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Historically, outsiders to Churches of Christ have noticed the great unity and uniformity of faith and practice that characterize our fellowship. As Frank Mead put it, in his classic *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, “Since the status of [their] institutions is unofficial, none authorized to speak for the entire church, their conformity in ideas and teachings is all the more remarkable.” That is, despite the lack of institutional, denominational superstructure or adherence to a written confessional standard, Churches of Christ have traditionally maintained a surprisingly strong sense of identity. This common identity is exemplified in the common observation that, until the late twentieth century, one could walk into almost any Church of Christ and predict exactly what would be done and said.

This characteristic identity, reflected in a relative uniformity of doctrine and liturgy, has noticeably eroded over the past few decades. Now, those who enter an assembly of the Church of Christ can no longer predict with the same degree of accuracy what they will find. A variety of cultural and religious factors have further loosened the ties that once maintained the unity of belief and practice in this loose affiliation of congregations. It is important, therefore, for members of Churches of Christ to reflect on issues related to our identity—past, present, and future.

In this issue of *Christian Studies*, we have asked contributors to keep in mind the very broad but important question about the identity of Churches of Christ. This question thus serves as a general thread that runs through the various articles. In their own way, and sometimes with different results, these articles touch on this concept by indirectly addressing questions such as: What has shaped the identity of Churches of Christ in the past? How can this identity be characterized at present? What does, or should, its future look like? What beliefs and practices are, or should be, central? What is, or should be, our relationship with other denominations, with evangelicalism, and with the world? All these questions, and more, are worth our contemplation, and the articles included in this issue are intended to initiate or extend such conversations not only among Churches of Christ, but among other groups who are wrestling with similar questions.

For many reasons, the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology wishes to dedicate this issue of *Christian Studies* to David Worley. Dr. Worley has donated his time, energy, and resources to the ministry at Austin Grad, including service to the school as president (1992–2000) and as chancellor (2001–present). In addition to being a New Testament scholar, he is a model shepherd and an outstanding example of Christian devotion and piety—exhibiting unity in necessary things, charity in all things, and patient endurance in trials. More specific to the theme of this issue, as long as I have known him, David has been a tireless advocate for preserving and passing on to others what is best about Churches of Christ, and he does so in a winsome, non-sectarian way. It is our hope that this issue reflects something of his interests and integrity, that he is honored by the questions and tentative answers found here, and that all readers will find the enterprise stimulating and edifying.

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The Restoration Movement, the Habit of Schism, and a Proposal for Unity

Keith D. Stanglin

Thomas Campbell's Call for Unity

The American Restoration Movement, as many historians have reminded us, was initiated around the turn of the nineteenth century primarily as a unity movement within Protestant Christianity. Such a movement was needed, after all. For all the good that the sixteenth-century Protestant movements may have brought to the Western Church in the way of doctrinal reforms, there was at least one outcome that wrought inestimable damage—namely, schism. It is not that there were no schisms before the sixteenth century. Neither is it the case that the early Protestants desired schism; in fact, they made a fairly strong case that it was the Roman Church's doctrinal innovations and resistance to reform that caused and perpetuated the schism. It is also true, however, that Protestants, almost as soon as there were Protestants, exhibited a persistent inability to get along with one another.

From the 1520s on, Protestant history includes stories of disagreements over baptism, the Lord's Supper, liturgy, free will and predestination, the relationship of the church with civil government, and biblical interpretation, which in many cases was the source of the disagreements. It did not take long for Protestants, as well as Roman Catholics, to draw up new confessions of faith that distinguished their own particular groups. Despite the occasional, lone voices calling for unity, by the end of the sixteenth century, instead of one unified church in the West, there were now Roman Catholic, Lutheran,

Reformed, and a number of Anabaptist and “radical” churches, each with its own confessional standard. Thus began denominations in the West.

