

# Christian Studies

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A Christian Affirmation, 2005:  
*An Exchange of Views*

Leroy Garrett and Jeffrey Peterson

The following exchange took place online in spring 2005 concerning *A Christian Affirmation 2005*, the text of which can be found at [www.christianaffirmation.org](http://www.christianaffirmation.org). We are grateful to Dr. Leroy Garrett for his permission to republish his response to the *Affirmation*. We suggest that the preceding *Affirmation* be carefully read prior to the Garrett-Peterson exchange.

Editor, *Christian Studies*

Response to *A Christian Affirmation, 2005*

Leroy Garrett

In the May, 2005 issue of *The Christian Chronicle* there appeared “A Christian Affirmation 2005” signed by 24 leaders of Churches of Christ—professors, deans, pulpit ministers, elders. The intention of the document is “to clarify our Christian identity in a time of increasing uncertainties.” The document expresses “A Word of Concern” that recent efforts to overcome a legacy of legalism and division has led us “to relax our commitment to practices that have been characteristic of our churches.” In doing this these leaders have placed issues on the table worthy of critical discussion.

I would like to join the conversation by questioning some of the affirmations set forth. In appealing to our heritage of unity in the American Restoration Movement, the leaders state that “we believe that unity cannot be grounded in minimal agreements among Christian traditions.” They go on to say that substantive Christian unity is found “in returning to the clear teaching and practices of the early church.”

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

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

In essentials (as few as possible), unity;  
 In opinions (as broad as possible without compromising essentials), liberty;  
 In all things, love.

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

All this conforms to the consensus of modern New Testament scholarship, that the early Christians had but one creed or one essential—Jesus is Lord! This is what they lived for and died for. All else was marginal. What believers live and die for is what unites them. “Multiplying the essentials” has sometimes been named as the cause of our divisions. Campbell called it “the tyranny of opinionism.”

When the Affirmation argues for unity by “returning to the clear teachings of Scripture and practices of the early church,” it is preserving the illusion

of restorationism that has been an albatross about our necks in Churches of Christ all these years. If what these leaders call “The Original Design” of the early church is all that “clear,” why have we divided into numerous factions over what that design or pattern is? Are the “clear teachings of Scripture” all that clear about whether we have Sunday schools, instrumental music, cooperation, societies, communion cups, etc. Are they clear about the millennium, glossolalia, predestination, election, the Trinity, inspiration, interpretation, etc.?

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

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

Another questionable affirmation in the document is that “God does not save individuals apart from the body of Christ.” Who is this that knows the mind of Him who said, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (Rom. 9:15)? God will save whom He will, in the church or out. Only God knows the heart, and only He knows how many Rahabs there are out there.

This exclusive view of God's grace is the offspring of "the only true church" fallacy that has long made us sectarians. It goes this way: the saved are all in the church. We are that church; so, if one doesn't belong to the Church of Christ, he is not saved.

The document rightly urges that we preserve such practices as weekly communion and baptism by immersion for remission of sins, and we may urge these as reflective of "the common faith and practice of the earliest Christians." But even here we cannot make our interpretation and practice tests of fellowship. We must recognize—as these 24 leaders appear reluctant to do—that there are multitudes of sincere, intelligent Christians who do not see "the common faith and practice of the earliest Christians" the same way we do. We can stand firmly for what we believe about baptism, and still accept as equals in Christ those who differ with us.

This is consistent with our heritage in Stone-Campbell. No one was more zealous for baptism by immersion than Alexander Campbell—debating it as he did—and yet he accepted as Christians those referred to as "the pious unimmersed." He was himself an example of his own definition of a Christian: "A Christian is one who believes that Jesus is the Christ, repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his understanding." After a prolonged study of baptism, he was immersed, but he believed he had been a Christian all along. One is responsible only for such light as he has at any given time, he held.

In defense of our singing without instruments, the 24 leaders point out that *a cappella* music has been the position of numerous reformers and churches through the centuries, such as John Calvin and the Puritans, and 300 million in Eastern Orthodox churches. But that is not the issue. No case has to be made for *a cappella* music. All churches sometimes sing *a cappella*. The issue is making instrumental music a test of fellowship. John Calvin did

not make a *cappella* music “catholic,” and the Orthodox churches do not make it an essential to fellowship, as we in Churches of Christ have done.

