

PART I: INTERVIEW RESPONSES

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1) What are the best distinctives of Churches of Christ that should be shared with the wider Christian world?

Our Lord's Supper practice comes to mind. On any given Sunday at the church I attend, I can look around and see visitors from various backgrounds—whether Baptist, Pentecostal, paedobaptist or possibly even unchurched—eating and drinking at the table of the Lord. Technically speaking, this may not be considered “open communion” since we do not explicitly invite people from various other Christian backgrounds to participate in the meal. In fact, there is likely an unspoken understanding that this Supper is only for the properly baptized. Still, we do not prohibit or discourage anyone from partaking. If anything at all is said about who should take the Supper, some sort of appeal is made to the conscience of each individual based on the exhortation to examine ourselves in 1 Corinthians 11.

Throughout church history, Christians have debated whether the Lord's Supper should be inclusive or exclusive, and early Restorationists are no exception. After considerable deliberation, the wise balance that prevailed in the Stone-Campbell Movement is captured with the following resolution: “We neither invite nor debar.” The practice that results from this mediating posture communicates openness and acceptance to all who wish to participate. Defending this approach, Barton Stone reasoned, “If I err, let it be on the side of charity.”

2) **What are the most significant weaknesses or deficiencies in Churches of Christ that must be addressed?**

Our most significant weakness is our lack of an agreed-upon summary of core beliefs, which comes as a result of our non-creedalism. “Nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith,” proposed Thomas Campbell, “nor required of them as terms of communion, but what is expressly taught and enjoined upon them in the word of God.”¹ This rejection of extra-biblical creeds is a constitutive principle of Restorationism. The founders pointed to confessions and creeds as the root cause for division between Christians. They were primarily concerned about how documents such as the Westminster Confession or Augsburg Confession functioned as sectarian lines of demarcation or tests of faith; but in eschewing extra-biblical creeds, they also raised suspicion regarding the ancient Christian creeds such as the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. This feature still runs deep in Restorationist churches. The Churches of Christ have an aversion not only to sectarian tests of faith, but also to the ancient creeds. Regarding the latter, it is not that we reject the theological claims within the creeds; in fact, we would likely agree with almost every statement. Rather, it is the creeds themselves that we reject because we hold that Scripture, particularly the New Testament, is our sole source of authority for doctrine and practice. In practical terms, this means that we do not use the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed in our curriculum nor do we recite them in our services or at our baptisms. It is not an exaggeration to say that a person born and raised in a typical Church of Christ could go her whole life without hearing anything about the Apostles’ Creed or Nicene Creed. Nevertheless, it is a bit vexing that we still view these historic, Scripture-laden summaries with suspicion, given the lax posture we tend to have toward songs. A popular song played on Christian radio with ideas that may not square with Scripture has a far better chance of making it onto the Sunday morning Power Point presentation than a tried-and-true creed that is 1,700 years old.

While our aversion to sectarian confessions is in keeping with our desire for unity, our rejection of the historic Christian confessions may have created more problems than it has solved. The main problem is that it leaves us without

¹ Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address* (1809), prop. 3, at https://www.therestorationmovement.com/_states/wv/declaration.htm.

a clear summary of core beliefs. As a result, the Churches of Christ are often beset with the following interrelated deficiencies. First, we lack a clear theological center. Without an agreed-upon set of core doctrines, we have not always anchored our faith in that which matters most. Second, we have no agreed-upon lens through which to read Scripture. Without an official guiding framework for our faith, there is no way to ensure that our churches read and understand Scripture in a consistent and coherent way. As such, Churches of Christ have too often interpreted the Bible in idiosyncratic and divisive ways. Third, not having a summary of faith means not having a distillation of the apostolic message, that is, the gospel. Without a consistent articulation and focus on the historic gospel, our churches have sometimes preached a “gospel” that is fragmented, distorted, or incomplete. Fourth, we lack a mechanism to help us prioritize doctrines. Without an authoritative summary of core beliefs, it has been difficult for Churches of Christ to distinguish primary theological matters from those that are secondary, tertiary, or peripheral. Fifth, we have too often enforced unwritten, sectarian “creeds.” Even though we have successfully banned written tests of faith, the Churches of Christ have sometimes replaced these with unwritten creeds which have functioned as equally powerful lines of demarcation between us and other Christians. Barton Stone expressed concerns about this phenomenon as he merged his unity movement with that of the Campbells in 1832:

