

Christian Unity in Stone-Campbell Movement

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Abstract *Author offers review of the backgrounds to Stone-Campbell concepts of Christian unity, insides on the early unity impulse in the Stone-Campbell Movement, as well as the development of the idea of unity in the Post-Bellum Period. A valuable explanation is offered on the twentieth-century understandings of unity in the Three Streams, and on the efforts at internal unity in the Stone-Campbell Movement.*

Introduction

In the western church the divisions resulting from the Protestant Reformation became a source of deep concern for some leaders. Lutheran Philipp Melancthon proposed compromise in the area of adiaphora, indifferent or non-essential matters, if it would maintain the church's visible unity. George Calixtus suggested that only heresy, defined as denial of an essential truth of Christianity believed by the church in the first five centuries, could be the basis for breaking fellowship. Calvin and other Reformed theologians insisted that the true church was invisible, ultimately known only to God, thus lessening the severity of the visible divisions.

I. Backgrounds to Stone-Campbell Concepts of Christian Unity

The transplanting of European Christianity to America exacerbated its divisions as religious freedom led to schism in existing bodies and the creation of new ones. For many Americans the developing system of denominationalism appeared to be the desired and normal condition of the church. They had no wish to return to the forced religious uniformity of Europe. Yet to others the evils of a divided Christianity became even more acute in America and demanded immediate correction.

This desire for unity combined with widespread anti-tradition, anti-elitist sentiment following the Revolution to spark a popular revolt against orthodox religious structures and a call for “gospel liberty.” Populist religious leaders like James O’Kelly, Elias Smith, Abner Jones, Barton W. Stone, and Thomas and Alexander Campbell began movements that urged Christians to throw off divisive creeds and ecclesial structures and return to simple New Testament Christianity, thereby effecting the visible unity of Christ’s church.

These movements did not seek structural union or merger of denominations. They sought, rather, the destruction of the denominational system itself, which they saw as inherently divisive. Their plea was highly individualistic, calling on believers from every Christian body to come together in their local settings to work and worship together with no requirement for communion but faith in Christ and obedience to the clear commands of scripture.

II. The Early Unity Impulse in the Stone-Campbell Movement

Unity was at the center of the founding documents of the Stone-Campbell Movement. In the “Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery” of 1804, Barton Stone and the other signers willed that their presbytery “die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large.” They called on fellow Christians of every name to join them in praying that God would remove all obstacles to his work—including the disunity of his church. In Thomas Campbell’s 1809 “Declaration and Address” he asserted that “the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one,” and that it consists of all who profess belief in and obedience to Christ according to the scriptures, and who show they are Christians by the life they live.

All the founding leaders held the Enlightenment idea of a universal mind that for all reasonable persons would lead to unanimity on a common core of Christian truth. All held that unity was essentially an individual matter; rather than a merger of institutions, it was a mutual recognition of all believers who demonstrated their belief in Christ in their daily actions. Yet there were clearly two different emphases in the unity platforms of the Stone and Campbell Movements.

For Stone, unity could not rest principally on doctrinal conformity, even on a perceived core of universally accepted tenets. It was, rather, the possession and manifestation of God’s Spirit in each Christian that was the essential basis of unity. “The scriptures will never keep together in union and fellowship members not in the spirit of the scriptures, which spirit is love, peace, unity, forbearance, and cheerful obedience,” he wrote in 1835. On the other hand, Thomas Campbell’s platform for unity in the “Declaration and Address” was the facts of the New Testament. His son Alexander would insist in 1832 that the only way to bring

about the visible unity of Christians would be to “propound the ancient gospel and the ancient order of things in the words and sentences found in the apostolic writings—to abandon all traditions and usages not found in the Record, and to make no human terms of communion.”

Despite this significant difference, all the founding leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement condemned the system of denominationalism as divisive while readily acknowledging the existence of true Christians in all groups. They believed that all human structures (sects, denominations, associations) had to vanish, as had the Springfield Presbytery and the Campbells’ Mahoning Association, leaving congregations of “Christians only.”

III. Development of the Idea of Unity in the Post-Bellum Period

Many in the Movement became disillusioned with this plea after the Civil War for two reasons. First, it became clear that most Christians would not accept the plea to abandon their denominational heritage and become part of what appeared to be another denomination. Though the Movement’s individualistic appeal was powerful, it had not been powerful enough to destroy the denominational system they so deplored (but in which *de facto* they participated). Second, alternatives to Stone-Campbell Movement’s plea for unity became available in the larger Christian world as the century progressed. Cooperative agencies, church federation, and overtures for union discussions like the Chicago-Lambeth proposal from the Episcopal Church became live options the Movement could not ignore. Three second-generation leaders, all influential editors, represent the divergent understandings of unity that developed in the Movement in the late nineteenth century: Isaac Errett (1820-1888), J. H. Garrison (1842-1931), and David Lipscomb (1831-1917).

