



# ONE KINGDOM

Essays in Honor of Christian Unity

ESSAYS IN HONOR OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

Common Grounds Unity

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Essays in Honor of Christian Unity

Volume 1,

Sample of Selected Essays

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*How blessed are those who make peace! For they will be called sons of God. — Matt. 5:9, Complete Jewish Bible*

*The glory which you have given to me, I have given to them; so that they may be one, just as we are one — I united with them and you with me, so that they may be completely one, and the world thus realize that you sent me, and that you have loved them just as you have loved me. — Jn. 17:22-23 Complete Jewish Bible*

*How wonderful it is, how pleasant, when brothers live in harmony! For harmony is as precious as the fragrant anointing oil that was poured over Aaron's head and ran down onto his beard and onto the border of his robe. Harmony is as refreshing as the dew on Mount Hermon, on the mountains of Israel. And God has pronounced this eternal blessing on Jerusalem, even life forevermore. — Psalm 133, The Living Bible*

~

*The scriptures will never keep together in union, and fellowship members who have not the spirit of the scriptures, which spirit is love, peace, unity, forbearance, and cheerful obedience. This is the spirit of the great Head of the body. I blush for my fellows, who hold up the Bible as the bond of union yet make their opinions of it tests of fellowship; who plead for union of all-Christians; yet refuse fellowship with such as dissent from their notions. — Barton W. Stone*

*I shall make nothing a test of fellowship which God has not made a condition of salvation. I shall be a brother to all who have been begotten by my Father. Brotherhood based on Fatherhood, fraternity based on paternity, this shall be my standard because it is scriptural. — Carl W. Ketcherside*

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# INTRODUCTION

From beginning to end, Scripture tells the story of God’s relentless effort to bring all people together into an intimate community of love. This is why he created the cosmos, why he created us in his image, why he worked through the patriarchs and the Hebrew people. It is why Jesus took on flesh and pitched his tent in our midst. It is the center of Jesus’s ministry and passion. It is the purpose of the church and the eschatological hope that draws us onward. At Common Grounds Unity, we have been richly blessed by the generous participation of writers who are living testimonies to God’s ministry of reconciliation. This book is a compilation of essays that have been previously published through our monthly newsletter. Each contribution is a gift that we would like you to receive. You won’t agree with everything contained in these essays—which is a good thing! Take advantage of such disagreements as opportunities to practice humility, curiosity, and a generosity of spirit that strives to see the best in others.

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# Homecoming of the Heart

*Drew Baker*

The unfortunate consensus in the US demands that our leaders come across as having all the answers. Whether it's politicians or preachers, we expect them to have perfect wisdom even if we know it's an impossible ask. I can't imagine a politician getting elected on a platform of humility and a willingness to learn even from political opponents. When it comes to preaching, we tend to expect more answers than questions from our pulpits. "Give us this day our daily truth, lead us not into contemplation, and deliver us from mystery."

In such a culture, is it any surprise that division is so ubiquitous? When opinions must be presented as certainties, there is no room for healthy dialogue. When I must prove my competence by making others appear incompetent, I preclude the possibility of unity. When pride prevails, division is inevitable.

Perhaps this is why Jesus insists that his followers must be people of humility. This teaching is particularly prevalent in the second half of Mark. Throughout the first half of Mark, discipleship

appears to be a pathway to power and glory. But after breaking the news that he is leading them to the cross (Mark 8:31), Jesus leads them through an intensive course on humility. The course includes lectures, object lessons, and the ultimate demonstration of humility. Topics include denying self (8:34-35), the last being first (9:35; 10:31), welcoming children (9:37; 10:14), receiving the Kingdom as children (10:15), and greatness taking the form of servanthood (10:42-44).

All these lessons take place as Jesus is drawing nearer to the cross, culminating in the words, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). Mark’s Gospel implies that Jesus utters these words near the Jordan, perhaps in view of the very place he was baptized--nearly the lowest place on the face of the Earth. Even the geography of the narrative seems to be assisting in the lesson of humility. Jesus makes it quite clear, his followers must be people of humility.

When early Restorationists call for a return to the New Testament for the sake of unity, true unity proves elusive. We catch glimpses of it when Barton Stone affirms the activity of the Holy Spirit at Cane Ridge--recognizing a unity that transcends his intellect. We see

it when Alexander Campbell acknowledges, “It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves,” thus conceding a Spiritual unity not dependent upon doctrinal perfection. Unfortunately, these whispers of unity are difficult to hear over the roaring demands for intellectual and liturgical conformity. The water in every stream of the Restoration Movement is murky because of the mud slinging and all-out battles that have taken place up-river. And even now, we muddy the waters for those below.