These initial breaks were only the beginning, though, as the disputes and divisions continued. Once Pandora’s box was opened, once the precedent was set that any doctrinal disagreement could justify starting a new church, the horrific *possibility* of schism that was realized in the sixteenth century evolved into the accepted *habit* of schism in the seventeenth and eighteenth. Debates ensued now over the interpretation of the new confessional standards—including what subscription meant and whether it was even necessary—all of which led to further contentions and divisions.

This habit of schism, transferred from the Old World, became compulsive in the New World. In American soil, nourished by autonomous freedom from old traditions and by optimistic visions of finally making the church what it was supposed to be, the seeds of schism proliferated, grew, and flourished. Implicated in this guilt were, among many others, the Presbyterians, whose Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechism served as confessional standards. Throughout the eighteenth century, a significant number of Presbyterians had various reservations about signing on to these standards, and many simply refused to subscribe at all. Aside from the doctrinal teaching of the Westminster standards, in the wake of the evangelical revivals in England and especially the Second Great Awakening in North America, Presbyterians further divided over their openness to the revivals (so-called “Old Lights” versus “New Lights”).¹

Many Presbyterians, such as Thomas Campbell, his son Alexander Campbell, and Barton W. Stone, were fed up with the divisive spirit. This frustration is evident in Thomas Campbell’s *Declaration and Address* (1809), a sort of manifesto for unity in the church. Campbell insists

that division among christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many evils. It is anti-christian, as it destroys the visible unity of the body of Christ; as if he were divided against himself, excluding and excommunicating a part of himself. It is anti-scriptural, as

¹ For such reasons a Presbyterian acquaintance of mine characterizes Presbyterians as the “split P’s.”

being strictly prohibited by his sovereign authority; a direct violation of his express command.²

As an antidote to the sin of division, Campbell's *Declaration* promotes two fundamental values: 1) the unity of Christians, and 2) restoration based on the sole authority of Scripture. The idea is simple: Christians can be unified once again if they will cast off human creeds and traditions, which have been the main cause of division, and return to Scripture as the only authority in religion. He writes:

To cease from all such things [divisions], by simply returning to the original standard of christianity—the profession and practice of the primitive church, as expressly exhibited upon the sacred page of New Testament scripture, is the only possible way, that we can perceive, to get rid of those evils. And we humbly think that a uniform agreement in *that* for the preservation of charity would be infinitely preferable to our contentions and divisions: nay, that such a uniformity is the very thing that the Lord requires, if the New Testament be a perfect model—a sufficient formula for the worship discipline and government of the christian church. Let *us* do, as we are there expressly told *they* did, say as *they* said: that is, profess and practise as therein expressly enjoined by precept and precedent, in every possible instance, after *their* approved example; and in so doing we shall realize, and exhibit, all that unity and uniformity, that the primitive church possessed, or that the law of Christ requires.³

Campbell's vision for his proposed Christian Association was not to start a new denomination, but to instill in fellow Christians a love for unity on the basis of New Testament Scripture.

It is important to understand the priority and relationship of these two fundamental values. As Campbell designates division as the “horrid evil, fraught with many evils,” so the unity of God's people is the ultimate *end*, the *telos*, the primary goal. Restoration, returning to the “profession and practice of the primitive church,” is the “only possible way, that we can perceive, to get rid of those evils” of division. In other words, this restoration of faith and

² Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, in *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address*, ed. Thomas H. Olbricht and Hans Rollmann (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2000), 19-20.

³ Campbell, *Declaration*, 37.

practice is the *means*, or the way, to the goal of unity. The means to unity—doing and saying as the New Testament church did and said—may be called a “patternistic restoration,” inasmuch as it seeks to “do and say” according to the definite pattern or “perfect model” revealed in the New Testament alone. In sum, for Campbell, this vision of patternistic restoration based on Scripture alone is the means to the greater goal of unity.

