

# In Opinions, Liberty

## Restoring Our Unity Heritage

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### The Problem

*“In faith, unity; in opinions, liberty; in all things, love.”*

I’ve heard the quote above throughout my life as being one of the grand mottos of the Restoration Movement. There were others, but among them is, “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.”<sup>1</sup> Combining these two slogans produces a seemingly simple game plan for unity: in faith (where the Bible speaks), unity; in opinions (where the Bible is silent), liberty; in all things, love.<sup>2</sup> So, armed with this slogan and a desire for unity, where did it all go wrong? The popular door knocking question “Why are there so many churches?” becomes “Why are there so many divisions among the Churches of Christ?”

In any town where the Churches of Christ are prevalent, you are bound to find that there are splits among the various congregations. Someone became upset over someone else’s interpretation or method and started their own group or kicked the offenders out. What is astounding about these divisions is that most of these splits think the same. They have the same philosophies when it comes to interpretation and application. They use the same passages to defend their differences and point out problems with others. The problem, then, doesn’t come from major theological differences; it comes from variations in method. Leroy Garrett was right when he wrote, “While the Movement has had a tragic history of internal fission, **virtually all of the disputes have been over methods.**” (Emphasis mine—bold)<sup>3</sup>

Methods aren’t concerned with questions like “Is it authorized to take communion?” Instead, the question would be, “Are we authorized to use one or multiple cups in the communion?” There is no doubt or debate over whether one should take communion in the majority of the Churches of Christ; the question is over the method.<sup>4</sup> One interesting historical sidenote, but one that is relevant to the discussion at hand, is that a variation of the slogan at the beginning of this article said, “In faith, unity; **in**

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, Vol. 1 (1897), p.237.

<sup>2</sup> I understand that silence, in more recent years, is seen as prohibitive. In the following pages, I will show how this was not the original interpretation of “silent” as used in this slogan.

<sup>3</sup> Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (2005), p.84.

<sup>4</sup> Think about the major splits in the Churches of Christ and you will see that this is generally true: instruments, fellowship halls, supporting orphanages, upper room communion, etc. etc. all have to do with methods.

**opinions and methods**, liberty; in all things, charity.” The inclusion or exclusion of the expression “and methods” can have an impact on what one views as “essential” or “non-essential,” to reference yet another version of this slogan.<sup>5</sup>

So, what’s the problem? The problem is that these various groups cannot agree on what is a matter of faith and what is an opinion, what is an essential and what is a non-essential, so when something comes up that they can’t agree on, another split arises. In other words, if I were to ask you to make a list of the things required for Christian fellowship and, therefore, salvation, and I were to ask someone else to make a similar list, it is likely there will be some differences. One may ask, “Well, why is that a problem? One can serve God in the way they wish, and I will do it in the way I wish.”

While I agree that there is liberty in our service to God as Paul discusses in Romans 14, splits and divisions in the church that cause two or more groups to cease fellowship with each other is very serious indeed. What these various groups are saying is far graver than simply preferring different methods. What they are essentially saying, in their excommunication of others, is that the other individuals or congregations are not even in the kingdom of God. Since the church is the body of Christ and Christ is the savior of the body, of which there is one, it stands to reason that those who are not in the body of Christ, through choice or expulsion, are not among the saved.

To excommunicate or withdraw from someone, then, is to say that they don’t really belong to the kingdom of God and, therefore, must belong to the kingdom of darkness! Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell’s father, expressed it this way in his paper from 1809:

A third and still more dreadful evil is, when we not only, in this kind of way, judge and set at naught our brother, but, moreover, proceed as a Church, acting and judging in the name of Christ, not only to determine that our brother is wrong because he differs from our determinations, but also, in connection with this, proceed so far as to determine the merits of the cause by rejecting him, or casting him out of the Church, as unworthy of a place in her communion, and thus, as far as in our power, **cutting him off from the kingdom of heaven**. In proceeding thus, we not only declare, that, in our judgment, our brother is in an error, which we may sometimes do in a perfect consistence with charity, but we also take upon us to judge, as acting in the name and by the authority of Christ, **that his error cuts him off from salvation**; that continuing such, **he has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God**. If not, what means our refusing him — our casting him out of the Church, which is

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<sup>5</sup> “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

the kingdom of God in this world?<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

Divisions over opinions matter. Even if they seem benign, we must endeavor to maintain unity because of our joint faith in Jesus despite diversity of opinions. But how do we determine what is a matter of opinion and what is a matter of faith? In the following section, we will discuss the hope and potential of Christian unity before answering that question in the third major section.

## The Solution

*“The glory which You have given Me I also have given to them, so that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and You loved them, just as You loved Me.”*

John 17:22–23

## The Spirit’s Unity

At times it seems a bit hopeless. When one can drive down a stretch of highway and see several congregations of the Churches of Christ and know that none of them will have anything to do with each other, one wonders if unity among all believers, not just the Churches of Christ, is even possible. But I sincerely believe that it is, and I believe that the tools to accomplish that have been handed down to us by men such as Alexander Campbell, Walter Scott, Thomas Campbell, and Barton W. Stone. Furthermore, I believe that the principles which they set forth as the basis of unity are sound, biblical principles that any Christian can reasonably agree to regardless of their background.

Naturally, there will be those who will continue to hang on to their traditions, regardless of how unnecessarily divisive they may be. And while I regret that such will be the case, I am still optimistic that the Lord’s prayer in John 17 was not in vain, and that unity is possible.

Of course, for unity to be achieved (or should I say allowed?), there are some things that need to be worked out, specifically, what is the basis of fellowship? And to answer this question, we must also discover the difference between a matter of faith and opinion. This is a task, as we shall see in this article, that Alexander Campbell labored over for thirty years before reaching a reasonable and biblical conclusion.<sup>7</sup> Prayerfully,

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address* (Kershner, 1972), p.73.

<sup>7</sup> Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (2005), p.15. Campbell suggested to get all the various groups together, including “the Greek and Roman sects” and determine the rule of union. Whatever was universally admitted among all the parties in areas of faith, piety, and morality would be the basis of union

and with a little help from Alex, we will only take a few paragraphs, not thirty years. But first, let's explore what the Bible says about unity.

In the quotation from John 17 at the beginning of this section, Jesus said that the basis for unity is the glory which is given to those who are His disciples. In other words, unity is less about what we do and more about relinquishing the things that divide us and allow the unity that already exists to be seen among us. Jesus also says something that should be troubling to anyone who is even remotely aware of the many divisions that plague the church: unity among the disciples is a major way the world can come to know Jesus. As long as we remain divided, we are severely harming our ability to reach those who do not know Jesus. Thomas Campbell explained,

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.<sup>8</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

Thus, we see just how important Christian unity is. In a world plagued with violence, greed, immorality, and all other manners of evil, the church should no longer contribute to those continued evils by remaining divided. While we may not be taking part in those evils ourselves, remaining divided as we are takes away our most powerful witness: unity through mutual love.

