

# *Call to Unity*

RESOURCING THE CHURCH FOR ECUMENICAL MINISTRY

**Issue 10 • October 2009**



Council On  
Christian Unity

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**Identity, Spirituality and Conviction:  
Our Ecumenical Vocation**



## FROM THE EDITOR

### A Mixed Bag

This issue of *Call to Unity* brings together a collection of lectures and addresses, sermons and a bible study, each focused upon the theme of understanding the call to Christian unity in the 21st century context. Many of the articles are focused upon the identity of the Disciples of Christ—looking not only to the past to provide meaning, but also to the present and future as we seek to live faithfully and to bring an authentic and relevant voice to the ecumenical witness of the church in these times.

The **25th Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity**, delivered by Michael Kinnamon, issues a clarion call to the Disciples to reclaim unity as “our heart,” and to live as “a community of those who have received God’s holy hospitality and, therefore, offer it to others, especially those whom the world excludes.”

In a series of three lectures to the **2009 General Assembly** of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), D. Newell Williams offered a fresh historical review of the spirituality of the Stone-Campbell Movement, concluding that “the fundamental ingredient of Christian character is humility. And, that humility allows for genuine community in which we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.”

The **10th Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture on Christian Unity**, given by John H. Thomas, underscores a key issue for ecumenism today: “The ecumenical movement does far more than invite us into friendship with the friendly. It calls us into relationship with those who, to us, feel wholly other, strange, alien and at times even hostile—namely, the friends we didn’t choose.”

In his **sermon to the 2009 Conference on “Churches responding to the challenges of racism**, Sam Kobia offers a fresh look at the parable of the Good Samaritan. He declares, “The truth is that the neighbor and the stranger are one. A commitment to unity overwhelms our differences.”

The **2009 Watkins Lecture** at National City Christian Church, also given by Michael Kinnamon, focuses on a new understanding the Disciples of Christ as “The People of the Paradox”—where Disciples are ‘both-and people’ in an ‘either-or world.’

Andy Mangum, in a **sermon at the opening ecumenical service of the Ulster Project** in Arlington, Texas, proclaimed, “Jesus isn’t fixin’ to make us all one. It’s done. Christ has made it so.”

And finally, in a **bible study on Zechariah 3**, Jim McGrath presents this text as a “coded message” for unity in the 21st century—not only for unity as Christians, but “making room under the great tent of the Lord for all believers of all faiths.”

**A mixed bag...and yet**, taken together, this collection of articles brings to focus central themes related to our calling to unity as Disciples as we look to the future: *identity*, *spirituality*, and *conviction*. It’s our ecumenical vocation.

Robert K. Welsh

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# **Call to Unity**

## **Resourcing the Church for Ecumenical Ministry**

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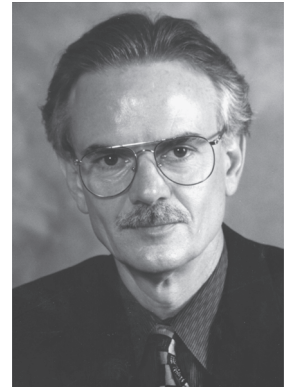
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# Celebrating Our History as a Movement for Unity

25TH PETER AINSLIE LECTURE ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

Michael Kinnamon



DR. MICHAEL KINNAMON, *General Secretary of the National Council of Churches*, presented this address at the Council on Christian Unity/Disciples Historical Society Dinner in Indianapolis, August 1, 2009.

I love the National Council of Churches, but it is always great to be at home! My thanks to Robert and the Council on Christian Unity, and Glenn and the Historical Society, for inviting me, and to all of you for supporting these defining ministries of the church. May God use our time together to build up the body in love.

This is a year for anniversaries. In April, the same week I turned 60, Katherine and I celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary. We did so by going to see my beloved Cubs in spring training—but I won't tell you what year this is for them! I am also pleased to note that 2009 marks the 25th year since I first beat Robert Welsh in squash, but who's counting.

Perhaps more significantly (at least to some people), this is, as you know, the bicentenary of the "Declaration and Address," Thomas Campbell's great call to the church to recognize that it is (say it with me) "essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one;" and, before we meet again in assembly, we will celebrate 100 years of the Council on Christian Unity, started by Peter Ainslie. Ainslie proposed the idea of a "council on Christian union," as he then called it, in his presidential address to the American Christian Missionary Society in January of 1910—because, as he put it, the church in its essence is not only apostolic (i.e., missionary), it also is one body and, therefore, should not only have a mission society but a unity council.

Listen to his language from the presidential

address: "I beg that you will pardon me if I speak too frankly, but these are serious times, and soft words will not suffice. If I mistake not, the Disciples of Christ are facing the most critical period in their history... [because] they drift from their original principles into wreckage and crystallization." Any of this sound familiar? "These conditions," Ainslie continued, "must not be smoothed over with self-laudatory sentences and self-congratulatory reports"—for they have to do with our fundamental identity."

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*Listen to Ainslie's language from the presidential address: "I beg that you will pardon me if I speak too frankly, but these are serious times, and soft words will not suffice."*

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"I have traveled," he told the Society, "throughout the church on your behalf and have discovered that few in our membership ('at most 25%') know anything at all about what the [special] mission of the disciples is." (Any of this sound familiar?) "They know," he says, "that in the New Testament baptism is by immersion; but if that's all they know, they may as well be Baptists! They know that the Bible speaks of elders and deacons; but if that's all they know, they may as well be Presbyterians! They know that in the New Testament church government is congregational; but if that's all they know, they may as well be Congregationalists!"

An ecumenical dinner is probably not the appropriate time to speak ill of Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists (let alone the UCC!), but you get his point: We are Disciples of Christ, a people, a movement, a brother/sisterhood whose larger

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*The pursuit of justice is made infinitely more hazardous and difficult,  
perhaps even impossible, when the church is divided...*

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loyalty, to paraphrase Ainslie, is so fully given to the personality of Jesus Christ that we seek to remove all barriers to communion with all persons who also bear his name. Ainslie's basic message is simple: We are doing lots of good things, but we are in grave danger of forgetting who we are, grave danger of losing track of the being that gives focus and coherence to all of our varied activity. Any of this sound familiar?!

If you hear urgency in Ainslie's words, and in mine, then we are in good company. How about Barton Stone: "If we oppose the union of believers, we oppose directly the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, the spirit of piety, and the salvation of the world"—because, you see, the gospel of God's amazing grace must be embodied, not just proclaimed. We usually remember the first proposition from Campbell's "Declaration and Address" (at least you remembered it), but how about the tenth: Division among Christ's followers is "antichristian," "antisciptural," and "antinatural"—because it sets people in opposition when our deepest obligation is to love one another as Christ has loved us. Such division, writes Campbell, has "rent and ruined the church of God."

One hundred years later, Ainslie drew the logical conclusion: "Take Christian unity out of the message of the Disciples," he once wrote, "and [our] existence only adds to the enormity of the sin of division by making another division." As I see it, it is this passion for unity, this sense of distinctive mandate, this readiness to die for the sake of our calling, that has given vigor to our evangelism, an edge to our social witness, and particular content to our worship and preaching. And, as in Ainslie's day, we are in grave danger of losing it. These are serious times and soft words will not suffice.

Last week, I was working on a revision of my anthology of the ecumenical movement, reading so many speeches and essays that they began to blur—except one from Archbishop Tutu. Listen to his language, forged in the crucible of apartheid: "A united church is not an optional extra. A united church is indispensable for the salvation of God's world." (Heard that before?) "[For] we can be safe only together. We can be prosperous only together.

We can survive only together. We can be human only together." Church unity, he notes, has often been dismissed as ecclesiological tinkering. Critics say that it is time to stop wasting energy on internal matters and get on with the business of making the world more hospitable for human beings. But our experience, he reports, is that the "pursuit [of justice] is made infinitely more hazardous and difficult, perhaps even impossible, when the church is divided. . . . Apartheid is too strong for a divided church."

Stone and Campbell and Ainslie would have understood his urgency. These are serious times and soft words will not suffice!

Let me relate all of this for a moment to my own work at the NCC. The greatest challenge, as I see it, is to help the churches recognize that they *are* a council of the churches. I keep insisting, until my friends here are sick of me saying it, that the NCC is not an organization they have joined; it is a covenant they have made before God with 34 other communions to manifest the oneness that is our gift—not our achievement, but our gift—in Christ.

To put it in terms we were just using, the essence of the Council is not what the churches *do* together but what they *are* together. To be in covenant relationship with Orthodox churches and Historic Peace churches and African American churches and recent-immigrant churches as well as mainline churches is now part of their identity, not an optional organizational membership that can be demoted on the list of priorities in lean times.

At our best, Disciples have understood—in our bones, at our core—that church unity is not just another programmatic emphasis but the key to all our programming. At our best, we have claimed as our distinctive purpose to make this known in the wider church. But in recent years, if I'm not mistaken, we have begun to think of ourselves more and more as simply another denomination. And without this particular sense of calling to promote the visible unity of Christ's body, it is no wonder that we find ourselves searching for direction and purpose—brand Z on a shelf that already has A through Y, but without the historical depth of



Presbyterians or the missional focus of Mennonites or the ethnic identity of Lutherans or the liturgical cohesion of Episcopalians. These are serious times and soft words will not suffice!

Speaking now for myself, and from my heart, I am not much interested in our being a better little church than other little churches. That, after all, only contributes to the sin of division. I am passionately committed, however, to our being a community of distinctive purpose within the church catholic.

There is, of course, an obvious irony in stressing that we are Disciples while also emphasizing our ecumenical mandate. But I hope you agree that this irony is the key to who we are. At our best, we have been a very rare thing: a community with a passionate sense of particular identity that isn't sectarian because its particular identity is to be a healer of the universal church! And if we have lost this, then not only we but the wider church are impoverished.

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*The NCC is not an organization they  
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they have made before God.*

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Now let me name some good news. I find it very encouraging that Sharon Watkins is making such prominent use of the Vision Team's Identity Statement. Let me read both of its sentences, not just the one we have been hearing in this assembly: "We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us." Such welcome is not just a practice, it is an identity. Instead of defining ourselves over against others, drawing lines to keep our identity secure by keeping others out, we define ourselves as a community of those who have received God's holy hospitality and, therefore, offer it to others, especially those whom the world excludes. My God, what a thing to be!

Why speak of "wholeness" rather than "unity"? Well, unfortunately, despite its different use in scripture, unity has come to be associated, for many people, with institutional merger, with a suppression of diversity, even with force or coercion. Tyrants can create monolithic "unities" which we want no part

of. So perhaps a new generation will hear in the word wholeness what Campbell and Ainslie heard in the word unity—a sense of diverse community of which one part cannot say to another "I have no need of you" because each is enriched by the other.

Beyond that, the language of wholeness may signal the intimate connection between our reconciliation as Christians and the promise of shalom for the entire human family. This is a key to the entire ecumenical movement: the conviction that point through the way we live with one another to God's will for the whole creation.

Our Disciples tradition has borne witness to this in the number of prominent unity advocates who were also ardent peacemakers, even pacifists—including Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, Raccoon John Smith, Robert Richardson, Moses Lard, Alexander Proctor, David Lipscomb, J.W. McGarvey, Charles Clayton Morrison, Harold Fey, Kirby Page, William Robinson, T.J. Liggett . . . And the one who linked unity and peace most directly, Peter Ainslie. War, as Ainslie saw it, is the ultimate church division, and church unity is the ultimate witness to peace. *Both* the church's endorsement of state-sponsored violence *and* its acquiescence to fractures caused by culture, race, or ideology show just how far Christians have strayed from the mind-set of the New Testament. "As wearers of the name 'Christians only,'" thundered Ainslie in his presidential address, "hostility to war should be as deeply rooted in our conscience as it is in the conscience of our Quaker brethren!"

Or, to put it another way, a church that claims an ecumenical identity—a church that claims to be a movement for wholeness—should have no problem affirming a resolution that names "opposition to war as a expression of Christian unity." I voted in favor of referral this year and will contribute, if asked, to the study process. But *in two years* we had better be able to say to the world that for us unity and peace go hand in hand. We are Disciples *of Christ*, which means not only claiming those who bear his name as sisters and brothers, it means making secondary all allegiances other than our allegiance to him. The flag is *not* more important to us than the cross! These are serious times and soft words will not suffice.

What must we do to be a viable movement for wholeness? For one thing, model such wholeness in our own life—which is why the anti-racism emphasis

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is so important. Second, welcome those excluded by society—which is why our growing openness to persons who are gay and lesbian is so important. Third, teach this vision to the next generation—which is why Robert’s concern for young adult ecumenism is so important. And fourth, support those parts of the church that lift up this identity—which is why your presence here tonight is so important. In these lean times, the Quakers in the NCC have cut back on lots of things, but not on their peace ministries, because that would be to cut out their heart. So why would we whittle away at the Council on Christian Unity as if it were an optional program to be treated like all the rest? What is *our*

heart, if not this?! Say it with me: These are serious times and soft words will not suffice.

I will end with a nod toward our vigil later this evening. Health care reform was never going to be easy. And now that critics are coming out of the woodwork is precisely the time to stand up and be counted. In the same way, church unity was never going to be easy. And now that the ecumenical movement is experiencing tough sledding is precisely the time for Disciples to stand up and be counted, to reaffirm to ourselves and the world that the reconciliation of those who were estranged is not only our calling and identity, it is the gospel. Thanks be to God!





# Historical Reflections on Stone-Campbell Spirituality

In Recognition of the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of  
Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*

D. Newell Williams

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DR. D. NEWELL WILLIAMS is President of Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, Texas, and Professor of Modern and American Church History. For the past two years he has served as Moderator of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington County, Pennsylvania*, published in September 1809, along with the *Last Will and Testament of Springfield Presbytery*, published in June 1804, is recognized as a charter document of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Key to understanding the vibrant hope for Christian unity that these documents express is the spirituality of the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Likewise, the unfortunate history of divisions within the Stone-Campbell Movement cannot be understood apart from spirituality; in this case, distortions of the spirituality of the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

Lest you think that you might have a hard time grasping Stone-Campbell spirituality and its distortions, I offer a simple definition of spirituality: Spirituality is our understanding and practice of relationship with God. I address three questions to individuals and groups in the history of Christianity to tease out their understanding and practice of relationship with God. These are the questions: What is sin and what are its consequences? What is salvation and what are its consequences? And, how does one get from sin to salvation, and are there side effects? When one asks these questions of the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement one gets a coherent set of answers which disclose their spirituality—their understanding and practice of relationship with God.

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*Key to understanding the vibrant hope for Christian unity that these documents express is the spirituality of the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement.*

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Before engaging the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement with these questions, I want to say just a word about their religious background. Barton Stone, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and Walter Scott were Presbyterians from different parts of the world. Stone was from the southern United States, the Campbells were immigrants from Northern Ireland, and Scott was an immigrant from Scotland. Presbyterians shared a spiritual tradition profoundly shaped by the Reformed Tradition, one of the major Christian traditions to emerge out of the sixteenth century reformations of Western Christianity. The theologian most identified with the Reformed tradition, John Calvin, whose personal motto was “the heart aflame,” was born in 1509. Three hundred years later, Thomas Campbell, standing squarely in the Reformed tradition, would pen his *Declaration and Address* in response to a scandal endemic to the Reformed tradition, the scandal of division among Christians. But I am getting ahead of myself.