The following years and decades proved that people were less willing than Campbell anticipated to renounce their denominational creeds and practices that were “not as old as the New Testament.”⁴ In some ways analogous to how the Wesleyan revivals in the Church of England led to the unintended establishment of a distinct denomination (Methodism), the Campbells’ attempt to reform from within Baptist churches led to a parting of the ways and the formation of a group with a distinct identity. Though not officially or structurally a denomination, the Restoration Movement became, by a loose sociological definition, a distinct denomination.⁵

The further, tragic irony is that this same group, a unity movement, experienced its own divisions. In addition to the doctrinal and social reasons for the eventual divisions, it should be observed that later divisions reflected an ideological tension laid out in Thomas Campbell’s original vision. Unity and restoration, as an enduring pair of principles in the subsequent Restoration

⁴ Campbell, *Declaration*, 19. Alexander Campbell also used similar language: “...I commenced my career in this country under the conviction that nothing that was not as old as the New Testament should be made an article of faith, a rule of practice, or a term of communion amongst Christians.” Alexander Campbell, “Address to the Public,” *Christian Baptist* II/2 (Sept. 6, 1824): 40.

⁵ “A denomination is an association or fellowship of congregations within a religion that have the same beliefs or creed, engage in similar practices and cooperate with each other to develop and maintain shared enterprises.” D. O. Moberg, “Denominationalism,” in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 350. This standard definition, which fits mainstream Churches of Christ, would seem to differ from the more formal and overtly ecumenical aspects of a denomination assumed, for example, by Barry Ensign-George, “Denomination as Ecclesiological Category: Sketching an Assessment,” in *Denomination: Assessing an Ecclesiological Category*, ed. Paul M. Collins and Barry Ensign-George (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 1–21. The idea, assumed by Ensign-George, that denominationalism is ecumenically friendly was certainly not the assumption of Campbell, who saw denominational reality as the corollary and culprit of continual division.

Movement, came into tension with one another. This conflict between the two values hinged on the inevitability of differing interpretations of Scripture. In other words, if even the people who were willing to follow only the Bible could agree on its interpretation and application, then unity would indeed be the inevitable result. Such uniformity of interpretation and application, however, was not to be. This problem was evident during the Reformation and was a source of Roman Catholic polemic against Protestants. Taking the responsibility for biblical interpretation out of the hands of church leaders or the pope and putting it into the hands of all Christians simply made little popes out of everyone. The outcome of endless divisions, so the Roman Church argued with some justification, was predictable.⁶

On occasions when there was not agreement on the interpretation of Scripture, which value—unity or restoration—would be emphasized in the tension? One stream of the Restoration Movement tended to sacrifice agreement on Scripture for the sake of unity, whereas another stream tended to sacrifice wider unity for a particular interpretation of Scripture. Among the former (represented especially by Disciples of Christ), doctrinal distinctions were easily overlooked and de-emphasized in the practice of open fellowship. Among the latter (represented especially by Churches of Christ), the goal of broader unity was largely effaced by the defense of a certain set of exegetical conclusions. In most Churches of Christ, the means of restoration became the end in itself, and the original end, unity, was effectively obscured.⁷ In traditional Churches of Christ, when lip service is paid to unity, it is usually in terms of persuading others to that set of exegetical conclusions necessary for salvation. It is an exaggeration to say that unity and restoration are two “mutually exclusive” or “incompatible” goals,⁸ but it is clear that, in

⁶ Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 87–96, 130–31, 202–5, 365–75, documents this trajectory, though he exaggerates the extent to which this characterizes all Protestants and the extent to which it affected modern civilization.

⁷ This obfuscation is evident, anecdotally, by the common reaction of surprise when members of Churches of Christ first learn that their movement began as a unity movement.

