ circles, “anti” is usually used as a term of reproach.

As a matter of principle, I refuse to use words that demean hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters. Jesus condemned the use of “*Raca*” and “fool,” and surely he meant to prohibit the use of all demeaning labels. Hence, if someone permits a practice

² I will generally quote from the New International Version. I am well aware that the NIV has caught quite a bit of criticism—some of it very well deserved, some unfair. But all translations are imperfect human efforts, and all reflect the biases of their translators. When the NIV is wrong, I'll try to quote from a different translation or suggest my own translation. In fact, I'll be correcting the NIV quite often.

we consider wrong, I will refer to that person neither as a “liberal” nor as a “digressive.” These terms are intentionally insulting and therefore impermissible. And if someone considers a practice sinful that I consider permissible, I will not refer to him or her as an “anti.”

But surrendering these words to Jesus leaves me somewhat short of useful terms. After all, most of the terms we use to describe one another are intended as insults! (It’s hard to speak a sadder commentary on the current state of the Churches.) Hence, I will use the terms that each party uses to refer to itself. Those who are moving away from many of the practices and teachings that characterized the 20th Century Churches of Christ I’ll call “progressives.” Of course, I know that those who disagree would strongly dispute the term, insisting that they are making no progress at all but are, rather, digressing. But I’d rather be a bit controversial than violate the Sermon on the Mount.

Similarly, those who reject certain forms of inter-congregational cooperation I’ll call “non-institutional,” as this is their preferred term. And those who oppose the progressives I’ll call “conservatives.” The term generally refers to those who oppose change, and that is certainly apt in our current circumstances. Of course, in broader theological circles, “conservative” generally refers to a believer who accepts the inspiration of scripture, the virgin birth, miracles, and the divinity of Jesus—that is, not a liberal—and the fact is that *all* factions within the Churches of Christ are conservative in this sense. Those who are caught in the middle between conservatives and progressives, I’ll call “moderates.”

These divisions aren’t sharply defined. Many a congregation will be moderate but with tendencies toward being progressive or conservative. Indeed, there are degrees of being progressive and of being conservative. Hence, one progressive church might allow instrumental worship on occasion while another might vigorously oppose instrumental worship. I am imprecisely drawing lines along an ever-shifting continuum. Therefore, I will try to be careful to avoid overly generalizing about what conservative, or non-institutional, or progressive churches teach or practice. It is unlikely that much can be said about *all* churches of any classification except that all believe in Jesus, all accept the inspiration of scripture, and all seek to obey God’s commands as they understand them.

There are those who would dispute that last statement, but I’ve yet to come across a congregation of the Churches of Christ for which these conclusions aren’t true. Until proven to the contrary, I choose to think kindly of my brothers and sisters. Some see things differently, but I believe my approach is commanded by scripture.

(Matt. 7:1-2) “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

(James 4:11-12) Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

Lesson 3: Words, Part 2 **Judging motives**

As I consider the divisions within the Churches of Christ, my first and most important task is to press for a change in the tone of the conversation among the factions. Things have gotten so emotional that all sides are increasingly guilty of actions that are simply unjustifiable—and often very un-Christian.

For example, Paul Clements writes in the February 1999 issue of the *Firm Foundation*,

What about the music issue? It isn't an issue for one who accepts the Bible as God's Word. So, what's the problem? It's the same problem that has troubled the church from the start. Man wants to take liberties where God has not allowed. Maybe we have some who are assuming "apostolic privilege" and binding or loosing on earth when they want to set aside those doctrines that distinguish the church from the denominational world.

It's certainly fair to argue that instrumental music violates the scriptures, and if Clements had left off at that point, I'd have no criticism. But he instead insists on claiming that if you accept the authority of the Bible then instrumental music "isn't an issue." Really? Is the Bible so plain regarding *a cappella* music that it's *impossible* to accept the Bible as authoritative and yet believe the scriptures authorize instrumental music? Do *all* who use the instrument claim the authority to re-write scripture?

