

## Unity in the Perspective of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ\*

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It should go without saying (although I'll say it anyway) that Christian unity is one of the foundation stones of the Restoration Movement. When the Springfield Presbytery wrote its Last Will and Testament in 1804, the first item they enunciated was "We will that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large." When Thomas Campbell penned the Declaration and Address in 1809, his first proposition was that "the church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." Barton W. Stone stated "Christian unity is my polar star." In 1808 William Guirey stated that the western Christians (of the Stone Movement) and the southern Christians (of the O'Kelly Movement) were united. When Joseph Badger of the New England Christians came to the west in 1826 he and Stone forged a union between their two movements. We all know that in 1832 the followers of Stone and Campbell formed a union, first in Kentucky then spreading outward. When Stone was criticized by the New England Christians for having abandoned them and "gone off and joined the Campbellites," Stone defended his stand by stating he stood where he always stood, but he just found other people standing there as well. In his autobiography, Stone referred to this union with Campbell by stating, "This union, irrespective of reproach, I view as the noblest act of my life."<sup>1</sup>

That's the basic thematic statement, but the issue needs fuller fleshing out. Let me suggest this in three components: our biblical

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understanding of unity, our historical understanding of unity, and what we have done about it. First, then, what is our biblical understanding of Christian unity? Let me begin with the caveat that I am an historian, not a theologian. My understanding of theology (indeed, even of most history) is very simplistic. So I submit these comments with all due apologies to theologians and those more versed in theological arts.

#### *Our Biblical Understanding of Christian Unity*

A key to understanding our view of Christian unity is to return to Thomas Campbell's first proposition in the Declaration and Address. "The Church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." Notice that he does not say the church ought to be one. The fact is, the church is one, whether we acknowledge that or not. In its essence, its intent, and its constitution, there is only one church. All who are true Christians are members of the one body of Christ on earth.

The Apostle Paul develops the imagery in several of his letters that we are members together of one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, we have no need of you, because we are all members of one body. The same is true of the church. I realize the whole concept of church membership has been a controversial one, and that led to our historic conflict over "open membership." But at least Paul uses the imagery of "membership" to define the relationship of Christians together in the body of Christ. And just as a body is united under one head, so the church is united under Christ as the head. Whether we like it or not, all true Christians are members together of the body of Christ and therefore united together. Therefore, our biblical understanding of Christian unity is that it is part of the nature of the church. Jesus prayed that his followers would be one, in order that the world might believe. It is, therefore, an obligation upon us to achieve as great a measure of Christian unity on earth as is humanly possible.

#### *Our historical Understanding of Christian Unity*

Reading history convinces us that Christian unity, while desired, is quite elusive. We are not the first movement in history to emphasize a concern for Christian unity. Efforts for unity between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism continued off and on for centuries. Once the Protestant Reformation got well under way, with its inevitable splintering of various groups, Protestant efforts for unity also

multiplied. The Lutheran Book of Concord of 1580 pulled together virtually all the Lutheran groups that had divided over the problems Lutheran theology had spawned over the previous half century. Hugo Grotius and John Dury also spent much of their lives trying to pull together disparate Protestant groups, but with no significant success.

In his sermon from the courthouse balcony in downtown Philadelphia in 1740, the famous evangelist of the Great Awakening George Whitefield appealed to Father Abraham, asking, “Whom have you in Heaven? Any Episcopalians?” “No.” Any Presbyterians?” “No.” “Have you any Independents or Seceders?” “No.” “Have you any Methodists?” “No, no, no!!” “Whom have you there?” “We don’t know those names here. All who are here are Christians—believers in Christ—men who have overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of His testimony.” “Oh, is this the case? Then God help us, God help us all, to forget party names and to become Christians indeed and in truth.”<sup>2</sup> Thomas Campbell would have loved it. But he was not even born for another twenty-three years.

Thus, Christian unity was not unique to this Restoration Movement either. What was unique, however, was the commitment that Christian unity could be achieved only on the basis of agreement that the Bible alone was the sufficient guide to faith and practice. Of the various streams that came together to form the Restoration Movement, this emphasis on the Bible alone was a common one. This was one of the five Cardinal Principles of the O’Kelly Movement. The Last Will and Testament asserted the same thing, stating the Bible is “the only sure guide to heaven.” Books which stand in competition with it should be cast into the fire, for it is better to enter life with one book than having many books be cast into hell. Thomas Campbell in Proposition Three of his Declaration and Address stated that nothing should be required of Christians except what is expressly revealed in the word of God. And in Proposition Five, where Scripture is silent as to the details of our obedience to Christ, no human authority has the power to interfere. These two propositions sum up his famous motto, “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where they are silent, we are silent.”

This is where the Stone-Campbell Movement was different from earlier (and later) attempts at unity. Earlier attempts were grounded in a written statement of faith. This probably began at the Council of Nicea in 325, and it continued through the centuries. In 1438 the Orthodox and Catholics tried to work out their problems by a carefully written statement at the Council of Florence. The statement

had a very bold statement on the filioque problem, but a very ambiguous statement on Roman primacy. Orthodox representatives signed the statement at Florence, but the folk back home repudiated it. The Book of Concord was a written statement to which all Lutherans agreed. Hugo Grotius and John Dury based their work on written formulas. The fact of the matter is that humanly devised statements rarely accomplish much meaningful Christian unity in the long run.