⁸ As do Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (1996; reprint, Abilene: ACU Press, 2008), 22; and M. Eugene Boring, *Disci-*

Given the history of sectarianism and further division within the Restoration Movement, it should be safe to say that restoration has not been a perfect means to unity. Not only has it actually failed to achieve and maintain unity, but restoration, as described by Campbell, is practically untenable. In short, saying and doing what the first-century church said and did would involve the transference of cultural utility (for example, in washing feet) and cultural symbolism (wearing head coverings) that are neither useful nor appropriately symbolic today. This sort of restoration, applied as simplistically as Campbell seems to suggest, has never consistently been practiced and does not work.¹⁰ If Campbell could see us now, he might be inclined to return to his statement and ask, “Is there ‘a better way?’”

Toward a “Better Way” to Unity

With regard to Thomas Campbell’s two fundamental values, where are Churches of Christ now? In an attempt to make a long and complex description shorter, I offer the following brief synopsis. Churches of Christ are increasingly diverse, but they still reflect to some degree the tension between restoration and unity. Many congregations still hold to the restoration principle of doing and saying what the first-century church did and said. Most of these congregations have given up on the prospect of broader Christian unity on the basis of this principle and its practice.

Other Churches of Christ have gradually neglected or outright rejected the ideal of patternistic restoration—sometimes, it should be observed, out of apparent embarrassment—in their embrace of the call to ecumenical unity. Such congregations tend to proceed toward this goal by engaging first with evangelical and other conservative Protestant groups, a natural and commendable move. One concern, though, is that many who have rejected the simplistic sort of restorationism have not really decided what, if anything, to

¹⁰ To be fair, one’s hermeneutical practice is often better than one’s hermeneutical theory. This seems to have been the case with Campbell. In addition, there have been restorationist hermeneutical proposals sympathetic with Campbell’s that provide more nuance regarding which commands and examples are to be followed and how. By and large, because they use the same approach, such attempts still fail to achieve the desired unity, and they usually fail to relieve people of the abiding impression that sound biblical application is equivalent to repeating first-century speech and practice.

put in its place. By default, restorationism and the classic distinctive practices of the Churches of Christ (especially *a cappella* singing) tend to be replaced by a sort of generic, American evangelical theology and practice, most readily noticeable in ecclesiology and worship.

For those who are moved by Campbell's, and Christ's, call to unity, is there an alternative to the simplistic restorationist hermeneutic, and can there be one that does not involve being absorbed into another denominational or evangelical identity? Is there, to use Campbell's words, "a better way"?

This better way, in order to achieve real unity among Churches of Christ and beyond, must address the problem of individualistic biblical interpretation that makes each interpreter his own pope. Such an approach has led to divisions as numerous and insidious as those caused by any creed or confession. The better way, while keeping Scripture primary, must provide a lens or an aid in interpretation that guides and limits interpretation. Since there is no purely objective reading of the text, since it is impossible to read the biblical text as if we are the first ones to read it, then it is worth asking what sort of critical theory or perspective we will bring to the text—deconstructionist, feminist, post-colonial, and so on? No. What is needed is a theory, a lens, that is distinctively and unashamedly Christian.

The better way, in order to achieve real unity among Churches of Christ and beyond, must also address the "flattening" of Scripture that makes each commandment and article of faith as important as the next. The patternistic restorationism of "doing what they did" has resulted in an unhealthy equalizing of commands and examples, as well as making possible inferences the equivalent of express commands. By this principle, for instance, the correct frequency of communion became as necessary as practicing it at all. *A cappella* singing could be thought as central a tenet of the faith as the divinity of Christ. Such thinking led to lists of the necessary articles of faith that could be lengthy and, again, based on one's own individual interpretation of Scripture. Although no true articles of faith are unimportant, the better way must provide a way to distinguish between the central and the peripheral articles of

the faith, thus enabling the church to find and maintain unity in those core beliefs and practices.¹¹

In the search for this desired but elusive unity, one could take a page from the restorationist playbook and ask the following question about the first-century church: “What is it that united the early church, to the degree that those Christians were united?” Whatever it was, it was not the principle of “Scripture alone.” Rather, what brought people to Christ and kept them united in him was their common belief in the content of the apostolic proclamation. Quite apart from the New Testament as such—whose contents were still being written in the first century, collected in the second, codified in the fourth, and not widely available to individual believers until the sixteenth—it was their common commitment to the faith, orally passed on and received, that gave Christians their identity and ecclesiastical unity.

