

An Examination of the Current Unity Movement

Where It Is, How It Got There, Where It Is Going

Dub McClish

Introduction

The title of this MS implies certain things, among them, the following:

- **First**, there is currently a “unity movement” of some sort underway involving many of our brethren. This movement is primarily aimed at achieving unity with the Independent Christian Church (also known as the “Conservative Christian Church,” henceforth referred to as “ICC”) by extending fellowship to same. I say “primarily” with the ICC because some have already indicated that they desire to broaden the effort.
- **Second**, to speak of a “current unity movement” implies the existence of such activity in the past. Since the departure of the digressive brethren from the Lord’s church in 1906 and forming the “Christian Church,” several efforts have been made to effect unity between the ICC and the church, and we will do well to give some space to a study of them. There are always lessons to be learned from history. A **failure to learn the facts** of restoration history of the past 150 years, coupled with a **disregard for the meaning of those facts** by some who know them, has produced serious compromise and chaos in the kingdom. It threatens to produce more.

A Brief History of Previous Unity Movements

Even before the ICC broke away from the Disciples of Christ denomination (1926-27) some attempts at unity were made. A program emphasizing unity was launched in 1914 by E. H. Koch, State Secretary of the Tennessee Christian Missionary Society (Waddey, art. no. 1, p. 3). “The Commission on Unity” was formed in the early 1920s for the sake of addressing the instrument question, especially. Its means of doing so was to distribute O. E. Payne’s book, which not only defended instrumental music in worship, but required it. John B. Cowden, one of the instigators, stated in a letter to *The Gospel Advocate* (May 18, 1922) that they were proceeding “...on the hypothesis that there can be no unity until our divisive differences are settled, and settled right” (Highers, 5[165]). After considerable effort, Cowden concluded:

They [churches of Christ] will have nothing to do with us but state openly and flatly that we are a separate and distinct people and occupy irreconcilable positions: and there is nothing left for us to do but fall in or fall out with them (Waddey, art. no. 1, p. 3).

This movement led to and was effectively terminated by the Hardeman-Boswell Debate on the instrument in 1923. A written debate on the same topic between H. Leo Boles and M.D. Clubb in 1926 also grew out of this effort. It is worth pointing out that, although the leaders of this movement sought to accomplish unity by convincing our brethren that use of the

instrument was Scriptural, they at least understood and appropriately aimed at the principal cause of division.

In the 1930s a movement aimed at unity between the ICC and the churches of Christ was inaugurated by Claude F. Witty of the Westside-Central Church of Christ in Detroit, Michigan and James DeForest Murch, editor, preacher, and leader in the ICC. While more men were eventually involved in this project, it primarily involved the efforts of "...50 men from each communion [who] braved the criticism of many of their brethren to make valuable contributions to the venture" (Murch, 275). The first of several meetings with an equal representation of men from both groups was held in Cincinnati, Ohio, February 23, 1937. Several similar meetings followed in various places for several months.

These meetings led to a five-point "Approach to Unity":

1. Prayer (private and congregational) for unity
2. Surveys to determine common points of faith and practice
3. Establishment of friendly relations through "fraternal courtesies" and "fellowship meetings,"
4. Establishment of cooperation in "enterprises which will not do violence to personal or group convictions"
5. Study and discussion of the causes of division (Murch, 274-275).

The smaller, localized meetings also led to "National Unity Meetings," the first of which was hosted by the church where Witty preached in Detroit on May 3-4, 1938, with more than 1,000 in the audience. A second such meeting was conducted at the Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana in May 1939. It was at this second "national" meeting that brother H. Leo Boles, editor of *The Gospel Advocate*, was invited to speak. He delivered a "block-buster" speech lasting one hour and thirty-one minutes in which he reminded those gathered that their fathers (Boles was the grandson of "Raccoon" John Smith) had all originally believed and practiced the same things until introduction of the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849 and the instrument about 10 years later. He charged that, as a further roadblock to unity, the ICC had plunged headlong into denominationalism. Specifically, he said:

You know where you left the churches of Christ; hence you know where to find them; come back and unity is the inevitable result. There will be no compromise or surrender on the point [i. e., opposition to denominationalism, DM]. The churches of Christ, as long as they are loyal to the New Testament, cannot compromise on this or any other point so clearly taught in the New Testament. You should not want any compromise on error; there will be no compromise. Do you now see the

way to unity?... It is a sin to follow ordinances, or services, based on the precepts and doctrines, opinions, and teachings of men (Col. 2:20-23). It is not only wrong to bring such things into the worship of God; it is wrong to tolerate them in the worship; it is wrong to affiliate with them or countenance those who bring them in. Hence, it is sinful to bring anything not commanded by God into the worship of God... (Boles, 16, 30-31).

Since the ICC people were not willing to give up their cherished idols so well-described by brother Boles, his speech had the effect of so cooling the effort as to practically end it. The Murch-Witty crusade not only produced "unity" meetings, but it also spawned a journal, *Christian Unity Quarterly*, jointly edited by Murch and Witty. As a further fallout, an

... independence of friendly thought and action developed among young ministers of both communions. Lines were crossed in occasional exchanges of pulpits, and lecturers from one group were invited to speak in colleges and seminaries of the other (Murch, 276).

In 1950 Ernest Beam, a California preacher, began *The Christian Forum*, a paper designed to promote unity. He preached for and worked with liberal churches that had no qualms about such innovations as the instrument and the missionary society until his death in the late 1950s. He met stiff and effective opposition from men like Foy E. Wallace, Jr., and G. C. Brewer.

