

Celebrating Points of Consensus*

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We started with the Bible and the Reformed Tradition. Some of us, like Barton Stone, were fifth generation Americans. Others, like the Campbells and Walter Scott, were immigrants. Together, we dreamed of a great new reform to unite Protestant Christianity on the North American continent. We thought of it as the new Israel.

What do we now share two centuries later as separated brothers and sisters of the Stone-Campbell Movement here in the United States? We will briefly explore our disparate wilderness treks in the American ethos to find points to celebrate our common life.

Our story is a wilderness journey, a narrative with Biblical themes and Biblical vastness. In prayer we dare hope it will find its way to a place of promise. As Bible-carrying immigrants we came to a land of freedom, egalitarianism, manifest destiny, enlightenment, and the immigrant experience. In our trek across two hundred years we ask, are there still points of familial connection? Are there still mutual visions of promise? Is there shared vocation? I will approach the question under the above-named categories of the American experiment. I make no claims that those are the only or even the best routes to our subject.

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Freedom

Our forebears thrived and I suspect delighted in throwing aside authoritarian structures and creeds. They relished their freedom of independent and individual thought. They relished autonomy for congregations. We have had two severe challenges in our freedom movement, one *de facto*, the other *de jure*.

In the national experiment in democracy the survival of that experiment is keyed to the principal *e pluribus unum*, from many, one. We are one nation while being free as separate states, separate ethnic groups, distinct regions. We are diverse in thought and opinion. "It's a free county," we say. The genius of America is that we are radically free and still, somehow, we have a national identity; we are a country. Our movement has not fared so well.

Freedom has, *de facto*, meant freedom to separate. There was no equivalent to a Civil War to preserve the union. Our movement has divided. Our congregations have split. We recite the nomenclature of *de facto* division: one cup, non-Sunday School, Sommerite, pre-millennial, Independents, a cappella, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It sounds sadly like the old nomenclature: Anti-burger Seceder Presbyterian. Our passion for freedom is still intact. Sadly, it has not been balanced by the gift of being free to be different and yet one.

De jure: here I move to an apologetic. In 1968 the Disciples of Christ restructured. A great issue in that process was the question of freedom and autonomy. One point of instruction may be helpful to our dialogue. There has been no compromise of freedom in restructure. There has been no abating of the passion for freedom among Disciples. Congregations are autonomous. Regions are autonomous. Each general unit is autonomous.

What has been attempted is to live the biblical life of covenant. The question is not "pluribus." We are very insistent on, and adept at, protecting ourselves from each other—sometimes too adept. The question is "unum." How do we have life together as one people? Disciples opened the scripture and designed a covenant polity. We have had thirty years now of successes and failures in moving toward being a free people in covenant.

Freedom still stirs deeply in the hearts of all our separated people. But, with it comes the challenge to be one people while maintaining our passion to be free.

Egalitarian

We are an immigrant people immersed in the American ethos. One of the gifts of that ethos is that we are an egalitarian people. That ethos provides an environment in which there is potential for a fuller expression of our reformed commitment to the priesthood of all believers.

Let me lay out the brief fundamentals of our theology of ministry. I suspect that your theology, while stated differently, will rest fairly comfortably with mine.

Our ministry is primarily Christ's ministry. He has chosen to give it, by bequest, through the centuries to the people, the community, that confesses him as Lord. Our ministry is Christ's ministry entrusted to the *laos* (the people).

We have a functional and practical way of structuring this ministry entrusted to us by Christ. Alexander Campbell taught us that not all persons are fit to do all works of ministry. There is an apt ordering by gifts and functions. Campbell studied the scripture and identified evangelists, elders, and deacons.

Recall Campbell's descriptions of ministry. Evangelists do not serve the congregations directly but are sent out by them for the proclamation of the gospel, for making of converts and for the planting of churches. Deacons, like elders, focus their ministries within a congregation. They are called by and accountable to the congregation for their performance in regard to its temporal interests. They serve the functions of treasurers, almoners, stewards, doorkeepers, and messengers. Elders, also called Bishops and Overseers, are authorized by the congregation "to preside over, to instruct, and to edify the community—to feed the church of the Lord with knowledge and understanding—and to watch for their souls as those that must give account to the Lord at his appearing..."¹ Each congregation is to have or to equip local persons qualified by biblical standards to serve as elders. The combined gifts of teaching, shepherding, overseeing and presiding are beyond the qualifications of any one individual. The congregations need to be led by a local group of bishops, a "plurality" of elders. That is our shared heritage of ministry.