What we need is not just a return to the New Testament, but a return to Jesus. Not a doctrinal return, but a homecoming of the heart. We need to remember that we are students of the Rabbi. We need to observe his ways and follow. Instead of jockeying for doctrinal dominance, we must seek to serve. We should view every human as a potential teacher—whether she be an uneducated child or an esteemed scholar. We need to sit at the feet of Jesus to hear him lovingly rebuke us again:

*“You’ve observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, and when people get a little power how quickly it goes to their heads. It’s not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first*

*among you must be your slave” (Mark 10:42-45, MSG).*

The Restoration Movement has much to offer the broader Christian community and to the world. But until we learn to sit and eat at the same table with our own family, I’m afraid the Restoration plea will go largely unnoticed. When we come to the Lord’s table, take the bread, take the cup, and don’t forget the humble pie. We can’t be a family without it.

# Standing at the Crossroads

*John Teal*

One Sunday in the 1980s, serving as a campus minister, I found myself standing at the crossroads in front of our church building. I was debating whether to walk into the worship service or turn around and leave. The singing had started and the doors were closed. Tragically, these were not the only closed doors. My heart had been closing for some time and I was largely blind to it along the way. I had not guarded my heart well (Prov. 4:23). I thought I was building on the rock, but clearly, the opposite was true (Matt 7:24-27).

I was a young ambitious dreamer running on my strength and not God's. Now, I was a weary youth ready to stumble (Isa. 40:30-31). I was trying to live up to what I perceived others wanted and in the process, I was not honest with myself or others. I ignored my fears, doubts, struggles, and even my questions about God and His word. Moreover, I struggled with pride, legalism, and a sectarian spirit. The perfect storm had come and now I was facing reality.

There I was, standing in the street, wrestling with whether I should walk in or pack up my truck and head home to Michigan. Then I thought about the extremely

heavy, antique, solid maple dresser my grandmother had given me. Living in a second-floor apartment, I knew I could not carry it down the narrow stairwell by myself, and I could not leave it behind. And so, I decided to walk into church – this began the long road of reconstructing my faith. That dresser served as an anchor for my soul. Not the dresser itself, but rather, the relationship with my grandmother – It was a relational and historical mooring that I will never forget.

Some within the Stone Campbell Movement (SCM) are dangerously untethered to the better angels of our heritage – voices of reason, unity, biblical wisdom, hope, vision, and experience. Are these not voices that we should know well and listen to?

In the USA individualism is deeply embedded into our DNA. We tend to strike out on our own and cut new paths. But, in so doing we can lose the value of community, experience, and heritage. We are left alone to struggle and repeat the mistakes of our ancestors. The other option is to listen to those who have gone before us. To learn from their journey, mistakes, struggles, and victories.

The written word has allowed me to sit at the feet of courageous men of faith - Barton W. Stone, Alexander Campbell, Leroy Garrett, Carl Ketcherside, James DeForest Murch, James North, Rick Atchley,

Bob Russell, Ben Brewster, Douglas A. Foster, and more. I have gained tutoring for my life and grown in my faith. These have sought, or are seeking, to bring Christians together in unity rather than divide them into “us and them.” In my view, this is a sustainable way forward for our heritage. Below are three voices who have helped me anchor my soul and live better for our Lord.

*The Scriptures will never keep together in union and fellowship and members not in the spirit of the scriptures, which spirit is love, peace, unity, forbearance, and cheerful obedience. This is the spirit of the great Head of the body. I blush for my fellows, who hold up the Bible as the bond of union yet make their opinions of it tests of fellowship with such as dissent from their notions.* **Barton W. Stone**

*It should impress us profoundly that our Lord, even in his last hours, should pray for the oneness of his disciples. That alone should make divisions among Christians intolerable. And should it not also lead us to pray for the unity of all God’s peoples, including in our assemblies?”... “Christian unity and evangelism are interrelated. Jesus made this strikingly clear in his prayer for unity, even implying that a*

*divided church cannot effectively evangelize.  
The church is to be one so the world can be  
won. Leroy Garrett*

*I shall make nothing a test of fellowship which  
God has not made a condition of salvation. I  
shall be a brother to all who have been begotten  
by my Father. Brotherhood based upon  
Fatherhood, fraternity based upon paternity, this  
shall be my standard because it is scriptural. I  
have no half-brothers or step-brothers in the  
Lord. I accept you where you are and as you are.  
If you are good enough to be his son or daughter  
you are not too bad to be my brother or sister. If  
a man is good enough for God to receive he is  
not too bad for me to accept. The unity of the  
Spirit is one of community, not conformity; of  
diversity, not uniformity. Carl Ketcherside*

# Reflection on the Restoration

*Andy Fleming*

In 1973, one of the leading scholars of the Restoration Movement summed up the restoration plea as three noble goals: 1) the ideal to be the New Testament church; 2) to practice undenominational unity; 3) to restore man to the image of God—restoration itself being a process and not the goal.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, at the moment when these words were published, I was 15 years old and completely unaware of such a sophisticated view. Instead, through consistent exposure to public preaching and Bible classes within the Churches of Christ I held a much narrower understanding that I believe would have been common to many of my generation: 1) I was part of the fully-restored New Testament church; 2) uniformity was expected more than diversity, and; 3) as a Christian, my mission and my purpose were essentially the same things (i.e., I had confused ‘what I could do for God’ with ‘who I could become by God’s grace’). Despite this lack of insight and understanding, I received a lot of support from various mentors as well as an affirmation

from the church community - that I was on the right track.

