Progressive Christianity and Its Outcomes

Doctrine, Governance, and the Apostolic Pattern

A companion study to "Yet Another Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15" and the course "The Obedience of Faith" (https://TeachTheWord.Church).

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Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible unless otherwise noted.

Preface: Scope and Method

This article asks one question and tries to answer it with evidence rather than temperature. The question is: when a Christian body adopts the interpretive method of progressive Christianity, what happens to its doctrine and to the way it governs itself?

The question needs a fixed point from which to measure. This study takes as its baseline the pattern visible in the New Testament and in the churches of the first two centuries, and it treats the American Restoration Movement's recovery of that pattern as its nearest modern approximation. Concretely, the baseline has three features: the authority of Scripture holds precedence over tradition, experience, and culture; congregations are governed by a plurality of local elders rather than by a hierarchy above them or a single man among them; and the church is non-denominational in the specific sense that it claims no creed, name, or structure beyond what the apostles delivered. The reader who rejects that baseline will still find the historical and statistical material useful, because the outcomes documented here are outcomes regardless of what one thinks of them. The reader who shares the baseline will find the material arranged to show how far, and by what mechanism, bodies that began near it have moved away.

Three cautions govern the method. First, "progressive Christianity" is a family of positions rather than a single creed, and the family is defined here by its method rather than by any particular conclusion. Section 2 gives that definition. Second, correlation is not demonstration. Where this article reports that a body adopted a method and later declined, it also reports the competing explanations and does not pretend the numbers settle what they cannot settle. Third, numerical growth is not the biblical test of faithfulness. The Berean method (Acts 17:11) tests teaching against Scripture, not against attendance. Section 6 explains why the numbers are nevertheless worth knowing.

The article builds on two prior pieces of work. The exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 established the "narrow position" on that passage (the restriction concerns the authoritative teaching that governs

the gathered church and the elder office attached to it, not women's speech or ministry in general), and it argued in its Part Eight that the real dividing line in the gender debate is whether teaching authority is *conferred* by apostolic appointment or *generated* by gifting, fruit, or cultural progress. The course "The Obedience of Faith" developed that distinction in Week 10 (Apostolic Appointment) and applied it to the assembly in Week 11 (God's Created Order), after establishing the Berean method in Week 5. This article takes the conferred-versus-generated distinction and shows that it is the hinge not only of the 1 Timothy 2 debate but of the entire progressive trajectory, in doctrine and in governance alike.

Part One: The Baseline

1.1 Authority in the apostolic church

The New Testament locates the church's teaching authority in a deposit that was received and handed on. Paul describes his gospel as something he "received" and "passed on" (1 Cor 15:3), his instructions as "traditions just as I passed them on to you" (1 Cor 11:2), and his own standing as something to which he "was appointed" (1 Tim 2:7). The deposit is to be guarded (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14) and entrusted to faithful men who will teach others (2 Tim 2:2). The verbs are verbs of transmission. Nothing in them suggests that the content is expected to improve with time.

The sharpest statement comes in the very passage that regulates order in the assembly. "If anyone considers himself a prophet or spiritual person, he should acknowledge that what I write to you is the Lord's command. If someone does not recognize this, he is not recognized" (1 Cor 14:37–38). Paul names the two credentials most likely to be raised against apostolic writing (prophetic gifting and spiritual maturity) and subordinates both to the writing. He does not deny that the Corinthians had gifts. He denies that gifts adjudicate order. This is the apostolic answer to the question "where does teaching authority come from?" and it is the answer every later progressive movement has had to reverse.

1.2 Governance in the apostolic church

The governing structure that goes with a received deposit is a plurality of local elders. Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders for them in the various churches" (Acts 14:23) on their first return journey, within roughly three years of planting. Paul charges the Ephesian elders to "watch out for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers," warning that "savage wolves" will come and that "from among your own group men will arise, teaching perversions of the truth to draw the disciples away" (Acts 20:28–30). Titus is to "set in order the remaining matters and appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). The qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9 are the qualifications of men who must be "able to teach" and able to "refute those who contradict" sound doctrine. Peter addresses "the elders among you" as a fellow elder and tells them to "shepherd God's flock among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion but willingly"

(1 Pet 5:1–3). Hebrews describes leaders who "keep watch over your souls and will give an account" (Heb 13:17).

Four features of this picture matter for what follows. The elders are *local*: there is no office above the congregation except the apostles themselves, whose office was not perpetuated. The elders are *plural*: no text contemplates a single overseer. The elders are *teachers*: the office exists to guard doctrine, not merely to manage affairs. And the elders are *appointed* against stated qualifications, not elected on the strength of popularity or gifting. The exegesis ranked the restriction of this office to qualified men as the strongest of the claims it examined, because it rests on explicit qualification lists rather than on inference.

1.3 The second-century witness

The churches of the next three generations preserved this picture with recognizable fidelity before it began to drift. The Didache (c. 100) tells congregations to "appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord," plural and local. 1 Clement (c. 96) rebukes Corinth for deposing presbyters who had been appointed "with the consent of the whole church" and traces the appointment back to the apostles (ch. 44). Polycarp's letter to Philippi deals with a presbyter removed for avarice, which shows that qualification continued to be enforced. Ignatius of Antioch, writing around 110, already presses for a single bishop in each city, and his letters are the first clear step toward the monarchical episcopate; but even Ignatius assumes the bishop acts with a council of presbyters, and he has to argue for his view, which means it was not yet the universal practice. By the time of Cyprian (250s) the single bishop is standard and regional synods are adjudicating disputes; by 272 the church at Antioch is asking the emperor Aurelian to settle who its bishop is. The drift from local plurality to external hierarchy took about two centuries, and Section 5 will show that it was driven in every documented case by the failure of a local eldership to resolve its own conflicts.

