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FR 266

RESPONSE TO "A CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATION 2005"

Leroy Garrett

In the May, 2005 issue of *The Christian Chronicle* there appeared "A Christian Affirmation 2005" signed by 23 leaders of Churches of Christ – professors, deans, pulpit ministers, elders. The intention of the document is "to clarify our Christian identity in a time of increasing uncertainties." The document expresses "A Word of Concern" that recent efforts to overcome a legacy of legalism and division has led us "to relax our commitment to practices that have been characteristic of our churches." In doing this these leaders have placed issues on the table worthy of critical discussion.

I would like to join the conversation by questioning some of the affirmations set forth.

In appealing to our heritage of unity in the American Restoration Movement, the leaders state that "we believe that unity cannot be grounded in minimal agreements among Christian traditions." They go on to say that substantive Christian unity is found "in returning to the clear teaching and practices of the early church."

That unity can be realized *only* by minimizing the essentials, while at the same time allowing liberty in a wide variety of opinions, is the hallmark of our Stone-Campbell heritage. Alexander Campbell often referred to "the seven facts" of Eph. 4:4-5 as the grounds of unity, and sometimes he reduced them to three – "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Barton W. Stone was equally minimal when he defined a Christian as one who acknowledges "the leading truths of Christianity, and conforms his life to that acknowledgement." They saw the "core gospel" as the basis of unity, not an extended list of dogmas and practices.

This gave rise to an axiom that goes far in identifying who we are or should be:

In essentials (as few as possible), unity;

In opinions (as broad as possible without compromising essentials), liberty;

In all things, love.

W.T. Moore, one of our earliest historians, identified this unique appeal of our heritage in mathematical terms: "The Disciples have always contended for the greatest possible numerator with the least possible denominator." He meant by this the greatest possible liberty of opinion (numerator) with the fewest possible essentials (denominator). Robert Richardson, an associate of Campbell and our earliest historian, stated it even more succinctly: "That alone which saves men can unite them."

All this conforms to the consensus of modern New Testament scholarship, that the early Christians had but one creed or one essential – *Jesus is Lord!* This is what they lived for and died for. All else was marginal. What believers live and die for is what unites them.

"Multiplying the essentials" has sometimes been named as the cause of our divisions. Campbell called it "the tyranny of opinionism."

When the *Affirmation* argues for unity by "returning to the clear teachings of Scripture and practices of the early church" it is preserving the illusion of restorationism that has been an albatross about our necks in Churches of Christ all these years. If what these leaders call "The Original Design" of the early church is all that "clear," why have we divided into numerous factions over what that design or pattern is? Are the "clear teachings of Scripture" all that clear about whether we have Sunday schools, instrumental music, cooperation, societies, Communion cups, etc. Are they clear about the millennium, glossolalia, predestination, election, the Trinity, inspiration, interpretation, etc.?

We differ on all these things – and even baptism. Stone and Campbell differed on baptism. Our own people have never been of one mind about baptism, much more the church at large. We can no more see everything alike than we can look alike. But we don't have to! That is the genius of the Stone-Campbell heritage. We can differ on opinions – and all the above are opinions – while we unite upon the essentials, which are centered in the core gospel, Jesus Christ and him crucified.

This is a weighty flaw in the "*Affirmation*" – it has little place for unity in diversity, which is the only kind of unity there is. We can have churches that sing acappella and those that use instruments, and still be united. We can have congregations that have Sunday schools and join in cooperative efforts, and those that do not, and still be one in Christ. We are united in Christ, not by agreement on opinions or methods. It is a Person that unites us, not theories or theology about the Person.

Another questionable affirmation in the document is that "God does not save individuals apart from the body of Christ." Who is this that knows the mind of Him who said, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Rom. 9:15)? God will save whom He will, in the church or out. Only God knows the heart, and only He knows how many Rahabs there are out there. This exclusive view of God's grace is the offspring of "the only true church" fallacy that has long made us sectarians. It goes this way: the saved are all in the church; we are that church; so, if one doesn't belong to the Church of Christ he is not saved.

The document rightly urges that we preserve such practices as weekly Communion and baptism by immersion for remission of sins, and we may urge these as reflective of "the common faith and practice of the earliest Christians." But even here we cannot make our interpretation and practice tests of fellowship. We must recognize – as these 23 leaders appear reluctant to do – that there are multitudes of sincere, intelligent Christians who do not see "the common faith and practice of the earliest Christians" the same way we do. We can stand firmly for what we believe about baptism, and still accept as equals in Christ those who differ with us.

This is consistent with our heritage in Stone-Campbell. No one was more zealous for baptism by immersion than Alexander Campbell – debating it as he did – and yet he accepted as Christians those referred to as "the pious unimmersed." He was himself an example of his own definition of a Christian – "A Christian is one who believes that Jesus is the Christ, repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his

understanding." After a prolonged study of baptism, he was immersed, but he believed he had been a Christian all along. One is responsible only for such light as he has at any given time, he held.

In defense of our singing without instruments, the 23 leaders point out that acappella music has been the position of numerous reformers and churches through the centuries, such as John Calvin and the Puritans, and 300 million in Eastern Orthodox churches. But that is not the issue. No case has to be made for acappella music. All churches sometimes sing acappella. The issue is making instrumental music a test of fellowship. John Calvin did not make acappella music "catholic," and the Orthodox churches do not make it an essential to fellowship, as we in Churches of Christ have done.

A number of our congregations have recently gone public in stating they will no longer make instrumental music a test of fellowship – not that they will no longer sing acappella. That is the issue. Do the 23 signers of the "*Affirmation*" agree with those churches, or are they saying that we should keep on making a test of what is but our opinion or preference?

The "*Affirmation*" errs as much in what it does not say as in what it does say. In any effort to identify ourselves we should recognize that Churches of Christ are part of a movement "to unite the Christians in all the sects," and that we must get back on track as a unity people. We must reaffirm such mottoes as "We are Christians only, but not the only Christians."

In doing this we must confess our sins – that we have claimed to be the only Christians and the only true church, that we have often been sectarian about the nature of the church and legalistic about baptism. And that we have been wrong about instrumental music – not in singing acappella, but in making the instrument a test for accepting other believers as equals in Christ. We must go on to affirm our intention to become a Christ-centered, Spirit-filled people desirous of enjoying fellowship with all other Christians, and to join them in labors of love for Christ's sake. []

(Read the Affirmation and all about it at <www.christianaffirmation.org>.)

Used with permission, this is Occasional Essay 72 (5-7-05) of Soldier On! w/Leroy Garrett. You may receive these email lessons by request to leroy.ouida@worldnet.att.net. Next week I plan to use another of Leroy's articles about Alexander Campbell which may surprise, or even shock, most of you as it did me. Don't miss it!

(Cecil Hook: May 2005)

Talkin' Texas: Texas' 5,175 square miles of inland lakes and streams is surpassed only by Alaska.