It's very convenient to assume that those who disagree with us necessarily do so with bad motives, but it's just not true. And we have no right to make accusations with no factual basis. I know a great many people who are persuaded that the Bible authorizes instrumental music and not a one of them denies the authority of the Bible or claims the apostolic authority to set aside scriptural teachings. *Not a solitary one.*

This sort of argumentation is known to debaters as an *ad hominem* attack, that is, an attack on the person rather than the argument being made. After all, if we are truly convinced that the Bible demands *a cappella* singing in worship, why isn't it enough to make the argument from scripture? Why stoop to attacking the motives of our opponents?

Now this is no trivial matter. Indeed, critics of the Churches of Christ have used our tendency to stoop to such tactics against us. See, for example, “Is the Church of Christ a Cult?” at <http://www.chocd.org/pages/5/>. More importantly, it’s just wrong—for at least three reasons.

First, to attack the motives of one’s opponents is to argue an irrelevance. If even a convicted child molester, thief, and murderer finds a sound argument for or against instrumental music, the argument’s soundness has nothing to do with the character of the man making it. This should be obvious. Therefore, when we use an *ad hominem* attack, we are missing the point and we demonstrate that we are unskilled thinkers.

Second, most of the time, such arguments are untrue. It’s just not true that all who argue for instrumental music in worship do so by denying inspiration. Anyone who has friends among denominations that use instruments will know this. In fact, if we intend to persuade those outside of our circle that they are wrong, we hardly do so convincingly if we begin by insulting them and compounding the sin by falsely accusing them of denying inspiration!

Third, we aren’t mind readers. How dare we presume to know the motives of our intellectual opponents? Are we the only people who want to obey God? Are our arguments so incredibly persuasive—and so well known—that all who disagree deny the inspiration of scripture? If we think this, we are truly deluded.

Therefore, while I am pleased to publish views contrary to mine on this web site, I will not publish *ad hominem* arguments—especially those that falsely accuse my opponents of bad motives. I pledge not to try to persuade by personal attacks or by presuming that all who disagree with me are bad, ill-intentioned people. If I violate this pledge, please call me on it.

(Titus 2:7-8) In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.

Lesson 4: Logic, Part 1 **The false dichotomy**

Your wife walks in the door fresh from the local dress shop. “Just look at this beautiful dress I bought!” she says. You notice that the dress is indeed very beautiful—too beautiful!

“*Ahem*. It looks really nice,” you say, “but how much did it cost?”

With a wicked grin she says, “Just \$10,000.”

After you pick your jaw off the floor and put your eyes back in their sockets, you say, trying to suppress your anger and surprise, “That’s too much. You know we can’t afford that kind of money!”

She responds, “You don’t want me to wear anything! Do you expect me to go around naked? Well, do you? I’ve worn out all my old clothes and now you won’t let me buy a thing! You are such an ogre!”

Your wife has just committed the logical error known as the “false dichotomy.” In other words, she’s falsely assumed that the only possibilities are the two extremes: a \$10,000 dress or nakedness. Of course, there are numerous other possibilities, and she knows it, but her goal isn’t to seek the truth, it’s to win the argument. So she hopes you are fooled by her ploy. You aren’t.

We make the same mistake in many of our doctrinal debates. For example, in discussing whether the Spirit indwells the Christian, we often assume that either the Spirit operates solely through the word of God or else the Spirit empowers the Christian to do miracles and to receive new revelations. Once we make a case against miracles and revelation, we believe we’ve proven the word-only position.

However, this is a false dichotomy, that is, we’ve falsely assumed that there are only two choices. Among the other possibilities to consider is that the Spirit operates on the heart of the Christian in a way that reinforces the action of the word. There are other possibilities.

Similarly, when we discuss scriptural silences, we assume that either all silences are prohibitions or all silences are permissions. Obviously, there’s another possibility: that some silences are prohibitions and some are permissions. Hmm. It’s very easy to demonstrate how foolish it would be to believe that all silences are permissions, but it’s harder to deal with the in-between possibility that some are and some aren’t.

In fact, the view of the institutional Churches has been, since at least the 1950’s, that some silences may become permissions for the sake of expedience, so that for example, the silence of the scriptures on orphans homes can be considered permissive, orphans homes being an expedient means of caring for orphans, as we are certainly commanded to do in James.

