

We...

Daniel Rogers

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Introduction

*We are a community of Jesus followers
who desire to spread hope and peace
through a loving faith.*

Our vision statement starts off with the word “we.” This begs the question, “Who are we?” We could answer this a few different ways. We may point to a category like *Christian* or *American*. We could talk about our disposition or character: *happy* or *moral*.

How we think about ourselves matters. Our understanding of who we are and where we come from can impact how we act. A few weeks ago, I gave a sermon on our identity as the *kingdom of God* to encourage us to live out our faith daily. It was my belief that a healthy understanding of our identity as the kingdom could inspire us to live boldly and expect big results.

Knowing our history can also remind us of who we truly are when we lose our way. In the story of the prodigal son, the son had every thing he could have ever needed, but he lost his way. When he was considering whether or not to eat alongside the pigs, he remembered who he was.

But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” ’ (Luke 15:17–19)

So, who are we? We can attack this question from many different angles, as we have already seen, but today, I’ll be talking about who we are historically. While we share a common capital ‘H’ Heritage with every Christian, we share a unique lowercase ‘h’ heritage with others within the Disciples of Christ, Christian Church, and Churches of Christ. That is, we’ll be talking about who we are in the context of our lowercase ‘h’ heritage in the American Restoration Movement, which is also called the Stone-Campbell Movement.¹ While there are thousands of pages out

¹ For more information, see my longer version of this sermon on my site: <https://danielcrogers.gumroad.com/1/InOpinionsLiberty>

there that survey this history, we'll be looking at it through three major passages used by these reformers: John 17:20-21; Ephesians 4:1-6; Romans 15:7.²

John 17:20-23

Let the unity of Christians be our polar star.
- Barton W. Stone

This quote from Barton W. Stone can be found in the seventh volume of the *Christian Messenger* on page 266. In this passage, he talks about not allowing differences of opinions to divide brothers and sisters in Christ. He then says,

Let the unity of Christians be our polar star. To this let our eyes be continually turned, and to this let our united efforts be directed—that the world may believe, and be saved. A little longer forbearance with each others weakness, and truth will triumph. But let the man, who opposes Christian union, remember, that he opposes the prayer of Jesus, and the salvation of the world.³

May we all fix our eyes upon the same goal and learn to be patient towards one another! But why? So we can have bigger congregations? So we can fellowship with more believers? While this may be a result of this kind of attitude, there is actually a more noble reason behind Stone's statement. He says it's based out of a prayer given by Jesus, and the goal is the salvation of the world. The prayer he's talking about is found in John 17.

I ask not only on behalf of these but also on behalf of those who believe in me through their word, 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. (John 17:20–21)

Jesus prayed for unity among his disciples because he believed that this is how the world would come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. When there is division among Christians, it distorts the message of the gospel to the world around us. Think of all of the different denominations in our county alone: Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Church of God, Roman Catholic, and even the community church movement. No wonder people ask, "If Christians can't even agree with each other, then why should I trust in Jesus? It doesn't seem to be that effective."

² For a detailed account of the Restoration Movement, search YouTube for Leroy Garrett's series called "Our Unity Heritage." Here is a direct link to the playlist: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9hYEK_exryGZ3bu_PD8KLOkUvoLu9D6

³ Barton W. Stone, *The Christian Messenger*, Vol. 6 (Star Bible Publications: Fort Worth, TX), 266.

Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell's father, had this to say about the necessity of Christian unity and the impact of division in the church on the world:

Have we not seen congregations broken to pieces, neighborhoods of professing Christians first thrown into confusion by party contentions, and, in the end, entirely deprived of Gospel ordinances; while, in the mean time, large settlements and tracts of country remain to this day entirely destitute of a Gospel ministry, many of them in little better than a state of heathenism, the Churches being either so weakened with divisions that they cannot send them ministers, or the people so divided among themselves that they will not receive them.⁴

In other words, the reformers of the Stone-Campbell movement saw Christian unity as a necessity to reach the world with the gospel. When a congregation or group of congregations are divided, they typically spend their time arguing about their division instead of doing what they need to be doing: preaching the gospel, serving the poor, and visiting the sick. We only have so much time in the day, so when we spend our time fighting over things that are not necessary to following Christ, then we take time away from those who desperately need our help.

Christian unity should become our polar star because without it we cannot accomplish the mission Jesus gave us to accomplish. When our own ego or our own need to be right becomes our polar star, we move swiftly towards division which, as Jesus said in his prayer, makes it so that the world cannot come to know Jesus.

While this sounds good, it is still the case that churches divide with each other over different beliefs. Is there any way we can know where to draw the line? Some churches have tried creeds and statements of faith. In the Churches of Christ, we have historically rallied around three p's: (1) preaching schools, (2) publications, and (3) preachers. We have put our faith in these three p's to determine where to draw the line. You may have heard someone say, "Do you take Nichol's or Wood's view of the Holy Spirit?" Or, "Do you understand divorce and remarriage like Nichols or Deaver?" Churches are often associated with a particular school. Whether or not the members attend certain conferences or retreats says a lot about what opinions they think are necessary for Christian fellowship.

But what did the fathers of our heritage view as necessary for Christian unity?

⁴ Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address* (Kershner, 1972), p.28.