Again, how can we come to unity? It's not that we aren't united at the deepest levels; the problem is that we do not consent to the Spirit within us who longs for us to lay aside the weight that so easily divides us. By this I mean, if we will not be divided in Heaven, why should we remain divided on Earth? Returning to Thomas Campbell, he exclaimed,

O! that ministers and people would but consider that there are no divisions in the grave, nor in that world which lies beyond it! there our divisions must come to an end! we must all unite there! Would to God we could find in our hearts to put an end to our short-lived divisions

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while all other disagreements would be rejected as schismatical and human. (*Millennial Harbinger* (1839), p.212.)

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address* (Kershner, 1972), p.28.

here; that so we might leave a blessing behind us; even a happy and united Church.<sup>9</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

This unity which exists in the world beyond the grave, as Thomas Campbell put it, doesn't come from unity in doctrine, theology, or methodology. The unity in the world beyond the grave comes from the simple fact that we have all been baptized into the same body by the same Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). The unity which exists between every believer belongs to the Spirit, for Paul wrote, "...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, being diligent to keep **the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace**" (Ephesians 4:2-3, emphasis mine—bold).

Since it is the Spirit that unites all believers in one body, it is not our superficial definitions of unity and fellowship which unite us, it is the Spirit. Any unlawful division, then, is in direct rebellion to the Spirit Himself. To speak of a divided church, really, is a contradiction. The basis of the theology of the church held by the Disciples of Christ is "that the church by its very nature is one, and that it is a contradiction to speak of a divided church."<sup>10</sup> This idea comes ultimately from the Bible ("is Christ divided?"), but it is a reference to Campbell's paper from which we have quoted several times thus far:

That the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else; as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.<sup>11</sup>

As referenced above, this is a sound, biblical principle. There is only one body, and that one body is the church which belongs to Christ (Ephesians 4:4; cf. Ephesians 1:22-23). While the church may be visibly divided, it never can be divided at its core.

### **Unity in Diversity at the Church in Corinth**

The greatest example of this I can think of is the church at Corinth. At this church, there were Christians from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. They had different thoughts on what one could and couldn't eat, what holy days to keep, and whether one should circumcise their children. The important thing to see as we go through a few passages in 1 Corinthians is that it wasn't their opinions and methods that caused division, it was their attitudes and the drawing of party lines that threatened to break up the church.

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address* (Kershner, 1972), p.40.

<sup>10</sup> Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (2005), p.109.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address* (Kershner, 1972), p.44.

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul introduces the problem:

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:10-13)

These Christians weren't speaking the same thing. Now some, including myself at one point, would point to this passage to talk about how divided the church is doctrinally, but that misses the point of what Paul was saying. They could have their different opinions; there is nothing wrong with that. The issue arises when we divide, split, and form groups around those opinions.

For example, Paul considered himself the minister to the uncircumcision (the Gentiles) while he called Peter the minister to the circumcision (the Jews):

But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), (Galatians 2:7-8).

While there is nothing wrong with having a favorite or preferred preacher, writer, or minister, there is an issue with dividing over it, as Paul covers in the context of Galatians 2. In Corinth, apparently, they were dividing over these differences. Those who were Gentiles, or maybe sympathetic to the Gentiles, were gravitating towards Paul while those who were of Jewish descent who kept the Law gravitated towards Peter. Others, of course, may have appreciated Apollos for his speaking ability, something Paul claimed was not his gift (Acts 18:24; 2 Corinthians 11:6). Regardless of their reasons, their preferences were not wrong so long as they did not lead to divisions.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened. Some were claiming to be "of Paul" or "of Peter" when they should have all claimed to be of Christ. George Whitefield, a preacher during The Great Awakening (1730s-40s), said during one sermon in Philadelphia,

Father Abraham, whom have you in Heaven? Any Episcopalians? "No." Any Presbyterians? "No." Have you any Independents or Seceders? "No." Have you any Methodists? "No, no, no!" Whom have you there? "We don't know those names here. All who are here are Christians -

believers in Christ men who have overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of his testimony." Oh, is this the case? Then God help us, God help us all, to forget party names, and to become Christians in deed and in truth.<sup>12</sup>

The point here is simple: while preferences aren't inherently divisive, they can bring about division if they are made into law, creed, or confession of faith. This has been the problem with the protestant reformation, and it is the problem among Churches of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul reveals a little more about what was going on in the church at Corinth. There were those within the church who had the correct opinions. They had a better understanding of what was allowed than other Christians at Corinth. In fact, they understood the nature of God better than some of the newer converts. The trouble they had, however, was using their correct knowledge to abuse or belittle others in the church. This was a problem that the Stone-Campbell Movement faced in its earlier years. Thomas Campbell observed,

"Whereas, were we to refute all the errors in Buck's Theological Dictionary by the common method of theological argumentation, we might, indeed, by so doing, **make orthodox systematics; but not one real practical [C]hristian.** And why? Because, in this way of arguing, the mind is turned away from itself, to sit as a judge in the case pending; so that the point at issue becomes an abstract truth, addressed purely to the understanding—not to the heart, as directly and immediately affecting the hearer himself; but merely to his judgment, to determine who is right... Hence it often happens, that the purest orthodoxy, and practical [C]hristianity, are not always found united in the same person.<sup>13</sup>  
(Emphasis Mine—bold and underline)

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul shows us what pure Christianity looks like when he wrote,

"Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. (1 Corinthians 8:1–3)

Pure Christianity is not defined by what we know but by whom we are known. If we are showing Christian love towards one another, this is a sign that we are known by God.

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<sup>12</sup> Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (2005), p.49. Garrett cited William Warren's book *The Story of Religion in America* (Harper, 1935), p. 206.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Campbell, "To the Editor of the Millennial Harbinger," *The Millennial Harbinger* (1836), p.216.

When we define Christianity based upon one's abstract knowledge, then we make the mind the center of our faith and not God. This is what happened at Corinth, and this is what continues to happen in churches all around the globe.

Returning to Paul's question in chapter one we now ask, "Is Christ divided? Were you baptized into the Memphis School of Preaching? Were you baptized in the name of Gus Nichols, Guy Woods, Franklin Camp, or some other man?" While preferences do not divide on their own, the way some people act, including myself at one point, it is their way or the highway. We must not elevate our understanding of the Bible (that is, our opinions) to the level of the Word of God Himself (Jesus). In the next section, we'll cover what differentiates faith from opinion.

