

# “O MAN OF GOD”

2 Timothy 3:16–17

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## PASTORS, LGBTQIA2S+, AND FELLOWSHIP LINES: EXAMINING THE DISCUSSIONS AMONG THE UMC, SBC, AND THE COC

### FAITH AND WALKING TOGETHER

One prophetic question, still uttered and written today is, “How can two walk together accept they be agreed” (Amos 3:3)? And though the question is rhetorical, expecting a certain answer, our present religious expectation is that two should walk together, though they disagree. This is not the outcome the prophet Amos envisioned. More recent than Amos, religious people often find themselves considering another piercing question: “Can’t we all get along” (Rodney King, 05.01.1992)? Before us we have both a desire for getting along, and a prerequisite for walking together.

The desire to get along is certainly a respectable desire. Our country would function with less fussing, fighting, bickering and focus on prejudice. Our neighborhoods would realize a reduction in crimes against humanity. Our homes would be places where domestic violence was not experienced. And the church would benefit as well, eliminating church brawls and member separations. But when it comes to really getting along, what cannot be absent is agreement.

Agreement and disagreement are both realities in our relationships with one another. And recent religious history manifests that though believers want to get along, there is difficulty walking together when there is a hurdle demanding agreement. What is to be done about the disagreement?

The approach many take is to live as if there is no real disagreement worthy of discussion among the religious. This is certainly fueled by positions encouraging,

“you have your faith and I have mine.” It is undergirded by questions like, “what right does anyone have to question something someone believes deep in his or her heart”? Then there is the attempt to make persons ashamed about their refusal to “go along to get along” by suggesting that the God of love accepts everybody’s sincere beliefs, and we should too. All of these positions serve as an armor shielding its adherents from attacks on their unwillingness to ask, “what does the Lord require”?

It is apparent, however, that there are people among certain faith fellowships who are asking about what the Lord requires, or more importantly, they want to know what Scriptures actually teach. They want to be as noble as those of Berea who received the word with all readiness of mind and searched the scriptures to see if the things said were so (Acts 17:11).



### Faith Fellowships in the News: Southern Baptists

Southern Baptists comprise the largest faith fellowship in the United States. The organization, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), boasts some 13.5 million adherents to their teachings. Recently, the SBC was rocked by allegations of sexual abuses that were not properly addressed, or, in a faith context, not han-

dled in biblical and godly ways. News of these events shocked even the convention’s own members. But as damaging as this ungodly news was, when it comes to issues affecting the Baptists, recent disagreements on the role of women and the issues of who is a pastor have been the more recent destructive concerns of the SBC.

On the role of women, Beth Moore, one of the most prolific woman writers among the Southern Baptists, split with the organization, as well as its publishing arm, Lifeway, in 2021. This left people asking what were the real issues she had with the organization, though she named racism and sexual abuse among the problems. But there are persons who believe that her influence had become far too much for what is often seen as a male dominated fellowship, a position undermining the egalitarian beliefs of many religious persons. By egalitarianism, we mean the position that allows both men and women to hold the same offices and perform the same functions in the church.

The position reserving some roles as distinctively held by males is complementarianism. Complementarianism agrees that the work of both men and women are important, but their roles and functions are different. This position is viewed by many as male domination.

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On the issue of male domination, especially when one speaks of the role of pastors, another prolific writer, Rick Warren, former pastor of the Saddleback church, the second largest Baptist church in the convention, recently questioned the insistence that only men should serve in the role of pastors. He demonstrated his willingness to change such positioning by anointing females pastors. And most recently attempted to justify his new positions in a series of writings and broadcasts.

The SBC responded to Rick Warren's position, deciding to break friendship lines with Saddleback. And though Rick Warren has attempted to have the SBC reconsider, the SBC has held to its position, insisting that only men serves as pastors, and that the church remains separated from the SBC. These discussions have not been voiced in secret, but have made national and international news.



## Faith Fellowships in the News: United Methodists

The SBC has not grabbed headlines alone. The United Methodist Church (UMC) has also made national, international, and "global" news. Their size is not as large as the SBC, listing some 6, 239, 000 members. But they, too, have concerns about who pastors, who serves. Their concern, however, revolves around the LGBTQ community. They ask whether those from the LGBTQ community can be ordained as pastors, what constitutes godly marriage, and whether those who do not accept ordaining persons of the LGBTQ community should remain in

the denomination. Can those who disagree over doctrine remain in fellowship with one another?

The UMC is on the front pages of much printed media. The church is presently going through one of the largest divisions in recent world church history. A new body of believers continues to identify with the newly formed Global Methodist Church (GMC). The Global Methodists take positions that do not recognize gay marriages and that deny the possibility of ordaining pastors from the LGBTQ community. This position is of course unpopular with modern society and cultural expectations.

