

Our Unity in Christ: From Cane Ridge to Kansas City*

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The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) understanding of “our unity in Christ” was born of the Great Revival in the West (1797-1805) that culminated in the Cane Ridge Meeting of August 6-12, 1801. In his “History of the Christian Church,” published in 1827, Barton Stone declared that the meeting at Cane Ridge would ever be “memorable” not only because of the large attendance and the number of persons who fell “as slain in battle,” but because “The spirit of love, peace, and union, were revived.” As he recalled twenty-six years after the event,

You might have seen the various sects engaged in the same spirit, praying, praising, and communing together, and the preachers in the lead. Happy days! Joyful seasons of refreshment from the presence of the Lord! This work from this period spread throughout the western country.¹

In Stone’s view, the progress of the Great Revival was “checked” by the emergence of “partyism” or what we would call “denominationalism.” Prior to the Cane Ridge Meeting, Stone had rejected the Presbyterian doctrine of predestination and the related

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teaching that the Holy Spirit must prepare persons to believe the gospel. Although still a Presbyterian minister, he no longer preached the Presbyterian views that he had rejected. Stone's failure to preach the distinctive doctrines of the Presbyterian Confession was a source of concern to other Presbyterian ministers, especially after they began to observe Baptists and Methodists who participated in the revival "drawing away disciples" after themselves. In order to correct what they perceived as failings in the preaching of Stone, and other Presbyterians who shared his views, they emphasized in their preaching the views that Stone had rejected. In response, Methodist and Baptist ministers began to preach the distinctive doctrines of their confessions. And, in Stone's words, "The war commenced; and now there appeared to be more solicitude to establish certain dogmas, and to enlist members into a particular party, than to preach the gospel, and win souls to Christ."² Stone reflected: "Never before did partyism to my mind appear so hateful, so destructive to the progress of truth and vital piety, and to the salvation of souls."³

Stone's experience of the Great Revival formed the view of our unity in Christ that he would bequeath to the Stone-Campbell Movement. That view can be summarized in two statements. 1) Our unity in Christ is a gift of the Spirit. 2) It is through our unity in Christ that God wills to bring the world to faith that Jesus is the Christ and to inaugurate Christ's earthly reign of peace and justice.

Unity as Gift of the Spirit

Stone's view that unity is a gift of the Spirit was published as early as 1804. In September of 1803, Stone and four other Presbyterian ministers withdrew from the jurisdiction of the Synod of Kentucky rather than be censured for not preaching the distinctive doctrines of the Presbyterian Confession. They formed the independent Springfield Presbytery. In their *Apology for Renouncing the Jurisdiction of the Synod of Kentucky*, published in January of 1804, they proposed that Christians "forget" their creeds and confessions as they had in the early years of the revival. They prodded, "Say, ye that love the Lord, what is it that unites you together? Is it a creed, or the living Spirit of the crucified Jesus?" They suggested that persons who thought that a church could not exist without a confession betrayed "their ignorance, of the uniting, cementing power of living religion."

Stone's view that unity is a gift of the Spirit had two corollaries. One of those corollaries was that unity could not be formed by creeds or confessions of faith, written or unwritten, or by the practice of immersion. He gave classic expression to this view in 1833, while seeking to shore up the union of his followers with the followers of Alexander Campbell. He reported having seen himself in a "late retrospect" of his life, more than a quarter of a century earlier, addressing "a large, attentive congregation" on the subject of Christian union. He remembered having remarked that there were four different kinds of union. Book union was founded on a creed or confession of faith. Head union was the same as book union, except that the articles of the confession were not written in a book. Water union was founded on immersion into water. Fire union was "the unity of the Spirit—a union founded on the Spirit of truth." Fire or Spirit union, he argued, alone would "stand," and no other union was "worth the name." "This Spirit," he observed, was "obtained through faith, not in a human form or set of opinions, whether written or not written, but in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners; and by a cheerful obedience to all his known commands." "This Spirit," he continued, "leads us to love God and his children—to love and pray for all mankind." He stated that it was fire union "for which Jesus prayed [in John 17:20-21], and by which the world will believe that he is the Christ of God."⁴ Employing another image, he observed "How vain are all human attempts to unite a bundle of twigs together, so as to make them grow together, and bear fruit!" To grow together, he continued, twigs "must first be united with the living stock, and receive its sap, and spirit, before they can ever be united with each other." "So, he asserted, "must we be first united with Christ, and receive his Spirit, before we can ever be in spirit united with one another." "Men," he observed, "have devised many plans to unite Christians—all are vain." "There is," he admonished, "but one effectual plan, which is, that all be united with Christ, and walk in him."⁵

