# Unity and the Stone-Campbell Movement: Considerations for the ICOC

Prepared by John Teal

Maintaining unity and sustainable growth among any organization is challenging at best. But what if a movement had unrealized predispositions making unity and long-term growth even more problematic? The historical roots of the International Church of Christ (ICOC) are found in the Stone- Campbell Movement (SCM) that began by calling for unity in essentials and liberty in matters of opinion. In time, the movement developed restorationist ideologies that eventually led to a division in 1906. Restoration churches typically experience exceptional growth followed by stagnation and decline or collapse. They are commonly susceptible to division, each claiming to be the “one true church.”

Are we, the ICOC, at a crossroads? What choices will we make and will they produce unity? What can we learn from our forefathers and can we avoid the mistakes they made? Could we be a catalyst for unity among the SCM, as well as the church universal? In this paper, I will address the major issues creating stress within the SCM and the factors that led to the 1906 division. Furthermore, I will suggest considerations for the ICOC that may produce a more positive outcome than that of our forefathers.

## Faith for Our Future

How we act, react and respond is greatly influenced by our surroundings. We act in the present, however, the past can be a catalyst leading us to patterns of behavior that later may be regretted. One of my favorite movies is “A Few Good Men”. In one scene Captain Ross (Kevin Bacon) meets with Jack Kaffee (Tom Cruise) as friends and opposing lawyers. Ross warns Kaffee that his choice could have a significant impact on his future, including possible court martial. Ross tells Kaffee that he was bullied into the courtroom by the memory of his father. Despite his past, despite his reactions, he wins the case. His defendants were not convicted, yet, they did face the consequence of dishonorable discharge. To the honor-bound Marines, this was a weighty and unbearable consequence.

Church leaders bear a great weight and responsibility. The spotlight is not always kind to those who serve in leadership roles. One day you are being held up and honored and another day you are trampled underfoot. Maybe, in our western way of thinking we burden our leaders with too much weight; maybe we placed too much on their shoulders - somewhat like lieutenant Kaffee who held the lives of two marines in his hands. Maybe our leadership models are driven more by our western corporate culture and less by the Lord’s model. But I digress. The point that I would like to make is that we are greatly impacted by our history. We are impacted by the way we act, react, and respond, and this has significant consequences for ourselves and those whom we lead.

What I now write, I write out of love and concern for our movement. My aim is to submit the following with humility and respect. I am convinced that Satan will attack our movement, he will attack our unity. And while our union may be threatened from time to time, I have faith in our future. I have faith because I have seen how we have overcome adversity. I have faith because we have recognized our shortcomings and have pursued the Lord. I have faith because we have sought His will and not our own. I have faith because we have broken from our traditions that were neither biblical nor beneficial. I have faith because we are educating and training our leaders better than in the past. I have faith because we are growing in our ability to collaborate, listen, and develop leadership models that are healthier, sustainable, and in the long run more productive. I have faith because we are seeing leadership working in cooperation with their flock. I have faith because we are developing various platforms such as Christian Professionals Conference, Teaching Ministry websites, Schools of Ministry, and other valuable resources.[[1]](#footnote-1) These appear to be developing independently and organically, which seem to be a healthy model. These voices and resources are invaluable to opening positive and productive learning and dialog within our family of churches. This is all to say that I am encouraged by our determination to grow and be led by the Spirit. It is my hope that we will continue to do so.

In this spirit, I wish to share considerations and convictions that may help the ICOC from repeating the mistakes of our forefathers. In my mind, the considerations below are core to our future success as a movement. I do recognize that we have hundreds of churches spread across the globe and each congregation has its own personality and culture. I understand that any attempt to address our movement as a whole may contain generalities that may or may not apply. I pray that this will not be received as criticism but rather as observations and a request for consideration. I do not assume that I am the only one who has studied and considered these matters. In all likelihood, there are those who may be more knowledgeable and qualified to speak and teach on these matters than me. I assume there are those who have studied these considerations and given them significant thought. However, I will not assume this to be the case for the sake of the reader that is new to these thoughts. There is a possibility that the reader may not agree with my conclusions. In that event, I would wish that we could respect the diversity and embrace the following principle:

“In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”

Rupertus Meldenius[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Framing Our Historical Context

Our family histories influence who we are. They affect our culture and our personality traits. They affect our thinking and frame of reference. They affect our abilities to pursue peace and unity. These influences affect harmony in our relationships. Whether, marriage, parenting, family, work, or church, we all have ghosts in the machine that influence our ability to pursue and maintain unity.

