

# *Call to Unity*

RESOURCING THE CHURCH FOR ECUMENICAL MINISTRY

Issue 3 • December 2004



Council On  
Christian Unity

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**200 Years Later**  
**The Last Will and Testament**  
**of the Springfield Presbytery**



## FROM THE EDITOR

### Back to the Future

At first glance, this issue of *Call to Unity* appears to be about the past:

- It lifts up the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* as a seminal document that gave life and direction to a movement for Christian unity that spread across the western frontier of a rapidly expanding nation.
- It celebrates the life and ministry of Barton W. Stone and his passion for unity in the one Body of Christ.
- It recognizes the contribution of a people committed to overcoming division and “party spirit” within the church in order “to cultivate a spirit of love and unity with all Christians.”
- It records Peter Morgan’s address, “Life after *The Last Will and Testament: the Stories of Two Faithful Executors*,” that traces the history of this movement over the past two centuries—focusing upon the lives of Peter Ainslie and Leroy Garrett who embodied the vision that has claimed the best of the Stone-Campbell tradition that includes a love of scripture, a passion for freedom, and a persistence in seeking reconciliation and unity in the one church of Christ.

Yes, it is about the past. But more, it is about the future: God’s future, and our role and responsibility as heirs to the legacy of *The Last Will and Testament* today.

In addition to Peter Morgan’s article and sermon delivered at National City Christian Church in Washington D.C. this past October 30-31, 2004 as the 22<sup>nd</sup> Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity, this issue includes four papers that were presented at the meeting of the national Stone-Campbell Dialogue in April, 2004. These papers explore different approaches and differing models of unity for the church today—each rooted deeply in the soil of the traditions that developed from *The Last Will and Testament*; each pointing to a future that claims unity and healing in the church, by the power of God’s grace and the work of the Holy Spirit.

To understand the future, it is often helpful to look back. This issue, **200 Years Later**, is offered in that spirit and with that hope of rediscovery, not only of our past, but of our future—claiming not only what has been, but what is yet to be: a people who (in the words of *The Witnesses Address of The Last Will and Testament*) join together “in thanksgiving to God for the display of his goodness in the glorious work he is carrying on . . . which we hope will terminate in the universal spread of the gospel, and the unity of the church.”

Robert Welsh

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# Call to Unity

## Resourcing the Church for Ecumenical Ministry

Issue No. 3 • December 2004

### 200 Years Later: The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery

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# The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery

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For where a testament is, there must of necessity be the death of the testator; for a testament is of force after men are dead, otherwise it is of no strength at all, while the testator liveth. Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened except it die. Verily, verily I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground, and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. Whose voice then shook the earth; but now he hath promised, saying, yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, yet once more, signifies the removing of those things that are shaken as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain—Scripture.

THE PRESBYTERY OF SPRINGFIELD, sitting at Cane-ridge, in the county of Bourbon, being, through a gracious Providence, in more than ordinary bodily health, growing in strength and size daily; and in perfect soundness and composure of mind; but knowing that it is appointed for all delegated bodies once to die: and considering that the life of every such body is very uncertain, do make, and ordain this our last Will and Testament, in manner and form following, viz.:

**Imprimis.** We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink unto union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one Body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in hope of our calling.

**Item.** We will, that our name of distinction with its Reverend title, be forgotten, that there be but one Lord over God's heritage, and his name One.

**Item.** We will, that our power of making laws for the government of the church, and executing them by delegated authority, forever cease; that the people may have free course to the Bible, and adopt the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

**Item.** We will, that candidates for the Gospel ministry henceforth study the Holy Scriptures with fervent prayer, and obtain license from God to preach the simple Gospel, with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, without any mixture of philosophy, vain deceit, traditions of men, or the rudiments of the world. And let none henceforth take this honor to himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.

**Item.** We will, that the church of Christ resume her native right of internal government—try her candidates for ministry, as to their soundness in the faith, acquaintance with experimental religion, gravity and aptness to teach; and admit no other proof of their authority but Christ speaking in them. We will, that

the church of Christ look up to the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into his harvest; and that she resume her primitive right of trying those who say they are apostles, and are not.

**Item.** We will, that each particular church, as a body, actuated by the same spirit, choose her own preacher, and support him by a free will offering, without a written call or subscription—admit

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*We will, that this body die,  
be dissolved, and sink unto  
union with the Body of  
Christ at large*

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members—remove offences; and never henceforth delegate her right of government to any man or set of men whatever.

*Item.* We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven; and as many as are offended with other books, which stand in competition with it, may cast them into the fire if they choose; for it is better to enter into life having one book, than having many to be cast into hell.

*Item.* We will, that preachers and people cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance; pray more and dispute less; and while they behold the signs of the times, look up, and confidently expect that redemption draweth nigh.

*Item.* We will, that our weak brethren, who may have been wishing to make the Presbytery of Springfield their king, and wot not what is now become of it, betake themselves to the Rock of Ages, and follow Jesus for the future.

*Item.* We will, that the Synod of Kentucky examine every member, who may be suspected of having departed from the Confession of Faith, and suspend every such suspected heretic immediately; in order that the oppressed may go free, and taste the sweets of gospel liberty.

*Item.* We will, that Ja— —, the author of two letters lately published in Lexington, be encouraged in his zeal to destroy partyism. We will, moreover, that our past conduct be examined into by all who may have correct information; but let foreigners beware of speaking evil of things which they know not.

*Item.* Finally we will, that all our sister bodies read their Bibles carefully, that they may see their fate there determined, and prepare for death before it is too late.

Springfield Presbytery,  
June 28th, 1804

Robert Marshall  
John Dunlavy  
Richard M'Nemar  
B. W. Stone  
John Thompson  
David Purviance

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*We will, that the people  
henceforth take the Bible  
as the only sure guide to  
heaven*

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# The Witnesses' Address

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We, the above named witnessed of the Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery, knowing that there will be many conjectures respecting the causes which have occasioned the dissolution of that body, think proper to testify, that from its first existence it was knit together in love, lived in peace and concord, and died a voluntary and happy death.

Their reasons for dissolving that body were the following: With deep concern they viewed the division, and party spirit among professing Christians, principally owing to the adoption of human creeds and forms of government. While they were united under the name of a Presbytery, they endeavored to cultivate a spirit of love and unity with all Christians; but found it extremely difficult to suppress the idea that they themselves were a party separate from others. This difficulty increased in proportion to their success in ministry, Jealousies were excited in the minds of other denominations; and a temptation was laid before those who were connected with the various parties, to view them in the same light. At their last meeting they undertook to prepare for the press a piece entitled Observations on Church Government, in which the world will see the beautiful simplicity of Christian church government, stript of human inventions and lordly traditions. As they proceeded in the investigation of that subject, they soon found that there was neither precept nor example in the New Testament for such confederacies as modern Church Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods, General Assemblies, etc. Hence they concluded that while they continued in the connection in which they then stood, they were off the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, of which Christ himself is the chief corner stone. However just, therefore, their views of church

government might have been, they would have gone out under the name and sanction of a self-constituted body. Therefore, from a principle of love to Christian of every name, the precious cause of Jesus, and dying sinners who are kept from the Lord by the existence of sects and parties in the church, they have cheerfully consented to retire from the din and fury of conflicting parties—sink out of the view of fleshly minds, and die the death. They believe their death will be great gain to the world. But though dead, as above, and stript of their mortal frame, which only served to keep them too near the confines of Egyptian bondage, they yet live and speak in the land of gospel liberty; they blow the trumpet of jubilee, and willingly devote themselves to the help of the Lord against the mighty. They will aid the brethren, by their counsel, when required; assist in ordaining elders, or pastors—seek the divine blessing—unite with all Christians—commune together, and strengthen each others' hands in the work of the Lord.

We design, by the grace of God, to continue in the exercise of those functions, which belong to us as ministers of the gospel, confidently trusting in the Lord, that he will be with us. We candidly acknowledge, that in some things we may err, through human infirmity; but he will correct our wanderings, and preserve his church. Let all Christians join with us, in crying to God day and night, to remove the obstacles which stand in the way of his work, and give him no rest till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth. We heartily unite with our Christian brethren of every name, in thanksgiving to God for the display of his goodness in the glorious work he is carrying on in our Western country, which we hope will terminate in the universal spread of the gospel, and the unity of the church.

# Life After *The Last Will and Testament*: The Stories of Two Faithful Executors

Peter M. Morgan

TWENTY-SECOND PETER AINSLIE LECTURE ON CHRISTIAN UNITY  
NATIONAL CITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH, WASHINGTON, D. C.  
OCTOBER 30, 2004



Do you know that the lights illuminating the doors on the porch of National City Christian Church are dedicated to Peter Ainslie? They are a gift from the Rappahannock, Virginia, Christian Church, the church of his growing up years. A light on the doorway to the house of God. What an appropriate symbol for Peter Ainslie's life and witness.

Not the least of the ways Peter Ainslie's life is a light for entering the house of God is the lectures which bear his name.

How good it is to welcome to these lectures those in the legacy of Peter Ainslie from Christian Temple, and indeed all who are committed to Christian unity. I'm honored to count myself among you even as I am privileged to present the 22<sup>nd</sup> Peter Ainslie lecture.

May our evening together be like Ainslie and like the porch lights of National City—a light on the doors of the house of God.

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We, the heirs of Barton W. Stone, are major beneficiaries of a will he signed. We received no grand estate. We received no vast financial trust. Barton Stone was not a wealthy man. However, he signed a will which set the course for what is our own Stone-Campbell Movement, called that in recognition of his leadership along with that of Alexander Campbell. That movement now flows in

three separated streams: the Christian Churches, the Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ.

The will signed by Stone is titled the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*. Its style is wry humor; its content is both earnest and visionary. This document is recognized as among the most important in the history of the American ecumenical movement. In this year of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the *Last Will*, I want to go back 100 years to the centennial of that document and name in celebration one of the faithful executors of that will. Then I will bring us to this, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and name before us one of our time whom I think of as an heroic executor of the *Last Will*.

On June 28, 1804, the Springfield Presbytery died in its infancy. On that occasion the deceased presbytery's last will was made public.

This young ecclesial organization was born and lived its brief life in the turmoil of church strife. The euphoric good will and high spirits of the Great Revival of Cane Ridge in 1801 had not resulted in further expressions of unity or intercommunion. Rather there was suspicion, threat, and discord between the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky and many of the leaders of the Great Revival. Those alienated leaders banded together and formed a rebel presbytery in 1803, the Springfield Presbytery.

Those strained relationships between the leaders of the Great Revival and their former Synod were all too reflective of their times. Richard McNemar, author

of the *Last Will*, recalled forty-five years later the character of church relationships in the years just before the Revival.

...although these different (sic) sects professedly set out to establish and promote the peaceable religion of Jesus, yet in the attempt their usual debates and controversies were brought to life, which, for a number of years, occasioned a hot spiritual war. Notwithstanding, these churches acknowledged each other as sisters, descended from the same stock, yet such was the zeal of each for their distinguishing tenets and forms of worship, that they stood entirely separate as to any communion or fellowship, and treated each other with the highest marks of hostility; wounding, captivating and bickering one another...<sup>1</sup>

The Springfield Presbytery's life came to an end when its leaders realized that they were simply perpetuating another division in God's church. In their witnesses' address they gave their rationale for willing the demise of the Presbytery.

We, the above named witnesses of the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, knowing that there will be many conjectures respecting the causes which have occasioned the dissolution of that body, think it proper to testify, that from its first existence it was knit together in love, lived in peace and concord, and died a voluntary and happy death...

(F)rom a principle of love to Christians of every name, the precious cause of Jesus, and dying sinners who are kept from the Lord by the existence of sects and parties in the church, they have cheerfully consented to retire from the din and fury of conflicting parties—sink out of view of fleshly minds, and die the death... T)hey yet live and speak in the land of gospel liberty.<sup>2</sup>

This remarkable document is brief, consisting of opening scripture quotations, an introductory paragraph, an *imprimis* and eleven brief *items*. In my study of the document I identify four grand themes: 1) homage to Christ, 2) liberty which welcomes diversity, 3) unity, and 4) the guidance of scripture.