There are two kinds of human authoritative creeds—one is drawn up in articles, and written or printed in a book—the other is a set of doctrines or opinions received, but not committed to writing, or printed in a book. Each of these kinds of creeds is used for the same purpose, which is to exclude the man, who dares to dissent from them. Of the two, we certainly give preference to creeds written and published; because we can read them, and form a more correct judgment of the doctrines contained in them.²

In short, our non-creedalism, which was born out of a desire for unity, has been as much a barrier as it has been a bridge. In pointing toward a solution, the Churches of Christ need an agreed-upon theological center, a lens through which to read Scripture to guard against idiosyncratic, isolationist, divisive interpretations. We need an authoritative and historic summary to help us

² Barton W. Stone, “An Address to the Churches of Christ,” *Christian Messenger* 6 (September 1832): 263.

distinguish non-negotiable truths from other important, though not core, matters of faith. What we need is a clear articulation of the gospel. I will take up this point in greater detail in my answers to questions 4 and 5.

3) What is the place of Churches of Christ today in the broader Christian world?

The Churches of Christ occupy a rare space in the broader Christian world. We are too Catholic to be Baptist and too Baptist to be Catholic. By this I mean we are too sacramental, too amillennial, and in some cases too apolitical to feel comfortable being lumped in with Evangelicals. Yet we are too congregational, non-liturgical, non-creedal, sermon-centric, and conversionist to be labelled a high-church, paedobaptist, creedal denomination. We occupy a strange middle ground that resists labels. Nowhere is this phenomenon seen more clearly than in our baptismal theology.

If I were to coin a label for the Churches of Christ based on our baptismal theology, I would call us “sacramental conversionists.” First, we are sacramental because we have a view of baptism that is similar in some ways to creedal, formal, liturgical traditions. Along with Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, and some mainline Protestants we teach that baptism is efficacious unto salvation—a necessary means of grace. As the Nicene Creed (381) puts it, we, too, “acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”

Second, we are conversionists. Along with Evangelicals and other low-church, immersionists, we insist that baptism is only for believers; that is, it is not for infants.

We hold both tenets with equal zeal. An initiate must be baptized for remission of sins and must be mature enough to have his/her own faith. We reject the Evangelicals’ low view of baptism at the time of faith and the paedobaptists’ low view of faith at the time of baptism. Sadly, however, we have tended to zero-in solely on these differences. We have built towering walls between ourselves and others by focusing on the things we reject.

However, as people who affirm the necessity of both baptism and faith, we are in an excellent position to represent and advocate for both kinds of traditions. For not only can we see and appreciate aspects of both sides, in many respects, we embody both sides. As sacramentalists, we can affirm with

paedobaptists the efficacy of baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As conversionists, we can affirm with Evangelicals the role that personal faith plays.

What if the Church of Christ understood her role as a peacemaker standing between two alienated siblings, grasping the hands of both in an effort to pull them closer together? I am not saying we need to change our theological *position* on these matters. I am saying we need to change our *disposition* and, perhaps, our focus. In our dialogue with both sides, we should err on the side of generosity—celebrating the overlap and seeking opportunities to turn walls of isolation into bridges of understanding and affirmation. As sacramental conversionists, the Churches of Christ embody the union of two seemingly dichotomous theological strains. Perhaps our place in Christendom is to serve as a bridge between two disparate Christian worlds.

4) What principle(s) of the Restoration Movement should we promote; what part of our identity should we pass along in our churches?

