

Stone-Campbell Dialogue Reflections Synthesis
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Reflecting upon our past as the Stone-Campbell Dialogue is crucial to the task of envisioning the work we can create together in the days ahead.

As we engage in the work of peacemaking and unity keeping we humbly acknowledge our complete dependence upon God. God has called us to co-create with him a visibly united body of Christ. The oneness of God's people in the church has already been initiated in the sacrificial act Jesus carried out on the cross at Calvary.

This conviction serves as the solid foundation that undergirds the synthesized reflective perspective of the Church of Christ participants in the Stone-Campbell Dialogue. Let me now explain the intention of this paper.

It is my intention to present on behalf of the Church of Christ participants a synthesized reflection upon the highlights we have seen over the past 10 years of conversation and dialogue. Secondly, it is my intention to state what we see as the issues and challenges still before. And finally I will offer some suggestions we think are helpful in shaping a positive future as we continue to move forward in this process of peace and unity.

HIGHLIGHTS

According to the majority of Church of Christ reflections I read there are a number of attractive highlights that pop up over the ten year course of meaningful conversation and interaction within the Stone-Campbell Dialogue. Fellowship amongst willing participants in the Stone-Campbell traditions has been excellent. The simple fact that we have been able to acknowledge one another as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ and as members of the same body of Christ has been truly refreshing. The determination to no longer recognize the dividing wall of hostility that kept us separated from one another for so many years has renewed hope in our hearts for the idea of real Christian unity.

The deepening fellowship that we have experienced over the past 10 years has been predicated upon the willingness of participants from each tradition in the dialogue to honestly confess our individual faults as well as what we perceive as the imperfections of our respective tradition. The dialogue has provided participants with a welcoming space to openly admit that we have been guilty of housing in the private domain of our hearts ugly and divisive stereotypes about one another.

In the context of fellowship, confession, and respectful conversation we have found encouragement and inspiration to aggressively fight the ungodly caricatures we once proudly held about one another. In the context of fellowship we have heard the call to let go of the legacy of hate handed down to us by those who fought and opposed one another in the name of sound doctrine.

We the descendants on all sides of the long standing family feud have developed a common distaste for our mutual involvement in the butchery and mutilation of Jesus' body. Cannibalistic division has left in our mouths the bitter after taste of remorse and shame.

We have reached a watershed moment in the history of the Stone-Campbell traditions wherein we have reached a point of exhaustion and grown tired of biting and devouring one another. The Stone-Campbell Dialogue is the grand intersection at which members of all three traditions have met simultaneously with a readiness to yield to the other the right of way.

Breaking bread together in communion is another exciting highlight of the past 10 years. Our exhaustion from biting and devouring one another has produced among us a renewed appetite for the meal prepared for us at the Lord's Table. We see communion as the supper table that empowers us to remember our spiritual kinship to one another despite the fabricated lines of separation that were set down between us over 100 years ago. Rick Hunter describes Communion as "a visual and participatory act that brings the words of dialogue into tangible action." He says that "Communion is an act that signifies a unity and has the possibility of allowing personal expression in challenging exclusivist thinking."

It is at the Lord's Table that we observe the dismantling of the spirit of exclusion and the dismissal of the unity betraying spirit of Judas that once freely existed within our traditions without challenge. Communion enables

us to join together in celebrating the deep roots of our common history and to embrace our common aspirations for a more united body of Christ. We are grateful to recount the exciting highlights that stand out over the past ten years. However, there remain issues and challenges for us today.

CHALLENGES

One major issue we are compelled to wrestle with is the nature of our representative role for our particular tradition in the Restoration heritage. Those of us from Churches of Christ who participate in the Stone-Campbell Dialogue have not been officially authorized by any governing board to do so. When we speak and act we are doing so as a very small minority within a larger body of people.

At this point I think it is safe to say that a large number in more traditional Churches of Christ are not ready to embrace the idea of unity among Stone-Campbell traditions as much as those members of Churches of Christ who participate in the SCD.

There are denominational minute men stationed along the borders of Churches of Christ ready to shoot anyone who dares to cross over the protected walls that have been erected to keep members within and to keep foreign religious influences out.

Being a part of the SCD is a wonderful experience for those of us who actively participate. However there is a general consensus that there needs to be a greater spill over of our Stone-Campbell Dialogue experience into the Church of Christ tradition. It is necessary for the SCD to find practical ways that can make our discussions and actions more relevant to our respective tradition.