Now the point isn’t to re-argue the orphans home question but to point out that there are often in-between positions that are ignored in our debates. Of course, some in-between positions are very wrong—but *sometimes* truth is found in between the extremes.

Lesson 5: Logic, Part 2 **Camels noses and compromises**

At a Sunday morning assembly, the elder making the closing announcements asks the members and visitors to pass in their attendance sheets. At no one’s request, a seven-year old girl named Katie gets up to help pick up the sheets. She’s seen her friends (all

boys) do the same thing the last several weeks and just assumes that if her friends can pick up announcement sheets, so can she.

Afterwards, two members who noticed this event ask to meet with the elders. The elders invite them to their next meeting, unaware that they have opposite feelings on the matter.

At the meeting, the elders tell the two members they should feel free to express their concerns. The older member, named Sam, begins.

“I can’t tell you how upset I am about this. I haven’t slept a wink since Sunday morning. That little Smith girl got up to pick up announcement sheets, and not a soul did anything to stop her! I mean, she walked right past two deacons and an elder, and they did nothing!”

An elder responded, “You know, of course, that this was an entirely spontaneous action by the girl. We didn’t ask her to take up announcement sheets. But when she walked by me, smiling, so proud to be helping out at church, I just didn’t have the heart to tell her that God wouldn’t approve of her serving the congregation this way. There really wasn’t time to think through all the doctrinal ramifications, but—on the spot—I couldn’t think of a scripture that permits boys to do this and not girls. And, you know, I still can’t. But maybe I’ve missed something. Is there a scriptural problem here? I mean, there may be reasons of expedience that we decide not to allow this, but before we talk about the practical implications, we really have to consider what God says.”

The older member looked the elder in the eye, ready to take up the challenge. “I know that she wasn’t asked to speak, or teach, or exercise authority. But I know this: this sort of thing is the way these things begin. First, you let girls take a seemingly neutral role in worship. Then you give the women the right to pass communion. Pretty soon, they’re preaching, and then you make them elders! It’s the camel’s nose under the tent! Giving women too much authority always starts with something like this! It’s happened at lots of congregations!”

Another elder turns to the younger member. “Joe, you haven’t said anything. Are you here to support what Sam says, or do you have something else on your mind?”

“No. I’m not here to support Sam. I love and appreciate Sam. He’s served the Lord very well over the years. In fact, I care so much for Sam that I’m not sure I’d have come if I’d known he’d be here taking the position that he has. I don’t want to start an argument or divide the church. But I just see things differently.

“You see, I have three daughters. They are bright, servant-hearted girls, and I can’t tell you how excited they were to see Katie picking up announcement sheets! And I’m scared to death that telling that sweet little Katie that she can’t pick up announcement sheets will just be the first step in our taking some major steps backwards regarding women. I’m so worried about this I haven’t slept a wink since Sunday.

“Right now, we don’t require women to wear hats in church, but we used to. Are we going back to that? And it used to be that we wouldn’t let women ask questions in class. Are we going back to that? And are we going to make them wear dresses on Sunday night and Wednesday night like we used to? Are we going to start preaching sermons against women wearing pants like we used to? Are we going to ban jewelry and make up like we used to? I just can’t bear the thought of telling my daughters they can’t play soccer anymore because they can’t wear pants even for sports—but that’s what we told my grandmother! And it looks to me like we’re right back there. It’s the camel’s nose under the tent!

“It just seems to me that we have this great opportunity to treat our girls better than we treated their mothers, and we’re going to blow it, and for no good reason. In fact, I’ve heard of lots of churches where this sort of thing was the first step in taking the church 50 years backwards in terms of our treatment of women! I don’t want to have women elders or preachers, but I just can’t ask my wife and daughter to go back to way things used to be!”

The second elder smiled. “So no matter what we do, we’re going to bring a host of evils down on this congregation, right? I mean, one seven-year old girl picks up a few pieces of paper and suddenly any decision we make leads to a long list of horrors, right?” The two members nodded, maybe a little sheepishly.

The oldest eldest who’d been listening intently with his eyes closed, spoke up. “Gentlemen. I thank you so much for caring enough about God’s word and about our members—men and women, girls and boys—to come speak with us. I think you are both sincere and both make well-intended points. You are good-hearted men.