Also, during the 1950s, W. Carl Ketcherside of St. Louis, Missouri (a rabid extremist in opposition to such things as located preachers, orphan homes, and "Christian" colleges) was adamantly pushing his views in public debates (e.g., Wallace-Ketcherside Debate, 1953) and in his paper, *The Mission Messenger*. His soulmate in these matters was Leroy Garrett, editor of a monthly paper called *Bible Talk*. However, during the 1960s Ketcherside swung to the opposite extreme and began to champion what he calls "unity in diversity" or "fellowship without endorsement." Garrett swung with him, and began *The Restoration Review*, whose sole purpose seems to have been to undermine and destroy the distinctiveness of the Lord's church.

Their program promotes fellowship with all who have obeyed the "Gospel," regardless of their doctrinal beliefs or practices. In the Ketcherside program, "doctrine" is distinct from "Gospel" and has nothing to do with fellowship. Such matters as instrumental music in worship, premillennialism, the missionary society, speaking in tongues, observance of the Lord's supper on Thursday night, or women preachers have no bearing on fellowship whatsoever (Woodson articles). While the views of these men have been generously praised by ICC men, our brethren generally (and correctly so) rejected them. However, the evil trio of toleration, antinomianism, and liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s in society found its way into the church. This has produced a new generation in the 1980s, principally led by certain young

preachers, that is basically contending for the Ketcherside/Garrett approach. Many have been caught up in it.

The Current Movement – Its History

While it is difficult to pinpoint the precise beginning of any historical movement, it appears to me that Rubel Shelly deserves the “credit” for getting the current “unity” movement underway with a series of sermons on “Udenominal Christianity,” delivered from the pulpit of the Ashwood Church of Christ in Nashville, Tennessee, in late 1982. This was followed by a speech at an annual “preachers’ forum” near Centerville, Tennessee, on March 21, 1983. He spoke on, “Is Unity Possible?” – purportedly, a summary statement of the sermon series previously delivered at Ashwood. This speech (although polished and “toned down” in some respects) was published in tract form later in the year under the title, *Christians Only*.

Much of Shelly’s Centerville speech was a harangue against what he perceived to be a “sectarian spirit” among his brethren (a spirit which he once had, but now had “repented” of). He spent considerable time applying Mark 9:38-41:

John said unto him, Teacher, we saw one casting out demons in thy name; and we forbade him, because he followed not us. But Jesus said, “Forbid him not: for there is no man who shall do a mighty work in my name, and be able quickly to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us. For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink, because ye are Christ’s, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.”

He also compared the sad spiritual condition of the Corinthian church to our time, alleging that Christ and Paul were pleased to extend fellowship to those in error and so ought we. He affirmed, “There are sincere, knowledgeable, devout Christians scattered among all the various denominations” (Shelly, Centerville, TN, tape transcript).

It was especially surprising and shocking to hear such statements from a man who, even though young, had already distinguished himself as an outspoken and capable advocate of the very things against which he was now bitterly lashing out. These speeches spawned a significant number of articles from sound brethren in various papers, all of which voiced concern over Shelly’s errors and their deadly consequences if accepted.

Shelly’s sermons and tract advocated tolerance and recognition of and fellowship with people who are not in the church of Christ (a la Ketcherside/Garrett), but they never got around to telling us his “hermeneutical program” by which this could be done. He did not wait long to tell us. In a speech in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1984, he revealed his “program” – divide *fellowship* into two levels. Shelly extends only Fellowship (spelled with upper-case “F”) to folks

whom he believes have “obeyed the Gospel” (such as a preacher-friend of his in the ICC). However, he has both Fellowship (upper-case “F”) and fellowship (lower-case “f”) with those who have “obeyed the Gospel” and who agree with him “doctrinally.” Elsewhere he has called this his “doctrine of limited fellowship” (Shelly, Hillsboro, OH, tape transcript).

Thus, while he does not have fellowship with his ICC friend in his use of the instrument, he has Fellowship with him in the “Gospel.” The same dictum applies to the question of the premillennialism, orphan homes, and other doctrinal matters. Of course, Shelly reserves for **himself** the right to determine the bases of extending Fellowship, based on his own definition of the seven “ones” of Ephesians 4:4-6 (see McClish, “The ‘One Faith’ of Ephesians 4:5”).

Shelly’s new-found convictions (although he ridiculously continues to deny he has changed, except in “attitude”) quickly became the rallying point for those who were already making some gestures toward the ICC. Alan Cloyd, director of “Restoration Leadership Ministry,” sponsored by the Vultee church in Nashville, Tennessee, and Don DeWalt of the ICC collaborated on what they styled a “Restoration Summit” on August 7-9, 1984, in Joplin, Missouri. Participation was “by invitation only,” with only 50 men from each group invited.

Of the 50 “Summiteers” from our brotherhood only 5 or 6 of them were men of unquestioned soundness. Most of those present were men whose sounds of softness and compromise were well known, including Rubel Shelly. The tone of this meeting is typified by the fact that Cloyd, as director of the “Summit,” would not allow the Boles speech of 1939 to be distributed, but a packet of compromising documents on “fellowship,” most written by Ketcherside, was put together by DeWalt for each participant and distributed freely with Cloyd’s approval.

The “Restoration Summit” raised grave concerns among faithful brethren for several reasons, among them the following:

1. As already mentioned, the great majority of “our” men who were invited were not men who had distinguished themselves as defenders of the faith, to speak tactfully.
2. There were no men invited of the same unquestionable scholarship and uncompromising spirit as brother Boles.
3. Suggestions were made that the men go home and arrange combined worship periods and exchange pulpits, articles in periodicals, and speakers on lectureships with those in the other group.
4. Wayne Kilpatrick made a suggestion, heartily endorsed by Furman Kearley, that ICC preachers could be brought first into our classrooms and then eased into the pulpit. (To Kilpatrick’s credit, he eventually apologized publicly for making the statement and said he was wrong to suggest such.)