Ferguson's points of analysis are noble goals and central to the Restoration plea - that cannot be disputed. On the other hand, I cannot help but feel that my affirmation puts me in the position of the teacher of the law who answered Jesus correctly (Luke 10) and then was challenged to "do this and you will live." Putting these principles into practice is very difficult when many members of our churches already assume that these principles have already been fully realized.

Considering the second goal (practicing undenominational unity), it seems that every time the church divides it solidifies a sense that they have more perfectly achieved the goal, and are now, in fact, defending its purity. I am in no way speaking against the exercise of church discipline here, but instead, encouraging us not to allow non-essential issues (and possibly even traditional interpretations) to become central and dogmatic in our thinking.

I very much agree with Ferguson that, "Failure to achieve this unity has been one of the principal criticisms of the Restoration Movement ... [but] failure to implement an ideal does not invalidate that ideal" (p.41). Of course, one of the greatest obstacles to fulfilling goal #2 is how we view goal #1. The more

narrowly we define #1, the more difficult #2 becomes. And yet, if #1 is not properly defined, how will the church remain true to its calling and separate from the world? This is a very difficult dilemma and I believe the answer lies in seeing the working of God outside of our definitions. We must not confuse the assurance of the gospel and the God-ordained response of faith to it (i.e., repentance and baptism), with God's ultimate prerogative to judge and to show mercy as he wills.

The heart of the gospel is God's love, and it is only when that love is at the center of our focus, that right doctrine leads to right action. Righteousness cannot be earned by human effort, but is instead, the gift of God to those who respond to the divine initiative with love and faith.

<sup>1</sup> Everett Ferguson, "The Validity of the Restoration Principle," *Mission*, no. 7, August (1973): 37-42.

# Our Polar Star

*Steve Kinnard*

A Polar Star is a star that is used to find an alignment for direction. For example, if you know where the North Star is, then you can align the directions south, east, and west based on the North Star. A Polar Star is also used as an image for finding alignment in life.

So, what is your polar star?

Since this article is written to members of the Stone-Campbell movement, I'll ask, "What is the Polar Star for the Stone-Campbell movement?"

My religious heritage is the Church of Christ of the Stone-Campbell movement. More specifically, my heritage is the Church of Christ of Middle Tennessee. I decided early in my life (at age fourteen) that I wanted to preach. When it came time to choose a college, I decided to go to Freed-Hardeman College in Henderson, Tennessee. My preacher recommended Freed-Hardeman because of its strong Bible Department.

I enjoyed my time at Freed-Hardeman. I studied

Greek and Hebrew. I took a variety of literature courses. My greatest blessing was that I met my wife there.

I want to share one incident that happened while I was in school that speaks to the mindset of some of the Church of Christ ministers in Tennessee in the late 1970s. It speaks to what was their Polar Star.

One semester a professor from Abilene Christian University was invited to share a series of lectures on his specialty—the transmission of the Bible text. The lectures were held in the Henderson Church of Christ just off campus. The professor gave his lectures and fielded questions.

During the time of question and response, an editor from one of the Church of Christ publications asked the professor about which translation of the Bible he used. It was policy at Freed-Hardeman College that students must memorize scripture from either the King James Version of 1611 or the American Standard Version of 1901. The professor answered that he used the Revised Standard Version.

The editor became visibly angry. He raised his voice and labeled the professor as liberal. He stated in emphatic terms that the professor ought to have never been invited to speak at Freed-Hardeman College (even though the editor had no official

standing with the college). It was an intense scene. The scene has stuck with me for over forty years. The editor demonstrated to all of us his Polar Star.

I'll never forget what happened next. The professor answered his accuser by gently saying, "Brother \_\_\_\_\_, I appreciate your work and I hope you appreciate some of my work. I'm not here to argue. I'm here to share about how we got the Bible. I believe our commonalities outweigh our differences." The professor looked for common ground with his accuser. He was gracious. He was loving. He turned the other cheek. He invited discussion and dialogue. He wasn't looking to win an argument. He showed us his Polar Star by his response.

Unfortunately, too often in the Stone-Campbell Movement, we have defined each other based more on our differences than our commonalities. What version of the Bible do you use? Do you worship with or without instruments? Do you believe in cooperation between congregations or the autonomy of congregations? In what capacity do women use their gifts in your church? Do you practice discipling? Do you baptize by immersion for the forgiveness of sins? Do you believe the Bible is the inerrant Word of God? How does the Holy Spirit work today? I could go on and on and on.