## Founding Spirituality

### *What is sin?*

Sin for the founding generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement was the failure to be in love with God. This definition implies something more

than the statement that sin is the failure to love God. To be in love is to be attracted, to find delight in the object of one's love. We speak of falling in love, for we do not experience this type of love as a matter of choosing. One might will to act toward God in a loving manner out of gratitude for some gift received or—more likely—to merit some future favor, but this is a far cry from being *in love* with God. To be in love with God is to love God for who God is. The New England theologian Joseph Bellamy illustrated this distinction as follows: “If I feel a sort of respect to one of my neighbors, who is very kind to me, and either do not know what sort of man he is or, if I do, yet do not like him, it is plain it is his kindness I love, and not his person; and so my seeming love to him is nothing but self-love in another shape.”<sup>1</sup> In one of the earliest documents of the Movement, a colleague of Barton Stone wrote: “The whole tenor of Scripture shows that [humanity] is made...to glorify God in an active manner; that knowing [God's] nature, perfections, and astonishing works, [we] should render due praise to the divine name, and employ all [our] powers of body and mind, in doing the will of God.”<sup>2</sup> Sin, for the founding generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement was the failure to be *in love* with God.

What are the consequences of sin? The consequences of sin were many and terrible. Preachers pointed to sin as the root of human unhappiness. Humans were created to love God. Not being in love with God, they constantly seek for some earthly good that will bring them pleasure—that will fill the place of God in their lives. James McGready, whose preaching awakened Barton Stone to his need for a love relationship with God, noted that some persons seek happiness through the satisfaction of their “animal nature,” others through the possession of “riches” and “honors,” while yet others seek happiness through a “religion of external duties” which is thought to secure the favor of a God who remains unknown and unloved. None of these substitutions, though, bring the ultimate happiness that humans were meant to know in a love relationship with God.<sup>3</sup> One preacher likened the sinner's search for happiness to chasing after phantoms. When one is seeking after a phantom, it seems quite real; when one

embraces a phantom, one discovers that it was not what one thought it was.<sup>4</sup> Barton Stone described the matter succinctly: “All are in want of what they were made to enjoy, which is God; and have a propensity to satisfy that want with meaner things. Hence arise the busy pursuits, the incessant labors, and the universal cry of a distracted, disappointed world. *Who will show us any good?*”<sup>5</sup>

Another consequence of sin was the proliferation of sins against God and neighbor. Not loving God, persons do not obey God's command to love their neighbor. Instead, they seek their own good without much regard for their neighbor. Stone stated that Jesus' life and death save us “from the *want* of love to God and [neighbor], and all those actions which are the native fruits of that *want*.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet another consequence of sin was hell or damnation. Hell was to be cut off from God. In an account of his conversion, Stone reported asking himself, “Are you willing to be damned—to be banished from God—from heaven—from all good—and suffer the pains of eternal fire?”<sup>7</sup> Hell was not so much a place as an experience. Stone wrote of a time in his life when he could not believe that God loved humanity. On the contrary, it seemed to him, based on his interpretation of the Reformed doctrine of predestination, that God delighted in the damnation of humanity. Describing his experience of this time, he notes: “I was bereft of every good;” adding, “The fires of Hell got hold of me, and were kindling a flame against such a God.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***What is salvation?***

Salvation for the founding generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement was to be in a love relationship with God. It was not a reward that one received for living a holy life, but the holy life itself. Consequently, it was understood to begin not at death, but whenever one became a Christian. Alexander Campbell spoke of “our individual enjoyment of the *present* salvation of God.”<sup>9</sup>

What are the consequences of salvation? First, one experienced the sheer joy and fulfillment of being in love with God. In a letter written in 1844, Thomas Campbell exclaimed, “Now can there be happier persons under heaven, than the believing

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*Sin for the founding generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement  
was the failure to be in love with God.*

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*Note if you will Stone's principles of interpretation: that scripture interprets scripture and that no interpretation of scripture can be authoritative if it stands in conflict with the Biblical revelation of God's love for all.*

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and obedient worshippers, who are thus divinely assured of the constant enjoyment of the Divine Presence!"<sup>10</sup>

Another consequence of salvation was that one desired to honor God by doing God's will in all matters. This is the origin of Thomas Campbell's commitment to address the scandal that had particularly marred his own Reformed tradition, the scandal of division among Christians. He had overheard Jesus praying in John 17: 20-23: "I ask . . . on behalf of those who will believe in me through [the word of the disciples] that they may all be one. As you Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

Desiring to honor God by doing God's will extended to social issues. Barton Stone, though reared in a slaveholding family, early became an opponent of slavery. The earliest writing that we have from Stone is a letter arguing against scriptural defenses of slavery on the grounds that the destruction of families and the suffering caused by slavery could not be the will of the God revealed in scripture. Note if you will his principles of interpretation: that scripture interprets scripture and that no interpretation of scripture can be authoritative if it stands in conflict with the Biblical revelation of God's love for all. Stone observed that it was often said by white Christians that it was not a good policy to set the slaves free "amongst us." Many, he responded, thought otherwise. In any case, he continued, "Christians ought not to let civil policy oppose the express will of God. If we know God's will, we are not to enquire whether it will be [in] our interest to do it."<sup>11</sup> For several years Stone supported the Colonization Society. Disillusioned with the Colonization Society's failure to end slavery with its promise of removing free Blacks to a colony in Africa, Stone became an advocate of the immediate abolition of slavery without any provision for the removal of formerly enslaved Blacks.<sup>12</sup>

Alexander Campbell's discernment of God's will with regard to war led him to embrace passivism.<sup>13</sup>

Alexander Campbell believed that the cumulative effect of the present salvation of individuals, accelerated by the unity of Christians and the restoration of apostolic practices (more on that below), would be the dawning of a this-worldly age of peace and justice; what he and other Christians called the Millennium. In the prospectus for the journal he launched in 1830, aptly titled, *The Millennial Harbinger*, Campbell stated that the new journal "shall have for its object the development and introduction of that political and religious order of society called THE MILLENNIUM, which will be the consummation of that ultimate [improvement] of society proposed in the Christian Scriptures." Among the subjects that readers could expect to see addressed was "The *injustice* which yet remains in many of the political regulations under the best political governments, when contrasted with the *justice* which Christianity proposes, and which the millennial order of society promises."

Yet another consequence of salvation was heaven. The founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement did not have much to say about the details of life in heaven. The central aspect of life in heaven would be the continuation of the joy of salvation. Thomas Campbell wrote of our present experience of salvation, "What can be more blissful than the exercises of *heaven*; namely, the contemplation, admiration, adoration, and worship of God? What more desirable than the enjoyment of the Divine Presence?"<sup>14</sup> This view of heaven is echoed in the literature of the Cumberland Presbyterians, a group that had much in common with the followers of Stone. Peggy Davidson Ewing was the seventy-six year old widow of Finis Ewing, a leading Cumberland Presbyterian preacher who had been a successful lawyer before entering the ministry. She was also the daughter of the family for which Davidson County Tennessee was named. It seems that a development officer, probably wanting to talk with Mrs. Ewing about a planned gift, asked Mrs. Ewing, "Do you not anticipate a happy meeting with those loved ones who have gone before?" To which Mrs. Ewing answered, "O yes; and it will be joyful, but nothing

like seeing my precious Saviour: without Him heaven would be no heaven to me.”<sup>15</sup>

### ***How does one get from sin to salvation?***

For the founding generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement one got from sin to salvation by the grace of God. Wrote Thomas Campbell: “It appears that we are as dependent upon the will of God for our salvation, as for our creation; for we can no more new create, or regenerate ourselves, than create ourselves first. Nay, it appears more difficult, if there can be any difficulty with God, to effect [our recreation] than [our creation]. For the dust could have no dislike to become a [human being], not so the sinner to be saved.”<sup>16</sup> Do you hear what he is saying? I don’t think I fully appreciated this comment until my wife, the Rev. Sue McDougal, and I began having children. For us, thanks be to God! procreation was, with the exception of nine months of morning sickness and eight hours of labor, fairly easy. Well, at least, fairly easy for me. The more challenging part, we discovered, came after our children were born, as each came into the world with a will of his or her own. For the founding generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement, our salvation was not ultimately something we accomplish, but something God accomplishes.

So, how does God accomplish our salvation? The founding generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement knew that God must somehow get our attention. This is what Presbyterians referred to as God’s “awakening” of sinners. And, they were adamant that it involved the sinner’s conviction that he or she was a sinner. In their view, this was the necessary first step in God’s work of salvation. Our Stone-Campbell forebears believed that awareness of our own sin was part of being a Christian, but were not at all sure that this awareness was the necessary *first* step on the way to salvation. In the words of Barton Stone, “We . . . do not prescribe to God the particular means by which [God] shall bring [sinners] to faith and repentance.”<sup>17</sup> In any case, the founding generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement, like other Presbyterians, understood that God’s getting our attention does not amount to falling in love with God.

For the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement, as with other Presbyterians, God causes us to fall in love with God’s self through our encounter with the Gospel of Jesus Christ—the Good News that God has acted in Jesus Christ that we might

know the forgiveness of our sins and receive the Spirit by which we are enabled to live new lives. James McGready, who described the sinner’s encounter with the Gospel as a “view” of “the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus,” put it this way: “No sooner does the ‘light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus,’ shine into their souls, then [sinners] are enraptured with [God’s] excellency, and their hearts are filled with [love toward God].”<sup>18</sup> In his earliest theological statement, Stone declared what other Presbyterians would have affirmed: [The sinner’s] “fears may be awakened by the thunders of Mount Sinai [a reference to the Ten Commandments]; but it is only a view of the holiness, goodness, love—and the free, unmerited grace and mercy of God, which produces true conviction [of sin] and true repentance, and which humbles the soul, slays the enmity of the heart, and makes [the sinner] willing to depart from all iniquity.”<sup>19</sup>

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*The founding generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement knew that God must somehow get our attention. This is what Presbyterians referred to as God’s “awakening” of sinners.*

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In the parlance of the time, it was said that persons who fell in love with God through their encounter with the Gospel would “come to Christ” for the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, which would sustain and strengthen their new relationship with God. Baptists and Methodists, and to a lesser extent, Presbyterians, believed it was important to have an assurance that Christ had forgiven their sins and granted them the Holy Spirit. Hence, the popular nineteenth-century practice of directing penitent believers to pray to God for an experience that would assure them of the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes penitents were invited to come to a “mourners’ bench,” where the saints would lay hands upon them and add their prayers to those of the penitents beseeching God to grant them assurance of the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement appreciated the desire for assurance of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, but believed the Apostles had provided a more certain way to that assurance and



the gift of the Holy Spirit though the baptism of penitent believers—an apostolic practice they sought to restore.<sup>20</sup>

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*Baptists and Methodists, and to a lesser extent, Presbyterians, believed it was important to have an assurance that Christ had forgiven their sins. Walter Scott could state how one got from sin to salvation on the fingers of one hand.*

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Walter Scott, the great evangelist of the first generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement, could state this distinctive view of how one got from sin to salvation on the fingers of one hand. *Faith* in the Gospel of Jesus Christ transforms one's affections and leads to *repentance*, which leads to *baptism*, which is followed by *assurance of the forgiveness of one's sins* and *the gift of the Holy Spirit*.<sup>21</sup>

The practice of the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement differed from that of Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists in another way, as well. All of these traditions valued the Lord's Supper, which re-enacts the central drama of the Christian gospel. The Stone-Campbell founders, however, were convinced that a restoration of what they believed to be the apostolic practice of every Lord's Day celebration of the Supper was critical to the spiritual health of the Christian community. So critical, that when an ordained minister was not available, congregations were to select qualified persons from among the membership to lead in the celebration of the Supper.<sup>22</sup>

The Stone-Campbell founders also encouraged the restoration of other apostolic practices as means of bringing the gospel before the minds and hearts of believers, including: study of the scriptures, prayer, meditation, observance of the Lord's Day, fasting, confession of sins, and praise.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Is there a side effect to this process of moving from sin to salvation?***

There is: humility. Thomas Campbell stated that humility, the attitude born of the believer's absolute dependence upon God for every aspect of salvation, is the "fundamental ingredient in Christian character."<sup>24</sup> Barton Stone wrote that Christians are well convinced of their "natural poverty of divine things, such as holiness, righteousness and peace," of their

"spiritual weakness to withstand evil, and to do good" and of their "ignorance of God, and divine glories. . ." He asserted that upon seeing wicked sinners Christians exclaim, "Who made me to differ from them? God only, in [God's] matchless grace."<sup>25</sup>

The answers of the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement to the questions of sin, salvation, and how one gets from sin to salvation disclose an understanding and practice of relationship with God that focuses on knowing and loving God. Thus, I refer to this spirituality as theistic. The main contours of this spirituality are expressed in a well-known eighteenth-century hymn.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound  
[the sound of the gospel]  
That saved a wretch like me  
[a person who never forgets that salvation  
is by grace].  
I once was lost [apart from God],  
But now am found,  
Was blind [did not see the excellence of God]  
But now I see.  
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear  
[the grace that got my attention]  
And grace my fears relieved  
How precious did that grace appear  
[the gospel of Jesus Christ]  
The hour I first believed.  
Through many dangers, toils, and snares  
[temptations to turn away from the love  
relationship with God]  
I have already come  
'Twas grace hath brought me safe thus far  
[the grace of the Holy Spirit]  
And grace will lead me home.  
When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days [to do what?] to sing God's  
praise  
Then when we first begun.

## **Distortions of Stone-Campbell Spirituality**

Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* was a call for Christian unity that the world might believe that Jesus is the Christ. While it initially attracted little attention, it had quite an impact on Thomas Campbell's son, Alexander Campbell. In 1832, the followers of Thomas and Alexander Campbell, known as Disciples of Christ, united with another Christian unity movement, the Christians, led by Barton W. Stone. How could it happen that by the dawning of the twentieth century this Stone-

Campbell Movement, born of a shared commitment to Christian unity, would divide into two streams, one known as Christian Churches or Disciples of Christ, and the other as Churches of Christ? And, how could it happen that well before the end of the twentieth century the Christian Churches / Disciples of Christ stream would divide into two streams, known today as the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)? Though other factors were involved, both divisions had a lot to do with two distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality that appeared before the end of the nineteenth century. I categorize one of these distortions of Stone-Campbell Spirituality as legalistic, as it focuses on knowing and obeying God's law. I describe the other as moralistic, as it focuses on knowing and promoting the social good.