A number of our congregations have recently gone public in stating they will no longer make instrumental music a test of fellowship—not that they will no longer sing a *cappella*. That is the issue. Do the 24 signers of the Affirmation agree with those churches, or are they saying that we should keep on making a test of what is but our opinion or preference?

The Affirmation errs as much in what it does not say as in what it does say. In any effort to identify ourselves we should recognize that Churches of Christ are part of a movement “to unite the Christians in all the sects,” and that we must get back on track as a unity people. We must reaffirm such mottoes as, “We are Christians only, but not the only Christians.” In doing this we must confess our sins—that we have claimed to be the only Christians and the only true church, that we have often been sectarian about the nature of the church and legalistic about baptism. And that we have been wrong about instrumental music—not in singing a *cappella*, but in making the instrument a test for accepting other believers as equals in Christ. We must go on to affirm our intention to become a Christ-centered, Spirit-filled people desirous of enjoying fellowship with all other Christians, and to join them in labors of love for Christ’s sake.

## A Reply to Leroy Garrett

Jeffrey Peterson

It’s been my pleasure to hear Leroy Garrett lecture and then sit down for discussion with him on two occasions, once at the Liberty Street Church in Trenton, New Jersey, and once at Austin Graduate School of Theology. Both times I was impressed with his passionate commitment to opposing sectarian-

ism in Churches of Christ. Reading his comments on “A Christian Affirmation,” however, I was led to wonder whether his passion sometimes leads him to see sectarianism where it isn’t present. Anyone familiar with the work of such teachers as Tom Olbricht, Jerry Rushford, Carl Holladay, Jim Roberts, and John Mark Hicks will recognize how implausible it is to charge them with a sectarian spirit, which is in fact explicitly repudiated in the Affirmation’s closing paragraphs.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> After our public exchange, Dr. Garrett indicated that it was not his intent to charge the signers of the Affirmation with sectarianism; he stated regarding his published response, “I said nothing about [the Affirmation] being sectarian, and I certainly did not accuse the brothers you listed as being sectarians. Of course, they are not sectarians” (email of 2 June 2005, quoted by permission).

Here is the relevant portion of my reply to Dr. Garrett (email of 4 June 2005): “I appreciate your clarification of your intentions in commenting on the Affirmation, and I appreciated your noting our repudiation of sectarianism. I responded as I did because I saw no other way to construe the following than as an imputation of sectarianism to the signers:

Another questionable affirmation in the document is that ‘God does not save individuals apart from the body of Christ.’ Who is this that knows the mind of Him who said, ‘I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion’ (Rom. 9:15)? God will save whom He will, in the church or out. Only God knows the heart, and only He knows how many Rahabs there are out there.

This exclusive view of God’s grace is the offspring of ‘the only true church’ fallacy that has long made us sectarians. It goes this way: the saved are all in the church; we are that church; so, if one doesn’t belong to the Church of Christ he is not saved.

In any case, other readers have reacted to the Affirmation as a sectarian manifesto, so even if I misunderstood the force of those paragraphs, I think there was some value in more explicitly saying that the Affirmation isn’t intended that way. I am glad to see that the agreement between us is more extensive than (e.g.) my friend Mike Cope appears to think. (Nobody ever said beneficial brotherly controversy would be easy!)” [This last was in reference to comments on Mike Cope’s blog, archived at <http://www.preachermike.com/2005/05/12/111589762986387502.>]

In fact, Dr. Garrett embraces the substance of the Affirmation when he says that it “rightly urges that we [Churches of Christ] preserve such practices as weekly Communion and baptism by immersion for remission of sins, and we may urge these as reflective of ‘the common faith and practice of the earliest Christians’.” That is precisely what I understand the Affirmation to urge, and I regret any faults in its wording that would lead a reader to think otherwise; by the same token, I would ask Dr. Garrett and other readers who find sectarianism endorsed by the Affirmation to consider whether they have not read this into the statement rather than out of it.