“ . . . but what is expressly taught and enjoined upon them in *the word of God*.”³

The principle of the Restoration Movement that we should promote and pass along in our churches is our commitment to *the word of God* as the basis for Christian unity. First, however, we need to revise this principle. When we use the phrase “word of God,” we should be more precise—especially when speaking of it as the basis for Christian unity. What do we usually mean when we say “word of God”? For valid reasons, Christians usually define “word of God” in two ways: 1) the Bible, or 2) Jesus, the Word incarnate (John 1:1–2, 14). I affirm both of these answers, but I want to suggest a third way to understand what it means. By far, the most prominent use of “word of God” in the New Testament refers not to the Bible or to Jesus, technically speaking, but to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not an overstatement to say that when the New Testament uses the phrase “word of God,” “word of the Lord,” or just “the word,” it is almost always talking about the gospel. Anyone who undertakes a

³ Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, prop. 3 (emphasis added).

detailed analysis of these terms in the New Testament will undoubtedly come to the same conclusion. Yet, curiously, when Christians today say “word of God,” they almost never mean the gospel. I am advocating that we align our language with that of the New Testament.

A quick examination of “word of God” in the book of Acts makes it clear what the author has in mind when he uses the phrase. For example, Acts 8:14 says, “When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted *the word of God*, they sent Peter and John to Samaria.” What was it, exactly, that Samaria accepted? People from Bible-based traditions such as ours have been slow to see this obvious truth, so at the risk of sounding pedantic, I will spell it out: the Samaritans in Acts 8 did not accept the New Testament—there was no such thing at the time. Rather, what they accepted was the proclamation of good news about Jesus Christ. Luke is joyously reporting that the Samaritans accepted the gospel! Similarly, Acts 11:1 says, “The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received *the word of God*.” Again, what was it that the Gentiles received? Thankfully, we have a sample of what these Gentiles received because Acts 10 summarizes the gospel message that Peter preached in the household of Cornelius. This usage is consistent throughout Acts and the rest of the New Testament (for example, Rom 10:17; 2 Cor 2:17; Gal 6:6; Col 1:22–29; 1 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:22–23; Rev 1:2, 9; 6:9).

To be sure, Acts uses other terms and phrases when speaking of the gospel as well: “Those who had been scattered *preached the word* wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and *proclaimed the Messiah* there” (Acts 8:4–5). Here we see that “preached the word” is synonymous with “proclaimed the Messiah.” Acts 8:12–14 puts it this way: “But when they believed Philip as he *proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ*, they were baptized, both men and women.... When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted *the word of God*, they sent Peter and John to Samaria.” A plain reading of these verses equates “the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” with “the word of God.”

In summary, as seen in Acts, when the New Testament refers to the “word of God,” it is generally talking about the gospel of Jesus Christ. We can draw two key points from this insight that will serve as the basis for my main proposal. First, it is the gospel (a.k.a. “word of God”) that established the church.

Wherever the gospel was proclaimed and received, the church came to be. Without the gospel, there simply is no church. More to the point, the New Testament did not establish the church; the gospel did. I do not say this to diminish the New Testament in any way. In fact, it is out of a deep commitment to its message that I feel compelled to make this unassailable claim. Second, it is the gospel that unified the church. As the gospel was proclaimed and received in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, it made Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles one in Christ. Space does not permit me to do much more than posit it here, but this is a truth that is echoed throughout the New Testament. Ephesians 3:6 could not say it more clearly: “This mystery is that *through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.*”

Yet, somehow, we have missed this straightforward, foundational truth—or at minimum, we have failed to adequately represent it with our language. As followers of Christ, heirs of a unity movement, and people who uphold the teaching of the New Testament, we must insist that the gospel is the basis for Christian unity. Long before there was such a thing as the New Testament, the proclamation of Jesus Christ established and unified the church. Years after these first churches were established, the apostles and those closely associated with them began to write letters to some of the churches they had planted in order to 1) remind them of the gospel they received, 2) establish them further in the gospel, and 3) hold them accountable to the ethical and ecclesial demands of that gospel. These documents were then circulated, compiled, and ultimately canonized into the 27 books that we know today as the New Testament. This apostolic collection, however, was never intended to replace the gospel as the basis for Christian unity. I have enough primitivist instincts from my Restorationist upbringing to deduce that if it was the gospel that originally unified the church, then it is that same gospel that unifies the church today. It must be said here that the New Testament is, in fact, our ancient, authoritative, apostolic, written access to the gospel; for it bears witness to and contains the gospel. Nevertheless, the New Testament is distinct from the gospel. With this in mind, it is important to understand that the gospel, not the New Testament, is the basis for Christian unity. I realize this may be a jarring claim, but it is not a new proposal for our movement. Early Restorationist, Robert

