

My Thoughts on “A Christian Affirmation 2005” #5

If you are still with me, you may be thinking of me as a barking dog who is constantly alarmed by imaginary dangers. While incessant barking is a nuisance, sometimes it may be a warning of actual danger which complacency ignores. As your dog grows older, you learn to give more attention to his warnings. So, maybe age is in my favor as I have been in the church over seventy years intimately acquainted with, and promoting, the claims of our Movement until I approached retirement age.

Who could disagree with the signers of the “Affirmation” when they state, “The path to substantive Christian unity is found in returning to the clear teachings of Scripture and practices of the early church, commonly acknowledged and respected by all Christian traditions.”? “The restoration vision is to unite with the earliest Christians,” they insist further. This is in essence a restatement of the aims of our movement which they identify as the American Restoration Movement. Read it at www.christianaffirmation.org.

With deep sadness, I must remind that we have proved the utter failure of such an approach to unity. We have divided as though the Lord commanded that as our mission! Even congregations in our various groups and sub-groups continue to divide. As Carl Ketcherside has observed, we are no more a unity movement than a hermit is a crusader.

It is unlikely that any of you think there was a time in church history when there were no saved people on earth. They were/are the church. The church has not ceased existence needing restoration. Restoration intentions are directed toward organized religion, but the church is not an organization. To restore the organized church, we must find a lawful pattern. Then we must agree on what the pattern is. We depend upon “the clear teachings of Scripture and practice,” which leads us to where we are in our pitifully divided state. Legalism, patternism, and restorationism have been the cause rather than the cure for our disunity. We have been unable to agree on the pattern, when it is violated, and when it is lawfully restored. Unless we can demonstrate that this is the remedy among our own congregations, how can we sell the concept to other churches?

“We do not, and cannot, follow the ‘original design’ for the church or its ‘practices’ today. We pick and choose what fits our own interpretations and traditions. The ‘early church’ was in many respects very different than any church today,” my dear friend, Robert Rowland of Corona, CA, observes in a letter to me. RHRowld@juno.com. Bob lists fifteen things in the early church that we do not include today. I shall adapt only ten of them here as sufficient to make the indisputable point.

1. We have no apostles. The early church did.
2. We have no inspired male and female prophets.
3. We do not have miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit.

4. We do not require women to wear veils. We have no enrolled widows who washed feet.
5. We do not have women praying or prophesying in our assemblies.
6. We do not have tongue-speakers, nor do we have interpreters.
7. We do not, and could not, go through Jewish purification rites as Paul did.
8. We do not gather apostles, elders, and the whole church to pass on instructions for other churches on doctrinal matters and practices.
9. We will not do away with our church buildings, a foreign concept to the early church.
10. Our Christian groups do not remain nameless like the early church did.

They had all those things in the early church! No doubt, you can add to this list. You probably have not seen us appoint elders with fasting, praying, and laying on of hands. Have you seen our elders pray for the sick while anointing them with oil? Are we willing to give up our professional surrogate elders who are hired to pastor/feed the flock which were unknown in the early church? Are we to model after the Judean disciples with James who continued to keep rituals of the Law or after the ones who left the Law behind? And how about laboring without the benefit of the new covenant Scriptures? Do we let evangelists appoint elders like they were instructed to do? We do not have Communion with our pot-luck meals as the Corinthians did.

One would be hard-pressed to prove that they engaged in congregational singing in the early church. Paul wrote the Corinthians, “When you come together, each one has a hymn ...” (1 Cor. 14:26). Our aversion to solos leads us to interpret that as “each one has a hymn to lead”! Our two proof-texts for congregational singing (and against instrumental music) are not referring to assemblies or “worship services.” Read them in context (Col. 3:12-25; all of Eph. 5) to see that Paul is giving exhortations concerning conduct and relationships in life generally with special words for wives, husbands, children, fathers, and slaves. In their social lives they were being exhorted to avoid the songs of the drinking parties in favor of singing uplifting, spiritual songs.

If the “clear teachings and practices of the early church” are actually clear, why has our Movement made such a mess of things, and why have the sincere searchers through the centuries not been united on them?

Are you willing to explore another interpretative route which includes the necessary concept of unity in spite of diversity – unity created by God on the essentials and diversity in practices, preferences, opinions, and convictions?