Here are samples of the language of the *Last Will* in support of those themes:

#### **Homage to Christ:**

Item 1: We will that the title reverend be forgotten, "That there be one Lord over God's heritage." [The glory is not to mortals no matter how high the rank. The glory is to Christ.]

Item 8: We will that those who needed the Presbytery "Betake themselves to the Rock of Ages and follow Jesus for the future." [Do not overly rely on human structures. Our faith is in Christ.]

#### **Liberty which welcomes diversity:**

Items 4-5: We will that the "church of Christ resume her native right of internal government," including preparing and calling candidates for ministry.

Item 9: We will that the synod of Kentucky suspend every heretic "in order that the oppressed go free and taste the sweets of Gospel liberty." [Note the wry humor.]

#### **Unity:**

*Imprimis*: [the priority clause of the entire will] "We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one Body, and one Spirit, even as we are called into one hope of our calling."

Item 7: "We will, that preachers and people, cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance; pray more and dispute less."

#### **Scripture:**

The document opens with New Testament citations on death and resurrection.<sup>3</sup> You may recall the lines about only the grain that falls into the ground and dies, "bringeth forth much fruit."

Items 2-3: We will "that people may have free course to the Bible." [Note here that Scripture and freedom go together.] And that preachers diligently study the Bible.

Item 6: "We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven."

Item II: "We will, that all our sister bodies read their Bibles carefully."

It's an amazing document that has quietly formed the vision of a movement for 200 years.



When Robert Welsh invited me to speak to you on the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* I immediately thought of my recent experience with another Last Will and Testament. As president of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society I was executor of the estate of Eva Jean Wrather, a founding board member of the Society and biographer of Alexander Campbell. I recalled going to court and swearing to faithfully execute her will. I remembered my labors to fulfill both the letter and the spirit of her will. I remember later spreading across the records of the court the evidences of my work as executor.

Tonight I come as an attorney, if you will, spreading before the court of your opinion the evidences of the faithful work of two executors of the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, one from 100 years ago, the centennial of the document and one from today, its bicentennial year.

### 100 Years Ago

Peter Ainslie was a southern gentleman with a spirit as big as God's whole created world. On one occasion, it was 1897, the Grand Army of the Republic assembled for their annual reunion and invited Peter Ainslie to speak. When they heard the soft tones of his Tidewater Virginia accent these Yankee soldiers thought they had made a major mistake. Although he was a native of Virginia, the magnanimity of his message soon won them over.

He came from good Scot's roots, a line of preachers who bore his identical name. He was Peter Ainslie III. His grandfather, born 1788, the year Alexander Campbell was born, migrated from Scotland and labored in Campbell's reformation by founding congregations in eastern Virginia. He knew firsthand the sin of division. His name was the top name on the list of preachers banned from Baptist pulpits in Virginia when the Disciples separated from the Baptists in 1830.

Peter Ainslie III was born on June 3, 1867, in Dunnsville, Essex County, Virginia. His parents were Peter Ainslie II, also a Disciples minister, and Rebecca Etta Sizer Ainslie. Peter Ainslie III attended Kentucky University and The College of the Bible. In 1889 he was a supply preacher at First Christian Church, Newport News, Virginia. In 1891 he accepted

the position of minister at the Third Christian Church, Baltimore, Maryland. In 1904, the year under consideration, he built the Christian Temple in Baltimore which he served until his death.

Dr. Ainslie, at the age of 58, married Mary Elizabeth Weisel in 1925. They spent their honeymoon in Europe attending the World Conference on Faith and Order in Stockholm. (That's a dedicated ecumenist.) They had two children: Mary Elizabeth and Peter Ainslie IV. Dr. Ainslie published 16 books plus hundreds of articles. He edited the *Christian Union Quarterly* from its beginnings in 1911 until his death.

Peter Ainslie was committed to peace and Christian unity and, in addition, civil rights for blacks and women. He was an outspoken opponent of the military build-up in America and Europe following World War I. In 1910 he helped found the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity which later became the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), our sponsor for this lecture. He was the president of this organization.

Peter Ainslie died in Baltimore, Maryland, on February 23, 1934.

On this 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* I identify Peter Ainslie as an eminent executor of the *Last Will and Testament*.

We go back 100 years to the centennial of that document. Not much was made of the occasion as evidenced by the silence of our journals on that subject. Even Peter Ainslie was silent.

1904 was Peter Ainslie's 37<sup>th</sup> year. It was a year of personal grief. It was a year of community calamity. It was a year of church building. In that year he ministered to and mourned the deaths of his handicapped sister, and a few weeks later, his mother. His adopted city of Baltimore experienced a fire of devastating proportion. The church under Ainslie's leadership was engaged in the nearly all-consuming project of expanding its ministry by the creation of a new congregation and the erection of an additional building. It would become Christian Temple.

Even with that intense year of sorrow, challenge and exhilaration, we see signs of the soul that inspired a century of ecumenical witness. If you look through

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*I identify Peter Ainslie as  
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his personal papers at the Historical Society you will discover articles that he clipped and saved on Christian unity going back to 1899. You will also find extensive lecture notes on a course on church history he taught on Saturday evenings of Advent of that year. On Christmas Eve a portion of his lecture was on the distinctive gifts of unity of the Disciples of Christ. Ainslie's records for 1904 also remind us of the larger view of the world he brought to his congregation. The first baptism candidate in their new building was a man of Chinese descent. Ainslie later saw that baptism as a precursor of their sponsorship of a missionary to China. Ecumenism was evident, even in the naming of their building. He wrote:

The name of the new church was of considerable concern to us—not of course as to whether the great Scriptural terms for the church would be used, such as “Christian,” “Church of Christ,”...but as to the local designation, lest we denominationalize the term “Christian” as is sometimes done in the use of such terms as “Third Christian Church” when there were four hundred Christian churches in Baltimore before Third Christian was thought of....[Third Christian Church was the current name of the congregation he served.] So we sought to find a name that would bring us into fellowship with all believers in Jesus.... The name Christian Temple was suggested and adopted.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to place Peter Ainslie in his congregational context. He insisted upon it himself and resisted attractive offers to serve in larger arenas. But his sphere of witness is much bigger than Christian Temple and Baltimore and lasted much longer than his life span from 1867 to 1934. He was a witness to the *oikoumene* (God's entire family—the whole inhabited world) and it has inspired us for a century.

The pivotal moment came in Ainslie's presidential address at the Christian Convention of 1910 in Topeka, Kansas. Recall from 100 plus years earlier the relationship of the churches as described by Richard McNemar, “...they stood entirely separate as to any communion or fellowship, and treated each other with the highest marks of hostility; wounding, captivating and bickering one another.” A different

but still gloomy picture could also be painted of Disciples in the first decade of the twentieth century. This movement, called to have life to bring unity to the Christian world, suffered from amnesia. They forgot why God gave them life. Ainslie became our memory, our conscience and the very voice of God recalling us to our vocation. Listen to a portion of his address to the Topeka Convention:

One afternoon I climbed the dark stairs of Stirling Castle that I might stand on its famous balcony and look out upon what Queen Mary of Scots said was the most beautiful landscape in the world....I felt as though I were looking around the world and beyond it. It is so today. I speak your own sentiments when I say that no one who sees and reads and thinks and feels can look out upon this century without being stirred by the world's panoramic vision. [He anticipated the global village.]

We who wear the name “Christian only” have climbed a hundred rugged steps and today, standing on God's balcony, we look down on the past, and yonder is Jesus moving in that mightiest drama of all time. The cross is still stained with his blood, the tomb of Arimathea lies broken, and the ascension from the Mount of Olives is as fresh as though it were the action of yesterday. Yonder are the apostles telling the story of Jesus and the resurrection from the dead. Yonder is Paul preaching in Ephesus, Philippi, Athens and Corinth.

Yonder are Polycarp, Papias, Irenaeus, and hosts of saints witnessing for Jesus....Yonder is Boniface preaching the gospel to the painted savages of Germany and Xavier to the untaught pagans of Asia.

Ainslie goes on in a brief recital of church history and its accomplishments. Then he calls the church back to its ministry of unity.

Still standing on God's balcony, we look into the sacred future and yonder are the vast multitudes of believers out of every tribe and tongue and nation. They are servants of Jesus....Sectarianism is going to its entombment and a united brotherhood is

rising with its undivided message for a lost world, for yonder down the ages is one flock as there is one Shepherd.

What a vision from God's balcony! Whether we look in the past, or around us, or into the future, we see our brethren. Then let us remember as wearers of the name "Christian only" we hold in this period of God's providence the cure for the divided church. Our message, therefore, to the present and to the future is to remove the barriers to brotherhood by a larger loyalty to the personality of Christ. The rightful contribution of the Disciples to modern religion is the widening of faith's view, for the best asset in this world is faith in Jesus Christ and love for all who love our Lord....

[Now] Disciples are facing the most critical period in their history. It is so with all movements. After passing a new decade or a century at most, they drift from their original principles either into wreckage or crystallization. It was so with every order started in the Roman Catholic Church and it has likewise been so with every movement in Protestantism.

The Disciples are passing the way of all others...and unless we turn our course in conformity to Thomas Campbell's clarion call... we are destined to become one of the most sectarian bodies, as love unused becomes unlove.<sup>5</sup>

That address inspired a church and set our course for the century of ecumenism. Inspiration means to breathe life into an object. Ainslie's speaking, writing and the integrity of his life breathed ecumenical life into our church.

In his brilliant mind and his power of communication he was a son of Alexander Campbell. But, I offer that he is rightly an executor of the *Last Will and Testament* because his soul makes him an heir of Barton Stone. Consider his discussion of the differences between Campbell's Disciples and Stone's Christians as he reflected on their union in 1832. Ainslie observes, "...with the Christians (followers of Barton Stone) the predominating idea was the uniting of men under

Christ for the conversion of the world, while the predominating idea among the Disciples (followers of Alexander Campbell) had become 'the desire of an exact conformity to the primitive faith and practice' as a way to union."<sup>6</sup> He is an executor of the *Last Will* because he is a spiritual heir of Stone, uniting believers under Christ, not a pattern of New Testament restoration. Did you catch it in his presidential address? "Our message to the present and to the future is to remove the barriers to brotherhood by a larger loyalty to the personality of Christ." There we capture two monumental principles of the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*: unity and homage to Christ.

He also was a sturdy advocate for the other two grand principles of the *Last Will*: freedom to be diverse and the guidance of scripture. He is an executor of the *Last Will* because, like the teaching of that founding document, he had an ardent and disciplined attention to the scripture. His discipline led him to teach and publish extensively on the Bible. From his life as a devout Christian and a working pastor he published eight books just on the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

He argued firmly against both those who sought a united church based either on the authority of an infallible church or the authority of an infallible Bible. Hear in Ainslie's word the echo of the *Last Will's* commitment to freedom and diversity.

The Hebrews were named as stewards of the oracles of God; the Christians were named as stewards of the Spirit of God. The passing from the stewardship of the oracles to the stewardship of the Spirit indicated the abrogation of external authorities in spiritual matters and definitely inaugurated the religion of the Spirit. Nevertheless gradually there grew up the authority of the Church, whose claim to infallibility logically must culminate in an infallible pope even if it took until 1870 to reach it.

