

# Unity in [Spite of] Diversity?

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## Introduction

Is a renewed and intensified “unity” initiative with the Independent Christian Church (ICC) underway? Abilene Christian University had an ICC preacher on its lectureship not very long ago. The Tulsa Workshop had two ICC speakers on its program last year. Even more recently, the December 2004 issue of *The Christian Chronicle* gave major ink to two news stories and an advertisement, all of which seem to point in this direction.

## News Story Number One

Page 1 carries the headline, “Church of Christ, Christian Church leaders test waters.” The article, written by *Chronicle* staffer Lindy Adams, tells of “Ministry Impact ’04,” an October meeting “for dialogue and fellowship” in Grand Prairie, Texas (near Dallas), involving 350 men from the ICC and churches of Christ. Adams, in typical liberal jargon, refers to us, to the ICC, and to the Disciples of Christ as “three streams” of the “American Restoration Movement” and of the “Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement.” (Note: I am not a member of a “movement,” but of the church of Christ, to which He added me when I obeyed the Gospel plan of salvation [Acts 2:38–41, 47].)

David Faust, president of Cincinnati Christian University (an ICC school) denied that the confab was “about an organizational merger.” Admittedly, “dialogue” with those with whom we differ does not imply unity or fellowship with them. Unless Adams was wrong in his report, however, they met for “dialogue **and** fellowship.” I need a bit of help to understand why engaging in “fellowship” with others does not imply “unity” with them, whether or not there is discussion of “an organizational merger.”

Some of “our” most devoted (to liberalism) liberals who spoke had other ideas. Rick Atchley (of the Richland Hills “Church of Christ” denomination near Fort Worth, Texas) wants to see a “family reunion” involving the two groups in 2006, the one hundredth anniversary of the division the ICC’s founders precipitated in order to have their unauthorized instruments and missionary societies. Prentice Meador of Prestoncrest Church of Christ in Dallas (another big city liberal church) suggested that Larimore, McGarvey, Brewer, and Lipscomb were men who believed in salvation “by God’s grace, not by getting everything right.” (Meador here—perhaps inadvertently—encapsulates the liberal credo: God does not regard obedience over disobedience or being right over being wrong.) Unfortunately, the men Meador listed are not around to respond to his defamations.

The same article recorded the donation of \$50,000.00 by an ICC in Colorado toward beginning a new congregation in Odessa, Texas, sponsored by the avant-garde Golf Course Road “Church of Christ” in nearby Midland. The article also noted that the Northwest Church of the Christ (Seattle, WA) and a nearby ICC had merged in September. This was hardly monumental, since Northwest was already using instruments in some of its Sunday worship assemblies.

Victor Knowles, ICC leader and editor of *One Body* (the paper he founded in 1984 to blur crucial distinctions between the ICC and the Lord’s church), commented that, while “some will be contentious” about such unification efforts, “many will welcome the opportunity to join hands.” (Oh, but I thought the meeting was just for “dialogue,” rather than for “joining hands”—merger or union.) He was right on both counts: (1) Some will be “contentious” about such efforts (count me among them), and (2) some (doubtless, many, including several attendees) gleefully welcome all such compromising efforts.

### **News Story Number Two**

A three-page article (17–19, including centerfold) reviews a new book, *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (more of that *Stone-Campbell Movement* lingo). The reviewers, John Harrison and Lynn McMillon (both *Christian Chronicle* staffers and Oklahoma Christian University religion professors), laud the work of its editors, one from each of the “three major branches of the movement” (there they go again) (the third “branch” is the modernistic Disciples of Christ denomination). The editor “representing” the “Church of Christ” is Doug Foster, highly acclaimed by Abilene Christian University as its resident “authority” on “restoration” history. (This is the same highly touted “scholar” who, in a 1992 *Wineskins* article, attributed heretical statements from a Baptist preacher to David Lipscomb, whom Lipscomb quoted in the process of refuting his error. Although almost thirteen years have passed, Foster has still not come clean on his appalling error.)

Tom Olbricht, retired head of Pepperdine’s religion department (and one of the originators and principal advocates of the “new hermeneutic” movement a few years ago) wrote several articles in this book concerning the church (including one on hermeneutics!). His credentials inspire anything but confidence that his material will faithfully represent Scripture or history.

One could easily infer that the reviewers consider all three bodies of the “Restoration Heritage” (the reviewers’ terminology) equally honorable (and/or culpable) concerning the three-way division. They say the *Encyclopedia* desires to “stress the ‘connectedness’ of the three

traditions.” This statement and/or aim is **almost** amusing, in light of the utter “disconnectedness” that prevails—and will remain—as long as the Disciples and the ICC despise the authority of Scripture, and as long as faithful brethren stand for the Truth.

