

My Thoughts on "A CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATION" #1

"A Christian Affirmation" signed by 23 respected brothers among us is drawing considerable attention and comment lately. You may read the document and information about it at [www.christianaffirmation.org](http://www.christianaffirmation.org). Their concern for the welfare of the church is shared generally though the specifics of concern may not be the same. From explanatory statements by some of the signers, it may be assumed that they signed in general approval instead of agreement with all the specifics. I grant that these men were moved by the highest of motives. I am not accusing them of formulating a creed for the Church of Christ. Preachers often give summations of beliefs in their discourses and tracts. It is proper for any person or group to write a listing and statement of beliefs, even designating it as a creed – "what we believe." It is only improper when conformity to it is made an essential to fellowship.

These men are calling for unity. We all applaud that. They call for unity to be found in "returning to the clear teachings of Scripture and practice of the early church." Most all Christendom will say amen to that, for that is what most churches claim to be doing. Yet we are still chasing the phantom of unity. It is implied in the first paragraph that our stance in Churches of Christ on certain of our identifying characteristics have met the norm, should not be considered strange, and should not be abandoned. The implication is that we may be the only ones right in some areas. Some such claim is necessary for us, or any group, to justify existence as a separate group.

In the remainder of the document, those areas are identified as the original design, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and new life worship. In my audacious manner, being a foreigner to academic community, I wish to offer some thoughts to you pew-people who continue to tolerate my agitating intrusions. I realize that, just as those signers made themselves vulnerable, I will also be setting myself up for target practice. No one can express thoughts that escape all criticism; it is even more difficult for a group to do it. As the cynic has observed, the elephant is a mouse created by a committee.

The Original Design

It is a prevalent misdirection to think of an organized system of religion as being in God's original purpose. God's design is to save sinful individuals. Those who were saved through trusting obedience to the gospel became the community of God (Acts 2:37-47). The unity was created then and there, "*For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit*" (1 Cor. 12:13). That is the minimal requirement for God-created unity! It is a unity by individual relationship to Christ rather than unity of organized systems. We cannot espouse congregational independence and congregational union at the same time.

Penitent believers desiring forgiveness of sins were not first queried as to their convictions about organization of the church, the name they should wear, who would lead

among them, whether or not they would be expected to assemble, how they might worship, details about the Lord's Supper, the role of women, the Genesis account of creation, the security of the believer, or any other of the countless issues we have made into divisive convictions. Such questions were not asked on Pentecost or before the baptism of any other person seeking salvation. God simply did not make such convictions requirements of salvation or the basis of unity. They are not in a creed of necessary beliefs as we have tried to make them. (For more on this, please read Chapter 25, "What God Requires," in my book, *Free In Christ*.)

We have not been called upon to create unity of the church. The Spirit took care of that in answer to Jesus' prayer. As Thomas Campbell rightly stated, "The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one.. ." It cannot be divided! Instead of our being responsible for devising the oneness, we are obliged to be "*eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" (Eph. 4:3). This is maintained by individual acceptance of all in Christ rather than by splinter groups agreeing to accept each other.

Are we to argue that later directives to be discovered in the "fine print" after baptism give an extended list of teachings and practices essential to making us one body and keeping us in it? If so, those things become essentials to salvation which were not met at the time of conversion. That being true, those on Pentecost were baptized into one body before they were actually saved! And what is the formula for exiting the one body or for casting someone from it?

The community was/is the result rather than the purpose. That body of believers is created through the gospel and guided by the teachings / doctrine. The Affirmation quotes Hans Kung, "It is the early church that, in Kung's words, provides 'the essential norm' by which the church in every age and culture measures its message, beliefs, and practices." However, Kung himself wrote, "... we cannot copy it today, but we can and must translate it into modern terms."

Isn't the translating it into modern terms what the signers are concerned about? They wish to hold on to the principles of our American Restoration Movement with our claims of having restored "the essential norm." At what point did we complete that restoration?

It is time for our Movement to ask questions about Restoration. Has there been a time since Pentecost when there were no saved persons? Has the church ever been obliterated so that it would need to be restored? Has the gospel message been silenced in any generation so that no people were obeying it? Perhaps all would answer that negatively, denying that any such restoration is needed.

The alternative concept of restoration is that the church as a system of religion has been misdirected in many teachings and practices so that restoration of specific characteristics is needed. It is more like your car being damaged. It is not totaled but some damaged specific parts make it inoperable and unacceptable. So it needs to be restored to original looks and function. In religion that is reformation. The need for reformation is constant.

So we return “to the clear teachings of Scripture and practices of the early church.” Efforts to follow these “clear teachings” have produced divisions and sub-divisions in our Restoration Movement and a much longer list of divisions in the universal church.

All who are baptized into Christ are in the one body. The Spirit has overseen that. Now, must we all agree in all doctrine and practice in order to maintain that unity? Are differing convictions divisive and damning? Is meeting in separate groups according to different convictions divisive? Be pondering these things as we await the next installment of this discussion. Your brief feed-back will be welcomed and weighed. []

(Cecil Hook; June 2005)

Talkin’ Texas: In area, Texas is larger than the combined areas of Germany, Italy, Israel, Kuwait, and Jamacia.

Do you still doubt that all “end-time prophecies” have been fulfilled? Then you need these two books: “*THE PAROUSIA*,” by James Stuart Russell, \$21.50 postpaid, and “*The SECOND COMING: MISSION ACCOMPLISHED*,” by Tom Kloske and Steve Kloske, \$30.00 postpaid. A June special: both for \$45.00 postpaid.