The content of this faith was passed on publicly in the reading and preaching of the word in early Christian assemblies. Such knowledge was available to a person before and after baptism. It was precisely at baptism, however—which was done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—when a person confessed what is central to Christian faith: belief in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Leading up to baptism, catechumens received more specialized instruction on all three of these points. First, the Father’s nature is one; he is the uncreated creator. Second, the Son’s nature is explained narratively. Beginning with his divinity, he is proclaimed to be God’s Son by nature, the Logos, the instrument of creation. His descent to humanity comes next, with emphasis on his physical nature and the historical verifiability of his life, suffering, and death. Then comes his glorification, described in terms of his resurrection, ascension, session at the right hand of the Father, and return. Third, the Holy Spirit’s work among God’s people is explained as the source of inspired prophecy and renewal, as

¹¹ If anyone doubts that some doctrines and commands are more important than others, carefully read, for starters, Hos 6:6; Matt 7:12; 22:35–40; 23:23; Mark 12:28–34; 1 Cor. 15:3–8. To acknowledge that there are “weightier matters of the law” implies that there are also less weighty matters; it does not, however, imply that the less weighty matters should be neglected (Matt 23:23). But to deny that there are such weightier matters would be to deny the clear meaning of these cited passages.

well as the guide of the church.¹² One owned and expressed this faith really for the first time at baptism.

This threefold expression of belief, passed down and received leading up to and at baptism, is what Irenaeus, Tertullian, and other early Christian writers refer to as the “rule of faith” or “rule of truth.” It is the measure (*canon*) of the essential truths of Christian faith. Because it was handed down orally, the rule of faith varied somewhat in its exact wording. Despite the verbal variation, there is remarkable consistency in what is said and believed about Father, Son, and Spirit. This increasingly consistent wording reflected the substance of what was confessed periodically at baptism, and a standardized text became a regular part of the church’s confession in worship. Eventually, the wording would be transcribed and codified as a creed, that is, a statement of belief.¹³ For example, the Creed of Nicaea (325) and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol (Creed) (381) were based on the baptismal confession and the corresponding rule of faith, but were each the immediate result of an official church council and its concerns. It was the Roman statement of faith, or creed, that eventually spread in the Western church and, after some alternate wording and merging with other statements, became codified and known as the Apostles’ Creed, not tied to a particular council.¹⁴

The rule of faith and the Apostles’ Creed are simply reiterations or extensions of the baptismal confession of faith, which itself is a summary of what the apostles preached. It is no accident, then, that every article of the Apostles’ Creed can be tied—and most of them verbatim—to passages in the

¹² The clearest early exposition of these three points is in Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching* 6, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 43–44. One of the best brief summaries of this content is in Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, new ed. (London: SCM Press, 2002).

¹³ “Credo” (whence “creed”) simply means “I believe,” and is the initial Latin word in ancient statements of faith.

¹⁴ The rule of faith and the creed (Apostles’ or otherwise) are not the same thing, but they differ more in function than in content. It is the content with which we are concerned here, and so I use them more or less interchangeably. For a discussion of this distinction, as well as a fine overview of the rule of faith and its functions, see Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015). For more on the Apostles’ Creed, see Keith D. Stanglin, “Apostles’ Creed,” in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 59–60.

book of Acts, which is itself, among other things, a record of the apostles' preaching.¹⁵ The Apostles' Creed is "biblical," so to speak, not because it was copied and pasted from the New Testament, but because, like the New Testament, it is apostolic in its content. Even Alexander Campbell, generally as anti-creedal as one can be, recognized the great value of the Apostles' Creed, calling it "a *bonafide* creed; and in every word true."¹⁶

What united the early church, then, was the common confession of apostolic faith summed up effectively for us in the Apostles' Creed. If one's faith reflected in the basic content of this creed was enough to unite the early church in the face of threats from within and without, then it is also worth considering whether it might provide a "better way" than the isolated biblicism that has failed to unite. How might that way look, or even be justified, in Churches of Christ?