Kearley, who was suddenly appointed to replace Guy N. Woods [an outspoken critic of the “Summit”] as *Gospel Advocate* editor less than a year after the “Summit,” has continued to make excuses for the statement and has steadfastly refused to print the Kilpatrick apology in the *Advocate*. (For a lengthy evaluation of the “Restoration Summit” see my MS on www.thescripturecache.com titled, “Reflections on the ‘Restoration Summit.’”) The ICC men have been ecstatic in their praise of the “Summit” and its by-products.

Alan Cloyd closed the “Restoration Summit” by urging the participants to go back home and set up similar local “summits,” although he warned that this would involve having to contend with “every ‘knucklehead’ in the country” if such meetings were opened to all. Some of these “mini-summits” did occur.

The next large-scale meeting was called a “Restoration Forum,” hosted by the Garnett Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, March 18–20, 1985 (they received so much heat for use of the term *summit* that they totally abandoned it before this meeting and have even begun calling the “Restoration Summit” the “Restoration Forum I”). Marvin Phillips, the “irenic” preacher at Garnett, did not want any trouble from “knuckleheads,” so the planning of the meeting was shrouded in secrecy and participation was by “invitation only” once more. It was set up much like the previous meeting with men from both groups giving speeches on assigned topics, followed by small group discussions. The same compromising atmosphere as that of the “summit” prevailed.

Additional major meetings of similar format have been conducted at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California (July 7–9, 1985), Milligan College at Johnson City, Tennessee (April 29–30, 1986), and Cincinnati Bible College and Seminary at Cincinnati, Ohio (April 28–30, 1987). Several preachers from the church of Christ have spoken before numerous church, college, and convention audiences of the ICC since the 1984 “summit.”

The Current Movement—Its Direction

The earliest efforts toward unity seem truly to have been aimed at this goal by settling the cause for division (use of instrumental music in worship and its implications concerning Scriptural authority). Those early attempts failed utterly because our brethren would have nothing to do with the ICC people while they clung to the instrument and their societies. The earlier quotes from Cowden show this to be true. In the 1920s our brethren were still very close to the excruciating division of 1906 and all its “fallout” (loss of property, divided congregations and families, et al.). Properly, they would not give an inch to the apostate innovators who had so recently sundered a once-harmonious brotherhood.

However, beginning with the Murch/Witty work of 1937, and continuing to the present, the efforts have not been so much for “unity,” as for “union,” “fellowship,” acceptance and cooperation **despite crucial differences which prevent true unity**. Alan Highers is correct in his assessment:

In more recent years, however, the emphasis has shifted away from the “unity” concept (which involved a settlement or resolution of doctrinal differences) and has turned more toward a “fellowship” concept (which seeks to promote joint participation and activity without the resolution of the issues and practices that divide us) (Highers, 5[165]).

The ICC men were not unaware of the precipitous timing of this new reapproachment. They had doubtless been reading such periodicals as *Mission Magazine*, *Integrity*, and *Ensign*, as well as Ketcherside’s *Mission Messenger* and Garrett’s *Restoration Review*, which had been gradually poisoning the minds of a younger generation with false ecumenical and generally liberal ideas. The ICC men had surely taken note of the increasingly tolerant and liberal views of Reuel Lemmons on fellowship (and other subjects) in the *Firm Foundation* (of which he was editor, 1954-1983). It could hardly have escaped their attention that Rubel Shelly, a younger “leading light” among us, had taken a dramatic and pronounced turn toward the ICC in several public declarations.

The foregoing are but a few of the signals which indicated that indeed a new climate of thinking now existed in many brethren which had not been present in the face of any such previous efforts. The time had now come when a considerable number of brethren were willing to talk about “fellowship” while ignoring the very barriers to its existence. When Alan Cloyd approached Don DeWelt about planning the 1984 “summit” we can only imagine the unrestrained glee with which the ICC received his approach. They had everything to gain from such discussions.

The resemblances between the Murch/Witty campaign of decades ago and the current one are striking. Both were begun by one man from each group. Both involved 50 men from each group in early meetings with similar formats of speeches and discussions. Both gave birth to a paper as a medium to promote their campaigns (Murch/Witty, *Christian Unity Quarterly*; DeWelt/Cloyd, *One Body*). Both have involved several meetings both on a local and nationwide scale. Both produced (and continue to produce) some exchanges of articles in papers and appointments for speeches. Both have involved several younger preachers. The new effort has followed a similar course to that of the five-point plan of the earlier meetings.

The Murch/Witty union effort came along when brethren were sufficiently stable doctrinally that few could be moved to compromise. It also came along before the Ketcherside/Garrett program of fellowship (on “Gospel” terms rather than on “doctrinal” terms) began to be promulgated. The current campaign has obviously revived the organizational approach of Murch and Witty, as outlined above. More crucially, the leaders among our brethren in this movement have revived the “fellowship” approach of Ketcherside and Garrett as their basis of dealing with the ICC, as I will subsequently demonstrate.