On the other hand, the infallible Church must be offset by the authority of an infallible Bible, the logical conclusion of which must culminate in an infallible interpretation, which crystallizes in legalism or the authority of the letter of the law. It could not have been the divine purpose that the Church and the Bible should have been put in opposition to each other; consequently the Roman Catholics abused the first by their own arrogant

claims and the Protestants abused the latter by their divisive interpretations, so that in the eyes of the world neither the Church nor the Bible attained to places of infallibility. In this departure the whole Church has suffered—Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant, so that it is evident that both the Church and theology have fallen from their fictitious heights. Both the Church and the Bible were to be servants of His religion—not taskmasters. The Gospel of God must not be detached from either the Church or the Bible, but it must be released both from the bondage of the Church and the legalism of the Bible. Jesus Christ came to make men free. His religion is the religion of the Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

He was a restorationist, but not as we commonly think of that label. He was too receptive to the ideas of historical criticism to think that the New Testament portrayed one ideal pattern for the church that could be restored in the twentieth century. Yet, I affirm his restorationism, because he sought to restore the church to its devotion to Christ. In that restored common devotion is to be found the unity of Christ's people. You see, the heart of Ainslie's ecumenism, the heart of Ainslie's love of Scripture, is this deep spirituality centered in Christ. He echoes the *Last Will's* homage to Christ.

Hear it in his own words on the "Sweetness of Scripture."

A father's voice does not sound in the ear of a stranger as it does in the ear of a loving child. Bro. Power recently sent me a package of letters written many years ago by my father to him. [The Brother Power he names most probably was the pastor of National City Christian Church of that era.] To Brother Power those letters had no special meaning other than that of friend to friend, but to me they were especially dear because they were my father's letters. So the word of God becomes more precious to those who know God as a living father than to those who simply regard him as the great power that is keeping things. After Miss Havergal had given herself to God, she wrote: "For the first time my Bible was sweet to me, and the first passage I distinctly remember reading, in the new and glad light, was the fourteenth and following chapters of

John's Gospels. I read them feeling how wonderously loving and tender they were and that I, too, might share their beauty and comfort." The sheep know the voice of the shepherd. Sitting yesterday by the bedside of a man who had lost his sight and was rapidly sinking away, he called for his mother and one of the family said, "Here she is," but he continued to call until he heard her voice and as soon as she spoke he was satisfied that she was near. Jesus said, "My sheep shall know my voice."<sup>9</sup>

In the "sweetness of Scripture" we hear the very voice of the savior we adore!

Peter Ainslie, twentieth century executor of the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, inspired a century of Disciples with the power of his oratory, the persuasion of his writing, the passion of the principled living of his convictions.

Ainslie opening the scripture in freedom and through the scripture cultivating a contagious, powerful, passionate, principled relationship with Christ led us to seek God's gift of unity.

Peter Ainslie could be portrayed as a contributor to the high councils of the first third of the ecumenical century. His name could be linked to the prominent names of church history of that era such as Bishop William Temple and Bishop Nathan Soderblom and John R. Mott. Indeed at the inaugural assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948, John R. Mott memorialized him as one of the twelve apostles of the modern ecumenical movement.<sup>10</sup> But in the self-effacing spirit of the *Last Will* I take you to a quiet place away from the spotlight of history. Peter Ainslie IV told me just this week that he learned from his mother that his father spent two hours every day in prayer. I take you to Peter Ainslie on his knees praying for one church.

Hear in that prayer two great themes of the *Last Will*: homage to Christ and unity.

Most Merciful God and Father, we thank Thee that, in spite of our divisions, Thou hast loved us, and art ever seeking to make thyself known to us, that we may love each other fervently with pure minds and true hearts, thereby proving ourselves to be disciples of the Lord Jesus. Guide us that our footsteps

may honour Thee, whose we are and whom we serve. Amen.<sup>11</sup>

### Our Own Time

The church in 1804 was hostile. The Stone-Campbell churches in 1904 were forgetful. The church Leroy Garrett grew up in was both hostile and forgetful. They “treated each other with highest marks of hostility, wounding, captivating, bickering one another.” (McNemar) They also “suffered from amnesia” regarding Christian unity, the very reason God gave them life.

Young Leroy Garrett fit right in with his hostile and forgetful church. But, thanks be to God, his story is a story of Saul being transformed into Paul. That transformed ecumenical leader is my choice for heroic executor of the *Last Will and Testament* in 2004. His life even carries the potential of Ainslie who set the course for a century.

Leroy Garrett was born in 1918 in Mineral Wells, Texas. His father Benjamin provided for his family as a dirt farmer and real estate agent. His mother was Annie Olivia Heath and, like his father, had no formal education. Both had the rudiments of reading and cultivated that art. Leroy was the seventh of eight children; all except one were boys.

The author of the preface of Leroy’s autobiography begins with the words, “I was born into the ‘everybody’s-going-to-hell-but-us’ Church of Christ, and I bought into it completely.”<sup>12</sup> By inference that description fits Leroy Garrett.

Leroy had finished his studies at Freed-Hardeman College and had moved on to study at Abilene Christian College. While there his sectarian proclivities were quite evident. While preaching at the North Park Church of Christ he made an effort to convert some Baptists. A nearby Baptist church barred him from even talking to their people. One thing you need to know about Leroy Garrett, whether he is right or wrong, he is persistent. One Sunday night he set up a loud speaker in the front of the house beside the Baptist church which had barred him from speaking to their members. Through that loud speaker he preached to the Baptists as they filed

out of the church after the Sunday night service. He tells us, “The police came about the time I had finished, and took me to the station...the police chief did call the president of ACC and told him, ‘I have part of your institution down here.’ The police dismissed me for lack of a charge.”<sup>13</sup> You get a glimpse of Leroy Garrett, our young Saul, in action.

His conversion was not a blinding flash of light and a voice from heaven like Saul heard on the Damascus road. Yet in a way it was. Leroy’s transformation came as light, the enlightenment of education, and even as voices from heaven heard as Leroy read the writings of our founders. His was not a blinding flash of light but rather a pilgrimage to the light. It probably began with his mother’s hunger for learning. Even though she had no formal education, in her mature years she studied grammar and the dictionary. More light came to Leroy at Freed-Hardeman College, that small family-like center of learning where the Bible was both learned and loved and where students were known and loved and encouraged. A beloved professor was remembered across a lifetime for weeping as he explored the biblical text with his students.

Princeton Theological Seminary was a whole new universe of light. Leroy was the first person from the Churches of Christ to receive a Princeton degree. Persons like President John Mackay enlarged Leroy’s vision by showing “the church catholic” and by his wisdom through teachings such as, “The road to tomorrow leads through yesterday.”

Leroy had equivalent “voices from heaven” in his Pauline transformation. As a master’s student at Southern Methodist University he explored the world opened with his new range of light, especially his own Stone-Campbell heritage. Indeed, his own road to tomorrow led through yesterday. He was now a person of learning out on his own, discovering the Holy Spirit. As he listened to Walter Scott and Robert Richardson he discovered that the Spirit can free one from scriptural legalism.

Not least in his “voices from heaven” was Barton Stone and the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*. The grace of God was evident and a vision

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*Young Leroy Garrett fit right in with his hostile and forgetful church. But, thanks be to God, his story is a story of Saul being transformed into Paul.*

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of unity was evident in words such as, “we will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large.” The heavenly words of grace and the enlightened vision of unity were gifts from God that could not be resisted by the pilgrim/seeker Leroy Garrett.

One very earthly voice also is an essential part of Leroy’s story. The name Garrett will ever be linked with that of Ketcherside in the annals of twentieth-century Church of Christ history. By some it is told as a story of the conspiracy of traitors, by others as a story of integrity and courage. Leroy Garrett and Carl Ketcherside were both journal editors and both were sectarian. Together they encouraged and stimulated each other in the challenging journey from sectarianism to freedom.

Leroy would need courage. I witnessed at the Historical Society, within this last year, Leroy’s sharing with a friend all the hostile letters in a Church of Christ newspaper that had been provoked by an earlier reporting of an honor he had received. He chuckled, “this is the other side of Leroy Garrett.” Those letters were small irritants compared to a more combatant earlier time.

In 1953 Leroy, a thirty-five-year-old editor with a reputation for provocative views, returned to his old school Freed-Hardeman to attend a lecture. He was a person of curiosity. Some students broke into his conversation with old friends to ask questions. This aroused the suspicion of the administrative leadership of the school. They called him into the president’s office and gave him an ultimatum to not further engage the students in conversation. It was a painful moment for the ultimatum came from his old dean. Leroy stood his ground. “What harm can come of this. You have the students for all year, I have them for two hours.” The confrontation escalated with the result that Leroy was arrested before a large group of the campus community and visitors to the lectures.

He spent the night in jail where he got acquainted with the town drunk. His cellmate informed him that the police were close on the trail of the town tough. If they caught him he would be put in their cell and would likely beat them up. The town only had a one-cell jail. Leroy’s great sense of humor is evident when he writes, “We were both pulling for the bad guy.”<sup>14</sup>

The humor of his friend Carl Ketcherside also helped him get through that bad time. Carl responded, “You lucky dog! All those years I’ve been trying to get those fellows to put me in jail.”<sup>15</sup>

Leroy’s career has not been served as a hired minister. That would not be possible for him. He keeps integrity with his own scholarship of scripture where he sees no place for an “imported” minister. Although his position seems idiosyncratic to many, that does not hinder his fellowship and even friendship as I, an ordained and often “imported” Disciples minister, can attest. Leroy has earned his livelihood as a philosophy professor with a Ph.D. degree from Harvard, and a successful businessman. (Sounds like the views and the way of life of another reformer, Alexander Campbell.) His service to the church is at financial sacrifice rather than gain. All honoraria for speaking and preaching have been invested back in his journals.

Let me now make my case before the court of your opinion on why I lift up Leroy Garrett as the executor of the *Last Will and Testament* in 2004.

First, and very simply, he recognizes the importance of that document. In his history of the movement, he writes, June 28, 1804, [The signing of the *Last Will*] is a “suitable [date] for the origin of the Christian Church and the beginning of the Stone-Campbell Movement.”<sup>16</sup> The *Last Will* is the foundation on which our movement was built.

In addition, he is a thoughtful student/teacher of that document. He has observed that the signatories of the *Last Will* signed out of their passion for liberty. We are a freedom movement which welcomes diversity. He points out that even Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell had significant disagreements, but that did not bar them from being in fellowship. In freedom we may have fellowship without agreement. He courageously called his church to reclaim its freedom. Listen to his ringing proclamation to freedom:

Freedom! I was urging my church to join me in a pilgrimage of freedom: freedom from sectarianism, legalism, and obscurantism;  
Freedom to embrace the grace of God fully, and to be joyfully confident of our salvation;  
Freedom to exult in the indwelling presence

of the Holy Spirit—whose mission is to conform us to the likeness of Christ.

Freedom to accept the Spirit's gift of unity with forbearing love—in spite of all our differences and hang-ups;

Freedom to accept as sisters and brothers all those who are devoted to Jesus Christ as Lord, wherever they may be;

Freedom to think for ourselves and to question the dogmas handed down by our forebears, including the dogma of anti-instrumental music;

Freedom from the tyranny of opinionism—making opinions and methods tests of fellowship—and from a herd mentality and blind conformity, which hinder growth in Christ;

Freedom to examine new ideas, to venture beyond party lines, and to march by a different drumbeat;

Freedom even to be wrong in the quest for truth;

Freedom to pick up the broken pieces and start over—whether a tragic divorce, drug addition, a gay lifestyle, or a wavering faith—and to be loved and accepted during the struggle;

Freedom to take a critical look at our history and admit where we've been wrong—and to get back on course;

Freedom to bring women into the church as equals in ministry, and to bring an end to male domination;

Freedom to participate in Body life in the assembly—with believers sharing their joys and sorrows, and encouraging each other in the faith—with professionals serving more as facilitators than as performers.<sup>17</sup>

Leroy has faithfully proclaimed one of the grand themes of the *Last Will*, liberty which welcomes diversity. Such liberty ties even into another great theme of the *Last Will*: scripture. In his trumpet call to freedom for the Churches of Christ he dares include this item: "Freedom to make use of modern biblical scholarship, and to be honest about the difficulties one faces in the interpretation of

scripture—without being called names or having one's motives impugned." This is said by someone who considers himself more conservative than Barton W. Stone. Leroy recommends a guiding text for our freedom/unity movement. Hear Romans 15:7, "Receive one another as Christ has received you."<sup>18</sup>

Leroy is an exemplary executor of the *Last Will* because he is a champion of unity, another great theme in that founding document. His studies of the *Last Will* make him acutely aware of the ecumenical vision of that document. In 1979, another major anniversary year of the *Last Will*, he wrote in his journal *Restoration Review*, "175 years ago: 'Let This Body Die.'"