The exegesis noted that the ante-Nicene writers (Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, the Didascalia) uniformly restricted authoritative teaching in the assembly to men, and that they did so by asking "who was appointed?" rather than "who has the gift?" That is the conferred-authority principle operating in practice, and it is worth noticing that the same writers held it alongside a very full account of women's ministry: deaconesses, widows enrolled for prayer, women prophets whose gift Origen conceded outright. The baseline is not a church in which women did nothing. It is a church in which the governing teaching office was conferred against stated qualifications and not generated by gifting.

1.4 The Restoration recovery

The American Restoration Movement of the early nineteenth century set out to recover exactly this baseline, and for a time it did. Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* (1809) proposed that "the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one," that "nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith, nor required of them as terms of communion, but what is expressly taught and enjoined upon them in the word of God," and that the New Testament is "as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church" as the Old was for Israel. Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone both insisted on

congregational autonomy under local elders, on the authority of Scripture over creeds, and on a name that was no name ("Christians," "Disciples," "Church of Christ"). The Campbells themselves served as elders of local congregations.

This article treats that recovery as the nearest modern approximation of the apostolic pattern for the three reasons already stated: it put Scripture above tradition and experience, it governed by local elderships, and it refused denominational identity. The movement's later history, which Section 4 traces, is instructive precisely because one of its three branches adopted the progressive method and the other two did not, and the three can be compared.

Part Two: What Progressive Christianity Is

2.1 A definition by method

Progressive Christianity is defined here not by any particular conclusion but by a single interpretive move: it relocates the source of doctrinal authority from a received deposit to an ongoing process. The process has been named differently in different eras (reason, religious experience, the Spirit's continuing work, the trajectory of redemption, the arc of justice, lived experience), but in every case the structure is the same. Scripture becomes a witness to an earlier stage of a process that is still underway, and the interpreter's task becomes discerning where the process is heading rather than what the text delivered. In the vocabulary of the exegesis and the course, authority is *generated* rather than *conferred*.

This definition has the advantage of being testable. One can ask of any teacher or body: when Scripture and the perceived direction of the process conflict, which governs? A conservative reader may be wrong about what Scripture says, but when corrected from the text he changes his position. A progressive reader, when confronted with a text that says the opposite of his conclusion, reinterprets the text as a stage to be moved beyond. The difference is not in intelligence or sincerity. It is in what counts as the final court of appeal.

2.2 A brief genealogy

The method has a traceable history. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) relocated the essence of religion from doctrine to the feeling of absolute dependence, which made religious experience rather than revealed propositions the primary datum of theology. The higher criticism of the nineteenth century (Wellhausen on the Pentateuch, the Tübingen school on the New Testament) treated the biblical text as the product of a developmental process and so made the process, not the text, the object of study. Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel (1907–1917) redefined the kingdom of God as the progressive transformation of society, which made social progress the measure of the church's faithfulness. Harry Emerson Fosdick's sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" (1922) and the Presbyterian Auburn Affirmation (1924) argued that the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, and the inerrancy of Scripture were theories about facts rather than the facts themselves, and that the church

must tolerate a range of theories. Paul Tillich's "method of correlation" made the questions of the culture determinative of the shape of the answers. By the end of the twentieth century John Shelby Spong's *Twelve Theses* (1998) could declare theism dead, the resurrection non-physical, and all Scripture-based ethics obsolete, and Marcus Borg and the Jesus Seminar could reconstruct a Jesus who had said and done almost nothing the Gospels record.

The same method appears in the gender and sexuality debates in a more sophisticated form. William Webb's *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* (2001) proposed a "redemptive-movement hermeneutic" in which the interpreter identifies the direction Scripture is moving relative to its culture and then continues the motion past the text. The exegesis addressed the slavery version of this argument directly (Part 8.4): Paul regulates slavery without ever grounding it in anything prior to society, which is why the church could move; he grounds the assembly instruction in the created order twice (1 Tim 2:13; 1 Cor 11:8–9), which is why it cannot be moved by the same reasoning. The point for this article is that the trajectory method is the progressive method in its purest form. It explicitly treats the text as a waypoint.

2.3 Four characteristic moves

Across its history the method has produced four recognizable moves, and the case studies in Parts Three and Four can be read as instances of them.

The first is the *relocation of authority* from the text to the process, already described. The second is the *re-grounding of ethics in experience*: what Scripture commands is tested against what seems loving, just, or inclusive to the present community, and where the two conflict the command is reinterpreted. The third is the *redefinition of unity*: because doctrine is now provisional, unity can no longer be unity in the faith once delivered (Jude 3; Eph 4:13) and becomes instead institutional cooperation on the broadest available basis, which in practice means the lowest common denominator. The fourth is the *reconception of the church as an agency*: once the church's purpose is understood as advancing a process in the world, it naturally organizes itself as a mission agency does, with professional staff, regional and national offices, program budgets, and a governing board, and the local eldership of teaching shepherds becomes an anachronism.

The first two moves reshape doctrine. The last two reshape governance. The rest of this article documents both.

Part Three: Doctrinal Outcomes

The progressive method, once adopted, has produced a strikingly consistent sequence of doctrinal outcomes across bodies that otherwise differ in polity, ethnicity, and region. The sequence is described here in its usual order, with the caution that the order is a tendency rather than a law and that individual bodies have skipped or compressed steps.

3.1 Scripture: from norm to witness

The first casualty is the status of Scripture itself. In the baseline, Scripture is the "constitution" (Thomas Campbell's word) by which teaching is tested. Under the progressive method it becomes a witness to the community's earlier experience of God, valuable and even inspired in some sense, but not binding where it conflicts with the community's present experience. The Presbyterian Church (USA)'s 1967 Confession made the shift explicit: "The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written." The sentence is carefully balanced, but its operative clause is "nevertheless." Once the words of Scripture are "conditioned," the interpreter decides which conditions have expired.

The effect on preaching is well documented. The Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne study of Canadian mainline congregations (2016), discussed in Part Six, found that clergy in declining congregations were markedly less likely than clergy in growing ones to affirm that the Bible is the authoritative word of God, and that the attendees followed their clergy. The exegesis observed that the egalitarian paraphrase of 1 Timothy 2:12 has to insert the word "currently" ("I am not *currently* permitting") to make the text temporary. That small insertion is the whole method in miniature: the text's authority is made to expire by the interpreter's calendar.

