

The Nature of Christian Unity: Historical Understandings of Churches of Christ *

Douglas A. Foster
Abilene Christian University
Abilene, Texas

The nineteenth-century origins of Churches of Christ are suffused with ideas that could easily be labeled *ecumenical* despite the communion's twentieth-century reputation for exclusivist sectarianism. The Stone-Campbell Movement from which Churches of Christ emerged was clearly a Christian unity movement. The strategy for effecting unity proposed by leaders like Barton W. Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell, however, was an appeal to individual Christians—the faithful scattered throughout *the sects*—not to denominations. When true Christians abandoned the divisions represented by the mutually exclusive denominations to unite on the clear teachings of Scripture—those ideas on which all *evangelical* Christians already agreed—without human philosophies and traditions, visible unity would be the result. In every locality persons united to Christ would come together to form a church of Christ, inherently one with all other such groups. Early leaders rejected the Protestant *invisible church* idea of an existing spiritual unity because they believed it justified continued division between denominations.¹

Thomas Campbell articulated the idea in 1809 in one of the classic documents of the movement, “The Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington (PA).”

*This paper was presented at the meeting of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue in June 2004 at the Disciples Center, Indianapolis, Indiana. It was presented earlier to The Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, November 1999.

Prop. 1. The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else; as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.

Prop. 2. That although the Church of Christ upon earth must necessarily exist in particular and distinct societies, locally separated from one another, yet there ought to be no schisms, no uncharitable divisions among them. They ought to receive each other as Christ Jesus hath also received them to the glory of God. And for this purpose, they ought all to walk by the same rule, to mind and speak the same thing; and to be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment.

Prop. 9 That all that are enabled, thro' grace, to make a profession [of their faith in, and obedience to Christ, in all things according to his word], and to manifest the reality of it in their tempers and conduct, should consider each other as the precious saints of God, should love each other as brethren children of the same family and father, temples of the same Spirit, members of the same body, subjects of the same grace, objects of the same divine love, bought with the same price, and joint heirs of the same inheritance. Whom God hath thus joined together no [one] should dare to put asunder.²

In a sense, this earliest unity impulse in the Stone-Campbell Movement was a modification— a hybrid perhaps—of the spiritual and organic unity ideas. Leaders believed there were true Christians in all the denominations, yet they were not satisfied with the idea that unity was already perfect in some intangible spiritual plane. Rather, all such Christians must leave the sectarian/ denominational organizations that divided them and come together to be visibly/organically united in local congregations of Christians. The unity envisioned was not organic in the sense of mergers of denominational structures but in terms of

individual Christians uniting with other individual Christians in every place without any features that would stop them from full recognition of all other such Christian groups.³

No structure beyond local congregations was envisioned at the beginning of the movement. The founding leaders believed that denominational structures were inherently divisive. Scripture was silent concerning any over-arching organization to secure and maintain unity. In another foundational document of the movement titled “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery,” the signers, including Barton W. Stone, asserted that there was neither precept nor example in the New Testament for such organizations as sessions, presbyteries, synods or assemblies. Later Stone wrote: “We have long been convinced that the sects, as such, can never unite. Every attempt has proved abortive, and must and will fail, till each sect give up its creed as authoritative, its name of distinction, its spirit of party, and feel willing to decrease that Christ may increase.”⁴

The platform on which unity was to be effected consisted of the clear teachings of scripture—particularly the New Testament. They drew their restitutionist plea partly from the ideas of their Presbyterian Puritan forbears and from Enlightenment assumptions about human ability and knowledge that had been “democratized” in the American frontier.⁵ Many advocates of restorationism in the past had seen it primarily as a means to separate true Christians from the corrupt visible church in order to restore purity. Leaders in the Stone-Campbell Movement, however, saw a restoration of the clear, unmistakable teachings of scripture as terms of Christian fellowship to be the only means whereby all Christians could be united.⁶ This idea became an essential part of the movement’s thought early in the nineteenth century when the religious groups around them were for the most part uninterested in unity.⁷

The question of precisely what must be restored varied somewhat among early leaders. Thomas Campbell’s son Alexander emphasized getting at the details of Scripture—the facts concerning what God wants people to believe and practice. He called these facts “the ancient gospel and order of things.” In a series of articles published in his journal *The Christian Baptist* between 1824 and 1830, Campbell developed many of the tenets that would come to characterize the movement, including its congregational polity with elders and deacons, and worship practices such as celebration of the Lord’s Supper every Sunday.⁸