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*Both divisions had a lot to do with two distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality that appeared before the end of the nineteenth century.*

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### Legalistic

So, to begin with the legalistic distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality: *What is sin?* Sin, in this distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality, was not the failure to be in love with God, but the failure to obey God's law. God had revealed God's law through prophets and apostles whose testimony was recorded in the Bible. Preachers argued on rationalist grounds that this testimony was reliable. Hence, ignorance or uncertainty regarding God's law was no defense.<sup>26</sup>

What are the consequences of sin? One consequence of the failure to obey God's law was anxiety regarding one's situation in life. In a sermon titled, "The Safety and Security of the Christian," Robert Milligan, prominent second-generation Stone-Campbell Christian, noted that sinners trust in riches, honors, and pleasures as the source of all good, rather than obedience to the eternal God. Since even sinners know that riches, honors, and pleasure can be taken away, they can never be fully confident of their situation in life.<sup>27</sup> (Please note: This view of the transience of earthly goods is significantly different from the founding Stone-Campbell spirituality view which declares that

earthly goods are incapable of satisfying the deepest human needs.)

Another consequence of failure to obey God's law was moral confusion and error. Benjamin Franklin, another prominent second-generation Stone-Campbell preacher, described the human situation as follows. "[Humans are] poor, imperfect, fallible, and erring creature[s]. [They need] infallibility somewhere to which [they] can come and receive instruction *implicitly*."<sup>28</sup> Sinners who reject the infallible instruction found in the Bible can hardly be expected to do the good. On the contrary, they can be expected to do evil. Pointing to revolutionary France, which rejected Christianity and promptly decapitated a fair number of its population, Franklin warned that society can "have no security for anything better without the Bible."<sup>29</sup>

A third consequence of failure to obey God's law was eternal punishment, or hell. Advocates of this understanding and practice of relationship with God asserted that persons who refuse to obey God's law will suffer eternal torment.<sup>30</sup>

*What is salvation?* Salvation for this legalistic distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality was the reward one received for obeying God's law. Salvation was not viewed as a relationship with God, which is reward in itself, as in the founding spirituality of the Movement, but as the pay-off for obeying God's law.

*What are the consequences of salvation?* The principle consequence of salvation was that upon death one would enter the eternal bliss of heaven. And, this heaven has more of a material aspect than the heaven of the founding spirituality of the Stone-Campbell Movement which focuses on the joy of experiencing God's presence. Franklin exhorted, "Let us hear [Jesus'] sayings and do them, that he may . . . lead us safely into the everlasting city, and to the fountains of living water, where there are riches, and treasures, and splendors, and sublimities, transcending all human imagination . . ."<sup>31</sup>

A consequence of compliance with the terms of salvation was confidence and assurance concerning the present and the future, even in the midst of suffering and misfortune. No matter what might be happening in the believer's life, one who had obeyed God's law in all things could be confident that the major matter of life was secure. Milligan promised that "As long as we love God with all our hearts, and souls, and minds, and do [God's] commandments,

so long God is faithful and will not allow any *absolute* evil to befall any one of us.”<sup>32</sup>

Another consequence of compliance with the terms of salvation was the moral and social good. Advocates of this understanding and practice of relationship with God were convinced that Christianity was necessary to maintain a humane society. Franklin appealed to sinners to become Christians, not only for the sake of their eternal good, but out of a concern for the moral and religious welfare of their communities.<sup>33</sup>

*How does one get from sin to salvation?* Not by grace, as in the founding spirituality of the Stone-Campbell Movement, but by searching the Scriptures to find God’s law and by obeying it in full. As preachers searched the Scriptures, the list of duties could become rather long. Robert Milligan promised heaven to his hearers on the following terms: “Do you believe, with all your heart, that Jesus is the Messiah—the Son of the living God? Have you repented of all your sins? Have you openly and publicly confessed the name of Jesus as your only and all-sufficient Savior? Have you, by His authority, been baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit? Are you now giving *all diligence* to adding to your faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge, and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience and to patience, godliness, and to godliness, brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness, love to all? If so, all is well. For just as sure as the Lord God omnipotent reigns, if you continue in these things, and abound in them, you will at last receive an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”<sup>34</sup>

The Stone-Campbell Movement’s distinctive practice of baptism was maintained in this distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality, but it took on a significantly different character. Baptism for Alexander Campbell was the gracious means by which a gracious God communicated to penitent believers assurance of the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the context of this distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality, baptism became one of many duties, albeit an important duty, that one must perform to obtain heaven. “Baptism,” Franklin wrote, “is the test of [the sinner’s] belief in Christ—the trial of the [sinner’s] loyalty to the King. There, at the entrance of the Kingdom, the question comes before the sinner of *obedience* in a matter of the most trying nature—

obedience to a commandment, where the sinner can see no reason for *obedience* only that the King requires it. If the sinner stops at this first formal act required, and refuses to *obey*, what may we expect of [this person] at any subsequent time?”<sup>35</sup> I refer to this understanding of baptism as the hazing view of baptism.

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*Thomas Campbell stated that humility is the “fundamental ingredient in Christian character.”*

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*Is there a side effect to this method of salvation?* Yes, a certain smugness, or pride; confidence born of the conviction that one has obeyed God’s law and, therefore, all is well, with *my* soul. This contrasts sharply with the humility of the founding spirituality of the Movement that was rooted in the believer’s conviction of sin and experience of God as the giver of every aspect of our salvation. John W. McGarvey, pioneer theological educator of the Stone-Campbell Movement, defended the practice of immersing new converts in cold, wintry streams, not in terms of the believer’s joy in the assurance of sin forgiven and the promise of the Holy Spirit, but by stating that “the consciousness of a solemn duty performed sends a glow of gratitude and peace through the inner man which contributes largely to the comfort of the body.”<sup>36</sup>

This practice of baptizing people in frigid waters could, it should be noted, produce some pretty radical characters. There was a Stone-Campbell woman by the name of Carry who married the Disciples minister, David Nation, and became famous for what she called “hatchetation”—the practice of entering illegal saloons with her hatchet and proceeding to chop up everything, the bar, the bottles, and the portrait of a half-naked woman behind the bar. Asked by a reporter why she was not content to advocate temperance in the manner of other women, she answered: “I was baptized on the coldest day of the year. They cut a hole in the ice and dropped me in, and I came out a bearcat for the Lord!”<sup>37</sup>

The legalistic distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality, both its demands and its promises, is nicely expressed in a nineteenth-century hymn which remains popular, at least among some Disciples, to this day.



When we walk with the Lord  
 In the light of his word,  
 What a glory he shows on our Way!  
 While we do his good will  
 He abides with us still  
 And with all who will trust and obey.  
 Trust and obey,  
 For there's no other way  
 To be happy in Jesus,  
 But to trust and obey.  
 Not a shadow can rise,  
 Not a cloud in the skies,  
 But his smile quickly drives it away;  
 Not a doubt nor a fear,  
 Not a sigh nor a tear,  
 Can abide while we trust and obey.  
 Trust and obey,  
 For there's no other way  
 To be happy in Jesus,  
 But to trust and obey.  
 Then in fellowship sweet  
 We will sit at his feet,  
 Or we'll walk by his side in the way;  
 What he says we will do,  
 Where he sends we will go—  
 Never fear, only trust and obey.

### Moralistic

The moralistic distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality takes a different track: *What is sin?* Sin, in this distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality was the failure to promote the social good; the failure to help America achieve its destiny as a land of liberty and justice. And the consequences: that America would not fulfill its destiny or, at the very least, that the sinner would not have a part in accomplishing God's good purposes for the human family.

*What is salvation?* Salvation was the fulfillment of God's purposes for America, the establishment of a land of liberty and justice. And the consequences: that Americans would enjoy the blessing of freedom, but more than that, that the example of America carried to other nations through the expanding influence of the American Republic would liberate all peoples.

Alexander Campbell contributed to this distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality by a series of popular lectures that, according to Mark Toulouse, were not meant to replace Campbell's writings on the role of a united and restored church in ushering in a this-worldly reign of peace and justice.<sup>38</sup> Be that as

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*Sin in the moralistic distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality was the failure to promote the social good; the failure to help America achieve its destiny.*

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it may, in 1849 Campbell prophesied that "The Lord Almighty, who has now girdled the earth from East to West with the Anglo-Saxon people, the Anglo-Saxon tongue, sciences, learning and civilization, by giving a colossal power and grandeur to Great Britain and the United States over the continents and oceans of the earth, will continue to extend their power and magnificence until they spread from north to south, as they have already from east to west . . . Then will "They hang their trumpet in the hall, and study war no more." Peace and universal amity will reign triumphant. For over all the earth there will be but one Lord, one faith, one hope and one language."<sup>39</sup> In 1852, Campbell stated that God had granted such stupendous power and might to England and America and would continue to favor them in order that they might shine the light of liberty and justice into all the world. Campbell called upon his listeners to fulfill the duties they owed to themselves, their country, and the human race.<sup>40</sup>

This idolaterization of Anglo-Saxon culture, it must be noted, while helping to fuel the nineteenth century overseas missionary movement, impeded and, dare I say, impedes Disciples of Christ evangelization of non-English speaking populations in the United States. This same idolaterization of Anglo-Saxon culture, with its blatant message of Anglo-Saxon superiority, also made it necessary for African-American Disciples to form organizations related to, but separate from, white Disciples.

*How does one get from sin to salvation?* One got from sin to salvation in this distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality by identifying and promoting the social good. And the side effects: A deep sense of satisfaction rooted in the conviction that one was helping to advance God's purposes and to improve the lives of all human beings. As with the legalistic distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality, there is not much room here for humility. Rather than seeing themselves as the recipients of God's grace, exponents of this spirituality tended to view themselves as partners with God in saving the world. And the result, as with the legalistic distortion, was a sort of smugness or pride. Having informed his audience in 1852 of their role as Americans in shaping the future of humanity, Campbell wrote, "We have,

then, a fearful and glorious responsibility. Let us cherish in our individual bosoms this feeling of personal as well as national responsibility. . . .”<sup>41</sup>

There is not much place in this scheme for the distinctive Stone–Campbell teaching on baptism. If one can get from sin to salvation by identifying and promoting the social good, why would one make a big deal out of baptism?

My hymn for this understanding and practice of relationship with God was written in the North just before the Civil War. It arose out of a men’s movement led by Dudley Tyng, who remarked in a sermon that he delivered to 5000 men, “I would rather that this right arm were amputated at the trunk than that I should come short of my duty.” The next week, while watching the operation of a corn thrasher, his arm got caught in the machine, was severely lacerated, and a week later he died. But not before uttering his last words which were the inspiration for the hymn: “Let us all stand up for Jesus.” Southerners learned this hymn from Union armies invading the South. Using a military theme, this hymn—still sung by Disciples—calls Christians to join Jesus’ army. Though it speaks of opposition, it promises victory and an exalted place in eternity for persons who join Jesus in the battle.<sup>42</sup>

Stand up, stand up for Jesus,  
Ye soldiers of the Cross;  
Lift high his royal banner,  
It must not suffer loss:  
From victory unto victory  
His army shall he lead,  
‘Til every foe is vanquished,  
And Christ is Lord, indeed.  
Stand up, stand up for Jesus,  
The trumpet call obey;  
Forth to the mighty conflict,  
In this his glorious day:  
“Ye that are men now serve him”  
Against unnumbered foes;  
Let courage rise with danger,  
And strength to strength oppose.  
Stand up, stand up for Jesus,  
Stand in His strength alone:  
The arm of flesh will fail you;  
[Did you get that?]  
Ye dare not trust your own:  
Put on the gospel armor,  
And, watching unto prayer,  
Where duty calls, or danger,  
Be never wanting there.  
Stand up, stand up for Jesus,  
The strife will not be long;  
This day the noise of battle,  
The next the victor’s song:

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*Disciples were sending ministerial  
candidates to Yale and the University of  
Chicago, where they were taught historical  
approaches to the Bible.*

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To him that overcometh,  
A crown of life shall be;  
He with the king of Glory  
Shall reign eternally.

## Division

Before the end of the nineteenth century, there were two distortions of Stone–Campbell spirituality bumping around in the Movement along with the spirituality of the founders. What would happen when the Movement would encounter social and cultural change? Division.

Following the Civil War the South was impoverished. Life was hard. Moreover, many white Southerners struggled to understand why the Yankees had won. Surely, many thought, God must have been punishing them. But punishing them for what? Not for slavery. They were sure that slavery was in the Bible. It must have been for something else. As a result, many white Southerners vowed to never again disobey God.

In the North, life was good, especially for the middle and upper classes. The economy, with a few hiccups along the way, was booming. Clearly, many thought, God had been on the side of the Union in its efforts to extend liberty and justice.

In this social and cultural moment, where do you suppose the legalistic distortion of Stone–Campbell spirituality would have been most attractive? In the South. And, where do you suppose the moralistic distortion of Stone–Campbell spirituality would have been most attractive? In the North.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Stone–Campbell Movement divided over whether the scriptures would allow the use of instrumental music in worship and the funding and oversight of missionaries by missionary societies. Three-fourths of the Churches of Christ, which opposed instrumental music in worship and missionary societies as not included in the New Testament order of the church and, therefore, forbidden, were located in the South.<sup>43</sup>

But, that’s not the end of the story of Stone–Campbell divisions. By the turn of the twentieth

century urban Americans had been exposed to social problems that accompanied industrialization. Disciples were sending ministerial candidates to Yale and the University of Chicago, where they were taught historical approaches to the Bible which discredited the idea that the New Testament contains a blueprint for the organization of the church. In response to urban social issues and historical approaches to study of the New Testament, some Disciples began to call for recognition of other denominations as churches, regardless of their views and practices of baptism, in order to partner with them in addressing contemporary social issues. In this social and cultural moment, where do you suppose the moralistic distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality was most attractive? In the cities. And, where do you suppose the legalistic distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality could be most easily maintained? In small towns and rural areas. In 1971, when the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, which had opposed partnering with other denominations, asked to be listed separately in the *Yearbook of American Churches* from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which had partnered with other denominations, the two groups did not differ significantly in number, on the average, in either rural or suburban counties; however, the Disciples' total membership in urban counties exceeded that of the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ by fifty percent.<sup>44</sup>

Legalistic and moralistic distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality have helped to divide a movement that began with a commitment to Christian Unity. But not just because they were different: each of these distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality produces a pride or smugness which makes it difficult for persons to tolerate, much less to welcome, diversity. Understanding these two distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality, and especially how each of them produces the side effect of smugness or pride, helps to explain why our record as a Christian unity movement has not been, to date, as good as one might have expected for a Movement which claims Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* as one of its founding documents.