So that innocuous little document of hardly more than a single page, written back in 1804, provides for us a working ideal. As they "willed that their insignificant little creation [the Springfield Presbytery] should be lost in the Church of Christ at large, it is to be our will that whatever is unique about us, that keeps us separated from other Christians, should also "Get lost" in a restored unity of all believers.

He wrote further:

This should be the attitude of every denomination—and may I presume this includes us all?—that it one day be dissolved and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large. If because of the contingencies of history we are a denomination (God forbid that we be a sect!), we should be a denomination in protest.<sup>19</sup>

He picks up and affirms Barton Stone's wisdom on the one necessity for unity. Stone preaches four ways to pursue unity, three false, one true. To seek unity on the basis of the head (theological agreement) will fail. To pursue book union (creeds) is to fail. To pursue water union (baptism) is to fail. "The only true unity is when that Spirit dwells in the hearts of believers... 'fire unity.'"<sup>20</sup>

Scripture is crucial, but it is a means that God uses to address us and call us to Christ and his Spirit. Leroy as executor of the *Last Will* calls us again to Barton Stone's wisdom that unity is based on loyalty to Christ, not legal adherence to the book.

In his autobiography Leroy shared what he wanted

for his own Church of Christ. In this time of denominations wrestling with their calling and identity he stated as his number one wish that, “We recover our heritage as a unity people.” He supported it with maybe his most quoted one-liner from our founder Barton Stone, “Let unity be our polar star.”<sup>21</sup> Garrett praised Stone for his noblest act, the giving up of the separate identity of the Christian Churches in order for them to unite with Disciples.

Leroy has confronted his own branch of the Stone-Campbell Movement with the same stick used as a warning by Barton Stone.

Stone published in...1832 “An Address to the Churches of Christ”... In that letter, he warned of the danger of making unwritten creeds tests of communion, they being more insidious than written ones. In that warning he was reading the future of the Churches of Christ. Our unwritten creeds have done us far more mischief than our written ones.<sup>22</sup>

Leroy also calls his church and us to a higher way. With the stick of warning he offers the carrot of that highest theme of the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, our common homage to Christ.

The great foundation of the *Last Will and Testament* is homage to Christ. It is a hard case to make for Leroy Garrett to be named exemplary executor of the *Last Will* based on homage to Christ. He doesn't talk about that. But you get it from observing a strong but gentle man who is both firm in his convictions to unity in freedom and deeply loving of his Lord and all who claim the name of his Lord.

“Receive one another as Christ has received you.” (Rms. 15:7) There is muscle in the tenderness of that text. Leroy's life is a witness to his homage to the Christ who receives him. He defines his whole life in the title of his autobiography as *A Lover's Quarrel/My Pilgrimage of Freedom in Churches of Christ*.

The language “Lover's Quarrel” comes from Robert Frost; the meaning from our frontier pioneer, “Raccoon” John Smith. He tells the story.

Perhaps the best case I can make for my quarrel being a lover's quarrel is that made by

Raccoon John Smith back in the 1820s. When some Baptists were fed up with his efforts to reform them, they urged him to “go on and leave us alone and join the Campbellites.” His response was “I love you too much to leave you.”<sup>23</sup>

After decades of vilification, imprisonment, slander, ostracism, Leroy was asked why he didn't just leave the Churches of Christ. Hear his Christ-like answer.

As I have said for fifty years, and I say once more: I will never leave the Churches of Christ, never, no matter what, for I love my people too much to leave them. Even if they kick me out, I'll stay around.<sup>24</sup>

That sounds like Christ's agape to me and not a bad basis for seeking the unity God wills.

Leroy's persistent love has been rewarded in recent years. This pilgrim in freedom has seen the church and even its college campuses that once vilified him now in many places being transformed. He is not only welcomed but honored. Leroy's persistent love and labor in Christian unity have also been rewarded in his later years. He has seen his earlier work within the Churches of Christ bring many

across the vast wilderness trek of believing that everyone was going to hell but them. Many now reach out to others. His early, often lonely, work with Perry Gresham of the Disciples on reconciliation within the Stone-Campbell Movement has matured to where he is often the guiding hand of the Churches of Christ's participation in such unity endeavors as the *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, Restoration Forum, the Stone-Campbell Dialogue, and the World Convention of Churches of Christ. Leroy Garrett is an heroic executor of the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century!

The year is 2004. It is not 1804; it is not 1904. It is 2004. Is there a word from the *Last Will* for those of us in the Stone-Campbell Movement in 2004?

Let me ask two prior questions reflective of 1804 and 1904. Is there any hostility among us today? Is there today any amnesia in our calling to be a uniting

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*Stone warned of the danger of making unwritten creeds tests of communion, they being more insidious than written ones.*

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people? As long as there is any hostility and ecumenical amnesia there will be a word from the *Last Will*.

In 2004, a great chasm divides the church. It is both within and among the churches dividing so-called liberals and conservatives. Those Christians often abuse each other with “the highest marks of hostility, wounding, captivating and bickering one another.” Whenever ethical issues are discussed such as abortion, capital punishment, women’s place in leadership, gays’ participation in the church, the parties glare at each other from across the chasm and mutter about each other. Even in response to our unity efforts such as the Stone-Campbell Dialogue we see and hear the responses of fear and hostility. I’ve heard from Disciples concerned about hard-earned gains for women. “Why are you even talking to those folks?” I know from dialogue partners from Churches of Christ *a cappella* and from Christian Churches that they hear the same words on the other side of that and other issues. Is there any hostility? Yes, to the point that some say that for peace of mind and peace in the church on both sides of the chasm it would be better if we simply turned our backs on each other.

Except as a temporary respite for purposes of healing, that is not viable option for those of us who remember we are heirs of Barton Stone and Peter Ainslie and are influenced by the lifetime of commitment of ecumenical Christians such as Leroy Garrett and Henry Webb and Robert Welsh. The influence of those three has the potential, in this time of alienation between conservative and liberal Christians, to be for the 21<sup>st</sup> century what Peter Ainslie was to the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Our traditions may be divided, but one thing they sadly share is amnesia to their founders’ vision of unity. As long as there is division and amnesia the *Last Will* calls out to us to remember and be faithful to our calling.

On this occasion I call us to remember our way back to June 28, 1804. Six church leaders are gathered before a document ready to affix their signatures. They too are remembering—back nine months and the birth of their short-lived presbytery, back three years to the exhilarating days when Baptist, Methodist and their own Presbyterians had their bickering swept away for a few days at a great

communion festival at Cane Ridge called the Great Revival. I even dare imagine that those six leaders remembered again a more grand invitation. Jesus, the host at a table, invited all to come together to remember him into their presence.

Those six leaders on that notable day realized they did not need hermeneutical or theological or ethical consensus. They signed a document which lifted up four great themes: 1) homage to Christ, 2) liberty which welcomes diversity, 3) unity and 4) Scripture. Here is the word for today from that document that bequeaths a grand and noble vision to us in 2004.

We are called in freedom to open our Bibles on our own terms and to understand it as we will with integrity. Yet through our different insights and understandings of scripture we are invited into one loving relationship with the same Jesus Christ who empowers us with love to “receive on another as Christ has received each of us.” (Rom. 15:7)

Is there a word to us today from the *Last Will*? There is a word of invitation to a table of memory which empowers unity. I see at that table a community loved by and loving in return the same Lord. I look around that table of today and I thank God for faithful executors of the *Last Will* bestowing their gifts on us: Leroy Garrett bestowing a passion for freedom and a persistence in love, and Peter Ainslie bestowing on us his great love of scripture and an admirable piety for Christ which rekindles our hope for unity.

Is there a word for tomorrow from the *Last Will*? I see another table in which we remember our way to tomorrow. At this table Barton W. Stone embraces again Richard McNemar who abandoned him for the Shakers. At this table Leroy Garrett once again embraces Freed-Hardeman College’s Dean Roland who had him arrested. At this table Edward Scribner Ames of the Chicago Institute embraces David Lipscomb of the Churches of Christ. It is at this table I wish to take my place. Here I pray, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Here I dare believe that this divided people of unity, by the example of their reconciliation in Christ, can be torchbearers of unity for all who name the name of Jesus.

*Dr. Peter M. Morgan recently retired as president of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Nashville, Tennessee. He continues to serve as a participant in the Stone-Campbell Dialogue.*

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- 23 Garrett, *Lover’s Quarrel*, xii.
- 24 *Ibid.*

*The Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity is delivered annually by an internationally recognized ecumenical scholar, and is intended to witness to the vision of Christian unity. Dr. Peter Ainslie III (1867-1934), a distinguished ecumenist, was the minister of Christian Temple, the Disciples congregation in Baltimore, Maryland, and the first president of the Council on Christian Unity. This lecture, inaugurated in 1982, is endowed by the Peter Ainslie Fund and sponsored by the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).*

# Polar Star

Peter M. Morgan

PREACHED IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE 2004 PETER AINSLIE LECTURE

NATIONAL CITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH, WASHINGTON, D.C.

OCTOBER 31, 2004

Ephesians 1:8b-14, 3:20-21, Isaiah 55:6-9

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Disciples of Christ are a people of a dream. Come with me out under the night sky and join our founder Barton Stone when he was in his sixtieth year. He points heavenward to the brightest star in the heavens. “Christian unity is our polar star.” Stone’s dream stayed with him the rest of his life. That’s our dream, Christian unity. We are a people with a dream.

The young missionary Paul was possessed by a dream, a dream of unity. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28) An apostle possessed by a dream.

Young Alexander Campbell, another Disciples founder, had a dream. In the second decade of the nineteenth century the young immigrant Campbell believed that this great American experiment in freedom could become a new Israel for the church. In freedom we could overcome the tragic divisions in the church. We could start anew as one people of God. How he loved to quote his father, “The church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one.” Campbell had a dream.

On this reformation and Heritage Sunday we’ve come to open God’s word before the question, “What do you do with a 200—no, 2000—year old dream of Christian unity?”

Young Paul, “hot head” apostle, wrote his earliest letter that we have in the New Testament to the Christians in the Galatian churches. You had to pick it up with your oven mitts on!

An opposition group was challenging Paul’s message of freedom and dividing those churches. In his letter Paul captures his dream and vision in the memorable

words, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28) Note, there is no equivocation, no “maybes,” no “sometimes,” no “on the one hand and yet on the other hand.” His uncompromising declaration is, “There is no longer Jew or Greek.”

Advance the scene a few decades and again we find Paul preparing another letter. Paul, older now, is in prison and rolling up manuscripts to be given to Tychicus to be delivered to the churches in today’s western Turkey. The letter we have today is addressed “to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus,” (Eph. 1:1) and by extension, “the saints of Washington.”

Many of the subjects of young Paul’s letter to the Galatians and older Paul’s letter to the Ephesians are the same: the relationship of slave to free, the relationship of women to men, the relationship of Jews to Greeks. So, we may logically conclude that the dream of unity in Galatians must not have come to reality. They are still issues in Paul’s waning years.

The subjects are the same: slave/free, women/men, but now the bright sunshine of idealism has been shaded with the dark clouds of cultural compromise. “Slaves obey your masters; (6:5); women be subject to your husbands.” (5:21)

What happened to “no male, no female,” or a “no slave, no free”? Paul’s days trickled down to a precious few—September, November, December. “What happened to the dream?”

In the hard reality of persisting divisions, Paul’s dream also persisted. He wrote Ephesians, a unity letter.