3.2 Christology and the resurrection

Once Scripture is a conditioned witness, the supernatural claims it makes become negotiable, and the resurrection is the first to be negotiated because it is the most central. Fosdick's 1922 sermon treated the virgin birth as a dispensable "theory." The Auburn Affirmation extended the same treatment to the bodily resurrection and the miracles. By the 1980s the Jesus Seminar was voting with colored beads on which sayings of Jesus were authentic and concluding that about eighteen percent were. Spong's third thesis stated that "the biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings fell into sin is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense," and his seventh that "the resurrection is an action of God. Jesus was raised into the meaning of God. It therefore cannot be a physical resuscitation occurring inside human history."

The relevance to governance will become clear in Part Four, but it should be registered here that these are not fringe positions. Spong was a sitting diocesan bishop of the Episcopal Church when he published them and was never disciplined. The Haskell study found that only 56 percent of clergy in declining mainline congregations agreed that "Jesus rose from the dead with a real flesh-and-blood body," against 93 percent of clergy in growing ones. A body whose teachers are divided on whether Christ rose has, by Paul's own test, teachers who are divided on whether its faith is "useless" (1 Cor 15:14).

3.3 Salvation and the loss of evangelistic nerve

The third outcome follows from the second. If the resurrection is a metaphor and Scripture a witness, the exclusive claims of the gospel (John 14:6; Acts 4:12) become one more conditioned expression, and some form of universalism or pluralism follows. The 2024 *Christian Standard* analysis of the

Disciples of Christ decline quoted the observation that universalism had "sapped the evangelistic vigor" of the body's clergy, and the Haskell study found that every one of the clergy in its growing congregations agreed it was "very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians," against half of the clergy in declining ones. The connection is not mysterious. A teacher who does not believe people are lost will not labor to find them, and a body whose teachers do not labor to find the lost will, in one generation, consist of its own children, and in two, of the fraction of its children who stayed.

The course's Week 8 (The Church's Tests) treated obedience to the gospel as the first test the apostolic church applied to its members. The progressive outcome is a church that has stopped applying any test, because it no longer believes there is anything to fail.

3.4 Created order, gender, and sexuality

The fourth outcome is the one that has produced the visible schisms of the last fifty years, and it is the one to which the 1 Timothy 2 exegesis speaks most directly. The sequence has been nearly identical across the American mainline. Each body first opened the teaching office to women, then ordained non-celibate homosexual clergy, then authorized same-sex marriage, with the steps separated by roughly one to three decades. The United Church of Christ ordained an openly gay minister in 1972 and endorsed same-sex marriage in 2005. The Episcopal Church regularized women's ordination in 1976, consecrated an openly gay bishop in 2003, and authorized marriage rites in 2015. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (women's ordination inherited from its predecessor bodies in 1970) authorized the ordination of partnered gay clergy in 2009. The Presbyterian Church (USA) (women's ordination 1956) did so in 2011 and redefined marriage in 2014–15. The United Methodist Church (full clergy rights for women 1956) removed its prohibitions in 2024 after a quarter of its American congregations had already left.

The point here is not to equate the two questions. They are exegetically distinct, and the narrow position argued in the exegesis affirms a very full breadth of women's ministry while restricting one function. The point is that the same hermeneutical move was used to reach both conclusions, and that the bodies which made the first move using that method made the second within a generation. The slavery analogy, the trajectory argument, and the appeal to Galatians 3:28 as an interpretive master key were deployed for women's ordination in the 1950s through 1970s and then deployed again, nearly verbatim, for same-sex marriage in the 2000s. Those who used the method the first time and objected to its second use found they had no principled ground to stand on, because they had already conceded that a creation-grounded instruction (1 Tim 2:13; 1 Cor 11:8–9; Matt 19:4–6) could be set aside by appeal to trajectory.

This is why the exegesis insisted on the distinction between what Paul grounds in culture and what he grounds in creation. The decisive observation was that Paul demonstrably knows how to give a local, reputational reason (1 Tim 5:14, "so that the adversary is given no occasion for slander") and does not give one in 2:13–14; he reaches past Ephesus to Genesis. An interpreter who treats a creation rationale as culturally expendable has no tool left for distinguishing any biblical instruction from its culture, and the history of the mainline is the record of that tool's absence.

3.5 The Stone-Campbell case

The Restoration Movement supplies an unusually clean test of the method's effects, because it divided into three bodies that share an origin and differ chiefly in how they handle Scripture's authority. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) adopted the progressive method; the independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and the Churches of Christ did not.

The Disciples' path tracks the sequence above. The movement ordained its first woman, Clara Babcock, in 1888, well ahead of the mainline, though at the time this was a local congregation's act rather than a denominational policy, since no denomination yet existed. The "open membership" controversy of the 1910s and 1920s, in which Disciples congregations began receiving the unimmersed into membership, marked the first point at which a plain New Testament command (Acts 2:38) was set aside for the sake of ecumenical unity, and it was the issue over which the independent Christian Churches began to withdraw. The higher-critical approach to Scripture entered through the Disciples Divinity House at the University of Chicago (founded 1894) and the College of the Bible controversy at Lexington (1917). Restructure (1968) converted the body from a convention of autonomous congregations into a denomination with "three manifestations" (congregational, regional, general), a change Section 4.2 examines in detail. Full communion with the United Church of Christ followed in 1989. In 2013 the General Assembly adopted a resolution welcoming members "regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity," and the denomination's seminaries and general ministries have since moved steadily toward affirming positions.

The membership figures are these. The Disciples peaked at just under two million members in 1958. They fell below one million in 1993, below five hundred thousand by 2017, and reported 278,000 in 2022, a decline of roughly 86 percent from peak during a period in which the United States population roughly doubled. The Churches of Christ, by contrast, grew through the 1980s (about 5 percent in membership among mainline congregations, per Yeakley's 1995 analysis), plateaued around 1.3 million adherents in the 1990s, and have declined since at a far gentler rate, about 10 percent in attendance since 1990 by one directory estimate. The independent Christian Churches grew through most of the same period and now outnumber the Disciples by a wide margin.

