

What We Might Have Done Differently In the Past*

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Introduction

I begin this presentation with three caveats. First, historians are not in the business of answering “what if” questions. They describe, analyze and interpret what has happened in the past to the best of their abilities. Speculating about how things might have turned out if something had been done differently is not a historical enterprise. It does make some sense to ask historians to do it, since supposedly they know what happened and can identify regrettable events. But this is a philosophical and theological task, not a historical one.

Second, the following five points are really strands of a web that cannot be taken in isolation. Each touches and shapes the others, so much so that they are really the same point. The individual items don’t make complete sense without all the others.

Finally, this list could be misunderstood as a blanket condemnation of those who lived through the divisive events of our history. It is not. Even in the midst of the conflicts there were people who were doing things differently, trying to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Thankfully God is a God of mercy and forgiveness. And thankfully we are not helpless. It is possible with the help of God to learn from and seek forgiveness for the sins of our past. Hopefully that is part of what we are here for.

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Five Things We Might Have Done Differently in the Past

I. We might have refused to allow the issues of missionary societies and instrumental music in worship to push us to vilify and excommunicate each other. Tolbert Fanning is an example of what might have been. Fanning was opposed to the American Christian Missionary Society. True, he had participated in various cooperative efforts in Tennessee and had even been elected ACMS vice-president for the state in 1849, though not at the meeting. But he was clearly in opposition to the national society and the dangers he saw in it. Yet in 1959 he traveled to Cincinnati and spoke at the ACMS annual meeting. He explained his objections to the organization and how he and others were doing much mission work in Tennessee without the society. But at the end of his address he asserted, "I am happy to say, that from what I have heard on the floor, we are one people."¹

Clearly missionary societies were not inherently divisive. Fanning disagreed strongly with those who supported the institutions yet continued to hold them in full fellowship. Not until the sectional division of the Civil War did the then-essentially-northern ACMS become a point of separation and condemnation for Fanning.

Without question instrumental music became the most volatile issue in the final years of the nineteenth century. To many, its use in worship symbolized a departure from apostolic simplicity and a surrender to self-gratification. Isaac Errett opposed the introduction of instrumental music into worship and urged strict avoidance of allowing such a matter to divide the movement. The essential matter was the command to sing and make melody in the heart to the Lord. Neither hymnals, tuning forks nor organs were essential, that is, of the essence of worship, he insisted. Those things were matters of expediency on which there could be a wide variety of opinions, and opinions must never affect the Christian integrity of those who differed.

Yet where instrumental music was introduced, those who opposed it could not continue worshipping there. Errett counseled that if a congregation chose to use instrumental music, there might have to be a separation. But this should not result in hatred and excommunication of each other. They should continue to do every-thing together they could without violating their consciences. In reality, that was a very hard proposition—yet there were a few who showed it could be done. J. W. McGarvey opposed instruments, and when they were added to his Lexington, Kentucky church he quietly moved to another congregation. But he always maintained fellowship with those who

used instruments and never condemned them as lost. T. B. Larimore opposed both the missionary society and instrumental music. But he expressed his attitude toward the issues as matters of fellowship in no uncertain terms.

When Brother [Enos] Campbell took my confession, on my twenty-first birthday, he questioned me relative to none of these “matters now retarding the progress of the cause of Christ.” While thousands have stood before me, hand in mine, and made “the good confession,” I have never questioned one of them about these “matters.” Shall I now renounce and disfellowship all of these who do not understand these things exactly as I understand them? They may refuse to recognize or fellowship or affiliate with ME; but I will NEVER refuse to recognize or fellowship or affiliate with them—NEVER.²

Frankly, I tend to see bureaucratic organizations as concentrations of power that become more interested in self-preservation than in anything they were originally created for. Furthermore, I believe there are solid biblical, historical, theological, and psychological reasons for insisting on a capella music in worship. But neither of these stances is sufficient grounds for vilifying and excommunicating followers of Christ who hold another position. We might have refused to do that.

