

## Aims and Observations

It is true that, if you don't know where you are going, you don't know if you are on the right road, and you will not know when you get there.

That realization causes me to reexamine my aims and to restate them all along to be sure that they are still evident in my writing. I realize that, in pursuit of bigger game, at times I may be distracted to chase some rabbits of different colors. Some subjects that I touch on are in that category, but most of them are related in some way to my main objective.

My first book, *Free In Christ*, was published primarily as an effort to lead my people in the Church of Christ from our entanglement in legalism into freedom in Christ offered through grace. It challenges the traditional interpretations and practices which have made us a pitifully, tragically divided movement. I have continued on that course with a few deviations. In gaining your loyal readership, my subordinate intention is to make sure that, when you see my name on an article, you will expect to find a new viewpoint or challenging thought. I cannot claim to have done that in every instance.

I still urge any who bother to read my material to begin with my book, *Free In Christ*, and then read my other books in the order written before reading the material of my newsletters. Otherwise, your understanding of my current expressions will be based on your previous concepts instead of mine. A free copy of the first book can be supplied for that purpose.

My extended purpose is to promote the recognition of unity of those who relate to God in Christ. Paul explained that "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself..." (2 Cor. 5:18). All the saved are in God through Christ. The reconciled ones comprise his *ecclesia*, his congregation, church, assembly. This is accomplished by relationship rather than doctrinal agreement in all things. It is individuals, not churches (either sectarian, *true*, *loyal*, or otherwise) who comprise that group. Can one reject, and dissociate from, others in Christ without destroying his own relationship?

The unity with one another is neither brought about nor maintained by agreement on all doctrinal issues. I have discussed with you many points on which believers disagree, not intending to cause you to override your convictions, but encouraging you to accept fellow disciples in spite of differing understandings and practices.

Almost two centuries ago Presbyterians, Barton W. Stone and Thomas Campbell with his brilliant son, Alexander, unknown to each other at the time, began working to break down the walls of separation among their Presbyterian factions. Their ideal of unity gained growing favor among Christians in various sectarian bodies. Their aim was not to *restore* a supposedly extinct universal church, to start a "one true church," or to unite sectarian groups into one new church, but it was for disciples of Christ to accept the reconciled ones who were in the various churches. They wanted Christians in the separated bodies to be *Christians only* while making no claim of being the *only Christians*.

Thomas Campbell's perception of unity has not been comprehended by many who think they pursue his aims. In his famous *Declaration and Address*, he stated: "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.” Since God intentionally brings all the saved together in Christ, universal oneness is an essential quality of the group constituting his redeemed. The universal body cannot be divided into two or more churches. Yes, exclusive factions may organize and identify themselves separately, but if there are any reconciled individuals in the groups, they are still in the one, universal body.

Those in the universal church may assemble and serve locally in groups with different traditions, understandings, and practices so long as they do not reject others whose practices may differ. Each individual and group must respect the discipleship of others even as they themselves wish to be respected. Disciples may work separately due to scruples, culture, race, or location without being opposed to each other. Since the universal body of believers has no name, no group should think its chosen name gives them favor with God.

Each disciple, and every organized group of them, have serious flaws, some more obvious and damaging than others. If we reject all who have imperfections, then we must reject all disciples, and we must expect to be rejected by all others. In a physical family, every member is less than perfect in all respects, but they are no less parts of the same family. They are sisters and brothers because of parentage rather than perfection. They learn to live together in spite of flaws and defects. Being antagonistic, critical, and abusive of each other does not change their relationship in the family but it only emphasizes the differences instead of cultivating loving forbearance.

My writings have been less devotional and inspirational and more doctrinal. In order to promote unity, I have felt the need of dealing with the doctrinal stance that has made us factious. So I have dealt with our legalistic approach to understanding. Thinking the New Covenant writings are a code of law legislating divine patterns for all that pertains to discipleship, we have focused on forms more than relationship. There are constant divisive debates over what the law specifies and how the pattern is maintained. That requires constant effort to restore the vaguely identified authorized pattern. That course is a built-in system for division.