The comparison is not perfectly controlled. The three bodies differ in region, in the average size of congregations, and in their relationship to the surrounding culture. But they began as one movement with one hermeneutic, and the branch that changed the hermeneutic is the branch that lost six of every seven members. No other variable separates them so cleanly.

Part Four: Governance Outcomes

Doctrine and governance are usually studied separately. This article's central claim is that under the progressive method they move together, and for a reason that can be stated precisely. The baseline polity (a local plurality of appointed teaching elders) exists to guard a received deposit. When the deposit is redefined as a process, the office that guards it loses its reason for being, and the body

reorganizes around the institutions that advance processes: professional staff, representative assemblies, and central agencies. The following five outcomes are the stages of that reorganization.

4.1 From teaching elders to a governing board

The first governance outcome is the quiet conversion of the eldership from a body of teaching shepherds into a board of directors. In the baseline the elder is first of all a teacher (1 Tim 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9) whose oversight consists in guarding doctrine and shepherding souls. Under the progressive method doctrine is no longer something to be guarded, so the teaching function migrates to the professional minister and the elders are left with buildings, budgets, and personnel. The Disciples made this official: their congregational elders are lay officers who assist at the Lord's table and serve on the board, while the teaching office belongs to the ordained minister, who is credentialed by the region rather than appointed by the congregation.

The same conversion has happened informally in many Churches of Christ that would never adopt the Disciples' polity. Yeakley's *Why They Left* devoted a chapter to elders who treat the preacher as an employee and manage rather than shepherd, and the practitioner literature of the last forty years is full of complaints about "board elderships." The point for this article is that a board eldership is a progressive eldership in embryo, whatever its members believe, because it has already surrendered the function that justifies the office. An eldership that does not teach cannot guard, and an eldership that cannot guard will eventually ratify whatever the professional staff proposes, as Section 4.5 illustrates.

4.2 From autonomous congregations to a denomination: Restructure

The second outcome is the creation of structure above the congregation. The clearest Restoration-era example is the Disciples' Restructure, approved by the International Convention in 1968 and implemented at the first General Assembly in 1969. Before Restructure the Disciples were, on paper, what the Campbells had intended: autonomous congregations that sent delegates to a convention and supported agencies by voluntary gift. Restructure replaced this with a "Provisional Design" in which the church exists in three "manifestations" (congregational, regional, general) bound by "covenant," with the General Assembly, a General Board, and regional ministers exercising real authority over ordination, standing, and property. The stated rationale, in Ronald Osborn's seven principles of 1964, was to build structures "interrelated and responsible" enough to carry out mission and ecumenical cooperation. Mission and unity were explicitly prioritized over restoration and liberty, and the body's own historians say so.

The congregations understood what was happening. *Christianity Today* reported in August 1968 that the Disciples had "lost 1,124 churches" that declined to be listed under the new design, and the independent Christian Churches completed their withdrawal over the following decade. The congregations that stayed accepted a polity the movement had been founded to reject, and they accepted it for the sake of the fourth characteristic move described in Section 2.3: the church reconceived as an agency. Osborn's principles are the principles of a well-run mission society. They are not the principles of Acts 14:23.

What is instructive about Restructure is that it was not forced on the Disciples by heresy from without. It was the natural organizational expression of a theological change already made within. A body that had decided doctrine was provisional needed a mechanism for revising it, and a General Assembly that votes on resolutions is that mechanism. A body that had decided unity meant institutional cooperation needed a structure that could enter into full communion with other denominations, and a general manifestation with ecumenical officers is that structure. Governance followed doctrine as water follows the slope.

4.3 Professionalization and the pastor system

The third outcome is the replacement of the eldership by a professional clergy as the real locus of authority. The Restoration Movement fought over this for a hundred years under the name "the pastor system," and the fight is worth recalling because both sides were partly right. The anti-pastor party (Tolbert Fanning, David Lipscomb, Daniel Sommer) saw correctly that a located, salaried preacher who controls the pulpit will in practice control the congregation, and that this reproduces the clerical order the movement had rejected. Lipscomb went so far in the *Gospel Advocate* (1877) as to say that men claiming official authority over a congregation without its consent were "essentially a pope" and "should be resisted even to the disruption of the body." The pro-pastor party (J. W. McGarvey and most of the twentieth-century Churches of Christ) saw correctly that congregations without trained teachers decline, and that Sommer's "mutual edification" congregations, which rejected paid preachers altogether, largely died out or became marginal by the 1950s.

The baseline resolves the tension in a way neither party fully adopted. The New Testament elder is the teacher (1 Tim 5:17 distinguishes elders "who work hard in speaking and teaching" and says they are worthy of "double honor," which in context means pay). The evangelist is a distinct and legitimate function (2 Tim 4:5; Eph 4:11), but he works under the elders, not above them, and the elders are to be men "able to teach" in their own right rather than men who hire teaching done. The progressive outcome collapses this into the mainline model in which an ordained professional, credentialed by a body outside the congregation, is the teacher and the elders are the board. Under that model the congregation's doctrine changes when its minister changes, and the minister's doctrine is formed in a seminary the congregation does not control. The Haskell study found that clergy beliefs predicted congregational growth or decline more strongly than attendee beliefs did, which is exactly what one would expect once the teaching function has been professionalized.

4.4 Property, trust clauses, and the courts

The fourth outcome is that disputes which the baseline would have settled within the congregation are settled instead by denominational tribunals or by civil courts, and that the body above the congregation ends up owning the congregation's building. This is the governance outcome that has cost the mainline most visibly in the last twenty years. The United Methodist "trust clause," under which every local church's property is held in trust for the denomination, meant that the 7,659 congregations (about a quarter of the American total) that left between 2019 and 2023 could do so only under a negotiated exit provision and in many cases only by paying substantial sums. Episcopal dioceses and parishes that departed over the 2003 consecration and its aftermath spent well over a decade in litigation, most of which the national church won on the strength of its own canons.