Somehow the churches of all the Stone-Campbell traditions must be lovingly provoked to participate in this work of unity. SCD participants must let our annual meetings be a gathering in the upper room where we wait upon the Spirit and prayerfully search for ways that we can serve as prophetic evangelists proclaiming the good news about the work of unity that God is doing and is seeking to do in our midst. Concrete plans, goals, strategies, and tactics are needed to promote ongoing visible unity among all our respective traditions within a given local area.

Doug Foster states, “We are all deeply committed to what we are doing in the Stone-Campbell dialogue, but we are not very good at disseminating, publicizing, “marketing” what has been done and the valuable tools that have been created beyond our own limited circles.” He states further, “In my opinion, one major challenge is to find ways that will expose more and more people to this work, and to encourage through the “Study Guide” people in local communities to begin and pursue their own Stone-Campbell Dialogues.”

This having been said, we are very much aware of the difficulty of experiencing this unity when we have differing views of unity that are operative in the Stone-Campbell traditions. Gary Holloway points out that “We still have at least two views of Christian unity on the Dialogue.”

Some believe that true spiritual community cannot be experienced among our traditions as long as we have theological differences. Therefore, the emphasis some feel should be placed upon theological agreement wherein we all think, believe, speak, and practice the same things.

Such believers see any harmony that is had without theological unity is equal to signing a peace agreement to walk together in a state of unified apostasy. They are convinced that in such cases Scriptural beliefs and practices are compromised for the sake of fabricated unity.

These are legitimate concerns for some people that must be taken into account as we continue in this work of unity. In light of this major hurdle how can we promote unity among our traditions without being insensitive and dogmatic? Carol Gafford suggests that rather than drawing lines, we must encourage our traditions to join hands in ways that reflect Christian love and outreach, no matter the issue.” She says “working together provides far more resources than working separately.”

Charme Robarts makes the strong case that visible unity must come through a focus on the never ending unifying work of the Holy Spirit. She states, “To say that the Spirit of God unifies us is not to mouth mere words of piety. They express realities we have in fact experienced in our churches and in the world. Our dialogue sessions are a microcosm of that reality. True there is still much to lament as we see ourselves continually struggling with pride, and lack of knowledge and understanding. And yet, we see much reason for hope as we wait for the day when God makes all things right.”

Doug Foster points out the critical need to talk about the “how” of unity through seeing the image of Christ in each other. Authentic visible unity is only possible when we begin to see others in the Stone-Campbell tradition as being the very body of Jesus. The attitude we visit upon fellow believers is the attitude we are visiting upon our Lord himself.

SUGGESTIONS

In addition to these challenges we offer several suggestions we think will be crucial to our growth and development as the SCD.

We must face the question of how broad we should cast our net of Christian unity. Should we only be concerned with unity among the Stone-Campbell traditions? What about our concern for unity among those outside of our traditions? Does the fact that we are not engaging Christians of other traditions mean that the SCD is merely promoting simply a wider sectarianism among our sister traditions?

Gary Holloway says, “My fear is that we are (perhaps unintentionally for many) simply promoting a slightly wider sectarianism and not genuine unity with all Christians.” Gary believes we need plans and structures for a wider ecumenism.” We must find ways to explain the positive contributions our theological heritage can make to the overall theological discussion in the academy and the churches of all traditions.

A greater fellowship between our various colleges, universities and seminaries within our traditions can help with this process. Exchanging professors at the collegiate levels among the traditions could lead to a broader theological landscape of mutual understanding that could contribute to the broader Christian community. There is much to criticize about our heritage and yet there is much in it to be valued.

There is much we can learn by being in dialogue with other religious traditions that may be further along the road in certain areas such as ethnic and gender diversity. The SCD must find ways to recruit and welcome youth, women and persons of color into the process. Diversity should become a major focus of our future efforts in the dialogue unless we unintentionally want the Stone Campbell traditions to have the same demographic descriptions they had at the turn of the 20th century.

It is crucial that we find ways to become more compatible to the 21st century in our make up and outlook. Will the SCD become the influence that acts and speaks prophetically to our traditions on all issues relevant to the gospel in these times? Will our efforts be recorded as an attempt to resurrect the past in its original form? Will our efforts be recorded as an attempt to build on the past while aspiring for a true and genuine inclusion of all God's children who are precious in his sight?