

## Models of Unity – What Model of Unity Should We Accept?\*

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We in the Christian Church/Churches of Christ have talked about Christian Unity from our beginnings. We have tried to tell the world that we have the answer. But all too often our answer was interpreted as “Come join us. Hang our sign over your door and do it the way we do it.” We have said, “We should agree on the *kerygma*, the essence of the gospel, give freedom in the non-essentials and in all things love.” But in our complex world, what is the *kerygma*, and can we live with very different non-essentials?

In 1963 Granville T. Walker, minister of University Christian Church, Fort Worth, Texas, addressed the International Convention using Joshua 3:1-6 as his text. He was encouraging the Disciples to accept restructure. He said, “Israel had never crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land before. It was to their shame that they had not done so, but they were afraid. Joshua and Caleb had said, ‘Let us go up and take the land; we can surely do it for God will be with us.’”

The great Restoration Movement that called for the unity of Christ’s church has divided twice. Worse yet, we were comfortable with the divisions. Each group knew the others were part of their great heritage, that unity was our divine calling, but was satisfied to be apart from the other two because “We are right,” and they were in error. The Restoration Forum began in 1984 and has served to reacquaint the Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. The Stone-Campbell Dialogue has brought all three groups into a long-overdue dialogue. What model of unity would serve to unite us?

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Regretfully we have not been this way before. The question is, “Do we have the faith in Jesus to move forward toward unity?” And what would “unity” look like?

Before we go further we need to take a look at the Biblical church of which we are a part. We are the called-out ones, the redeemed, the saved. None other than God’s son Jesus has called us to Himself and made us the children of God. As those whom He has reconciled to Himself, we have become the Body of Christ, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many” (1 Cor. 12-14). So we are part of that sacred body, each gifted for the work of that body. Christ is the head of His church (Eph. 1:22, 4:15, 5:23). The Church is the bride of the Christ (2 Cor. 11:2, Rev. 19:7). All of this is to say that the church is God’s chosen instrument to reconcile the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:19). We are His chosen people and we are to manifest the unity that we find between the Father and the Son (John 17:21). This unity is an imperative, “that the world might be one.”

But how have we shaped the church as it has moved down through the centuries? Our forefathers in the Restoration Movement of the early nineteenth century found themselves a part of a very divided Christendom. The Campbell’s native Ireland and Scotland were no exception. Thomas Campbell was part of the Old Light, Anti-burser, Succeder Presbyterian Church. Each of these clarifying names had its counterpart. When Campbell moved to America he was appalled at the divisions within the church of Jesus Christ. In his basic statement calling for Christian unity, the *Declaration and Address*, Campbell spoke of the “heinous nature, and pernicious tendency of religious controversy among Christians,” and soundly condemned these divisions.

The first proposition of Declaration and Address speaks to the unity of the church: “That the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else, as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.”

The means to this God-given unity was a return to the sacred scriptures and in particular the New Testament. Man-made doctrines were obstacles to this unity. The Campbells and others began a diligent

search of the New Testament to find the faith and practice of the church of the apostles. Slogans were useful in stating their case. "In faith unity, in opinions liberty, and in all things love." "The Bible only, makes Christians only." "We are not the only Christians, but Christians only." The *faith*, the *essentials*, were seen in the sermons of the apostles in the book of Acts.

Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah (Acts 2:16), and in Him the Old Testament Scriptures have been fulfilled. Jesus was accredited by God with "mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst" (Acts 2:22). Jesus was crucified for our sin, buried and raised on the third day (Acts 2:23-24). This same Jesus was proclaimed by God as both Lord and Christ (2:36) and is coming again to claim His own. Those who believe in Him must repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus to receive the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38, 3:19-21). The New Testament shows us that the early church practiced two *ordinances*, namely Christian Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The plea was for all Christians to embrace this simple gospel and to find unity. Restoring the faith of the early church was not an end in itself but a means to Christian unity.

Some of us here from the Christian Churches/ Churches of Christ have been in dialogue with the brethren from the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana. Their heritage is in the Holiness Movement. They would be in harmony with us in the statement of the Gospel as the basis of Christian unity, but they would insist that holiness be a part of that gospel. Gilbert Stafford of Anderson University in an unpublished paper, "Full Communion," written in October of 2002 writes, "But beyond this unity by default is the *active experience of unity made possible by entire sanctification*, or the perfection of love (i.e., the wholehearted love of God, of God's people, and of God's world)." Thomas Campbell had spoken of making "manifest the same by our tempers and conduct." All of us need to walk the walk while talking the talk. I see our brethren of the Church of God, Anderson underscoring an important lesson for all of us. We need to embrace Biblical holiness to be faithful Christians.