Compare the Sand Creek case. When the Sand Creek congregation in Shelby County, Illinois, split in 1904 over the issues the 1889 Declaration had raised, both factions went to court, and in 1906 the Illinois Supreme Court held that the property belonged to the faction that had kept the congregation's original teaching, expressly declining to judge which teaching was correct. The court could apply that rule because the congregation was autonomous: there was no higher body to whom the property belonged and no canon to override the congregation's own founding commitments. The baseline polity does not prevent disputes. It keeps them local, and it keeps the building with the people who kept the faith.

The early church shows the same dynamic in reverse. Section 5 will trace how, in every documented case before 300, a local eldership's failure to resolve its own conflict ended with authority migrating outward, first to a sister church, then to a synod, and finally to the emperor. Centralization is not a progressive invention. It is what happens whenever local oversight fails, and the progressive method guarantees that it fails by removing the deposit the oversight existed to guard.

4.5 Elder-led revision in the Churches of Christ

The fifth outcome is the most recent and the most pertinent to congregations that still hold the baseline polity. Since about 2000 a small number of Churches of Christ have used the authority of their elderships to make changes the movement had historically refused: instrumental music (Richland Hills, Texas, 2006; Quail Springs, Oklahoma, 2007), expanded women's roles in worship (the 2016 Wineskins survey estimated about 100 congregations out of roughly 12,000), women preaching (half of the surveyed congregations), and women elders (16 percent of them; Highland in Abilene appointed women elders in 2020, Broadway in Lubbock opened worship roles in 2019). In every case the decision was made by male elders, often together with the ministers, and announced to the congregation.

Two features of these cases deserve attention. The first is that the hermeneutic used to justify the changes was the trajectory hermeneutic described in Section 2.2, applied by congregations that had not adopted it anywhere else. The published rationales of such congregations have typically appealed to Galatians 3:28, to the slavery analogy, and to the "direction" or "trajectory" of the New Testament, and have treated 1 Timothy 2:13 as a culturally conditioned argument. The exegesis has already answered those arguments and need not repeat the answer. What matters here is that a body which accepts them for this question has accepted the method, and the mainline history in Section 3.4 is the record of where the method goes.

The second feature is the governance irony. In appointing women elders, an eldership uses the authority conferred on it by the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to set aside one of those qualifications. The office is being used to amend the terms of the office. Under the baseline, an eldership that did this would have exceeded its appointment, because the elders' authority is conferred by the apostolic deposit and cannot be turned against it; Paul's instruction to the Ephesian elders was to guard the flock against men "from among your own group" (Acts 20:30), not to be those men. The Wineskins survey found that about half of the congregations that made such changes lost members at announcement (averaging about 8 percent) and again at implementation, that elders reported the process took nearly twice as long as ministers thought it did, and that elders were markedly less likely than ministers to expect further changes. The last finding is telling. The

ministers, formed in the seminaries, could see where the trajectory led. The elders, who had made the first move, were already uneasy about the second.

4.6 The dissolution of elderships

Behind all five outcomes lies the chronic condition of the modern Churches of Christ that was documented in the research preceding this article: a majority of congregations have no elders at all, and the elderships that exist dissolve for a short list of recurring reasons. The reasons are not primarily progressive. They are a supply problem (qualified men decline the office; unqualified men seek it), a cultural problem (congregations prefer majority-rule business meetings to submission to overseers, which Bragwell in 1987 called the main reason churches lack elders), a relational problem (elders who cannot work with one another or with the preacher, as at Cincinnati in 2013, where the whole eldership resigned together), and a demographic problem (shrinking, aging congregations that cannot field a plurality of men meeting the household qualifications). Attendance at the Joliet congregation fell from 115 to 75 within a year of its eldership dissolving, which Bassford took as evidence that losing elders accelerates decline rather than merely reflecting it.

The connection to the progressive method is indirect but real. An eldership vacuum is filled by something, and in the Restoration Movement's history it has been filled by one of three things: a dominant preacher (the pastor system), an outside authority (the editor-bishops of the twentieth century, who could effectively disfellowship a congregation through the papers), or congregational democracy. The first two are the early church's Diotrephes and synod. The third is the progressive polity in its purest form, because a majority vote is the institutional expression of generated rather than conferred authority: the congregation decides what it will believe, and it decides again when the majority changes. The contemporary mainline denominations are, structurally, very large business meetings.

Part Five: Two Parallels

5.1 The early church

The leadership failures of the church before 300 were surveyed in the research preceding this article and need only be summarized here for comparison. At Corinth (c. 96) a faction deposed the appointed presbyters out of what Clement calls envy and jealousy. Diotrephes (3 John 9–10) "loves to be first," refuses the apostle's emissaries, and expels those who receive them. The presbyter Valens at Philippi was removed for avarice. The Shepherd of Hermas rebukes Roman leaders who quarrel over precedence and deacons who plundered the livelihood of widows. The schisms of Hippolytus and Callistus (c. 217) and of Novatian and Cornelius (251) turned nominally on the treatment of the lapsed and actually on contested elections and personal rivalry. Cyprian describes bishops in the Decian persecution who abandoned their flocks to manage estates. Paul of Samosata at Antioch (deposed 268–69) combined doctrinal deviation with a civil office, a throne, extortion, and hymns

sung to himself by women, and held his see for four more years because the synod that deposed him had not consulted the congregation, until the emperor Aurelian was asked to intervene.

Five characteristics recur. The trigger is almost always a personal fault (envy, love of preeminence, greed) rather than a doctrinal one, with doctrine arriving as a secondary charge. The faults cluster around money, status, and faction, the three temptations the pastoral epistles already name. Plurality fails in one of two directions: a single man dominates, or a faction overrides the appointed body. Discipline disputes become proxies for power. And when the local body cannot resolve the matter, authority migrates outward and does not come back.

