Progressive Christianity and the Churches of Christ

What the Method Does to Doctrine and to the Eldership

A companion to "Yet Another Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15," the course "The Obedience of Faith", and "Progressive Christianity and Its Outcomes". Each available at: https://TeachTheWord.Church. Individual links provided within the references section herein.

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Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible unless otherwise noted.

Abstract and Key Points

The question. What happens to a church's teaching and leadership when it changes how it reads the Bible? This summary measures the answer against the pattern of the New Testament church: Scripture above tradition and feeling, each congregation led by its own appointed elders, and no name or structure beyond what the apostles gave.

What "progressive" means here. It is not a set of conclusions. It is a way of reading. Progressive Christianity treats the Bible as an early stage in a process that is still moving. The reader's job becomes guessing where the process is headed instead of obeying what the text says. Authority stops being something God handed down and becomes something people produce by talent, results, or agreement.

The test. When the Bible and the "direction of history" disagree, which one wins? A conservative reader may be wrong about a verse, but when shown the text he changes. A progressive reader, shown the text, says it was only a step along the way (1 Corinthians 14:37).

What the movement's own history shows. The Restoration Movement split into three branches that began with the same approach to Scripture. One branch, the Disciples of Christ, adopted the progressive method. It accepted the unimmersed into membership, turned itself into a denomination in 1968, and later changed its teaching on marriage. It has lost about six of every seven members since 1958. The Churches of Christ kept the original approach and have declined only slowly. One thing separates the branches: how they handle the Bible's authority.

How the change enters Churches of Christ. It does not come as an attack on the Bible. It comes on one issue, women's roles, using one argument: that Scripture is moving in a direction and we should keep going. But that argument is a method, not a conclusion. The churches that used it fifty years ago for women's ordination used the same words a generation later to redefine marriage. Paul grounded the assembly instruction in creation, not culture (1 Timothy 2:13). Once that is set aside, nothing in the Bible is safe from the same reasoning.

What happens to elders. Elders exist to guard what God delivered (Acts 20:28–30; Titus 1:9). When the truth is treated as a work in progress, there is nothing left for them to guard, and the office changes shape. Five things follow. Elders stop teaching and become a board that approves plans. The preacher becomes the real authority. Most congregations end up with no elders at all, and the empty space is filled by a strong man, an outside group, or a majority vote. Some elderships use their authority to remove one of God's qualifications for their own office. And churches that lose control of their property, pulpit, or credentials cannot resist being changed from outside.

An old pattern. The same failures appear before 300 AD: envy at Corinth, Diotrephes who "loved to be first," leaders chasing money and status. In every case the trigger was personal, not doctrinal, and when local elders failed, authority moved outward to synods and finally to the emperor. It never came back. A church with no elders, a dominant preacher, and a business meeting has recreated those conditions.

The "feminization" claim. Some blame the loss of male leadership on churches becoming feminized. The evidence does not support that as a direct cause; the share of women in Churches of Christ has been stable and is typical of all churches. What the claim really describes is leaders who will not teach hard truths or exercise discipline. That is a failure of authority, not a matter of gender.

An honest caution. Holding to the Bible slows decline but has not reversed it. Churches of Christ have their own problem: in the most conservative congregations, most children leave. Guarding doctrine is not enough. Elders must also shepherd souls (Acts 20:28).

What to do. Hold beliefs because Scripture teaches them, not because they are traditional or popular. Have elders who teach. Reject both the one-man church and the majority-vote church. Hold the biblical position on women's roles with precision: restrict the one thing Paul restricts, and honor every other ministry the New Testament gives women, so there is nothing for the progressive argument to grip. Keep the building, the pulpit, and the credentials local.

The sum. When authority moves from what God delivered to what people decide, doctrine becomes temporary, elders become a board, the church becomes an organization, and within two generations most of the people are gone. The alternative is Paul's charge: guard the flock, teach the whole counsel, expect wolves from within, and remember that the authority was given by the Holy Spirit and not by the men who hold it.

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1. The Question and the Baseline

This document asks what happens to a congregation's doctrine and governance when it adopts the interpretive method of progressive Christianity, and it asks the question specifically of the Churches of Christ. The baseline from which it measures is the pattern of the New Testament and the churches of the first two centuries, which the American Restoration Movement set out to recover: Scripture holds precedence over tradition, experience, and culture; congregations are governed by a plurality of local, appointed, teaching elders; and the church claims no name, creed, or structure beyond what the apostles delivered.