We have in common the fact that we did not stay purely with that order. We share the successful emergence of a professional ministry, while still holding our tradition of the ministry of the *laos*. Two opposing views developed simultaneously on adjusting the Campbellian system of ministry to make a place for a professional

ministry. The discussion was a lengthy one and not without heat during the 1890s. J.W. McGarvey and L.B. Wilkes championed the “ruling elder” view. Evangelists, guided by this view, in a sense moved back home as settled preachers who served at the call of the elders and under their strict supervision. The minister was clearly subject to the oversight and rule of the elders.

The opposite view, held by influential journalists such as Isaac Errett and J.H. Garrison, was that the minister is an elder. In fact the minister is the leading elder, a first among equals. Elders advise, serve at the table, and shepherd. The pastor, as elder, carries primary responsibility for teaching and preaching.

Even the emergence of a professional ministry has not severed us from the tap root of the primary ministry of the *laos*. Our pastors and especially our elders re-present to us who all of us are in this community of ministry. We are those who stand and serve in Christ’s place today. Ronald Osborn vividly called to mind our common ministry personified in our eldership. “Any (of us) of mature years can recall the spiritual witness of prayers at the holy table—offered by (those) who earned their living as carpenters, attorneys, salesmen, physicians, farmers, professors, storekeepers, and executives but who, in this office, proved themselves to be faithful stewards of the mysteries of God.”²

Our primary outreach ministry is carried by the whole community as they minister in Christ’s name in the world. Our theologian William Robinson presented pivotal lectures on the ministry of the *laos* at the College of the Bible in 1955. He said, “(Our religion) transfigures and transforms the life of this world, making all things new, investing everything and every action with new significance. Nothing that a man (or woman) who is in Christ, does in daily life—the life of business and politics—can be divested of this significance.”³

We look across the chasms that divide us and we see faithful ministries of those in Christ—be they Disciple, “Independent” or a cappella—and we rejoice together for a priestly people who are signs of what God is doing in establishing a holy commonwealth.

Manifest Destiny

America has been both blessed and cursed with its self-perception as a people of manifest destiny. Our Stone-Campbell manifest destiny is our call by a providential God to bring God’s people

to the unity Christ prayed for through the restoration of New Testament Christianity.

I pass by this very quickly. It is more suited to the dialogue of what divides us. The issue quickly stated is that a cappella congregations and independent congregations have held onto the restoration imperative while, in the view of Disciples, they have lost the passion for ecumenism. On the other hand, Disciples have been sacrificially committed to ecumenism but have judged restoration in relative terms. It was only a nineteenth-century methodology for implementing the ecumenical vision and an ineffective methodology at that. Because it was perceived as merely a method, pattern restoration was discarded. Disciples have continued to dialogue with the New Testament as the foundation for unity that God wills.

Even with this superficial description I find common ground. Among “restorationists” and “ecumenists” there has been a common loss of passion for our original plea—and even a loss of passion for our separate emphases of that dual plea.

The work of this dialogue holds promise as the concept of ecumenism has moved beyond institutional merger and toward a concept of a community of communions. Our work has urgency. In our founders’ day the call was to claim God’s unity from sectarian division. In our day the call is to claim God’s unity across the conservative/liberal chasm. Who better to lead the larger church than the Stone-Campbell tradition which has conservative and liberal streams, but shares a vocation of unity! We have much to talk about on what is our distinctive vocation as we enter the 21st century.

Enlightenment

We have read not only the Bible, but the works of John Locke. We are an enlightenment people. We celebrate not only common heritage but the common way we are formed in the faith as an enlightenment people. Look at the specifics.

*We are a learned people who highly prize education in the receiving and deepening of faith. Luke, with its emphasis on faith through knowledge, is our preferred gospel.

*We are a common sense, practical people. Our faith education does not look for the esoteric nor the metaphysical nor the speculative. We ask does our faith make sense and does it make a difference.

*We are a biblical people. The Word is, for all of us, God's primary avenue of revelation bringing us into relationship with Jesus Christ.

Here I give Dialogue colleagues an update. Disciples have been perceived as a church who often has taken Scripture less seriously than was the case of a cappella Christians and Independents. In that perception the words "My opinion" were placed on the throne of authority displacing the words, "Scripture says."

I would offer both a confessional response and a corrective response to that perception. The work of scholars such as Leander Keck, Eugene Boring, Beverly Gaventa well refutes the claim of no serious attention to the Bible. The foundational work of biblical thought of the Panel of Scholars in the 1960s and the continuing work of the Commission on Theology further exposes the charge as a misperception if not a caricature. Disciples have, at their best, developed more humility about the meaning of Scripture in the light of modern biblical scholarship, rather than devalued the Bible. Our differences are probably hermeneutical rather than the clear line of the Disciples ignoring the Bible while the conservative branches honored the Bible.