## **Faith Versus Opinions**

*I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel, which is not just another account; but there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, even now I say again: if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!*

Galatians 1:6-9

### **In Opinions, Unity?**

There is no doubt that we are united in the gospel of Christ. Paul said in Romans 1:16 that the gospel is God's power to save us. Anyone who has ever been saved or will be saved will have the good news of Jesus to thank for that. The passage quoted above has been used throughout my lifetime to condemn every disagreement under the sun.

Basically, anytime someone doesn't agree with the elders of a particular church, they will withdraw from them and say that the person has left the gospel of Jesus. When I was withdrawn from by my Stepdad and Granddad, I received a letter asking me to "return to the gospel, forsaking this other which leads to destruction." Two passages are behind that line of the letter: Matthew 7:13-14 and the one above (Galatians 1:6-9).

What had I done to receive such a letter? Deny that Jesus is the Son of God? Call into question the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus? Deny faith in God? Reject the teaching that there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God? None of that. Through diligent, sincere study I reached a different conclusion on the nature and timing of the coming of Jesus. Apparently, this was enough to set me on the wide path that leads to destruction through accepting "another gospel."

I don't bring this out to shame my family or their congregation. I sincerely believe they were doing what they thought ought to be done. As twisted as their actions may seem to some reading this, I can guarantee they did it out of love. They simply were following the traditions handed down to them which had their genesis in men like those who authored the *Address and Declaration* in Sand Creek in 1889.

I bring all this up to show how one may reword the title of this section to make it more clear to us. When we talk about matters of faith, we are speaking of things which pertain to the gospel. When we talk about matters of opinion, we are speaking of things which aren't expressly taught in Scripture. The question, of course, is how broad we may define the term gospel. For example, there are Christians within some of the more radical sects of the Churches of Christ who will condemn others for believing "The Core Gospel Heresy." These are ones, they tell us, who believe that one can have fellowship with another simply based on their common faith in the gospel, specifically faith in Jesus as the Son of God, his death, and resurrection.

They call this "The Core Gospel Heresy" because these individuals believe that anything which isn't specifically authorized by a command, example, or necessary inference is contrary to the gospel of Jesus and falls under the umbrella of what Paul was talking about in Galatians 1; however, when we look at the context of Galatians 1, we will find that this conclusion is unwarranted. After a brief survey of the word "gospel" in Galatians, we will look to history to see what the founders of the Stone-Campbell movement thought about unity.

### **What is the Gospel in Galatians 1?**

Anytime we study the Bible, it is important that we notice the context of the passage we are trying to understand. Context means more than just the verse before or the verse after; it can include the chapter, the book, the rest of the Bible, and even the historical or cultural situation at the time. To understand the parables of Jesus, one may need to read up on marriage customs of the first century, how shepherds kept their flock, and probably know what a mustard seed looks like.

To really understand the book of Galatians, we would need to take time to find out when the book was written, who wrote it, to whom it was written, and what situation the writer was responding to. While doing most of this is outside the scope of this article, taking the time to answer these questions, and more, would help one's overall understanding of this epistle. For our purposes, we will stay within the confines of Galatians and try to understand how the original audience would have understood these terms.

Whenever someone quotes a passage isolated from its context to make a point, this is called proof-texting. Proof-texting doesn't automatically mean that the person is using

the passage incorrectly, but the verse should be examined more closely when the opportunity arises, especially when the speaker or writer is condemning someone else with an isolated passage. Galatians 1:6-9 has been used for this exact purpose, to condemn people with different interpretations of the Bible. Simply waving our hand at this and dismissing it isn't enough; we must do our due diligence and see what the Bible says and how it defines the word "gospel." We'll begin in verses 3-5.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen. (Galatians 1:3-5)

This is the gospel in simple terms: God is our Father, Jesus is Lord, and He died for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age. Paul was concerned because people were being drawn away from these truths through the teaching of some Jewish individuals. Instead of teaching a message that "rescues" people, they were trying to bring the Gentiles under bondage by demanding that they be circumcised (Galatians 2:4). While Paul had taught the gospel of the new creation, they were trying to keep people within the old, fleshly world of the Law (Galatians 6:15; cf. Galatians 5:1-13).

Paul mentions the gospel again in Galatians 1:11-12, but we will skip down to verses 15-16 and 23.

But when He who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood...

...but they only kept hearing, "The man who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy."

To Paul preaching the gospel meant preaching "Him" (Jesus). This is also what is meant in the expression "preaching the faith." What was it that Paul was preaching? That the Son of God has come to rescue us from our sins. He preached and they believed. Where in Galatians, or in Paul's teaching in Acts, do we read about instrumental music, the number of communion cups, donating to orphanages from the church treasury, praise teams, or any of the things that have divided our Movement? Paul preached Jesus. He preached the Cross. That's what saves, not all this other, which leads to division.

In Galatians 3, Paul says something mighty strange if the popular way of understanding Galatians 1:6-9 among the Churches of Christ is correct.

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations will be blessed in you." So then, those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. (Galatians 3:8–9)

The gospel was preached to Abraham. Now, did God tell Abraham about the dangers of instrumental music, praise teams, or baptizing people in stagnant water?<sup>14</sup> Of course not. God told him about Jesus. He then concluded, "So then, those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer." Those who are of faith are blessed. Faith in what? Commands, examples, and necessary inferences or Jesus, the Son of God?

There is no room in Galatians 1 for condemning every group who doesn't see things your way. Paul said, "For you are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). Those who have faith in Jesus are the sons and daughters of God, and where He has a son or daughter, I have a brother or sister.

### Defining Faith and Opinions

If Christians can unite upon the simple Truth that Jesus is the Son of God, then what does that mean for doctrine? Does doctrine matter? Is being right about worship, the organization of the church, salvation, and the Holy Spirit important? Of course it is. These things are important in that they build up, edify, and strengthen the church. Having correct interpretations of the Scripture is important, but it is not the basis of our unity. Can it strengthen unity? Of course, but is it necessary for unity? No.