### **The Advertisement**

On page 15, *The Christian Chronicle* carries a prominent advertisement, titled, “President Sought.” The ad seeks a new president for the Disciples of Christ Historical Society. The candidate “must be...committed to reconciliation,” and must have “commitment to and knowledge of all traditions in the Stone-Campbell Movement.” (I failed to find *must be committed to the Scriptures* in the ad.) What business does the *Chronicle* have helping a branch of the modernistic Disciples of Christ (or any denomination) find an employee? Is this not one more attempt by the *Chronicle* to blur the line of fellowship between Truth and error? Are there still those who doubt the *Chronicle*’s leftward theological tilt?

### **A Bit of History**

“Ministry Impact ‘04” (merely for “discussion,” “dialogue,” and “worship,” but not “unity,” remember!) grew out of the series of “Restoration Forums” conducted over the past twenty years and the “Stone-Campbell Dialogue,” begun in 1999. The first of these forums (originally billed as a “Restoration Summit”) convened in August 1984 on the campus of Ozark Bible College (an ICC school) in Joplin, Missouri. Fifty men from churches of Christ and from the ICC (all deemed to be “irenic”) attended by invitation only. Principal participants included Rubel Shelly (he had publicly announced his liberalism only a year earlier) and Victor Knowles (ICC unity activist identified above).

Of the fifty men invited from churches of Christ, perhaps six were known for their conservatism, while the rest had already made a reputation, either as doctrinally soft and/or as unabashedly liberal. Some extremely compromising statements were made in this forum by men in—but on the way out of—the Lord’s church (e.g., Randy Mayeux). Others who were present, suggested compromises and/or wrote articles afterward that urged compromise in the interest of “fellowship” and “unity.” Liberals in the church have eagerly participated in these ecumenical exercises.

While some of “our” participants were quite willing to ignore such differences as the use of instruments in worship—and the crucial underlying issue of Biblical authority—the ICC attitude was uncompromising (regarding its compromises!). Concerning instruments, their attitude was (and is): “We are not about to give them up.” Since about 1987, only those on the extreme liberal fringe among us have attended these “love-ins” with the ICC folks. Faithful

brethren rightly view these forums as both futile and malevolent because they ignore the numerous substantive hermeneutical, doctrinal, and practical errors that preclude Biblical unity.

### **Is Unity the *Summum Bonum* in Religion?**

The foregoing considerations raise the question, “Should religious unity override all other considerations?” Are doctrinal Truth and Scriptural practice only secondary and relatively insignificant? Many in the church, in an ecumenism run amok, now answer these questions affirmatively and would have all of us do so as well.

Some delight in stressing the emphasis the Campbells and other early restorers made on unity, especially in their early efforts to free themselves from sectarian shackles. These self-styled “historians” leave the impression at times that unity was their **only** interest and plea. However, an objective perusal of only a few of A. Campbell’s uncompromising, strongly worded articles in *The Christian Baptist* (1823–29) will quickly dispel this impression. The early restorers pled for unity, but based on submission to, rather than sacrifice of, inspired Truth. Faithful men have never sought or proposed unity merely for its sake alone.

Undeniably, unity in spiritual matters is a major theme of the Bible. Jesus came to heal the great division between Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14–17). Moreover, he came to heal the ultimate alienation between God and mankind (Luke 19:10; 1 Pet. 3:18). None can (nor should any desire to) deny that the Lord and the inspired New Testament penmen urged (and urge) unity. The Lord prayed that all who would believe on Him would be one (John 17:20–21). Paul pled for unity among the Lord’s people (1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:1–3). Peace and accord are conditions that all right-thinking men highly prize and greatly admire: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Psa. 133:1). It is still appropriate to ask, however, if unity is the ultimate goal of God and the Gospel.

### **Some Balancing Considerations**

**The Lord’s Prayer:** As mentioned above, the Lord prayed for unity among all those who would “believe” on Him through the apostles’ teaching. However, one is mistaken to identify these “believers” as those who merely reach the conclusion that He is the Son of God, while ignoring His Word in their doctrine and practice. He did not have modern denominational “Christendom” in mind. That this conclusion is sound is attested by the *even as* clause He employed: “That they may all be one; **even as** thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us” (John 17:21a, emp. DM). The Father and the Son are absolutely one in doctrine and practice, and this is specifically the unity for which the Lord prayed.

Further, the New Testament repeatedly uses *believe* as a synecdoche for the entire Gospel plan of salvation, beginning at least as early as John 3:16. This use of the word is especially noticeable from Pentecost forward. Those who received the Word, were baptized, and were added to the church (Acts 2:41, 47) initially constituted “all that believed” (v. 44; cf. 4:4, 32; 5:14; 1 Cor. 3:5; 9:5; et al.). Similarly, inspired writers juxtapose *believer* with *unbeliever* to distinguish a Christian from a non-Christian (1 Cor. 14:22; 2 Cor. 6:15; 1 Pet. 2:7). A “believer” in the New Testament context is one who has obeyed the Gospel and has been added to the church.