To justify some sort of “fellowship” or “union” without the ICC’s giving any ground on the instrument (or other things that divide us), many of our brethren have been forced to adopt a whole new approach to various passages, words, and principles of interpretation of Scripture, sometimes referred to as a “new hermeneutic.” (When analyzed, it becomes apparent that the “new hermeneutic” is hardly more than the “old hermeneutic” of the ICC). By listing and briefly discussing the following principal points of this “new hermeneutic” we shall be able to clearly see the direction of the movement:

A Novel View of Fellowship

As earlier discussed, Rubel Shelly has been the prime advocate of two “levels” or “spheres” of fellowship (albeit I have not learned of any of his cronies in this campaign who have disputed his concept). Actually, it is neither new nor his—it is the old “Gospel/doctrine” theology of Ketcherside/Garrett, warmed over and expressed in some different terms. The Ketcherside/Garrett dictum of “fellowship based on Gospel” is tantamount to Shelly’s **Fellowship**. If Shelly disagrees with those who use the instrument, he simply has no **fellowship** with them on **that doctrine**; this equals the Ketcherside/Garrett contention that doctrine should not be a basis for determining fellowship. Since only the **fellowship** level involves endorsement, we can therefore have “Fellowship without compromise,” which is equivalent to “unity in diversity.”

Of course, the New Testament knows nothing of “levels” of fellowship. One is either in fellowship with God and men or not in fellowship with them (2 Cor. 6:14; Eph. 5:11; 1 John 1:7; et. al). The Ketcherside/Garrett/Shelly concept was born of the need for some device to allow those enthralled with error (particularly of the apostate ICC) to be granted “fellowship” without having to repent. This “new hermeneutic” on fellowship will allow acceptance of almost every form of doctrinal error and will greatly speed the process of apostasy among our weak brethren.

Denial of the Authority of Scriptural Silence

Those who divided the church by introduction of the missionary society and the instrument in the nineteenth century had to deny the significance of the silence of Scripture concerning both. Among other things, they argued, "The Bible doesn't say, 'Thou shalt not have instruments or societies.'" Now some of our brethren are saying about the same thing, for example: "Adultery and lying are explicitly condemned in Scripture; whatever else one can say about pianos and organs in worship, he cannot find their explicit condemnation in the Bible" (Shelly, "I Just Want...", 113). We expect those in the ICC to try to identify the sacredness and significance of Scriptural silence with Calvinism, "Campbellism," or some other source in an attempt to negate its validity, but we **do not** expect our own brethren to surrender it so casually.

"Where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent," more than any other one principle of exegesis and hermeneutics, has been responsible for the restoration and maintenance of pure New Testament Christianity. Even Murch of the ICC practically admitted as much (Murch, 313). Through the same breach in the dam of Scriptural authority that is made for instrumental music, because it is not "explicitly condemned in the Bible," others can bring (and have brought) in countless other innovations. I would like to hear an it's-not-condemned-in-the-Bible instrumentalist try to debate someone who wants to serve milk and cornbread on the Lord's table.

Respect for silence of Scripture, involving the "law of inclusion and exclusion," is not rooted in human dogma, but in Scripture itself. Simply put, this law means that when God specifies what He wants man to do or how He wants man to do a certain thing, He **simultaneously** includes what He wants and implicitly excludes every other thing in that class. We naturally and unconsciously use this principle every day. When the song leader says, "Please turn to number 100," no one expects him to call every other number in the book with the instruction not to turn to them. However, he has implicitly **excluded** them by **including** the number specified.

Noah demonstrated his understanding and respect for this principle by using only gopher wood in building the ark, although there is no explicit prohibition of other woods (Gen. 6:14, 22). Nadab and Abihu were consumed by God's wrath for offering "strange fire," not because it was fire explicitly forbidden by God, but because it was fire "... which He [God] commanded them not" (Lev. 10:1). (Interestingly, Marvin Phillips told the ICC men in the

discussion group he led during the “Tulsa Forum” that he would no longer use the Nadab-Abihu argument when talking with them about the instrument because “they did not accept it.” Since the Baptists will not accept valid arguments on the purpose of baptism and the Pentecostals will not accept valid arguments on the cessation of gifts, I suppose brother Phillips has abandoned such arguments when talking with them.) Godly men respected this principle. God punished those who did not respect it and rewarded those who did.

Moreover, inspired men used this principle to establish the existence of prohibitions or lack of Divine authority. There was no authority to bind circumcision on the church because inspired men “gave no commandment” (i.e., **were silent**) concerning it (Acts 15:24). The angels are excluded from being sons of God because He called only Jesus His Son and was **totally silent** concerning their sonship (Heb. 1:5, 13). Christ could not be a priest in Israel (Heb. 8:4), because he was of Judah, “... as to which tribe Moses **spoke nothing** concerning priests” (Heb. 7:14, *emph. DM*). The swiftest way for the church to apostatize totally again is to adopt this “new hermeneutic” that despises the authority of Scriptural silence. We need a strong and constant emphasis on the validity and sacredness of this principle right now.

Misapplying Romans 14: 1-3

But him that is weak in faith receive ye, *yet* not for decision of scruples.

One man hath faith to eat all things: but he that is weak eateth herbs.

Let not him that eateth set at nought him that eateth not; and let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. (Rom. 14:1-3)

This passage discusses “weaker” and “stronger” brethren and the forbearance that should exist between them. Some of our preachers are now saying that this passage applies to the issue of using instruments in worship and our relationship with the ICC. Larry James, preacher for the Richardson East Church of Christ, Richardson, Texas, likely spoke for several others when he wrote:

The whole discussion [with ICC men] called to mind Paul’s advice to the weak and the strong in fellowship (1 Cor. 8, 10; Rom. 14-15). Implicit in our dialogue was the realization that our division in the past has been over an issue of opinion, not of revelation. From my perspective in a non-instrumental congregation, it seems that I stand in the camp of the weaker brethren. I was made glad... at the generosity and maturity of my stronger brothers from the Independent Christian Churches (James, 1).