First of all, the better way begins with appreciating the significance of the baptismal confession in Churches of Christ. What is confessed by the one being baptized, which has often been Christocentric rather than Trinitarian, reflects what is regarded as the central and most important doctrine of the faith. The initiate speaks words that are uniquely Christian, that only a Christian can genuinely confess, and that reflect a faith necessary and sufficient for full membership. That is, in Churches of Christ, since there is already a tacit acknowledgment that this confession is a statement of belief ac-

¹⁵ For the text of the Apostles' Creed, see "Obiter Dicta" in this issue of *Christian Studies*. One must supplement with the Gospel according to Luke to see that Mary was a "virgin," and the idea that the church is "catholic" (or universal) is implied, but not explicit, in Acts.

¹⁶ Alexander Campbell, "Campbellism Examined," *Millennial Harbinger* (1855): 74. See also William Tabbernee, "Alexander Campbell and the Apostolic Tradition," in *The Free Church and the Early Church: Bridging the Historical and Theological Divide*, ed. D. H. Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 163-80; and the article in this issue by John Mark Hicks. Thomas Campbell was also not opposed to creeds *per se*. Campbell, *Declaration*, 26-27: "As to creeds and confessions, although we may appear to our brethren to oppose them, yet this is to be understood only in *so far* as they oppose the unity of the church, by containing sentiments not expressly revealed in the word of God; or, by the way of using them, become the instruments of a human or implicit faith: or, oppress the weak of Gods heritage: where they are liable to none of those objections, we have nothing against them. It is the *abuse* and not the *lawful use* of such compilations that we oppose."

ceptable for fellowship, there is already a mechanism in place for a common, uniting confession. The rule of faith, or creed, is the faith expressed in the Trinitarian baptismal confession, a confession that unites the people of God. For most congregations of the Church of Christ, if this baptismal confession is as important as we say it is, it will mean instituting a standardized set of words. More, not less, attention should be given, therefore, to a consistent form of confession that, like baptism itself, is Trinitarian.

Second, if faith in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as expressed in the Apostles' Creed, is sufficient for full union with the body of Christ at baptism, then there is no clear reason why it cannot be a sufficient form of unity in the ongoing life of the church. As such, the Apostles' Creed, or something very much like it, should be a regular part of the church's worship, as well as new members' and children's catechesis. On the question of unity, the faith confessed at baptism should be a sufficient test of fellowship. Such a standard will be easier to maintain if the first suggestion (above) is followed and attention to the fullness of justifying faith is given at the point of entry. As a result of uniting around a common confession, it would at least make it more difficult for a church to divide or to break fellowship with other churches over tertiary concerns.

Third, the rule of faith must come alongside the reading of Scripture. To recognize the importance of the rule of faith in this way is not to undermine the primacy of Scripture for the church. In fact, in this proposal, the study and application of Scripture are just as central as Thomas Campbell imagined. The difference is that the creed functions as a conscious guide and lens for biblical interpretation.¹⁷ By itself, the rule of faith is not a sufficient hermeneutical theory or method of interpretation, but a necessary supplement to responsible exegesis and application. This suggestion runs counter to the Enlightenment-era idea, shared by most restorationists, that one should read the Bible as if it has never been read before, giving no thought to previous traditions or interpretations. Rather, the rule of faith helps to limit biblical inter-