"But," someone may protest, "if my interpretation is true, then to disagree with it would be disagreeing with the doctrine of God!" While that may be the case, there is a difference in being ignorant about a particular subject or not being able to follow someone's reasoning and blatant disregard for God's word. Thomas Campbell, in two of his thirteen propositions (six and seven) found in the *Declaration and Address*, answers this question like this:

That although inferences and deductions from Scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God's holy word, **yet are they not formally binding upon the consciences of Christians farther than they perceive the connection, and evidently see that they are so;** for their faith must not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power and veracity of God. Therefore, **no such deductions can be made terms of communion,** but do properly belong to the **after and**

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<sup>14</sup> See Dallas Burdette's essay "Oddities in Pattern Theology" which can be found in his free book *From Legalism to Freedom*, chapter three for all the sad, strange things we have divided over. <https://freedominchrist.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/From-Legalism-to-Freedom.pdf>

**progressive edification of the Church.** Hence, it is evident that no such deductions or inferential truths ought to have any place in the Church's confession.<sup>15</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

That although doctrinal exhibitions of the great system of Divine truths, and defensive testimonies in opposition to prevailing errors, be highly expedient, and the more full and explicit they be for those purposes, the better; yet, as these must be in a great measure the effect of human reasoning, and of course must contain many inferential truths, **they ought not to be made terms of Christian communion; unless we suppose, what is contrary to fact, that none have a right to the communion of the Church, but such as possess a very clear and decisive judgment, or are come to a very high degree of doctrinal information;** whereas the Church from the beginning did, and ever will, consist of little children and young men, as well as fathers.<sup>16</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

Campbell's point is simple: truths that can be reached through intense study and dedication to God's word, including studies in the original languages, historical sources, etc. are beneficial to the church, but they rely so much on human understanding that to disfellowship someone who disagrees would be to elevate one's own understanding to the level of the word of God. Differences arise between sincere scholars all the time because of the many variables that exist when one studies the Bible, but these differences will only cause divisions when one is so arrogant as to claim that they are equal in knowledge to God, either directly or through implication based on their actions.<sup>17</sup>

What, then, is required for unity according to the early leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement? There are several quotations one could give, but before giving their opinions in theory, allow me to show a few things that they practiced. A few hot topics in the religious world relate to the Trinity, the atonement, and universalism. These are things that many throughout history have literally been killed over. Let's see how the early leaders of the Movement handled these differences when they arose.

The Trinity is an essential doctrine for many believers since it is part of the Nicene Creed (fourth century). Barton W. Stone, along with the other reformers of the Movement, rejected creeds as a standard for Christian unity. Instead, he looked to the Bible and couldn't find the doctrine of the Trinity, even though others, such as Campbell, did

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address* (Kershner, 1972), p.46.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> This is what these men meant when they talked about being silent where the Bible is silent. If something wasn't expressly approved or condemned, then it shouldn't be a test of fellowship!

despite not using that specific language.<sup>18</sup> Stone responded to those who may criticize him by writing in December of 1826,

If the doctrine of Trinity be an incomprehensible mystery, it cannot be understood by any. How then can we judge other by it? Had I a standard to judge of weight and measures, of which standard I was perfectly ignorant, how could I judge and determine by it? Just as well as by a standard of doctrine of which I was ignorant.<sup>19</sup>

To reject the theory of Penal Substitutionary Atonement, to some, is near blasphemy. Countless books have been written to defend or deny this doctrine with charges of heretic being thrown among Christians. Stone was the odd man out when it came to this doctrine. He wrote,

These notions have been made terms of communion by which much mischief and disorder have been produced in the church. All agree that the sacrifice of Christ is the means of our reconciliation with God—of the cleansing, purging, sanctifying, and washing us from sin—of putting away sin, etc. These are clearly revealed. But whether this sacrifice has the effects on God as stated by some, is doubted by many, who think such notions not contained in the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

After several exchanges between Thomas Campbell on the nature of the atonement, Stone backed out because of some who were disturbed by the disagreement between these two brethren.<sup>21</sup> In other words, he backed out because, though it was important to him, it wasn't worth dividing churches over. Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone continued to be in Christian unity for the rest of Stone's life despite these differences that would have divided, and do divide, many other believers.

One last issue that has caused much division is the subject of universalism. Universalism is the theory that everyone will eventually be saved. As with any label it is an umbrella term that many who would technically fall under it would reject because it isn't specific enough. In 1828, a young man named Aylett Raines adopted a form of universalism called Restorationism in which those who are lost in this life would undergo punishment to purify them for Heaven, which they could enter through faith in Jesus and repentance. When this man faced expulsion from the church, Thomas Campbell defended him:

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<sup>18</sup> Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (2005), p.85.

<sup>19</sup> Barton W. Stone, *The Christian Messenger*, Vol. 1 (1826), p.30.

<sup>20</sup> Barton W. Stone, *The Christian Messenger*, Vol. 1 (1826), p.37.

<sup>21</sup> Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (2005), p.86.

Brother Raines and I have been much together for the last several months, and we have mutually unbosomed<sup>22</sup> ourselves to each other. I am a Calvinist and he a Restorationist; and although I am a Calvinist, I would put my right arm into the fire and have it burnt off before I would raise my arm against him.<sup>23</sup>

Alexander Campbell also had something to say about various theories Christians may adopt, and it is a lesson we all need to learn: “No man can be saved by the belief of any theory, true or false. No man will be damned for disbelief of any theory. To make *new* theories is the way to make *new divisions*. To contend for the *old* is to keep up the old *divisions*.”<sup>24</sup> Why? Because “no theory is the gospel of Jesus the Messiah.”

If one could get away with unorthodox views of the Trinity, atonement, and salvation, then what did these disciples look for in other believers? What is essential to them if these key doctrines are not? Like I mentioned above, they offer us several lists. There are technical differences between these various lists, but they are the same in spirit. Thomas Campbell, since he has been the main feature of this essay, suggested the following:

Let us, therefore, confine ourselves to the all-important topics with which we are divinely furnished for this blissful purpose. Now these are precisely seven, viz.—The knowledge of God—of man—of sin—of the Saviour—of his salvation—of the means of enjoying it—and of its blissful effects and consequences.<sup>25</sup>

He went on to say that it is these doctrines alone which consist of one’s salvation. These are all totally consistent with what we read in an earlier section in Galatians: (1) faith in God, (2) understanding we need rescued, (3) knowing that Jesus rescues us, (4) we receive that gift through faith, and (5) we enjoy liberty because of that gift.