### **Adaptability of the Legalistic and Moralistic Distortions**

The legalistic and moralistic distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality both emerged at particular moments in our history and have been associated

with particular issues. However, they are remarkably adaptive. The legalistic understanding and practice of relationship with God in our tradition has often focused on the purpose and mode of baptism, while embracing other matters as well. It can as easily focus on what it means to be a man or a woman, and the related issues of sexual orientation, gender roles, marriage, the ordination of women, the ordination of gays and lesbians, and what it means to be a Christian family. Likewise, the moralistic understanding and practice of relationship with God in our tradition has not been bound to one social or political ideology. Although there was a good bit of Americanism and Anglo-Saxon racism in the emergence of this distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality, Americanism and Anglo-Saxon racism are not essential components of this spirituality. Indeed, this distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality has sometimes been expressed in ways that seemed, to some observers, to be anti-racist and even anti-American. In the 1960s, members of a generation who had been influenced by a moralistic understanding and practice of relationship with God rose up to oppose what appeared to them to be fundamentally anti-Christian and anti-American practices: the exclusion of Blacks from an equal share in American life and what they believed to be a war of aggression in Southeast Asia. Others of that same generation, also much influenced by a moralistic understanding and practice of relationship with God, responded that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a communist who represented a threat to the American way of life and that if Jesus were here today, he would be an American soldier in Vietnam.

If you think from these comments that I am opposed to obeying the law of God or would forswear the church's engagement with social and political issues, you are wrong. I will have more to say on this topic below. But first, I need to describe yet another distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality.

### **Another Distortion: Personalistic**

A third distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality emerged in the first half of the twentieth century. Its roots can be found in the early decades of the twentieth century that have been called "the Era of the Psyche." I refer to this distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality as *personalistic*, as it focuses not on knowing and loving God but on knowing and improving oneself.

*What is sin?* Sin is the failure to become a whole

person; the failure to realize one's true self. What are the consequences of sin? First, one is unable to find fulfillment or satisfaction in life. Second, one is unable to give oneself to others in supportive and nurturing relationships. Some years ago I was a member of a wonderful Disciples congregation that included the following prayer of confession in its liturgical repertoire:

Gracious and Holy One, Creator of all things, and of emptiness, we come to you full of much that clutters and distracts, stifles and burdens us, and makes us a burden to others. Empty us now of gnawing dissatisfactions, of anxious imaginings, of fretful preoccupations, of nagging problems, of old scores to settle and the arrogance of being right. Empty us of the ways we unthinkingly think of ourselves as powerless, as victims, as determined by sex, age, race, as being less than we are, or other than yours. Empty us of the disguises and lies in which we hide ourselves from each other and responsibility for our neighbors and the world. Hollow out in us the space in which we will find ourselves, find peace and a whole heart, a forgiving spirit and holiness, the springs of laughter and the will to reach boldly for abundant life for ourselves and the whole human family, in the spirit of Jesus. Amen.

Did you notice that the congregation, of which I was a member, did not confess that we had sinned against God? Rather, we confessed that we had sinned against ourselves and our neighbors, and we asked God to help us find ourselves, that we might have abundant life and better serve our neighbors.

*What is salvation?* Salvation is to become a fully functioning self, a whole person. *What are the consequences of salvation?* The consequences are that one finds personal happiness and fulfillment and is enabled to contribute to the well-being and happiness of others.

*How does one get from sin to salvation?* By employing the therapy or spiritual practices best suited to address the particular issues in one's life. *Are there side effects?* In one sense, there is no simple answer to this question, such as "humility" or "pride," as different therapies and spiritual practices may have different side effects. At the same time, it would appear that a general consequence of this method of getting from sin to salvation is an abiding focus on oneself.

Now, at this point, you may be expecting a hymn. For the founding spirituality of the Stone-Campbell Movement it was "Amazing Grace." For the legalistic distortion of that spirituality it was "Trust and Obey." For the moralistic distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality: "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus." For whatever reason, maybe it's the sheer range of therapies and spiritual practices by which persons can move from sin to salvation according to this perspective, I have not discovered a widely known hymn that expresses a personalistic understanding and practice of relationship with God.

## Reclaiming Stone-Campbell Spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The Stone-Campbell Movement has liked slogans. From Thomas Campbell: "The church of Jesus Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one," and "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent." From Barton Stone: "Let Christian unity be our polar star." And then those slogans for which we do not know the author: "No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible, no law but love, no name but the divine" and "We are Christians only, but not the only Christians."

In 2007, the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) meeting in Fort Worth, Texas affirmed a new one:

We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.

If we are going to live up to this slogan, or any of the earlier ones, we must have an understanding and practice of relationship with God that supports a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, that enables us as part of the one body of Christ to welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us. I submit that the founding spirituality of the Stone-Campbell Movement represents such an understanding and practice of relationship with God. I have identified this spirituality as theistic, because it focuses on knowing and loving God. As far as I can tell, this spirituality has never disappeared from any of the streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement. But, as I have sought to show, it's had some competition!

For the founding generation of the Stone-Campbell Movement sin was the failure to be in love with



God. The consequences being (1) that human beings, made to love God, cannot find happiness; (2), that not loving God, they reject God's command to love God and neighbor; and (3) that upon death they are cut off forever from the possibility of relationship with God. Salvation was to be in love with God. The consequences were (1) the sheer joy of being in love with God, which is heaven on earth; (2) a determination to honor God in all areas of one's life, both personal and public, which, in Alexander Campbell's view, would—through the influence of a united and gospel-proclaiming church—usher in the Millennium, a this-worldly reign of peace and justice; and (3) upon death, eternal joy in God's presence. One got from sin to salvation by God's grace. How? God shows us a view of God's self in the gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that causes us to fall in love with God. Through baptism, God assures us of the forgiveness of our sins, and gives us the Holy Spirit by which we grow in love for God through every Lord's Day celebration of the Lord's Supper, and other apostolic practices of the church which bring the gospel before our minds, such as prayer, scripture study, meditation, fasting, confession of sins, and praise. The side effect of this way of salvation—in which God is the giver of every aspect of our salvation—was humility. Christians know that they have not and cannot save themselves. They are saved by grace.

### **Can support a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world**

This understanding and practice of relationship with God can support a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world; it can enable us as part of the one body of Christ to welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us. Why?

First, it focuses on knowing and loving God. The distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality that I have described have as their end something less than knowing and loving God.

The legalistic distortion focuses on God's law. And, the purpose of obeying God's law is not to honor God, but to secure God's favor now and in the life to come. And so, the focus is really on us.

The moralistic distortion focuses on the social good. The purpose is to advance the social good for our own benefit and the benefit of others. The "us" of the social good is larger than the "us" of the former case, but the focus is still on us. And, the

social good is always our perception of the social good which often overlooks the perspectives of persons who differ from us in language, race, and experience.

We are not even aware that our structures and practices exclude the perspectives of others. Ron Sommerville, who teaches at Christian Theological Seminary, has written of his experience of the "unbearable whiteness of CTS" when he arrived there in 1994.<sup>45</sup> Well, you know, I was there in 1994. I was the Dean and Vice President. I did not experience the whiteness of CTS as unbearable. How rarely does it occur to most of us to seek the perspectives of persons who differ from us. Sandhya Jha quotes Maureen Osuga describing her experience in predominantly white Disciples congregations: "None of the churches in my life included me in any overt, positive way. Hence I was included on their terms, and my "Japaneseness" was non-essential and invisible. I was not invited to share that part of myself, nor did it occur to me to offer. As I think back, to have pushed myself into those churches would have violated that inner sense of needing to be invited in as an outsider."<sup>46</sup>

With the personalistic distortion of Stone-Campbell spirituality the focus again is on us, since the purpose is to improve ourselves for our own sake and the sake of others.

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*To be sure, the leading concerns of the legalistic, moralistic, and personalistic distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality are not bad in themselves.*

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To be sure, the leading concerns of the legalistic, moralistic, and personalistic distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality are not bad in themselves, and, indeed, have a positive role in the context of theistic spirituality. Commitment to obeying God's law, seeking to discern and advance the social good, working to heal and develop one's own self, are all aspects of living a life that serves and honors God. The distortion is when the ultimate purpose of these concerns is to serve ourselves and our perceptions of the good rather than God. In the founding spirituality of the Stone-Campbell Movement there is a place for each of these concerns, but they do not take the place of God in the believer's heart and mind. There is no forgetting in this

understanding and practice of relationship with God that the end of life is not our own good, or even our perception of the social good, but the glory and honor of the God revealed in the Good News of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. A movement for wholeness in a fragmented world must have a purpose higher than our own well-being and our always limited perception of the social good.

### **Every aspect of our salvation is gift.**

The understanding of how we get from sin to salvation in the founding spirituality of the Stone-Campbell Movement is the second reason that it can help us live up to this new slogan. Every aspect of our salvation is a gift in the founders' understanding and practice of relationship with God. As a consequence, the fundamental ingredient of Christian character is, as Thomas Campbell observed, humility. That humility, born of the experience of our salvation as gift, allows for genuine community in which we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us. The understandings of how we get from sin to salvation in the legalistic, moralistic, and personalistic distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality tend toward a sense of personal achievement or, to use the theological term, self-righteousness, which inhibits genuine community and increases the fragmentation of the world. A movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, a church that welcomes all to the Lord's Table as Christ has welcomed us, must be rooted in an understanding that every aspect of our salvation is gift.

We will conclude this 2009 General Assembly with a communion service led by members of the Churches of Christ, the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). There are differences that separate these three streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement. But we share much in common. We share the founding spirituality of the Movement and also in our own distinctive ways and measures the distortions of Stone-Campbell spirituality that have helped to divide us. One hundred years ago, the Christian Churches or Disciples of Christ stream of the Stone-Campbell Movement held a Centennial Celebration in Pittsburgh, Penn-

sylvania, in recognition of the centennial of the publication of Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*. Christians associated with the Churches of Christ did not participate in any significant number. But the crowd gathered at Forbes field for communion numbered in the thousands.

The concluding service of this General Assembly will be of greater significance. For the fact that Christians will be together from across the streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement is a testament to the abiding power of the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ to overcome alienation and mistrust.

As I bring to a close these reflections on Stone-Campbell Spirituality in recognition of the bicentennial of Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*, I would like to propose a hymn, written in the 1980s, which expresses the founding spirituality of Stone-Campbell Movement. Think of it as a call to the communions that await us. I invite you to sing.

We gather here in Jesus name,  
His love is burning in our hearts like living  
flame;  
For through the loving Son the Father makes us  
one:  
Come, take the bread, come drink the wine,  
come, share the Lord.  
No one is a stranger here, everyone belongs;  
Finding our forgiveness here, we in turn forgive  
all wrongs.  
He joins us here, he breaks the bread,  
The Lord who pours the cup is risen from the  
dead;  
The one we love the most is now our gracious  
host:  
Come, take the bread, come drink the wine,  
come, share the Lord.  
We are now a family of which the Lord is head;  
Though unseen he meets us here in the breaking  
of the bread.  
We'll gather soon where angels sing;  
We'll see the glory of our Lord and coming  
King;  
Now we anticipate the feast for which we wait:  
Come, take the bread, come drink the wine,  
come, share the Lord.

We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.

## Notes

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# Polar Star or Shooting Star: Ecumenism's Challenge Today

TENTH JOE A. AND NANCY VAUGHN STALCUP

LECTURE ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

John H. Thomas

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Following my mother's death this February, my sister and I went through her desk looking for a safe deposit box key while also exploring the artifacts of a long and well-lived life. It took a later word from our brother about the forgotten secret compartment in the desk to find the key. But in the meantime we discovered many other treasures. One was my mother's *watchword* card which was given to her at her confirmation in 1926. It is the tradition in many United Church of Christ congregations to offer a scripture text to a young person being confirmed, a word that can provide a kind of centering through the ebb and flow of life's joys and sorrows. (Mine, given to me at that same church forty years later, was "Put on the whole armor of God." It is a text that has served me well in these ten years as General Minister and President!) On this old yellowed card, signed by her pastor, was typed her watchword text from the gospel of John: "You are my friends if you do what I command you."

We like to think of ourselves as a community of friends in the church, bound together by shared beliefs, shared convictions, and above all, shared affections. This is a nice thought, and this may work in a local church, though I've rarely found a congregation where beliefs, convictions, and affections were fully shared. All the evidence points to the fact that we tend to be a body of people who don't look alike, don't think alike, don't act alike, and who, at times, don't even like each other! When we consider the Church universal, the notion of mutual friendship as a basis for life together grows even more problematic. Our beliefs differ in

significant ways, our convictions frequently diverge, and our affections can and do easily grow cold, particularly under the influence of diverse cultures on distant continents that often find themselves sharply at odds. An ecumenism based on shared friendship can easily turn the polar star of unity into a shooting star—bright and spectacular for an instant—but quickly lost, occasionally rejected, and in either case soon forgotten.

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*An ecumenism based on shared friendship can easily turn the polar star of unity into a shooting star—bright and spectacular for an instant—but quickly lost, occasionally rejected, and in either case soon forgotten.*

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about the dangers of grounding our ecumenical vocation and our search for Christian community in the illusion of easy friendship:

On innumerable occasions a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image . . . God will not permit us to live in a dream world even for a few weeks or to abandon ourselves to those blissful experiences and exalted moods that sweep over us like a wave of rapture. For God is not a God of emotionalism, but the God of truth, (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 35).

Bonhoeffer's problem with the illusion of community is that it draws our attention away from the true source of community, grounding it instead in our own arrogant pretensions and fragile emotions: "Those who love their dream of a Christian com-

munity more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial,” (p. 36). He then makes his point crystal clear: our community “can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by the one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. The bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting,” (p. 37).

This brings us back to my mother’s watchword: “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Christian community, the unity of the Church, is not about the friends we have gathered, made or found. It is, in fact, about the friends we *didn’t* choose. Christ does the choosing. Our community is built not of mutual belief, conviction, or affection, but in the Christ who has named us friends. The Second World Conference on Faith and Order in Edinburgh, Scotland, put it well in 1937: “Unity does not consist in the agreement of our minds or the consent of our wills. It is founded in Jesus Christ Himself, who lived, died, and rose again to bring us to the Father, and Who through the Holy Spirit dwells in His Church. We are one because we are all the objects of the love and grace of God, and called by Him to witness in all the world to His glorious Gospel,” (Leonard G. Hodgson, ed., *Second World Conference on Faith and Order*, p. 275). Or, more succinctly, in the words of the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948, “Christ has made us His own, and He is not divided,” (in Kinnamon and Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement*, p. 21).

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*Christian community is, in fact, about the friends we didn’t choose.*

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As most of you know, early leaders in the movement that became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) understood that the unity of the church was a fact, not a project, a gift not an accomplishment, and that it is grounded in the Christ who names us friends rather than in the friendships we nurture or maintain. Thomas Campbell famously declared that “the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one.” And Barton Stone’s *Christian Messenger* was sent forth under the masthead that read, “Christian union is

my polar star.” In that magazine’s first issue, he said, “If we oppose the union of believers, we oppose directly the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, the spirit of piety, and the salvation of the world,” (in Colbert Cortwright, *People of the Chalice*, p. 101). Mark Toulouse recalls the words of our old friend, Kenneth Teegarden, “The ideal of Christian unity is to Disciples of Christ what basketball is to Indiana, hospitality is to the South, and non-violence is to Quakers,” (Mark Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship*, p. 79).