¹⁷ E.g., see the proposal in Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

pretation, and its focus on the core of the gospel helps to keep inferential interpretations and applications in their proper place.¹⁸

Conclusion

All Christians should have an interest in Christ's prayer that his followers be united. As heirs of a Christian unity movement known more for its divisiveness than its unity, the Church of Christ perhaps has a special obligation to consider the problem within its own ranks and work toward resolution. Thomas Campbell certainly felt the call to promote unity, and, to that end, he proposed going back to Scripture alone to restore first-century beliefs and practices. Interestingly, he did leave room for a "better way" to promote unity, if one could be found. Two centuries of history have shown that the patternistic hermeneutic of restoration that Campbell seems to have endorsed has not served the goal of unity as effectively as he envisioned. In light of Campbell's own concession, and in the spirit of seeking to restore the unity of the early church, we seek a better way. The better way is to allow the "great tradition" of the church, the collection of voices from Christian history, in all of their unity and even their multiplicity, to have a seat at the table in the life of the church, including in the church's interpretation and application of Scripture. The unity of this tradition, expressed well in many sources, is succinctly stated in the rule of faith.¹⁹ As Everett Ferguson writes, the rule of faith "sustains unity in diversity and disagreement."²⁰

It is a proposal for deep restoration. By deep restoration, I mean restoration that is not fixated primarily on what the first-century church said and did, but is focused more on *how* they thought and *why* they said and did thus. Such a perspective will often result in saying and doing as the first-century church, but the saying and doing will go deeper and tap into the fount from which the practices flow. This source is the gospel, the rule; this is the pattern to be followed. This pattern is revealed in the apostolic proclamation of what

¹⁸ Thomas Campbell made clear that inferences should not be binding as tests of fellowship. Campbell, *Declaration*, 18-19.

¹⁹ The compatibility of a restoration perspective with an appreciation for church history is discussed in Keith D. Stanglin, "Restorationism and Church History: Strange Bedfellows?" *Christian Studies* 26 (2013-14): 21-32.

²⁰ Ferguson, *Rule of Faith*, 84. Ferguson describes many beneficial uses of the rule of faith in today's church (*ibid.*, 83-90).

God has done for his people in Christ, and it is summed up in the rule of faith and early creeds. This is how the early church thought, and this is how they read the Bible.

This proposal should be a welcome possibility for those who have rejected traditional “restorationism” but have yet to find anything to put in its place. It should also be considered by those who have held more firmly to the traditional patternistic way but have been discouraged by the lack of unity that it actually provides.

Opening the door to the tradition and history of the church throughout the ages will come with a new set of questions. How much influence should the tradition have? which tradition? and so on. There will be tension, and the voices of tradition often will not solve the question, but they will enhance the conversation. As an analogy, consider the function of case laws in jurisprudence. For any particular case at hand, lawyers have before them a long history and a myriad of cases relevant to the law’s interpretation and application, some of which may even be contradictory. Some of these decisions are more precedent-setting than others because of their wisdom, practicality, extensive reach, and their ability to stand the test of time and to gather consensus over a long period.²¹ Similarly, the church’s tradition, though complex, can speak with faithful wisdom to those willing to listen. This extended conversation can enhance the church’s current conversations and help unite Christians liturgically, doctrinally, and morally.

Like Thomas Campbell, we are open to and we seek a better way toward Christian unity and maturity. Whatever that way is, it will not succeed if it is simply another method. As long as humans are involved and have their way, even the best way can end in division. Rather, the help of the Holy Spirit is needed to grant knowledge, wisdom, perspective, humility, and love, all of which are necessary if Christians are to be one.

²¹ Giulio Silano provides an extended analogy between a casebook and Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*. See Silano, “Introduction,” in Peter Lombard, *The Sentences, Book 1: The Mystery of the Trinity*, trans. Giulio Silano (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007), xix–xxvi. This seems to be a helpful way to think about the whole Christian tradition.

Contributors

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