Barton Stone also emphasized scripture as the source of knowledge for the Christian. He insisted, however, that without the Spirit of Christ, precise knowledge could never effect unity. He wrote in 1835:

The scriptures will never keep together in union and fellowship members not in the spirit of the scriptures, which spirit is love, peace, unity, forbearance, and cheerful obedience. This is the Spirit of the great Head of the body. I blush for my fellows, who hold up the Bible as the bond of union yet make their opinions of it tests of fellowship; who plead for union of all Christians; yet refuse fellowship with such as dissent from their notions. Vain men! Their zeal is not according to knowledge, nor is their spirit that of Christ. There is a day not far ahead that will declare it. Such antisectarian-sectarians are doing more mischief to the cause, and advancement of truth, the unity of Christians, and the salvation of the world than all the skeptics in the world. In fact, they create skeptics.⁹

These perennial tendencies (head-heart/facts- Spirit) have maintained a strong presence and tension throughout the history of Churches of Christ. Yet Alexander Campbell's rational approach has most often dominated. To bring about unity, therefore, many believed it was necessary to convince Christians in all "the sects" of the reasonableness of their platform of the ancient gospel and order. All honest people, because of their reasonable nature, would eventually arrive at and unite on those core truths, allowing for a wide variety of opinions concerning non-essential matters.¹⁰ Christian unity was an inevitable consequence of the restoration of the ancient order of things plainly seen in scripture.

The fact that the movement itself suffered a painful division at the turn of the century and another in mid-twentieth century, led many to conclude that the concepts of restoration and unity cannot survive together; one must be subordinated to, or even obliterated by, the other. Some have insisted that primitivism is inherently divisive.¹¹ As long as restoration and unity were understood as complementary, they existed together, at least at a rhetorical level, with little problem. However, when ecclesiastical realities began to dawn on people, that is, when they realized that denominational structures were not simply going to go away, the two themes began to come apart.¹² At any rate, when the sects and denominations did not vanish, and when other ecumenical opportunities came available in the late nineteenth century, the movement's traditional position was supplanted in many minds by ideas of federation and organizational merger.

As early as 1895 J. H. Garrison described his idea of an evolution that would begin with unity within Protestant families, progress to a federation of all the churches for cooperation in benevolence and missions, finally ending with the dropping of sectarian names and creeds so that all would be united in one church. For the Stone-Campbell Movement to participate in this process it needed to create structures through which representatives could speak officially for it. Many understood such a move as a betrayal of their original plea for unity. The movement was giving in to the denominational system and becoming what they had always fought against. Though other issues played important parts in the divisions of the Stone-Campbell Movement, the body known today as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) took the route of creating structures through which to work for unity in councils of churches and official dialogues. The more conservative parts of the movement (Churches of Christ and the “independent” Christian Churches) have continued to embody the earlier individualistic unity emphasis.

Churches of Christ became a separate identifiable body over a fifty-year period following the Civil War. Because the movement then had no official structures beyond the congregational level, the issues that were the immediate cause of division had to work their way through every individual congregation.¹³ It was a long and painful process, but by the early 900s the body was regrouping and moving ahead in what it believed were the authentic intentions of the founders.

The division itself significantly shaped the group’s understanding of the church and Christian unity. At least parts of the group appropriated an idea that had existed among some second-generation leaders of the nineteenth century that the visible body known as Churches of Christ constituted the universal church. One of the most famous statements of that position was made by David Edwin Harrell, Jr., in his 1966 Reed Lecture at the Disciples of Christ Historical Society. Asked to speak on the relation of “his group” (Churches of Christ) to the church universal, Harrell frankly stated, “From my theological point of view, the group to which I belong is the church universal.”¹⁴

A common approach among those who hold this view is to list New Testament scriptures that speak of Christ’s universal body under headings such as “Why the church of Christ is not a Denomination” or “Why I am a Member of the church of Christ.”¹⁵ In one sense their points are irrefutable. Christ’s universal church is not a denomination or a sect. The authors make it clear, however, that they are talking

about the visible fellowship of congregations known exclusively as Churches of Christ.

In one sense their points are irrefutable. Christ's universal church is not a denomination or a sect.