In light of this, what are we to make of the fact that the ecumenical movement today often feels listless, that the ecumenical institutions that have sought to embody it are often weak and frighteningly threatened, and that church after church has once again grown preoccupied with its own confessions, traditions, and commitments so that even ecumenical engagement becomes an opportunity to defend who we are and have been rather than discover together who we might become? Nearly twenty years ago a group of Protestants and Catholics in France reminded us that Christian identity and conversion are not competitors. One demands the other. “Identity and conversion,” they said, “call for each other; there is no Christian identity without conversion; conversion is constitutive of the church; our confessions do not merit the name of Christian unless they open up to the demand for conversion,” (Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches*, p. 15). And yet, everywhere we find today Methodists defending their Methodism, Lutherans their Lutheranism, Catholics their Catholicism, Presbyterians their Presbyterianism, United Church of Christ members and Disciples defending their movements and traditions, as if defending a parochial identity, rather than submitting to mutual conversion, is the proper ecumenical task. How is it that the polar star of unity has been replaced by a shooting star, and often by merely the memory of it at that?

Today I want to explore three reasons. First, to return to my opening theme, the happy dream of Christian friendship as the foundation of unity has smashed headlong into the hard realities of sharp theological differences that endure, moral conflicts that persist, and arrogant assertions of truth that offend. To be blunt, the ecumenical arena doesn’t feel quite as friendly as it used to feel. Second, we have learned to settle for the significant but partial ecumenical accomplishments that have been

achieved, rather than see them as the foundation for the ecumenical vocation that yet lies before us. And third, we have lost sight of the truth that our brokenness is sin, a denial of God's gift and design. Disunity has grown respectable, a status quo that fails to scandalize or convict, and therefore does not cry out for conversion. When friendliness fails, when comfortable cooperation suffices, and when sin is rationalized and excused away, we have lost sight of our polar star and all we have left is the occasional shooting star, a thrill that inspires only until the shadows fall.

When the Vatican issued a set of "Reflections" last year on the nature of the church and appeared to go more than a little out of its way to remind us that we Protestants are not "churches in the proper sense," we may be willing to acknowledge that the members of the Curia in Rome may be God's friends, but we may not feel overly friendly to them ourselves. When the leader of the Missouri Synod announced to the national Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1997 that, if they voted to enter into full communion with three churches of the Reformed tradition as well as the Episcopal Church, he would consider them to have abandoned their confessional commitments, I found myself affirming that he was a child of God, even a friend of God, but my feelings toward him and his church were decidedly cool! When the Reformed Church in America passed an action at one of its Synod's calling for dialogue with the UCC on issues of human sexuality "in order to move us toward a more biblical understanding," I was prepared to continue viewing them as "church in the proper sense," but it would not be true to say I was not in an affectionate mood. And when a seminarian, baptized and confirmed in the United Church of Christ, decides to join a Baptist church and tells me with enthusiasm that he will be re-baptized, my friendliness toward the American Baptist Church that seems willing to ignore the validity of his baptism is challenged.

Each of these vignettes is true, and each reflects the sharp divisions that separate Christians today. How we understand the nature of the church, how we confess the apostolic faith, the faith of the church through the ages, where we find ourselves on difficult moral questions like homosexuality and abortion, and how we view our sacraments are often far more powerful centripetal forces in the life of the church than are the bonds of friendship. The

recent Reformed–Roman Catholic dialogue in this country, seeking a renewed mutual recognition of one another's baptism, has foundered on the shoals either of Reformed experimentation with the language of the baptismal formula or on Catholic insistence on guarantees of Reformed fidelity to the traditional formula. Deep friendships were developed over the course of years of study and reflection together. But, in the end, deep friendships were not enough to overcome theological divergence and institutional defensiveness.

Friendship can, of course, move the ecumenical movement forward. It is one of the profound gifts of the ecumenical movement for many of us, and it can be an instrument of our growth in unity. But ultimately we will discover, often painfully, that we are the friends we didn't choose. Thus it is the Christ who calls us friends who must remain the bright light of a polar star. The ecumenical movement does far more than invite us into friendship with the friendly. It calls us into relationship with those who, to us, feel wholly other, strange, alien and at times even hostile—namely, the friends we didn't choose. But what makes the ecumenical vocation incredibly demanding is also good news: The unity given in Christ is ultimately far more powerful and enduring than friendships which so easily fall before our disagreements.

The first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Willem Visser't Hooft, reminds us that

We do not come together as people who have to begin by finding a common foundation for their relationships. That foundation has been laid; the starting point is given. We seek koinonia, because there is koinonia in our common submission to Christ, not to an inactive Christ but to the living Christ who gathers His scattered children together. Whatever obstacles we see in front of us, we remain hopeful about the outcome of our encounter because Christ is at work among us, leading us back to the one fold of which He is the shepherd, (Visser't Hooft, *The Pressure of Our Common Calling*, p. 73).

The polar star of unity cannot rely on friendship alone for its guiding and directing power. All too often we have assumed that to be the case, and so have watched ecumenical passion flame out when friendships cool and our illusion of unity disintegrates before the heat of disagreements and the

allure of introversion and self-centeredness. Either we grow disillusioned with friends, or we declare, "So who needs friends anyway?"

A second reason for today's malaise in the ecumenical movement is, ironically, the fact that we have made much progress. Relationships among many churches have grown polite, even cordial. Public anathemas are rarely cast at one another. Christians are welcome, for the most part, in each other's churches and often at each other's tables. Churches of widely diverse traditions frequently join forces in ministries of compassion and service, particularly in times of crisis. Councils of churches have gathered into fellowship an impressive array of churches that were not even on speaking terms only a century ago. Members freely move from church to church without benefit of full communion agreements or formal acts of mutual recognition. Ecumenists speak of "reconciled diversity" as a proper goal of the journey of unity, a reminder that unity is expressive of a flourishing diversity even as that diversity honors an inherent unity. But the very phrase can imply a kind of surrender to status quo, a *settling for what is* rather than a longing for something more. The multiplicity of the churches fits comfortably and conveniently in the American consumer culture where our spiritual market thrives on ecclesial diversity and, at times, even competition, friendly or otherwise.

Now, I would contend that even this is too rosy a picture of the state of the unity of the churches today. Without denying the incredible progress that has been made on the ecumenical journey, I would argue that we are currently seeing a regression, a renewed fascination with distinctive identities at the expense of what we hold in common, and even within the ecumenical movement itself a kind of re-confessionalization that is placing more emphasis on our confessional or denominational families than on the wider unity we seek. Many of my colleagues invest more time and energy in intra-confessional ecumenism—the Lutheran World Federation, the Anglican Communion, the World Methodist Council, or the soon to be established World Communion of Reformed Churches—than they invest in inter-confessional movements like the World or National Councils of Churches or in the implementation of our full communion agreements. It is hard to deny that success has bred a kind of complacency.

Philip Potter, one of the giants of the ecumenical

movement, offered this stirring vision of the goal of the ecumenical movement in his address to the Vancouver Assembly in 1983. Using the image of the "house" and the "household" from the Greek *oikos*, Potter said,

The ecumenical movement is the means by which the churches which form the house, the *oikos* of God, are seeking so to live and witness before all peoples that the whole *oikumene* may become the *oikos* of God through the crucified and risen Christ in the power of the life-giving Spirit, (Potter, in Kinnamon and Cope, *The Ecumenical Movement*, p. 55).

Absent this kind of theological horizon, this kind of polar star if you will, ecumenism is quickly reduced to organizations and institutions, each important, but at most penultimate. One of Potter's predecessors as General Secretary, Visser't Hooft, spoke pointedly of the danger faced by the ecumenical movement in general and the World Council of Churches in particular, fearing that

the unity which the World Council promotes will in fact turn out to be the static institutional unity of the self-centered church rather than the dynamic unity of churches which fulfill their common missionary calling, (Visser't Hooft, *The Pressure of our Common Calling*, p. 38).

And he says further, that for churches to think that they've done enough when they cooperate with each other is a "false conclusion. For unity in Christ," he writes, "is unity in the deepest convictions and unity which embraces all of life. Those who accept co-operation as sufficient are in danger of retarding the growth of that true unity," (Visser't Hooft, p. 18). This, it seems to me, is precisely the situation, the danger, the safe accommodation, and the complacency we face today.

Finally, the ecumenical movement struggles today because our brokenness no longer scandalizes us as a sin from which we need to be redeemed. With the exception of interchurch families who must deal regularly with the painful realities of division at weddings and funerals, at the table and the font, the typical Christian in the United States is prepared at most to say that disunity is detrimental to our mission and perhaps an embarrassment. But listen for a moment to Karl Barth, the great twentieth century theologian, who wrote an essay in 1937 on



“the Church and the churches” in preparation for the Edinburgh Faith and Order Conference:

We have no right to explain the multiplicity of the churches at all. We have to deal with it as we deal with sin, our own and others', to recognize it as a fact, to understand it as the impossible thing which has intruded itself, as guilt which we must take upon ourselves, without the power to liberate ourselves from it. We must not allow ourselves to acquiesce in its reality; rather we must pray that it be forgiven and removed, and be ready to do whatever God's will and command may enjoin in respect of it, (Karl Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, pp. 22-23).

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*Horace Bushnell, the 19th century New England Congregationalist, spoke of sin that is so conventional we fail even to notice it. The multiplicity of the churches is the norm, a condition that has taken up comfortable residence in our household of faith.*

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These are powerful words, but I am struck by how alien and strange they sound in our ears today. We simply don't think of the church's disunity in these terms. It doesn't feel to us as “the impossible thing which has intruded itself.” No, the multiplicity of the churches is the norm, a condition that has taken up comfortable residence in our household of faith. In another context, Horace Bushnell, the 19th century New England Congregationalist, spoke of sin that is so conventional we fail even to notice it: “Sin is here and sin that wants salvation, but it is sin so thoroughly respectable as to make it very nearly impossible to produce any just impression of its deformity,” (Horace Bushnell in Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, vol. 1, p. 130). Visser't Hooft draws the clear meaning of this failure: “The realization that the Church must be one because of its very nature and mission has not penetrated into the whole life of our churches; we are not yet thoroughly ashamed of our many ‘parties,’” (Visser't Hooft, p. 24). Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, helpfully reminds us that denominations, properly conceived, are renewal movements preserving important dimensions of the Gospel in danger of being lost. But, Kinnamon

tells us again and again, we have turned the adjectives of our names—Lutheran, Catholic, Methodist, etc.—into nouns. The renewal movement has become the object of preservation itself.

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*It means measuring our progress or growth in unity against a vision that approaches us from God's future rather than our frequently over-cherished past.*

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Polar star or shooting star? The challenge to the ecumenical movement today is not simply organizational. To be sure, there have been failures in leadership. To be sure, financial crises in the mainline churches have left organizations starved. To be sure, inflated ego, self-serving ecclesial or personal agendas, and leadership deficits have left their wounds. But at the core is a spiritual and theological challenge. It is about getting beyond the shock of the unfriendliness we encounter in the other and undoubtedly that the other encounters in us by accepting the theological fact that we are the friends we *didn't* choose, that we are called to be one with the friends Christ chose for us. It means measuring our progress or growth in unity not against the divisions from the past we have overcome, but against the vision of the “household” that is to be sign and instrument of God's design for the whole of creation, a vision that approaches us from God's future rather than our frequently over-cherished past. It means confession and repentance, an acknowledgement that what we're dealing with is not just inconvenience or embarrassment, but sin.

Barth asserts that “Homesickness for the *una sancta* is genuine and legitimate only insofar as it is a disquietude at the fact that we have lost and forgotten Christ, and with Him have lost the unity of the Church,” (Karl Barth, p. 35). The great Indian ecumenist D. T. Niles puts it this way: “Men are not merely prodigal from their Father's home but have actually forgotten the Father's address,” (D. T. Niles, *That They May Have Life*, p. 42). Perhaps the reason we feel so often today to be living merely with the memory of a shooting star, is that we have made unity, rather than Christ, our polar star. If in fact the ecumenical vocation is ultimately about the *oikos* of God in service of the *oikumene*, the ecumenical house in service of the cosmic household, then it is

all about homecoming, and the welcome of the One—Jesus Christ—who calls us friend.

Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson relates this theme of friendship to the work of Sophia, or Holy Wisdom, the expression of divinity found in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Book of Wisdom we read:

Although she is but one, she can do all things,  
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;  
in every generation she passes into holy souls  
and makes them friends of God, and prophets, (*Wisdom 7.27*)

Here Johnson finds her symbol for the communion of saints, that community that transcends and destroys not only our institutional walls and fences, but also the boundary between life and death. This

friendship with God, mediated through Christ or Sophia-Wisdom, becomes for the divided church a sign of both judgment and promise, critique and hope. So I close with Johnson's vision as encouragement toward the polar star who is both the end and the beginning of the ecumenical vocation. Let her words be our prayer:

Down through the centuries as Holy Wisdom  
graces person after person in land after land,  
situation after situation, they form together a  
grand company of the friends of God and  
prophets; a wisdom community of holy  
people praising God, loving each other, and  
struggling for justice and peace in the world;  
a company that stretches backward and  
forward in time and encircles the globe in  
space, (Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, p. 41).

*The Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture on Christian Unity is a biennial event that takes place in the North Texas Area, bringing together the challenge of Christian unity in today's world with the commitment to the theological education of the laity. The lecture, jointly sponsored by the Council on Christian Unity and the Stalcup School of Theology for the Laity at Brite Divinity School, was inaugurated in 1989, and has continued to provide a meeting place for the local, regional, national and international witness to the oneness of the Church and the interconnectedness of the ecumenical movement. This lecture is made possible through the generosity of Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup.*

# And Who is My Neighbor?

Sam Kobia



DR. SAM KOBIA is General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. He presented this Opening Sermon at the June 14–17, 2009 conference on “Churches responding to the challenges of racism” in Doorn, Netherlands in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the World Council’s Program to Combat Racism.

But wanting to justify himself, he asked  
Jesus, and who is my neighbor? ~Luke 10:29

It seems the most natural thing in the world for a person to care about family members. A scientist points out that family is an extension of self, and argues that there is a “selfish gene” driving each of us to ensure the successful continuation of our family line. Perhaps this explains our concern for people who live in our own neighborhood as well: by watching out for the people who live close to us, we provide better security networks for our loved ones and ourselves.

But what is it that causes us to extend ourselves, and to take real risks, for people farther removed from us? Why, in the parable Jesus told, did a passing Samaritan put himself out for the sake of a Jewish traveler? The Jew was someone whom this passer-by would have regarded as *the Other*, someone whose well-being had no immediate relevance to the well-being of himself or his family.

Yet the Samaritan offers hospitality to this utter stranger. He treats his wounds and supports his recovery from the wrong that has been done to him, perhaps by situations and practices that cash on human vulnerabilities. It is a form of hospitality that goes far beyond our experience of offering a modest round of food and drink; the biblical concept of hospitality is a true challenge, an entering into a form of intimacy with strangers and the unknown. Biblical hospitality has little to do with enter-

tainment of one’s friends and the convivial gathering of folk who are much like ourselves. No, biblical hospitality has to do with the kindness of strangers—and that is just its problem, and its opportunity.

