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A Christian Affirmation 2005

Christian Chronicle, May 2005

The history of Restoration churches has been marred by its share of legalism, sectarianism, and divisiveness. An unexamined flight from these tendencies, however, may lead to embracing an almost shapeless Evangelicalism, which Evangelicals themselves are questioning (e.g., Mark Noll, David Wells). *A Christian Affirmation 2005* was an attempt to encourage reflection about the Restoration tradition. Rushing into a shallow ecumenicity offers little hope for serious discipleship or meaningful unity among churches.

The signers of *A Christian Affirmation* are persons who have pursued academic study with believers from other traditions. Several are faculty members at institutions where their Restoration orientation is respected (e.g., Princeton Theological Seminary, and Notre Dame and Emory Universities). The signers commend a biblical and theological approach to ecumenicity.

A Christian Affirmation has evoked considerable discussion. Readers should note that *A Christian Affirmation* makes no attempt to identify who is not a Christian.

Editor, *Christian Studies*

A Christian Affirmation 2005

It is our intention to clarify our Christian identity in a time of increasing uncertainties. Churches of Christ are part of the American Restoration Movement, which sought to overcome the divisions of Christendom by returning to the faith and practice of the earliest Christians. While we believe that disunity and division among Christians are not according to God's will, we also believe that unity cannot be grounded in minimal agreements among Christian traditions. The path to substantive Christian unity is found in returning to the clear teachings of Scripture and practices of the early church, commonly acknowledged and respected by all Christian traditions. In this light, beliefs and practices characteristic of Churches of Christ are neither novel nor idiosyncratic, nor should they be easily abandoned.

The Original Design

The compelling rationale for this commonsense approach to ecumenical reformation is well stated by Roman Catholic scholar Hans Küng. Recognizing “errors and false developments” in the church’s history, Küng states,

The New Testament message, as the original testimony, is the highest court to which appeal must be made in all the changes of history. It is the essential norm against which the church of every age has to measure itself. The New Testament Church, which, beginning with its origins in Jesus Christ, is already the Church in the fullness of its nature, is therefore the original design; we cannot copy it today, but we can and must translate it into modern terms. The Church of the New Testament alone can show us what that original design was (*The Early Church*).

It is the early church that, in Küng’s words, provides “the essential norm” by which the church in every age and culture measures its message, beliefs, and practices. It is to this “original design” (Küng) that we turn both for substantive guidance and for the common faith to be shared by and to unite all Christians.

According to the New Testament message, the Church of Jesus Christ exists to bear witness to the central truth that the Creator of all things “so loved the world that he gave his only Son” for us and our salvation (John 3:16). This salvation embraces the whole of creation in its scope; God’s saving will is “to reconcile all things to himself” through Christ’s incarnate life, death, and resurrection (Col 1:20). God’s saving purpose shapes the whole of the church’s life.

Baptism: The New Birth

Foundational to our response to the saving work of Christ is our faithful submission to his lordship in baptism. In baptism we enter the new creation inaugurated by Christ’s death and resurrection, which create a new humanity (2 Cor 5:14–15). As we once shared the destiny of Adam, God now grants us a share in the life and destiny of Christ, the new Adam, incorporating us into his body in baptism (Rom 6:3–6; 1 Cor 15:45; Gal 3:26–28; Col 3:10–11). In the ancient church there were no unbaptized Christians. The New Testament assumes that every Christian is baptized and has become a member of the body of Christ through the one baptism of water and of the spirit (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:5; John 3:5). God does not save individuals apart from the body of Christ; he saves us by making us members of Christ’s body through baptism and transforming us into his likeness (Rom 8:29–30).

The early church practiced baptism as the immersion of believers in water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those baptized received as benefits of Christ's death the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Baptism is the Christian's new birth into the people of God. Washed clean of sins and sealed by the Spirit of God, believers begin their transformation into the image of Christ (1 Cor 6:11) and to "walk in newness of life," "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:4, 11).

The Lord's Supper and the New Fellowship

Baptized believers gather each week around the table of the Lord. There, united as one body in Christ, we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26) as the "expiation for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:2). As Israel remembered God's deliverance in the Passover, Christians meet on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day (the day of Christ's resurrection) to remember and celebrate the salvation brought by Christ.

At the Lord's table we are drawn together through Christ's death and resurrection as members of his body. "Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body" (1 Cor 10:17). Moved by the memory that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper "on the night when he was betrayed" (1 Cor 11:23), members of the body of Christ are stirred to examine ourselves and recommit to serving Christ, one another, and the world (1 Cor 11:28-29).

We also remember that the risen Lord was "made known" to his disciples on the first day of the week "in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35) and graciously invited his disciples to "come and eat" (John 21:12). Thus we not only remember Jesus' death, but also celebrate his presence at table with his people today; and until he comes, we joyfully anticipate being together with him.