Richardson, says this very thing in this lengthy but pointed excerpt from the *Millennial Harbinger*:

The very abundance of the religious information furnished by the Bible, the multiplicity of its details, the sublime developments of its divine mysteries, seem to have led religious teachers to encumber the gospel with unnecessary aid, to complicate it with remote and refined deductions, and to conceal, at length, its beautiful simplicity beneath the appendages by which they sought to protect or to adorn it. *Men seem to have lost sight of the obvious distinction which is to be made between the Bible and the Gospel [sic]. As the Bible contains the gospel, and its ancient records are important in elucidating and confirming it they have become so intimately associated in the mind of the religious public, that they have lost sight of the just distinction between them.* The Bible is distributed everywhere at home, and in foreign lands, as a means of spreading the gospel, and we have reason to bless God for this distribution and for its blissful results. Yet it might be a very proper inquiry whether the conversion of the world might not be more rapidly and effectually accomplished by presenting, in the first instance, the gospel itself, in its own simple and distinct narration, just as prepared by its Divine Author, for universal acceptance. *It should never be forgotten that the Apostles and first preachers of the gospel had no Bibles, and not even a New Testament, to distribute; and that there was no such thing among the early Christians as a formal union upon the "Bible alone." Nay, rather, it was a union upon the Gospel [sic] alone: for in those days, the gospel possessed identity, and enjoyed a distinct and determinate character. It was then recognized as the substitute for all previous institutions, as complete in itself, and as being the very "power of God to salvation" to everyone who believed it.*

There can be no doubt that the gospel should now be regarded in the same light, and be suffered to occupy the same position. The same simplicity which fits it to the understanding of the illiterate, may well secure the admiration of the erudite; and the same comprehensiveness of annunciation which involves everything necessary to Christian faith, fits it to be the basis of Christian union. That alone which saves men, can unite them. That faith which the gospel requires of sinners, is the faith which should unite saints.... Let the "Bible

alone,” then, be our exhaustless treasury of religious knowledge, and to its sacred pages let us continually resort, that we may be enriched from its accumulated stores of divine truth. Let the Bible be our spiritual library; *but let the Gospel [sic] be our standard of orthodoxy*. Let the Bible be our test of Christian character and perfection, but let the Christian confession be our formula of Christian adoption and of Christian union. In a word, let the Bible be to us everything designed by its Author, *but let “Christ crucified” be not only our peace with God, but our peace with one another.*”⁴

Returning to the question, “What principle(s) of the Restoration Movement should we promote; what part of our identity should we pass along in our churches?” My answer here seeks to simultaneously promote and revise the fundamental principle of the Restoration Movement. We should promote and pass along our commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ as the basis for Christian unity.

**5) Have your views on these topics changed over the years?
If so, in what ways, and why?**

One way that my understanding on these matters has changed over the years is that I have a more precise and confident understanding of the gospel. If indeed it is the basis for Christian unity, the natural follow-up is, “So what exactly is the gospel?” This is not an easy question to answer due to the variety of possible responses. For example, if you were to ask seven Christians what the gospel is, you might get seven different answers. The number of starting points, approaches, antecedents, and metaphors by which people have come to know and share the gospel is staggering. No singular arrangement of words can fully capture all that God has done for us in Christ Jesus. The gospel’s nimble and adaptive quality has enabled it to flourish and multiply all over the world through the centuries. While this flexibility is something that we must acknowledge and appreciate, we must also acknowledge and appreciate the fixity of the gospel. Even given the seemingly inexhaustible number of ways to share it, the gospel has stable features that must not be neglected. Furthermore,

⁴ Robert Richardson, “Reformation No. IV,” *Millennial Harbinger* (September 1847): 508–9 (emphasis added).

since it is the basis for Christian unity, it is imperative that we identify those fixed, essential claims of the gospel, for it is within the common ground of these stable truths that we can embrace our brothers and sisters across denominational lines. The following statements articulate, in abbreviated form, the essential claims of the gospel:

- (1) Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is Lord.
- (2) God is one and he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- (3) Jesus was crucified and resurrected.
- (4) Believers remain in Christ through the church.
- (5) Through Christ sins are forgiven.
- (6) Through Christ God gives the Holy Spirit.
- (7) At the resurrection Christ will return to judge.