The professor who responded to his accuser with grace was looking for commonality. What brings us together as a people of God? What unique strengths do the various branches of the Stone-Campbell movement offer to the health and vitality of the whole of the church?

Recently, I've been interested in exploring the commonalities of the branches of the Stone-Campbell movement. I was asked to be the editor of a new scholarly journal entitled Teleios. It is a journal of Christian holistic spirituality. It seeks to bring people together.

One of my first jobs as editor was to pull together an editorial board. I looked for scholars from across the Stone-Campbell movement to be on that board. I believe that the commonalities of the branches of the Stone-Campbell movement will enable us to work together to produce a journal that will encourage all God's people.

I grew up in the Church of Christ. I'm grateful to the Church of Christ because it prompted me to pursue scholarship. I'm an adjunct with Lincoln Christian University which is part of the Christian Church (Independent). I have learned lessons from the Christian Church (Independent) about cooperation and church building. I'm building relationships with people

in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I'm grateful for the work that Disciples have been doing in the field of social justice. The Disciples call me higher in this area. I'm currently part of the International Church of Christ. I'm grateful for the evangelistic zeal of the ICOC.

Each branch of the Stone-Campbell movement has qualities that are distinctive from the others. Also, each branch of the Stone-Campbell movement has qualities that are common to one another. I want to focus on the commonalities. This creates dialogue. This allows us to learn from each other.

Years ago, I visited the Disciples of Christ National Historical Society in Nashville, Tennessee. I saw the statue of Barton W. Stone. On the statue is inscribed one of his most-quoted sayings, "Let the unity of Christians be our Polar Star. Let every Christian begin the work of union in himself." How about it?

Can we let the unity of Christians be our Polar Star?

# When Unity Begins with Me: How Scripture, the Spirit, and My Sisters Changed My Posture

*Jeanie Shaw*

Jesus' longest recorded prayer centers on one longing: "that they may all be one... so that the world may believe" (John 17:21, NRSV). For years, I believed I honored that prayer by being the most committed, most obedient, most doctrinally precise disciple I could be. I didn't realize that my desire to be the "discipliest disciple" had quietly shaped me into a person who valued certainty over relationship, judgment over compassion, and being right over being present.

My sisters became my mirrors helping me see what unity can be. They were not the obstacle to unity. I was.

More specifically, my posture was.

I grew up reading the Bible too often as a rulebook, a blueprint that promised clarity and safety if I

interpreted it correctly. Like many from my Restoration heritage, I was taught that unity came from agreement — agreement produced by correct interpretation. Without realizing it, that belief formed a judgmental lens. I believed I was being faithful, when in reality I was often being rigid, narrow, and inwardly critical of perspectives that differed from my own.

My three sisters, now ages 75 to 81, have always loved me deeply, and I have loved them. We have shared decades of memories, laughter, and loyalty. But for much of my life, I listened through the filter of my certainty. I couldn't fully see them or hear them, or others, really, because my internal script was often analyzing, measuring, and silently assessing. Not maliciously, but habitually. I thought I was defending truth. I thought I was being spiritually responsible. I thought unity depended on "getting it right."

What changed me wasn't an argument won or lost; it was the way I learned to read Scripture.

Over time, through study, prayer, grief, life experience, and the gentle work of the Spirit, I began to see the Bible not as a set of rules but as a revelation of the heart of God. I began to understand that Jesus was not calling us to uniformity, but to relational love rooted in the very life of the Trinity. I began to see that the glory Jesus speaks of in John 17, His glory He has given to us, is the glory of humility, self-giving love, and

making room for the other, not the glory of being doctrinally precise.

This shift in hermeneutic reshaped my soul.  
It softened me.  
It unsettled my certainty.  
It humbled me in ways I didn't know I needed.  
It taught me that Scripture is not a weapon for judgment, but a window into mercy.

And in that softened place, I noticed my sisters and others differently.

Our weekly Zoom calls didn't change — I did.

With that change I could now practice listening without filtering, loving without evaluating, and receiving without suspicion. Unity wasn't something they needed to "do better." Unity was something I needed to allow the Spirit to form in me.

Even though my sisters and I shared the same Restoration heritage and convictions, I realized that unity is not guaranteed by perfect agreement. Unity is formed in the heart.

At 71, I realized something freeing and beautiful:  
it is never too late to grow in unity.  
Never too late to repent of judgmental habits.

Never too late to release certainty when it blocks compassion.

Never too late to be shaped into the likeness of Jesus.

My sisters became mirrors reflecting the truth Jesus prayed: that unity is not built on agreement but on love — love that stays, listens, honors, and holds space for difference. Their presence revealed how much transformation was still needed in me, and how gracious God is to keep forming us well into our later decades.

Unity begins when we let Scripture reveal God’s heart rather than reinforce our own certainty.

Unity begins when we choose mercy over judgment.

Unity begins when we admit that sometimes we are the barrier God is gently trying to move.

The world will not believe because we are the most correct.

