

The Unity in the Churches of Christ: An Historical Perspective*

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My offering in the role of “discussion prompter,” is shaped by my experiences as a lifetime member of the Church of Christ and a minister in three congregations over the last 20 years. While it may not reflect a complete picture of the landscape today, hopefully it’s enough of a snapshot to prompt our discussion.

I grew up in the Ayers Street congregation in Corpus Christ, Texas, and our minister during those years, C. B. Thomas, was an avid “Campbellite.” Pictures of Campbell and Stone were in the main hallway of our building, and the congregation was well educated from the pulpit regarding the difference the Restoration Movement had made, and should make, in the life of the church. However, in practice our church held on to the conviction that we represented the stream that was “right.” So, being in the right church was the general focus of all teaching and preaching. While we were certain that we were the right church, we remained unsure of our salvation!

My guess is that most of our stream’s congregations have members who are aware of Campbell’s *Declaration and Address*, but for the most part, there is little “working knowledge” of it or of the Restoration Movement in general. At University Avenue Church in Austin, Western Hills in Temple, and now Overland Park in Kansas, the ministry staff was well-acquainted with the history of the Restoration Movement and always interested in what this Dialogue was discussing and up to, but no interest is, or was, present to proceed further.

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However, in all three churches there was a good relationship with nearby Christian churches and a general acceptance as fellow Christians.

Proposition 1—One Church

Unless the reference to “one church” was specific for Churches of Christ a cappella, most of our stream would not agree with this proposition. Even if it were limited to our stream, certain congregations would dispute “one church” since they are not in fellowship with the unacceptable. Even though our basic beliefs and practices are similar to both Disciples and CCCC, most would not consider them to be “the church.”

Proposition 2 – Different Ways

Response mirrors #1 with some exceptions in worship format or small groups.

Proposition 3 – God’s Requirements

Most believe that their congregation, or version of the CofC, reflects God’s requirements. For us this does depend on interpretation, and there is not complete agreement. We are still divided and strident in our disagreement on these points.

Proposition 4 – Bible: Legal document or transformational Word

Response here may be more generational. Few in my age group would agree since the Bible has been, and still is, the “master plan” or “blueprint for salvation” or basic proof text. My children’s generation – Generation X – is more inclined to embrace a transforming Word of God rather seek answers to prove something... The families with whom I work certainly have a transformational view of the Bible, but they understand its use in the past as a document to prove/disprove debated points.

Proposition 5 – Spelling out requirements

For the a cappella churches in general, this flies in the face of our “command, example, and necessary inference” that has served as our hermeneutic over the years. This may be changing, especially in larger, more progressive (whatever that means) churches, but it’s still widespread. Especially in smaller congregations and those in

rural areas, it is not unusual to hang on to the stipulations taken from scripture and make them tests of fellowship – even when some practices are recognized as tradition.

Proposition 6 – Everyone on the same page/thinking differently and accepting others For the most part, once a decision is made and the winning answer becomes

sacred, change is difficult to come by. One congregation wrote a 28 page policy statement on the use of instruments in worship. The first 27 pages reported that including instruments in the worship of the church was permissible and not a salvation issue, but the last page said they could not be used, even in children's and teen's classes and gatherings unless the students just listened and didn't sing along. "That's not the way we've always done it," still carries great weight.

Proposition 7 – Statements of Belief

The previous example is why this is wise. Until a policy statement above is revoked, it will always trump scripture.

Proposition 8 – Knowing "enough" to become a Christian

There is far more agreement in practice here. A more conservative mindset may step over a line, but for the most part Campbell's proposition stands.

Proposition 9 – All who claim Christ are in the same family

For many of our churches if a believer is not a member of a Church of Christ a cappella, they have left the church. A major CofC publication carried a lead story recently with those interviewed stating dismay that their children had "left the church," when, in fact, their children were deeply involved with other Christian groups. More congregations are now willing to accept those who have been baptized in another church, i.e., Baptist, Christian, etc. This is another place where "one church" has multiple meanings.