In view of this, my efforts have been to direct our attention to the Covenant of Grace in contrast to a perceived covenant of law. And it becomes a whole new ball game. Freedom is in grace, not law. Why are we so enslaved to law and so afraid of freedom?

My influence has been limited. I entertain no delusions of self-importance. Yet, from my limited perspective, I have sufficient reason for optimism. The response that I have received from the *pew people* since *Free In Christ* was published late in 1984 has changed drastically. While our congregational structures are still guarded zealously in most places by traditional legalists, there is a more Christ-centered message being preached. Disciples have grown tired of spiritually debilitating doctrinal argumentation which holds us to formulas and rituals. They want a family relationship that gives them strength for daily life and a positive interaction with all other believers. The old "We are right and you are wrong" attitude is fading due to the brighter realization that our righteousness is a gift rather than our being right, or *more nearly right*, on everything.

In the few years since my first book was published, a good number of men much more qualified than I have made great material available. Their works are receiving attention from spiritually hungry disciples. Our sectarian and denominational status is being recognized and remedied.

Our people are also developing courage to read challenges to other of our identifying distinctions such as instrumental music, the role of women, marriage and divorce issues, patternism, and the work of the Holy Spirit today. Robert Rowland's "*I Permit Not A Woman...*" *To Remain Shackled* is being read widely. So have Edward Fudge's *Beyond the Sacred Page*, concerning the working of God in our lives, and *The Fire That Consumes*, which questions unconditional immortality and unending conscious torment inflicted on the damned in hell.

Various of our splinter groups resist any change because they think their particular group has restored the "one, true church" in its pristine form. So they decry any who would reform as *change agents* who are trying change God's "original pattern." There is a disconcerting militancy remaining among these disciples. So we have a long way to go yet.

For years I wished to be able to attend a session of *Restoration Forum*, an annual gathering of heirs of the Stone-Campbell Movement to discuss unity among us. Several years ago I had that opportunity when it was hosted by the Skillman Avenue Church of Christ in Dallas. With all the Churches of Christ, Christian Churches (Independent), and Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in the metropolitan area, where would they find a place big enough for such a meeting? Texas Stadium, maybe? Not exactly! I think the auxiliary chapel of the Skillman building could have held us all!

What does that say about our interest in unity? No, attendance was not the proof or disproof of an interest in unity, but wouldn't just a mild interest have filled the building? Paul's urging to "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit though the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3) was interpreted our action as "make little effort."

Incidentally, in May I received an unsolicited copy of the first issue of *Bartimaeus*. It explains: "*Bartimaeus* is a periodic newsletter for the promotion of dialogue between Roman Catholic Christians and Christians of the Churches of Christ. For information: Editors: Rev. Benjamin F. Luther, 6705 Old Highway 45, Paducah, KY 42003 or Bruce Sullivan, 8257 Bunnell Crossing Rd., Hardyville, Ky 42746. Phone: (502) 554-3810. This newsletter is subscription free." The main article was a review of Richard T. Hughes' *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of the Churches of Christ in America*." The review was an honest and conciliatory outreach. Where will it go and what can it accomplish? Who knows? You may want to be in on it. If so, contact them.

The question is not whether various churches will unite by working out some sort of creedal agreement. Our freedom as individual disciples will not allow any sort of organized system to deliver us as a group. Individuals, however, have the responsibility of erasing needless barriers of fellowship person by person. Because a person is in a congregation with sectarian minded people does not mean that the individual exhibits a sectarian attitude.

In so many of our local groups the rejecting, sectarian attitude is so developed that any suggestion of recognition of, or working with, disciples of other groups is unthinkable! Just recently I received the report of a preacher being dismissed

immediately, and area congregations were warned of him, because he conceded that some in other churches might be saved.

Yet, factionalism is receding, our people are more unity minded, and we are centering around Christ more than around church systems

I will conclude this with some challenges. Please restudy the basis of unity for yourself and erase any erroneously erected barriers. Remember, the party spirit is a work of the flesh. Study these matters with other individuals. Feed them literature that emphasizes the correct basis for unity. In time, encourage congregational restudy. A brighter world will come into view! []