Some influences come from our parents and some from generations past. The young almost always think they are original, cutting a new path. But with age, we begin to realize that apples have not fallen far from the tree. We are our father’s son, our mother’s daughter. We carry on the good and some of the not so good. Unless we are conscious and give thought to our ways, there is a good chance we will pass along undesirables to our children. If we are not aware of our history we will likely repeat the mistakes of our past.

The International Churches of Christ (ICOC) has a family history too! Our historical and cultural context came from the American Restoration Movement.[[3]](#footnote-3) It has also been called the Stone-Campbell Movement after Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell. In 1832, the two groups merged after realizing they had come to similar conclusions relatively independent of each other. This brotherhood aimed to be unified in essentials, allow liberty in matters of opinions and apply love in all things. While the first generation founding fathers were still alive unity was preserved, diversity was respected. After their death, the movement began to break along ideological lines of biblical interpretation. There were hot topics and real issues, however, these were the smoke, and the fire was under the surface. It was a matter of time before it would burst into flames.

The vast majority of our members, and some of our leaders, in the ICOC, have little or no understanding of our heritage pre-Crossroads / Boston Movement. Our history did not start in a Boston living room in 1979. We are part of a much larger story. That story, in part, fuels the narratives in our collective DNA. It has an impact on how we think, react, and act. It affects our attitudes and our cultural models. It influences how we lead and how we think about leadership. It has bearing on the way we interpret the Bible. This narrative changes the way we view ourselves and the way we view those who think differently than us. This narrative colors how we see grace and law, right and wrong, truth and errancy. Our particular movement (ICOC) is now middle-aged and we have matured immensely. We have cast off some of the mistakes of our spiritual parents and we have made our own mistakes. But do we have a working knowledge of the undercurrents that influence the way we process, act, and react?

When I was 5-years old my father began showing signs of paranoid schizophrenia. His illness over the next seven years became even more pronounced. By the time I was 12 years old, my father had become increasingly delusional and dangerous. If we had stayed in our home, my mother and I would likely not be alive today. After becoming a disciple it took a while to undo some of the negative thinking in my heart and head. I am now approaching 60-years of age and I still may have some negative narratives floating around. It does not make me bad; it just makes me broken. Broken, just like the rest of us. Our histories have an impact on our present way of thinking and reacting. It is safe to say that most of us have experienced involuntary responses that are triggered by something historical. It may be fueled by a past event or a pattern of experience but it is real and it affects how we interact with others. These responses can be emotional and they may affect us physiologically. They are visceral, instinctive, and spontaneous reactions. I do not like being controlled by these forces, but it would be naïve to deny their influence on me. We in the ICOC would also be naïve to ignore our historical influences. We may not recognize our historical triggers, but that does not rule out their existence.

The founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement dreamed of a church united by the Bible. Unfortunately, subsequent generations’ became better at dividing than uniting. Certain things happened along the way and the movement began to splinter. The two largest groups that broke away were the Churches of Christ (A Capella) and the Independent Christian Church / Churches of Christ (instrumental). We often define the difference based on instrumental and A Capella. Yet the difference was much more ideological and the instruments were the visible tip of the iceberg. About 70-years prior to the famous living room in Boston our spiritual parents were involved in a very nasty divorce and in 1906 they went their separate ways. The parties had drawn lines on issues, but how they interpreted the Bible was at the very core of the split.

Fortunately, there is now a movement among these two groups to reunite in Spirit. There are those who believe they have more in common and that they should not let their difference separate them. While there are distinct cultural differences that may prohibit a merger, the two are beginning a process of coming together in a spirit of brotherly love and fellowship. Rick Atchley, who is the Senior Minister of one of the largest Churches of Christ, and Bob Russell, who was the Senior Minister of a 22,000 member Christian Church, wrote a book titled *Together Again – Restoring Unity in Christ after a Century of Separation*.[[4]](#footnote-4) Their call is to put aside our differences and begin working together to accomplish Christ’s mission to save the lost world.