As Paul in a Roman prison had to face the aging of this dream of unity, Alexander Campbell in the 1860s had to face his aging dream of unity. This movement which was to transcend separations and unite the denominations had become itself another denomination. Campbell, this apostle of freedom, saw the negation of freedom in the evil persistence of slavery. This adopted nation, so much the hope of his immigrant youth, was divided in civil war. And that war even divided his family. His own body and mind had aged. His days, a precious few: September, November, December. “What do you do with an aging dream?”

His biographer describes the scene of the old bishop’s last sermon.

He was quite unwell, and for some weeks was confined to the house. After he had to some extent recovered, he came over again to meeting and entered the pulpit. The manifest languor which had for many months attended his ministrations seemed for the time to have disappeared. His voice had resumed much of its former force and clearness, and his mind seemed unusually alert and vigorous. Taking up the first chapter of Ephesians, he delivered one of the most interesting and animated discourses of his life, when God would gather together in one all things in Christ....(He) seemed to have had restored to him for the occasion almost the entire vigor of his earlier days, nor was it unfitting that one who had so long held highest rank as a preacher should thus terminate his ministerial labors, for this proved to be his last discourse.

Did you notice, Alexander Campbell came to life by lifting up the lesson from Ephesians, Paul’s unity letter from near the end of his life.

We disciples were created to bring unity to God’s people and God’s world. It is our dream; it is our calling from God; it is our very reason for existence. But we must ask after 200 years, “What do we do with an aging dream?” Maybe we start by picking up Ephesians and considering the work of a couple of old dreamers, the Apostle Paul and the reformer Alexander Campbell.

### **The World of Chasms**

Paul, Alexander and Disciples are a people given the heavenly burden of Christian unity. In our maturity

we learn the hard reality of the world of chasms—great rifts that persistently are opened by the earthquakes of suspicion, animosity and even the natural terrain of honest differences that we allow to erode into chasms.

The chasm in the church of Paul’s time was the divide between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. For Campbell it was the division after division that had spread like a cancerous growth across the church for 300 years from the reformation. The name of the church of his youth gives one small example. It was named the “old light, antiburger, seceder” branch of the church or Scotland, each of those names carrying the painful story of a division. The name of one church is a small sample of the almost countless scars from the wounds in the Body of Christ.

I imagine that both Paul and Campbell in the brash naiveté of youth thought they had a way to heal those divisions. So did we Disciples. As late as 1910 we believed it when the great twentieth-century ecumenist Peter Ainslie of Baltimore rallied us to the cause by saying Christian unity will happen in the twentieth century, don’t get left behind.

But, divisions endure and regenerate with diabolical persistence. Paul in this letter on unity acknowledges “our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the *cosmic powers* of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil...” (6:12).

We know about chasms, do we not?

We know about the diabolical character of division. From our nation united by 9/11 we are now two nations staring across the chasm of a political election, goaded into our separate camps of suspicion by the hostile rhetoric of our politicians. What has happened to the aging dream, “One nation, indivisible?”

We know about chasms, do we not? While we no longer have Paul’s Roman and America’s tragedy of human slavery, we do have—141 years after the great emancipation—the gaping chasms of racism. Across the chasm we speak polite words to each other; we even reach toward each other across the chasm in noble experiments of inclusion such as have been lived out for the last several years at National City Christian Church. Yet in our separate racial places we are still threatened and sometimes suspicious of

each other. The enemy within is strong; principalities and powers are mightier than our good intentions and our human efforts at unity, peace and reconciliation.

We know about chasms, do we not?

In the church we can celebrate the just-concluded century of ecumenism. Still there is a persistent divide in the church. Today's chasm, today's ecumenical challenge, is between conservative Christians and liberal or progressive Christians.

We know about chasms, do we not? Gay/straight, rich/poor, liberal/conservative. Chasms!

There is a diabolical persistence in powers of evil to keep us divided. National City Christian Church is not immune from the chasms of division.

"What do you do with an aging dream?"

In this city in 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of a dream of racial unity and stirred a nation. But he knew that some dreams take "the fullness of time" to use the words of our Ephesians lesson. Five short years later he spoke to a congregation in Memphis. Somehow he knew, "I may not get there with you." The next day he was dead.

What do you do with an aging dream? First, you acknowledge your individual inability to make your own dream come true, no matter how noble that dream.

### **A Word of Cosmic Call**

Into the world comes the *word*. Into the world of chasms comes a word of cosmic call.

What do you do with an aging dream?

What did Alexander Campbell do with his aging dream? Let your imagination take you back to Bethany in the then new state of West Virginia. See an old man slightly stooped now rise up and haltingly make his way to the pulpit. He opens the Bible to read. He needs no open Bible. He knows the words. You hear the traces of old Ireland still in his speech as he speaks the text haltingly at first then gaining strength as the recitation advances. "God set forth Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up (to scoop up in one unifying hand) all things in him, things in heaven and on earth."

When you become tired in the pursuit of noble dreams, you return to the word. How Campbell

loved Ephesians. Lee Snyder, a scholar friend from the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, tells me in Campbell's writings he referenced or quoted that book 2700 times! There is always new life springing fresh from the word.

In the reading that animated the elderly Campbell we hear that God looked out on the great chasm between heaven and earth and declared, "I, too, have a dream. In my dream that chasm between heaven and earth will be bridged and all things will come together both in heaven and earth. My family, the whole created universe, will be one. Your separation from me will be ended." You see, our dreams of one church, one nation, one people without racism, are a part of God's great universal dream, God's great longing of love to be one with us. What do you do with an aging dream? You listen to the word and discover that your dream is part of God's even bigger dream. O for a bridge to cross that chasm between God's dream and our reality!

You listen to the word and discover that God not only has a dream but a plan. God has "set forth Christ." Across the great chasm of heaven and earth, across the chasm between God and us, stretches a rough-hewn timber, a bridge. If you look carefully you will notice on that timber stretched across the chasm a rough-hewn crossbar. Look even more closely. Those rough-hewn timbers are stained—bloodstained. You see, God's peace, God's shalom, that will bring us together comes not from the blood of our enemies, the blood or the defeat of those on the other side of the chasms we face. God's peace and unity come not from enemy blood but from the blood of Christ. God has a plan and that plan was set in motion some 2,000 years ago on the city dump outside Jerusalem when the cross of Christ stretched from earth to heaven, from heaven to earth. In the cross Christian unity has already been accomplished!

What do you do with an aging dream?

When you are tired, when you are discouraged, you immerse yourself in the word. God has a dream—God has a plan. God also has a timetable. Oh, how we wish God's timetable were our timetable. But in this word of God from the Ephesian letter we are called to submit our impatience to God's timetable. We read, "...a plan *for the fullness of time*, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven, things on earth."

In submitting our impatience to God, let us take our satisfaction in the fact that we are participants in a heavenly dream. I've forgotten the source of this bit of wisdom, but remember it when my own struggles with heavenly causes make me impatient. "If the causes to which you commit your life can be completed in one lifetime, you probably didn't think big enough!"

Our satisfaction is not in the completion, but in the participation in God's heavenly dream. Christ has bridged the chasm between heaven and earth. We are to be Christ's bridge builders! Alexander Campbell thought that the great reformation of the sixteenth century did not go far enough. He committed himself to bringing to fuller reality the priesthood of all believers. Let's take the priesthood of all believers one step further. One of the titles of the pope is "Pontifus maximus," pontiff, the "supreme bridge."

What do you do with an aging dream? In the priesthood of believers claim your pontifical ministry. Are there any dreams here today? Claim your pontifical ministry!

Is there hurt in your heart because of the separations and alienations around you and within you? Claim your pontifical ministry. Participate in God's dream. The cross is a bridge God stretches out before you. Walk across that bridge. Take your hurting heart to God in prayer.

Are you holding onto disappointment and resentment and fear about the future of your church and anger against those on the other side? Claim your pontifical ministry. Participate in God's dream. Walk on across that cross/bridge. Your feelings aren't wrong. They aren't evil. They need to be taken to God.

As you put those first tentative steps out onto that bridge, look up. As you take those first shaky steps across Christ's cross/bridge, look up above the distant horizon. There is a star in that heaven—a polar star. The first step toward our polar star of unity begins in our own desire to be reconciled with God and each other.

Are you suffering forgiveness fatigue? Carry that forgiveness fatigue across the bridge. Be assured by Christ's words that with him you can forgive seventy times seven. Practice your pontifical ministry. Build some bridges. When they get broken, build them

again. Participate in God's dream of unity. You are a unity-loving person participating in God's dream. As you carry your forgiveness fatigue onto Christ's cross/bridge, look up and see a star, a polar star. The pain in our own hearts leads to the next steps toward our destiny of the star, to be one people with God and each other.

Our natural inclination is to stay with those in our side of the chasm. Here we test our views and perceptions with like-minded folks. Here we get affirmation that we aren't evil or crazy. Here we seek healing from the pain in our heart. Here we even do a little name calling. Here we ventilate some anger. Here we do a little finger pointing. And for a season that may be appropriate. But in all my life I've never known a relationship to be healed by talking about those on the other side of the chasm. Eventually you don't talk about them; you have to talk with them. To bridge chasms of separation you have to have some people from both sides of the chasm come together—some people with a star in their eyes who say to each other, "We can do better than this. Together let's build some bridges."

Are you a Democrat? Reach out to a Republican. Are you black? Notice and affirm the gifts of a white sister. Are you straight? Embrace a gay brother. Are you a mainstream, progressive Christian? Take some time to know a conservative Christian, and, without compromise, let that brother or sister know where their faith stretches, confronts and, yes, enriches and blesses your faith. You are Christ's bridge builders and are part of the construction team in God's plan to build a dream.

Barton Stone, a man in the October of his days, points us to our heavenly destiny: "Let the unity of Christians be our polar star." You see, he knew that our passion for unity in many ways was a star-struck dream. It's a lure; it's a guide; it's a quest more than an achievable destination. It is a noble venture in God's dream more than it is a scheme to be achieved by human ingenuity. It is tied to God more than to us.

So what do you do with our noble but aging dream of Christian unity? You give yourself in faith and courage to your call.

What do you do with an aging dream?

You dream...the impossible dream...

You fight...the unbeatable foe...  
You bear...with unbearable sorrow...  
You run...where the brave dare not go...  
You right...the unrightable wrong...  
You love...pure and chaste from afar...  
You try...when your arms are too weary...  
To reach...Barton Stone's polar star.  
This is our quest, to follow that star...  
No matter how hopeless, no matter how far...  
To fight for the right, without question or pause...

To be willing to march into Hell, for a  
    Heavenly cause...  
And I know if we'll only be true  
To this glorious quest,  
That our hearts will lie peaceful and calm  
When we're laid to our rest...  
And the world will be better for this:  
That we, scorned and covered with scars,  
Still strove with our last ounce of courage  
And at last reached...the polar star...



# The Nature of Christian Unity Historical Understandings of Churches of Christ

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Douglas A. Foster

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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).”

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.

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.

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

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*The strategy for effecting unity proposed by leaders like Barton W. Stone and Thomas and Alexander Campbell was an appeal to individual Christians—the faithful scattered throughout the sects.*

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inheritance. Whom God hath thus joined together no [one] should dare to put asunder.<sup>2</sup>

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.

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup>

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. Many advocates of restora-

tionism<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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

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*Leaders believed there were true Christians in all the denominations.*

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than all the skeptics in the world. In fact, they create skeptics.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> It was a long and painful process, but by the early 1900s the body was regrouping and moving ahead in what it believed were the authentic intentions of the

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*For the Stone-Campbell Movement to participate, it needed to create structures through which representatives could speak officially for it.*

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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."<sup>14</sup>

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."<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> Those holding this view refuse to acknowledge the true Christian identity of any but those in Churches of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

Within these two broad understandings are several complications. The first relates to the terms *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.<sup>20</sup>

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.