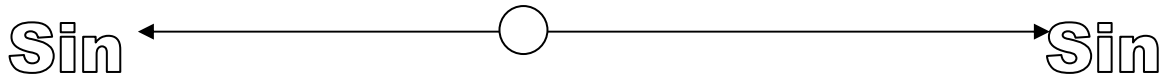
“But I’ve been an elder for an awfully long time, and I learned something a long time ago that might be of some help here: no matter what decision we make on anything, no matter what we decide, any decision we ever make—taken to extremes—will have ungodly results. But it’s our God-give job to make decisions. We just need to be sure that we don’t go to extremes—either extreme. And I can assure both of you that no matter which way we go, we’ll not go to either extreme. None of these terrible things you are afraid of will happen at this church so long as God gives me and my brother elders breath. We’ll make a decision. I don’t know what it will be because we’ve not talked about it yet. But we know our scriptures, and we respect our women, and neither of you needs to lose any more sleep.”

It’s a classic argument, you know—the camel’s nose under the tent. Let the camel stick his nose under the tent skirt and pretty soon the whole camel’s come in and destroyed the tent and everything in it. And sometimes this is true, but not nearly as often as our editors and authors would have us think.

You see, there’s not a single position or decision that anyone can ever make that—taken to extremes—couldn’t lead to something clearly sinful. And as our story attempts to illustrate, it’s remarkable how many of our brothers and sisters know of countless congregations where just this thing has happened. Of course, rarely can they

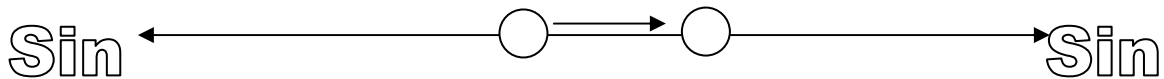
give the names of those churches! But we sometimes imagine to be true what we are afraid is true. It's one those human flaws that so plague us all.

Perhaps a chart will help make the point.

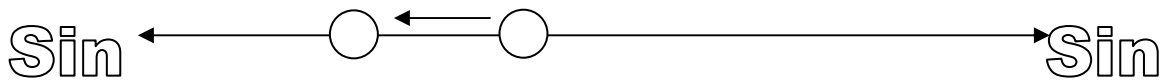


The line represents all the possible outcomes of a decision. The arrow tips are the sinful extremes. Of course, there are usually, maybe always, sinful extremes in both directions. The circle is where a congregation presently is on the issue. This congregation is just a hair left of center.

Any change in a given position moves the church closer to a sinful position:

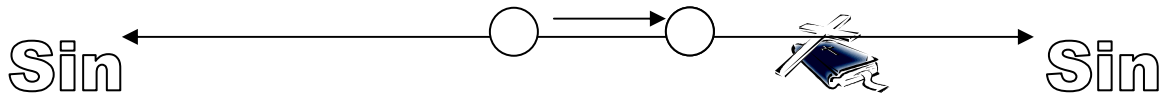


If the church moves a bit to the right, it's moving toward the extreme right.



But a decision to the left, moves the church one step closer toward the extreme left. No matter which way the church changes, it moves toward a sinful extreme. And so, do we refuse to ever change? Well, only if we are never wrong, and only Jesus can make that claim!

The solution is to get away from worrying about extremes. Rather, we need to worry about *truth*, and we need to always move in the direction of truth, even though a movement toward truth will always also be a move toward a sinful extreme.



In the above example, a move to the right not only moves the church closer to the sinful extreme on the far right, it moves the church closer to scriptural truth. Even if members, editors, or others protest the move—and accurately point out how this moves the church closer to the sin on the far right—the church *must* make this move. In fact, it should move even further. Of course, the church should also carefully refrain from moving too far.

Now this brings us to a related fallacious argument, the compromise argument. Just as every move can accurately be described as moving the church closer to a sinful extreme, every move can also be categorized as compromise with a sinful extreme.

