



JULY 1988

# The Reflector

## An Identity Problem

by Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Mistaken identity has affected most of us, either as perpetrators or victims. The results may have ranged from amusing, to embarrassing, to frustrating or even to disastrous.

A brother followed his wife into the auditorium one Sunday. From behind, he mistook another sister for his wife. Only after sitting down beside the sister and putting his arm around her did he realize his mistake. It amused us, who watched, but embarrassed them.

The recent shooting down of a passenger plane, mistaken for a fighter plane, over the Persian Gulf is an example of how disastrous misidentification can be.

I have been frustrated several times by mistaken identity. I was once delayed in Nashville by a police road block simply because my car and I met the description of a man and his car who had robbed a bank a few minutes earlier. I thought it was inexcusable, given my honest face and all.

We have lived in three towns near people with names similar to

ours. People constantly confused us with them. A TV cable company threatened to disconnect our service. A furniture company called demanding payment for furniture that we did not have. We also had to combat a rumor potentially harmful to our reputation. All of this because of the deeds of a man with a similar name.

In another town we received telephone calls from members of a Baptist church with a preacher with a name similar to ours. At times we heard some interesting things before we and the caller realized they had the wrong number.

At another place a man with a similar name ran a country store. We received calls at all hours from folks out of gasoline wanting road service. Shortly after moving from there we received an insurance settlement check made out to the store owner and forwarded to us by the Postal Service. Oh, yes, we sent it back -- though we felt like keeping it to repay for all those times we were awakened to phone calls meant for him.

I must confess that there were a few times that we felt like changing our name. I suspect some of them felt about the same way. However, we had second thoughts. If a name as rare as "Bragwell" could be so easily confused with another, what name could we use that would solve the problem? So, I have just kept on being me and keep on explaining that I am not "Bagwell", "Braswell", "Bradwell", "Broadwell", etc., or even "that Bragwell".

We are having a similar problem religiously in calling ourselves "Christians" (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16) or, collectively, "churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16). There are people who call themselves "Christians" and churches that are called "churches of Christ" with whom we had rather not be confused. The problem is becoming so acute that some good brethren are suggesting that maybe we should start identifying ourselves differently. Some even make a concerted effort to avoid being identified as a "member of the church of Christ" as they do personal work in their community.

The problem stems from the fact that these scriptural terms have been perverted, abused and used to identify people and groups who have little in common with what the New Testament teaches about these terms. Here in the Birmingham area recently there was a full-page article about the "Birmingham Church Of Christ" (associated with the cult-like Boston/Crossroads movement). In spite of our having so little in common with those folks, some thought we were all of the same persuasion.

A preacher friend was asked, "What does the church of Christ teach..." on a particular subject? He replied, "Just about any thing you can think of". He then went on to explain that no matter what the view is, that you can likely find some claiming to be members of the church teaching it and churches claiming to be "of Christ" supporting them in it.

Sound teachers have no

monopoly on the use of scriptural terms of identification. Nearly every crime known to man has been done by those who identify themselves as Christians. Some even saying they do them because they are Christians.

Yes, there are many "churches of Christ" with whom I do not want to be confused. There are many who claim to be just "Christians" that I had rather not have folks think that I am associated with them. They teach and practice things that I abhor.

What is the solution to this dilemma? Shall I carefully tip toe around so as to avoid referring to myself as a Christian or as a member of the church of Christ? Shall I avoid using good scriptural designations simply because someone claims to be the same thing but are not? Should Paul, or Peter, or any other apostle, (1 Tim. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1) have quit referring to himself as "an apostle of Jesus Christ" because of those who "call themselves apostles, and they are not" (Rev. 2:2)?

Really, brethren, any scriptural way that we identify ourselves will leave us with the same identity problem. I know of no scriptural term that has not been associated with doctrines and practices that are totally unscriptural. No matter what scriptural terms one uses he is going to have to *further identify himself* in some way to those not familiar with New Testament terminology.

If a group puts up a sign simply reading, "Christian's meet here", "The Lord's church", etc., it will still have to prove that the sign is telling the truth by its teaching and practice. They will still be confused with folks with whom they had rather not be identified. They will still have to constantly be explaining who they are to the people of the community. There are others who claim to be "Christians" and the "Lord's church". In fact, such terminology in many communities is associated with the pente-

costal movement. So, why further confuse the issue so that even good brethren looking for a place to worship will have trouble finding a starting place for identifying them?