Progressive Christianity is defined here by method rather than by any conclusion. The method relocates the source of teaching authority from a received deposit to an ongoing process, whether that process is called reason, experience, the Spirit's continuing work, or the trajectory of redemption. In the vocabulary of the 1 Timothy 2 exegesis (Part Eight) and of the Obedience Of Faith course (Week 10), authority becomes *generated* rather than *conferred*. Paul addressed that question directly in the passage that regulates 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" (1 Cor 14:37). Gifting and maturity are real; they do not adjudicate order. Everything that follows is an account of what happens when that verdict is reversed.

The method is testable by one question. When Scripture and the perceived direction of the process conflict, which governs? A conservative reader may be wrong about the text and will change when corrected from it. A progressive reader, confronted with a text that says the opposite of his conclusion, reinterprets the text as a stage to be moved beyond.

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2. The Movement's Own Natural Experiment

The Restoration Movement supplies an unusually clean test 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 and the Churches of Christ did not.

The Disciples' path ran in the order the method predicts. Open membership in the 1910s and 1920s set aside a plain command (Acts 2:38) for the sake of ecumenical unity. Higher criticism entered through the Disciples Divinity House at Chicago and the College of the Bible controversy at Lexington (1917). Restructure (1968) converted a convention of autonomous congregations into a denomination with congregational, regional, and general "manifestations," regional credentialing of ministers, and a General Assembly that votes on doctrine; *Christianity Today* reported that 1,124 congregations declined to be listed under the new design. Full communion with the United Church of Christ followed in 1989, and a 2013 General Assembly resolution welcomed members regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Membership fell from just under two million in 1958 to 278,000 in 2022.

The Churches of Christ, holding the same founding hermeneutic, grew through the 1980s, plateaued near 1.3 million adherents in the 1990s, and have since declined gently, roughly 10 percent in attendance since 1990 by one directory estimate. The comparison is not perfectly controlled, but the three bodies began as one movement with one hermeneutic, and the branch that changed the hermeneutic is the branch that lost six of every seven members. This is the one piece of broader statistics this document retains, because it is the movement's own.

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3. The Doctrinal Sequence as It Appears in Churches of Christ

Across bodies that have adopted the method, doctrine has changed in a recognizable order: Scripture is redefined from norm to conditioned witness; the resurrection and miracles become negotiable; the exclusive claims of the gospel soften into pluralism and evangelistic nerve fails; and finally the creation-grounded instructions on gender and sexuality are set aside by appeal to trajectory. In the mainline each step followed the previous by one to three decades, and the same arguments (the slavery analogy, Galatians 3:28 as a master key, the "direction" of the New Testament) were used for women's ordination in the 1950s–70s and again, nearly verbatim, for same-sex marriage in the 2000s.

In the Churches of Christ the sequence has run in a different order, and that difference is instructive. Because the movement's identity was built on the authority of Scripture, the first step (redefining Scripture) has rarely been taken openly. Instead the method has entered at the fourth step, on the question of women's roles, and has been justified with the trajectory hermeneutic by congregations that have not adopted that hermeneutic anywhere else. The 2016 Wineskins survey estimated about 100 congregations, out of roughly 12,000, had expanded women's roles in worship; half of those surveyed had women preaching and 16 percent had women elders. Broadway in Lubbock opened worship roles in 2019; Highland in Abilene appointed women elders in 2020. The published rationales appeal to Galatians 3:28, to the slavery analogy, and to the direction of the New Testament, and treat 1 Timothy 2:13 as culturally conditioned.

The 1 Timothy 2 exegesis answered those arguments and the answer need not be repeated. Paul grounds the assembly instruction in creation twice (1 Tim 2:13; 1 Cor 11:8–9), demonstrably knows how to give a local reputational reason (1 Tim 5:14) and does not give one here, and never grounds slavery in anything prior to society, which is exactly why the one instruction could be carried past its culture and the other cannot. What matters for this document is the structural point: a congregation that accepts the trajectory argument for this question has accepted the method, and the method's other steps do not wait for permission. The ministers in the Wineskins survey were markedly more likely than the elders (70 percent to 48 percent) to expect further changes. 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.

Two things keep this from being an alarmist claim. First, the narrow position on 1 Timothy 2 (one function restricted; the full breadth of women's ministry honored) is itself a position about creation order, not about culture, and a congregation that holds it precisely is not on the trajectory. Second, the broad position (women silent in every sense) is contradicted by 1 Corinthians 11:5 and cannot be defended from the text, and positions that cannot be defended from the text are abandoned by the next generation along with whatever was taught beside them. The trajectory argument gets its grip on congregations that hold the broad position and cannot say why.