Even a neophyte in the Scriptures can perceive that Paul was not discussing matters of obligation (such as how to worship acceptably or the action or purpose of baptism, et al.) in Romans 14. He was discussing matters of **option** or **indifference** (eating meat and herbs as opposed to eating only herbs and esteeming days differently [Rom.

14:2, 5, 15]). God cares not whether we eat meat or herbs (1 Cor. 8:8) nor whether we esteem days differently (Rom. 14:5–6), as long as we do not judge or condemn those who differ from our practice (Rom. 14:4, 10) and do not destroy another by insisting on our own way (Rom. 14:13, 15, 20–21). Such forbearance is to apply to all matters of option.

If we insert instrumental music into Romans 14, to be consistent ought we not also to insert women preachers, missionary societies, non-congregational singing, premillennial views, “open” membership, and all of the other errors of the ICC? In fact, why not throw in the multiplied hundreds of erroneous doctrines and practices of Protestantism, Catholicism, and the “Orthodox” churches as well? To consider those who can tolerate, yea, revel in error as “stronger” ones and those who refuse to become enmeshed in such errors as “weaker” ones is grotesque. However, I suppose we should expect as much from one who considers the use or non-use of the instrument “an issue of opinion not revelation.” Let it be clearly stated that in matters of obligation (which most certainly describes what Christ teaches about worship [John 4:24]) there is to be no forbearance for deviation from the inspired pattern (1 John 1:6–7; 2 John 9).

Relegating Instrumental Music to the Realm of “Opinion”

The brethren who began clamoring for the instrument over a century ago did so chiefly on the ground that it was “an expedient,” a matter of mere “opinion.” Now, some of our brethren who are caught up in the euphoria of this new *fellowship the ICC* crusade are doing the same. The foregoing quotation from Larry James is a case in point. Randy Mayeux (at the time of the “summit,” preacher for the 37th and Atlantic Church of Christ in Long Beach, California, but now preacher for the Preston Road Church of Christ, Dallas, Texas), commented in his report on the Joplin “summit” as a participant:

No, those from the Christian Church did not burn their pianos in the town square, neither did those of us from the Churches [sic] of Christ order new pianos. But we each learned of the integrity, the sincerity, the true but honest “difference” of **opinion** [emp., DM] on the subject (Mayeux, 6).

Bill Minick preached for the Woodland West Church of Christ in Arlington, Texas at the time he attended the “summit.” In reporting on it in that church’s bulletin, he wrote: “Do we really believe that one will be lost eternally because he does not agree with us on divorce, Sunday School, communion cups, going to war, instrumental music, missionary associations ...?” (Minick, 1). In other words, instrumental music in worship is merely an optional item; its use has nothing to do with whether one will be saved or lost.

Calvin Warpula of Sugarland, Texas, also attended the “summit” and in his report on it to a meeting of Houston, Texas, preachers, declared:

I think there are still some of our people who would say, “If you use the instrument you will go to hell.” **I used to be there** [emp., DM]. I don’t think that’s where most of the church is today... We’ve got to be careful about taking baptized believers and then sending them to hell over something like this where God doesn’t say (Warpula, tape transcript).

Rubel Shelly has become somewhat of a champion of the position that regards the instrument as a matter of conscience or personal opinion:

Adultery and lying are explicitly condemned in Scripture; whatever else one can say about pianos and organs in worship, he cannot find their explicit condemnation in the Bible. ... At best, one comes to regard their use as wrong on the basis of a process of inferences concerning biblical authority (Shelly, *I Just Want ...*,” 113).

At an ICC family encampment in Hillsboro, Ohio, he was even more plain in relegating the instrument to the realm of indifference:

I don’t draw the line at the instrument. I don’t think the Lord died over that. I’m not going to make that a test of my fellowship with you in Christ... I don’t want to be divisive over it. I refuse to be divisive over it. If I were in a congregation where the will of that congregation, the decision of the elders, was that the instrument was going to be used next week, I wouldn’t mount the pulpit and condemn them and divide the church. I’d have a conscience question whether I could stay and worship with that church, but I would not stand up and say, “Let the faithful of God step across the line and stand with me” (Shelly, Hillsboro tape transcript).

The signal has definitely been given to the ICC that at least some of “us” will treat the instrument as a matter of private scruples and option, rather than one of obligation and doctrine on which we must be united. I believe the ICC folks must be laughing behind the backs of these weak and “irenic” brethren. What more could they desire than to get us to allow them to keep their instruments, pretending that they are no “big deal”? Indeed, I doubt that their aim has ever been to persuade us to use the instrument; they only desire that we embrace and accept them in warm fellowship while they keep their instruments (and other miscellaneous denominational baggage).

As already mentioned, what pleases God in worship is not a matter for men to decide, but which God himself has decreed. We have the inspired command to sing praise unto God as Christians (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), and no New Testament passage authorizes any other kind of music. This is the ground upon which the pioneer preachers of the Restoration rejected it in their practice, and it is the ground upon which all who were in the restored church were one until the mid-nineteenth century. In the heat of the controversy over the instrument, David Lipscomb, editor of *The Gospel Advocate*, well wrote in 1873:

We have no knowledge of what is well-pleasing to God, in worship, save as God has revealed it to us. The New Testament is at once the rule and limit of our faith and worship to God. This is the distinctive difference between us and other religious bodies.... We seek for things authorized, they for things not prohibited. Our rule is safe — theirs is loose and latitudinarian. Ours confines us to God's appointments. Theirs opens the worship and service of God to whatever will please men. Our rule limits man's worship to the exercises approved of in the Bible (Lipscomb, 854–855).