If he endorses its fundamental appeal, to what does Dr. Garrett object? He protests that the signers “make our interpretation and practice tests of fellowship” and so deny salvation to all those who do not share our interpretation of early Christian faith and practice. But the Affirmation does not address the question, “Who is a Christian?” The question it addresses (as I understand it) is what the orientation and practice of Churches of Christ should be as we emerge from a century of relative isolation from other Christian communions and enter into meaningful conversation with them. The signers appeal to Churches of Christ to retain a broadly restorationist frame of reference and specifically to maintain certain characteristic beliefs and practices—the Gospel of God’s grace intended for all, extended through Christ, and experienced in the formation of the church; believers’ baptism by immersion as the initial means of saving grace and our entry into Christian fellowship; weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper as constitutive of the Christian community and as a continuing means of grace; and *a cappella* singing as an element of the church’s worship. The statement pronounces no anathemas on those who conclude or practice differently, nor does it excommunicate anyone; it simply commends the convictions expressed to the conscience of other Christians.

The crucial line that Dr. Garrett quotes to show the statement's sectarian bent—"God does not save individuals apart from the body of Christ"—only does so if "body of Christ" means what it did in (say) Leroy Brownlow's *Why I Am a Member of the Church of Christ*. In the context of the Affirmation, which summarizes Paul's teaching on the significance of baptism, the term naturally refers instead to the risen body of Christ, the last Adam, of which we are made members by God's saving grace. That is, the background to the Affirmation's statements about the body of Christ is supplied by the New Testament's teaching that "by one Spirit we all were baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13); that "we, though many, are one body in Christ" (Rom 12:5); that in his death and resurrection Christ embraced all people (Jew and Gentile) and "created one new person in him" (Eph 2:15), "the [universal] church, which is [Christ's] body" (Eph 1:22–23). Indeed, the word "church" finds its logically primary sense in a passage like Heb 12:23; the first full gathering of God's universal church will be the "the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven," and all meetings of the church before that time are only partial and hopeful anticipations of that eschatological congregation. Paul and Hebrews treat the earthly church as the proleptic gathering of all those whom God will ultimately redeem from human history, and they present baptism as the normative way in which God admits people to this gathering; if Paul and Hebrews aren't sectarian in this, it is difficult to see how the Affirmation is. Dr. Garrett's suggestion that "Jesus is Lord" is the sum total of apostolic proclamation and a sufficient basis for Christian communion today needs some qualification. "Jesus [Christ] is Lord" is one very early summary of the Gospel (Rom 10:9–10; 2 Cor 4:5; 1 Cor 12:3; Col 2:6), but in the Pauline letters alone, the basic claims of the gospel which converts accept upon entering the Christian community are said also to include the following:

- 1) the one true and living God, whom we must forsake idols to serve and whose risen Son we await to deliver us from God's coming wrath (1 Thess 1:9–10);
- 2) Jesus' birth as David's heir to the title Messiah and his resurrection as the Son of God in fulfillment of Old Testament promise (Rom 1:3–5; cf. 2 Cor 1:19–20);
- 3) the Messiah's death for our sins, burial, resurrection on the third day, and appearances to disciples, whom he commissioned as his apostles (1 Cor 15:1–11; cf. 1 Thess 4:14; Rom 8:34);
- 4) baptism in Christ's name into his one crucified and resurrected body as the means by which God initially bestows his saving grace (Rom. 6:3–4, 1 Cor 1:13, Gal 3:27–28);
- 5) fellowship at Christ's table as an ongoing communion in the life of his resurrected body and a continuing proclamation of the risen Lord's death (1 Cor 11:23–26; 10:16–17);
- 6) the obligation of baptized persons to shun the various vices they once practiced and to be led by the Spirit in the virtues of Christ (1 Cor 6:9–11; Gal 5:16–25; Eph 4:20–24; Col 2:6–7; 1 Thess 4:1–2) so as to be kept blameless for the day of the Lord (1 Cor 1:8; 1 Thess 3:12–13).

None of these passages presents new instruction offered for the first time in Paul's letters; they rather remind Christians of the basics of the Gospel as they had previously learned and embraced it. All of this teaching can be understood as unpacking what's involved in the confession "Jesus Christ is Lord," but it also shows that that bare formula wasn't sufficient to constitute and sustain the church in its first generation. Indeed, within the pages of the New Testament the confession, "Jesus is Lord," is itself more precisely defined to guard against misunderstanding that arose a generation after Paul's time. In 1 John 4:2–3 and 2 John 7, John explains that true confession of Jesus includes his appearance in the flesh, and he maintains that any other interpretation of the term "Jesus" (e.g., as a being who appeared to be human but didn't have a body subject to physical death) is a spiritually

fatal misunderstanding of the faith. If we were to insist on nothing beyond “Jesus is Lord” as the entire basis for Christian communion, we would find ourselves obliged to embrace the Docetist heresy should it reappear in modern dress.

