

A Challenge and a Privilege

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It is both a privilege and a challenge to join with this group and to participate in the Stone-Campbell dialogue.

- It is a *privilege*, because of the reputation, experience, education, and service of the men and women who have formed this group. Given the many important tasks stemming from your own ministries that already occupy you so fully, your commitment to this dialogue speaks to its importance and potential.

- It is a *challenge*, because this dialogue pulls me outside the comfortable routine of my many to-do's and gives me the opportunity to see so much that is new to me: the paths your service has taken—many of them totally unfamiliar to me—and the positions you have come to hold dear, some of them uncomfortable to me.

- It is a *privilege*, because of the lofty ideal this dialogue pursues, nothing less than obeying the will of our Lord Jesus who prayed that those who worship him would be one.

- And this is a *challenge*, a seemingly unreachable goal, when we read that the oneness Jesus seeks is not the result of negotiation or organization or compromise—or *dialogue!* No, the oneness he prays for is an organic, spiritual, eternal unity: may they be one, Father, he prays, “just as you are in me and I am in you.” How can this be possible among the scores of suspicions and accusations between Christians today, including those still experienced and expressed in each of our “streams” toward the other two?

Before I Was Invited

Did I know about this Dialogue before being invited to join it? Oh yes, of course I knew, although I may not have understood how it related to other unity efforts and discussions that our groups have initiated. And I had little idea of what this Dialogue was truly accomplishing to impact attitudes and actions of many local congregations. It seemed to me that those from the Christian churches/churches of

Christ who participated may not have been the most mainstream or influential members of our fellowship.

That's because our local churches no longer look first to editors or professors for guidance in how to conduct their ministries. Their primary influence is the megachurch, the megachurch pastor, and other leaders of growing congregations.

This leads me to express another challenge I'm feeling as I join with you. Frankly, I question the willingness of many CC/CofC leaders to give energy to our goals. A pervasive pragmatism characterizes many of them; they are not as concerned with the philosophical or even the theological as they are with their list of goals: growing the church, managing their staff, and leading effective ministry programs. They want to see progress; they're all about results. What have we accomplished after 10 years of talking together?

Considering the Papers

There are answers to that question, some of them indicated by the March 2009 papers reflecting on the work of the Dialogue in its first 10 years. But those papers also reflect the agonizing slowness experienced in the process of coming together:

- Witness the observations of Newell Williams regarding divisions over the issue of women in ministry and the problem of differing commitments in areas such as prolife/prochoice.

- Hear the frustration of Jerry Taylor who looks at the diversity within his own fellowship and wonders if many churches are ready even to consider talk about unity with congregations outside it.

- Consider the frank observations of Jim North who discusses a hermeneutic of the churches of Christ as being more rigid than that in the CC/CofC congregations and the hermeneutic of the Disciples as being more flexible.

Professor North's summary of the situation seems eloquent to me, perhaps because I resonate with it so completely and I believe many in the CC/CofC congregations would agree:

“Can we reach out to others in Christian unity without stepping off the platform of biblical teaching?” he asks. Or, on the other hand, “Can we narrow our fellowship to those who share our biblical views without cutting off brothers and sisters in Christ? That is the question and the challenge.”

At the Great Communion celebration in Pittsburgh a few weeks ago, Victor Knowles, who has sometimes attended these Stone-Dialogue meetings, quoted Thomas Campbell, who wrote,

“Our desire, therefore, for ourselves and our brethren would be, that . . . taking the Divine word alone for our rule; the Holy Spirit for our teacher and guide, to lead us into all truth; and Christ alone, as exhibited in the word, for our salvation, that, by so doing, we may be at peace among ourselves, follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”

Victor reminded his audience of about 700 gathered for that celebration, of the following words by Campbell, toward the end of the *Declaration and Address*. “Union in truth has been, and ever must be, the desire and prayer of all such; ‘Union in Truth’ is our motto.” And he quoted the late Reuel Lemmons who observed many years later, “Unity at the expense of doctrine is unacceptable, and doctrine at the expense of unity is obnoxious.”

No Compromise

It is wonderful to sense that no one in the Stone-Campbell Dialogue has been obnoxious! It is a privilege to fellowship with a group of men and women committed to an irenic dialogue. It is a challenge, in the face of dearly held convictions, to keep oneself from being obnoxious!

The privilege and the challenge are summarized well by Dr. North’s March 2009 paper. He wrote, “We dare not compromise our commitment to the authority of Scripture; at the same time, we dare not compromise our commitment to the unity of the body. So we continue in dialogue—we *must* continue in dialogue!”

I am *challenged* by the possibilities of where this dialogue could lead us. Is it possible that a future generation will say we have made history here? Pursuing that possibility with you is indeed a *privilege*.