The differences between the GMC and the UMC, as stated by leaders in the GMC organization, has to do with Social Principles (UMC) and Social Witness (GMC). The Social Witness teachings are binding on the clergy and churches that identify with the GMC. There are many churches and clergy that who accept these teachings and are proud of their association with the GMC. As of May of 2023, almost 2000 churches and 2400 clergy now identify with the GMC. One should further note that while marriage and ordination of LGBTQ clergy are of concern with the GMC, the church does not forbid women from participating in every level of leadership within the church.



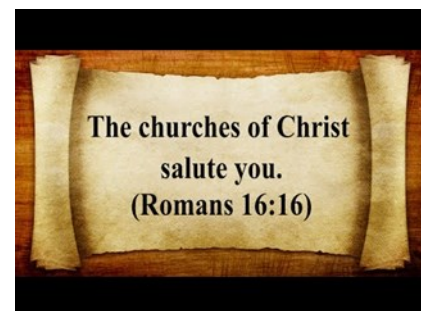
A transitional leadership council presently serves as the overriding structure governing the UMC. At its head is Keith Boyette, appointed in June of 2022. Others serving on the leadership council include Reverend Dr. Kimba Evariste of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ms. Krystal Gault, leader in the Pennsylvania Council, the Rev. Jessica LaGrone, an elder and Dean of Asbury Theological

Seminary, and the Rev. Dr. Daniel Topalski who has served as leader of the WCA's Eastern Europe Regional Chapter. The GBC manifests no desire to adhere to their former fellowship with the UMC.

## Faith Fellowships in the News: Churches of Christ

News related to issues in churches of Christ is on a much smaller scale than the faith fellowships of Baptists and Methodist. Churches of Christ acknowledge somewhere around 2 million members and 40,000 individual congregations. And though the SCB and UMC have no authorizing authority on a national scale, they do unite around conventions aimed at fostering close connections between churches within their denominations. This does not occur at any significant level among churches of Christ.

Though there is no organizational entity, it has been noted that colleges, and universities, print media, national figures and lectureships have played a major role in fostering a sense of unity among believers who are a part of this restorationist tradition. Throughout its history, there have been positions considered conservative and liberal, then, more recently, progressive. Various issues related to the concerns in the SBC, UMC, and GMC have also been a part of the discussion in churches of Christ.



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There are now women preachers and elders in some churches of Christ. The distinctions made between preachers and pastors is blurred. Many senior and younger members have adopted a use of the word, pastor, to identify the person who at one time was known as the preacher. Churches are experimenting with where to place women in worship. Should she read the Scripture? Should she officiate the communion service? Should she lead congregational prayers? Why should not more women be encouraged to serve as elders?

While the concerns over leadership are one of the main issues, proper teachings on the LGBTQ community have also become a part of church conversations. Centering these discussions is how to receive those who either practice the LGBTQ lifestyles or have ceased from the lifestyles. Are these allowed to be in fellowship? Are those who engage in the lifestyle forbidden from leading in worship? Since God loves all, is it appropriate to question the way he made these individuals?

Practices related to these concerns vary from region to region, city to city, and church to church. What is most interesting is the level of disinterest among many in seeking answers from Scripture, an attitude found especially among those who would consider themselves more progressive.

At the same time, many who have adopted practices of women ordination to the eldership, as well as uses of mechanical instruments, and the LGBTQ community have found a way to make Scripture speak afresh of concerns that they believe have been misunderstood for emerging cultural growth. That is, though Scripture may have required one understanding in a different time and culture, believers are free to make the Scripture relevant for modern culture.

## **CHURCHES OF CHRIST AND FELLOWSHIP**

The number of issues drawing fellowship lines among members of churches of Christ are well known to students of their history. Even as the Restoration movement gained footing in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were questions about the extent of fellowship allowed among those discarding early Calvinist positions and how abandonment of such teachings would reshape church dynamics.

As prominent figures emerged in the nineteenth century, their voices became more distinct and their championing of their biblical positions entered a newer and more fierce stage of advocating for an ancient order. Now there were discussions about baptism for believers, and what to do about those who would not submit to believer's baptism.

What unity was the goal? Was it a unity among several denominations, or only a unity between Restorationist churches like the Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ? How long could these sectional churches, with their leaders, maintain the unity?

When it became evident that there would be war between the states, how would churches and brethren North and South relate to each other? Was it appropriate to join the Confederate Army and go to war against brothers in the Union Army? How would the churches relate to each other after the conflict, through Reconstruction and throughout Lost Cause ideology?

Was it true that churches of Christ did not split over slavery, or are the lines drawn distinctly evident that the split was a North and South split specifically over what to do with the enslaved, formally enslaved, and freedmen who were also known as coloreds and negroes?