I have no quarrel with the definition of a Christian that Dr. Garrett quotes from Alexander Campbell: “one who believes that Jesus is the Christ, repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his understanding.” This definition would include the Society of Friends, which offers an interesting test case for the question of fellowship that Dr. Garrett presses. Friends (Quakers) confess Jesus as Lord but reject all outward forms of worship, including baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and congregational singing. They are noteworthy for their simplicity, egalitarianism, rejection of violence, and willingness to suffer for the sake of justice. Will there be any Quakers in God’s eschatological assembly? It is not ours to “judge the servant of another” (Rom 14:4), but it would be surprising indeed if the God who declares “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” should deny so graced a life as John Woolman’s an abode among the saints because of a misunderstanding of baptism and the supper.<sup>2</sup> It is regrettable that Woolman and other Quakers have denied themselves the visible means of grace and neglected to proclaim the death of the risen Lord at his table; but then, we who have benefited from baptism and the table yet have done so much less than Woolman to oppose injustice have more reason for regret.

Thankfully, we may be content to leave final judgment (our own and others’) in the hands of our gracious God, but in the meantime Christians who

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<sup>2</sup>See David Sox, *John Woolman: Quintessential Quaker, 1720-1772* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press ; York, England: Sessions Book Trust, 1999).

baptize and celebrate the supper and who think it important to do so must decide how we will relate to any Quakers that cross our path. Dr. Garrett counsels “unity in diversity” and criticizes our statement for failing to pursue this aim, but what would this formula mean when applied to Quakers? Should Churches of Christ receive Quakers as members without requesting that they receive baptism, or seek to hold joint services with them, or abandon our forms of worship for their services of silent waiting on God? Should we not rather recognize that while we both claim Jesus as Lord, our understanding of how best to honor God in public worship differs so much from the Quakers’ that the integrity of our discipleship (and of theirs) is best preserved by meeting apart, by praying for one another, by discussing what we share and where we differ as opportunity presents itself, and by co-operating in such good works as we feel we can? (I would suppose this means, for example, yes to joint benevolence but no to common mission.) Should we not trust God to lead us to unity in the life of his Son, when we stand before his throne if not sooner, rather than insisting on visible unity now in ways that violate our own limited understanding of the obligations of discipleship, and the limited understanding of Quaker disciples as well?

There are, of course, far fewer Quakers than evangelicals or Catholics, and only a few Churches of Christ in a handful of states face the practical question of how to relate to them, but the same issues are involved when churches decide whether and how to relate to any other communion, whether Baptist or Presbyterian or Orthodox. The Affirmation does not specifically address that question but deals with a more elementary one. Every congregation of God’s people, no matter how open and irenic, must decide what beliefs it will regard as central and what practices it will regularly observe. The Restoration tradition encourages us to look to the churches that the apostles established as our primary models for the life of the church today, and

the Affirmation reaffirms this orientation with specific reference to a few contested beliefs and practices. It is my conviction that Churches of Christ can best engage other Christian churches (and the unchurched as well) by embodying the Restorationist way of being Christian to the best of our ability rather than abandoning it at the first sign that not everyone agrees.

Like some other readers, Dr. Garrett is especially critical of our affirmation of *a cappella* singing as an element of the church's worship worthy of cultivating and preserving, but his sketch of the present situation is incomplete. While it is true, as he writes, that some churches are resolving that music should not be made a test of fellowship, he fails to note that some churches are also making the decision to abandon the *a cappella* practice. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that within the next decade every urban and suburban Church of Christ will face a decision whether to continue worshipping *a cappella* or adopt instruments. If one applauds current efforts to recognize that, as Jeff Walling put it at Pepperdine University recently, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are brothers and sisters in Christ who worship differently, but one also thinks that singing *a cappella* is a more appropriate way for the church to honor God and edify one another, then it's not clear what one would say to commend the practice except just what the Affirmation says. It's unclear how a person of such convictions could satisfy Dr. Garrett's concern except by keeping silent about the music of the church altogether.