The perception does have enough truth to warrant confessional self-examination by Disciples. In con-gregational preaching and teaching leaders have too frequently approached their tasks topically rather than leading the congregation to engage the biblical texts using the tools of interpretation.

In the last 25 years, I have seen a very encouraging shift in Disciples' serious engagement with biblical texts. I would cite two influences while acknowledging others. First is the use of the lectionary in preaching and in local church education. Second is the influence of one individual and a seminal little book written in his early career. That person is Fred Craddock. The title speaks volumes about the shift of focus from the preacher to the text. The title of that book is *As Ones Without Authority*. Craddock is actually representative of the "Bible missionaries" the other branches have sent us. People like Ralph Wilburn, Roy Key, John Bean, Lester Palmer and Eugene Boring, as well as Craddock, have helped win us back to the Bible. Some crossed the line to Disciples from the Churches of Christ. Others came to us, in an earlier era, from Johnson Bible College when there was less distinction between Independents and Disciples.

We are together at another point as an enlightenment, common-sense, practical and rational people. Throughout our history

we are frequently baffled about what to do with our theology of the Holy Spirit. We probably now have consensus on the notion that the Spirit did not go out of business after inspiring the Scripture. After that we are not sure. This is a point of common ground, not to be celebrated, but to be acknowledged as common challenge.

Immigrant Experience

Our heritage is a case study in the immigrant experience. We are northern European, African, Hispanic, Asian. Our founders were predominantly Scots Irish who either experienced first-hand the arrival in the new world or knew it from family lore. Sometimes they over idealized this land—note here Campbell’s views of America as the land of the millennium—a latter-day Israel restored to welcome the triumphant reign of Christ.

Then came the painful disintegration of the ideal. For Campbell and Walter Scott it was the Civil War. For later Irish immigrants to Boston and New York it was poverty, exploitation and ethnic stereotyping. In my native part of the world Scots-Irish too were impoverished, exploited and typecast as dumb hillbillies. Our ethnic minority members experienced even harder realities, namely slavery and racism.

Thank God the immigrant journey doesn’t stop there. The journey goes on to acceptance and the welcoming of ethnic gifts.

The Stone-Campbell Movement is populated now by people who are in various phases of the immigrant journey. Now, we, the separated streams of this company of immigrants, hold in common the challenges of becoming a welcome place for those who continue the struggles of the journey. Together we may now have the maturity and the Christian grace to understand our journey as pilgrimage and to walk beside fellow pilgrims: Caucasians, Hispanics, African Americans, American Asians and indigenous peoples. By sharing the struggles, no matter the individual place in the journey, the church can be a place of hospitality for all our many and diverse gifts. Our shared immigrant experience (our pilgrimage to promise, if you will) helps us in this day of our shared challenge to be ethnically hospitable.

We hold in common our varied treks as three religious communities influenced by the American experiment. We have points of commonality in our responses to what we have received from our cultural context: freedom, egalitarianism, manifest destiny, enlightenment, the immigrant experience. Yet, these have not been

sufficient to hold us in fellowship, to preserve our unity. We must look for a common bond that transcends our ethos, important as it is. The clue of promise for our unity is in the sacramental sharing known and offered through Scripture. The Scripture summons us to a life of reconciliation, hospitality, *koinonia* and covenant. Biblical hospitality is most clearly focused and has most profoundly formed all of us in the Stone-Campbell Movement as a sacramental people. (Choose your own preferred language for “sacramental people.”)

We may never agree on open/closed membership, for example. But, our separated family still shares being moved to tears when one we love is plunged into the watery grave and rises in newness of life. We stand together in awe before the great grace of God. As one, our hearts are lifted to glorify God at that moment when we hear God’s hospitable welcome, “This is my beloved child; I am well pleased.”

With seemingly one heart our separated people still move to one place, a table of ultimate reconciliation and hospitality. It is a table where our one crucified and risen Lord welcomes us and those others he loves whom we often think are dreadfully mistaken. And here we say to each other Alexander Campbell’s words of our yesterday, overheard by the world, “Mutually embraced in the everlasting arms, I embrace you in mine.”⁴ Here we say to each other and the world words from today sung by Hispanic Disciples, “In Cristo, Somos Uno.” In Christ we are one.

Endnotes

¹ *The Christian System: In Reference to the Union of Christians and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity as Plead in the Current Reformation*, 4th ed. (Cincinnati: H. S. Bosworth, 1863), 79.

² “The Eldership among Disciples of Christ: A Historical Case-Study in a ‘Tent-Making Ministry,’” *Midstream* 6 (1967): 99-100.

³ “Completing the Reformation: The Doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers (Lexington, KY: College of the Bible, 1955), 50-51.

⁴ *The Christian System*, 310.