The world will believe because we are the most loving.

If someone like me, long shaped by certainty, fear of being wrong, and “getting it right” can be softened into a posture of unity by the Spirit of God... then unity is possible for all of us.

And if four strong-willed sisters in their seventies and eighties can find deeper unity through humility, listening, and love, then the church, with God's help, can too.

# Conflict That Creates Connection— Is it Possible

*Jennifer Konzen*

Conflict can cause division. But conflict can also be a door that opens to deeper connection. When you think of your relationships (with co-workers, friends, family, neighbors, folks at church, spouse), how do you experience conflict with people? Some say they have constant, low-grade conflict that destroys relationships and leads to disconnection. For others, if conflict is aggressive, they experience multiple levels of damage. There are others who say they have very little conflict in relationships. However, if this is due to avoidance, avoidance of conflict can also create distance and a lack of closeness.

Let's focus on a few skills crucial for healthy conflict resolution: seeking understanding, getting rid of the pointing finger, striving for empathy, and taking timeouts.

## **Seeking Understanding**

“Though it cost all you have, get understanding” (Prov 4:7). We often confuse being understanding and

validating someone's view with being a doormat. Having clear boundaries is important in any relationship. An important caveat for this lesson: If conflict is making things unsafe for you, get support. It is also healthy in any relationship to know when to say "yes" and "no" (Matthew 5:37) and how to speak the truth (Ephesians 4:15). The scriptures advise, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself" (Proverbs 26:4) and "Rebuke your neighbor frankly" (Leviticus 19:17). When someone speaks in a way contrary to the Scriptures, God says to deal with this kind of opposition with the firmness and frankness. No doormats here.

So how about when someone comes to you bothered, hurt, or angry about something you have done? The Bible calls us to be humble and take correction (Proverbs 12:1). Proverbs 4:7 says it is expensive to understand someone. You may need to set your own self aside and consider the other person as better than yourself: "In humility, consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4).

When you strive to understand, to truly hear someone when they come to you, put yourself aside to hear them. When someone speaks to us, our minds begin racing:

**Defend:** “Excuse me!! You’re the one who . . .”

**Explain:** “That’s not what happened” or “I didn’t mean...”

**Fix it:** “OK, so how do you want me to say it?”

Apologize or reassure: “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean . . .”

These responses are normal but can get in the way. Your own hurt may also come up. It may be tempting to spend most of your time preparing your response while they are speaking. What do you do with all those thoughts whirling around? Do not ignore them or push them under the carpet. In fact, give those thoughts some room and honor them. Instead of blurting them out or shoving them down, I recommend putting them on a virtual shelf—one right in front of you. Set them up there for safekeeping. When you’re done focusing on the other person, coming to an understanding of what they are feeling, you are ready to look back on that shelf and see what is still up there to talk about.

### **Getting Rid of the Pointing Finger**

*“If you do away with the pointing finger... and spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become*

*like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.” —Isaiah 58:9-11*

A huge barrier in resolving conflict is the pointing finger. The pointing finger is the “yeah, but you” in a conflict. It is the blaming, the accusing, the attacking, and the assuming that permeates arguments. God says to get rid of it. Why? Because of the beautiful benefits God promises. Your light will shine. “You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail” (Isaiah 58:11). He will guide you and satisfy your needs. You will be able to walk on a well-lit path. When you decide to stop spending your energy on finger-pointing, you will be more equipped to spend yourself on behalf of the hungry. And God will meet your needs as well.

### **Striving for Empathy**

The goal of each of the skills above is empathy. Empathy is the glue that makes relationships satisfying. Look at the example God sets. “In all their distress, He too was distressed” (Isaiah 63:9). God is a God of compassion (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). He calls us to have compassion and empathy for others (Romans

12:5). That can be hard when the person who wants our empathy is upset with us! Yet this is God's heart and his call to each of us. "He is kind to the wicked and the ungrateful" (Luke 6:35). Imitate Him.

Jesus is the ultimate example of genuine empathy. Read Luke 7:12-15. Jesus sees a funeral go by. The dead man is the son of a widow. When Jesus saw her, "His heart went out to her" (v.13).

*Splagchnizomai* in Greek means movement in the gut. Jesus guts, his heart, went out to her. So how do we get there? In the research on empathy, looking at things through someone else's eyes is called perspective-taking. Perspective-taking undergirds the ability to have empathy and resolve conflict. In order to have empathy, we do have to identify, understand, and feel our own emotions (another lesson) which gives a greater ability to step into someone else's shoes.