We might usefully compare *a cappella* singing as treated in the Affirmation with the practice of reading scripture in public worship. No New Testament passage definitely requires scripture reading in church, but 1 Tim 4:13 encourages it, and Christian churches have practiced it since at least the second century; today several Protestant denominations as well as the Roman Catholic Church prescribe four different Scripture passages to be read every

Sunday, following this ancient practice.<sup>3</sup> If one of our congregations adopts an explicit policy of reading Scripture in every worship service (or even of following a lectionary, as some now do), would we say that by that act they have condemned churches that have not adopted this practice? If a ministry staff or eldership becomes convinced that the lectionary is the best way to edify the church and advocates its use at regional gatherings and lectureships, would we think of charging them with fostering a sectarian spirit? If not, it seems unjustified to charge the signers of the Affirmation with sectarianism for commending a longstanding practice that is not explicitly required by any New Testament passage but is encouraged in several (e.g., Eph 5:19; Col 3:16) and remained for centuries the practice of the ancient church.

Dr. Garrett criticizes such an approach to evaluating our faith and practice as “preserving the illusion of Restorationism that has been an albatross about our necks in Churches of Christ all these years.” Like some other readers, he seems to find the “Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery” a more adequate charter for our movement than Thomas Campbell’s “Declaration and Address.” The irony, noted in the Affirmation, is that this surrender comes just as leaders in many other churches have begun to take an approach to seeking increased unity that has much in common with Restorationism. In recent years, Lutherans and Roman Catholics have come to agreement on justification by faith through common study of scripture;<sup>4</sup> a number of communions have found common ground on baptism, eucharist,

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<sup>3</sup>See *The Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), available online at <http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary>.

<sup>4</sup>See the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* by The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). 2000 (online at <http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/>).

and ministry (including recognition that “baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament documents” and that the Lord’s Supper “should take place at least every Sunday”)<sup>5</sup>; evangelicals and Catholics have begun a substantive unofficial dialogue on issues including soteriology, scripture, fellowship, and sanctification<sup>6</sup>; and Thomas Oden has discerned a new, popular ecumenism taking its bearings from the New Testament and ancient teaching and practice.<sup>7</sup> It is a new day for conversation between different churches, and viewed within this context, Dr. Garrett’s concerns about communion cups and Sunday schools may seem a bit parochial.

Churches of the Restoration tradition have much to learn from conversation with evangelical Christians and with others, but our heritage also gives us valuable insights to contribute to that discussion. I signed the Affirmation because I understand it as an appeal not to throw out the Restorationist baby along with the legalist/sectarian bathwater when our re-engagement with other Christian traditions has scarcely begun. Leroy Garrett’s opposition to sectarianism and his determination not to introduce

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<sup>5</sup>See the “Lima Report” of the World Council of Churches, published as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva : World Council of Churches, 1982), as well as the useful evangelical response by David F. Wright, *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry (The “Lima Report”): An Evangelical Assessment* (Edinburgh : Rutherford House, 1984).

<sup>6</sup>See the statements “Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium,” *First Things* 43 (May 1994): 15-22; “The Gift of Salvation,” *First Things* 79 (January 1998): 20-23; “Your Word Is Truth,” *First Things* 125 (August/September 2002): 38-42; “The Communion of Saints,” *First Things* 131 (March 2003): 26-33; and “The Call to Holiness,” *First Things* 151 (March 2005): 23–26. All of these are available online at [www.firstthings.com](http://www.firstthings.com).

<sup>7</sup>See Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), and also my review in *The Christian Chronicle* 61/8 (August 2004): 32 (online at [www.austingrad.edu/peterson.html](http://www.austingrad.edu/peterson.html)).

unnecessary impediments to fellowship with other Christians are exemplary, but I respectfully suggest that he has not yet heard what the Affirmation commends to Churches of Christ. I look forward to the prospect of further conversation with him and other reflective readers.

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## *Contributors*

Everett Ferguson is Professor Emeritus of Church History at Abilene Christian University

Leroy Garrett is retired editor of *The Restoration Review*

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Jeffrey Peterson is Jack and Ruth Wright Associate Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

J. J. M. Roberts is William Henry Green Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary and Adjunct Professor of Old Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Michael R. Weed is Billy Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics at Austin Graduate School of Theology