Proposition 10 – Division

Surely there is total agreement that division is never good. But in our stream, as in others, it takes place. As a young adult I witnessed division in my home church.

Those who left to begin another congregation did so because the other side just went too far. Those who stayed rejoiced that the liberal element was gone and the church was cleansed. To some extent this exists today... a city in central Texas has experienced this in the last year among churches of Christ.

Proposition 11 – Reasons for the division

The proposition states it correctly for the example cited above.

Proposition 12 – Reaching perfection

For us to want to reflect Christ so purely to a watching world this must be our intention. Again, how can anyone disagree? But in our stream when we decide who's right and who's wrong, we have continued to willingly draw lines and divide the body.

Proposition 13 – Expedients and conveniences and worship

As in the above as well as other propositions, this may be a lofty goal or dream, but the reality of our differences causes us to delete congregations from the list in the national Church of Christ directory, write scathing letters to the elders of a congregation that is judged not "right," and refuse to meet at table rather than love and accept each other.

Summary

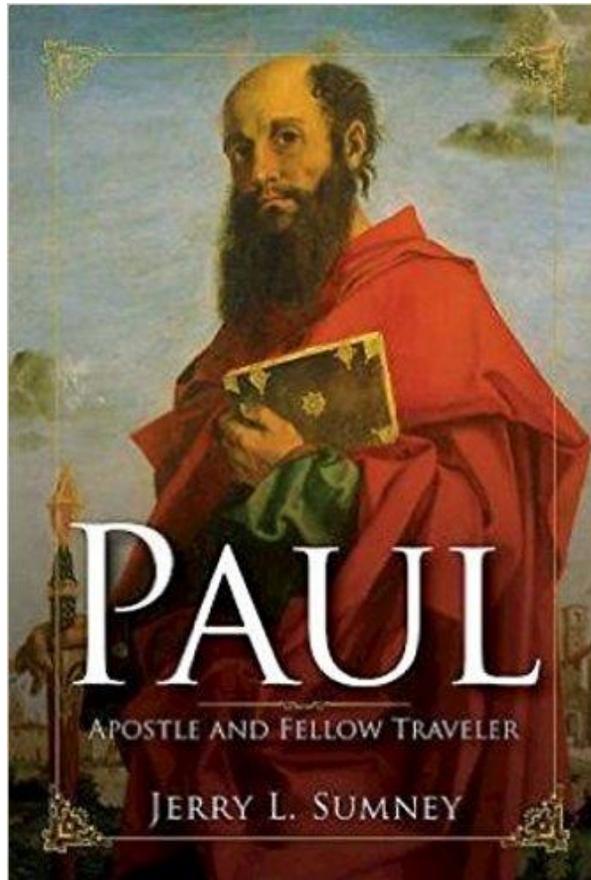
In working through these, considering what I've experienced and read about, my reflections may sound harsh and/or disappoint my stream since their experiences may be different than mine. However, my examples – except for my home church since that happened when I was in my 20s and my parents had already moved away – are current and part of the experiences I've had in the three churches I've served.

Because of all of that, what I see is not much different from the mid-century when we came to be known for our debates and the one liner about being the only ones who were right. In many ways in many places we have allowed tradition to erase the love and acceptance that must be part of every Christian fellowship.

But I have seen some of the same in this group. And to the

extent we let the past corrode our present and the hurts that were real then define our fellowship now, we will not restore much of anything. Nor will we impress world that is waiting to see if we are authentic.

The experience with you in this Dialogue has been a significant one for me... transformational in so many ways. But if we are to inspire others to experience unity in the name of Jesus, they must first see it in us. The propositions speak to us, particularly the ones in which we are reminded that none of us have it all completely right. And since that is true, should authority be exerted by anyone as the answer for all. We may want to remember that the older brother needed the same measure of grace and forgiveness as the prodigal.



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