### **Taking Timeouts**

But what do you do right in the middle of the conflict when understanding and empathy are the furthest things from your mind and pointing finger is not backing down? When conflict gets heated, emotions and defenses can seem to take over our bodies? When someone approaches you in a conflictual way, your heart rate, perspiration, and

respiration may increase. This is the body's way of reacting to perceived danger, the fight/flight/freeze response. It becomes difficult to resolve conflict when our senses are heightened or shut down. If you notice a spike in your heart, breathing, or respiration rate, a tightening in your chest or your forehead, or a pit in your stomach sensation, press the pause button. Take low, deep breaths, one of the first practical skills to work on during conflict. Then, take time to get to a better place by breathing, praying, walking, writing, or talking. The goal is to get to a good place so you can listen to understand (Proverbs 4:7) or speak the truth with love (Ephesians 4:15). When you get to that place, come back together to talk.

# An Often Overlooked Principle for Unity

*James Estep*

Consider all the calls for unity we hear today. Everyone deploring the current state of political discord and division, leaders talking past one another, looking for the sound-bite, wanting to land a verbal punch, viewing one another as enemies, combatants; missing opportunities for dialog, finding mutual ventures, communicating with one another, and attending to the national interest rather than partisan pursuits. Unfortunately, we not only see this in our politicians, but from within the church itself.

Denominations seek unity with one another, all abhorring the divisiveness within the church, while extolling the value of unity of God's people. But how? On what basis? Calling for it is easy; making it happen is another matter entirely. Some say, "Of course we want unity! We will unite with anyone, as long as they agree with our statement of faith . . . all 38 items on it." Others say, "Naturally we want unity! We will join with anyone, if they are willing to wear our label." Not to

mention that it's hard to facilitate unity while leveling veiled insults and satirical commentary, casting one another in the most critical light.

Is this what the Restoration Movement means by "unity"? Fellowship based on unanimous agreement with one another on every point? Accord by identifying with the same brand? Isn't this what political parties, unions, and merely human organizations tout as unity? Are we any better than this? Is this the path forward for the Restoration Movement?

While commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, the text begins with, "He opened his mouth and taught them, saying..." (Matt. 5:2 ESV). In the middle of his lesson, Jesus introduces a new topic: Love.

*You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, LOVE your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles*

*do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48 ESV)*

Just a few observations: First, Jesus is not critiquing the Old Testament, but teaching by the Pharisees about those passages (“you have heard that . . .”, not “it is written”). Second, love that the world understands is simply reciprocal. Receive love, return love; receive hate, return hate. Greet those with whom you already have relations, but no one else. Even tax collectors and brothers do that! Third, we are called to something deeper, a love that is unfamiliar to us. “Love your enemies,” pray for them. This is the kind of love God has for us, blessing the just and the unjust, the good and the evil. Finally, he challenges us to be “perfect,” technically complete, mature (Greek *telios*). Our love should dwarf that of the world. The world’s love should pale in comparison with God’s love. Now, we are challenged to have God’s love for one another.

Ponder this: Do we exhibit this love toward one another? Do we exhibit only a reciprocal love or a Godly love? Is love restricted to only those we already recognize?

One of our credos that has been consistently articulated in our movement has been: “In essentials, unity; in opinion, liberty; but in all things, love.”

Perhaps we have focused on the first two phrases to the virtual exclusion of the third. We can concern ourselves with identifying what is essential and what is opinion; thinking that alone would ensure a unified movement to restore the first-century church in the twenty-first century. However, without an all-encompassing love, “in all things,” are we not committed merely to a political partisanship, divisive rancor, polarization, and division?

It may sound too simple: love. But consider this: in any relationship, whether it’s between individuals or institutions, if there is not an a priori commitment to love as the basis of the relationship...we are all too familiar with the result, or lack thereof. We are the Restoration Movement. We don’t do “church” like everyone else or like the world dictates. We do it the way God calls us to do: by exhibiting love to all, whether we agree or disagree, whether it is an essential or opinion, whether they are familiar or strangers to us. Love is the thread that binds the tapestry of our movement; not creed, label, geography, politics, or structures. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35 ESV).

# The Bones are Good

*Marty Solomon*

I love the idea of unity. I say it that way on purpose; I love the idea. I say it this way because I'm not sure I've ever truly experienced unity in the way that the early Christian movement did. One of the things that I get to do with my students as I lead study tours in Turkey is examine the evidence that we have for who the early Christians were and how they chose to live their lives. I personally believe there is a tremendous amount of evidence to show that their greatest commitment was to a peculiar unity — an inclusive community of belonging that turned the secular “status quo” on its head.

One of the most dominant ideas throughout the letters of the apostle Paul is an exhortation to be unified and to share the same mind together as the Body of Christ. This wasn't a cheap or shallow unity that wasn't willing to dig in deep to nuance or have differing convictions. The Hebraic culture of Paul that provided the bedrock for this burgeoning movement of believers was a culture that was unbelievably educated and used to the idea of differing perspectives and deeply held convictions. But these “children of the Resurrection” believed that a new creation was bursting forth in the midst of this one and this new order was one that saw the need for each individual to be invited into the diverse community of God.

In my opinion, it was this diversity that actually gave the early church an empowered gospel to share with the world. It was not just the words or the abstract truth of the gospel that was so powerful. It was the fact that such a gospel was incarnated in the way that this community treated each other.