All this reminds us of an old "Theophilus" cartoon by Bob West. (We were unable to locate our copy of it that we so carefully filed away). A sign painter was working on the sign in front of a denominational church building with the local "pastor" looking on. The "pastor" first objected when the painter lettered, "A Church Of Christ" on the building. He then objected when the painter changed it to "Not A Church Of Christ".

The term "church of Christ" is both scriptural and familiar to most New Testament Christians of this generation - so why abandon its use? Most members of the church know that not all who claim to be "churches of Christ" are indeed "of Christ". Yet, when they see the term on a sign it furnishes a good starting point for investigating it for other aspects of scripturalness.

Too, any church of Christ bent on identifying itself in some novel or unique way (especially in an area where script-

ural churches of Christ have met for years) needs to ask itself if it is not really trying to disassociate itself from admittedly scriptural churches of Christ. Could such be borne of an inordinate desire for independence and uniqueness? If there is really no difference, then why unnecessarily make the appearance of difference? Especially, since such redesignating does not really solve the identity problem in the community and creates one with brethren in the area.

Brethren, we need to remember that no matter how we scripturally identify ourselves, we will still need to supply much more information in word and deed before we will be properly identified by people in the community. One may scripturally call himself a "Christian", a "saint", a "believer", a "child of God". When he does he will likely be confused with unscriptural folks who call themselves by the same terms. A church may call itself a "church of Christ", a "church of God" or simply a "church". One should not be afraid or ashamed of any of these terms. Yet, when using any of them, we will need to spend much time in teaching and demonstrating to

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of their own needs and those of the poor (Eph. 4:28), yet the church is not thereby authorized to finance its own work the same way; the church must exhort individual disciples to hospitality and wholesome social activities, but it is not equipped or directed by the Lord to finance or oversee such activities.

The collectivization of our thinking and the institutionalizing of the churches has impressed a carnal generation, but at the cost of stripping individual disciples of personal initiative and ardor for the Lord. **We have built institutions, but we have destroyed Christians.**

Via "Pause - Ponder - Profit"



by Hollis Creel

As we drive along the highway, occasionally we will see the sign, "SLOW DOWN AND LIVE". Aside from the fact that Christians are heaven-bound to

honor the traffic laws of our land, this is excellent advice. It is designed with the good of all who travel the highways of our nation in mind.

In the hustle bustle, hurry scurry world in which we live, this is also good advice in our every day life. Things are moving at too fast a pace. We are too busy to really live. Dad often works two jobs. Mother works outside the home as well as caring for the home. Both have their different social activities, clubs, parties, lodges, sports, etc. Children also have jobs, and play different sports, going here and there. All this makes it virtually impossible for family togetherness. Thus we miss many of life's most wonderful blessings, being with and enjoying each other. Our children are with us for such a brief time. We need to slow down and make the best of this time -- together.

W.H. Davis said, "A poor life this, if full of care, we have no time to stop and stare." The Psalmist said, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork" (Psa. 19:1). The "GREAT I AM" has so arranged our surroundings as to reveal Himself to us. But if we are too busy to pause and behold the wonders and beauty of His hand, then we miss seeing Him. Every tree, every flower is a manifestation

of His being and everpresence. I need to slow down and smell the roses as well as see them. Their beauty and fragrance say to us: "GOD IS REAL."

God has also provided for man's eternal well-being through the gift of His Son, Christ Jesus. In order for us to enjoy these blessings, God has placed certain conditions upon them. We need to slow down and see these conditions, and with the help of Jehovah God meet His every condition, that we might live.

Many are too busy to render any service to their Maker. Therefore, they refuse to surrender themselves unto God. Because of a busy schedule many do not obey the gospel. Even some of God's children fail to find time to worship and work in the Lord's vineyard. These are truly the finer things of life, but many miss them because they are too busy.

In Christ Jesus there is salvation (2 Tim. 2:10). In Christ, God has promised every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3). In Him there is peace of mind, security, happiness, and the hope of eternal life. Anxieties, frustrations, failures, and fears are met in Him. But, if in this life we are too busy to see these things, and strive for them, we need to slow down and live.