Another complicating factor is the group's heritage of restorationism. The leaders of the Stone-

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

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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.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> Another concept expressed is that while Churches of Christ might not be perfect, they are closer to the ideal than anyone else. 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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 form [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.<sup>26</sup>

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

### 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.<sup>28</sup>

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

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*Followers of Christ are to be united.... To admit that there are Christians in other groups is to endorse division*

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involved in unity efforts 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.<sup>29</sup>

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*\* Presented earlier to: The Faith and Order Commission, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, November 1999.*

## Notes

- 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. <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/tcampbell/da/DA-1ST.HTM>
- 3 Roy B. Ward, "The Nineteenth Century Restoration Movement and the Plea for Unity," *Restoration Quarterly* 2 (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), p. 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, 1630-1875* (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* 2 (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* 11 (June 1841):334; and Barton W. Stone, "The Convention," *Christian Messenger* 12 (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 (March 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*, pp. 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*, pp. 34-44

- (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1967), p. 35.
- 15 See for example, Roy E. 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.d.). All have been reprinted, the first two numerous times.
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  - 22 McClish, "Observations on the 'Restoration Summit,'" p. 21.
  - 23 See for example the series by Ronnie Morrison, beginning with "Have We Effectuated 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; see also D. Gene West, "Is the New Testament Church a Denomination?" *Bible Herald* 36 (May 15, 1987):11.
  - 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," pp. 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 Christ 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."

A Model of Unity  
**What Model of Unity  
Should We Accept?**

Stone-Campbell Dialogue, Indianapolis, Indiana

April 25-26, 2004

**John Mills**



**W**e in the Christian Church/Churches of Christ have talked about Christian Unity from our beginnings. We have tried to tell the world that we have the answer. But all too often our answer was interpreted as “Come join us. Hang our sign over your door and do it the way we do it.” We have said, “We should agree on the *kerygma*, the essence of the gospel, give freedom in the non-essentials and in all things love.” But in our complex world, what is the *kerygma*, and can we live with very different non-essentials?

In 1963 Granville T. Walker, minister of University Christian Church, Fort Worth, Texas, addressed the International Convention using Joshua 3:1-6 as his text. He was encouraging the Disciples to accept restructure. He said, “Israel had never crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land before. It was to their shame that they had not done so, but they were afraid. Joshua and Caleb had said, ‘Let us go up and take the land; we can surely do it for God will be with us.’”

The great Restoration Movement that called for the unity of Christ’s church has divided twice. Worse yet, we were comfortable with the divisions. Each group knew the others were part of their great heritage, that unity was our divine calling, but was satisfied to be apart from the other two because “We are right,” and they were in error. The Restoration Forum began in 1984 and has served to reacquaint the Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. The Stone-Campbell Dialogue has brought all three groups into a long-overdue dialogue. What model of unity would serve to unite us? Regretfully we have not been this way before. The question is,

“Do we have the faith in Jesus to move forward toward unity?” And what would “unity” look like?

Before we go further we need to take a look at the Biblical church of which we are a part. We are the called-out ones, the redeemed, the saved. None other than God’s son Jesus has called us to Himself and made us the children of God. As those whom He has reconciled to Himself, we have become the Body of Christ (I Cor. 12-14). “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many . . .” So we are part of that sacred body, each gifted for the work of that body. Christ is the head of His church (Eph. 1:22, 4:15, 5:23). The Church is the bride of the Christ (II Cor. 11:2, Rev. 19:7). All of this is to say that the church is God’s chosen instrument to reconcile the world to Himself (II Cor. 5:19). We are His chosen people and we are to manifest the unity that we find between the Father and the Son (John 17:21). This unity is an imperative, “that the world might be one.”

But how have we shaped the church as it has moved down through the centuries? Our forefathers in the Restoration Movement of the early nineteenth century found themselves as part of a very divided Christendom. The Campbell’s native Ireland and Scotland were no exception. Thomas Campbell was part of the Old Light, Anti-burgher, Succeder Presbyterian Church. Each of these clarifying names had its counterpart. When Campbell moved to America he was appalled at the divisions within the church of Jesus Christ. In his basic statement calling

for Christian unity, *Declaration and Address*, Campbell spoke of the “heinous nature, and pernicious tendency of religious controversy among Christians,” and soundly condemned these divisions.

The first proposition of *Declaration and Address* speaks to the unity of the church: “That 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.”

The means to this God-given unity was a return to the sacred scriptures and in particular the New Testament. Man-made doctrines were obstacles to this unity. The Campbells and others began a diligent search of the New Testament to find the faith and practice of the church of the apostles. Slogans were useful in stating their case. “In faith unity, in opinions liberty, and in all things love.” “The Bible only, makes Christians only.” “We are not the only Christians, but Christians only.” The *faith*, the *essentials*, were seen in the sermons of the apostles in the book of Acts.

Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah (Acts 2:16), and in Him the Old Testament Scriptures have been fulfilled. Jesus was accredited by God with “mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst” (Acts 2:22). Jesus was crucified for our sin, buried and raised on the third day (Acts 2:23-24). This same Jesus was proclaimed by God as both Lord and Christ (2:36) and is coming again to claim His own. Those who believe in Him must repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus to receive the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38, 3:19-21). The New Testament shows us that the early church practiced two *ordinances*, namely Christian Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The plea was for all Christians to embrace this simple gospel and to find unity. Restoring the faith of the early church was not an end in itself but a means to Christian unity.

Some of us here from the Christian Churches/

Churches of Christ have been in dialogue with the brethren from the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana. Their heritage is in the Holiness Movement. They would be in harmony with us in the statement of the Gospel as the basis of Christian unity, but they would insist that holiness be a part of that gospel. Gilbert Stafford of Anderson University in an unpublished paper, “Full Communion,” written in October of 2002 writes, “But beyond this unity by default is the *active experience of unity made possible by entire sanctification*, or the perfection of love (i.e., the wholehearted love of God, of God’s people, and of God’s world).” Thomas Campbell had spoken of making “manifest the same by our tempers and conduct.” All of us need to walk the walk while talking the talk. I see our brethren of the Church of God,

Anderson underscoring an important lesson for all of us. We need to embrace Biblical holiness to be faithful Christians.

For us to proceed in our discussion we need to place our understanding and practice of church within the larger Christian picture. Certainly the church for our peoples of the Stone-Campbell movement has taken a different shape than say the Roman Catholic Church or a Protestant denomination that is fully institutionalized. I am indebted to Avery Dulles for his study, “Models of the Church.”<sup>1</sup> Dulles defines churches as Institution, Mystical Communion, Sacrament, Herald, Servant, etc.

In reading his definitions of the various churches, I believe the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, the Churches of Christ and, to a great extent, the Disciples of Christ fall into the definition of Herald. We are ‘great commission’ people. Evangelism and missions have been very important to us and have shaped us as a people. The worship services focus on preaching. Our people refer to their ministers as “the preacher” more than they do “pastor.” The *word* is primary and *ordinance* secondary. Faith and proclamation has become more important than interpersonal relations and mystical communion.<sup>2</sup> “This model is kerygmatic, for it looks upon the Church as a herald—one who receives an official message with the commission to pass it on.”<sup>3</sup> Dulles

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*Restoring the faith of the early church was not an end in itself but a means to Christian unity.*

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sees Karl Barth as the chief proponent of this model of the church. “The Church is the congregation that is gathered together by the word—a word that ceaselessly summons it to repentance and reform.”<sup>4</sup> Dulles quotes Hans Kung:

*Ekklesia*, like “congregation,” means both the actual *process of congregating* and the *congregated community* itself: The former should not be overlooked. An *ekklesia* is not something that is formed and founded once and for all and remains unchanged; it becomes an *ekklesia* by the fact of a repeated concrete event, people coming together and congregating, in particular congregating for the purpose of worshipping God. The concrete congregation is the actual manifestation, the representation, indeed the realization of the New Testament community.”<sup>5</sup>

The Herald model of the church differs greatly from the Institutional model in that each congregation sees itself as the church in that particular place. Our congregations do not refer to “The Church, Anderson, or Indianapolis.” This is not to say that our local autonomy or our independence is great theology. Many of our people have great reservations about our talks with the Church of God, Anderson, or with the Disciples of Christ because they fear the “M” word. But how can merger take place when there is no one nor a means to accomplish this with autonomous congregations?

Some of us have problems with the Herald model because this model gives a lower priority to the New Testament ordinances, or sacraments of Christian baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Our “low church” understanding of worship is in part due to our frontier origins and in part to our anti-Roman bias. The Sacramental model of the Church does not fit us either because of our strong emphasis on being the Herald. But the immersion of believers and the weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper are central to all three groups in our dialogue. Our open communion position allows us to extend table unity to all those confessing Christ as Lord. But our closed membership position which insists on the immersion of believers for church membership is a more

volatile issue when we talk unity with others. These ordinances must be part of our faith statement as we consider who we are. But the Herald model is still a good working picture of who we are as *church* in this day and time.

What would unity for our three kindred groups look like? Rather than try to reinvent the wheel, allow me to use the prior work of Harding Meyer, “That All May Be One.”<sup>6</sup> Meyer shows us the models of unity that have been used in the Ecumenical movement. Rather than develop new models I suggest that we look at the models that have been used by others.

Because our current understanding of Church is that of the Herald model, it is easier to move forward in the effort to design a model of unity. Which one of the models shown by Meyer is most appropriate for

our work? The first, *Full Corporate Unity*, is not possible for those who work out of the Herald model of the church. There is no way for the congregations to move in this direction. Nor is there a desire to see unity as merger.

The second model that Meyer discusses is the *Cooperative-Federal Model*.<sup>7</sup> It is most interesting to see that Meyer traces this model back to the Great Awakening and names

Thomas Campbell and the *Declaration and Address*.<sup>8</sup> Meyer quotes the Edinburgh Conference which describes “cooperative action.”

The unity which we seek may be conceived of as a confederation or alliance of Churches for cooperative action.

In all areas where common purposes and tasks exist, such action is already widely possible without violation of conscience. Church “federation” is the most common expression of such unity, and one of the most hopeful paths to understanding and brotherly relations. We believe federation, so construed, is a promising approach to more complete forms of unity . . .

We recognize that federations for cooperative action should not be construed as examples of “federal union . . .”

We are agreed that cooperative action between

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*This model looks upon the Church as a herald—one who receives an official message with the commission to pass it on.*

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Churches unable to achieve intercommunion or to look towards corporate union and compelled by fidelity to conscience to remain separate bodies with separate loyalties, is not our final goal, since cooperative action in itself fails to manifest to the world the true character of the Church as one community of faith and worship as well as of service.<sup>9</sup>

This model has two characteristics. The first is *cooperative action*. To make the unity most meaningful the areas of cooperative action need to be comprehensive. The unity must be seen in many areas, not just one or two areas. The second, this cooperative action can become effective within the *continuing independence* of the churches, not only in their legal form but also in their special features of confession. However this communion may—and must—find structural form, these structures are of such a kind that they do not impair or cancel but rather preserve and protect the liturgical, theological-confessional, and constitutional uniqueness and identity of the individual churches. Here is the second typical characteristic of this basic model, and the concepts *federation* or *federal* refer to it.

. . . the related Churches remain clearly distinct from one another in their *own* eyes and in the eyes of those who look at them from without. They still function as separate bodies. Their individual history can still be written.<sup>10</sup>

Meyer discusses the weakness of this model which is really not a true unity. He asks, “does the ‘federal’ form of this model of union, that is, the *continuing independence and uniqueness of the churches*, mean that as far as the relation of churches one with another is concerned, there is no desire for a closer interecclesiastical communion, and the present side-by-side existence of church should be left as it is? Or is this form of union proposed out of the desire to protect differences that are acknowledged to be legitimate and in this way conform to the nature of ecclesiastical communion.”<sup>11</sup>

I do not see the people of our three groups having the necessary burning will to accept this model. Nor do we have the structures with which to make the necessary commitments to make it happen. Our

peoples would have a difficult time separating “structural form” and “merger.”

The third model of unity Meyer describes is that of *Mutual Recognition* or of *intercommunion* and says,

A second aspect of Church unity is commonly indicated by the term “intercommunion.” This is the fullest expression of a mutual recognition between two or more Churches. Such recognition is also manifested in the exchange of membership and ministrations.