We are all different — different levels of wealth, education, social status, pagan history — and Rome seeks to pit these differences against each other. Empire calls us to form tribes and seek to establish power and dominance. But we believe in a shared table. We believe that a giving up of power and influence for others is far more powerful than the seizing of position over others. You aren't educated? Come and share your voice. You are poor? Have some of the excess. You have a history littered with idolatry? Come be washed clean. You are a slave? Come and let yourself be served by a senator.

Here is some bread. Here is some wine. Christ crucified. And a new creation.

This unity, this refusal to seize the opportunity to lord it over others, was one of the most powerful testimonies that God's people have ever had. Kingdom had come and everyone everywhere was invited to be a part of it. And by my estimation, this was the Spirit-empowered movement that caused the most powerful empire the world had ever seen to crumble like Play-Doh left out on the counter.

It was a community that was about Jesus. Only Jesus. Not Jesus and... not Jesus but... not Jesus as long as... just Jesus. And this

community was empowered by “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” (Ephesians 6). A Spirit-empowered community that found its practice centered on the Scriptures and led by the person of Christ Jesus.

Give us Jesus.

Give us the Bible.

And point us towards the Gates of Hell, because they don't stand a chance.

And this is why I love the Stone-Campbell movement. These are the two pillars that this movement seeks to be built upon. Jesus and the Bible. Give me a commitment to Jesus as Lord, and give me a commitment to the inspired Word of God as my guide, and I can worship next to anyone. At least that was the idea in our earliest moments.

I love the Stone-Campbell movement because of its roots and its ideals. I have not fallen in love with her execution of those ideals.

We have often defaulted to the rulebook of first-century Pharisicalism, the efficiency of tribes, and the idolatry of imperial power. But as the popular current country song says, “the house don't fall when the bones are good.”

We probably need to help take part in a serious remodel. There are things hanging on those walls that need to be discarded. We probably need to remove some mold and tear out some drywall. We certainly will need more than just a coat of fresh paint.

But the bones are good.

Did you know that in the earliest iterations of our movement, some of our first leaders had deeply held convictions about baptism? Ok, ok, yeah, you know. But did you know that in those earliest days, when those convictions threatened to splinter the growing movement, it was those founding voices that said, “I need Jesus and I need the Bible. I have convictions about baptism, but the kingdom needs unity. Please stay.”

And in those chapters of history, it was not the Campbellites that left, but the others. It was the Campbellites that begged them to bring their convictions and stay at the table. Here is some bread. Here is some wine.

Can you imagine that kind of a world? It’s compelling. And it would rock the status quo of our world today. You have been on Facebook recently, yes?

I love our movement because the bones are good. Our core convictions are still mixed in the concrete that forms our foundation. My prayer is that we will continue to recapture a more complete expression of new creation for our world today.

Here is some bread.

Here is some wine.

Christ crucified.

And a new creation.

# Would We Know Unity if We Saw it?

*Casey Tygrett*

Just before the snows of Illinois winter began, just a few weeks ago in fact, our neighbors put a substantial addition on the back of their house.

It is important to note here that I'm not a nosy neighbor. The result of having a new puppy in the house is that I make frequent trips to the backyard. I watched as the building process began and as with any construction project I see, my first question is: "How do they know what they're doing?"

Also, important to note is that I have no technical or handyman skills in my quiver. Anything that starts with nothing and ends with an inhabitable structure is basically witchcraft as far as I'm concerned.

So, the dog and I watched as small machinery cleared tons of dirt. Then they poured a concrete slab. Lumber came next, rising tall and strong to form a structure. Step after step proceeded forward until this very moment where I can look out the window of my office and see a fully completed structure.

From the first gaping gash in the dirt to what I now see from my window, this finished product was in someone's mind. It

was part of the plan. The goal.

As I think about unity, specifically the kind of unity Jesus talked about that captivated the founders of the Restoration Movement, a question comes to mind: Would we know what that unity looks like if we had it?

In other words, our neighbor's addition doesn't exist without someone who had the big picture – the final goal – in mind. They knew what arrival would look like.

When it comes to those of us who long for unity between followers of Jesus, those who listen breathlessly for the whisper of Spirit, we do not lack will or desire. Very few people if asked would say, "I think we can take a pass on all the 'unity' stuff."

What we lack is the ability to dream deeply and concretely about what that unity looks like. How would we know when we had the unity we're talking about? If the "unity plea" became "unity granted" – what would that look like?

In my study of Christian spiritual formation, I've found it helpful to return again and again to the concept of vision.

Vision can be defined in myriad ways, but ultimately vision is what the architect has in mind before the first excavation takes place.

Vision is the inspiring picture of a preferred future.

Vision is what inspires creativity when obstacles emerge.

When things become difficult, disagreements reach fever pitch, vision is what compels us forward and through the strain.