Take the most recent chart above. When the elders decide to move the church to the right, those who disagree can characterize the move as a compromise between the church's former position and the sinful too-far-right extreme. After all, the church's new position will not only be closer to the sinful right, it will not go all the way, making it

look an awful lot like compromise. Of course, this “compromise” happens to move the church closer to the truth.

Now we need to make an important distinction here. Proving that a position happens to be a move toward a sinful position does not make it wrong, does not make it a compromise, and doesn’t prove it will lead to sin. After all, all moves are toward a sinful extreme.

On the other hand, if someone intentionally adopts a change for wicked motives, then the change is wrong. Such a person may well be guilty of compromise with Satan. And such a change may well lead to ever-greater sin. I am not at all suggesting that no change can lead to sin or that no compromise ever occurs. Rather, the point is that it takes much more to prove someone wrong than to point out that the change he or she proposes is in the direction of some wrongful extreme. And far too often, we’ve accepted such arguments as convincing. They are not.

We are going to have to content ourselves with proving arguments wrong by the scriptures rather than fears of what may happen next or spurious compromise claims. On the other hand, it is perfectly fair when an eldership encourages change in any direction to ask them how far they intend to take things. If the elders give an answer, they should be believed.

The Scriptures explicitly prohibit making charges against elders “except on the testimony of two or three witnesses” (1 Tim. 5:19). Speculation about what may come next hardly measures up to this standard and is a form of rebellion against God’s leaders. (We’ll talk more about “two or three witnesses” in the next lesson.)

Lesson 6: Logic, Part 3

Slander, gossip, and swimming pools

This story is told by a campus minister friend of mine.

In anticipation of fall semester, the minister wrote congregations around the state inviting students coming to attend the University of Alabama to participate in his student ministry. He pointed out the many advantages of doing so, inviting the students to come see “our pool and ping pong table.”

Well, it wasn’t long before a rather strongly worded bulletin article made the rounds pointing how his church has a “swimming pool.” The bulletin made its way to the campus minister, who was mortified, because his church has no swimming pool—never has, never will. In fact, he’d meant to write that the student center has “pool and ping pong tables.” He got one little “s” wrong and suddenly he’s being lambasted in the church periodicals.

He called the minister who’d written the article, explained the typographical error, apologized for the error and the trouble he’d caused. He assured the minister that his church has no pool. The minister who’d written the bulletin was unconvinced. The campus minister offered to buy his gas if he’d come to Tuscaloosa and see for himself

that there is no pool! The minister responded, “I don’t need to come to Tuscaloosa. I already know that you have a pool”!

Perhaps it was pride that kept the bulletin-writing minister from publishing a retraction. Or maybe he’s just one of those people who likes to think the worst in others. But the man’s baptism seems not to sunk all the way into his heart. I mean, interpreting the first letter as referring to a swimming pool is understandable. Refusing to learn the actual facts is sin of a particularly pernicious kind.

An article in the *Firm Foundation* illustrates a related concern. An author was concerned that Rubel Shelley and other preachers were speaking before a denominational assembly. The author declared, “I’m told that at least one of them might have even worn the robe of the hosting clergy while delivering his address.” http://www.bible-infonet.org/ff/articles/agents/111_08_17.htm.

Was the author reporting a fact? No, he was repeating a rumor. Not even that: he quoted a rumor obviously based on rank speculation. With no evidence of any kind, he sullied the reputation of his intellectual opponent.

The Bible condemns *katalalia*, variously translated as slander, backbiting, and evil speaking (1 Pet. 2:1; 2 Cor. 12:20). Of course, false witness, lying, gossip, filthy language, whisperings, murmuring, and such are also condemned in the strongest of terms. And yet we sometimes feel that the truth of the gospel is so important that we are justified in these very behaviors in its defense. But you can’t, by sinning, defend freedom from sin! You can’t defend Jesus by denying what he stands for!

In fact, Church of Christ periodicals and sermons ought to be the most carefully fact-checked information on the planet. We ought to be known as a people who love, not only the truth of the Bible, but truth in general. We can’t lie to defend the truth! Nor can we be casual or careless about the facts. We need to make every effort not to bear false witness, even unintentionally. Unintentional lies do just as much harm to their victims as intentional lies. If you feel compelled to say something negative, then follow the scriptures: be sure you have “two or three witnesses” (Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1).