It is this reluctance to write out theological statements that has characterized the Movement since its inception. The Stone Movement in 1810 wanted to get better organized, and they decided to write out a statement of faith to determine what they believed so they could also determine who all was with them. They decided to focus particularly on the atonement, the nature of Christ, and the Trinity—they picked on the easy topics first. But they could not agree on these topics. After they discovered they could not agree, they decided this was a good thing. Because if they had agreed to a statement, it would become another creed. Therefore, it was good that they could not agree. Robert Marshall and John Thompson, however, were not comfortable with this open-endedness and went back to the Presbyterians. But the rest of the Stone movement remained committed to the principle of having no written creeds.

The commitment to have no creeds was part of the commitment to the Bible alone as the sufficient guide to faith and practice. This is the second primary foundation of the Movement—a commitment to biblical authority and to none else. Unfortunately, just as creeds have been subject to varying interpretations, so has the Bible itself. Thomas Campbell was certainly aware of this. That's why repeatedly in the Declaration and Address he talks about the Bible's "express declaration," and in Proposition Six he made a major distinction between the clear teaching of Scripture and the opinions that are deduced from Scriptural premises. Therefore, opinions were not to be binding upon the consciences of Christians. However, under the impress of Lockean thinking and frontier Jeffersonian/Jacksonian democracy, he believed that common people could come to a consensus on biblical teaching. Today we would call that naïve optimism; we are much more painfully aware of the difficulties of coming to a consensus on many biblical teachings.

*What We Have Done With Christian Unity*

If the above is our biblical and historical understanding of Christian unity, then what have we done with it? Sadly, we have not done much. It is fun and inspiring to relate the stories of the victories accomplished by our pioneering founders, particularly the unity meetings held in Georgetown and Lexington in 1831 and 1832. But since then our record has not been inspiring. We have to acknowledge that since the Stone-Campbell merger, the history of our movement has focused on division rather than union. The separation of the Church of Christ brethren by 1906, and the separation of the conservative Christian churches in 1927 have been major mileposts along the way.

But these separations, while tragic, disappointing, and frustrating, are not an indication that later followers departed from the founding principles of the movement. Instead, they are an indication of how difficult later generations found it to maintain the two original principles. The twin commitments to Christian unity and biblical authority created polarization when applied to new issues. In the first instance, no one decided to abandon biblical teaching. Rather, it was a hermeneutical disagreement over how to apply biblical authority in the silent areas of organization development and instrumental music in worship. The issue was not really about missionary organizations and musical instruments; it was about how to apply biblical authority in areas of biblical silence. Therefore when some spoke in the areas of biblical silence, others took this as an abandonment of biblical authority. Many then decided that Christian unity could not be had at the sacrifice of biblical authority. Division was the result.

It was a similar story in the early twentieth century. The disagreements of the time focused on open membership and comity agreements. But in 1923 both sides agreed that baptism was not the real problem. The issue was biblical authority and how to apply it. Baptism simply became the battle ground of conservative and liberal views of the Bible and its inspiration. Again, many felt that Christian unity could not be maintained at the expense of biblical teaching on baptism. Division was the result.

Perhaps the one positive experience the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ have had in trying to implement Christian unity was our decade-long discussions with the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana). Several years of national meetings with the Open Forum led to several years of a group of scholars meeting in a Doctrinal Task Force to discuss unity—its implementation and its implications.

Unfortunately those discussions fizzled out when the national leaders of the Church of God (Anderson) lost focus in an administrative reshuffling, and there was not sufficient interest on the local level to continue. We can honestly say we tried. But except for some enriching personal experiences and a somewhat surprising agreement on a consensus of faith, there is little of any substance to show for these efforts.

Perhaps the key to understanding the history of our movement is to understand the delicate balancing act between our two original principles. We are committed to both Christian unity and biblical authority. Ideally these two principles work in tandem, or side by side. However, the commitment toward Christian unity is a commitment that wants to reach out and embrace as many people as possible. But how far out do we reach before we have in fact stepped off the platform of biblical authority? We cannot reach out so far that we compromise our commitment to biblical authority. But on the other hand, the commitment to biblical authority tends to become a narrowing focus of having the Bible alone as our guide to faith and practice. But how narrow do we become before we stop lopping off brothers and sisters in Christ? The result is a lot of creative tension between these two polarizing principles. Where is that healthy median line between these two tendencies? Unfortunately, different people have drawn that line in different places

It is easy to be united in Christian fellowship with people who believe exactly the same as we do. The challenge is to apply Christian unity to people whose practices or beliefs are different from ours. At what point does Christian unity become theological compromise? At what point does biblical authority become sectarianism? These questions are easy to ask; the answers are much more difficult.