This is not an exhaustive explication, but rather a table of contents for the gospel; these brief statements regarding who God is and what he has done function as place holders or indicators of the gospel themes that must be unpacked. In other words, they do not say all that needs to be said. For example, the gospel also entails ethical demands that are not spelled out in this brief list. I will explore some of the ethical ramifications of these themes later in this response. Nevertheless, I have confidence that these are the salient themes of the gospel for the following reasons: they correspond with the theological content of baptism, they line up with the seven “ones” of Ephesians 4:4–6, they are present in the sermons in Acts, they are found throughout the letters of the New Testament, and they correspond with extra-biblical formulas such as the rule of faith and the historic Christian creeds.

First, I am confident that the above list is an accurate summary of the fixed truths of the gospel because all seven are present in baptism. While the Churches of Christ uphold a precise theology *about* baptism, we have not always recognized the theology *in* baptism. But if we examine closely the entire event of baptism—the confession, the invocation, and the symbolic action—we will find a compendium of the essentials of the Christian faith. Corresponding to the numbered list above, the core teachings expressed in baptism are as follows: (1) The initiate confesses that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is Lord. (2) There is the invocation: the person is baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (3) The symbolic action of lowering into and rising up

from the water dramatizes the death and resurrection of Jesus. (4) The importance of the church is symbolized; for it is a representative of the church who administers this washing, signifying that the church is an essential dimension of the gospel. After all, one does not bypass the church in order to receive God's grace. (5) The fact that the event itself is a washing or a cleansing, proclaims and performs that in Christ we have forgiveness of sins. (6) The gift of the Holy Spirit is associated with Christian baptism (Acts 2:38–39) as it was with Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. (7) As Jesus was raised from the dead, so we will also rise on the last day when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead. This ancient, participatory, apostolic ritual proclaims and enjoins upon the church the essential truths of the gospel. A more academic way of saying it is that baptism compresses and stores the Christian system: Christology, Theology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, Anthropology, Pneumatology, and Eschatology.

Second, these seven fixed truths of the gospel found in baptism also correspond with the “seven ones” in Ephesians 4:3–6, which Paul puts forth as the ground of unity: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Five of the seven are obvious correlations, but two require some explanation. “One faith” corresponds to (3), the core belief that Jesus was crucified and was raised from the dead. Faith in the death and resurrection is the core of the core, like in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7, where Paul reminds them of the Gospel that he preached and that they received “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” Or in Romans 10:8–9: “‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the message concerning the *faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*” So, in Ephesians 4, Paul adapts this theme to this rhetorical flurry of “ones” by simply referring to it as the “one faith.” The other “one” that requires explanation is “one baptism,” corresponding to core belief (5). To ancient ears this would have been heard as “one bath” or “one washing,” or “one forgiveness.” Wherever the gospel was

preached, forgiveness was offered; and the one baptism that we all share in Christ is the participatory enactment and reception of this wonderful gift.

Third, these seven doctrinal themes occur repeatedly in the sermons recorded in Acts, such as in Acts 2 when Peter preaches the first Spirit-empowered gospel sermon to the Jews at Pentecost. The same seven themes can be found in Peter's sermon to the Gentiles at Cornelius' house in Acts 10 as well.