We regard sacramental intercommunion as a necessary part of any satisfactory Church unity. Such intercommunion, as between two or more churches, implies that all concerned are true Churches, or true branches of the one Church.<sup>12</sup>

The Edinburgh Conference, in describing this model, is correct in pointing out that for there to be “intercommunion” there has to be a “likeness of faith in confession,” in “worship,” “in doctrine and the administration of the sacraments,” and in the “ministries.”<sup>13</sup> The focus of this model is the *relation of the churches to one another*.<sup>14</sup> The churches involved are to examine the differences that have divided them with the aim of not necessarily resolving them, but rather to deprive them of their church-dividing component. Also in this model the churches continue both their identity and their independence. Unity and diversity are held in purposeful tension. Working together in witness and mission is imperative. This fits well with churches working out of the Herald model. Our three groups have a common heritage and a common “polar star.” Can we mutually accept and recognize one another as well as work together?

Much of the deep bitterness that once existed between our separate groups has gone to the grave with those who bore the deep scars incurred during our separations from each other. But there is still much distrust and fear on the part of all three groups toward one another. Unity would not come easily, but it is the imperative of none other than the Lord of the church!

The Preamble for the Consensus Statement of Faith agreed to by members of the Christian Churches/

Churches of Christ and members of the Church of God, Anderson, speaks to this suggested model of unity named *Intercommunion*:

“We as two church movements have much with which to enrich each other. We have begun to learn from each other and must continue to benefit by building meaningful relationships. While we hold in common the lordship of Jesus Christ, we do not need to arrive at full consensus on doctrinal issues in order to be open to each other, influenced by each other, genuinely valuing and loving each other, and learning to minister with each other.”<sup>15</sup>

The following Consensus of Faith Statement embraces the “faith,” the *kerygma* of the apostles, and is consistent with our restoration heritage.

### We Believe

1. That Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, that He was crucified for our sins, was buried, and raised on the third day, seen of many witnesses, ascended to the Father and is coming again to judge the living and the dead. This same Jesus is Lord of Lords and King of Kings.
2. That there is salvation in no other name save Jesus. That those who believe in Him, repent of their sins, confess Him as Lord and Savior and are baptized by immersion which always involves the forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Spirit, and have been saved by grace through faith.
3. That we are called to partake of the Lord’s Supper each week.
4. That the Bible is the inspired word of God, and that the New Testament is the only authority for Christian faith and practice.
5. That God is the maker of heaven and earth, and hold to the covenant of love that binds us to God and to one another.
6. That we are to give obedience to the Great Commission, practice the Great Commandment and the Second commandment and to practice Biblical morality.

I believe that our three groups can come close to agreement on the Faith, the essentials as stated above.

But when it comes to the great social issues of our day, we will have a greater problem. Each group continues to show concern for the poor, the children and the elderly. This is heeding the call of the eighth century Old Testament prophets. We each oppose racism. Some will have problems with the role of women, but I believe those opposed to women in pulpit ministry will accept those who include them in this role. The one issue that the Churches of Christ, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and the large majority of Disciples will not accept is condoning the practice of homosexuality whether for membership or for formal ministry. I Corinthians 5 and 6 make this issue a test of fellowship. To us, condoning the practice of homosexuality would violate Biblical authority and holiness. Another big issue would be the condoning of abortion.

We have not been this way before. Can we in the words of Joshua and Caleb, “Go and take the land; we can surely do it for God will be with us.” Do we trust Jesus, the Lord of the Church, to lead us to unity?

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### Notes

- 1 Dulles, Avery, *Models of the Church* (New York, Image Books, 1978).
- 2 Ibid. p. 81.
- 3 Ibid. p. 81.
- 4 Ibid., p. 82.
- 5 Ibid., p. 84.
- 6 Meyer, Harding, *That All May Be One, Perceptions and Models of Ecumenicity* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999).
- 7 Ibid, p. 81.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid. p. 82.
- 10 Ibid. p. 83.
- 11 Ibid. p. 87.
- 12 Ibid., p. 89.
- 13 Ibid., p. 90.
- 14 Ibid., P. 91
- 15 Callen, Barry and North, Jim, *Coming Together In Christ* (College Press, Joplin) p. 213.

# Models of Unity A Changing Landscape

Stone-Campbell Dialogue, Indianapolis, Indiana

April 25-26, 2004

Robert K. Welsh



In the meeting of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue in June 2002, I presented a paper on the nature of the unity we seek as Disciples of Christ within the ecumenical movement. My basic point in that presentation was that our understandings of the nature of the unity we seek have shifted in recent years—moving from an emphasis upon structural and institutional unity to one that finds its focus in relationships and mission centered in Jesus Christ. Let me lift up five points identified in that presentation that summarize key understandings of Christian unity today:

1. The starting point in all our ecumenical work and involvements is that our unity is in Jesus Christ, not in structures or institutions or theological agreement—but in the grace and love of God offered to us and to the world in Jesus Christ.
2. Christian unity is not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world and its salvation. Unity stands as a witness before a divided society and world to the power of God's love to reconcile all things through Christ to himself (Colossians 1:20).
3. As Disciples, our understanding of unity begins at the Table where we are made one in Christ; and from the Table, we are called to witness to the message of reconciliation, welcome, and hospitality that we have experienced in our being welcomed, and sharing the bread and the cup. Unity is first-of-all sacramental, not organizational.
4. Unity does not mean uniformity—neither in belief, nor in practice. It is not based upon our

agreement as Christians, but upon our shared life in the Risen Christ. We are seeking oneness in Christ, not sameness in our theology, or worship, work practices.

5. Unity is more relational than institutional. (This is a new insight for the ecumenical movement.) Christian unity finds its life and reality in relationships as we serve together, as we engage in mission together, and as we worship and pray together, especially in sharing the Lord's Supper together. Unity does not begin with plans of union or major statements of theological consensus; rather unity is known as we engage in deepening relationships with other Christians and other churches in the lived experience of worship, confessing the faith, addressing issues of social justice and peace together.

## Models Old and New

The topic of “models of unity” has been a part of our history as Disciples since our earliest days. The goal of unity and union has never been denied—rather, the question has continued to be, “What kind of unity are we seeking? And, how is to be achieved?”

Responding to this basic concern, Barton W. Stone saw unity not coming from theological argument or agreement, but from the practice of love and trust centered in Jesus Christ. For Stone, there was no single or precise pattern of union presented in the Bible; rather, we are to go to the Scriptures seeking the same spirit and love of Christ. Stone believed that an underlying unity already exists among the followers of Christ, and the task of unity is to

recognize that gift which is given by God in Jesus Christ. In seeking the character of God reflected in Jesus, Christians can become partakers of this divine nature and manifest the divine spirit of love to one another as they cooperate in the work of redemption. "By becoming co-workers with the Father and the Son in the work of redemption, believers become one with one another." (William Garrett West, *Barton Warren Stone: Early American Advocate of Christian Unity*, Nashville: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1954, p. 127)

Barton Stone often spoke of four types (or kinds) of union: *book union*, *head union*, *water union*, and *fire union*.

Book union was based upon an authoritative creed, confession of faith or church discipline. Head union was based upon a common opinion, and Stone warned that this approach was characteristic of many who denounced creeds and made the Bible their creed. He warned that to make interpretations of the Bible a system of salvation is equally wrong. Water union was based upon baptism by immersion of believers; made the primary criteria of faith, said Stone, immersion can become sectarian. These three concepts of union Stone rejected in favor of the fourth: the union of fire or the Spirit. This is the perfect union achieved not by the agreement of human opinion but faith in our "Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners, and by a cheerful obedience to all his known commands." The road to union is the road toward the Lordship of Christ. (Paul A. Crow, Jr., *The Anatomy of a Nineteenth Century United Church*, Lexington: Lexington Theological Seminary, 1983, pp. 16-17)

Disciples continue to embrace much of the intent and spirit of Stone's vision of achieving true unity based upon *fire union* as the model. Indeed, I believe the five basic understandings and convictions outlined above in the introduction to this paper reflect the same direction and vision as Stone was expressing in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, Disciples continue to explore the shape of

unity not only in relation to our many experiences and efforts in manifesting our oneness in Christ with other Christians, but also within the broader understanding of the vision of unity that comes to us from our involvements in the national and global ecumenical movement. It is important for us, therefore, to examine appropriate models for Christian unity afresh as we look to the new era in our life as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and in our relationships with other churches and Christians.

It is my conviction that as our understanding of the goal of unity changed in recent years, so too our understanding of the model of Christian unity has

expanded and shifted. A foundational definition of the commonly accepted vision of the goal of unity continues to be the concept that was articulated at the 3rd Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961 at New Delhi:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ

and confess him as Lord and Savior are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires

This statement identifies several key elements that Disciples would affirm as essential to our quest for visible unity today. These elements include (1) a commitment to a unity that is both local and universal—"all in each place" and "in all places and ages"; (2) a unity whose character is intense and intimate—"one fully committed fellowship"; (3) a unity in which the Churches share deeply the good gifts of God—"one apostolic faith . . . one gospel . . . one bread . . . joining in common prayer"; and (4) a

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*Participants in the consultation agreed that the model of unity, if it is to deserve such a label, must be costly enough that churches are changed as a result of being in it.*

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unity which enables the Church to be engaged in common mission in the name of Christ.

Over the years, Disciples have sought to express our unity with other Christians through various models and approaches: *organic/visible unity* which would be realized in church union; engagement in councils of churches (*conciliar ecumenism*); programs and organizations committed to particular social justice ministries or *cooperation in mission* (e.g., Church World Service, Habitat for Humanity, Church Women United, local food banks, etc.); and, joining in efforts to realize and express our *spiritual unity* through common worship, prayer, and fellowship. Most of these initiatives and approaches continue—though each has taken on new dynamics and (in some cases) revised its basic objectives and goals. For example, the goal of most “church union conversations” today has shifted from a structural model to that of *full communion* (which is understood to be a unity built upon formal relationships that manifest oneness in and through common mission, witness, service, worship and the reconciliation of ordained ministries).

### Benchmarks for the Way Ahead

The point I would want to make in this presentation is: *Whatever “model of unity” or whatever approach we take to Christian unity in this new era of the 21st century, there should be identifiable marks of faithfulness in that quest to embody God’s gift of oneness in Christ.*

Quoting from the *Message from the 7th Consultation of United and Uniting Churches in Driebergen, The Netherlands*, on September 11-19, 2002,

Participants in the consultation agreed that the model of unity, if it is to deserve such a label, must be **tangible enough** to make a witness to the world, **intense enough** that those in it recognized their responsibility for one another, **costly enough** that churches are changed as a result of being in it, and **intentional enough** that the body of Christ is renewed through the sharing of gifts. We also agree, however, that no one model guarantees (or denies) such an outcome. The new models remind us to look for partners in

unexpected places and to expect to be surprised by what God will do in our methods.

In addition to these benchmarks related to our involvements in seeking unity, I would also identify four insights and affirmations from that *message* that provide a broader framework for our discussion of appropriate models of unity for the present (and changing) situation. These include:

- a. Any model of authentic unity must directly address the issues that divide the human family in our particular settings (e.g., combating racism and white privilege here in the United States).
- b. Any model of authentic unity must incarnate the gospel in each place, even as it transcends every culture.
- c. Unity demands such qualities as mutual trust, accountability, and responsibility. (One way to express this element of our life together in unity is found in the Lutheran-Reformed “Full Communion Agreement” when it calls for “mutual affirmation and mutual admonition.”)
- d. The model of unity should seek to witness to the interrelatedness of unity, mission, and identity. Disciples remain convinced that disunity is an impediment to mission, and that the very fact of being united in one body is already a witness to the reconciling power of God.

As the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) continues to be in dialogue with the Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, we look forward to exploring new models and new approaches to expressing our unity in Christ that will both challenge us as a church and open us to new occasions of God’s grace. I look forward to the discussion in our Dialogue session around the topic of “models of unity,” hoping that together we might identify benchmarks that will move us into God’s future with greater faithfulness and obedience to the prayer of Jesus in John 17:21, “that all may be one . . . so that the world may believe.”