Jesus’ and Paul’s reference is to Deut. 19:15. Of course, the inspired authors did not intend that we allow rapists to go free if we have no witnesses but we have DNA evidence or a video tape. The point is that we must be very, very careful before we make an accusation, much less a judgment. In the immediately following verses, the Law declares that where it’s one man’s word against another’s (there aren’t two or three witnesses), the judges must “make thorough investigation” and then render judgment. “Thus v. 15 states the general requirement of the Law; vv. 16-21 attempt to provide a means of dealing with cases where circumstances might not allow the normal requirement to be met” P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: 1976), 276.

In other places where judges are to conduct fact-findings, the Law requires that they “must inquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly.” Deut. 13:14. See also Deut.

17:4. However, in the case of the death penalty, the testimony of single witness is specifically made insufficient to condemn. Deut. 17:6.

In the American criminal system, the more serious the accusation, the higher the standard of proof. Thus, a murder conviction is extremely difficult to obtain. But far too often, in the Church of Christ, we destroy reputations on a whim.

(Prov. 22:1) A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

A man who takes another man's reputation wrongly is a thief and should be treated as such. Far too often, such men instead receive honors, obeisance, and subscription revenue. Those who aren't honored are feared. But such men should be called to repentance.

Lesson 7: Logic, Part 4 Abusing the language

Another reason that we in the Churches of Christ have trouble working things out among one another is our abuse of the language. In fact, a stranger to our publications would often be mystified at our use of words.

Liberal

For example, we throw around "liberal" using a meaning for the term that is completely foreign to its definition. "Liberal" has a specialized meaning in religious circles. When discussing Christianity, "liberal" means someone who denies the inspiration of scripture and the incarnation of Jesus. For example, see the article on liberalism in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09212a.htm>, and Jack Cottrell's article on Protestant liberalism at http://www.christianchronicler.com/history1/protestant_liberalism.html. Calling someone a "liberal" in a religious conversation is a very serious charge.

We, however, mean "someone who doesn't bind a law that I think Jesus binds." But sometimes we blend the two, arguing that the man who fails to read the Bible as we do must deny the inspiration of scripture to do so. Hence, if you have the audacity to disagree with me, you must be a liberal in the "denies Jesus" sense. But in reality, denying my understanding of divorce and remarriage or worship in the assembly is a far cry from denying Jesus—unless I consider myself of equal authority with the carpenter from Nazareth!

And so, we use the word contrary to its accepted definition. Worse yet, when we do so, we say things that communicate a much greater criticism than may be intended. Or sometimes we say much worse things than are deserved. Therefore, in my discussions, I will use "liberal" only its generally accepted sense. To speak otherwise is to risk being guilty of slander, which is utterly unacceptable among Christians.

Change agents

It's lately become popular to designate certain preachers and authors as "change agents," and such people are spoken of in very harsh terms. Clearly, the term is intended to be an insult. However, outside the Churches of Christ, the term has a well-understood, highly complimentary meaning.

One website defines "change agent" as—

A person who leads a change project or business-wide initiative by defining, researching, planning, building business support and carefully selecting volunteers to be part of a change team. Change agents must have the conviction to state the facts based on data, even if the consequences are associated with unpleasantness.³

A change agent is charged by management with making much-needed changes in an institution even when most people in the institution resist the change, often with underhanded tactics. The change agent is the good guy. Countless books, businesses, and seminars are dedicated to helping train people in the skills needed to effectively change businesses, government agencies, and such as management wishes.

Therefore, to call a preacher a "change agent" *should* be to accuse of him of working for management (God) to assert the facts (God's truth) despite opposition from critics (church members who have weak faith or who misunderstand God's will).

However, many within the conservative ranks of the Churches of Christ use the term as an insult, indeed, as an accusation. According to them, change agents seek to impose change contrary to God's will. Thus, to someone not familiar with the peculiarities of Church of Christ jargon, the use of "change agent" as an insult comes across as, well, uninformed.