From the perspective of the world, the church of Christ is a denomination. They see a group that is independent from other groups, so they assume it is merely another of the groups in the denominational system. It is true, of course, that the church of Christ is a separate people; but the church of Christ is not a division of the body of Christ. *It is the body of Christ.* Those who are uninformed may not understand this, and are in need of teaching and study.¹⁶ Those holding this view refuse to acknowledge the true Christian identity of any but those in Churches of Christ.¹⁷

Yet there have always been voices expressing the view that Churches of Christ constitute a movement within the universal church. This idea is epitomized by the nineteenth century slogan "Christians only, but not the only Christians." The churches formed by the efforts of the Campbells, Stone, and countless others, did not claim to contain all Christians. Rather, they wanted all Christians to drop denominational creeds and structures as tests of fellowship and be simply Christians. Those who hold this concept point out that Christ's universal church is over nineteen hundred years old and encompasses untold millions of believers, alive and dead, who had no knowledge of nor connection with the American-born Churches of Christ.¹⁸ A journal published by members of Churches of Christ, *Wineskins* magazine, expresses this understanding in its statement of purpose. "Our background and commitment is to the Church of Christ that was born of the American Restoration Movement. Our goal is to move that group closer to the church of Christ revealed in Scripture."

Those who see this body as the universal church often insist on identifying it in writing as "church of Christ" or "churches of Christ" to indicate that the phrase is not a proper name but a simple description—this is Christ's church. One prominent leader in the 1950s, G. C. Brewer, chided those who insisted on that designation.

Some unthinking brethren seem to hold that to spell church with a small "c" avoids making a title or proper name of the phrase "church of Christ." This is laughable. When the sense is plainly a designation—a telling of "what" church is intended—then the phrase is used as a proper name, and thus the scriptures are violated [by using a scriptural phrase for all the saved to apply to only a portion], and to use

a small initial letter in a proper name is to violate the laws of grammar. So, brother, you are both unscriptural and ungrammatical.¹⁹

Within these two broad understandings are several complications. The first relates to the term *sect* and *denomination*. The Stone-Campbell Movement began with an inherent antagonism toward sectarianism and denominationalism—terms early leaders used interchangeably to label structures that divide Christians. Followers of Christ are to be united. Anything dividing believers is evil.

Those who equate Churches of Christ with the universal church view those who believe there are true Christians outside that body as sectarians. Christ's church is not a denomination; it consists of all the saved. To admit that there are Christians in other groups is to endorse division—denominationalism and sectarianism. By definition, there can be no Christians outside of Christ's church.²⁰

To those who see Churches of Christ as a body of people dedicated to following Christ, but not the only ones legitimately making that effort, the viewpoint just described appears to be the ultimate in sectarianism. This group agrees wholeheartedly that Christ's church encompasses all the saved and that it is not a denomination. They insist, however, that Christ's church is not confined to one visible, historically-bound body named Churches of Christ. Both sides condemn sectarianism, but each holds a radically different concept of what it is.²¹

Another complicating factor is the group's heritage of restorationism. The leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement understood restoration of the New Testament church as the necessary step that would lead to the unity of Christians and the conversion of the world. For part of the movement, restoration—particularly of correct doctrine and form became the chief end. Some believe that the New Testament church was restored at some point in the past through the efforts of the Stone-Campbell Movement. The Churches of Christ are, they believe, the restored New Testament church. The job now is to be vigilant against any deviation from that completed restoration. "The church was restored and continues to maintain its distinctiveness and exclusiveness only by powerful and plain preaching and defense of the truth."²²

Others are less absolute in their claims for perfect restoration. One idea is that though Churches of Christ have recovered correct doctrine and worship practices, they are still lacking in areas such as the evangelistic zeal and church discipline that characterized the early church. Another concept expressed is that while Churches of Christ

might not be perfect, they are closer to the ideal than anyone else.²³ A leading spokesperson in the 1960s and 1970s, Batsell Barrett Baxter, urged members to “Take the New Testament as the blueprint or pattern and then come across the centuries to our own day. Then find the church that is most like the pattern.”²⁴ That church, of course, would be the Churches of Christ.