Barton W. Stone gave a similar list in the first volume of the *Christian Messenger*. Before citing it though, here are a few quotes which help set the stage for his overall view:

From the beginning, various opinions have been formed of many of these truths. This is a liberty, which could never be denied to any man, without

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<sup>22</sup> “To disclose one’s thoughts and secrets”

<sup>23</sup> Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (2005), p.115. Garret cites A.S. Hayden, *History of the Disciples of Christ on the Western Reserve* (1875), p. 168.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, vol. 2 (1897), p.152-153.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Campbell, “To the Editor of the Millennial Harbinger,” *The Millennial Harbinger* (1836), p.215.

denying the liberty of thinking at all. This cannot be easily done; and every attempt to do it is an attempt to enslave the mind.<sup>26</sup>

If opinions of truth were to be made terms of fellowship, it is much questioned whether any two men on earth could so perfectly agree in all points, as ever to unite; there would be no end of terms—there could be no union or fellowship on earth.<sup>27</sup>

...it is contended, that there are some doctrines essential to salvation, and that errors in opinion respecting them, ought to exclude those who hold them from the union and fellowship of Christians. We grant that any opinion, which may have such an influence on the heart of any man, as to lead him to immorality and disobedience to the gospel—to the neglect of his duty to God, and to his neighbor, or to the subversion of plain, fundamental truth, ought certainly to be reprobated, and he that holds such an opinion should be rejected from Christian fellowship; because his works prove him to be a heretic, knowing that he that is such, is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself—Titus 3:11.<sup>28</sup>

The idea behind these quotes is simple: one must affirm the truths the Bible expressly states, but their interpretations of these truths can vary between believers.

This idea really comes out when we consider the list he gives in the following paragraphs:

1. There is a Father and a son.
2. Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
3. Jesus is come in the flesh.
4. Jesus died, was buried, and rose again.
5. We must believe in Jesus Christ and obey him.<sup>29</sup>

He then boldly claims, “In these particulars, we presume all Christians agree; and we are happy to find that the terms of Christian unity and fellowship are considerably diminished in number.”<sup>30</sup>

Returning now to Alexander Campbell, we will focus in once more on the differences between Stone and himself. In his famous debate with Rice, Campbell had to answer the charge that no Movement could truly be from God if the two main leaders

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<sup>26</sup> Barton W. Stone, *The Christian Messenger*, Vol. 1 (1826), p.27.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.27-28.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

were divided on such key issues as the Trinity and atonement theory. In response to this charge, Campbell said,

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 catholic 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.<sup>31</sup>

This list he offers should be familiar to us because it comes from Ephesians 4 where Paul discusses the importance of striving for unity. These seven ones are things every Christian can agree on in principle. We may have differing ideas about means and methods, but it is the affirmation of these truths which unite, not our opinions of them. One of these ones, however, is more controversial than all the rest, and it is upon it that our focus will shift in the following section.

## **Must We Be United in Our Understanding on Baptism?**

*"For twelve years I thus lived without immersion, and believe that I lived under the smiles of heaven. But when I became acquainted with my duty, I submitted to it."<sup>32</sup>*

One of the most debated, divisive, and important subjects among the Churches of Christ is the subject of baptism. It is probably *the* issue on most members' minds, with instrumental music being a close second. If someone from the Churches of Christ wants to study with a member of another denomination<sup>33</sup>, it is probably about baptism. Personally, I have made people angry, cry, and feel insecure about their baptism. Not only would I mention the "plan of salvation" in every sermon, but I would also find some

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<sup>31</sup> *Campbell-Rice Debate* (1844), p.505.

<sup>32</sup> Barton W. Stone, *The Christian Messenger*, Vol. 12 (1841), p.38.

<sup>33</sup> I understand that this is expression to my brothers and sisters in the Churches of Christ, but what are we if not divided?

way to talk about baptism if someone in the audience was visiting who hadn't been baptized in the way I thought they should.<sup>34</sup>

In Ephesians 4, Paul said that there is one baptism. Someone from the Churches of Christ may ask, "Which baptism? Sprinkling infants or immersing adults? Baptism in order to be saved or because you already are saved?" In other words, the "one baptism" is specifically baptism in water for the remission of sins with the understanding that you are completely and totally lost until you come up out of the water, at least, according to the mainstream teaching of the Churches of Christ.

This idea about baptism has led some to reject baptized individuals from churches which practice believer's baptism since their baptism wasn't done exactly as stated above.<sup>35</sup> Since they didn't have the *one baptism*, they really didn't have any baptism and were as lost as Hitler, Stalin, and Billy Graham.<sup>36</sup>

If members of the Churches of Christ reject those baptized without a "correct" understanding of baptism, then they do not accept anyone as a Christian who was sprinkled as an infant. Catholics, Methodists, and Presbyterians are doomed to burn in Hell forever despite their holiness, love, and being willing to die for their faith in Jesus as Lord.

In the following sections, we will address these two issues from the standpoint of the Stone-Campbell Movement to see if these ideas of who is saved and who is lost originated with Campbell and Stone.

### **Rebaptism in the Stone-Campbell Movement<sup>37</sup>**

When I was eighteen years old, I attended Auburn University for a few years before deciding to begin preaching full time. While I was there, I was walking down the concourse on the way to Parker Hall one day when I came across a student reading her Bible on one of the benches. I was quite early for Calculus, so I decided to initiate a study. Following the example of Phillip in Acts 8, I asked her if she understood what she was reading. After a few minutes of going back and forth about Genesis 1, I began to show

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<sup>34</sup> The "plan of salvation" consists of five, sometimes six, steps: hear, believe, repent, confess, be baptized, and live faithfully. This is adapted from a Stone-Campbell evangelist named Walter Scott who had a five-finger exercise: believe, repentance, baptism, remission of sins, and the gift of the Spirit.

<sup>35</sup> Believer's baptism is the immersion of believers only, not infants. Many people have been persecuted, burned at the stake, and had all sorts of terrible things done and said about them for believing this doctrine.

<sup>36</sup> I don't mean to say that I believe Billy Graham to be lost, but since he was **the** preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he is often a punching bag for preachers in the Church of Christ, much like Joel Osteen, Max Lucado, and Rob Bell are today for conservative churches of every background.

<sup>37</sup> While I will only write a few paragraphs, Dallas Burdette wrote around 28 pages on "Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Movement." You can access his essay here: <https://freedominchrist.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Chapter-04-Rebaptism-in-the-Stone-Campbell-Movement.doc.pdf>

her how Spirit and water were related. When I came to John 3, we talked about her baptism and her reasoning behind it. She had been baptized to obey Jesus as a profession of her faith, but she was sure she was saved prior to getting wet. After I got done with her, she was in tears because I called into question her faith, her baptism, and her salvation since she wasn't specifically baptized "for the remission of sins."

The above story has happened thousands of times with only the setting and characters being changed. Some stories end in tears. Others end in anger. While few end in the individual being rebaptized. Rebaptism is preached throughout many modern-day Churches of Christ, and it is just one of the many examples of how we have broken that old motto "Where the Bible speaks, we speak, and where the Bible is silent, we are silent." There is not one syllable in the New Testament that teaches, commands, or implies that one who had previously been baptized in the name of Jesus needed to be rebaptized because they were unfamiliar with all the blessings associated with it. If that were the case, then anyone who studies would need to be rebaptized every time they learn something else about the baptismal blessings.