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4. The Governance Sequence as It Appears in Churches of Christ

Doctrine and governance move together, for a reason that can be stated precisely. The eldership exists to guard a received deposit (Acts 20:28–30; Titus 1:9; 1 Tim 5:17). When the deposit is redefined as a process, the office that guards it loses its reason for being, and the congregation reorganizes around the things that advance processes: professional staff, votes, and structures above the congregation. In the Churches of Christ this has taken five forms.

From teaching elders to a board. In the New Testament the elder is first a teacher, "able to teach" and able to "refute those who contradict" (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9), and elders who labor in teaching are worthy of double honor (1 Tim 5:17). Many Churches of Christ have quietly converted the eldership into a board that manages buildings, budgets, and personnel while the preacher teaches. Yeakley's *Why They Left* devoted a chapter to elders who treat the preacher as an employee and manage rather than shepherd. A board eldership is a progressive eldership in embryo whatever its members believe, because it has surrendered the function that justifies the office. An eldership that does not teach cannot guard, and an eldership that cannot guard will eventually ratify what the staff proposes.

The pastor system and its mirror image. The movement fought for a century over the located, salaried preacher, and both sides were partly right. Fanning, Lipscomb, and Sommer saw that a man who controls the pulpit will in practice control the congregation; Lipscomb wrote in the *Gospel Advocate* (1877) 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." McGarvey and the twentieth-century mainstream saw that congregations without trained teachers decline, and Sommer's "mutual edification" congregations, which rejected paid preachers altogether, largely died out by the 1950s. The baseline resolves the quarrel in a way neither party adopted: the elders are themselves the teachers, and the evangelist works under them rather than above them. The progressive outcome collapses this into the mainline model, in which the professional is the teacher and the elders are the board, and a congregation's doctrine then changes when its minister changes.

The elder vacuum and what fills it. A majority of Churches of Christ have no elders at all; informal estimates run from two-thirds to three-quarters of congregations, and churches that lose elders tend to stay without them. The documented reasons elderships fail to form or dissolve are not primarily progressive. They are a supply problem (qualified men decline the burden and exposure; unqualified men campaign for the office), 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 entire eldership resigned together), and a demographic problem (small, 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.

The connection to the method is indirect but real. An eldership vacuum is filled by one of three things: a dominant preacher, an outside authority (the twentieth-century editor-bishops, who could 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 authority: the congregation decides what it believes and decides again when the majority changes.

Elder-led revision. The most recent form is the use of eldership authority to make changes the movement had historically refused: instrumental music at Richland Hills (2006) and Quail Springs (2007), and the women's-role changes above, all decided by male elders, often with the ministers, and announced to the congregation. In appointing women elders, an eldership uses the authority conferred on it by 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to set aside one of the qualifications in those lists. The office is being used to amend the terms of the office. Under the baseline that exceeds the appointment, because the elders' authority is conferred by the deposit and cannot be turned against it; Paul told the Ephesian elders to guard against men "from among your own group" (Acts 20:30), not to be those men. About half of the congregations making such changes lost members at announcement, averaging about 8 percent, and again at implementation.

Keeping the building local. Because Churches of Christ hold their own property and credential their own teachers, they cannot be revised from outside, and disputes stay local. When the Sand Creek congregation split in 1904, the Illinois Supreme Court (1906) awarded the property to the faction that kept the original teaching, expressly declining to judge which teaching was right. The court could apply that rule only because no body above the congregation owned anything. The 7,659 Methodist congregations that left their denomination in 2019–2023 had to negotiate for theirs. This is a modest, non-theological reason the baseline polity has proven more durable under pressure than any alternative, and a reason not to accept, under the name of cooperation, any arrangement in which a congregation's doctrine or property is held elsewhere. The sponsoring-church controversy of the 1950s was, whatever else it was, an argument about exactly this.

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5. The Early Church Parallel

The leadership failures of the church before 300 recur in the Churches of Christ with little alteration. At Corinth (c. 96) a faction deposed appointed presbyters out of envy. Diotrephes "loves to be first" and expels those who receive the apostle's emissaries (3 John 9–10). Valens at Philippi was removed for insatiable greed (i.e. avarice). Hermas rebukes Roman leaders quarreling over precedence. The Roman schisms of 217 and 251 turned nominally on discipline and actually on contested elections and rivalry. Paul of Samosata at Antioch held a civil office, a throne, and a following that sang hymns to him, and kept his church role (i.e. see) for four years after an ecclesiastical governing council (i.e. synod) deposed him without the congregation's consent, until the emperor was asked to intervene.