We are grateful that this form of hospitality, of breaking down the barriers that separate us from those whom we are encouraged to view as the Other, is practiced in our time—although with varying degrees of success.

This is a season in which we recall the inauguration 40 years ago of the ecumenical campaign to combat racism, and particularly to oppose the system of apartheid in South Africa and its satellites. Thanks largely to an initiative undertaken under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, people from all regions of the globe were enabled to join in the struggle for liberation wherever racism raged. We have come to discern afresh what this commitment to battle against racism implies in today’s world. For indeed, racism is still alive.

Some asked at the time (1969), “Why should white Europeans take sides in the internal politics of a far-away nation like South Africa?” For Christians, surely, the answer lies in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

In this parable of Jesus, the person to whom we ought to pay most attention says not a word, and not the slightest clue is offered as to who he is, or what he does. Jesus simply says, “A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers.”

That is all we know, and that is why most sermons on this text ignore that man and concentrate upon the priest, the Levite, the Good Samaritan, and even upon the innkeeper. Preachers love to discuss the hypocrisy of the priest and the Levite, how doubtless they were on their way to meetings to



discuss how to make the highways safer for pedestrian travel, and hence had no time to stop. More knowledgeable exegetes refer to the various laws and hygienic codes that would have to be broken for priests and Levites to engage in roadside rescue work.

I want us to visualize this nameless, faceless and voiceless traveler from Jerusalem to Jericho. Who was he? And then there is the good and proper emphasis upon the Samaritan and his unhesitating and generous hospitality to the wounded man. Jesus uses the Samaritan to illustrate that one who was himself an outcast, and one of the wounded of the society, was more likely than the privileged to show kindness and hospitality, which is what compassion means. He is described by the lawyer to whom Jesus tells the story as “the one who showed mercy” (v.37), and we are asked to “go and do likewise.”

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*In the new law that Jesus offers,  
the expected is not enough.*

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Now, this word *mercy* is a bit curious in this context, for the word *mercy* suggests an unmerited kindness, the gift of something undeserved. When a judge shows mercy in a criminal case, he is not responding to the facts, or what custom or even justice requires. But in the face of justice he shows mercy. That is, he forbears to do what is expected to someone whom he has in his power, and who has absolutely no claim upon him of any sort, and instead he shows compassion. It is not simply kindness; it is kindness in face of an opportunity to do otherwise. Mercy is not less than justice done; it is more than justice requires.

The reason why the Samaritan is called “good” and is described as “showing mercy” is that, as a stranger in Israel, a foreigner, he had no obligation to show hospitality to Jews, who were his sworn enemies; in fact, he might have been taught that a dead or dying Jew was one less Jew about whom to worry. Likewise, Jews traditionally were not encouraged to help a Samaritan; the law that tended to apply in this relationship was the law of the jungle. This Samaritan acted contrary to universal expectations and against his own cultural history and community interest; he showed mercy in spite of it all.

What this story demonstrates to us is that, if justice is the tool of the powerful, then mercy is the power

of the weak, for herein is the power not simply to change conditions but to change minds and hearts. The Good Samaritan showed mercy when he could have exacted rough justice. And Jesus upholds him as one who, living beyond what the law requires, has a clue of what righteousness and eternal life are all about.

Now let us remind ourselves that Jesus was talking to a Jewish lawyer who, having knowledge of strict schools of biblical interpretation, may have had a narrow understanding of who his neighbor was. Jesus invites this learned friend to expand his perspective, and the model for mercy that Jesus offers him is that of an outcast, one of the wretched of the earth and despised by many in the lawyer’s own community, but—and this is an interesting turn—Jesus does not bid the young Jew to love the Samaritan for what he did; he bids him to *do* as the Samaritan did.

It is the stranger who is commended to us, the foreigner who has no claim of kinship or obligation upon us to whom we open our hearts, not simply because it is expected in the way of minimal civil hospitality but because in the new law that Jesus offers, the expected is not enough. Simple justice simply will not do. The old definitions of justice and hospitality will not work. It is a new and radical day that Jesus proclaims. In showing mercy, hospitality to the strangers among us, we expand the circles of God’s providential and refreshing love and thereby free ourselves as well as others from the bondage of our own narrow limits.

The story of the Good Samaritan told two thousand years ago has become a touchstone for those who ask not merely, “How am I to treat my next-door neighbor?,” but “To whom am I called to be a neighbor?”

Neighbors from many nations found common cause in Nelson Mandela’s struggle in South Africa, neighbors who knew of him only through reports from a distant land. And as they began to take action together to combat racism, the system of apartheid was indeed “bound to fail.”

Today, I see the parable of the Good Samaritan as a classic text within the “ultimate immigration handbook,” the Bible. It is as applicable to our situations today as it was in the actual context when Jesus told it. It speaks to us in this time after virulently anti-immigrant parties have made unprecedented gains in European elections. This

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*Christ calls us to be neighbors of immigrants, of oppressed minorities  
within our own nations, of all who are in need of a neighbor.*

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parable of Jesus calls us again to consider, “Who is my neighbor” and how are we to live out that relationship? Christ calls us to be neighbors of immigrants, of oppressed minorities within our own nations, of all who are in need of a neighbor. Christ calls us to be neighbors of people of other races who come to be a part of our community. Christ calls us to be neighbors of people of other faiths who become part of a society where Christianity is the majority. To do this we are called to oppose all systems and structures, all policies and practices, that discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion. We are called to reiterate our clear position that racism is a sin against God who determines the color and race of all those God creates.

For churches and Christians across this world, reaching out to the strangers in our midst or advocating with the government in an increasingly difficult climate is not easy. Sometimes the ordinary

Christians in the pew are confused or even hostile to refugees who are often of a different race and color. The backlash is not something that is happening “out there.” It is also happening in the communities where most of us live.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the author writes, “Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:1-2).

In our text this afternoon it is the stranger and the battered Jew who is the means of entry into the new kingdom that is revealed in Jesus Christ, for the truth is that the neighbor and the stranger are one, that a commitment to unity overwhelms our differences. The neighbor is that person with whom we share not simply the cup of water and the crust of bread, but the adventure of life itself, given by God and lived to God’s glory; and when we discover that, we will discover not only who our neighbor is, but who and whose we are. Amen



# The People of the Paradox

Michael Kinnamon



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DR. MICHAEL KINNAMON is General Secretary of the National Council of Churches. This Watkins Lecture was presented April 24, 2009 at National City Christian Church, Washington, D.C.

First things first: It is an honor to have my name associated with those of Hal and Evelyn Watkins. If we ask, “What is needed to renew the church?” we can find no better answer than to point to the integrity, faithfulness, and stewardship that mark their lives.

As Hal knows, I didn’t really grow up in the Disciples; and so it probably isn’t surprising that I have been deeply concerned with the identity of this community that I embraced as an adult. Some of you may take “who we are” for granted; but, for me, it is a heritage I have had to grow into through exploration. For that reason, I welcomed the invitation to serve on the 21st Century Vision Team, an advisory group to the General Minister and President. As part of that team, I had a major role in drafting a new Identity Statement and Marks of Identity—which led to the articles you may have seen over the past year in *DisciplesWorld*. And these, in turn, have contributed to a book, co-written with Jan Linn and published by Chalice, that will be off the press before the General Assembly, entitled *Disciples: Reclaiming Our Identity, Reforming Our Practice*. This lecture provides an opportunity to summarize some of this work, and I am grateful for the invitation to deliver it.

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Disciples have been called “the people of the parenthesis,” but a far better label would be “the people of the paradox.” A paradox, as you know, is a statement that holds together ideas that seem to be

in opposition to—or, at least, considerable tension with—one another. At our best, we are both—and people in an either-or world, a community that insists on holding in tension what others often split apart.

I am by no means the first to make such a claim. A good example, appropriate for this year, is the International Convention of 1909, the centennial celebration of Thomas Campbell’s “Declaration and Address.” The convention report focused on “the chief things for which this movement stands,” often in paradoxical terms. The following sentence is illustrative: “The distinction between faith, which has Christ as its object, and opinions, which are deductions of human reason..., has enabled the advocates of this Reformation to harmonize two important principles which have often been regarded as incompatible: namely, union and liberty.”

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In the same vein, Peter Ainslie used to argue that the Catholic Church has, at times, maintained unity at the sacrifice of freedom, while Protestants have, at times, safeguarded freedom at the cost of unity. Disciples are, he contended, distinct in our insistence that Christians can express their oneness in Christ without a magisterium, standardized forms of worship, or hierarchical decision-making structures. There is a touch of self-righteousness in this, but you see the point. It is not the commitment to freedom alone, or unity alone, that defines us; it is the combination, the tension, that makes us who

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it is the combination, the tension, that makes us who we are.*

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we are. People of the paradox. A both-and people in an either-or world.

Before continuing, I must acknowledge that “both-and-ness” is easy to caricature. You may know that the University of Chicago Divinity School holds periodic lectures in honor of an imaginary theologian, Franz Bibfeldt, who is inevitably lauded, tongue in cheek, for his wishy-washy theologizing. Kiekegaard may be known for his bold either-or, I’ve heard Martin Marty declare, but our man Bibfeldt stands firmly for both-and!

What Disciples have stood for, however, is not an anything goes acquiescence (at least, at our best) but a tough-minded embrace of tension—which, after all, is central to the whole Christian theologian tradition. The God we worship is, paradoxically, three and one. The Christ we follow is, paradoxically, human and divine. Human beings, if scripture is our guide, are, paradoxically, “dust and ashes” and “little lower than the angels,” bound by a power of sin that infects our wills (see Romans 7) yet responsible for our actions. Disciples are a people of paradox in the sense that we have confessed this historic faith of the church; but, as I will try to demonstrate, we have also gone further in our willingness to hold disparate concepts and practices in tension.

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*And without this sense of calling, it is no wonder that we are searching for direction and purpose—brand Z on a shelf that already has A through Y.*

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Behind this lecture, with its focus on an identity of paradox, is one other passionate conviction: that we, older Disciples, have not taught this heritage to a new generation, to the point that even leaders in our congregations are unfamiliar with central aspects of our historical identity. Being a “restructured” denomination seems to have become an end in itself. Having lay elders at the table, or baptizing pre-adolescents instead of babies, has become more of an idiosyncrasy—“just the way we do it”—than part of a

theologically-grounded effort to help renew the church universal. Even more troubling (at least to me), many contemporary Disciples seem unaware of, or indifferent to, our special calling to promote this paradoxical unity-through-liberty. And without this sense of calling, it is no wonder that we are searching for direction and purpose—brand Z on a shelf that already has A through Y, but without the historical depth of Presbyterians or the missional focus of Mennonites or the ethnic identity of Lutherans or the liturgical cohesion of Episcopalians.

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Let me begin with the paradox that runs prominently throughout our history. On the one hand, we are a *church*; we gather for worship, engage in mission, baptize, ordain, and develop structures needed for common life. On the other hand, our forebears did not set out to be another denomination—brand Z on a shelf with A through Y. We have seen ourselves as a reforming *movement* within the universal church, a movement whose reason for being is to help heal the church’s divisions for the sake of its witness to the gospel of reconciliation.

This all needs to be said clearly and carefully. I affirm the decisions, made at the time of Restructure, to make the Disciples a more “churchly” body. It seems to me, however, that the architects of Restructure saw “church” as an *alternative* to “movement,” whereas I think we are truest to our identity when we hold these concepts in creative tension. Whenever Disciples begin to act like any other denomination, it is time to recall that we are, first and foremost, “a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world” (Vision Team), but a movement that knows it must paradoxically be a church in order to fulfill its calling.

At our best, Disciples have been a very rare thing: a community with a deep sense of particular identity that isn’t sectarian—because its particular identity is to be a healer of the universal church! We have developed distinctive practices and perspectives, not to separate ourselves from other Christians, but to offer these practices and perspectives as gifts for the renewal of Christ’s one body.

This paradoxical identity, however, has made it difficult for Disciples to say who we are (thus the parenthesis). The 1909 Convention declared that our movement “stands for the rejection of all party names in religion,” so that even our label might show the preeminence of Christ. The irony, of course, is that our priority for the unity of the church is itself a particular identity! Beyond that, how will people hear our witness to unity if we aren’t clear about who we are and what we stand for?

Our ecclesiology contains other paradoxes, but, for the most part, they are ones we share with mainline Protestants. One of these—that the local church is the universal church in each place, while the universal church is the communion of local congregations—was the focus of my *DisciplesWorld* article last month. This is a case where Restructure was intended to move us beyond the notion that only the local gathering of believers is truly church to a more paradoxical understanding. We now affirm that each local community, in which Christ is present through faith, is truly the church, not simply a denominational branch office. But this local congregation cannot be whole—“Catholic”—unless it is in structured communion with other local communities. The universal church is in the local church, and the communion of local churches is the church universal.

In one of the ironies of history, however, just as Disciples were working to become more interdependent, the American church as a whole was, sociologically speaking, becoming more congregational! We were surely correct, theologically speaking, to emphasize the covenantal bonds that tie Christians to one another. But we have been trying to live this out at a moment in history when such bonds have been weakening across the church.

Let me use that as a transition to another crucial paradox. I doubt that I need to establish that the Stone-Campbell movement began as a freedom movement, drawing on the heady excitement of the nation’s early decades. The “Declaration and Address” is an extended call to “resume that precious, that dear bought, liberty wherewith Christ has made his people free.” By the time of the centennial convention in 1909, our protest had assumed a familiar form: no to ecclesiastical hierarchy that would impose decisions on congregations, no to creedal conformity that would regard particular statements of belief as tests of

fellowship, and no to an elevation of clergy that would constrict the priesthood of all believers.

This emphasis on freedom, however, is only half the picture. Ralph Wilburn put it this way: “From the beginning, Disciples of Christ have been aware of the need to hold this principle of individual freedom in creative balance with the principle of community.” The paradox of freedom-in-community. Just as the apostle Paul admonished the new Christians in Galatia to exercise their freedom in Christ by becoming servants to one another (Galatians 5:1, 13), so the founders of our movement envisioned a freedom that would give rise to a “disciplined holiness” sufficient to build up the one body of Christ. They clearly recognized that individual liberty, if unchecked by common submission to what Thomas Campbell called the “self-evident” truths of scripture, undercuts the community’s ability to live and witness together—thus threatening two other pillars of the movement: the unity of all Christians and their mission of calling the world to Jesus Christ.

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*The concept of covenant proposes that we are mutually accountable to one another because we are commonly accountable to Christ.*

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The challenge of Restructure, I take it, was to give structured expression to a way of being church that holds this tension between freedom and community, that promotes accountability without coercion, that calls church members to obedience to the gospel as articulated in community while still making plenty of room for dialogue, diversity, and dissent. And the lynchpin of their effort is the concept of *covenant*, which, in essence, proposes that we are mutually accountable to one another because we are commonly accountable to Christ.