Isaac Errett continued the earlier appeal to individuals characteristic of the first generation. He saw Christian unity as possible on the basis of two things: faith in Christ as the divine Son of God, and submission to immersion. No other doctrines could be grounds for rejecting or accepting another as a Christian. He categorized things not explicitly taught in scripture into matters of inference, expediency, or opinion according to how much biblical information or direction was given. These things could never be the basis for disunity. The spirit he feared and fought most was one that demanded conformity on non-essential matters, whether for or against them. The “law of love” was to govern in such matters. The unity he envisioned was a “unity in diversity.”

Like Errett, J. H. Garrison spoke of simple faith in Christ as the basis of visible unity rather than creedal statements. He taught that most issues dividing Christendom were outside the realm of essentials. Yet Garrison went beyond

Errett in significant ways. He moved away from the individualistic appeal of the early Movement, insisting on recognition of other groups as legitimate Christian bodies seeking to do God's will. Cooperation with other Christian bodies to oppose evil and promote righteousness would lead to mutual understanding and eventual consensus on matters of disagreement. He projected three stages leading to visible unity: internal union in denominational families worldwide, federation of denominational groups for cooperation, and finally a falling away of denominational distinctives to form one visible universal church. It was the duty of the Movement to structure itself to be able to participate in this process. These convictions led Garrison to urge maintenance of the Movement's internal unity based on simple faith in Christ, to endorse the move toward more formal structuring of the Movement, and to advocate the Movement's participation in the Federal Council of Churches.

David Lipscomb's understanding of unity included neither a large area of non-essentials nor a process of organizational maturity for the Movement. For Lipscomb the only basis for Christian unity was to follow meticulously the clear teachings of the Bible without addition or subtraction. For Lipscomb there were no non-essentials. There were only essentials and things unlawful; beliefs and practices which must be accepted, and those which must be rejected. In addition, Lipscomb held a radically congregational notion of the basis of Christian unity, insisting that the only division condemned and the only unity enjoined in the New Testament was that within an individual congregation. Efforts to effect union between various church bodies were efforts in the wrong direction. Unscriptural organizations to effect organic union between churches actually produced the conditions needed for extended division. Under "God's plan" there was no organic union to be broken.

Though all three taught extensively about and worked for unity, each had a fundamentally different concept of what it is and how to reach it. The tensions that led to the Movement's two major divisions forced a refocusing of its unity emphasis from a call to all followers of Christ to a plea to members of the Movement itself to maintain unity with one another. Historians have often interpreted the cleavage in the Stone-Campbell Movement as the result of a separation of the original elements—unity and restoration—into the possession of one of the antagonistic groups. It may be more helpful to understand the schism as a result, paradoxically and ironically, of the continued struggle for unity understood in very different ways.

IV. Twentieth-century Understandings of Unity in the Three Streams

In the twentieth century, the part of the Movement that supported the International Convention of the Disciples of Christ and that supported a more formal

organization moved increasingly toward full participation in the Ecumenical Movement. Disciples established their first permanent organization to pursue contacts with other Christian bodies in 1910 through the efforts of that year's International Convention President, Peter Ainslie (1867-1934). In his address to the Topeka, Kansas convention Ainslie told Disciples that the task of seeking unity with their sisters and brothers in other communions was part of God's program, and therefore should be part of theirs. He called for creation of a Disciples unity council that would be given equal footing with the missionary societies. Late that year Ainslie and others incorporated the Commission on Christian Union to arrange unity conferences and work with the commissions of other bodies to arrange a world conference on Christian union. In 1911 Ainslie began publication of the Christian Union Library, renamed the Christian Union Quarterly in 1913, that carried articles on Christian unity by members of various communions. Ainslie and the Council on Christian Union were in the forefront of the Ecumenical Movement begun at the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910. That meeting and a unity conference held in London immediately afterward resulted in the creation of cooperating commissions in many denominations. Tissington Tatlow in his history of the Faith and Order Movement places Ainslie's efforts in the vanguard of this surge of unity committees.

In 1917 the Council was reorganized and renamed the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity, becoming a department of the Disciples General Convention, the first American denominational unity committee to be elevated to such a status. In 1954 it was renamed the Council on Christian Unity, which name it still retains. When Disciples restructured in 1968 into the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Council became a "unit" of the denomination. This organization in its various forms took the lead in twentieth-century Disciples unity overtures.

A mass meeting at the 1907 Disciples General Convention endorsed Disciples participation in the Federal Council of Churches. Disciples participated in the formation of the World Council of Churches (1948) and the National Council of Churches in the United States (1950), providing significant economic support to each. Disciples were also part of two unsuccessful multilateral unity efforts: the American Council on Organic Union begun in 1918 and the Conference on Church Union of 1949. In 1963 Disciples became part of the multilateral Consultation on Church Union (COCU), reformed in 2002 as Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC).