Likewise, it seems that some of us in the ICOC have begun to extend a few olive branches toward our brothers in the Church of Christ and Christian Churches. While we also have developed cultural differences that may prohibit merger, we are still brothers and sisters in Christ. It might do us well to put aside our differences and begin working together to accomplish Christ’s mission to save the lost world. In fact, many of the Christian Churches are growing at a rapid pace. It might be that a cup of coffee once a month may have an incredible impact on the growth of our churches in the ICOC. Maybe it starts by picking up the phone and setting up lunch. I am not in the full-time ministry, however, I have made the opportunity to meet or have coffee with five ministers of local Christian Churches. Two are large and rapidly growing churches, two are medium sized with slower numerical growth, and one recently merged into the other local Christian Churches. I can tell you that my faith has been personally enriched by each and every one of these brothers in Christ. I have grown in my understanding of God, His word, and His Church through these relationships. I will say, that my initial struggle was to be critical of the differences, to magnify our strengths and magnify their weaknesses. I can say from experience that this is not a good way to develop a relationship. No one grows in that scenario. But if as disciples of Christ, learners, and followers, we approach each other with humility and respect, we may develop a spiritual relationship far more precious than we could ever imagine.

So, just about the time the United States of America was fighting for its independence, Thomas Campbell began proclaiming a Christian declaration of independence from the highly sectarian religious culture of his time.[[5]](#footnote-5) It was a plea to follow the Word of God over and above man-made creeds and doctrines. The slogan “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent" emerged as an enduring principle. Yet, this very principle was core to the eventual split that would separate the movement in 1906. What could be wrong with this statement? It certainly sounds like a reasonable statement. In my opinion, it was a good principle, but a very flawed mandate.

Eventually, prominent leaders developed deep convictions about certain issues, methods, or practices. The conflicts would arise and silence would be at the center of the battles. Many of these disagreements became quite heated. One party believed that silence of the scripture provided permission or freedom to decide if a method or practice was acceptable or beneficial. The other party held that the silence of scripture was an absolute prohibition of method or practice because there was no clear directive in scripture. At some point, these two groups hit an ideological fork in the road, and the further they traveled down their particular path the further they distanced themselves from each other. In general, those holding the prohibitive view were the Southern Churches, who became known as the A Capella Churches of Christ (COC). Those holding the more permissive, the view that they were free to decide, became the Christian Church / Churches of Christ (CC).

Thomas Campbell, his son Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, and several other prominent leaders inspired a movement seeking to unify by the perfect word of God. However, it would be shown that while the Word of God is perfect, we humans are flawed in our ability to perfectly interpret it. The notion that sustainable unity is created by adherence to the Bible alone is, in my opinion, a false premise. Unity can only be found in Christ, and through the Spirit who unites us in Christ.

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. John 16:13

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:3

Unity comes by the Spirit, not by biblical knowledge. The Bible is the inspired word of God, it is living and active.[[6]](#footnote-6) And knowing God’s word is absolutely crucial to being led by the Spirit. However, the Word is not the Spirit, it is the sword of the Spirit.[[7]](#footnote-7) We do not worship the Bible we worship Jesus, we worship the Godhead. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I am convinced that most of the founding fathers of the Stone-Campbell Movement understood this. However, some within the movement began fixating on a rigid pattern of “worship” born out of their biblical perception. Once accepted as the correct interpretation, any who thought differently were viewed as wayward disciples who should be excluded from fellowship. In our efforts to be biblical Christians we must be careful not to create a New Testament law. We are a freed people living by the Spirit of life.

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. Romans 8:2 ESV

We have been given the Spirit as a seal, but we have also been given the Spirit to lead and direct us. We do not see the disciples seeking a perfect pattern of worship, we see them seeking to understand the will of the Spirit.[[8]](#footnote-8) We do not see the disciples of Jesus debating doctrinal positions, we see them discerning what the Spirit desires. How can we be listening to the Spirit and at the same time be divided with our brother? How can we quarrel over who is more right or wrong when all along we are all wrong in one way or another? We do not see clearly, we see dimly.[[9]](#footnote-9) Truth be told, even on my best day, I fall short of rightly dividing the word of truth.[[10]](#footnote-10) My guess is that you do too.

The first 50 years of the new movement saw considerable growth. By the time of the American Civil War, the SCM numbered about 190,000 disciples. However, the ideological divide continued to widen and the movement began to show more pronounced signs of stress. The unity movement was beginning to experience structural cracks. It would be in the hands of the second generation that these stressors would fuel an even greater divide. The fifty years post-Civil War would see the cracks turn to fault lines as the movement grew to 1.1 million by 1906. This was the year of the official split of the two groups. It would be the minority group holding the more rigid position and in 1906 they were officially recognized as the Church of Christ and seceded from the movement’s union.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restoration\_Movement