The only account we have of one being rebaptized is in the case of the disciples in Ephesus in Acts 19. However, rebaptism isn't the correct terminology to use when describing what happened to them, for they had only been baptized once into John's baptism and would be baptized later, once, into the name of Jesus.

My friend Wayne Dunaway, who preaches for the Ohatchee church in North Alabama, made a good point to me in a conversation we had the other day. "Daniel," he said, "If a preacher for the Church of Christ had been in Ephesus, he wouldn't have rebaptized a soul because he would have only asked two questions: were you immersed and was it for the remission of sins?"

John's baptism covered two of the major contentions the Church of Christ has with the baptism of other denominations. Furthermore, I doubt if there are many Churches of Christ preachers would have asked what Paul did: "Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?" (Acts 19:2). Walter Scott popularized what is called the five-finger exercise: belief, repentance, baptism, remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. One preacher asked, "What happened to Scott's fifth finger?" While it isn't the subject at hand, one wonders when the Trinity became God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Bible.

Regardless, what was Alexander Campbell's view of rebaptism? How did he view those who were immersed without the knowledge of it being "for the remission of sins." Well, Mr. Andrew Broaddus had a similar question: "How are the baptized to obtain

remission of any sins which may have committed after baptism—must they be rebaptized as some have been?”<sup>38</sup>

Campbell dismissed the question as unnecessary. He felt that Broaddus already knew the answer to it, but to him it was a symptom of another matter, viewing baptism as an expiatory rite.<sup>39</sup> Campbell insisted that one who would view baptism like making a sacrifice under the Law had missed the entire point of baptism to begin with.<sup>40</sup> He goes on to observe that he had heard of some who had been rebaptized specifically “for the remission of sins.”

He then explained why someone may get rebaptized, and it sounds like what preachers today subscribe, but he believes the logic is flawed because it makes baptism into an expiatory rite:

It appears, indeed, that this was making baptism a mere expiatory rite, and regarding it as designed alone for ablution. It made void the former baptism, not because the subject did not believe and confess that Jesus was the Messiah the Son of God—not because the subject was not intelligently immersed into Christ, and did not constitutionally put him on, being, according to the commandment, immersed on said profession, into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and thenceforth admitted into the family of God; but because the subject or the administrator did not fully understand the whole purport of the institution.<sup>41</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

He followed this up by saying,

I trust we need not attempt to show that **Jesus Christ has not ordained any institution solely for the remission of sins—any rite or observance for expiation**...No person, intelligent in the [C]hristian religion, can be baptized for the remission of his sins apart from all other blessings. For one, then, that has been born again, born of water and of Spirit, one who has been baptized into Christ, confessing his faith in the person, character, and mission of Jesus, to be baptized a second time for the remission of sins by itself, or for the Holy Spirit by itself, or for any one

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<sup>38</sup> Alexander Campbell, *The Millennial Harbinger* (1831), p.431.

<sup>39</sup> An expiatory rite is a religious ceremony, like sacrifice under the law, which is able to make atonement.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p.482.

blessing, is without command, precedent, or reason from the New Testament.<sup>42</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

Campbell then offered a humorous explanation for his reasoning when he wrote,

Indeed, I know not how any proclaimer of the gospel, how any intelligent disciple, **can presume to bury a living disciple; [it is against the law!]** how he can immerse a believer a second time into Christ, into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. He must have received a new commission.<sup>43</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

He demonstrated his point further by appealing to Romans 6 where Paul said, “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?” (Romans 6:3). They did not understand baptism in all its “designs, meanings, and bearings,” but the apostle did not demand they be rebaptized.<sup>44</sup> From Campbell’s perspective, all items of a given covenant are secured to the person on the confirmation of the covenant.<sup>45</sup> He explained,

“To as many as received Jesus he gave the privilege of becoming the children of God. In constituting them children he bestowed upon them all the privileges of children of God, made them heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ.”<sup>46</sup>

If one were to ask Campbell his thoughts on a preacher who demands that individuals be rebaptized, he would respond, “He that insists upon a person being rebaptized in order to fellowship, makes his own inferences a bond of union, and adds to the commandments written in the book.”<sup>47</sup> While this may not be that difficult to hear, what about one who has never been immersed at all? Does God accept them as His children? We’ll cover that in the next subsection.

### **What About those Who Have Never Been Immersed?**

We will begin this section with a look at a series of articles Barton W. Stone wrote in response to an Elder Thomas Carr<sup>48</sup> who wrote for the Christian Palladium, a journal

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p.483.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.484.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.485.

<sup>48</sup> [https://www.newrivernotes.com/topical\\_history\\_biographies\\_elder\\_thomas\\_carr.htm](https://www.newrivernotes.com/topical_history_biographies_elder_thomas_carr.htm)

published in New York and edited by Joseph Badger.<sup>49</sup> In this article he stated that he was hopeful to join the “Disciples”<sup>50</sup> in Christian union, but very quickly, he said, the prospect of unity vanished when he realized what it would cost.

But very soon it was discovered that in order to have a union with them we must renounce our former views respecting God’s plan of forgiveness, and all our experiences in religion, or hear it denounced at all times when they thought it expedient. My soul has been pained within me, at many times, on hearing pure, spiritual religion ridiculed and denounced as being the result of false teaching.<sup>51</sup> Those seeking religion in any way but the way than these exceedingly wise persons would direct, were fit subjects for ridicule.<sup>52</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

Unfortunately, this paragraph perfectly captures the attitude and message of most Church of Christ preachers and members with whom I am acquainted. Any joy, peace, love, or comfort you feel because of Jesus prior to being baptized in their prescribed way is fraudulent according to their teaching, which is the way I believed and taught as well.

Barton W. Stone was saddened by this message, and he felt like it did not capture the spirit of the Movement which he and the Campbells had started. He asked this brother, “Now, I ask him and all concerned, Was it ever required of him or any other, by any intelligent brother amongst us, to renounce their former views of God’s plan of forgiveness, in order to have union with us? **I boldly deny it.**” (Emphasis mine—bold)<sup>53</sup> One may wonder if Stone would doubt the intelligence of those who, so many years later, appear to do the very thing he boldly denied!