The way Jesus saw the world through the lens of an unshakeable Kingdom was the preferred future the world wanted, even though it wasn't clear on that desire.

Writer James Bryan Smith says that for that deep and abiding formation in Christ to take place, we need to work at the level of vision. The way I often represent this is to say, "What is one thing that is true of Jesus that you would want to be true of you?"

If we could adapt that thinking for the concept of unity, we see in Jesus an ability to think beyond the interaction and conflict at present. I don't see that in me, and likely that's why unity remains a vision yet to be embraced. Jesus compels us instead to think beyond the moment in front of us, beyond the disagreement to a bigger picture. A vision of life in the unshakeable Kingdom of God.

A life of following Jesus and being formed into his character and habits is about thinking beyond our immediate aches and pains. Spiritual practices help us step out of those common preoccupations. We aren't simply fasting, we are becoming the kind of people who can live without being a slave to compulsion.

Reading Scripture isn't an earning of points towards eternal reward, it is a tunneling towards the spring of wisdom that God created in the fabric of the universe.

But what is the bigger picture that emerges from Jesus' imagery of "may they be one as I and the Father are one" (John 17:11, paraphrase)? How do we cultivate that seamless connectivity with God that draws together the religious and the marginalized?

Where is that natural, seamless path of wisdom-becoming-mission that Jesus paints throughout the Gospels and how can all of us join Him there?

In other words, how do we embrace the kind of unity with God that allows us to be united with each other at the very base of our lives? Can we imagine a picture of unity like that which flows between creed, color, disagreement, and devotion?

I believe that rediscovering the balance of individual and corporate spiritual formation is deeply connected to our ability to think in terms of a vision – a picture of what it looks like when we find the unity we long for. The unity that Jesus had in mind in John 17.

The practices that shape us in the singular then build in us the ability to be one in the plural. When we engage in the spiritual practice of fasting and learn to live without compulsion, we can also learn how to engage with those with whom we disagree and know we don't need to win.

When silence and solitude are our companions, we can do the creative listening that allows bridges to be built and mission to move forward between theological streams that typically do not converge.

The story of Scripture, of a God who created every human being on earth as *tov me'od* – “exceedingly good or pleasing” (Genesis 1) gets embedded in our minds. It leads us to reach across divides and disagreements to say, “How can the Kingdom

come through us, we the “exceedingly good” folks in this particular, unique moment in time?”

With those (and many more) in place, we begin to shape a picture of unity that inspires us towards the preferred future Jesus had in sight. Then we start moving some dirt with joy. And we do it together.

And as a result, we build a structure where we can all live.

**About this Sample Version:** You have been reading a sample version of *One Kingdom: Essays in Honor of Christian Unity*; selected essays for your review. The complete 220-page paperback or Kindle version can be purchased on Amazon.

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**Jonathan Lichtenwalter** is a leader of a Bible discussion in Dallas, TX, and greatly desires to see the gospel spread throughout the Dallas area. Since he was a teenager, he started questioning his Christian beliefs to see how they held up to reason and other belief systems. He is now passionate about teaching apologetics to build up the faith of fellow Christians. He loves to use his writing and studies to build up the faith of others, to help disciples grow deeper in their understanding of scripture, and to share the truth of the gospel with nonbelievers. His hobbies include but are not limited to, playing the piano, classical and jazz music, creative writing, and listening to great podcasts. He earned a Master's degree in Missional Leadership from Rochester University. He is married to his best friend and beautiful wife, Nicole.

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**Lloyd Pelfrey** (D.D.) was a member of the original faculty for Central Christian College of the Bible when it began in 1957 in Moberly, Missouri. He retired from the college 65 years later in 2022 after serving as a professor (Old Testament), academic dean, and president (1972-1998). He received three degrees from Cincinnati Christian University (originally named The Cincinnati Bible Seminary). For many years, he was a writer for the Standard Lesson Commentary, usually developing texts for lessons from the Old Testament. He and his wife Irene have three daughters, five grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.

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**Marty Solomon** grew up in the Reformed tradition before attending Boise Bible College and getting his B.A. in Christian Ministries. In 2008 he studied in Israel with Ray Vander Laan and was challenged to grapple with his own Jewish heritage. As he learned more about the wider conversation surrounding the Bible, especially through a Jewish context, he began to develop BEMA Discipleship as a way to share his experience with others. He found his way into Impact Campus Ministries, seeing college students as in the perfect stage of life to experiment with the methods he saw in Jesus. Marty began leading trips of his own to Israel and Turkey in 2014. After a few iterations of his BEMA material, The BEMA Podcast was launched in 2016,

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Since 2014, Steve has been a consultant and researcher, working primarily with churches and charities. These projects have taken him to single and multisite churches in eleven states and four non-US countries. He holds graduate degrees in Theology (Wheaton College, 1996) and Conflict Management (Lipscomb University, 2013). Steve is currently working on a donor-funded project called Transforming Church Cultures.

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