II. We might have realized that the controversies were complex and went well beyond the surface issues of instrumental music and missionary societies. We in Churches of Christ were largely ignorant of the differences among those in Christian Churches/Disciples. We lumped everyone who differed with us together and assumed a monolithic “enemy.” Underlying questions included matters like biblical authority and interpretation, human nature, reason, and ability. We might have realized that the “other” part of the movement was multidimensional (as were we), and that a spectrum of views existed—even within the other two bodies that took shape in the twentieth century.

III. We might have avoided the vitriolic, inflammatory language that impugned the motives of fellow believers. Our

confrontations too often went well beyond arguments about doctrinal positions; they became personal assaults that ridiculed, reproached and dismissed others as enemies of God. Describing those in the movement with whom he disagreed, Moses Lard accused,

They love everybody but their brethren, forget no one except their former friends, and have an immense affinity for sects, but none for the Church of Christ. They talk much of spiritual Christianity, but attempt to check their folly, and they reveal that they have the spirit of the Devil. . . . They love the sects, and yet will not abandon the brethren whom they hate [; they] preach in churches where they are not wanted, affect piety as mechanically as a Pharisee . . . Such are a few of those who, just at this time, must slough off into the service of Satan.³

Such language is not conducive to the unity of Christ's church. This does not mean that the ideal is to compromise convictions or be unwilling to state them clearly. But anything we believe to be truth must be spoken in love, and love is not rude or irritable. We might have stuck to the matters over which we disagreed and refused to use language characterized by a spirit of hatred.

IV. We might have held more strongly to our heritage of seeing ourselves as "Christians only but not the only Christians" instead of adopting a sectarian exclusive understanding of the church. It's not hard to see what happened. The doctrinal fights provoked condemnatory language. When people are convinced they are defending something important—even essential—the human tendency is to see those who disagree with them as outside the church. Yet from the very beginning there was a more "catholic" view of the church. Look at the language of the Movement's founding documents.

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 result in the universal spread of the gospel, and the unity of the church (Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery).

Our dear brethren of all denominations will please consider that we have our educational prejudices and particular customs to struggle against as well as they. But this we do sincerely declare, that there is nothing we have hitherto received as a matter of faith or practice which is not expressly taught and enjoined in the word of God . . . that we would not heartily relinquish, that we might . . . enjoy full communion with all our brethren, in peace and charity (Declaration and Address of the Christian Association).

The other sentiment was not long in coming, however. Benjamin Franklin, editor of the *American Christian Review*, was clear about how he saw our efforts at restoration.

Better were it for a man that he had never been born, than that he should trifle with this mightiest and greatest of all causes. Men may leave one human establishment and go to another, without affecting them much; but men who leave this cause leave Christianity, the church of God, and the Head of the church; and all such men are ruined.⁴

We might, without compromising beliefs, have refused to settle into the attitude that “we” were the “only ones.”

V. We might have refused to act as if assent to a set of doctrines IS Christianity and the Christian life. This has been a constant danger for Christians. After the first generation of leaders in the Protestant Reformation, the so-called Lutheran Scholastics created a package of doctrines that defined who were the “true” Lutherans. The package had to be defended as a whole—everything was of equal weight. Anyone who disagreed was denounced as outside the pale of salvation. The attitude led to what some call “second-degree separation”—even if you agree with a fellow Christian on a point of doctrine, if that person will not separate from those who disagree with you, you must separate from him or her also.

For people who understand Christianity as essentially accepting a set of doctrines, the logical end is a rigid emphasis on

hairsplitting doctrinal precision. Christianity certainly rests on fundamental teachings about God and the Christ. But even the devils believe. Christianity is essentially a life that has been transformed by one's acceptance of Christ as Son of God and Savior.

Division is essentially an attitude. So is unity. I pray that these meetings will promote an attitude of understanding and unity. that will glorify the one who prayed that his followers be one.

Endnotes

¹ "Annual Meeting of the American Christian Missionary Society For 1859" *Gospel Advocate* 5, 11 (1859): 333.

² "Reply to O.P. Spiegel's Open Letter," *Christian Standard* 33 (1897): 965-7.

³ "The Reformation for Which We Are Pleading - What is it?" *Lard's Quarterly* 1 (1863): 21.

⁴ *American Christian Review* (1856): 3-4.