Christians often use biblical arguments to support their philosophical disagreements. The division among the Disciples was no different. In large part, the battles were waged through media platforms; which at that time was journals or Christian periodicals. The two most prominent were the Gospel Advocate and the Christian Standard. Later the Firm Foundation would arise to combat the Gospel Advocate’s position on Baptismal Cognizance.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Gospel Advocate came to be the standard bearer of those who would become the Church of Christ. The Christian Standard generally represented the views of the mainstream movement that would become the Christian Church.[[12]](#footnote-12) Again silence was at the core of the fault line. Arguments did arise over certain topics but at the core of it all was their ideological view on biblical interpretation. We should not be surprised. This is no different than a married couple who quarrel over superficial issues when all along the real culprit is their particular perspectives on love and respect, feelings and principles, or the culture and guidelines. The issue between the Disciples was ideological and not biblical. The unfortunate outcome was an inability to accommodate the perspectives of one another. When prominent individuals within movements take rigid positions and are unable to listen to one another then the inevitable outcome will likely be negative. As Christians we often proclaim that we do not believe in separation or divorce, yet, far too often we see a corporate version of divorce repetitively played out in our churches. Why do we separate what God has joined together? So let us discuss some of the particular arguments as case studies. Hopefully, we can glean wisdom from the mistakes of our ancestors.

## **Slavery and Abolitionism**

Often we can observe national and cultural narratives influencing collective thought or values within the church. Slavery was a controversial topic for 19th Century Americans. It was also controversial in the church. The proslavery side advocated examples and precedent in scripture for the acceptance of slavery. The abolitionists, on the other hand, had been mounting a growing movement against the practice. This opposition challenged the economic engine of the South. During the first Great Awakening (1730 – 1755) protestant evangelicals raised the injustice of slavery to a mainstream national discussion. As the SCM developed strength the northern disciples began to hold positions opposing slavery stating that it was inconsistent with Christian values and was an evil of society that should and must be abolished. Since there was no direct command for the support of slavery, and since there was ample support that such treatment was inconsistent with Christian values, the disciples of the north believed they had the freedom to oppose the practice. Disciples in the South were typically either non-committal or in favor of slavery. Some reasoned that there was sufficient evidence that slavery was permitted in the bible and therefore God allowed it. Some leaders were outspoken on the issue and some desired to keep the national controversy out of the church. Those striving to keep the church free from this issue saw it as a volatile issue that would only bring division. They were correct in their estimation and the seeds of division were sown. Ben Brewster writes:

Yet, Disciples could not discuss the morality of slavery without invoking the use of the Bible, which in their minds was the sole basis for morality. With slavery and its many arguments, the Disciples found themselves watering their own seeds of division. [[13]](#footnote-13)

Each generation has its own battlefields that future disciples will be tempted to judge from the light of their own progress. But ours is not to judge the struggles of our forefathers. It is, however, ours to learn from them. From our 21st Century lens, we would all certainly agree that slavery is and was a barbaric practice that needed to be abolished. Yet, this was the political and social hot topic of our forefather’s day. It is easy for us to see the clear path forward in retrospect, however, it was not easy for them. Certainly, we have political and social hot topics of our day, and while we should be free to debate, we should protect ourselves from attitudes that would divide us in the church. This particular debate was the kindling that started the fire. It was influenced by the societal narratives of the day. It was an emotional national quarrel that infiltrated into the church. It was this argument that split the American nation, it should not have been an argument contributing to the demise of brotherly love within the church.

## Pacifism and Military Service

The Disciples faced another issue related to the American Civil War; the debate over military service. Generally, the northern Disciples believed the New Testament was silent on the subject of military service and therefore it was allowable. It was in their minds open to opinion and or personal conviction. In their view, they were supporting a right and righteous national cause by enlisting with the Union army. On the flip side, the southern editors and theological leadership generally took a position of pacifism stating that there was no biblical precedent for disciples serving in the military. Therefore they believed it wrong to enlist and become entangled in the conflict. Despite their position, many of the southern Disciples enlisted with the Confederate Army. David Lipscomb, the editor of the Gospel Advocate, was considerably scarred by family losses, including the loss of his only son who died as a result of inadequate medical attention due to the war.[[14]](#footnote-14) He was a diehard pacifist who had to balance loss in the light of Disciples who supported the war. War changes those who survive and this would be a contributing factor in the life and writing of one of the most prominent movement editors. From 1861 to 1865 fellow Americans bore arms against one another, and fellow Disciples raised arms brother against brother. It was under this tension and backdrop that trust and relationship between the Northern and Southern churches eroded even further.