For us to proceed in our discussion we need to place our understanding and practice of church within the larger Christian picture. Certainly the church for our peoples of the Stone-Campbell movement has taken a different shape than say the Roman Catholic Church or a Protestant denomination that is fully institutionalized. I am

indebted to Avery Dulles for his study, *Models of the Church*. Dulles defines churches as Institution, Mystical Communion, Sacrament, Herald, Servant, etc.<sup>1</sup>

In reading his definitions of the various churches, I believe the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, the Churches of Christ and, to a great extent, the Disciples of Christ fall into the definition of Herald. We are ‘great commission’ people. Evangelism and missions have been very important to us and have shaped us as a people. The worship services focus on preaching. Our people refer to their ministers as “the preacher” more than they do “pastor.” The *word* is primary and *ordinance* secondary. Faith and proclamation have become more important than interpersonal relations and mystical communion. “This model is *kerygmatic*, for it looks upon the Church as a herald—one who receives an official message with the commission to pass it on.”<sup>2</sup> Dulles sees Karl Barth as the chief proponent of this model of the church. “The Church is the congregation that is gathered together by the word—a word that ceaselessly summons it to repentance and reform.”<sup>3</sup> Dulles quotes Hans Kung:

*Ekklesia*, like “congregation,” means both the actual *process of congregating* and the *congregated community* itself: The former should not be overlooked. An *ekklesia* is not something that is formed and founded once and for all and remains unchanged; it becomes an *ekklesia* by the fact of a repeated concrete event, people coming together and congregating, in particular congregating for the purpose of worshipping God. The concrete congregation is the actual manifestation, the representation, indeed the realization of the New Testament community.<sup>4</sup>

The Herald model of the church differs greatly from the Institutional model in that each congregation sees itself as the church in that particular place. Our congregations do not refer to “The Church, Anderson, or Indianapolis.” This is not to say that our local autonomy or our independence is great theology. Many of our people have great reservations about our talks with the Church of God, Anderson, or with the Disciples of Christ because they fear the “M” word. But how can merger take place when there is no one nor a means to accomplish this with autonomous congregations?

Some of us have problems with the Herald model because this model gives a lower priority to the New Testament ordinances, or sacraments of Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper. Our "low church" understanding of worship is in part due to our frontier origins and in part to our anti-Roman bias. The Sacramental model of the Church does not fit us either because of our strong emphasis on being the Herald. But the immersion of believers and the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper are central to all three groups in our dialogue. Our open communion position allows us to extend table unity to all those confessing Christ as Lord. But our closed membership position which insists on the immersion of believers for church membership is a more volatile issue when we talk unity with others. These ordinances must be part of our faith statement as we consider who we are. But the Herald model is still a good working picture of who we are as *church* in this day and time.

What would unity for our three kindred groups look like? Rather than try to reinvent the wheel, allow me to use the prior work of Harding Meyer, "That All May Be One."<sup>5</sup> Meyer shows us the models of unity that have been used in the Ecumenical movement. Rather than develop new models I suggest that we look at the models that have been used by others.

Because our current understanding of Church is that of the Herald model, it is easier to move forward in the effort to design a model of unity. Which one of the models shown by Meyer is most appropriate for our work? The first, *Full Corporate Unity*, is not possible for those who work out of the Herald model of the church. There is no way for the congregations to move in this direction. Nor is there a desire to see unity as merger.

The second model that Meyer discusses is the *Cooperative-Federal Model*.<sup>6</sup> It is most interesting to see that Meyer traces this model back to the Great Awakening and names Thomas Campbell and the *Declaration and Address*.<sup>7</sup> Meyer quotes the Edinburgh Conference which describes "cooperative action."

The unity which we seek may be conceived of as a confederation or alliance of Churches for cooperative action. In all areas where common purposes and tasks exist, such action is already widely possible without violation of conscience. Church "federation" is the most common expression of such unity, and one of the most hopeful paths to

understanding and brotherly relations. We believe federation, so construed, is a promising approach to more complete forms of unity . . . We recognize that federations for cooperative action should not be construed as examples of “federal union...” We are agreed that cooperative action between Churches unable to achieve intercommunion or to look towards corporate union and compelled by fidelity to conscience to remain separate bodies with separate loyalties, is not our final goal, since cooperative action in itself fails to manifest to the world the true character of the Church as one community of faith and worship as well as of service.<sup>8</sup>

This model has two characteristics. The first is *cooperative action*. To make the unity most meaningful the areas of cooperative action need to be comprehensive. The unity must be seen in many areas, not just one or two areas. The second, this cooperative action

can become effective within the *continuing independence* of the churches, not only in their legal form but also in their special features of confession. However this communion may and must find structural form, these structures are of such a kind that they do not impair or cancel but rather preserve and protect the liturgical, theological- confessional, and constitutional uniqueness and identity of the individual churches. Here is the second typical characteristic of this basic model, and the concepts *federation* or *federal* refer to it... “the related Churches remain clearly distinct from one another in their *own* eyes and in the eyes of those who look at them from without. They still function as separate bodies. Their individual history can still be written.”<sup>9</sup>

Meyer discusses the weakness of this model which is really not a true unity. He asks,

does the ‘federal’ form of this model of union, that is, the *continuing independence and uniqueness of the churches*, mean that as far as the relation of churches one with another is concerned, there is no desire for a closer interecclesiastical communion, and the present side-by-side existence of church should be left as it is? Or is this form of

union proposed out of the desire to protect differences that are acknowledged to be legitimate and in this way conform to the nature of ecclesiastical communion?<sup>10</sup>

I do not see the people of our three groups having the necessary burning will to accept this model. Nor do we have the structures with which to make the necessary commitments to make it happen. Our peoples would have a difficult time separating “structural form” and “merger.”