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# Circle of Fire: Barton Stone and a Spiritual Model of Unity

Gary Holloway

Recent decades have witnessed a renewed interest in Barton W. Stone among all three branches of our movement, as evidenced by the increased acceptance of the term “Stone–Campbell Movement” to describe us,<sup>1</sup> the popularity of a video presentation on the life of Stone,<sup>2</sup> and the recent biography by Newell Williams, entitled *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography*.<sup>3</sup>

What seems to fascinate us most about Stone is his deep spirituality. Like the Campbells, Walter Scott, and other early leaders of the movement, Stone was a child of the Enlightenment and certainly modern in his thinking. However, he combined this modern outlook with a firm belief in the current experience of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. In contrast to some who would place the work of the Holy Spirit solely in the biblical past, Stone writes:

The denial of the direct operation of the spirit [sic]<sup>4</sup> cuts the very nerves of prayer. We have known some, who were once warmly engaged in the duty of prayer, lose the very spirit and practice of it, by speculating and philosophizing on this subject. We can conceive of no doctrine more dangerous to the souls of men, than that, which tends to destroy the spirit of prayer. Such a doctrine stands opposed to the spirit and practice of Jesus, our pattern, to the doctrines and example of the apostles and primitive saints, and to the experience of every living Christian.<sup>5</sup>

Many also find Stone’s emphasis on Christian unity attractive. Indeed, these two guiding principles of Stone—the experience of the Spirit and the call to

Christian union—make him an appealing model for Christians in a postmodern culture that appreciates experience, tolerance, and community.

## Stone’s Models of Union

How are these two principles, spirituality and unity, related in Stone? In a seminal article, he describes four kinds of union—book union, head union, water union, and fire union.<sup>6</sup> These kinds also describe some of the models of unity that have characterized the three branches of the movement since Stone’s time. Perhaps Stone would call the emphasis of the Disciples of Christ on structural and institutional unity, “book union,” that is, unity based on agreed upon confessions. These would not be narrow denominational confessions but statements by ecumenical organizations. I am certainly open to correction on this from Disciples scholars. Some scholars from Christian Churches/Churches of Christ have also told me this is the type of union they promote; however, the confessions they agree upon are Evangelical in nature.

Of “book union,” Stone says, “For these books [creeds and confessions] have, from their very introduction, been the unhappy cause of disunion—and as light and liberty progress will be banished from the Christian community.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, creeds as tests of fellowship tend to divide rather than unite. In spite of the support of some of us for “book union,” all three branches of our movement ultimately reject this model of unity. Indeed, we all seem proud of our anti-credalism.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, Churches of Christ practiced “head union” based on a common understanding of the Bible. In Stone’s

words, “Each one believed his opinion of certain texts to be the very spirit and meaning of the texts—and that this opinion was absolutely necessary to salvation.”<sup>8</sup> In Churches of Christ this led to the worst of sectarianism—we alone were the whole church and others could be unified with us if they accepted “the truth” (that is, our opinions on certain texts). While Christian Churches have been less sectarian than Churches of Christ, it seems to me that they too have insisted on head union on certain issues, particularly those growing out of the Fundamentalist-Liberal controversy of the 1920’s. They have been more open to unity with evangelicals but not mainliners. Some in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have also proved narrow and judgmental when it comes to biblical interpretation. Indeed, whether one takes the Fundamentalist or the Liberal side, both seem to focus on “head union.”

It is clear that “head union,” that is, hermeneutical agreement on the Bible, will not produce true union but rather division and sectarianism. This does not mean that Stone, nor his theological heirs, place little emphasis on the authority of Scripture. Indeed, Stone’s comments on the all-sufficiency of Scripture are as strong as anyone in our heritage. However, he properly understood the Bible to point beyond itself to oneness in Christ, the unity of the Spirit. This spiritual reading of Scripture is quite different from hermeneutical agreement on issues.

But by the reception of the Spirit, the Scriptures are experimentally known in their power and glory, and the person renewed in knowledge after the image of him who created him. They are no longer lead by the flesh but by the Spirit—they follow not after the flesh, but after the Spirit—they are justified and saved from sin, are new creatures, created anew in Christ Jesus unto good works.<sup>9</sup>

“Water union” seems too weak to unite Christians. Stone says, “Water union was defined to be a union founded on immersion into water. But fact proves that this union is easily dissolved, and that

immersion will not keep those who are immersed, united.”<sup>10</sup> Currently there is some controversy among Churches of Christ regarding immersion. Many of us cannot deny that there are many devout Christians who are unimmersed.

This review of Stone’s first three models of unity should remind us of the inadequate models we have followed in the past. Let us not dwell on past failures. Instead, we should embrace his final model or type, “fire union” or “the unity of the Spirit.” In Stone’s words,

How vain are all human attempts to unite a bundle of twigs together, so as to make them grow together and bear fruit! They must first

be united with the living stock, and receive its sap and spirit, before they can ever be united with each other. So must we be first united with Christ, and receive his spirit [sic], before we can ever be in spirit united with one another. The members of the body cannot live unless by union with the head—nor can the members of the church be united, unless first united with Christ, the

living head. His spirit is the bond of union. Men have devised many plans to unite Christians—all are vain. There is but one effectual plan, which is, that all be united with Christ and walk in him.<sup>11</sup>

#### **A Postdenominational Model of Spiritual Union**

In a recent paper written for the Stone-Campbell Dialogue, Robert Welsh (President and Ecumenical Officer of the Council on Christian Unity) says that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has shifted from “an emphasis upon structural and institutional unity to one that finds its focus in relationships and mission centered in Jesus Christ.”<sup>12</sup> This is a healthy shift, also taking place in Churches of Christ, and in Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. Many in Churches of Christ would agree with the understandings of Christian unity outlined by Welsh. From my perspective as a teacher of undergraduates and graduate students at Lipscomb University, it is Welsh’s fifth under-

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standing, “Unity is more relational than institutional” that is particularly important to the younger generation.

We live in a time when God’s people seem much more open to a relational and spiritual model of Christian unity. We can label that time as postmodern, postChristian, or as postdenominational, as expressed in a recent interview with Phyllis Tickle, long-time religion editor at *Publishers Weekly*.

A prolific writer and popular speaker on religion and religion publishing, Tickle predicts that American Protestantism in particular is in for a new look and some new labeling. The old denominational hierarchies are crumbling, she says, and the dividing lines between the various communions within Protestantism are blurring.

What will take their place, she believes, is new groupings of believers, like liturgical Baptists or charismatic Episcopalians, who will realign themselves along lines of practice rather than theology. Organizational hierarchies will be replaced by networks of communication, many of them Internet-based and all of them offering a greater role for local congregations.

Such a tectonic shift in American Protestantism opens the door for publishers to offer books and materials about and for the new players in a changed religious landscape. “We are indeed in postdenominationalism, by whatever name you want to call it,” says Tickle.<sup>13</sup>

My own experience teaching in a university where 70% of the students are from a *cappella* Churches of Christ confirms this cultural shift away from the importance of denominational labels to a deep concern for relational and spiritual union. It is not unusual in a typical week for our students to attend a Monday night instrumental (!) praise worship at a local Church of Christ, a Tuesday night ecumenical teaching session at First Baptist downtown, Wednesday night church at a fairly traditional Church of Christ, and Thursday night Taize worship at a Presbyterian church—all before going home on the weekend to their parent’s Church of Christ where many think we are the only Christians!

A typical week could also find the same group of students protesting against abortion at a clinic and against the death penalty at the local prison.

Or to give another example. A colleague of mine teaches a required Bible-major undergraduate course on “The Church.” At the beginning of the course, he divides the students into groups of five, each constituting a “church.” They then have to answer certain questions as a group: “What does our church believe?” “How do we worship?” “How are we organized?” “Are we part of a larger group or denomination?” For the last few years, in every case the students said their “church” was not connected to any larger group. Without any prompting from the instructors, they all chose to be postdenominational.

Are my students merely confused? Are they searching for the “right” church? No. Instead, they are pursuing the Spirit of Christ wherever they may find him. Generally, I find their descriptions of their spiritual, relational ecumenicity extremely healthy.

The question is “What about those of us from an older generation?” Are we willing to let go of some of our denominational distinctives to embrace other Christians? Are we actually willing, like our spiritual ancestors (including Barton W. Stone), to let our denomination “sink into the body of Christ at large”? Or are we so much denominational loyalists or perhaps so loyal to past models of ecumenicity that we will not be open to the “fire union” promised by the Spirit?

In other words, are we willing to embrace in prayer, worship, and service all those who exhibit the fruit of the Spirit? Are we willing to see the Spirit at work in an ordained woman and in one who opposes the ordination of women? In those for and those opposed to abortion? In those who believe the Bible is inerrant and those who do not? In those who support war in Iraq and those who do not? In all these “issues” of “book union” and “head union” it is clear to me which side God is on. However, God through his Spirit can work even through those who are wrong. I hope so, for I believe he works in me even when wrong.

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Are we willing to let our denominations die? For those in “undenominational fellowships,” the answer seems obvious. Yet when we talk about unity beyond the boundaries of those with our “name” and our distinctives, we begin to worry about losing our identity. In the words of Barton Stone’s generation (expressed in *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*), “we will that our sister bodies read their Bibles carefully, that they may see their fate there determined and prepare for death before it is too late.” Must our distinctives and identity die in order for the Spirit to bring unity?

### The Future of the “Fire Union” Model

So what does it look like to work toward Christian union based on this model? It will not look like the ecumenicity of the past. Dialogues, papers, conferences, and councils may help with “book union” or “head union” but will have less value with “fire union.” Instead, this model of union begins and ends with prayer, worship, and service together. It will not be structural union, although structures will be found that promote such union and discarded when they no longer promote it. It will not be

“doctrinal” or “Bible-based” union, not in the narrow sense of total agreement on Scripture and doctrine.

I submit that this is in no way an abandonment of our emphasis on the Bible or a straying from the ancient order. Instead, this is the only way to be faithful to Scripture. In the words of Stone:

We have been too long engaged with defending *ourselves*, rather than the truth as it is in Jesus. Let us trust our little selves with the Lord; and rest not, till by faith in the promised Spirit and by incessant prayer we receive and be filled with it, like they were of old in the ancient order of things.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, union will be produced by the work of God among us and inside us through his Holy Spirit. As such, it is hard to predict, promote, or control that work of the Spirit. The question we face then is not “How can we work toward unity?” but rather “How will we be faithful to the call to maintain the unity of the Spirit?” Perhaps we can discuss that question in our dialogue.

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### Notes

- 1 This trend began with the publication by Leroy Garrett of *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin: College Press, 1981), although Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker used the term earlier in their *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 1975).
- 2 Bill Humble, *Like Fire in Dry Stubble* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1992).
- 3 St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000.
- 4 One could argue that the lower case “spirit” indicates Stone’s low view of the person of the Holy Spirit. However, I think Stone is simply inconsistent in his capitalization and does not intend the Holy Spirit in this quotation.
- 5 Barton W. Stone, “On Prayer,” *Christian Messenger* 1 (August 25, 1827), 236.

- 6 Barton W. Stone, “The Retrospect,” *Christian Messenger* 7 (October 1833), 314-316.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 315.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Barton W. Stone, “The Fourth Interview Between an Old and a Young Preacher,” *Christian Messenger* 14 (May 1844), 9.
- 10 Barton W. Stone, “The Retrospect,” *Christian Messenger* 7 (October 1833), 315.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 316
- 12 Robert K. Welsh, “Models of Unity: A Changing Landscape,” unpublished paper, April 25, 2004.
- 13 Quoted from [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/13/story\\_1323\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/13/story_1323_1.html)
- 14 Barton W. Stone, “A Hearty Tribute to Merit,” *Christian Messenger* 8 (January 1844), 271.