The controversy was even warmer when J.W. McGarvey, an editor of *Apostolic Times*, wrote a series of articles in 1881, positively identifying the use of instruments in worship as a sin. He correctly connected the rejection of the instrument with the very basis of the restoration:

It is manifest that we cannot adopt the practice without abandoning the obvious and only ground on which a restoration of Primitive Christianity can be accomplished, or on which the plea for it can be maintained. Such is my profound conviction, and consequently the question with me is not one concerning the choice or rejection of an expedient, but the maintenance or abandonment of a fundamental and necessary principle... (Highers, 5[165]).

It is undeniable that many of the prime movers in the current *fellowship-the-ICC-movement* have departed from the ground of the pioneers as well as from their own former convictions on the instrument. Even worse, they have departed from the safe and solid ground of Scriptural authority in their “new hermeneutic.”

Reinterpreting Ephesians 4:5 and 2 John 9

Until recent times our brethren have almost with one mind understood that the “one faith” of Ephesians 4:5 refers to “the faith once for all delivered” (Jude 3) (i.e., the Gospel, the Truth, the Word of Christ). However, now some are saying it is the “...atonement through Christ's death, burial, and resurrection...” (Shelly, *I Just Want . . .*, 81). Therefore: “The ‘one faith’ has nothing to do with our methods and procedures of doing God's work.”), which conveniently removes instrumental music from being a basis of fellowship. (see my previously cited MS, “The ‘One Faith’ of Ephesians 4:5”).

In 2 John 9, the apostle wrote: “Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son.” Our brethren have almost with one voice until recently contended that the “teaching (‘doctrine,’ KJV) of Christ” in this passage refers to that which Christ taught and inspired others to teach. Some are now saying that the “teaching of Christ” is the teaching **about** Christ, particularly about His Deity and Incarnation:

... a belief that just denies the very heart of the Gospel would be the sort of thing that John is talking about in 2 John, verses 7 to 9, where some Gnostic-type false teachers are denying that Jesus has really come in the flesh (Shelly, Hillsboro transcript).

If this is what John was saying, then it follows that the only basis in this context for withholding or withdrawing fellowship from another (see vv. 10–11) is a denial of the Incarnation of Christ. Again, conveniently, this removes instrumental music as a basis for determining fellowship.

This view by some of our brethren is contrary to what they themselves formerly believed and taught, besides contradicting recognized scholarship. The New Testament consistently emphasizes the need for us to continue faithfully in the Truth (John 8:31; Acts 2:42; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 1 John 1:7; et al.). John’s instruction in 2 John 9–11 makes it plain that fellowship is directly dependent upon faithfulness in doctrine, despite the “new hermeneutics” which avers otherwise.

Declaring That Alien Sinners Need Not Know the Purpose of Baptism for It To Be Scriptural

Yes, some brethren have such a severe case of “union fever” that they have even begun to capitulate on this fundamental matter. Rubel Shelly wrote as follows in 1984:

Lately I have been bothered by two false teachings about baptism which are being circulated within our fellowship. False doctrine #1: “Unless one expressly understands that baptism is ‘for (i.e., unto) remission of sins,’ he has not been baptized for the right reason, is still in his sins, and needs to be baptized again” (*Ashwood Leaves*, 2).

In the same article he told of teaching a man who was “hopelessly confused” about baptism, particularly about its relation to salvation. This man was not sure about the necessity of baptism to go to Heaven. Shelly finally baptized him “to obey Christ.” The same writer has further stated:

I see no reason to think one has to understand “for the remission of sins” in order to be baptized scripturally, for I do not think there is ONE right reason for being baptized. I would say that one must be baptized for a right reason in order for his baptism to be acceptable ... (*I Just Want...*, 144).

Would not this view cover almost every sectarian variation of baptism as long as it was immersion? How long will it be till sprinkling and pouring are pronounced as good as immersion? I would not insist that *for remission of sins* are the only words permissible to convey to a sinner the purpose of baptism, although the apostle Peter was not reluctant to use them to instruct the thousands gathered on Pentecost of their need for baptism. However, the equivalent of these terms (e.g., “in order to be saved” [Mark 16:16; 1 Pet.3:21], to “wash away” sins [Acts 22:16], to be “made free from sin” [Rom. 6:17–18, 3–4], “to enter the kingdom of God” [John 3:5], et al.) must surely be understood.

The foregoing expressions all focus on the one single design or purpose God had in mind for the act of baptism—to place one who is alienated from God and lost in sin into a reconciled and forgiven state through the blood of Christ. **There are not many purposes of baptism; rather, this one purpose is stated in a variety of ways.** The purpose of baptism is the very essence of the act. To suggest that one might be Scripturally baptized, not understanding the very essence of the act, is to suggest an utter absurdity.

Had brother Shelly or one of his cronies, rather than Paul, found the twelve men in Ephesus who had been immersed with John's baptism (Acts 19:1-5) they would have seen no need to immerse them again. After all, they had been immersed for "a" Scriptural reason (because baptism was commanded of God), and that is sufficient, they aver. Note, however, that it was **because of a defect in their understanding** of baptism that they had to be correctly taught and then correctly baptized. Is it enough merely to go through the proper **action** of eating the bread and drinking the fruit of the vine for "a" Scriptural purpose (e.g., "to obey God") without **understanding the essence** of the Lord's supper (i.e., a memorial of Christ's death [1 Cor. 11:24-26])? Paul said that such was a damnable practice (vv. 27-28). I suggest that this principle applies to singing or praying or any other Divine institutions for which God has a stated purpose, certainly, including baptism.