In addition Disciples engaged in serious union talks with American Baptists beginning in the 1890s and continuing until 1952. Disciples began talks with the Congregational-Christian and the Evangelical and Reformed Churches in 1946, the two groups that became the United Church of Christ in 1958. The Disciples

and UCC entered an “ecumenical partnership” in 1985, and declared themselves to be in “full communion” in 1989. Disciples began talks with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States in 1967, and in 1977 started international conversations sponsored by the Council on Christian Unity and the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

In contrast to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Churches of Christ and Christian Churches/Churches of Christ have largely maintained an individual rather than organizational approach to unity. Both their congregational polity and perception that the Ecumenical Movement had a largely liberal theological and social agenda have made meaningful participation in it difficult. Individuals from these two communions do participate in trans-denominational organizations such as Bible Study Fellowship, Walk to Emmaus, and Promise Keepers. In addition, the two groups have been involved in conversations with other religious bodies through the Open Forum meetings between the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) from 1989 to 1997, and the Southern Baptist - Churches of Christ Conversation from 1992 to 2000. Such efforts by necessity are done by individual initiative, with institutional backing from local congregations or schools.

Beginning in the late 1950s Carl Ketcherside (1908-1989) and Leroy Garrett (1918-) of Churches of Christ called for a rejection of the exclusivism that had come to characterize the more conservative streams of the Movement. This call included acceptance of believers in all streams of the Movement as well as in other Christian bodies. Through their papers *Mission Messenger* and *Restoration Review* respectively, Ketcherside and Garrett laid the foundation for a more inclusive attitude especially among members of Churches of Christ and Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. Their appeal was still, by necessity, to individuals.

V. Efforts at Internal Unity in the Stone-Campbell Movement

In the twentieth century several attempts at maintaining or restoring the unity of the Movement itself have been undertaken. In 1936 Claude F. Witty (1877-1952), minister for the West Side Central Church of Christ in Detroit and James DeForest Murch (1892-1973), then literary editor for the *Christian Standard*, brought ministers from Churches of Christ and the (as yet undivided) Disciples together to discuss divisive issues and the possibilities of unity. They began publishing the *Christian Unity Quarterly* as a forum for the efforts. Murch and Witty encouraged the organization of local meetings and conducted two national conferences in Detroit (1938) and Indianapolis (1939). Opposition to the meetings from the most conservative segment of the Churches of Christ represented by the *Gospel Advocate* contributed to a cooling of enthusiasm, and the efforts ended in the early 1940s.

In 1934 the International Convention of Disciples of Christ set up a Commission on Restudy that was charged with exploring ways to promote greater unity and cooperation in the Movement. This effort was prompted by growing theological tensions among Disciples over issues such as open membership and liberal views of scripture, though the Commission invited participation by Churches of Christ. Comprised of representatives of a wide spectrum of views in Disciples, the Commission met three times a year through 1948 and produced over seventy studies. The Commission's final report urged Disciples to allow freedom of opinion and to recapture the sense of mission that could be carried out only in a united body. The report and the Commission's own modeling of unity in diversity were largely ignored by the International Convention however, exacerbating the growing division.

Another attempt at unity in Disciples circles occurred between 1959 and 1965 following a series of regional unity meetings in the form of four national Consultations on Internal Unity of the Christian Churches. The issue of the proposed Restructure had heightened already-existing tensions. Some in the Consultations argued for wide diversity and tolerance, insisting unity was primarily spiritual (invisible), involving a common core of faith with neither unity of action nor theological interpretation as essential. Even those who advanced this idea differed in their understandings of the common core, however, with ideas ranging from simple acceptance of Jesus as Lord to insistence on a long list of essentials. Some who had initially been supporters of Restructure eventually came to fear that the structure would no longer permit nominal unity with the independents, a feature many liberals cherished as evidence to the religious world that unity in diversity was possible. The Consultations failed in maintaining the internal unity of the Disciples yet created a network of persons that would continue to seek peace even after the division.

In 1984 a group of selected leaders from Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and Churches of Christ met in Joplin, Missouri on the campus of Ozark Bible College for a "Restoration Summit" to discuss differences and ways the two bodies might recognize each other and work together. The following year the meetings were opened to the public and renamed the Restoration Forum. Usually meeting once a year and hosted by churches and schools of the two bodies, the Restoration Forums have promoted mutual understanding and cooperation in domestic ministries and worldwide missions. In the twenty-first century there have been increased efforts to include members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in these talks.

Another major event in the area of internal unity was the beginning of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue in 1999. Involving members of all three major streams of the Movement, the Dialogue met twice a year for three years producing nu-

merous studies as well as a confession of sin and statement of faith. In 2002 the Dialogue moved its focus to facilitating conversations and networking among church leaders of the three streams in local contexts like Louisville, Kentucky and Atlanta, Georgia.

While considerable diversity will continue to exist between the three streams, new understandings of unity that go beyond ideas of uniformity and structural union appear to be the foundation for increasing cooperation and mutual ministry between the three streams in the future.

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Sažetak *U prvome dijelu daje se pregled povijesti Stone-Campbell ideja o kršćanskom jedinstvu, zatim se obrazlažu rane ideje kršćanskog jedinstva te razvoj tih ideja u razdoblju poslije Američkog građanskog rata. U drugome dijelu raspravlja se o poimanju jedinstva u tri struje u dvadesetom stoljeću te nastojanju za unutaršnjim jedinstvom u pokretu Stone-Campbell.*