I will not elaborate here on a theology of covenant, since I have written and spoken about this in other settings. I will simply note that behind all this lies the vital assumption that the church doesn’t only exist to meet our needs, to be a source of fellowship and occasional inspiration. Church is the place (or should be the place) where we are shaped in a way of living that is likely not that of the world around us. The community of the church should challenge our easy presuppositions and call us to intimate life with persons we, humanly speaking, may not like or be



like. What the theology of covenant insists, however, is that this calling to account is not done by some “superior” authority but by ourselves through persons and bodies we authorize to help hold us accountable to our own covenantal promises. Freedom in community.

As you might image, my concern is that, for whatever reasons—our legacy of freedom, the individualism of the culture, flaws in the structure set up in the 1960s—Disciples, despite the rhetoric of Restructure, have not really taken covenant seriously as a basis of church life (a claim we may want to discuss later). While reformers in some churches still need to free the individual from the domination of the church, the challenge for us is still to free the church from the domination of the individual—to hold an appropriate tension between personal freedom and interdependent community.

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*At our best, we have preached  
a costly faith without claiming that  
we have the last word on it—  
Christians only, but not the only Christians.*

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Covenant ecclesiology is by no means easy! To demonstrate disciplined community that yet values diversity, dialogue, and dissent—to model responsible freedom—requires real spiritual maturity. But if we Disciples don’t act as a covenantal people, then we become, in effect, clubs of culturally-formed individuals, preoccupied, as Clark Williamson once put it, with “the relief of psychic distress and institutional maintenance.”

There is much more to say about all this, but I will leave it for discussion and move to another example of my main thesis. Disciples are obviously not the only church to practice believers’ baptism; but we are practically the only believers’ church to make Christian unity a key part of our mission and self-understanding. The commitments to radical discipleship (the point of this form of baptism) and ecumenical openness have historically been seen as either-or. Disciples, at our best, have said both-and.

All of this became very clear to me when, in 1983, I became the first member of the WCC staff to visit the Faroe Islands. In case you’ve not been there, the Faroes is a chain of eighteen islands, belonging to Denmark, somewhere between the Shetlands and

Iceland in the North Atlantic. At the time of my visit, 80% of the Faroes belonged to the Danish Lutheran Church. In Denmark itself, nearly 90% of the population were at that time members of the “folk” (national) church, although only a tiny percentage worshiped regularly.

I was traveling with the dean of a cluster of churches in East Germany (a committed peace activist) and a very middle class young adult from South Africa—so it was a bit of a shock when the headline in the local newspaper read “Communist Bishop, South African Radical, and Liberation Theologian Visit Faroes”! It turned out that the editor of that paper was a member of the Plymouth Brethren, a fundamentalist group of believers’ baptists that, in recent years, had been growing by leaps and bounds. So I called him. “My own church,” I told him, “is a believers’ baptism tradition.” Pause. “Okay,” he said. “We’re having a meeting tonight in Torshaven, and *you* can come.”

It was a very instructive evening—like something out of Kierkegaard! “What,” I asked, “is your major complaint about the Lutheran folk church?” That unleashed a torrent! “They baptize everyone, so it doesn’t mean a thing! A person shouldn’t enter the church because it’s part of their national identity. You become a Christian through repentance, change of heart. It involves a commitment, a decision to live a new way. They act as if discipleship doesn’t matter. Just baptize babies so you can count them, and then let them live like everybody else!”

Such language should sound familiar to anyone steeped in our own history. Alexander Campbell called baptism the “Jordan flood” that separates every Christian from the values of the nation or culture in which he or she happens to live. The church, wrote Campbell, is a “peculiar people” who preach a costly faith that calls for genuine commitment to follow the way of the Cross. This is the great strength of a believers’ baptist tradition. But the great weakness is that these traditions tend, like the Plymouth Brethren, to be exclusivist, anti-ecumenical—as if God were theirs, rather than the other way around.

And that’s why I love being a Disciple. At our best, we live paradoxically: practicing believers’ baptism while seeking unity with those who practice differently. At our best, we have preached a costly faith without claiming that we have the last word on it—Christians only, but not the only Christians.



Overseas, only one believers' baptism tradition has become part of church unions in such places as North India, the United Kingdom, and Jamaica—the Disciples of Christ. In this country, eleven churches have participated in Churches United in Christ, only one of which practices believers' baptism as its normative practice—the Disciples of Christ.

In our book, Jan Linn and I refer to this paradox as “bold humility”—bold in our proclamation and service, humble in our hospitality to those who are different. Baptism is, or should be, a visible embodiment of this tension. Through baptism, God lays claim to us and turns us from other gods; but also through baptism, God unites us with the whole Christian family and opens us to persons unlike ourselves and perspectives unlike our own. Discipleship and openness. Bold mission and ecumenical humility. It is a wonderful identity!

The problem, from my perspective, is that we haven't usually claimed it. For generations, as you well know, members of the Stone-Campbell movement battled over whether the “pious unimmersed” were Christians. And even today, large parts of that movement regard ecumenism—unity with differently-practicing Christians—as a four-letter word. They break the tension between radical discipleship and ecumenical openness by emphasizing only the former.

What I fear is that *we* break the tension by emphasizing only the latter. One indication of this may be how little contemporary Disciples talk about baptism at all. Stephen England could still declare in 1963 that “Disciples of Christ have been noted for ‘majoring in baptism’”; but a scan of the past twenty years of *The Disciple* and *DisciplesWorld* turned up very few articles on the subject. It was once commonplace, say older friends, to hear lengthy references to baptism from Disciples pulpits or at Disciples assemblies; but this is no longer the case, at least in my experience. The thinking seems to be, “If we are going to be open to the sprinkling of infants, why make a big deal out of our different approach?” This, however, at least as I see it, completely misses the point. What is distinctive,

what identifies us as Disciples, is precisely the paradox: radical discipleship *and* ecumenical commitment.

I hope this is sufficient to establish my thesis: We are a people of the paradox. Unity *and* freedom. Church *and* movement. Radical freedom *and* accountable community. Committed discipleship *and* ecumenical openness.

I want to conclude by making three other observations related to this identity of paradox. They are somewhat disparate, but all three may provide fodder for our discussion. First, I am convinced that many of our divisions between liberals and conservatives are caused by—or, at least, exacerbated by—the failure to affirm the paradoxical nature of Christian faith. A good example is the tension between grace and faith that was at the heart of the “Jesus only” controversy that swirled through the 1987 and 1989 general assemblies. Is Jesus Christ the only savior, the One we must confess if we are to be in right relationship with God? This was the question posed in a resolution authored by the conservative evangelical group, Disciple Renewal. The Commission on Theology, in its report to the assembly, refused to say yes because, they argued, that would put limits on God's grace. To which Disciple Renewal responded that grace, while freely given, must be made our own through faith. It is like having a free ticket to a Cubs game; you still have to enter the stadium, you still have to respond, for it to be of any value. To which the Commission responded that this makes salvation dependent on something we do. As Ephesians (2:8) puts it, even faith is a gift, lest we should boast. But the problem with this is that it makes it sound as if some people are pre-destined to have faith (a gift of God), while others aren't.

This is a theological debate worth having. But should it really be divisive? Isn't it better to recognize that we are here in the realm of paradox, that grace and faith are properly held in unresolved tension. At one pole is legalistic religion where Christians think they must or can earn God's grace. At the other is cheap grace where Christians forget that we are called to love as we have been loved. Living in the tension between them is where Christ-

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*I am convinced that many of our divisions between liberals and conservatives are caused by—or, at least, exacerbated by—the failure to affirm the paradoxical nature of Christian faith.*

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ianity gets most profound. And we likely need one another, liberals and conservatives, if we are to stay in that space.

Second, there is (as you may already have noted) something paradoxical about the whole focus on identity, because excessive focus on ourselves is, of course, the surest way not to focus on God—which, in the last analysis, is the heart of our problem! Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw this very clearly. “Our church,” wrote Bonhoeffer from his prison cell, “has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, [and as a result] is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to [humanity] and the world.”

I believe that strengthening our own identity as Disciples of Christ can enhance our participation in God’s mission of peacemaking and compassionate service. But surely Bonhoeffer is right: a pre-occupation with self-preservation is antithetical to a faith that has the cross as its central symbol. In Bonhoeffer’s words, “the church is the church only when it exists for others,” only when it gives itself away in witness, service, and advocacy. Any discussion of identity must bear this in mind.

My final point has to do with the Lord’s Supper, because, after all, I am a Disciple! Here, again, we show ourselves to be a both-and people. Disciples are like the Catholic, Orthodox, and Episcopal churches in regarding the Lord’s Supper as the very center of our communal life. Preaching alone, or some private experience of the Holy Spirit, is no

substitute, we have said, for the community’s public celebration of Communion—at least every Lord’s Day. We are like free-church Protestants, however, in our conviction that formal orders of worship can actually hinder Christians from gathering at the Table. It is hard to think of another church (another movement within the church) that combines this eucharistic center with free-church practice.

There is, however, a more important point to be made: Through the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, we *experience* the paradoxes inherent in Christian faith. One of these is the tension between memory and anticipation. “Do this in remembrance of me.” “Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus!” In a very real sense, at the Table we remember the future (a true paradox) by recalling God’s promises, not just for our biblical ancestors but for us. A true “restoration tradition,” I would suggest, will not seek to replicate the chronological past, but will anticipate the eschatological future by “restoring” the biblical promises of God’s coming reign to the center of our life. Memory *and* anticipation.

And, of course, there is much more. In the Lord’s Supper, God shows us fullness through self-emptying, God shows us greatness through servanthood, God shows us the way to life through death. These aren’t propositions to be learned; they are mysteries to be enacted—until our very lives are shaped by God’s paradoxical truth rather than society’s either-or logic. We are a people of the paradox because we are a people of the Table. The two go hand in hand.



# A Ya'll Which We Call the Church

Andy Mangum

*DR. ANDY MANGUM is the Senior Minister of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Arlington, Texas. This sermon was given at the Opening Ecumenical Service of the 2009 Ulster Project. The Ulster Project is an ecumenical effort to bring Catholic and Protestant Youth between the ages of 14 and 16 from Northern Ireland together with Catholic and Protestant Youth from the United States to discover together their role in Christian Unity, conflict resolution, and peace. It began in 1974, and since that time, Ulster Projects have been born in several cities throughout the United States. The Arlington Ulster Project, started in 1994, partners with the Belfast Area.*

<sup>11</sup>Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)—<sup>12</sup>remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup>by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup>and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup>He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup>For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Consequently, you are no longer foreigners

and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup>And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.  
~Ephesians 2:11–22

<sup>20</sup>“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, <sup>21</sup>that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup>I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: <sup>23</sup>I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. <sup>24</sup>“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. <sup>25</sup>“Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me.

~John 17:20–25

I want to welcome those of you from Northern Ireland to Texas. I’m glad that we could provide some of our milder summer weather for you. I hope you enjoy your stay.

I thought it might be helpful if I gave a brief lesson in the Texas forms of English Grammar. We have

words here that you may not have encountered before. Like the word, *awholenother*. As in, “it’s hot but not like 1980—now that was awholenother story.” It’s an intensified form of the common word “another.” But where any other English speaker would simply say “that’s another story,” the Texan wants to be sure you understand that that’s a-*whole*-nother story. We also have a multi-purpose immediate future tense infinitive—*fixin’, f-i-x-i-n*. It means that there’s something that is immediately about to happen “cause I’m fixin’ to do it.” As in, “I’m fixin’ to eat some cookies,” or “I’m fixin’ to go brand the cattle,” or “it’s almost July, and it’s fixin’ to get really hot, but not like 1980—now that was awholenother story.”

Most of these Texanisms are just quaint. I wouldn’t try to defend them. But I do think Texas offers one variant to the English language that is quite useful. I’m hoping it catches on.

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It has to do with the second-person plural pronoun. In standard English, when you are speaking to one other person, and you want to refer to them, you use the pronoun *you*. But when you want to refer to a bunch of people, you use the *same* *you*. It’s hard to know in English whether you talking about one person or a whole group of people. But in Texas, we’ve solved the problem by using the phrase *ya’ll*. You, singular; *ya’ll*, plural. It’s a contracted form of *you all*. But don’t use *you all* ’cause then people will think you’re from the Deep South, and that’s awholenother culture. But sometimes, you know, *ya’ll* can be confusing when you have lots of different groups in the same place: I could say “*ya’ll*” for instance here in this room, and I might be referring to the guys in the uncomfortable robes, or I might be referring to *ya’ll* adults. I might be referring to *ya’ll* ladies or *ya’ll* gentlemen. *Ya’ll* from Northern Ireland or *ya’ll* from Texas. *Ya’ll* Roman Catholics; *ya’ll* Protestants; *ya’ll* Anglicans. But again, Texas has an additional construction that lets us speak to everyone in a large group made up of smaller groups like this one. It’s the phrase *allya’ll*—pronounced *aw-ya’ll*. It means everybody together, *aw-ya’ll*.

That’s helpful in looking at our text this evening from Ephesians 2. The first part of chapter 2 dealt

with salvation. And though Paul uses the second person plural in that text, we often think of it as singular, as a person. “For by grace you have been saved, through faith.” That’s something we do as individuals. Or at least that’s how we see it. But Paul understands that when *you* come into an understanding of grace, you join a *ya’ll* which we call the church. You become a part of the whole church—the Apostles Creed we just read says “catholic” church and has an asterisk identifying that as universal. But we also become a part of a local church. The New Testament is imprinted with this understanding. The first set of letters in the New Testament addresses local churches—Rome, Corinth, Ephesus. The second set of letters generally addresses the larger movement of Christianity—the *aw-ya’ll*—of the earliest believers. James for instance addressed his letter to “*aw-ya’ll* twelve tribes of the diaspora.” So the New Testament itself speaks to different *ya’lls* in specific places, but also to the *aw-ya’ll* of Christians everywhere.

The second part of Ephesians 2, the part that picks up with the scripture we just read, deals with this *ya’ll* of the local church. See, apparently the local church there had started to get bogged down into divisions—rival sets of *ya’lls* were arguing with each other. Paul writes that *ya’ll* who were gentile by birth are called the *uncircumcision* by those who call themselves the *circumcised*. That’s not what they were actually called, but I’m not going to tell you what the actual word is. Make your own preachers uncomfortable and ask them. The church had dissolved into name calling and not name calling like Rose Marie, Tom, or Lee Ann. They were angry names, bitter names.

And Paul reminds them that Christ’s death forever eliminated this sort of divisiveness: “*Ya’ll* who were once far away have been brought near, and *aw-ya’ll* have become one holy commonwealth covenant people, because Christ is our peace. *Ya’ll* who have been fighting, *aw-ya’ll* belong together as one *ya’ll*, reconciled through one *you*, who is Christ.”

It is that vision that brings us to this place called Ulster Project. We recognize that between Europe and the United States we have lobbed our fair share of names at one another. Between men and women we have our dividing wall of hostility. Between Protestants and Catholics, between different denominations of Protestantism and different understandings of Catholicism we have generated hurtful and painful divisions. And these words make us cringe a little, “For he is our peace, in his



flesh he has made both groups into one, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.” Notice, by the way, that Paul doesn’t say this *will* happen. Paul doesn’t say, “Jesus is fixin’ to make us all one.” It’s done! We are one. Christ has made it so.