The Lord instituted this observance, and he sets the conditions for participation at his table (Rev 3:20). All who acknowledge Christ's lordship and demonstrate this faith in their character and conduct are welcome at the Lord's table.

Worship and the New Life

For centuries Christians have recognized that as we worship, so we believe, and so we live. Worship stands at the center of the church's existence and the formation of Christian identity. In worship, the people of God remember and rehearse God's great acts of disclosure and deliverance in our history. We praise and adore

God for the gifts of creation and redemption in Christ.

The center of Christian worship is the Lord's supper, which unites us in remembering the sacrificial death of Jesus and encourages us to offer ourselves to the Lord as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1–2). Christian proclamation, prayer, and singing in the New Testament and early church were characteristically Christ-centered. In content, Christian song is an instrument of teaching enabling the word of Christ to dwell richly in God's people as we teach and admonish one another in wisdom with thankfulness (Col 3:16).

In manner, Christian singing from the very first and for nearly a thousand years was “a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb 13:15), without accompanying instruments. Singing *a cappella* (“in the manner of the chapel”) was encouraged by reformers such as John Calvin and the Puritans in England and America and remains the practice of some 300,000,000 members of Eastern Orthodox churches. The practice of *a cappella* singing recovers both the “original design” of the early church and the common practice of the whole church for centuries.

Christian worship delivers us from the illusions, distortions, and distractions of the world. Worship releases us from preoccupation with our limited thoughts, abilities, and feelings. Our worship reminds us, as Paul says, that our ultimate hope and confidence reside not in ourselves—not in our possessions, our feelings, our intellect, or anything we can measure and manage—but in “God who raises the dead” (2 Cor 1:9).

A Word of Concern

While the work of restoration is difficult and has often been done poorly, neither the difficulty of the task nor our failures justify abandoning the attempt to recover biblical faith and practice. Many in Churches of Christ today are rightly concerned to overcome a legacy of legalism, sectarianism, and divisiveness. It is easy to suppose that opposition to these scandalous realities means that we must relax our commitment to practices that have been characteristic of our churches.

We commend an alternative vision. The restoration vision is to unite with the earliest Christians, to take as the indispensable guide to life in Christ their common faith and practice, which Christians in every age respect and honor. In the twen-

tieth century, early Christian practice was rediscovered as a norm and a basis for seeking unity by leaders, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. It would be a sad irony, now that others in the religious world are recognizing the value of a return to Christian beginnings, if our own churches were to abandon the quest.

The undersigned prayerfully commend these considerations, this 18th day of April in the year of our Lord 2005.

Jim Baird
Professor of Bible
College of Biblical Studies
Oklahoma Christian University

Terry Briley
Dean, College of Bible and Ministry
Lipscomb University

Everett Ferguson
Professor Emeritus of Church History
Abilene Christian University

Hugh Gainey, Elder
University Avenue Church of Christ
Austin, Texas

John Mark Hicks
Professor of Theology
Lipscomb University

Carl R. Holladay
Candler School of Theology
Emory University

Evertt W. Huffard
Dean, Harding Graduate School
of Religion

Lynn McMillon
Dean, College of Biblical Studies
Oklahoma Christian University

Allan J. McNicol
Professor of New Testament
Austin Graduate School of Theology

Mike Moss
Associate Dean, College of Bible
and Ministry, Lipscomb University

Curt Niccum
Associate Professor of Bible
Oklahoma Christian University

Howard Norton*
College of Bible and Religion
Harding University

Tom Olbricht
Professor Emeritus of Religion
Pepperdine University

Jeff Peterson
Associate Professor of New
Testament
Austin Graduate School of Theology

*Although one of the original signers, Howard Norton's name was omitted in the initial publication of the Affirmation.

Paul Pollard
Professor of Bible
Harding University

J.J.M. Roberts
Professor Emeritus of Old Testament
Literature
Princeton Theological Seminary

Jerry Rushford
Professor of Church History
Pepperdine University

R. Mark Shipp
Professor of Old Testament
Austin Graduate School of Theology

Gregory E. Sterling
Professor of New Testament and
Christian Origins,
University of Notre Dame

James W. Thompson
Professor of New Testament
Graduate School of Theology
Abilene Christian University

Don Vinzant
Adjunct Professor of Bible
Oklahoma Christian University
Minister of Edmond, Church of Christ

Michael R. Weed
Professor of Theology and Ethics
Austin Graduate School of Theology

Frank Wheeler
Professor of Biblical Studies and Chair,
Bible Department, York College

Wendell Willis
Associate Professor of Bible
Abilene Christian University

John F. Wilson
Professor of Religion
Pepperdine University