In a church that boasted its plea for unity, how was one to explain the most segregated hour in America? Churches

were divided over the issue of integration, and the building of edifices barely beyond the noise of baptism waters in one church from another evidences an urgent attempt, not to be together, but separated.

There have been other issues: the work of the Holy Spirit, millennialism, missionary societies, cooperation, children's homes, political involvement, support for Christian schools, Race, higher education. Churches of Christ have had no smooth sailing as they have navigated their way through the decades.

We are not to forget that both the Crossroads movement and the Boston movement shook church fellowships to their core. And without sounding simplistic, let us state that through it all, what has been core to the mission of churches of Christ has survived. That core calling has been for a recognition of God's intent for humanity and the church as revealed in Scripture and as practiced by the church in those Scriptures.

At this point in history, older concerns: justification for mechanical instruments of music, lines of fellowship and Race are still discussed. But demanding more time is the issue of the concern for the organization of the church, the ministry of women, the title, pastor, and what it suggests about ministers, the LGBTQ community and open fellowship. Even more concerning, what continued role does Scripture have in determining the life, structures, worship, and practices of the church?

## **SCRIPTURE AND PASTORS: WOMEN, LGBTQ, AND MEN**

Baptists, Methodists and Churches of Christ all use the terms, bishops, pastors, and teachers. But there are differences in their understanding in relation to the structure of the church. Baptist churches are organized with the pastors as ultimate authority.

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Within their churches, deacons are appointed to further provide guidance and to serve as advisors to the pastor.

The pastor may function in a singular role. The SBC continues to have discussion on the scriptural model of elder led churches, discussing that elders were often in a plurality in biblical texts. Their current concern has more to do with whether women should be pastors. That practice is rejected by the SBC.

Women pastors in the UMC and GMC are not an issue. Both organizations accept women as scripturally sanctioned pastors. The issue that splits them is whether those who are a part of the LGBTQ community should be ordained as pastors. The UMC has allowed this, causing a split with those who are now the GMC. Their position is further informed by their belief that the bible sanctions marriage only between a man and a woman. This position makes it impossible for one to meet this requirement who is married to someone of the same sex.

In churches of Christ, the terms elders, pastors/shepherds and bishops all refer to the same office (Acts 20:28, Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Titus 1:6–9, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Peter 5:1–6). In many churches of Christ there are only two leadership roles, that of elders (pastors/shepherds/bishops) and deacons. This teaching is more predominant among Caucasian churches of Christ. Among African American churches of Christ, however, the role of the Evangelist/preacher is also considered a part of the leadership structure (Ephesians 4:11).

Both African American churches of Christ and Caucasian churches of Christ have taught that one of the pastors can be the preacher/evangelist (1 Timothy 5:17) but not necessarily so.

And that when he is a pastor, he still functions in a plural office of other elders/pastors. Recent trends find a number of preachers who refer to themselves as the singular pastor. With these, there is little attempt to scripturally justify this position and practice. It is mainly an appellation being used to be in line with practices in other faith fellowships.

There is no scripture justification for the term, pastor, being used for a singular leadership title. And from the perspective of churches of Christ and their insistence on scriptural foundations for their teachings, the practice is to be considered wrong. Along the same lines, elders and preachers advocating for women elders have not made a biblical case above their believing that it is time to be in line with cultural expectations, a position that forces these to ignore the teachings of New Testament writers. (It is the same reasoning many use as they implement the use of mechanical instruments.)

Faith fellowships have a decision to make on these issues. Those associated with the SBC have spoken loudly and clearly. Baptist churches who appoint women pastors are not in friendly relationship with the SBC, no matter the influence of men like Rick Warren. The GMC has also spoken by way of its actions. It has split from the UMC.

Like other faith fellowships, churches of Christ have no governing headquarters setting doctrinal stances. Walking in step with other faith fellowships, there is general agreement and understanding on doctrinal positions. But there are recent major differences.

Churches of Christ recognize marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman (Matthew 19:4–6). They recognize pastors as men who serve with other pastors/elders (Acts 20:28). They do not practice the one pastor leadership

of Baptist churches. Though there are many who presently refer to themselves as such, there is no serious attempt to justify the practice by Scripture.

Unlike other faith fellowships that are the subject of this discussion, churches of Christ have been timid about the necessity to make any bold stance against teachings and persons who have erred in relation to the Scriptures. It should be our prayer that believing men and women would come to understand that it is still most difficult to walk together when we are not in agreement with the Scripture and with each other. We can get along, but there is effort needed, effort consistent with endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). Pray that our goal will be to learn to walk together by way of the teachings of the Lord who saves us.

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