

Models of Unity – A Changing Landscape

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In the meeting of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue in June 2002, I presented a paper on the nature of the unity we seek as Disciples of Christ within the ecumenical movement. My basic point in that presentation was that our understandings of the nature of the unity we seek have shifted in recent years — moving from an emphasis upon structural and institutional unity to one that finds its focus in relationships and mission centered in Jesus Christ. Let me lift up five points identified in that presentation that summarize key understandings of Christian unity today:

1. The starting point in all our ecumenical work and involvements is that our unity is in Jesus Christ, not in structures or institutions or theological agreement—but in the grace and love of God offered to us and to the world in Jesus Christ.

2. Christian unity is not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world and its salvation. Unity stands as a witness before our divided society and world to the power of God's love to reconcile all things through Christ to himself (Colossians 1:20).

3. As Disciples, our understanding of unity begins at the Table where we are made one in Christ; and from the Table, we are called to witness to the message of reconciliation, welcome, and hospitality that

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we have experienced in our being welcomed, and sharing the bread and the cup. Unity is first-of-all sacramental, not organizational.

4. Unity does not mean uniformity—neither in belief, nor in practice. It is not based upon our agreement as Christians, but upon our shared life in the Risen Christ. We are seeking oneness in Christ, not sameness in our theology, or worship, or work practices.

5. Unity is more relational than institutional. (This is a new insight for the ecumenical movement.) Christian unity finds its life and reality in relationships as we serve together, as we engage in mission together, and as we worship and pray together, especially in sharing the Lord’s Supper together. Unity does not begin with plans of union or major statements of theological consensus; rather unity is known as we engage in deepening relationships with other Christians and other churches in the lived experience of worship, confessing the faith, addressing issues of social justice and peace together.

Models Old and New

The topic of “models of unity” has been a part of our history as Disciples since our earliest days. The goal of unity and union has never been denied—rather, the question has continued to be, “What kind of unity are we seeking? And, how is to be achieved?”

Responding to this basic concern, Barton W. Stone saw unity not coming from theological argument or agreement, but from the practice of love and trust centered in Jesus Christ. For Stone, there was no single or precise pattern of union presented in the Bible; rather, we are to go to the Scriptures seeking the same spirit and love of Christ. Stone believed that an underlying unity already exists among the followers of Christ, and the task of unity is to recognize that gift which is given by God in Jesus Christ. In seeking the character of God reflected in Jesus, Christians can become partakers of this divine nature and manifest the divine Spirit of love to one another as they cooperate in the work of redemption. “By becoming co-workers with the Father and the Son in the work of redemption, believers become one with one another.”¹

Barton Stone often spoke of four types (or kinds) of union: *book union*, *head union*, *water union*, and *fire union*. Book union was based upon an authoritative creed, confession of faith or church discipline. Head union was based upon a common opinion,

and Stone warned that this approach was characteristic of many who denounced creeds and made the Bible their creed. He warned that to make interpretations of the Bible a system of salvation is equally wrong. Water union was based upon baptism by immersion of believers; if made the primary criteria of faith, said Stone, immersion can become sectarian. These three concepts of union Stone rejected in favor of the fourth: the union of fire or the Spirit. This is the perfect union achieved not by the agreement of human opinion but faith in our “Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners, and by a cheerful obedience to all his known commands.” The road to union is the road toward the Lordship of Christ.²

Disciples continue to embrace much of the intent and spirit of Stone’s vision of achieving true unity based upon fire union as the model. Indeed, I believe the five basic understandings and convictions outlined above in the introduction to this paper reflect the same direction and vision as Stone was expressing in the early 19th century.

Today, Disciples continue to explore the shape of unity not only in relation to our many experiences and efforts in manifesting our oneness in Christ with other Christians, but also within the broader understanding of the vision of unity that comes to us from our involvements in the national and global ecumenical movement. It is important for us, therefore, to examine appropriate models for Christian unity afresh as we look to the new era in our life as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and in our relationships with other churches and Christians.