To emphasize his point, he further questioned,

But I would ask your correspondent, what were his former views of God’s plan of forgiveness, which he thinks they must renounce in order to union? He answers, he always believed that faith, repentance, prayer, and seeking with all the heart, was God’s plan of salvation. **Can any**

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<sup>49</sup> The memoirs of Joseph Badger are preserved at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/40609/40609-h/40609-h.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> Disciples was a sectarian name adopted by some in Stone’s day, something he wished they wouldn’t do. Instead, he wanted them to be Christians only (p.41).

<sup>51</sup> The term “false teaching” is often used as a label for the one who disagrees with someone else about the Bible. Dallas Burdette dedicated his entire dissertation to addressing this misconception. You can read it for free here:

[https://freedominchrist.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/01.-Dallas-Burdette\\_Dissertation.pdf](https://freedominchrist.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/01.-Dallas-Burdette_Dissertation.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> Elder T. Carr, *The Christian Messenger*, Vol. 12 (1841), p.17.

<sup>53</sup> Barton W. Stone, *The Christian Messenger*, Vol. 12 (1841), p.19.

**believe that these sentiments were ever required to be renounced?**<sup>54</sup>  
(Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

Stone had no problem fellowshiping this brother; it was Elder Carr who had the issue, but the real source of his consternation will come out in the following quotation.

His main disagreement with Stone was his interpretation of baptism for the remission of sins and what he saw as a grave inconsistency. Apparently, some within the Stone-Campbell movement were demanding that individuals be immersed before they would have fellowship with them. Here is what he wrote:

I have said the honest among them do not fellowship any but the immersed, because none but such have remission, consequently not born of God, not his children, not their brethren, not Christians; and to fellowship such would be to encircle in their communion the unregenerate, and give 'holy things to dogs.'<sup>55</sup>

After a lengthy defense of the legitimacy of baptism as being part of God's plan of salvation, he began responding to Carr's charges point by point. In a section not quoted above, Carr said that one who isn't baptized must be a sinner lost according to Stone. Stone responded, "Yes; if the sinner knew that God required immersion, and will not obey, he will certainly be lost, or not saved."<sup>56</sup> Stone went on to say that this charge is denied by himself and other "Disciples." He further explained,

We with you believe that immersion only is baptism, and is not to be administered to helpless babes, but to believers only...Now we think with you that there are many pious [C]hristians, who from ignorance of immersion as their duty, have neglected it, and yet are accepted of God with all their ignorance. Yet these same people have the spirit of obedience, and did they know that immersion is required, they would obey.<sup>57</sup>

He then offered himself as a personal example:

For twelve years I thus lived without immersion, and **believe that I lived under the smiles of heaven**. But when I became acquainted with my duty, I submitted to it. How should I then act? Should I teach the world that baptism was unnecessary for salvation, because I experienced

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Elder T. Carr, *The Christian Messenger*, Vol. 12 (1841), p.33.

<sup>56</sup> Barton W. Stone, *The Christian Messenger*, Vol. 12 (1841), p.37.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

salvation without it? Should I labor to comfort people in their ignorance, or teach them their duty and urge them to obey it?<sup>58</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

Stone's major point is that, while God is gracious towards those who are ignorant of the specifics of various commands, one's previous ignorance is no excuse to forsake the command when one gains adequate knowledge of it. One shouldn't worry about deceased relatives who weren't aware of the command or be overly concerned with others, but they should do their best to teach and live the Bible to the best of their abilities regardless of what they used to do or not do.<sup>59</sup>

Alexander Campbell held a very similar position to Stone in answering a question just four years earlier. The letter to Campbell was written in response to a comment he had made in June of that year. He had written,

We would, indeed, have no objections to co-operate in these matters with *all Christians*, and raise contributions for all such purposes as, in our judgment, are promotive of the Divine glory or of human happiness, *whether or not they belong to our churches: **for we find in all Protestant parties Christians as exemplary as ourselves according to their and our relative knowledge and opportunities...***<sup>60</sup> (Emphasis Campbell—italics; Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

The sister who was disturbed by these comments, responded,

I was much surprised today, while reading the Harbinger, to see that you recognize the Protestant parties as Christian. You say, you 'find in all Protestant parties Christians.'<sup>61</sup>

She went on to ask Campbell which act of his gave him the name Christian. Then she inquired, "Does the name of Christ or Christian belong to any but those who believe the *gospel*, repent, and are buried by baptism into the death of Christ?"<sup>62</sup>

Campbell's response was to first appeal to the nature of the church. He argued that if one must live believe exactly as those within the Movement lived and believed, then there would be no Christians all the way back to the first century and that the promise of Jesus failed when He said that the gates of Hades would not prevail against

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38.

<sup>59</sup> See Thomas Campbell's sixth and seventh propositions cited earlier in this essay (p.11).

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Campbell, *The Millennial Harbinger* (1837), p.272.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.411.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

the church.<sup>63</sup> Campbell then gave his definition of a Christian: “But who is a Christian? I answer, Every one that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will.”<sup>64</sup> After talking about the differences between babes and adults in Christ, he made this powerful statement:

**I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion into the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit**, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-grounded hope of heaven...It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves; **and this does not consist in being exact in a few items**, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known.<sup>65</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

Alexander Campbell then answered some of the very questions we have been asking about faith and opinions when he made the following comment about ignorance:

Many a good man has been mistaken. Mistakes are to be regarded as culpable and as declarative of a corrupt heart only when they proceed from a wilful neglect of the means of knowing what is commanded. **Ignorance is always a crime when it is voluntary; and innocent when it is involuntary**. Now, unless I could prove that all who neglect the positive institutions of Christ and have substituted for them something else of human authority, do it knowingly, or, if not knowingly, are voluntarily ignorant of what is written, I could not, **I dare not say that their mistakes are such and unchristianize all their professions**.<sup>66</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

Campbell then made the argument that to condemn all who are ignorant of the specific commands of the Bible would be to do a great injustice. After all, he reasoned, there are many who cannot read, are deficient in education, and ruled by those who they view as smarter and more pious than themselves. He said, “...they never can escape out of the dust and smoke of their own chimney, where they happened to be born and educated!”<sup>67</sup>

Anticipating that someone may say baptism is absolutely essential, Campbell explained, “The preachers of ‘*essentials*,’ as well as the preachers of ‘*non-essentials*,’

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.412

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.413

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

frequently err...My correspondent may belong to a class who think that we detract from the authority and value of an institution the moment we admit the bare possibility of any one being saved without it.”<sup>68</sup> Continuing this line of thought, Campbell compared someone who hasn’t been immersed to someone who might be missing an eye or hand:

**There is no occasion, then, for making immersion, on a profession of the faith, absolutely essential to a Christian – though it may be greatly essential to his sanctification and comfort.** My right hand and my right eye are greatly essential to my usefulness and happiness, but not to my life; and as I could not be a perfect man without them, so I cannot be a perfect Christian without a right understanding and a cordial reception of immersion in its true and scriptural meaning and design. **But he that thence infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he who affirms that none are alive but those of clear and full vision.**<sup>69</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

How could someone who was so dedicated to restoring the ancient order also be willing to count those who didn’t follow that order, as he saw it, as Christians? Because while Campbell understood what baptism meant, he also understood grace. He believed that the principles laid out in his father’s *Declaration and Address* were biblical, and he allowed them to guide him in his life.