The last characteristic is the one that bears on the progressive question. The monarchical episcopate, the regional synod, and the imperial adjudication were each, in their moment, the solution to a local eldership's failure. Each solution worked, in the sense that it ended the immediate dispute. Each also removed from the congregation a piece of the authority Acts 14:23 had placed there, and none was ever given back. By 325 the church that had been governed by local pluralities of teaching elders was governed by a hierarchy that an emperor convened. The Restoration Movement spent its first century undoing that, and the Disciples spent 1968 redoing it in a single vote.

5.2 The "feminization" thesis

Some observers attribute the decline of institutional Christianity, and the loss of male leadership in particular, to the "feminization" of its institutions, a thesis associated with Leon Podles (*The Church Impotent*, 1999) and David Murrow (*Why Men Hate Going to Church*, 2005) and recently restated in secular form as "the great feminization" of professional and civic institutions. The exegesis listed one such analysis among its sources, and the question deserves a careful answer rather than either enthusiasm or dismissal.

The evidence for a direct causal link to the failure of elderships is weak. Churches of Christ members in Pew's sample are roughly 58 percent women and 42 percent men, which is about the ratio of American Christianity generally and has been stable for as long as it has been measured; an Episcopal rector complained in 1856 that his church was "composed chiefly of females and aged men." Since Churches of Christ restrict the eldership to men, a female-skewed membership does mechanically shrink the pool of potential elders, but a stable skew cannot explain a trend. Gallup reported in 2025 that among Americans aged 18 to 29 the historic gap has actually reversed, with 42 percent of young men and 29 percent of young women saying religion is very important to them, though the subgroup samples are small. And the documented causes of eldership dissolution (Section 4.6) are governance, conflict, and demographics, with women's-role disputes a real but minority trigger that, when it occurs, behaves like every other contested decision.

The evidence for an indirect link is stronger, and it is best stated in the vocabulary of this article rather than in the vocabulary of gender. What Podles and Murrow describe as feminization (consensus-seeking leadership, reluctance to exercise discipline, therapeutic rather than doctrinal preaching, the church as a place of comfort rather than of testing) is, in the terms of Section 2.3, the re-grounding of ethics in experience and the redefinition of the church as an agency of care. Those are progressive moves, and they do erode the eldership, because an eldership's distinctive work is the exercise of conferred authority in teaching and discipline, which is precisely what a therapeutic

institution finds uncomfortable. Whether to call that trajectory "feminization" is an interpretive choice; the data can only say that gender ratios themselves are not the moving variable. Lipscomb's 1877 editorial against elder authority and Bragwell's 1987 complaint about "democratic thinking" describe the same drift from conferred to generated authority a century apart, and neither has anything to do with the sex ratio of the pews.

The practical conclusion is that congregations which hold the narrow position on 1 Timothy 2 have nothing to gain from the feminization frame and something to lose. The frame invites the broad position (women silent in all senses), which the exegesis showed to be contradicted by 1 Corinthians 11:5 and which drives away women and men who can read. The baseline is a church in which the governing teaching office is conferred on qualified men and the full breadth of women's ministry is honored, and that church is defended by exegesis, not by sociology.

Part Six: The Measurable Record

6.1 Why count at all

Numbers are not the test of faithfulness. Noah preached to eight. Jeremiah's congregation shrank. The Berean method tests teaching against Scripture, and a congregation that grew by abandoning the gospel would have failed the test however full its pews. Nonetheless the numbers are worth knowing for two reasons. First, progressive Christianity has consistently claimed that its method is necessary for the church's survival in the modern world (Spong's 1998 book was titled *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*), and that claim is empirical and can be checked. Second, Jesus gave fruit as a test of teachers (Matt 7:15–20), and while fruit is not identical to headcount, a body whose children overwhelmingly leave it has produced a kind of fruit that can be inspected.

6.2 The mainline

The American mainline denominations, which adopted the progressive method between roughly 1920 and 1970, peaked numerically in the mid-1960s and have declined without interruption since. Measured from 1987 to 2021, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America lost 41 percent of its members, the United Methodist Church 31 percent (before its 2019–2023 schism removed a quarter of its congregations), and the United Church of Christ more than half; five of the six largest mainline bodies fell at least 30 percent over a period in which the national population grew by about a third. The Disciples of Christ, as Section 3.5 reported, fell from just under two million in 1958 to 278,000 in 2022. The Episcopal Church reports membership losses of roughly 40,000 a year. Nine major denominations that together held 30.8 million members in 2022 would have held about 53 million had they merely kept pace with population growth since 1990.

6.3 The Methodist schism as a natural experiment

The United Methodist disaffiliation of 2019–2023 is the largest Protestant schism in American history, and it is a nearly ideal test of whether the doctrinal disputes described in Part Three actually move congregations. The denomination's official position on marriage and ordination had remained traditional, but bishops and annual conferences had for years declined to enforce it. When a disaffiliation window was opened, 7,659 congregations, about one in four in the United States, left, and more than 4,000 of them joined the newly formed Global Methodist Church, with others becoming independent. The stated causes, as reported by observers on both sides, were "disagreements over sexuality and church authority" and the denomination's "failure to enforce" its own standards. The departing congregations were disproportionately the larger and more active ones in their regions. The remaining denomination then removed the prohibitions in 2024.

Two things are notable for this article. The departing congregations did not leave because the denomination had changed its doctrine. They left because its governance had stopped enforcing the doctrine it still professed, which is the Section 4.1 outcome (oversight that no longer guards) operating at the denominational level. And the issue that triggered the exit was the fourth doctrinal outcome in the sequence of Section 3.4, which the method had reached on schedule roughly fifty years after the Methodists granted full clergy rights to women using the same arguments.