Again, as I am familiar with the standard use of the term, I will not refer to those who advocate change I disagree with as change agents. Indeed, as I am attempting to bring unity to a disunited body, that is, change, I am myself a change agent, as the word is generally understood.⁴

Denomination

"Class, I want to show you something that has me really upset," the teacher began. He placed a transparency on an overhead projector. "This is the ad in the Saturday

³ Manoj Bhardwaj, *iSixSigma Quality Dictionary and Glossary* (Mar. 13, 2003) http://www.isixsigma.com/dictionary/Change_Agent-393.htm (typographical errors corrected).

⁴ I hope no one is so corrupt as to take this quote out of context!

paper that many of the larger churches in town runs ads in. Lot's visitors to the community use this to find a church to visit on the next day. And yet, we're not in it!

"There's a line item in our budget for us to be in this ad. I was at a deacons meeting where this was specifically approved—months ago. I yet we're not listed! I don't know if the paper's messed up or if someone in the church office botched this, but—I tell you—I'm pretty concerned about this." The teacher pauses to catch his breath and sees hands up across the room.

A woman on the front row is particularly animated and doesn't even wait to be called on. "We are up there! Can't you see!" Several other class members nod vigorously.

The teacher appears clueless. He stares at the projection and says, "I don't see it. You're going to have to show me. Walk up here at point."

The woman obligingly points to the ad very prominently displayed under the caption "Churches of Christ." The teacher looks shocked—shocked!

He says, "Oh!! I'm so embarrassed. I'm sorry I've wasted so much class time. You see, I was looking in the wrong place." The class looks puzzled. "Well, didn't you get confused, too?" The class looks more confused. The teacher continues, "I was looking under 'Nondenominational.' Where else would I have looked?"

The class laughs. The point's been made. The teacher then leads a discussion about what how far removed we've become from the nondenominational ideal.

Church of Christ writers often make a point of distinguishing us from "the denominations" and insist that we are not "a denomination." Whether these statements are true depends on what "denomination" means. And as is so often true, our use of the word is contrary to the conventional use of the word. A thoughtful discussion is found at www.reference.com—

A denomination in the Christian sense is an identifiable religious body, organization under a common name, structure, and/or doctrine.

Christianity, in modern times, exists under diverse names. These variously named groups, Anglicans, Baptists, Catholics, etc. are called denominations. ...

Comparisons between denominational groups must be approached with caution. For example, in some groups, congregations are part of one monolithic church

organization, while in other groups, each congregation is an independent autonomous organization.⁵

By this definition, which closely tracks most people's use of the term, the Churches of Christ are a denomination. We are certainly identifiable. Indeed, we often merit our own special section in the Yellow Pages, and we routinely insist on being listed there rather than under "Nondenominational"! We have a common name, we are consistently autonomous in structure, and we have very uniform doctrine (although this is becoming less and less true). Indeed, the very fact that your author can say "we" and expect to be understood as referring to those people who advertise themselves as the Church of Christ in the Yellow Pages proves that we meet this definition.

However, within the Churches of Christ, we take great pride in not being a denomination while asserting that all the other churches are. One argument is that a denomination claims to be only a part of a larger church of Christ. As we refuse to divide ourselves from the entirety of the church of Christ, we insist on not being a denomination. This is a noble aspiration. We shouldn't divide the body of Christ. But this is simply not what "denomination" means. Some denominations claim to be part of the larger body of Christ. Others claim to be the only saved people. In fact, there are countless denominations that claim to be the only saved people. The Catholics and Eastern Orthodox being two very large examples.

The confusion likely stems from the word "denominationalism," which does indeed refer to the belief that all denominations are going to heaven. Someone somewhere likely failed to realize that denominationalism, which is indeed error, is not the same thing as being a denomination. It's an understandable mistake.

Another claim is that "denomination" means as a body of people practicing error. And in our experience, most members of the Churches of Christ, when they insist we are not a denomination, mean that we are not guilty of error, at least not so much error that we've lost our souls. By that definition, we certainly don't want to be a denomination! But this is just not what the word means to anyone outside the Churches of Christ.

One example of this approach is to argue that the denominations insist on adopting unbiblical titles: Methodist, Baptist, or the like, while we use a biblical name only. But this doesn't explain why we consider the Church of God or Assemblies of God, for example, denominations even though their names are found in the Bible ("assembly" is a perfectly good translation of *ekklesia*, also translated church). And again, "denomination" simply doesn't mean "a body of people with an unscriptural name."

