

What We Have Done/Learned

Jim North

We have engaged in this Dialogue for about ten years now. It has been an interesting journey—sometimes scary, sometimes enlightening, sometimes frustrating. In these meetings, we have encouraged members of the three major streams of our Movement to engage in dialogue with one another. We represent three elements of a movement that began early in the nineteenth century as a call for Christian unity: Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and Churches of Christ. Each of us have come through past experiences that have given us perceptions of the other two groups. In these discussions, sometimes those perceptions have been reinforced, sometimes they have been challenged and shattered. But through it all, I believe we have come to an appreciation of each other's commitment to Jesus, though that commitment may be demonstrated in significantly different ways.

As the designated spokesman for the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ—a position I did not request—I want to try to summarize some of the perceptions of some members of our group about this ten-year journey. First of all, it is easy to talk about our relationships with the Churches of Christ. Some of us have been active in various meetings of the Restoration Forum, a series of meetings between our two groups that has achieved a significant amount of good in establishing bridges between our two fellowships, in fact pulling down some of the suspicions and unease that have existed for decades.

I think it is safe to say that the Churches of Christ are more conservative than most of our fellowship—not necessarily in theology, but certainly in worship style. The

preference to not use instruments in worship is but one indicator of that. Yet we have found brethren of kindred spirit. It has always seemed to me that the instrument was never the real issue of contention; it was a hermeneutical methodology, almost a personality, that tended to say “Thou shalt not,” unless the Scriptures explicitly said “Thou shalt.” Yet our perception is that this spirit of negativism, whether or not it actually existed in previous decades, is diminishing considerably in the present. Even so, however, some of our members still experience times when individuals from the Church of Christ regard us with fear and distrust, seeing us as agents of a liberalizing tendency that will eviscerate their love for the Word of God. As a result, some individuals from the Church of Christ come across as self-righteous, even though that may not be their intention. But on the whole, I believe there has been a great amount of goodwill and harmonious fellowship with our brethren from the Church of Christ.

On the other hand, there are the Disciples of Christ. Although the Churches of Christ appear to us to be generally more conservative than we are, we see ourselves as certainly more conservative than the Disciples. If anything, this helps us understand the Churches of Christ more. We understand why they are wary of getting too cozy with us, because we are wary of getting too cozy with the Disciples. We see the hermeneutic of the Churches of Christ as being a bit too rigid; yet our hermeneutic is uncomfortable with the flexibility of the Disciples.

I was not able to attend the Dialogue in Dallas a few years ago when Eugene Boring gave a paper on hermeneutics. But I read his manuscript later, and I certainly agreed with one thing he said. In the past I have often been frustrated by discussions of hermeneutic between us and the Churches of Christ, because those discussions were often

theoretical and got nowhere. Dr. Boring explained why. He said discussions about hermeneutics in general accomplish nothing; it is necessary to talk about specific texts.

We have often wound up talking about homosexuality in our dialogues. Unfortunately, that has probably appeared that we are hung up on this one issue. I don't think we are, but that one issue seems so symptomatic of a whole host of other things, and the issue itself seems to be clear-cut to us. Not so to the Disciples. We were flabbergasted at our dialogue in Lexington when some Disciples commented that the Scriptures do not condemn homosexuality. When we called attention to Romans 1, it was explained that Paul was referring to homosexuals trying to be heterosexuals—they had exchanged the natural for the unnatural. Dr. Boring may be right when he said discussions of hermeneutic principles in general are pointless; but it seems that discussion of specific texts is also pointless because we see them so differently. This is part of the frustration I referred to earlier.

In my textbook on Restoration History, I contend that much of the history of the movement is a struggle between the twin ideals of biblical authority and Christian unity. It is so easy to sacrifice one to achieve the other, and the imbalance has been done by all three groups. Can we reach out to others in Christian unity without stepping off the platform of biblical teaching? Can we narrow our fellowship to those who share our biblical views without cutting off brothers and sisters in Christ? That is the question and the challenge.

Many members of the Christian Church/Church of Christ fellowship are quite content that we dialogue with the Church of Christ. The theological perspectives of our two groups are basically quite compatible. In addition, they seem to be coming over to

our position since some of their churches are even holding instrumental services. So in general there are good vibes about any discussions with the Churches of Christ.

But many of the members of our fellowship are quite confused about engaging in a dialogue with the Disciples. They see the Disciples as just another liberal church dying on the vine. Their indifference stems from distrust, and probably both indifference and mistrust stem from a lack of contact. It is tempting to say that many of our members perceive the Disciples as arrogant in their liberalism; it may be just as true that our people are arrogant in their belligerence toward liberalism.

As we participate in these dialogues, we need to ask ourselves, “Did we come here to listen and learn from one another, or did we come to convert others to our superior position? Do we want unity with Jesus at the center, or do we want it under the banner of our branch?” All of us can, and should, confess sins of self-righteousness, indifference, and arrogance. Yet all of us can also agree with Luther, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe.”

So we participate in the dialogues, hoping and praying that we can find unity in Christ in spite of our preconceptions, our biased experiences, our imperfect perceptions. We are strongly pulled toward a desire to defend biblical truth—of course that means biblical truth as we understand it. We are equally pulled toward a desire to embrace as many people as possible in the arms of Christian unity. We are pulled, and we are stressed by this polarity. In fact, we are not just pulled, we are torn on the horns of this polarity. We dare not compromise our commitment to the authority of Scripture; at the same time, we dare not compromise our commitment to the unity of the body. So we

continue in dialogue—we must continue in dialogue!-- paraphrasing Luther: “Here we stand. We can do no other. God help us. Amen.”