We have long preached that one cannot be taught incorrectly and baptized correctly, directing it at denominational dogma that denies God's purpose for baptism. We have long preached that one cannot be "accidentally" baptized for the Scriptural purpose, directing it at sectarian theology. Now, we must turn the force of these same Scriptural principles toward some of our brethren who have compromised the Truth.

Mixing "Apples" and "Oranges"

While I have touched on this element of the "new hermeneutics" in a previous section, it deserves more specific attention. By mixing "apples" and "oranges" I mean the treating of unlike things as if they were the same. An alarming number of brethren are now taking obligatory matters and treating them as optional. A good illustration of this is the following statement from Bill Minick, one of the participants in and outspoken admirers of the Joplin "summit."

When we admit to ourselves and others that we have been too unbending on our traditions and opinions there is hope that we may work with **all** segments of the brotherhood, and not with just one. What we all have in common is our oneness with Jesus

Christ because of our new birth. If Jesus can save us, surely we can accept one another. Do we really believe that one will be lost eternally because he does not agree with us on divorce, Sunday School, communion cups, going to war, instrumental music, missionary associations, covenants, formula for baptism, ladies wearing pants in the assembly, etc., etc.? We need to take a good hard look at what is essential to salvation (Minick, 1).

His statement deserves some analysis. He apparently views all the several items he lists as among “our traditions and opinions.” Bear in mind that mere traditions and opinions (as long as they are authorized by Scripture) are optional, negotiable things. Yet, he lists instrumental music and use of missionary associations among them. I have a few questions: If matters of worship and organization of the church of Christ are optional, then just **what** about the church **is** obligatory? What about the terms of membership (the new birth itself)? What about morals (since he included divorce in his list); are God’s moral laws optional or obligatory? What right does brother Minick (or any man) have to pronounce those “saved” who have refused to submit to the authority of Scripture, when the Lord said such would **not** be saved (Mat. 7:21-23)?

Our brother has put together a classic list of spiritual “apples” and “oranges.” Equating instrumental music in worship and employment of a missionary society in evangelism, with the communion cup and Bible class issues might be understandable in a spiritual neophyte, but it is nothing short of disgusting in a Gospel preacher of 40 years’ experience. By including the instrument and the society in his list he subtly (but obviously) attempts to place matters that involve Divine obligation on the same level with things that are merely optional.

Whether we use 1 cup, 100 cups, or 1,000 cups in the Lord’s Supper is not specified in the New Testament, but the kind of music which God accepts in worship is specified (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Whether or not we employ Bible classes on Sunday morning to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord” (2 Pet. 3:18) is a matter of option and expediency but preaching the Gospel to the world **by the church** as God’s sufficient agency of evangelism is a matter of Scriptural obligation (Mat. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; 1 Tim. 3:15, et al.).

Our brethren who oppose multiple cups, Bible classes, orphan homes, and churches cooperating to preach the Gospel make the mistake of counting optional things as obligatory – such is legalism (i.e. law-making). Our brethren (as brother Minick) who would allow such things as instrumental music and missionary societies to be in the same class with Sunday schools and communion cups make the opposite mistake of counting obligatory things as optional – such is liberalism (i.e., law-breaking). I heartily agree with the last sentence of brother Minick’s statement, indicating that some need to re-study what is essential to salvation. In fact, I suggest that brother Minick and his fellow-travelers badly need to do this very thing.

Exalting Unity Over Truth

This element of the “new hermeneutics” somewhat symbolizes the entire direction of the current “fellowship” initiative with the ICC by some of our brethren. Admittedly, the beauty and desirability of unity are often emphasized in the Bible (Psa. 133:1; John 17; 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:1-5; et al.). While the pursuit of unity is certainly a virtue, it is not the supreme virtue. Yet, to listen to and to observe the actions of some brethren who are bent on union with the ICC (and perhaps other denominations), one would think that there is no virtue equal to it. Because of this spirit, “unity” and “fellowship” are being sought with and proffered to others despite their errors in doctrine and practice without any acknowledgement or repentance of these errors on their part.

Many of the quotations previously cited bear testimony to the willingness of some of our brethren to overlook such matters as the instrument and missionary society in forging a bond with the ICC. However, some have gone further and have already “declared” unity and are now openly engaging in fellowship with the ICC in various ways. This is evident in the words of Reuel Lemmons in his speech at the Joplin “summit”:

It [baptism] unites us in the one body by the cross. It makes us not only brothers, but members of each other, like the members of our body are members of each other. It would be a sin for us not to recognize or acknowledge that unity and those who do not recognize that unity, sin ... we can acknowledge that unity. We can go there from here. We can implement the unity that already exists ... (Joplin tape transcript).

Randy Mayeux has written of his experiments in such fellowship:

Here at 37th and Atlantic, we have already made first steps. The First Christian Church met with us on a Wednesday evening last December. We are invited to their building for a Wednesday this December. (They will not use their piano that evening—a noble gesture, consistent with the attitude and actions that I felt from all of our Christian Church brothers in Joplin.) (Mayeux, 6).

Calvin Warpula addressed the ICC folks as follows in one of their journals (doubtless, much to their gleeful relief):

Some have argued that the instrumentalists will have to admit their past error and publicly repent of the sin of using an instrument before we can ever recognize each other as brethren or worship together. This appears to be an untenable demand... (*One Body*, 31).