More subtly, some argue that a denomination is a church with a national or state office. Hence, the sin of being a denomination is to violate the Bible's teachings on church autonomy. The trouble with that position is that there are a great many

⁵ Typographical errors corrected.

denominations out there that teach and practice congregational autonomy. And yet we insist on referring to them as denominations, too.

To refer to the Churches of Christ as a denomination is not to accuse us of error or of having a denominational hierarchical organization. It doesn't describe us as lost, and it doesn't imply that the other denominations are also saved. It just means that we are separate from the others by name and doctrine, and indeed we are.

A conclusion

But our argument is much broader than these particulars. If we expect the world that surrounds us to understand us, we need to know how to speak the common language. If we give terms meanings within the Churches of Christ that differ from their use outside, we become insular and out of touch, unable to effectively tell the lost of the world who we really are and why they should join us.

We are at risk of becoming as foreign and incomprehensible to the world as the Catholics were when they insisted on always conducting church in Latin. Indeed, we are repeating the mistake of the medieval Catholic Church that refused to allow the Bible to be translated into the vernacular—we make it unnecessarily hard for people to understand us when we try to teach them the good news of Jesus! If we love the lost of the world, then we'll endeavor to avoid usages and definitions that make us hard to understand. In fact, there are times we think we've so confused our language that we have trouble speaking to one another!

Lesson 8: Not doing your homework The progressive sin

The first goal of argumentation is to speak the truth in love. The second goal is to persuade. The progressive wing of the Churches is especially weak when it comes to being persuasive.

For example, when Max Lucado argues that baptism isn't essential in his *In the Grip of Grace*, the only argument he makes is that baptism is a symbol, like circumcision. Lucado writes beautiful prose, and makes some points, but does he really expect the conservative members of the Churches of Christ to be persuaded by such an argument? Surely not. Those already inclined to think that way were surely affirmed by the book, but those firmly convicted on baptism aren't about to change their mind on such a flimsy argument.

In Rubel Shelley's *I Just Want to be a Christian*, he argues for a broader view of grace and fellowship based Jesus' declaration that "he who is not against me is for me." Is anyone not already inclined to agree with Shelley going to be persuaded by this argument? Surely not. In fact, Jesus also said that "he is who not for me is against me."

The *Firm Foundation* took Bill Banowsky to task (http://www.bible-infonet.org/ff/articles/acu/111_11_01.htm) for arguing that we should accept some denominations as brothers and sisters because Jesus said, "I have other sheep that are not

of this sheep pen.” It was correctly pointed out that Jesus was referring to Gentile converts to Christianity as opposed to Jews—not Baptists as opposed to those in the Churches of Christ.

Many times a preacher or author has expressed his view that baptism isn’t essential without bothering to tell his audience why they should agree with him. Do these leaders not realize how distressing it is to have these arguments made and yet so very poorly supported? There are many within the Churches who’d love to believe that the Baptists or Methodists are going to heaven, and they are thrilled to hear great preachers say so—and then crushed when the preachers offer so little in support of their views.

And here’s the thing: even if they’re right, they’ve done a huge disservice to the Church by offering these opinions without laying out a careful, thoughtful case sufficient to persuade an open-minded person not already of the same mind. Even if they’re right, their repeated failure to lay out a case necessarily leads to division, as some church members just can’t follow their lead without the chapter and verse argument.

As I offer up arguments for greater unity among Christians, I am going to try to avoid this mistake. I’ll explain my thinking and do so very carefully and thoroughly. I hope you don’t lose patience with me, but the deliberate pace is for a very good reason. We’ve gone too fast for too long. It’s time to slow down, catch our breaths, and open the Bible. We need to put personalities and anger behind us. No more name calling and labels. No intellectual shortcuts and sloppy thinking. Rather, it’s time to painstakingly lay the word of God out in all its beauty and elegance and see where it leads us.

Please ask questions as we go, and feel free to express your disagreements. This is not a lecture—it’s a conversation. Join me.