How then can we deal with such a question of union in our present discussions? Where can we draw the line of acceptance between the Scylla of ecumenical vacuity and the Charbydis of narrow sectarianism? It is probably easy to discuss more meaningful unity between the fellowship of Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and the Churches of Christ. Although there are still significant differences in the comfort level of the two groups toward organizations and musical instruments in worship, people in the CC/CC do not see these as faith issues, and increasingly I believe the Churches of Christ do not see them in these terms either. Therefore, it is relatively easy to build bridges of acceptance and fellowship across our traditional lines of separation. Already there are numerous instances of pulpit exchange

and joint worshipping for special events such as Sunrise Easter services and fifth-Sunday evening services. Therefore the lines of demarcation here are slowly being eroded.

But fellowship between the CC/CC and the Disciples is another matter. It would be easy for me to detail the issues in dispute in the early twentieth century and defend the conservative rationale, but this is not the place for that. But it is necessary for me to point out, however, that we still have many people in our churches for whom those years of traumatic separation are still a living memory.

Some of these issues will need another generation before they can be discussed calmly and objectively. But in the meantime, what do we mean by trying to increase our sense of Christian unity? Another question is to ask, "What is the nature of the union we seek?" If in fact the church of Christ on earth is one, how do we manifest that in congregational and brotherhood life? Is Christian unity merely a matter of verbally attesting that we are united? Or does it involve some kind of organic merger? And do we even have the machinery to orchestrate an organic merger? In our discussions with the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), this issue came up. We emphasized early on that we were interested in creating more of a sense of unity between the two fellowships, but we were not interested in merger. But some, on both sides, wanted to go beyond theoretical discussion and talk about merger. Others, however, were very skittish about such prospects. Indeed, trying to characterize the nature of Christian union is a daunting task. In this fellowship where no one can speak officially for anyone else, to engineer any kind of organic unity would be very difficult, to say the least.

What can be the possible results of our discussions here, particularly between the CC/CC and the Disciples? I don't believe anyone here seriously believes we can have organic merger between the North American Christian Convention and the Disciples General Assembly. But how then do we measure any increase in our Christian unity?

This is made even more difficult by the common perception of where our two groups are theologically. I realize that common perceptions are sometimes very inaccurate. Hopefully perceptions can be clarified by sitting down together and talking frankly and calmly about our different situations. By and large the fellowship of churches in the CC/CC are conservative; we heard Dick Hamm in Indianapolis state that 80% of Disciples ministers are liberal while 80% of the laity

are conservative. Indeed, the common perception is that the Disciples of Christ is basically a liberal denomination.

So other than personal friendships that may emerge out of such meetings as we have had, what unity can we expect from two fellowships that are identified with different theological commitments? CC/CC perceptions of Disciples' involvement in COCU are both puzzling and disturbing. Puzzling in that we lack the orientation and conditioning to see the value in it; disturbing in that we see many of the COCU denominations as so liberal that we wonder why anyone would want to be linked with them.

Further, Disciple statements with regard to homosexuality are equally disturbing. I have heard it expressed in our meetings that the Disciples General Assembly has not taken a position on ordination of homosexual ministers; that decision is left up to the regions. Yet I wonder if the Disciples would do the same if the issue were racism. Although there are certainly New Testament texts that teach against discrimination, racism is not identified as a sin in the New Testament, while homosexuality is. How would the Disciples respond if a region decided that racism was fine as long as it was practiced responsibly, and then allow the racists to define what it is to "practice it responsibly."

I don't know where the Disciples are officially or officially on the issue of abortion, but my guess is that most Disciples would support a woman's right to choose. Which of course means her right to kill. The overwhelming majority of people in our churches would view this as an unsupportable infanticide, equivalent to the Holocaust and other "ethnic cleansings."

The Disciples General Assembly bi-ennially endorses various resolutions on social and ethical issues. According to the April issue of *The Disciple*, the General Board was in the process of considering recommendations for the following items:

urging President Bush to seek the release of an American writer imprisoned in Peru for treason;

support for a UN embargo on "conflict diamonds";  
support for a farm ministry program seeking to overcome powerlessness;

urging the US government to convey to the Japanese government our concern for the “comfort women” of WWII; reparations for slavery;

support for church-related environmental actions; and urging health care for same-sex domestic partners.

If the General Assembly can entertain such resolutions, why not resolutions to condemn abortion as infanticide and condemn homosexuality as perversion and sin? Where does this leave us with regard to our original question of unity? I believe it leaves us right in the middle of the dilemma that has faced our Movement twice before. At what point does unity mean a sacrifice of biblical standards? At what point does separation mean a sacrifice of Christian unity? Frankly, I don’t know. I have lots of questions, but very few answers. Hopefully in our continuing dialogue we can come up with some workable answers.

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Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “A Short History of the Life of Barton W. Stone” in *Voices from Cane Ridge*, ed. Rhodes Thompson (St. Louis, MO: Bethany Press, 1954), 109

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Aaron Crossley Hobart Seymour, *Memoirs of the life and character of the late Rev. George Whitefield, A. M.* (Philadelphia: Simon Probasco, 1820), 308.



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