

**Review of: Mark Thiesen, *Churches of Christ: A History of the Restoration Movement in Malawi 1906-1981*, Mzuzu: Mzuni Press 2020
(mzunipress1@gmail.com), London: African Books Collective 2020
<https://www.africanbookscollective.com/books/churches-of-christ>)**

Review Article¹ by Steven Paas

As a fraternal worker, mainly in the south of Malawi, Dr. Mark Thiesen operated in the same country where he had spent much of his youth, especially in the north when his parents were missionaries for an American branch of the 'Church of Christ' (CoC). His theological and cultural background made him well-equipped for writing this scholarly volume, which is the result of his researching the early 19th-century history of the Restoration Movement in the United Kingdom and America, especially in the emergence of the 'Church of Christ' (chapter 2). The rest of the book (chapters 3-7, and appendices 1-8) is an in-depth study of the development of the 'Church of Christ' and its various split-offs in Malawi in the period 1906-1981. This makes the study an indispensably precious historiographical addition to the largely unknown history of a specific appearance of the Restoration Movement in general and of its taking shape in Malawi in particular.

The author minutely unveils both the strong and the weak sides of the movement. He shows how it presented itself under the telling banner 'Church of Christ', and with the confession of being founded on the three pillars of: Biblical truth, Christian unity, and evangelism or mission. On its strong side the movement has been remarkably effective, spiritually and organisationally. God especially blessed the missionary work of Malawian Christians. In participation with and supported by Western missionaries, they were instrumental in drawing many people to Christ, who accepted Him as their Saviour. Educational centres served the Malawian people in their own languages with Biblical tracts and exegetical materials. In this concern, an important role was played by Namikango Bible School at Thondwe in the south, which in later years was led by the author. As a result, there was much numerical growth, both of congregations and of members of the Body of Christ. However, when the movement lost sight of the organic interrelatedness of the three pillars and their shared connection with Christ Himself, its weak aspects became apparent, and its spiritual effectiveness declined.

The author shows how many CoC members came to disregard Christ's desire for the unity of His people, disconnecting it from the truth pillar, which they one-sidedly favoured. Consequently, Biblical truth was dislocated, and this led to the development of a set of legalistic views, which split the Church into various separated groups that fought each other, and considered as non-Christian ('heathen') all who had not experienced baptismal immersion and all groups that had not been organised according to what they thought to be a New Testament pattern of the Church. As a result, the mission pillar tended to neglect its task regarding people of other religions, and shifted to the recruiting of members of other Christian denominations.

Likewise, Dr Thiesen describes how members of the 'Church of Christ in Malawi' came to neglect its truth pillar. Being disappointed by not finding in Scripture a clear-cut organisational

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structure of the Church, they started to grow away from the christocentric nucleus of God's revelation, and shifted to seeking Christian unity with others without applying Biblical normatives. Consequently, their mission pillar weakened and tended to be characterized by some kind of ecclesiological indifference and by an appearance of theological ecumenism that mainly consisted of seeking unity with other churches along organisational (institutional) lines, disregarding spiritual consequences, and busying itself in non-committal talks with unbelievers and members of other religions.

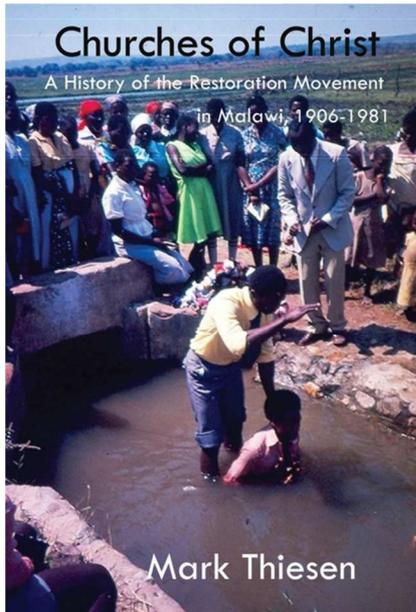
The Church belongs to Jesus Christ. He is the Head of His Body, which is the communion of saints, the organism of all true believers of all times and places. But both extremes on the weak side of the Restoration Movement, in its appearance under the title 'Church of Christ', show that this beautiful name does not automatically guarantee a healthy Biblical connection between man-made ecclesiastical institutions and the Head of God's Church.

In his concluding considerations the author rightfully urges all wings of the 'Church of Christ' to restore a Biblical balance. We have to learn that even true Christians are not perfect. Churches, however 'pure' they may think to be, are not perfect either. Yet God maintains His love and grace by withholding his condemnation. We need Christ's forgiveness and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit on a daily basis. I came across a church logo in Latin 'Nec tamen consumebatur', 'but [the bush] was not consumed' (Ex.3:2). The most astonishing fact in salvation history is God's patience in Christ despite our imperfection and sins. Perhaps this is the most important message of Dr. Thiesen's fine historical study.

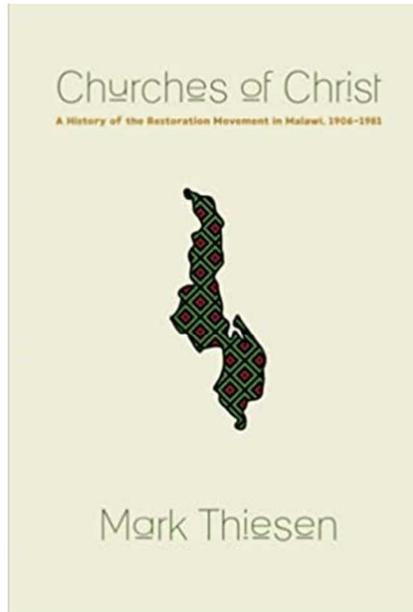
Unfortunately, the Malawi-produced copies of this valuable book have been poorly printed and bound. However, the copies sent by London co-publisher are of excellent quality.

In short: Highly recommended!

The reviewer, Dr. Steven Paas, is a Dutch theologian (church history, missiology), who taught in Malawi and was a minister of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). He published about European and African church history, mission, the phenomenon of Israelism or Christian Zionism in the interpretation of biblical prophecy, and about the lexicography of Chichewa, a widely spoken language in Central Africa, especially in Malawi.



Cover of the London edition



Cover of the Mzuzu edition