

Boundaries with Integrity: Some Thoughts on Fellowship

Some years ago I was conversing with a colleague on what he hoped to accomplish after spending his life in teaching institutions affiliated with Churches of Christ. He said a number of things, but what especially remained with me is one comment: “My work is directed towards seeing that the Churches of Christ become a responsible denomination.”

Now I fully understand that in some quarters part of the terminology will be regarded as inappropriate, but that is not my point. I think I know what my friend meant. He was basically saying it is time that we took ourselves seriously as a responsible communion. We ought to be accountable for the theological claims that we make. I would add that I believe now, as much as any time in our history, certain emphases we have set forth are valuable. They need to be heard not only among us, but also in the wider ecumenical community.

Nowhere is this so true as in the area of ecclesiology: the doctrine of the church. This may come as a bit of a surprise. Some of us were reared on McGarvey’s *Commentary on Acts* or, more recently, we have heard endless sermons on what the church (read -- what the pulpit minister thinks) should be doing today. Surely we have heard enough about the church?

But, I wonder – especially when so many of our young families are so quick to seek out a faith community where the basic agenda is simply to nourish a personal relationship with Jesus – what has happened to the magnitude of the biblical vision that the church plays in the divine plan? And how determinative is the vision for cultivating a responsible understanding of what it means to be part of the people of God. Can we not understand that there is a world of difference between finding a place where “I do my worship” for an hour on Sunday morning and grasping what Jesus is saying about the relationship he seeks with his people in John 13-17 or what Paul is saying about the One Body in Ephesians?

I believe it is time to reaffirm some key biblical insights that Restorationists, in their better moments, have set forth about the church. Today, we have been asked to put on the table the issue of fellowship. Who do we in Churches of Christ fellowship? On what grounds, etc.? I plan to address this issue, but it is important not to get the cart before the horse. The important thing is for us to catch the vision of the people of God shaped by biblical faith. That is the basis for all true fellowship. In light of that vision we do need to set some policies for practices that are consistent with the vision, but maintaining the vision is the key point. Without it our discussions on fellowship are without significance.

Thus, procedurally, I will make several brief comments on the vision of the church set forth in scripture. Limited as these may be, perhaps we may get a small glimpse of what the ancient believers understood had taken place in the Christ-event that was and remains significant for God’s people. Then we will have a basis to see what is at stake when we begin to approach the issue of fellowship today. We shall see that it should not be viewed as a matter of the lowest common denominator, or because there is no verse against receiving others with different practices, but it is a gift for which we all long because we hold sacred things in common. It is so precious that it causes great pain when it cannot be extended. Reflection on these matters will form the second part of our discussion.

The Biblical Vision

I wish to draw attention to one of the most amazing texts in all of scripture. In Eph 3:1-13 Paul is giving an explanation of why he is conducting a ministry to the Gentiles. Starting with verse 3 he states that the reception of the Gentiles was held as a divine secret from all eternity but has now become disclosed as a matter of revelation. In verse ten he states that not only does God add Gentiles to the divine assembly, the church, but the worship and witness of the church proclaims to the very powers and forces that oppose God that they have lost control over the Gentile world. What they thought was their sphere of influence has come under the captivity of Christ. Do we get the force of that metaphor? The church – made up now of Jews and Gentiles – is God’s special vehicle that is ordained to bring the creation into unity under the lordship of Christ. People have

often wondered how Paul could say such things when, on the ground, Christianity seemed to be such a negligible force. For the writer of Ephesians, those struggling little congregations, men and women of all races scattered throughout the Jewish Diaspora, baptized in the name of Jesus, are the first fruits of the ultimate reconciliation of the world. Paul will call them ‘the body of Christ.’ In Eph 4:4 he states there is one body and in 5:22-33 he states that Christ left heaven and through his work on earth united with his bride: the church. Together they constitute the most significant reality of the universe.

The point of this little venture into scripture is to show that the church, the foundational reality of the new creation, is central to the whole story of salvation. The texts we have noted are only the tip of the iceberg. We sometimes hear, even sad to say, in my own fellowship, “I like Jesus, but the church is another matter.” If we want to be biblical such a statement is complete nonsense. What is far closer to the point was the famous observation Thomas Campbell made almost 200 years ago:

The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one.