It is my conviction that as our understanding of the goal of unity changed in recent years, so too our understanding of the model of Christian unity has expanded and shifted. A foundational definition of the commonly accepted vision of the goal of unity continues to be the concept that was articulated at the 3rd Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961 at New Delhi:

We believe that the unity which is both God’s will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Savior are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time

are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.³

This statement identifies several key elements that Disciples would affirm as essential to our quest for visible unity today. These elements include: 1) a commitment to a unity that is both local and universal—“all in each place” and “in all places and ages”; 2) a unity whose character is intense and intimate—“one fully committed fellowship”; 3) a unity in which the Churches share deeply the good gifts of God—“one apostolic faith . . . one gospel . . . one bread . . . joining in common prayer”; and 4) a unity which enables the Church to be engaged in common mission in the name of Christ.

Over the years, Disciples have sought to express our unity with other Christians through various models and approaches: *organic/visible* unity which would be realized in church union; engagement in councils of churches (*conciliar ecumenism*); programs and organizations committed to particular social justice ministries or *cooperation in mission* (e.g., Church World Service, Habitat for Humanity, Church Women United, local food banks, etc.); and, joining in efforts to realize and express our *spiritual unity* through common worship, prayer, and fellowship. Most of these initiatives and approaches continue—though each has taken on new dynamics and (in some cases) revised its basic objectives and goals. For example, the goal of most “church union conversations” today has shifted from a structural model to that of *full communion* (which is understood to be a unity built upon formal relationships that manifest oneness in and through common mission, witness, service, worship and the reconciliation of ordained ministries).

Benchmarks for the Way Ahead

The point I would want to make in this presentation is: *Whatever “model of unity” or whatever approach we take to Christian unity in this new era of the 21st century, there should be identifiable marks of faithfulness in that quest to embody God’s gift of oneness in Christ.*

Quoting from the *Message from the 7th Consultation of United and Uniting Churches* in Driebergen, The Netherlands, on September 11- 19, 2002 ,

Participants in the consultation agreed that the model of unity, if it is to deserve such a label, must be **tangible enough** to make a witness to the world, **intense enough** that those in it recognized their responsibility for one another, **costly enough** that churches are changed as a result of being in it, and **intentional enough** that the body of Christ is renewed through the sharing of gifts. We also agree, however, that no one model guarantees (or denies) such an outcome. The new models remind us to look for partners in unexpected places and to expect to be surprised by what God will do in our methods.⁴

In addition to these benchmarks related to our involvements in seeking unity, I would also identify four insights and affirmations from that *message* that provide a broader framework for our discussion of appropriate models of unity for the present (and changing) situation. These include:

- a. Any model of authentic unity must directly address the issues that divide the human family in our particular settings (e.g., combating racism and white privilege here in the United States).
- b. Any model of authentic unity must incarnate the gospel in each place, even as it transcends every culture.
- c. Unity demands such qualities as mutual trust, accountability, and responsibility. (One way to express this element of our life together in unity is found in the Lutheran-Reformed “Full Communion Agreement” when it calls for “mutual affirmation and mutual admonition.”)
- d. The model of unity should seek to witness to the interrelatedness of unity, mission, and identity. Disciples remain convinced that disunity is an impediment to mission, and that the very fact of being united in one body is already a witness to the reconciling power of God.

As the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) continues to be in dialogue with the Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, we look forward to exploring new models and new approaches to expressing our unity in Christ that will both challenge us as a church and open us to new occasions of God's grace. I look forward to the discussion in our Dialogue session around the topic of "models of unity," hoping that together we might identify benchmarks that will move us into God's future with greater faithfulness and obedience to the prayer of Jesus in John 17:21, "that all may be one....so that the world may believe.

Endnotes

¹ Barton Stone, quoted in William Garrett West, *Barton Warren Stone: Early American Advocate of Christian Unity* (Nashville: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1954), 123.

² Stone cited in Paul A. Crow, Jr., "The Anatomy of a Nineteenth Century United Church," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 18 (1983): pp. 16-17.

³ See the full statement at <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/1961-new-delhi/new-delhi-statement-on-unity>

⁴ See the full statement at : <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/vii-united-and-uniting-churches/message-from-the-7th-international-consultation-of-united-and-uniting-churches-driebergen-the-netherlands-2002>.