Still other voices emphasize that while *restoration* is essential, it is a never-ending process—a quest that will always occupy sincere Christians both collectively and individually. For these people, the goal is continual study and learning, openness to the Word, self-examination and correction in light of the Word, and a *movement* toward what God would have us be. Because we are imperfect humans, they insist, the process never ends.²⁵

The matter becomes even more complicated when some members of Churches of Christ deny they have any historical connection with the Stone-Campbell Movement. “We base our religious beliefs and practices solely on the clear teachings of the New Testament,” they argue. Since all honest people in every age can read and understand the New Testament correctly and alike, those who have done so today do not owe their understandings to any historical movement or person. We have simply gone to the source of authority, the Bible, and reproduced New Testament Christianity in its original form. In other words, we would have produced the church just as we have even if there had never been a Barton W. Stone or an Alexander Campbell or a Stone-Campbell Movement.

In the guest editorial [What Is Good About the Church] references were repeatedly made to a “Restoration Movement,” “our movement,” “the restoration tradition,” etc. In more than 40 years of preaching from [sic] the Bible this language is puzzling to me.... We do not have “our movement;” Jesus Christ has his Body, his Church, his Family. We strive to be a part of that fellowship, avoiding any sectarian movements or memberships.²⁶

Others insist that while our American Restoration history may be important, our real heritage is not in the nineteenth century but in the first.²⁷

Conclusion

Churches of Christ from their earliest history have longed for the visible unity of all followers of Christ. The Stone-Campbell Movement optimistically proposed a platform of restoring the ancient

gospel and ancient order to achieve that visible unity. The rejection of that platform by many believers, shifts in understandings and even divisions within the movement itself, pushed many in Churches of Christ to emphasize the sectarian exclusivist parts of their heritage during much of the twentieth century. Yet the wider view was always there and has perhaps taken the forefront in recent years.²⁸

Even when inclined to do so, Churches of Christ have participated in the Ecumenical Movement only tangentially and with difficulty because of their radical congregational polity and the structures of the National and World Councils of Churches. There is today, however evidence of an increasing desire to be involved in unity at many levels, both in the formal Ecumenical Movement (my own participation in the Faith and Order Commission is one example), and in local and national activities that bring believers together across denominational barriers.²⁹

¹ This appeal was by no means unique in early nineteenth-century America. See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

² Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (Washington, PA: Brown and Sample, 1809) 16-17.

https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/tcampbell/da/DA-1ST.HTM#Page16

³ Roy B. Ward, "The Nineteenth Century Restoration Movement and the Plea for Unity," *Restoration Quarterly* (Second Quarter 1958):80; and Barton W. Stone and others, "Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery," (n.p., 1804; reprint ed., St. Louis: Mission Messenger, 1978), 21.

⁴ Barton W. Stone and John T. Johnson, "Editors' Address," *Christian Messenger* 7 (January 1833): 1.

⁵ I am using the terms restorationism, restitutionism, and religious primitivism interchangeably for the same idea of a return to the perceived pristine perfection of the first century church. Various forms of the idea can be traced through Christian history from the earliest times. See especially A. T. DeGroot, *The Restoration Principle* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1960) and Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1930-1875* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁶ See similar ideas in the independent movement begun by Robert and James Haldane in Scotland. Deryck W. Lovegrove, "Unity and Separation: Contrasting Elements in the Thought and Practice of Robert and James Alexander Haldane," pp. 153-177 in *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany and America c. 1750-c.1950*, Keith Robbins, ed. (Basil Blackwell, 1990).

⁷ Ralph G. Wilburn points out that many churches later became interested in unity and began making strides toward its realization

along routes other than that of restoring the "ancient order of things." This type of challenge was not present in the early days of the Disciples Movement. "A Critique of the Restoration Principle, Its Place in Contemporary Life and Thought," *Encounter* 20 (Summer 1959): 341-2.

⁸ Alexander Campbell, "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things," *Christian Baptist* (1824): 48- 50. ". . . the fact should be acknowledged and lamented, that very much is wanting to bring the Christianity and the church of the present up to the New Testament standard."

⁹ Barton W. Stone, "Remarks," *Christian Messenger* 9 (August 1835): 180. See also Barton W. Stone, "The Union of Christians. Lecture IV," *Christian Messenger* (June 1841): 334; and Barton W. Stone, "The Convention," *Christian Messenger* (May 1842): 195.

¹⁰ Richard T. Hughes, "From Primitive Church to Civil Religion: The Millennial Odyssey of Alexander Campbell," *Journal of The American Academy of Religion* 44 (1976): 89.

¹¹ Alfred Thomas DeGroot, *The Grounds of Divisions Among the Disciples of Christ* (Chicago: Privately Printed, 1940) 220; and DeGroot, *The Restoration Principle*, 7-8.