Via "Words Of Life".

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## SERVICES

Sundays:

Bible Classes	9:45 A.M.
Worship	10:45 A.M.
Worship	6:00 P.M.

Wednesdays:

Bible Classes	7:30 P.M.
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the community what a "Christian", a "believer", a "saint", a "church of God", a "church of Christ", or a "church" really is - from the scriptural point of view.

Think about it, brethren.



# Games Churches Play

by Paul Earnhart

We read recently of two large Texas Baptist churches involved in a friendly rivalry over the size of their respective bowling alleys. They were also admirably equipped with gymnasiums, jogging tracks, saunas, etc. There is nothing startling about this. Increasingly American churches have begun to take on the atmosphere of health spas, their facilities heavily accented with the smell of sweat and the sound of running feet. Their calendars are filled with social events and entertainment. They no longer aspire merely to be a spiritual refuge for the sinner but the agent of his social life as well. To say that this trend has trivialized churches and brought into their fellowship people attracted by the wrong thing is to speak the obvious. It is also gratuitous to add that many of these churches are made of those who claim to be undenominational New Testament Christians.

Somehow I have real difficulty envisioning first century churches, in a life and death struggle to save a generation from hell, blithely engaging in building gymnasiums. And the New Testament has certainly not helped my problem, what with the writers' failure to either mention

or imply such activity by the churches. Some will no doubt feel that my problem is one of anachronism; the same kind of difficulty one has in imagining the apostle Peter tooling around in a Chevrolet (or to make it really tough, a Mercedes Benz). But that really is not true. Citizens of the Roman Empire were not strangers to recreation, entertainment and physical culture. They loved it. Their children played no less than five different games of ball and the Roman emperors were masters at building public baths and putting on athletic spectacles to keep the mind of the populace off politics and their own miserable lot in life. Augustus even threw in free haircuts.

It certainly was not lack of opportunity or appeal which kept New Testament churches out of athletics and entertainment. The marvel is, given the times, that they did not set up gymnasiums, public baths and banquet houses in every community. It certainly would have improved the public image of a people who were being called "haters of all mankind" (Tacitus). Even the most carnal minds would have been impressed by a program like that. The disciples must have had a compelling reason for their restraint. We believe it has to do with the will of God.

Though not much of an athlete myself (one friend describes my efforts as "spastic") I do not question the relative usefulness of physical exercise and recreation (1 Tim. 4:8). I am even more persuaded of the value of close social ties between Christians (Acts 2:46; Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:1-2). I am in regular association with brethren who will be found encouraging the Lord's people to get to know and appreciate one another through sharing in life's day-to-day experiences. It is evident that close family ties cannot be cultivated among Christians who only see each other briefly during worship assemblies.

But this does not make me happy about the social and recreational programs of local churches. The burdening of the church with such activity has served to drain away vital energy and resources needed to accomplish the work God ordained them for (1 Tim. 5:16). The Lord did not commission or equip local assemblies to become social clubs -- centers of recreation and entertainment. He did command them to join together in the study of the Scriptures and in worship (Acts 2:42; 20:7; Heb. 10:24,25) in order to produce spiritual maturity in all disciples and train them for service (Eph. 4:11-15). This was to be the task of elders appointed in every church (Acts 20:28), men whose qualities lay in godliness of life, knowledge of God's word, and the ability to teach (1 Tim. 3:1-7), not in physical culture and entertainment. While it is true that New Testament churches were also found supplying the needs of gospel preachers (Phil. 4:15-16) and their own poor (Acts 4:34-35) the primary function of the churches was to nurture the saints to maturity.

My point is simple. Local churches in their uncomplicated structure were never intended by the Lord to direct the whole range of a disciple's duties. This "teamwork" is but one expression of our discipleship which began and continues in the main to be a life lived out as an individual. We are fully persuaded that the great majority of our work in Christ is to be fulfilled, not collectively, but individually -- in the home, the school, the working place. While it is true that no local church has done its work unless it exhorts the disciples to absolute commitment in all areas of life, there are many things which the church must encourage in its members but cannot engage in as a body. The local church must exhort saints to take up honorable occupations for the provisions