The second corollary of Stone's view that our unity in Christ is a gift of the Spirit was his conviction that Christians need not agree on all issues to manifest their oneness in Christ. At this point Stone's views differed somewhat from those of Alexander Campbell, with the result that Stone aggressively sought union of his followers with those of Campbell, while Campbell sought to slow the movement toward union that Stone had initiated. A major point of difference concerned opinions. Although both Stone and Campbell would allow for a wide variety of "opinions" within a uniting church, they differed on their definition of what constituted an opinion. For Stone, an opinion was an

interpretation of Scripture regarding doctrine or practice. For Campbell, opinions were restricted to “speculative” interpretations of Scripture regarding doctrine. Practices, such as believer’s immersion for remission of sins, were clearly revealed and should be required as a term of communion. For Stone, Campbell’s interpretation of the Scripture’s teaching on the practice of baptism was an opinion and should no more be a barrier to communion with Christians than any other opinion. For Stone, it was enough for Christians to be drawn together by the Spirit and to accept the Bible as their norm.

Had it not been for Stone’s more radical version of the conviction that Christians need not agree on all issues to manifest their oneness in Christ, Stone’s Christians and Campbell’s Reformers would not have united in January of 1832. Campbell wanted more discussion! In 1832, the Christians and Reformers differed on whether Christians should commune with the unimmersed, on the doctrines of Trinity and Atonement, on whether ministers or congregations had the authority to ordain, and on whether they should be called Christians or Disciples of Christ. In a joint editorial published in April of 1832, Stone and Reformer John T. Johnson declared that neither side had “joined” the other. They noted, “One will say, the Christians have given up all their former opinions of many doctrines, and have received ours—another will say, the Reformers have relinquished their views on many points, and embraced ours.”⁶ Such statements, they insisted, were not true: “We have met, together on the Bible, being drawn together there by the cords of truth—we agreed to walk together according to this rule, and to be united by the Spirit of truth.” “Neither the Christians nor Reformers,” they remarked, “professed to give up any sentiments or opinions previous to our union, nor were any required to be given up in order to effect it.” Rather, “We all determined to learn of Jesus, and to speak and do whatsoever he says to us in his word.”

Unity as Means of Conversion and Transformation

Stone’s view that it is through our unity in Christ that God wills to bring the world to faith that Jesus is the Christ and to inaugurate Christ’s earthly reign of peace and justice was also published in the 1804 Apology. In a section written by Stone, the members of the Springfield Presbytery admonished:

Let all Christians. . .unite in prayer, that God. .
.would collect and unite into one his scattered flock,

that the whole world may believe in Christ the Saviour of sinners. "That the light of the moon may be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun seven-fold;" "that it may no longer be day and night, but one day known to the Lord, when the Lord shall be king over all the earth."

The prayer that God would collect and unite into one God's scattered flock, that the world may believe, was a paraphrase of Jesus' prayer in John 17:20-21. The quotation from Isaiah 30:26 (regarding the light of the moon and the sun) and the compilation of texts (regarding the one day known to the Lord) were commonly interpreted as references to the millennium of Christ's earthly reign believed to be prophesied in Revelation 20:1-6. Like other Presbyterians, the members of the Springfield Presbytery believed that the millennium would be marked by the unity of Christians, an end to all forms of arbitrary power and oppression (in particular, slavery), and evidence of the love of Christians for all humanity without national or political distinctions.

The belief that unity in Christ would result in the conversion and social and political transformation of the world led the members of the Springfield Presbytery to dissolve their Presbytery in June of 1804. Believing that their Presbytery was becoming an obstacle to Christian union, they signed the Last Will and Testament of Springfield Presbytery, willing that their Presbytery "die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large." They also determined to take "no other name than christians." Shortly thereafter they published Rice Haggard's pamphlet on the Christian name. The pamphlet was a vigorous call for Christians to reclaim their family name and to unite on the scriptures, alone, by the power of the Spirit. Haggard promised that the millennium would come when "the different denominations, which have long been at variance, shall join hands in an everlasting peace." Haggard asked, "Are you not all praying, brethren, Lord, hasten the approach of that day? The day has already begun to dawn among some. Let a spirit of union and love (which is the fruit of the Spirit of God) prevail among you, and you will find, that this is day in the moral world."⁷