¹² Bill J. Humble, "The Missionary Society Controversy in the Restoration Movement (1823-1875)," (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1964), 26.

¹³ Issues included the creation of extra-Congregational agencies like the American Christian Missionary Society, the use of instrumental music in worship, the role of women in public leadership, and the creation of a clergy.

¹⁴ David Edwin Harrell, Jr., "Peculiar People: A Rationale for Modern Conservative Disciples," in *Disciples and the Church Universal* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1967), 34-44.

¹⁵ See for example, Roy El Cogdill, *The New Testament Church* (Port Arthur, Texas: O. C. Lambert & Sons, Publishers, 1938); Leroy Brownlow, *Why I am a Member of the Church of Christ* (Fort Worth, Texas: Leroy Brownlow, 1945); G. C. Brewer, "Is the Church of Christ a Denomination? (n.p., n.p.). All have been reprinted, the first two numerous times.

¹⁶ David Pharr, "Reexamining the Fundamentals, XIII," *Carolina Christian* 32 (April 1990): 4.

¹⁷ See for example, D. Gene West, "Is the New Testament Church a Denomination?" *Bible Herald* 36 (May 15, 1989): 10-112; Eddie Whitten, "I Love the Church of Christ," *Firm Foundation* 103 (January 14, 1986): 3-5.

¹⁸ Calvin Warpula, "The Importance and Uniqueness of the Church," *Image* 2 (July 15, 1986): 23.

¹⁹ G. C. Brewer, *A Story of Toil and Tears of Love and Laughter: Being the Autobiography of G. C. Brewer* (Murfreesboro, TN: DeHoff Publications, 1957), 137-8.

²⁰ Dub McClish, "Observations on the 'Restoration Summit,'" *Spiritual Sword* 16 (April 1985): 21.

²¹ Anthony L. Dunnavant, "United Christians, Converted World: John 17:20-23 and the Interrelation of Themes in the Campbell-Stone Movement," *Discipliana* 46 (Fall 1986): 44-46.

²² McClish, "Observations on the 'Restoration Summit,'" 21.

²³ See for example the series by Ronnie Morrison, beginning with "Have We Effected Complete Restoration?" *Christian Bible Teacher* 29 (July 1985): 272-4; and David Pharr, "Reexamining the Fundamentals, XI," *Carolina Christian* 31 (June 1989): 7.

²⁴ Batsell Barrett Baxter, "Finding the Lord's Church," *Gospel Advocate* 119 (May 12, 1977): 289, 296.

²⁵ See Glover Shipp, "Restoration, An Ongoing Process," *Image* 4 (December 1, 1988): 5, 10.

²⁶ Roy H. Lanier, Jr., "Forum: Letters Demonstrate Wide Diversity of Views from Subscribers." *Christian Chronicle* 49 (May 1992): 23.

²⁷ Paul E. Jarrett, "Our Restoration Heritage," *Carolina Christian* 30 (June 1988):5-6; F. LaGard Smith, *The Cultural Church* (Nashville: 20th Century Christian, 1992), 209-10.

²⁸ "It requires no negotiation or arrangements. Among [people] to unite them as one in Christ. If we are in Christ, we cannot help being one with all who are in Christ." David Lipscomb, in J. W.

Shepherd, ed., *Salvation from Sin by David Lipscomb* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1950), 299. "... no truth can be as vital as union with God and therefore union with all the children of God. Nothing should separate us from each other unless it is something that separates us from God." G. C. Brewer, "A Plea for Unity," 169-186 in *Abilene Christian College Bible Lectures 1934* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1934), 183.

²⁹ Take for example the 1996 Promise Keepers Speech by Max Lucado, minister of the Oak Hills Church of God in San Antonio, Texas. "There is a common deck on this boat on which we can all stand. We can "bunk" with whomever we choose-probably those who are like us-but when the Captain calls all hands on deck to battle the enemy, it's time to leave opinions and personal preferences behind and stand together."

Enhance your ministry.

Practical ministry
and continuing education programs online

- Master of Divinity
- Master of Theological Studies
- Certificate in Pastoral Ministry
- Master in Pastoral Studies
- Doctor of Ministry
- Lay School of Theology & Webinars

lexington
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

lextheo.edu
QUESTIONS: Rev. Erin Cash ecash@lextheo.edu