6.4 Theology as a predictor of growth

The most careful study of whether theology itself predicts congregational growth is the Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne paper "Theology Matters," published in the *Review of Religious Research* in 2016. The authors surveyed 2,255 attendees and 29 clergy in 22 mainline Protestant congregations in Ontario, nine growing and thirteen declining, drawn from the same denominations and the same region so that polity and demographics were held roughly constant. After controlling for other factors, "theological conservatism of both attendees and clergy emerged as important factors in predicting church growth." The reported differences were large: 93 percent of clergy in growing congregations agreed that Jesus rose bodily, against 56 percent in declining ones; all of the growing-church clergy agreed it was very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians, against half of the declining-church clergy; growing-church clergy were several times more likely to read the Bible daily. The attendees tracked their clergy. The study confirmed, with better controls, what Dean Kelley had argued in *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972): bodies that make serious demands and hold definite beliefs retain and attract members, and bodies that do not, do not.

6.5 Caveats the frame must accept

Three qualifications are owed to the reader and to the method.

First, conservative bodies are now declining too. The Southern Baptist Convention has lost members every year since 2006 and now loses more in a single year than the entire Presbyterian Church in America holds. The Assemblies of God grew more than 50 percent from the late 1980s but its annual growth has fallen to nearly zero. The Churches of Christ have declined gently since the 1990s. Theological conservatism slows the decline sharply and has, in the mainline comparisons, been the single strongest predictor; it has not, in the current environment, reversed it. The correct claim is that the progressive method accelerates decline, not that its absence guarantees growth.

Second, demographics do real work. Mainline bodies are older, whiter, and have lower birth rates than the national average, and some of their decline is simply the arithmetic of those facts. The Haskell study's design is valuable precisely because it compared congregations with similar demographics and still found theology predictive, but no study has fully separated the two, and this article does not claim one has.

Third, the Churches of Christ have their own retention problem that cannot be blamed on progressivism. Yeakley's data, as Jay Guin read them, showed that the congregations which identified as most conservative retained only about 40 percent of their children, with 45 percent leaving organized religion altogether, a worse result than more moderate congregations. Whatever one makes of Guin's interpretation (he attributes it to legalism; others would say those congregations were also the smallest, most rural, and most elder-less), the finding is a warning that the baseline polity is not self-sustaining. An eldership that guards doctrine but does not shepherd souls fails the Acts 20:28 charge from the other side, and its children leave for a different reason than the Disciples' children did, but they leave.

Part Seven: The Case for the Other Side

An article written from a stated baseline owes the reader the strongest form of the opposing case, and the Berean method requires that it be weighed rather than waved off.

The progressive case runs roughly as follows. The church has always developed doctrine; the Trinity and the canon were themselves worked out over centuries, so the idea of a fixed deposit that admits no development is itself a later construction. Acts 15 shows the apostles themselves setting aside explicit commands of Scripture (circumcision, the food laws) on the strength of what the Spirit was observed to be doing among the Gentiles, which is precisely the experience-tested, trajectory-following method this article has criticized. Galatians 3:28 states a principle ("there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female") whose logic the apostolic church had not yet fully applied, and the church's abolition of slavery shows that it is legitimate to carry an apostolic principle past apostolic practice. The restrictions in 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 are addressed to specific disorders in specific congregations, and their universalization is a later reading. The mainline's decline is better explained by birth rates, education, and the broad secularization of the West than by theology, and the conservative bodies' present decline supports that reading. Finally, the Restoration Movement's "baseline" is itself a nineteenth-century lens, shaped by Lockean epistemology and American democratic assumptions, and its claim to read the New Testament without tradition is naïve.

Several of these points land. The church did take time to articulate what it had received; the demographic explanations are real; the Restoration Movement did carry nineteenth-century assumptions, some of which (the Lipscomb minimalism on elder authority, for instance) this article has itself criticized. The argument from Acts 15, however, proves the opposite of what it is made to prove. The apostles did not set aside Scripture on the strength of experience; James settled the matter by citing Scripture (Amos 9:11–12) and the apostles issued an authoritative written decision (Acts 15:23–29) that the churches received as binding. Acts 15 is the model of conferred authority,

not generated authority. The slavery analogy was answered in the exegesis: Paul never grounds the master-slave relation in creation, and he does ground the assembly instruction there, which is exactly the difference between an instruction that can be carried past its culture and one that cannot. Galatians 3:28 addresses standing before God in Christ, and Paul himself, who wrote it, also wrote 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 11:3; a reading of the first that contradicts the second is a reading Paul did not hold. And the demographic explanation, while real, does not survive the Haskell comparison or the Stone-Campbell comparison, in both of which bodies of similar demographics diverged along theological lines.

The deepest point of disagreement is not any of these. It is the question the exegesis identified in its Part Eight and the course made the subject of Week 10: whether teaching authority in the church is conferred or generated. The progressive case is coherent if authority is generated; every one of its arguments is an argument from gifting, fruit, or trajectory. The baseline is coherent if authority is conferred; every one of its arguments is an argument from appointment, deposit, and transmission. Paul addressed that question directly, in the passage under dispute, and his answer (1 Cor 14:37–38) is the reason this article takes the baseline it does.

Part Eight: Implications for Congregations Governed by Local Elderships

8.1 Guard the hinge

The single most important implication is that the conferred-versus-generated distinction, not any particular conclusion, is what a congregation must guard. A congregation can hold every traditional conclusion and still have adopted the progressive method if it holds them because they are traditional, or because the majority prefers them, or because they seem to work. Such a congregation will revise its conclusions when the tradition, the majority, or the results change. The guard against that is not a list of positions but a settled practice of testing every teaching against Scripture and submitting to what Scripture delivers even when the culture, the congregation, or the elders themselves would prefer otherwise. The course called this the Berean method and spent a week on it for this reason.

8.2 Elders who teach

The second implication is that an eldership which does not teach cannot guard. Section 4.1 showed that the board eldership is the progressive eldership in embryo; Section 4.5 showed what happens when a board eldership is confronted by a trajectory argument it has never had to answer. The remedy is in 1 Timothy 5:17 and Titus 1:9: elders who labor in teaching, who know the text well enough to "refute those who contradict". A congregation that has a preacher and a board should ask whether it has elders at all in the New Testament sense, and if the honest answer is no, it should set about producing them. Bassford's practical counsel is sound: value the office, treat its absence as a

serious weakness, identify and mentor men toward it over years, and merge with a neighboring congregation rather than go another decade without.