Stone worked for Christian unity, believing that it would lead to the conversion of the world and the establishment of Christ's reign, for the rest of his life. He often counseled individuals to act in behalf of unity, as in his 1844 admonition: "We must be co-workers with God; every one should be engaged; and as large bodies move slowly, let each

one begin in himself.”⁸ He also summoned denominations to work toward unity. In 1841 and again in 1843, he called on the “various denominations of Christians” to appoint representatives to meet in some central location to “confer” on the union of Christians.⁹ In the early years of his ministry, he may have been a postmillennialist, believing (as did Alexander Campbell), that Christ would reign on earth spiritually for a thousand years prior to his coming in judgment. However, at least from 1832 onward, he was a premillennialist, teaching that Christ would come in judgment at the beginning of the millennium and personally reign on earth for a thousand years. From a practical standpoint, Stone’s premillennialism allowed him to exhort the church to reform—in particular, to end the institution of slavery—by threat of God’s imminent judgment. However, the key to Stone’s understanding of the coming of Christ’s earthly reign remained his view that “the return and salvation of the Jews” and “the fulness of the Gentiles brought in”—both of which he taught would precede the return of Christ—depended upon the union of Christians. In February of 1836, four years after having first published his view that Christ would return in judgment before the millennium, Stone wrote that it was God’s design to “conquer and save the world” by the “union and joint co-operation” of Christians.¹⁰ For Stone, to work for Christian union was to work for the conversion of the world and the establishment of Christ’s reign of peace and justice.

From Cane Ridge to Kansas City

The view of our unity in Christ born of the Great Revival has continued to shape Disciples. This is not meant to deny the important influence of Thomas and Alexander Campbell in the development of the Disciples commitment to Christian unity. It was the common commitment to unity that the world might believe that Jesus is the Christ that made possible the union of Christians and Reformers. However, at the points where Stone differed from Alexander Campbell, in particular regarding the degree of uniformity required to manifest Christian unity, Disciples have tended to adopt Stone’s perspective.

The convictions that (1) unity is a gift of the Spirit, along with the corollaries (a) that creeds and immersion will not produce unity and (b) that uniformity is not required to manifest oneness in Christ and (2) that God wills to convert the world and establish Christ’s reign through the unity of believers, have stood behind many Disciples endeavors. Disciples were charter members of the Federal Council of Churches in

1908. Disciples' endorsement of federation had come six years earlier when Elias B. Sanford, secretary of the Federal Council's predecessor National Federation of Churches, spoke to the Disciples convention in Omaha. J. H. Garrison defended the principle of federation by arguing that association with other bodies in the Federal Council could be a vehicle for promotion of the Disciples' unique plea for unity. Disciples have also participated in the Council's successor organization, the National Council of Churches, and have contributed numerous leaders to the organization, including Roy G. Ross (general secretary), J. Irwin Miller (president), and Joan Brown Campbell (general secretary). In 1948, Disciples participated in the formation of the World Council of Churches and have remained active participants in the work of the Council. Disciples have also taken active roles in local councils of churches and have participated in United Ministries in Higher Education.

Disciples established a general organization to pursue contacts with other Christian bodies in 1910 through the efforts of that year's International Convention president, Peter Ainslie. In his address to the Topeka Convention, Ainslie told Disciples that the task of seeking unity was part of God's program and therefore should be part of theirs. Late that year Ainslie and others incorporated the Council (or Commission) on Christian Union. In 1917 the Council was reorganized and renamed the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity. In 1954 the charter of the Council was changed again and the Council was renamed the Council on Christian Unity. The purpose of the organization, now a general unit of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), has remained the same.

Disciples have engaged in numerous efforts at union with other churches through the Council, and even before its organization. In 1887, the General Christian Missionary Convention responded to the Protestant Episcopal Church's Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral. Ultimately, however, Disciples concluded, as did most other churches, that the Quadrilateral was a call for everyone to become Episcopalians.

Disciples have engaged in numerous talks with American Baptists—dating back to 1841. Serious union discussions began in the 1890s. In 1930 the Baptists rejected a report calling for union, citing the Disciples teaching of baptismal regeneration as the barrier to unity. In the 1940s Disciples cooperated with Baptists in the preparation of Sunday School literature and a widely used hymnal. Merger talks began again in 1947, but were broken off by the Baptists in 1952. This time fear of losing dissident congregations to the Southern Baptist

Convention, as well as the matter of baptism, was put forward as a reason for breaking off talks.

Talks began with the Congregational-Christian and the Evangelical and Reformed Churches in 1946. These two groups were themselves engaged in merger talks that resulted in the formation of the United Church of Christ in 1958. Between 1961 and 1966 several conversations were held with the United Church of Christ. When hope for a broader union of churches was raised by the formation of the Consultation on Church Union, Disciples-UCC talks were suspended. Later talks resumed, leading not to merger, but to the adoption by both bodies in 1985 of a recommendation that the Disciples and UCC enter into an "ecumenical partnership." In 1989 the General Assembly of the Disciples and the General Synod of the United Church of Christ both passed a resolution declaring that "a relationship of full communion now exists between our churches."