As we covered earlier, when the gospel was proclaimed and people were obedient to it in repentance and submission to baptism, they were saved. They became the church, which is the saved. The Lord added them together. By one Spirit they were all baptized into one body. That is the unity created by God. It was created before any indoctrination in various other beliefs and practices which might be introduced later. So unity could not have been based on conformity on those additional teachings.

In the first chapter of my first book, *Free In Christ*, for emphasis, I sort of overloaded my gun by listing one hundred things over which we disagree in our congregations. I did this because many in our divided segments steadfastly deny the possibility of unity in diversity. They demand that we all agree on doctrines and practices while sitting with, and in fellowship with, people in every assembly who disagree on many of those things listed! I would be so bold as to guess that no five elders serving any congregation agree on 75% of the things listed. Yet they deny unity in diversity!

What a pity that the apostles did not have my list so they could indoctrinate all of their “responses” on Pentecost with the correct answers before baptizing them into Christ! There is no evidence that any evangelist drilled his prospective converts before baptism on the organization of the church, the name it should wear, its worship procedures, the activities it should take part in, what they must believe about contraception, abortion, warfare, the security of the believer, predestination, the nature of the resurrection, the work of the Holy Spirit, the millennium, the inerrancy of the Scriptures, the creation account, my list of a hundred issues, and countless others.

I address you as the respected friends and brothers whose sincerity I do not question. We must face the unmasked truth. Why was there no such course of indoctrination before persons were, at the direction of the Spirit, baptized into, and united in, the one body? The answer is indisputable. Those things are not the basis of salvation or unity. They are no part of the Gospel.

Were subsequent teachings in the epistles sort of fine print added as essentials to salvation for those already saved? If you consider them an appendix of essentials, the appendix has become inflamed and needs excision! In the epistles we find teachings, exhortations, warnings, and historical narrative giving guidance for edification, work, and growth. But specific requirements of the time, frequency, length, and activities of assemblies are not given. Where is a list of essential rituals delineated? Specific plans and participation for edification are left to our judgment. If they build up, fine; if they are perfunctory rituals that are burdensome, discouraging, or ineffective, delete! Can you not discern what builds you up spiritually and what does not?

Are we saying that none of the things mentioned above or in my list of one hundred are of any concern? Absolutely not! Some of them may be damning! But everyone else may not agree with you as to what is damning. Who is to set himself up as the judge and reject those who disagree? Each person is accountable to God and must live according to his own conscience while living in harmony with other brothers in Christ.

Circumcision, the eating of certain foods, and the keeping of special days became topics of contention in the early church. Some disciples were convinced that their convictions were essential to salvation, but Paul explained that they were matters of indifference, except that one should not violate his own conscience, lead a weak brother to stumble, or judge and reject his brother, thus becoming divisive (1 Cor. 8; Rom. 14).

In addition to being in the one universal church, disciples began to form and join congregations. We still do that. Even though they were not differentiated by names as is true in our modern world, they were composed of erring people, persons with different convictions, individuals who were ignorant and misguided, and disciples with problems – just like every church in the world today. How can you protect your conscience in such a perplexing situation? Preferably, by study we may come to agreement.

Otherwise, without claiming to be the whole church, we can and do join and serve with disciples who hold similar convictions as parts of the universal church. The Lord does not add us to these congregations. Neither is one saved due to being in any of those denominations but one may serve faithfully in spite of it.

It is not meeting separately that is divisive but rejecting one another is sinfully divisive. Unity is not in congregational systems but in individuals. The Spirit united individuals, not churches. We are to maintain that unity by accepting each other individually rather than by the identifying name we have chosen.

If you are convicted against annual communion, lifting up hands in praise, singing with instruments, women praying in the assembly, or any other similar issue, then worship with a group where your participation is not a violation of your conscience. You can do that without rejecting and working against those who practice those things. You can continue to work with them in the cause of Christ. Such a loving, accepting attitude is not divisive. Respect for the Father will foster respect for his children.

I can readily understand and respect your disagreement and total rejection of my proposed solution for I myself have spent a lifetime searching through the confusing, darkened jungle of divisive contentions. Let peace rule in our hearts. []

(Cecil Hook; July 2005)

Talkin' Texas: Dublin, in Erath County, takes its name, not from Dublin, Ireland, but from the alarm cry "Double in!" used to warn of impending Indian attacks.

"I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).