It is in keeping with that reality that we ought to ground any discussion on fellowship today.

Restoration Emphasis

Well, some may say, that was the biblical era but today, two thousand years later, we encounter a bewildering number of fellowships in our great cities that all claim that in some way they are the church. In light of what has taken place in church history, how do we determine what is a genuine fellowship?

It is here that I think it is appropriate that we underscore some of the contributions that emerge out of the Stone-Campbell movement. Generally throughout church history it is held that there should be four tests to determine a genuine Christian fellowship. A fellowship is genuine if it is one, apostolic, catholic and holy. Various fellowships nuance these marks and put different emphases upon them. In my own study and writing I have become convinced that in Churches of Christ we have a theological center that gives a particular understanding of apostolicity and holiness. I mean by that at the center of our proclamation is the gospel of Christ (the facts of the kerygma) and the ordinances (baptism, and the Lord’s Supper). They are the vehicles that function as God’s instrument to place us in the sphere of salvation. Simply put, to be genuinely apostolic is to restore the proclamation of the ancient gospel and its ordinances, and to be holy is to manifest a lifestyle shaped by this proclamation. The proclamation of the gospel and the called for response in baptism and regular observance of the supper are ineluctably linked because they draw us into the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This understanding of apostolicity and holiness is the necessary core for our existence as a fellowship. At our best we seek to restore the common faith of the ancient church on these matters. This is not meant to be an exercise in antiquarianism, but it is meant to establish distinct and defensible parameters for underscoring the centrality of the gospel and what is involved in being faithful to it. It provides our unique identity.

Current Issues in Fellowship

So where does this leave us today with respect to issues of fellowship that continue to surface among us? As one who was raised in the Australian Churches of Christ and have witnessed Restorationism firsthand on most continents, I realize this is a very difficult and painful issue for many. Let us be frank about it. Like most heirs of the Reformed tradition we have been way too quick to divide. I think we can make progress here if we adhere to a basic distinction. I want to claim that we need to distinguish between the claims someone makes to be a believer and the appropriate boundaries observed by a particular fellowship. What I mean by that is I am quite willing to accept the definition of a Christian commonly set forth by nineteenth-century Restorationists, which I may paraphrase as:

He or she who believes Jesus is the Son of God and manifests the same by appropriate life and conduct.

Let me be clear on this point. I accept this basic definition. Indeed, one of the glories of our fellowship in America is that we stress at the table that it is the Table of the Lord and it is He who invites all who can make this confession.

On the other hand, it is another matter when we come to a discussion of what are the legitimate boundaries for a fellowship which attempts to represent itself as an expression of the common faith of the ancient church. If I understand it right this is what we in Churches of Christ intend to do. Without in any way wishing to venture into sectarianism I believe that any entity must have boundaries to maintain its own integrity. As a fellowship whose *raison d'être* is the restoration of the common faith of the ancient church, I would affirm that it is appropriate that people seeking membership be asked to make the basic biblical confessions that are found in scripture with respect to Jesus and be baptized as believers in Him. From what I read of ancient Christianity you do not have believers walking around who shun baptism or refuse to be regular communicants at the Table of the Lord. I do not pronounce anathemas on those who, for historic reasons, do things differently; but for the life of me I cannot see how what we do should be branded as sectarian if we are doing what was standard practice among the earliest Christians.

William Placher, one of the better known systematic theologians of our time, notes that the boundaries of fellowship in the ancient church were quite fluid; but there were three things they could not encompass:

- 1) Any compromise with the means of salvation – i.e. Christ. This means that you have to think right about him.
- 2) Do not change the liturgy. That connects us with God.
- 3) Do not harbor teachers who openly violate the scriptures. Scripture is our basic story as true people of God.

I believe this is a fair reading of the faith of the ancient church; and, I also believe the boundaries that I have discussed fall well within this framework.

In closing I return to the sentiments of my colleague. It is a time Churches of Christ unapologetically acted like a responsible fellowship. What will eventually happen, of course, will fall under the verdict of history. Of course, we may have something to apologize for; we cannot and should not apologize for seeking to be apostolic and holy.

Allan J. McNicol
Austin Graduate School of Theology
presented at The Austin Forum on Christian Unity
July 11-12, 2008