He then proceeded to list and discuss twelve reasons why he opined public repentance was unnecessary.

In his report on the Tulsa Forum, Victor Knowles, a prominent ICC man in the “fellowship” movement, editor of *One Body*, wrote:

Special mention should also be made of the cooperative efforts that are already going on between non-instrumental and instrumental fellowships. Don DeWelt mentioned the cooperative effort of both fellowships to feed the starving Christians in Ethiopia. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been given by both fellowships and **sent to the elders of the White's Ferry Road Church of Christ in West Monroe, Louisiana** for distribution in Ethiopia. He also reminded us that the Bible School literature both groups use is due to the cooperative effort of **Sweet Publishing Company** in Austin, Texas, and **College Press Publishing Company** in Joplin., Missouri. And Reuel Lemmons [all emp., DM] told me that from five to ten thousand teachers in his **World Bible School** (which baptizes scores of thousands each year) are people from instrumental churches. So we are uniting our efforts in feeding the hungry, educating the church, and saving lost souls. And isn't that really the three-fold work of the church? (21).

In connection with the above, more than one issue of *One Body* has carried a full-page advertisement under the headline, "Disaster Assistance Program," calling it a program of "benevolent evangelism by Christian Churches and Churches of Christ" (e.g., June 1985).

Brother Shelly has advocated ignoring the issue of the instrument, especially on the mission field:

...In a situation like brother DeWelt suggested a moment ago, you go into a mission place, just leave it [the issue of the instrument] alone. Well now, some might be inclined to say, "But they would have to go further; they would have to disavow it and say, that in principle, it is evil, it is sinful and that anybody who does that [uses the instrument in worship] is sinning." Why? I don't believe that. When it [the instrument] is foregone simply as a matter of courtesy to the conscience of a brother or a group of brothers within the group, ...That's a loving concession, by perhaps the stronger to the weaker (Hillsboro tape transcript).

Thus, on the mission field (at least) our brother says that we (as "weaker" brethren, a la Larry James) should be happy to merge with those in the ICC as our "stronger" brethren and never even think about the instrument question if they are willing magnanimously to forego it for our sakes.

Space fails us to list numerous other illustrations of this attitude that unity is to be had at all costs, even a surrender of the Truth. Of course, our brethren who are caught up in this movement loudly protest that this is not so, denying any compromise at all. However, Judas could as well have denied that he betrayed our Lord as for them to deny that with them God's Truth has become secondary to unity. Both by action and speech they are increasingly demonstrating it.

If there is any principle taught throughout the Bible, it is that our ultimate loyalty must be to God's revealed Truth. The reason this is so is because it is not possible to be loyal to God or His Son if we are not loyal to Their revealed Will. To reject the words of Christ is to reject Him (John 12:48). To obey the commandments of Christ is to love Him (John 14:15). **All** that we

do (including any attempts at unity with others) must be done by the authority of Christ, that is, with complete loyalty to His Truth (Col. 3:17). It is knowing and abiding in the Truth, rather than in unity, that makes us free in Christ (John 8:31-32).

Unity, in and of itself, is not the principal aim of Christianity, otherwise Christ would not have brought division and a sword (Mat. 10:34; Luke 12:51). God-ordained unity exists between 2 or 2,000,000 men only when (and because) they are all walking in the light of God's Truth (1 John 1:7). We dare not surrender to the ultimate principle of the "new hermeneutics" that would seek unity based on doctrinal compromise instead of upon Scriptural conformity (McClish, *Spiritual Sword*, 34-35). In the midst of the trying days of the past century when many were seeking to prevent division at any cost, J.W. McGarvey wrote the following sobering words:

...I have but little sympathy with those brethren who seem to dread disunion among ourselves as the direst of all evils. If we would inspire sensible men around us with a desire for union with us, we must be careful to show them that we do not and will not maintain unity with anything unscriptural, whether it shows itself within our ranks or outside of them. Truth first, union afterwards, and union only in the Truth. This is our motto (7).

Conclusion

Those who are familiar with restoration history are aware that we are seeing history repeat itself in the current attempts at unity. As Moses Lard observed the Lord's people as they began to clamor for more and more innovations and to have less and less respect for the authority of Scripture in 1865, he wrote as follows:

He is a poor observer of men and things who does not see slowly growing up among us a class of men who can no longer be satisfied with the ancient gospel and the ancient order of things. These men must have changes; and silently they are preparing the mind of the brotherhood to receive changes (251-262).

Those changes of which Lard spoke came to fruition in 1906 when the church of the Lord was divided by those who had to have the changes. For some time now, those within our own brotherhood have been demanding changes and have been both quietly and openly working to bring them about. It appears that the current "unity" movement may serve as a catalyst to help some of them get off the fence. Regrettably, they are coming down on the wrong side of it.

While lauding any Scripture-based move toward unity, it appears certain that this current effort is in the wrong hands. It began in the hands of a young, impetuous, and ungrounded brother, not long himself out of the ICC (Alan Cloyd). Since his ill-conceived "Summit" in 1984, the ICC men have largely been in the driver's seat in promoting and

dominating the meetings and some of our brethren have been gladly going where they are being led.

The Lord's church has already suffered from this effort, but it will likely suffer more before it runs its course. Some have already been drawn away by the ICC's siren song. Others are there in heart and affection and it is only a matter of time till they come completely out of the "closet." Hopefully, this movement will serve to reawaken and strengthen some. If division must come (and sometimes it must—1 Cor. 11:19), those who stand for the Truth will continue with the Lord's work, just as loyal brethren did who found themselves "starting all over again" over a century ago when the innovators took over with a high hand.

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