Now, someone will say, “If we are already one, then why are we still divided. Why do we still choose to call names rather than claim siblings? Why do we still build walls?” Good question. I’m glad you asked it. I don’t have any good answers for why we do these things. We continue to let someone or something divide us even though Christ already unites us, Christ has saved all of us and has said—I love aw-ya’ll as much as I love you. Since I cannot answer the question “why are we still divided,” I hope you don’t think it rude of me to pose one to you. But, in a spirit of love, let me ask, “What are you going to do about it?” Some people look at the divisions and fragmentation that exists in our cultures, in our world, in the whole Church and say, “That’s why I’m not a Christian. They just can’t get along with each other.” Others see these divisions and choose to stay within their own little sub-set of the world. But for people like us, we don’t feel quite settled with that response. We keep thinking about this prayer we overheard Jesus pray—that *they might be one so that the world might know*.

One of the things you have chosen to do about it is you have chosen to be a part of Ulster Project, a unique experience. There are folks who will tell you that the friends you make this summer are friends you will have the rest of your life. I think that may be a bit short sighted. The friends with whom you worship tonight have belonged to you since Christ enfolded them and you in the same love displayed on the cross. I pray that your lifetimes are long and blessed, but your lifetimes are too small to contain the nature of these friendships. They are made of eternal stuff. You *have been made* one. Now, Christ prayed, may you be one. What an amazing thing! Jesus looked past all of the history that separates us from him. He looked past the hot summer of 1980, or the Hundred Years War, or the Great Schism. Jesus looked past all that—and into this room—and prayed for us, that they might be one so that the world might know.

I pray that Ulster Project is not the end of the work that you do in the effort to manifest the unity and peace of the whole Church of Jesus Christ. I pray that you hold our feet to the fire and ask the tough questions about why we can’t seem to make the pieces fit. I pray that you become leaders within the Church who seek reconciliation. Most of all, I pray that you make a commitment this summer to the people in this room—that from now on you refuse to allow anyone to refer to the groups represented here in this room as *awholenother group*. You will soon discover that you can learn together, laugh together, love together and live together. May no one ever speak ill of these members of this covenant.

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*Paul doesn’t say, “Jesus is fixin’ to make us all one.” It’s done! We are one.  
Christ has made it so.*

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Sometimes people say to me, “Andy, you’re not naïve enough to believe that Christian groups will ever completely set aside their differences are you? You don’t honestly believe that Christians will ever reach that unity do you?” My response is quite simply, “Yes.”

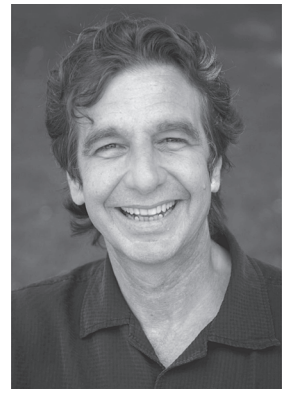
They say, “Andy, that’s impossible.” I say “I don’t know who you’re following as your savior, but the one I’m following specializes in the impossible.”

And then they say, “Fine, but it’s not going to happen in your lifetime.” Maybe not. But we have come so far in 2000 years of trying. God has brought us to a place that no one even a few generations ago could have imagined. God has brought us to a place where Catholic young men and women and Protestant young men and women, kids from rival schools in Arlington, Texas and from different segments of Northern Ireland can be together for a whole month. I believe that one day the Church will be visibly, palpably and authentically one. That we will show in our words and actions and worship that we are the Church that Christ destroyed walls to build up. I believe it because Jesus prayed a prayer, and I don’t think God will leave that prayer unanswered. After all, when Jesus prayed that prayer, he looked into this room, and he saw...you.



# Zechariah 3: A Coded Recipe for Unity in the Twenty-First Century

Jim McGrath



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Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him.

And the Lord said to Satan, "The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a man plucked from the fire?"

Now Joshua was dressed with filthy clothes as he stood before the angel.

The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." And to him he said, "See, I have taken your guilt away from you, and I will clothe with festal apparel."

And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with the apparel; and the angel of the Lord was standing by.

Then the angel of the Lord assured Joshua, saying

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of

access among those who are standing here.

Now listen, Joshua, high priest, you and your colleagues who sit before you! For they are an omen of things to come: I am going to bring my servant the Branch.

For on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day.

On that day, says the Lord of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree." ~Zechariah 3

There are many ways in which religious people divide and put up barricades to separate themselves from others. The world of worship is divided into the great religions. The great religions are divided into sects. The sects are divided into worshipping communities. The worshipping communities divide into liberal and conservative. These polarized worshippers, believing that they are serving God, close off their ears to the arguments of those on the opposing sides, historically condemning them to hell and waging war against them. Religious differences have been cited to justify genocide. These sometimes fatal divisions, sometimes based on issues that eventually are erased by time, cannot be God's plan. It should be the job of religious leaders in general and followers of Jesus in specific to make peace and build bridges. Many Disciple leaders have been active in this process for years.

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*If this Heavenly Court represents the basic human issue of polarity or factional dispute among religious men and women, then the answer God gives for how to deal with this issue is plainly a very quick and thorough burying of the hatchet.*

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Disagreement is so pronounced on the international scene between Hindus and Muslims, Christians and Muslims, and Jews and Muslims that a high death toll continually results. Within worshipping communities polarity over such issues as feminism, gay marriage, stem cell research, and abortion could lead to major schism in the twenty-first century. How can Disciples and other like-minded lovers of unity effectively call the polarized to live in harmony?

The third chapter of the book of Zechariah in the Hebrew Bible carried an important message for the Jews who were about to begin the difficult work of rebuilding the Temple and it marked the beginning of a new kind of understanding of God and community. But there is also something in this passage for the global community in our present twenty-first century time and situation as well. It is a coded recipe for congregational, Christian, and interfaith unity.

The Book of Zechariah takes place in the second and fourth years of the reign of Persian King Darius, according to verses 1:1 and 7:1. Darius appointed Jewish exiles Zerrubabel ben Shealtiel and Joshua ben Jehozadak to go to Jerusalem in 522bce to start construction on the second temple.<sup>1</sup> The returning exiles were looked down upon by the Jews who had stayed in Jerusalem after the fall of the Temple and worshipped in its ruins. Because the exiles had lived among the Babylonians, they were thought of as tainted by paganism.<sup>2</sup>

Joshua ben Jehozadak was the son of Seraiah, a chief priest at the beginning of the exile, who was executed by the Babylonians. Joshua is described as a returning exile in Ezra 2:2 and in Nehemiah 7:7, and may be properly seen as a priest from a family associated with the pre-exilic priestly class who was born and raised in Babylonian captivity and who now “returns” to Jerusalem. It is not a personal return for Joshua, who did not previously live in Jerusalem. His appearance in Jerusalem signals a return for his family and for the larger family of Jewish exiles. This notion of “returning” begins the idea that Joshua, in this fourth vision of Zechariah, symbolizes or serves as a delegate for the entire community of Jewish exiles.

Another character introduced in verse 1 is Satan. The Hebrew word for Satan is literally translated as “the accuser,” and derives from a root word meaning “to oppose, to act as an adversary.”<sup>3</sup> This is not

exactly the same Satan we meet in the New Testament. In the Cambridge University commentary on Zechariah, Rex Mason suggests that the definite article appearing before the word for Satan “denotes an office rather than a personal name.”<sup>4</sup> According to Mason, in a similar scene and setting in Job, chapters 1-2, the word describes the office as “Council for the Prosecution.”<sup>5</sup> The similarity to the usage of Satan in the book of Job and the stated location of Satan being listed as “at the right hand” both suggest that the setting of this vision is the Heavenly Court, the highest court there is. This Court’s findings cannot be reversed.

Verse 2 begins with YHWH’s pronounced rebuke of Satan. From the promptness and force of the rebuke, the text emphasizes that any of these unspecified charges Satan may have brought against Joshua are either rejected outright or never really taken seriously by the Heavenly Court. The text identifies the rebuking YHWH as the “Lord that has chosen Jerusalem . . .” YHWH calls Joshua a “brand plucked out of the fire . . .” The same words are used in Amos 4:11 to describe those who have survived the fire of God’s judgment of Israel, the exile and all the suffering that the people have endured because of it. They have been refined. Their punishment is over. Joshua is their delegate

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*In verse 4, the angel orders the filthy garments removed from Joshua and announces that he has caused Joshua’s “iniquity” to pass away . . . and Joshua is then clothed in priestly garments.*

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Verse 3 introduces the “filthy garments” that Joshua wears as he stands before the angel. The Hebrew word for “filthy” comes from a root word which is used in Isaiah 28:8 to describe vomit and in Isaiah 36:12 to describe excrement.<sup>6</sup> An extreme form of filth is suggested. A lot of commentaries view these very dirty clothes worn by Joshua as being symbolic of a public or private guilt, in the same way that Joshua himself is seen as symbolic, representing a contamination or a taint that comes from living in Babylon among the Babylonians.<sup>7</sup> But the language of the text itself is so forcefully plain in its description of the extremity of the filth that such a leap to guilt or sin may not be necessary, even though the theme of Joshua’s supposed “iniquity” subsequently

arises. Who carries the smell of excrement? That is the smell of homeless people, even in the contemporary world. Joshua, being an exile, was a homeless person. I would argue that the filthy garments do not symbolize any form of sin or guilt, but rather that they symbolize extreme poverty. Joshua stands before the angel of the Lord owning nothing.

In verse 4, the angel (or YHWH) orders the filthy garments removed from Joshua and announces that he has caused Joshua's "iniquity" to pass away. The prophet Zechariah himself enters the picture in verse 5, ordering that a clean turban be placed upon Joshua's head. This order is fulfilled and Joshua is then clothed in priestly garments. Any question about Joshua's past guilt has, by verse 7, gone the way of the filthy garments and become a non-issue. The emphasis from here on is what Joshua will do in the future, not on his past.

In verse 9 YHWH lays a stone with seven eyes before Joshua, promises to engrave it, and then promises to remove the inequity of Israel in one day. My argument that Joshua's filthy clothes symbolized poverty could be supported by a simple reading of this passage. With this engraved stone from God, Joshua's poverty is past history. And the text informs us that as simply as Joshua's poverty has been removed, the iniquity of the land will be removed.

Finally, in verse 10, the Lord of Hosts promises that all who can hear Him will "call every man his neighbor under the vine and under the fig tree." Verse 10's beautiful description of peace, abundance, and communal sharing is the final benefit from all that has gone before.

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*Finally, in verse 10, the Lord of Hosts promises that all who can hear Him will "call every man his neighbor under the vine and under the fig tree."*

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YHWH solves the problem of the filthy garments quickly and promises to solve the problem of Israel's past iniquity just as quickly. If this Heavenly Court represents the basic human issue of polarity or factional dispute among religious men and women, then the answer God gives for how to deal with this issue is plainly a very quick and thorough burying of the hatchet. It is not necessary even to consider such

Christian ideas as Grace or God's forgiveness. Forgiveness comes after blaming. Here, God rejects even the blaming. Satan may be speaking for those Jews who consider Joshua to be an unfit leader because he has lived among the Babylonians and maybe even taken part in their heathen religious expressions. But those who managed to escape being taken into exile have no way of knowing the kind of pressure that Joshua was under or the kind of suffering that he endured in God's name. God, who knows what is in our hearts, rejects the judgments and the accusations of the prosecutors out of hand, even refusing to hear the charges. If the poor and dispossessed are dressed in filthy clothes, the answer is not to blame them but to clothe them.

Last year's presidential election saw incredibly hostile polarity between the two sides. But factional quarrels will not help us with the job of rebuilding that we have before us as we feel the effects of a bad economy, unemployment, war, and oppression. If there was ever a time to forget the past and greet leap over all of these man-made barricades with outstretched hands, it is now. Just as Joshua and the exiles had to work together with those who despised them in order to rebuild the Temple and the spirit of the people it represented, so we today have to replace the filthy garments of our adversaries with a clean set of vestments and call them our neighbors under the vine and fig tree.

Disciples have a history of reaching out over those barricades. At the 1952 Third World Conference on Faith and Order in Lund, Sweden, W.E. Garrison argued in favor of unity on the basis of the American Founding Fathers' ideals of freedom of thought and expression, which played such an important role in the formation of the Stone-Campbell Tradition.<sup>8</sup> As official observer for the World Convention of Churches of Christ at the third and fourth sessions of Vatican II, William Blakemore wrote and spoke of the Holy Spirit at work, bringing Protestants and Catholics away from their opposing poles, toward a central point of mutually-informed unity.<sup>9</sup> Ronald Osborn saw revelation as arising from the experience of the people of God working out their differences with one another.<sup>10</sup> In his *Experiment in Liberty: The Ideals of Freedom in the Experience of the Disciples of Christ*, Osborn wrote, "Perhaps it is the greatest genius of Disciples after all, in politics as well as in the ecclesiastical sphere: to concentrate on the essentials which unite."<sup>11</sup>

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*“Perhaps it is the greatest genius of Disciples after all, in politics as well as in the ecclesiastical sphere: to concentrate on the essentials which unite.”*

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In his article “Toward a Disciples Theology of Religions,” Don A. Pittman discusses efforts to “offer a theological rationale for interreligious engagement and to outline implications for inter-religious dialogue in a pluralistic, globalized, and postcolonial world.”<sup>12</sup> In detailing the 2006 report of the Council on Christian Unity, Pittman explores the possibility of finding salvation outside the Church as a way of entering dialogue with practitioners of non-Christian religions. To even enter into such a dialogue demands change and a commitment to an openness in areas of understanding that have heretofore been absent from most forms of organized religion. As Pittman beautifully puts it, “God is greater than we have been able to comprehend. Our fundamental commitment, then, is to God and not our current images of God.”<sup>13</sup>

It has been said about the great popular song lyricist Johnny Mercer that as a man he was a southerner, as a southerner he was an American, and as an American he was an internationalist. A native of Georgia, Mercer spoke and sang with a pronounced southern accent. His rustic origins inform his lyrics to such

popular songs as “I’m an Old Cowhand,” “Jeepers Creepers,” and “Blues in the Night.” But, while he never lost his southern colloquial charm, he rose to the task of creating timeless classics by translating lyrics of foreign language songs into such lyrical masterpieces as “Autumn Leaves” and “The Summer Wind.”

Mercer could serve as a great example for Disciples, who can in the twenty-first century, without sacrificing one part of their Christian faith, make room under the great tent of the Lord for all believers of all faiths. In fact, the inspiration for how to do so can come from the Bible. Zechariah 3 is one example. Another, as Pittman points out,<sup>14</sup> can be found in the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 15, when the argument arises as to whether the uncircumcised could be saved, Peter points out that God, knowing the content of their hearts, has given the uncircumcised the Holy Ghost as well as the circumcised. And it is that same God who calls us to unity with men and women of all denominations, faiths, and traditions in the twenty-first century.

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### Notes

- 1 Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Prophetic Literature*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 202.
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