Surely, the Lord would not have confused us by referring in His prayer to “believers” in some other sense. Granted, He would have all men be one who “believe” on Him in any sense, but His prayer is much more narrowly focused. He did not pray for some sort of pseudo “unity” of His people with doctrinally diverse denominationalists in an oxymoronic “unity in diversity” in which they would “agree to disagree.” *Believers* did not include such folk, so **any application of the prayer to denominationalism is secondary at best.**

Primarily and specifically, His prayer looked toward the fast-approaching Pentecost and the glorious new era it would inaugurate as the apostles began preaching His Word (Mat. 28:18–19; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:47–49). The “believers” were those who would believe on Him “through their word” (John 17:20)—those who would obey the Gospel, as demonstrated earlier. He prayed that all **these** “may...be one.” *May be* translates a present tense form, indicating continuing action. Hence, He prayed not only for initial, but also for perpetual unity among those **who would obey the apostles’ teaching** and **whom He would add to His church**, as occurred in the beginning (Acts 2:41–42, 47).

Those disciples did not need a “unity forum” to achieve unity. Unity occurred when—and because—they initially obeyed the Gospel, and it continued as long as they “continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching.” When three or three thousand persons obey the pure Gospel and continue in it, they will become and remain genuinely united, whether in the first or the twenty-first century.

**Paul’s Plea:** Paul’s plea for unity (1 Cor. 1:10) was directed to the Corinthian saints who had initially been united in Christ by obeying the Gospel (vv. 13–16; 15:1–2). For doctrinal and practical reasons in their private and congregational behaviors (e.g., 1:11–12; 3:3–6; 5:1; 6:1–8; 11:17–34; 12:1–31; et al.), the Corinthian saints were divided. Paul did not urge them to merely declare a state of “unity” in spite of their doctrinal diversity. Rather, he pled for them to “all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in

the same mind and in the same judgment” (1:10). They were to be of **one mind** and **one voice** because of the **one message**, which Paul taught “everywhere in every church” (4:17)—not because of negotiated compromises.

**Division Commanded:** Some depict those who dare oppose any effort supposedly aimed at “unity” as negative knuckleheads who delight in religious division. This depiction is neither true nor fair, nor is it Scriptural. “Unity,” if not based upon Truth, is not only undesirable—it is **unauthorized**. Some moderns are apparently unaware of Jesus’ declaration in Luke 12:51: “Think ye that I am come to give peace in the earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division.” God’s faithful ones are forbidden to maintain fellowship and be united with those who rebel against the Lord and His Word (to do one is to do the other, John 12:48).

Jesus commands His church to separate from (not remain united with) one who sins against a brother and will not repent (Mat. 18:15–17). The church is to mark and turn away from (not unite with) those who deceive others by their false doctrines (Rom. 16:17–18). The church is to “purge out” and no longer “keep company” with a member who lives an immoral life (1 Cor. 5:1–13). The church must “withdraw” from and “have no company with” brethren who are disorderly and who reject apostolic doctrine (2 The. 3:6, 14; cf. Eph. 5:11; 1 Tim. 1:19–20; Tit. 3:11–12; 2 John 9–11; Rev. 2:5). These passages clearly affirm that “unity,” arrived at by compromise or surrender of the Truth, is forbidden and sinful. The conclusion is also unavoidable that our Master requires us to disrupt fellowship and unity when men will not repent of their rebellion against Him. We are to have no fellowship with **brethren**, much less denominationalists, who persist in sin and error.

### **Conclusion**

Both branches of the Christian Church (i.e., the Disciples and the Independents) are denominations, spawned by those who rebelled against the Christ and His Word. I know of no present attempt to “cozy up” to the left wing (theologically and politically) Disciples. The present thrust of liberals among the Lord’s people continues to be toward the ICC. However, those who are so eager to join themselves to the ICC (in spite of its adamant refusal to repent of its many errors) may as well go ahead and start fellowship negotiations with the Disciples. The two groups share the same basic attitude toward the authority of Scripture. The Disciples have simply been more consistent in following where that attitude leads.

The old denominational slogan, “One church is as good as another,” is accurate only in reference to the denominations. If the liberals in the church of Christ accept one denomination (e.g., the ICC), they have no logical basis on which to discriminate against and reject another

(e.g., the Disciples, the Lutherans, the Baptists, et al.). Max Lucado and Rubel Shelly have been consistent—if grossly in error—in this respect. Not only have they openly embraced the ICC, but Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, and likely others in their open-ended ecumenism. Lucado has outdone even Shelly (and several other fellow-apostates) in at least one respect: He changed the name of his denomination so that innocent Truth-seekers are no longer confused by seeing “Church of Christ” on his building. May the Lord speed the day that all of those who are more in agreement with and feel a greater kinship toward the denominations than with the Lord’s faithful people will go ahead and join them “whole hog.” The “sooner the better” it will be for the church of Christ. As beautiful and desirable as unity is, it is not the “be all and end all” in religion. Jesus did not say, “Ye shall know unity, and unity shall make you free,” but “Ye shall know he truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

**[Note:** I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the January 2005 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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