8.3 Neither Diotrephes nor the business meeting

The third implication is that the two historic failure modes of the eldership (the dominant man and the democratic vacuum) are both forms of generated authority and both lead to the same place. The congregation whose preacher or senior elder is Diotrephes has located authority in a personality; the congregation that decides everything by majority has located it in a headcount. Neither is appointment against qualifications. The Restoration Movement's hundred-year quarrel between the pastor party and the mutual-edification party was a quarrel between these two errors, and both parties' congregations suffered for it. The baseline is a plurality of qualified, appointed, teaching elders who exercise real oversight (Heb 13:17) and are themselves accountable to one another and to the deposit they guard.

8.4 Hold the narrow position, and hold the whole of it

The fourth implication concerns the question with which this project began. A congregation that wishes to resist the trajectory described in Section 3.4 is best served by the narrow position on 1 Timothy 2, held with precision and in full. The precision matters because the broad position (women silent in every sense) is contradicted by 1 Corinthians 11:5 and cannot be defended from the text, and a position that cannot be defended from the text will be abandoned by the next generation, usually along with everything that was taught alongside it. The fullness matters because the narrow position is a position about one function, and a congregation that restricts that function while honoring every other form of women's ministry the New Testament records (praying, prophesying, teaching women and children, private instruction of the kind Priscilla gave Apollos, diaconal service, labor in the gospel) has nothing to apologize for and nothing for a trajectory argument to grip. The exegesis set out the "honest ranking" of the claims; the course's Week 11 presented the breadth. Both are needed.

8.5 Keep the building local

The fifth implication is structural and modest. Congregations that hold title to their own property, that credential their own teachers, and that answer to no body above them cannot be revised from outside. Sand Creek kept its building because no one else owned it. The 7,659 Methodist congregations had to buy theirs back. This is not a theological argument, but it is a reason the baseline polity has proven more durable under pressure than any alternative, and it is a reason not to accept, under the name of cooperation or efficiency, any arrangement in which a congregation's doctrine or property is held by someone else.

8.6 The shape of the outcome

The story this article has told can be compressed into a sentence. When authority is relocated from the deposit to the process, doctrine becomes provisional, the office that guarded it becomes a

board, the body reorganizes as an agency, and within two generations most of the people are gone. That sentence describes the mainline, it describes the Disciples of Christ, and in its first two clauses it describes a number of congregations that still call themselves Churches of Christ. The alternative is not nostalgia and not sociology. It is the pattern Paul left with the Ephesian elders: guard the flock, teach the whole counsel, expect wolves from within, and remember that the authority to do all of this was conferred by the Holy Spirit and not generated by the shepherds themselves.

Appendix A: A Comparative Timeline

Year	Event	Significance
c. 48–50	Acts 14:23; Acts 15	Elders appointed in every church; apostolic written decision settles the Gentile question from Scripture
c. 62–65	1 Timothy, Titus	Elder qualifications; teaching restricted and grounded in creation
c. 96	1 Clement	Corinth deposes presbyters; Rome intervenes; first outward migration of authority
c. 110	Ignatius	First argument for a single bishop per city
217, 251	Roman schisms	Contested elections, discipline as proxy for power
268–272	Paul of Samosata	Synod deposes without the congregation; emperor adjudicates
1809	Declaration and Address	Restoration baseline stated
1877	Lipscomb editorial	Elder authority minimized within the movement
1888	Clara Babcock ordained	First woman ordained in the movement
1889–1906	Sand Creek Declaration, split, court case	Property stays with the faction that kept the original teaching
1917–1920s	College of the Bible controversy; open membership	Higher criticism and ecumenism enter the Disciples

Year	Event	Significance
1922–24	Fosdick sermon; Auburn Affirmation	Progressive method articulated in the mainline
1956	Methodist, Presbyterian women's ordination	First step of the Section 3.4 sequence
1967	PCUSA Confession of 1967	Scripture "conditioned"
1968–69	Disciples Restructure; 1,124 congregations withdraw	Autonomous congregations become a denomination
1972	Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*	Growth gap first documented
1987	Bragwell, "A Leadership Crisis"	Elder shortage and "democratic thinking" named
1989	Disciples–UCC full communion	Unity as institutional cooperation
1998	Spong, *Twelve Theses*	Progressive endpoint stated by a sitting bishop
2001	Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*	Trajectory hermeneutic formalized
2003–2015	Episcopal, ELCA, PCUSA, UCC sequence	Third step of the sequence
2006–07	Richland Hills, Quail Springs	Elder-led revision enters Churches of Christ
2013	Disciples GA resolution on sexual orientation	Disciples reach the sequence's third step
2016	Haskell et al., "Theology Matters"; Wineskins survey	Theology shown predictive; ~100 CoC congregations with expanded roles
2019–2024	UMC disaffiliation; prohibitions removed	7,659 congregations leave; largest American Protestant schism
2019–2020	Broadway (Lubbock), Highland (Abilene)	Women in worship roles; women elders, by elder decision

Year	Event	Significance
2022	Disciples report 278,000 members	86 percent decline from 1958 peak

Appendix B: Relationship to the Prior Work

The exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 supplies this article's hermeneutical hinge (Part 8 of that document, conferred versus generated authority), its treatment of the slavery analogy (8.4), its demonstration that Paul's rationale in 2:13–14 is creational rather than local (Part 6), and its "honest ranking" of claims (1.4), which Section 8.4 above relies on. The course "The Obedience of Faith" supplies the Berean method (Week 5), the two-righteousnesses distinction that underlies the critique of experience-grounded ethics (Week 4), the church's tests (Week 8), apostolic appointment (Week 10), and the created order in the assembly (Week 11). This article may be read as an extended historical footnote to Weeks 10 and 11: what has happened, over two thousand years and especially over the last sixty, to bodies that answered the Week 10 question the other way.

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