Someone may argue that to allow for these possibilities negates the importance of the institution. Both Campbell and Stone made comments denying this conclusion, but to reinforce what they both said, read this last paragraph from Campbell:

But to conclude for the present—he that claims for himself a license to neglect the least of all the commandments of Jesus, because it is possible for some to be saved, who, through insuperable ignorance or involuntary mistake, do neglect or transgress it; or he that wilfully neglects to ascertain the will of the Lord to the whole extent of his means and opportunities, because some who are defective in that knowledge may be Christians, is not possessed of the spirit of Christ, and cannot be registered among the Lord's people. So I reason; and I think in so reasoning I am sustained by all the Prophets and Apostles of both Testaments.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.414

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.414.

What Campbell is saying is that just because people like himself, Stone, and me are willing to have fellowship with those with whom we disagree, it does not give others an excuse to willfully disobey plain commands of Jesus. We fellowship them in their ignorance just as they fellowship us in our ignorance on other matters that they may be better studied in. The point of this entire paper is that Christian unity must be our polar star and is founded upon the basis of faith in Jesus and a desire to do his will. I'll close this section with one last quotation from Campbell:

Should I find a Pedobaptist more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immersed on a profession of the ancient faith, I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most. **Did I act otherwise, I would be a pure sectarian, a Pharisee among Christians.**<sup>71</sup> (Emphasis mine—bold and underline)

## The Truth Shall Set You Free

*So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

John 8:31–32

In the last 12,000 words, I have done my best to present what the Bible and the early leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement had to say about various aspects of unity: what are the essentials, who is a Christian, and what role does doctrine play in one's salvation? Hopefully this has been eye opening to you and at least causes you to compare where we are now in the Churches of Christ and how it all started.

While this history is fun to study, at least for me, I also recognize that Alexander Campbell and all the rest are not my standard for how I ought to live and worship God. That standard is, and forever will be, the Word of God—Jesus. This last section, then, is dedicated to showing how I reached similar views to Campbell and Stone without ever reading their writings. I did not obtain my copy of their material until August of 2021 whereas I have been publishing similar conclusions to what I have presented in this paper for several years now.

In other words, I hope to show what the Bible says about truth, faith, opinions, and unity without appealing to any other source besides the Bible and our common sense.

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.412. This entire article is well worth your time, but hopefully these few selections will help reshape how you view these men. For some, it may mean denying that they are part of your heritage. For others, it may cause you to rethink how you view other Christians. I pray the latter is true for every soul who takes the time to think through these things. Grace is liberating.

John's account of the gospel and his epistles teach that there are two things needed for Christian unity: belief in Jesus and love.

In the trial of Jesus, Pilate asked, "What is truth?" It is this question I will seek to answer in this subsection. First, we must ascertain why truth is important. First, in John 8:32, as quoted above, we see that it is truth that sets us free. In John 17:17, Jesus prays for the disciples to be sanctified in God's truth. Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:21 that the one who practices truth comes to the light. And in 1 John 2:4 warns that the truth is not in those who refuse to keep the commandments.

This brings us back to our question, what is truth? Perhaps the reason people are so divided over this question is because it is the wrong one. Perhaps Pilate didn't have the right foundation, so he asked the wrong questions. The question isn't "what is truth" it is "WHO is the Truth?" That answer is simple and comes from John 14:6: "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

Jesus is the Truth that sets free, for He said in John 8:36, "So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free." Jesus is the Truth that sanctifies, for John began the book, "And the Word became flesh..." The one who practices the Truth follows Jesus, for John wrote, "If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light..." (1 John 1:7). And the Truth is in everyone who keeps the commandments, for Jesus said, "If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love..." (John 15:10).

Jesus is the Truth. Our interpretations of the Bible, doctrines, and methods of worship may be "true" in the sense that they are technically correct, but to believe in the Truth means to believe in Jesus, not one's party doctrines. To really see this, let's look at John 20:

So then, many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31).

Where did John mention baptism? Instrumental music? Fellowship halls? Lord's Supper once a quarter? Or any of the things the Church has split over? What is necessary for life? He plainly says it is belief in Jesus, who is the Truth, the Word, the Life, the Light, and the source of salvation. Like we saw in the section on Galatians, the gospel is Jesus.

In the book of first John, John tells us plainly who is practicing truth versus who believes a lie:

By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and

does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever follows His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says that he remains in Him ought, himself also, walk just as He walked. (1 John 2:3–6)

What are the commandments? This is another one of those passages used to bash anyone who disagrees with the minister giving the sermon. One preacher said on his radio program, “Baptists are liars! Presbyterians are liars! Methodists are liars!” Now if John here means that we must be perfect in our understanding of doctrine and worship, then who among us can be saved?

Luckily, we do not have to look far in 1 John to know what he means by the commandments:

This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. The one who keeps His commandments remains in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He remains in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us. (1 John 3:23–24)

Belief in Jesus and love for one another are the commands we must keep. If we keep these, John tells us, then we are walking in the light, remaining in Jesus, and have the Truth within us. Is this not, in essence, what the first twenty-six pages taught? If we truly know someone has Jesus within them by their profession of faith and love for one another, then why do we cast out those who have Jesus within them by demanding that they follow the Bible in the way we see it?

John, in his first epistle, is not alone in this. Jesus said the same thing in John’s account of the gospel: “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you” (John 15:12). If I find a Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, or a member of the Churches of Christ who believes in Jesus and loves their neighbor, I don’t have to interrogate them about their method of worship, ideas regarding salvation, or their concept of the Trinity. Those discussions can happen in time (and are quite fun!), but they are not to come between brothers and sisters in Christ.

This paper is a plea for restoration, not restoration of the church, but restoration of the goal of unity prayed for by Jesus, the apostles, and great men like the Campbells and Stones of the world. Let’s allow Christian unity to be our polar star and understand that the work of Christian unity begins within ourselves. Father, help us to let go of the self-imposed obstacles and consent to you working within us to accomplish within our generation what Your Son prayed for two thousand years ago.