Five characteristics recur: the trigger is personal (envy, status, money) rather than doctrinal; plurality fails toward either one dominant man or a faction overriding the appointed body; discipline disputes become proxies for power; and when the local body cannot resolve the matter, authority migrates outward and does not return. Over two centuries that migration produced the monarchical bishop, the synod, and the imperial council, each a solution to a local eldership's failure and each a permanent loss to the congregation. The Restoration Movement spent its first century undoing that; the Disciples redid it in a single vote in 1968; and a Church of Christ with no elders, a dominant

preacher, and a business meeting has reproduced in miniature the conditions that produced it the first time.

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6. The "Feminization" Thesis, Briefly

Some attribute the loss of male leadership to the "feminization" of institutions (Podles, Murrow, and recent secular restatements). The evidence for a direct link to eldership failure is weak. Churches of Christ members are about 58 percent women in Pew's sample, the same as American Christianity generally and stable for as long as it has been measured; the ratio mechanically shrinks the pool of potential elders but a stable ratio cannot explain a trend; Gallup found in 2025 that among adults under 30 the gap has reversed; and the documented causes of eldership dissolution are governance, conflict, and demographics, with women's-role disputes a minority trigger that behaves like every other contested decision.

The evidence for an indirect link is stronger and is better stated without the gender vocabulary. What the thesis describes (consensus-seeking leadership, reluctance to discipline, therapeutic rather than doctrinal preaching) is the re-grounding of ethics in experience and the church reconceived as an agency of care, and those are progressive moves that do erode the eldership, because an eldership's distinctive work is the exercise of conferred authority in teaching and discipline. Lipscomb in 1877 and Bragwell in 1987 described the same drift a century apart and neither had anything to do with the sex ratio of the pews. Congregations holding the narrow position on 1 Timothy 2 have nothing to gain from the frame and something to lose: it invites the broad position, which the text does not support and which drives away people who can read.

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7. What the Record Does Not Let Us Say

Three qualifications are owed. Theological conservatism slows decline sharply and is the strongest predictor in every controlled comparison, but it has not reversed decline in the present environment; the Churches of Christ are shrinking, slowly. Demographics do real work, and no study has fully separated them from theology. And the Churches of Christ have a retention problem that cannot be blamed on progressivism: Yeakley's data, as Guin read them, show that congregations identifying 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. Guin attributes this to legalism; others note those congregations were also the smallest, most rural, and most often without elders. Either way, an eldership that guards doctrine but does not shepherd souls fails the Acts 20:28 charge from the other side. Its children leave for a different reason than the Disciples' children did, but they leave.

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8. Implications for a Congregation Governed by Elders

Guard the hinge, not the list. 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 work. The guard is a settled practice of testing every teaching against Scripture and submitting to what Scripture delivers even when the culture, the congregation, or the elders would prefer otherwise. The course called this the Berean method (Week 5) and spent a week on it for this reason.

Elders who teach. An eldership that does not teach cannot guard and will not withstand a trajectory argument it has never had to answer. The remedy is 1 Timothy 5:17 and Titus 1:9: elders who labor in the Word, know it well enough to refute. A congregation with a preacher and a board should ask whether it has elders in the New Testament sense at all. Bassford's counsel is sound: value the office, treat its absence as a serious weakness, mentor men toward it over years, and merge with a neighbor rather than go another decade without.

Neither Diotrephes nor the business meeting. The dominant man and the democratic vacuum are both forms of generated authority and lead to the same place. The baseline is a plurality of qualified, appointed, teaching elders who exercise real oversight (Heb 13:17) and are accountable to one another and to the deposit.

Hold the narrow position, and all of it. Restrict the one function Paul restricts, ground the restriction where Paul grounds it (creation, not culture), and honor every 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. A congregation that does this has nothing to apologize for and nothing for a trajectory argument to grip. The exegesis's "honest ranking" and the course's Week 11 together supply the precision and the breadth.

Keep the building, the pulpit, and the credentials local. Not as a theological principle but as the arrangement that has proven, from Sand Creek to the present, hardest to revise from outside.

The whole 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. The Disciples of Christ are the movement's own demonstration. The alternative is the charge Paul left with the Ephesian elders: guard the flock, teach the whole counsel, expect wolves from within, and remember that the authority to do so was conferred by the Holy Spirit and not generated by the shepherds themselves.

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