

RANDOM THOUGHTS ON THE CURRENT UNITY MOVEMENT

Concern for the unity of believers in Jesus Christ has been an important part of the American restoration movement ever since the days of Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone. Unity, however, has not been easy to achieve.

In 1906, spiritual heirs of the Stone-Campbell Movement went their separate ways and were listed in the Federal Census either as Churches of Christ or Disciples of Christ (Christian Church). Churches of Christ strongly opposed missionary societies and the use of instrumental music in worship. The Disciples of Christ accepted both. The 1906 census acknowledged this division that did, in fact, exist.

After the division of 1906, there was always a tension within the Disciples of Christ concerning the authority of the Scriptures and how these Scriptures should be interpreted and applied. In the 1920s, for example, the American Christian Missionary Society began teaching that non-immersed believers could be accepted into the fellowship of the Disciples of Christ on the foreign mission fields.

Finally, in the 1950s and 1960s, the differences between the conservative and liberal wings of the Disciples of Christ became irreconcilable, and the conservative and liberals separated from one another. The conservatives are now known as the Independent Christian Churches, and the liberals are known as the Disciples of Christ.

As many readers know, the Independent Christian Church in cooperation with certain leading speakers in Churches of Christ have put on a full-court press to reunite the Independent Christian Church and Churches of Christ after a century of separation.

Here are some random thoughts about this push for unity. First, unity is dear to the heart of Jesus Christ. No one can read Jesus' prayer on the night of his betrayal and question his fervent desire for the unity of his people.

Second, we must recognize that every person in the world who has heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, believed in him as the Christ the Son of God, repented of his or her sins, confessed Jesus as Lord and been baptized for the forgiveness of sins --- whether he or she knows about "us" or not --- is our brother or sister in Christ. This includes people, for example, who have obeyed the gospel and are affiliated with the Independent Christian Church. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Third, Jesus' emphasis on unity never implies that we should compromise biblical truth or the authority of the Scriptures to attain it.

Fourth, it would be a major step toward unity between Churches of Christ and the Independent Christian Church if the brethren who insist on using instrumental music (but who readily admit that God does not require it) would just remove the instrument from the public assembly so we could all worship together in good conscience.

Finally, there is no need for anyone to provoke another division in our fellowship by attempting to lead a cappella churches to accept instrumental music. The heirs of the Stone-Campbell Movement already have plenty of options. If someone wants a very liberal church with a low view of biblical authority that uses instrumental music, the Disciples of Christ meet his need. If someone wants a conservative church that believes we should follow the Bible but use instrumental music, the Independent Christian Church is available. If someone wants a conservative church that uses only a cappella music and believes the church today should follow the New Testament carefully as our authority in matters of faith and worship, Churches of Christ meet the need.

Let us remember that God will hold us accountable for the choices we make. Let's always try to choose the path that's right and cannot be wrong. Whatever we do, let's not provoke another division in the Lord's church by insisting on using instrumental music in the worship assembly --- something that has no basis in the Scriptures or in early church history.

--- Howard W. Norton