Ephesians 4:1-6

*In faith, unity; in opinions and methods, liberty;
in all things, love.*

In a debate, Alexander Campbell had to answer a similar charge to what I stated before: if Christians everywhere have different opinions and interpretations of the Bible as well as different methods and preferences of worship, then how can they have unity? Campbell's answer to this question should cause us all to rethink what is truly important:

Our bond of union is not opinion, nor unity of opinion. It is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Spirit, one hope, one God and Father of all. These we all preach and teach. We have no standard opinions amongst us. We have no patented form of sound words drawn up by human art and man's device, to which all must vow eternal fidelity. It is our peculiar felicity, and perhaps, it may be our honor, too, that we have been able to discover a ground so common, so sacred, so divinely approbated, so perfectly catholic⁵ and enduring, on which every man, who loves our Lord Jesus Christ sincerely, may unite, and commune, and harmonize, and cooperate in all the works of faith, in all the labors of love, and in all the perseverance of hope.⁶

These words of Campbell come from Ephesians 4:1-6. He said that their mutual allegiance to this common ground was so strong that they could have perfect unity despite their differences. Ephesians 4:1-6 says,

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace: there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

From Campbell's perspective, if we can all accept that there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God, then we can have perfect unity. The source of this perfect unity is the Spirit, and it is not maintained through debate, logic, and well put together arguments; instead, it is maintained through humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance. This may sound different from what we are used to, but this is who *we* are. Like the prodigal son, we may have lost our way at times, but this is at the root of our existence. Why not return home?

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⁶ Campbell-Rice Debate (1844), p.505.

When we learn to focus on what really matters like Stone and Campbell attempted to do, we will learn to accept one another with open arms just as Christ has accepted us, warts and all.

Romans 15:7

*Receive one another, therefore, just as Christ
has received you, for the glory of God.*
(Romans 15:7)

Some versions of this passage say that we are to “welcome” or “accept” one another. After writing Romans 14 in which Paul instructs the church at Rome to not bind their opinions concerning certain religious practices on each other, he encourages the church to learn to welcome, receive, and accept each other just as Jesus has welcomed them into the family of God.

We are all keenly aware of our imperfection. It is hard to go a day without being reminded of it, but this knowledge should instill within us an urgent need to be patient with each other. It’s easy to grant ourselves the benefit of the doubt, but it can be incredibly difficult to afford our brothers and sisters in Christ that same privilege.

In Matthew 18, Jesus tells a story about a king who forgave one of his servants something like four billion dollars worth of debt. When the servant left the palace, he went to one of his fellow servants, beat him, and demanded that he be paid back in full. This is what we do to each other. After experiencing the untold grace of God, we turn around and give each other little to no grace at all when we ought to be asking God to forgive us of our debts as we forgive others their debts.

From the beginning of our movement, there have been those who have disfellowshipped others over everything from church-sponsored festivals to missionary societies to using a piano to accompany songs. Instead of giving each other grace and allowing others to have liberty when it comes to opinions and methods, we have demanded perfect conformity. Conformity is not true unity because it forces others to not be themselves. While we should be patient with one another and bear with one another, we can have perfect unity within our diversity.

Thomas Campbell explained it this way,

That although the Church of Christ upon earth must necessarily exist in particular and distinct societies, locally separate from one another, yet there ought to be no schisms, no uncharitable divisions among them. They ought to receive each other as Christ Jesus hath also received them, to the glory of God.⁷

⁷ Thomas Campbell, Declaration and Address (Kershner, 1972), p.44.

In other words, even if churches have to meet in separate places because their preferences are incompatible, they can still work together and have unity. Differences in practices and differences in methods do not mean that we have division. Division and diversity are not the same thing; division involves hostility and separation whereas diversity is the natural state of any relationship between two or more humans! Husbands and wives are not perfectly alike in every way, but that does not mean that they are divided.

When we learn to receive each other as Christ receives us, we will be willing to lay down our own preferences for the other. This is why Paul gives the job of unity to all Christians, but specifically to the mature Christians: “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Romans 15:1). Unless someone is going against a clear command of God, then it is our job to maintain unity; we can’t pass the responsibility on to someone else. We must first learn to receive others as Christ has received us, not expect others to receive us as Christ has received them.

In other words, churches often have this backwards, and that is why they split. Instead of the offended member taking it upon themselves to maintain unity in matters of opinion, they expect everyone else to do their bidding, which means that the church will always be as “conservative” or “traditional” or “grace-centered” or “progressive” as that individual. This is the opposite of what Paul is teaching.

Each Christian is to take it upon themselves to receive one another as Christ has received them. Even if someone isn’t receiving them as they ought to, that does not absolve them of their responsibility! Unity starts with us. Now, if there is something that offends the conscience or goes against a clear teaching in scripture, then it is that person’s responsibility to bring it up and voice their concerns. In this case, dialogue and mutual love will reveal the best path forward.

Conclusion

Our heritage has a lot of gems we can learn from. Understanding who we are and the principles which our movement were founded upon can help guide our way in the present. As we try to spread hope and love in 2023, learning to have, enjoy, and appreciate unity in diversity, instead of unity in conformity, will enable us to be patient with each other, loving towards those outside of our church, and at peace within ourselves.