In 1977 the Council on Christian Unity began international conversations with the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. The talks are not intended to lead to union (at least in the foreseeable future), but are for the development of communion between the two churches.

Disciples have also participated in multilateral conversations. In 1919 they participated in the development of the Philadelphia Plan. Ainslie saw the plan as an imperfect but positive step. However, no church body approved it. In 1949 the Disciples joined the Congregational Christian Churches (now part of the UCC) in calling a Conference on Church Union, which met at Greenwich, Connecticut. Disciple Charles Clayton Morrison presented the initial draft of a plan. The plan was revised in 1953 and again in 1958, but was never presented to the denominations for action.

By far the most significant multilateral effort in which the Disciples have participated is the Consultation on Church Union, which Disciples joined in 1963. From 1968-1974 Disciple Paul Crow served as COCU General Secretary. In 1984 COCU completed *The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting*. After over three years of study by various congregations, the 1989 Disciples General Assembly, meeting in Indianapolis, affirmed the consensus as consisting of "a sufficient theological basis to proceed with the covenanting acts and the uniting process to be proposed by the COCU churches." July 16, 2001, The General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), meeting in Kansas City, adopted a resolution calling for enthusiastic reception of the Consultation on

Church Union's "Recommendation to the Churches for a New Relationship, Churches Uniting in Christ." The New Relationship adopted by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is not a merger. Rather, not unlike the 1832 union of Christians and Reformers, it is a covenant to manifest our unity in Christ, despite our differences.

The Disciples passion for our unity in Christ born of the Great Revival was alive in Kansas City. May it be so in other venues, including our conversations with Stone-Campbell brothers and sisters!

Endnotes

¹ *The Christian Messenger* 1 (February 1827), 76, 77.

² *Ibid.*, 77.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *The Christian Messenger* 7 (October 1833), 314-316.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 315-16.

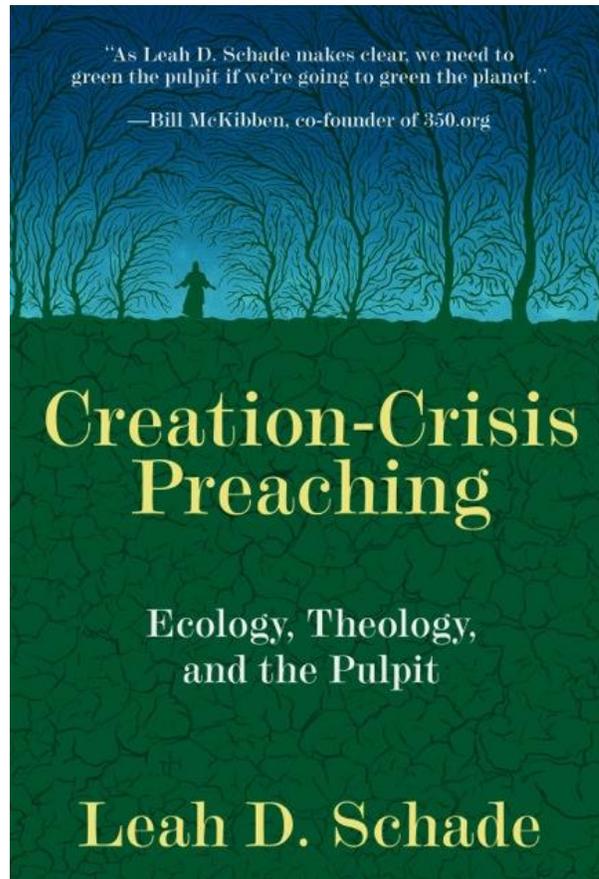
⁶ *The Christian Messenger* 6 (April 1832), 110.

⁷ Rice Haggard, *An Address to the Different Religious Societies, on the Sacred Import of the Christian Name* (Lexington, Ky.: Joseph Charles, 1804), reprinted with a preface by John W. Neth, Jr., *Footnotes to Disciple History*, no. 4 (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1954), 31-32.

⁸ *The Christian Messenger* 14 (June 1844), 41.

⁹ *The Christian Messenger* 11 (March 1841), 246-24; *The Christian Messenger* 13 (May 1843), 8-9.

¹⁰ *The Christian Messenger* 10 (February 1836), 17-18.



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