

## Lesson 11: *Past Controversies*

Although Jesus only built one church and prayed that its members might be unified, and although the Holy Spirit sought unity through his revelation, the church of Christ has periodically faced divisive controversies throughout its history.

The original controversy among members of the body of Christ involved the assimilation of Gentile converts into a group that had formerly been exclusively and proudly Jewish. When God was ready to send the gospel to the Gentiles, he proved his intentions to Peter through means of a vision and a miracle in the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion whom the apostle then baptized (Acts 10). Peter's actions were put under scrutiny by Jewish Christians who assumed that Gentiles would be left out as they had been under the law of Moses. When he explained the course of events to them, however, "they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life'" (Acts 11:18). Gentile conversions continued in Antioch and elsewhere. Just then some Christians came down from Judea and taught the Gentile converts that they needed to be circumcised according to the custom of Moses in order to be saved (Acts 15:1), leading to no small dissension and dispute.

The parties involved met with the apostles and determined that God's revelation included the Gentiles without mandating they become Jewish proselytes first. The Judaizers were not satisfied with this decision, however, and continued to trouble their Gentile brethren.

The woman's role in the church was also an early source of confusion. Custom and Mosaic tradition seemed to forbid her from taking a leading role in worship and guidance, but the presence of spiritual gifts in her led to an assertion of privilege. The apostle Paul wrote on a couple of occasions to clear up the controversy.

"Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it shameful for women to speak in church" (1 Cor. 14:34-35). In worship services when the church is assembled, women are not permitted to speak as teachers, prayer leaders or song leaders.

He also wrote to Timothy, "Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence" (1 Tim. 2:11-12). This precludes women preachers and mixed gender adult Bible class teachers.

His qualifications for the offices of elder and deacon also forbid women in that they call for office-holders to be husbands and fathers. No woman can be a husband or a father.

This became very controversial in the nineteenth century and was one of the issues that led to a major division among Christians. It is being renewed today, especially among very liberal congregations and preachers.

The church of Christ in early centuries began to drift from the Bible pattern as the eldership mutated. First one elder took preeminence over a local eldership. Then one elder began to exercise authority over several churches in a region. Finally, a "pope" was appointed as earthly head of the universal church. This is the Catholic apostasy that has continued to drift away from the Bible ever since. Protestant denominationalism mimics this form of hierarchy and ignorance of congregational autonomy (see lesson four) by appointing lawmaking conventions and creed writers.

Attempts to restore the church's practice to the Bible pattern largely succeeded in the nineteenth century, but were somewhat reversed when Alexander Campbell championed the American Christian Missionary Society, an organization that exacted funds from local congregations to do a work on behalf of the universal church, without scriptural authority. This was another issue that split the ranks.

In the 1950s, the Highland congregation in Abilene, Texas, began a radio program called "Herald of Truth," which they wanted to broadcast worldwide. Because funding this project was more than they could bear, they requested other congregations to give up part of their treasury to the oversight of the Highland church. When objections were raised regarding the authority for this method, a deep fissure began to show among Christians across America. The decision by most to go along with this program led to the institutional controversy among churches that also included church support of orphanages and colleges. Today there are institutional churches that range in their liberalism all the way to the social gospel of gymnasiums and banquet halls.

1. What requirements were some Jewish Christians attempting to lay upon their Gentile brethren?
2. Why was division over this controversy generally contained to small losses in the first century?
3. How did Paul feel about the Judaizing teachers (Gal. 5:11-12)?
4. What does Titus 2:3-5 say about the role of the woman before God. Is she inferior to the man?
5. Why cannot a woman be an elder or deacon?
6. Why cannot a woman take a leading role in the worship services of the church?
7. Why is this doctrine about women's roles controversial today?
8. How did the early church drift into centralizing of authority? Why is this wrong (1 Peter 5:2)?
9. What was wrong with the American Christian Missionary Society of the nineteenth century?
10. What was wrong with the *Herald of Truth* funding program in the 1950s?
11. How far have many institutional churches gone, now a half-century later?