The third model of unity Meyer describes is that of *Mutual Recognition* or of *intercommunion* and says,

A second aspect of Church unity is commonly indicated by the term “intercommunion.” This is the fullest expression of a mutual recognition between two or more Churches. Such recognition is also manifested in the exchange of membership and ministrations. We regard sacramental intercommunion as a necessary part of any satisfactory Church unity. Such intercommunion, as between two or more churches, implies that all concerned are true Churches, or true branches of the one Church.<sup>11</sup>

The Edinburgh Conference, in describing this model, is correct in pointing out that for there to be “intercommunion” there has to be a “likeness of faith in confession,” in “worship,” “in doctrine and the administration of the sacraments,” and in the “ministries.” The focus of this model is the *relation of the churches to one another*. The churches involved are to examine the differences that have divided them with the aim of not necessarily resolving them, but rather to “depriv[e] them of their church-dividing component.”<sup>12</sup> Also in this model the churches continue both their identity and their independence. Unity and diversity are held in purposeful tension. Working together in witness and mission is imperative.<sup>13</sup> This fits well with churches working out of the Herald model. Our three groups have a common heritage and a common “polar star.” Can we mutually accept and recognize one another as well as work together?

Much of the deep bitterness that once existed between our separate groups has gone to the grave with those who bore the deep scars incurred during our separations from each other. But there is still much distrust and fear on the part of all three groups toward one

another. Unity would not come easily, but it is the imperative of none other than the Lord of the church! The Preamble for the Consensus Statement of Faith agreed to by members of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and members of the Church of God, Anderson, speaks to this suggested model of unity named *Intercommunion*:

We as two church movements have much with which to enrich each other. We have begun to learn from each other and must continue to benefit by building meaningful relationships. While we hold in common the lordship of Jesus Christ, we do not need to arrive at full consensus on doctrinal issues in order to be open to each other, influenced by each other, genuinely valuing and loving each other, and learning to minister with each other.<sup>14</sup>

I propose the following Consensus of Faith Statement that embraces the “faith,” the *kerygma* of the apostles, and is consistent with our restoration heritage.

*We Believe*

1. That Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, that He was crucified for our sins, was buried, and raised on the third day, seen of many witnesses, ascended to the Father and is coming again to judge the living and the dead. This same Jesus is Lord of Lords and King of Kings.
2. That there is salvation in no other name save Jesus. That those who believe in Him, repent of their sins, confess Him as Lord and Savior and are baptized by immersion which always involves the forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Spirit, and have been saved by grace through faith.
3. That we are called to partake of the Lord’s Supper each week.
4. That the Bible is the inspired word of God, and that the New Testament is the only authority for Christian faith and practice.

5. That God is the maker of heaven and earth, and hold to the covenant of love that binds us to God and to one another.
6. That we are to give obedience to the Great Commission, practice the Great Commandment and the Second commandment and to practice Biblical morality.

I believe that our three groups can come close to agreement on the Faith, the essentials as stated above. But when it comes to the great social issues of our day, we will have a greater problem. Each group continues to show concern for the poor, the children and the elderly. This is heeding the call of the eighth century Old Testament prophets. We each oppose racism. Some will have problems with the role of women, but I believe those opposed to women in pulpit ministry will accept those who include them in this role. The one issue that the Churches of Christ, Christian Churches/ Churches of Christ and the large majority of Disciples will not accept is condoning the practice of homosexuality whether for membership or for formal ministry. I Corinthians 5 and 6 make this issue a test of fellowship. To us, condoning the practice of homosexuality would violate Biblical authority and holiness. Another big issue would be the condoning of abortion. We have not been this way before. Can we in the words of Joshua and Caleb, "Go and take the land; we can surely do it for God will be with us." Do we trust Jesus, the Lord of the Church, to lead us to unity?

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 79. The quotation of Hans Küng is from *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward: 1968), 84.

<sup>5</sup> Harding Meyer, *That All May Be One, Perceptions and Models of Ecumenicity* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.82.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 83, quoting Angus Dun, *The Meanings of Unity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), 35.

<sup>10</sup> *That All May Be One*, 87

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 89-92.

<sup>14</sup> The full “Consensus Statement” may be found at <http://www.christianchronicler.com/consensus.html>.