Fourth, these seven themes show up again and again in almost all of the New Testament letters. Constant allusions to the salient teachings of the gospel are to be expected if the New Testament letters are indeed written in order to 1) remind Christians of the gospel they received, 2) establish them further in the gospel, and 3) hold them accountable to the ethical demands of the gospel. Regarding those ethical demands, if we read the New Testament through the lens of these seven gospel themes, we will find that each theme carries with it ramifications for our conduct and dispositions. (1) To confess Jesus as the Christ is to submit to his reign in all things. (2) Coming to know God as Father, Son, and Spirit is to know him as a diversity of persons who are fully united in love. Chief among all ethical expectations in Scripture is that of love (Mark 12:29–31; Rom 13:8–10), which is primary for no greater reason than that it mirrors the relational essence of God (1 John 4:8, 16). (3) Our participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus entails that we will replace our vices with Christ-like virtues. This is clear in passages like Ephesians 4:22–23: “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitudes of your minds; and to put on the new self.” This passage then goes on to enumerate specific vices to avoid and virtues to inhabit. (4) Inclusion in the church demands that we use our spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ (Eph 4:7–13). (5) The forgiveness we have in Christ makes ethical demands of us, as well, for we must “forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph 4:32). (6) The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives enables us to uphold the ethical and dispositional demands of the gospel, transforming us into the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:5–29; Gal 5:16–23). (7) The promise to someday join Jesus in his resurrection sets a cruciform vision for us so that we can live into our identity as heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17; Col 3:1–5). In short, the gospel tells us who God is and what he has done for us, which holds out

expectations for what we are to become, since, in Christ, we are “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24).

Fifth, all seven of these themes of the gospel occur in later, extra-biblical summaries as well, including but not limited to the following: the rule of faith, the Roman Symbol, Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, and the Apostles’ Creed. These formulas and creeds helped guide the church and protect it from heresies for the first several centuries. The consistency of these confessions and creeds is evidence that they are based on the same common source. To say it another way, the gospel that established and unified the church is the same gospel that was confessed and symbolized in the first baptisms; which is the same gospel that we read about in the New Testament, which is consistent with the rule of faith that provided the standard to stave off heresies, which was used as a criterion for canonicity of the 27 documents we call the New Testament, which was the same content that provided the basic outline for the deliberations at the Ecumenical Councils, which is the same gospel that is confessed through the creeds at liturgical churches all over the world, which is the same gospel that is proclaimed and enacted when someone is baptized in one of our churches even to this present day. As an example of the consistency of these themes, I have used the numbers from my earlier list to identify all seven stable teachings of the gospel in the Apostles’ Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, (2)
Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, (1, 2)
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried; (3)
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again; (3)
He ascended into heaven,
He is seated at the right hand of the Father, (1, 7)
And he will come to judge the living and the dead. (7)

I believe in the Holy Spirit, (2, 6)
The holy catholic Church, (4)
The communion of saints,

The forgiveness of sins, (5)
 The resurrection of the body, (7)
 And the life everlasting. (7)
 Amen.

What exactly is the gospel? As mentioned earlier, seven different people might offer seven different answers. A Lutheran might talk about justification by faith. A Reformed person might focus on God's irresistible grace for the elect. A Restorationist might emphasize baptism for the forgiveness of sins. A mainline Protestant might focus on social issues. An Evangelical might hold out the importance of accepting Jesus to be one's personal Lord and Savior. A Roman Catholic might emphasize the church and the sacraments. While these are unfair caricatures, there is a reason they are readily recognizable. Namely, we all tend to emphasize those things that distinguish us from other Christian faiths. As heirs of a movement committed to tearing down the walls that divide us, let us hold fast to that which makes us one.

The gospel must become our theological center. If we can articulate and agree upon the content of that gospel and make it the center of our identity and message, we will address our most significant deficiencies in the Churches of Christ. While there are countless starting points and approaches to the gospel, there are also fixed, non-negotiable teachings; and I have proposed several ways to access and verify seven of them. The presence of these seven themes in the event of baptism, the sermons in Acts, the "seven ones," the content of the letters of the New Testament, the ancient rule of faith, and the historic Christian creeds attests to their centrality. Having clarity regarding the core teachings of our faith enables us to read Scripture in a consistent and coherent way that is in keeping with the historic Christian faith. It grounds our ethics and ensures that the gospel we proclaim is not fragmented, distorted, or incomplete. It provides a mechanism to help us prioritize doctrines, enabling us to distinguish primary theological matters from those that are secondary. And, hopefully, these seven central teachings of the gospel will replace the unwritten sectarian creeds that have built walls between us and other Christians.