## Autonomy and the Missionary Society

While foundational cracks were beginning to emerge there was one burning desire that both Northern and Southern Disciples shared. They both had a desire to fulfill the Great Commission, to reach a lost world for Jesus. However, they again had differences as pertaining to the methodology. Later, liberal theology would be the catalyst that would divide the Christian Church and the Disciples of Christ. However the first split, in 1906, was produced mostly by issues of methodology. In 1849, the Disciples held a national convention and created the American Christian Missionary Society (ACMS). Other societies and conventions would be created in later years. While the ACMS was generally accepted by most, not all of the Disciples were in favor of its creation, and its formation incited much controversy. Again, the core tension centered on a theory of biblical interpretation as it pertained to silence within the New Testament record. Those in favor of the ACMS generally believed that it was permissible to form or utilize missionary societies to promote church plantings, educate and train ministers, support Bible College development, and support or strengthen weak and struggling churches. In other words, they believed that para-church organizations were not only permissible but also beneficial.

Those in opposition to the missionary societies viewed this “innovation” as an assault on fundamental principles set forth by the founders of the SCM, by the apostolic model, and they considered it going beyond what was written.[[15]](#footnote-15) To them, this issue was very troubling because, in their thinking, it threatened a return to the rigid denominationalism from which they had come. These associations or societies were viewed as the first step in the demise of the congregational model, which they viewed as the example and precedent in the New Testament. Their fears would not be realized for the most part. Roughly seven decades later the Disciples of Christ would adopt a centralized church governance, but the larger Christian Church would maintain the congregational model of leadership.

The SCM had existed for some time as a federation of independent congregations. Certainly the movement had opinion leaders that influenced the dialog and collective narratives, however, each congregation held its own conviction and were led and directed by the local eldership. There was room for diversity of thought and practice in the early days, yet, as the movement aged, lines were drawn based on methodology and later based on theology. Leroy Garrett stated:

The Church of Christ separated over methodology by and large, while the Christian Church withdrew (from the Disciples of Christ) over theology. [[16]](#footnote-16)

In 1906 the Church of Christ would separate from the much larger mainstream Restoration Movement (159,658 out of 1,142,359).[[17]](#footnote-17) By 1971, the Christian Church asked not to be listed with the Disciples of Christ who had enacted a denominational leadership model. The Disciples of Christ would also accept a more liberal view of Scripture (regarding inerrancy and infallibility) and acceptance of open membership models for non-immersed believers.



In both cases, the ideological elements that led to the eventual split had co-existed within the movement until a breaking point had been reached. Much like a political environment, there is typically a right, left, and center. In this case, the Church of Christ would hold to the conservative position, the Disciples of Christ would adhere to the liberal position, and the Christian Church would occupy the center.

The seceding Church of Christ would be about 14% of the SCM and generally aligned with the views of David Lipscomb who was the editor of the Gospel Advocate. Those who would become the Church of Christ would take the position that “innovations” without New Testament example or precedent could not and would not be permissible. The eventual outcome would be a firm position, on their part, to preserve the apostolic model by not extending “the right hand of fellowship” to those they viewed as being in error. Daniel Sommer, whose actions were incendiary, would celebrate the separation of the Church of Christ and the Christian Church. Others, such as David Lipscomb, were deeply grieved at the separation. History has been kinder to Lipscomb for his role in the division than it has been for Sommer. It is safe to say that few, in any branch of the SCM, hold Sommer in high esteem for his role in dividing the fellowship.

In general, the Restoration Movement developed a spirit of monolog rather than a spirit of dialog. The debate over the ACMS was no different. It seems that the movement followed cultural and political narratives of its time. The nineteenth century was a period of great debates that would last for many hours. Sometimes they would last for days as in the Lincoln-Douglas Debate in 1854. It was a time when positions and ideas were thoroughly argued and debated. The movement was involved in many public debates with denominational theologians of their day. However, inside the movement, the use of publications was employed to argue their positions. This method did not promote a spirit of dialog. It promoted a culture whereby people took up sides and talked at each other, not with each other. While living, Campbell and Stone, preserved a spirit of unity even in the light of diversity. However, after their death, the tone changed under new leadership. There was no formal denominational headquarters or bishops within the SCM. Yet, what did develop was leadership coined as “Editor Bishops.”

Leadership proved to be the difference. Once Campbell left the scene in 1866, a leadership began to emerge, particularly “Editor Bishops,” that was willing to divide churches in order to be loyal to its interpretation of “approved precedent.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

While they had no official office, they did have considerable authority. We may ask, did they use their authority wisely? Was the public square the best place for airing every opinion? Was there a better platform for the movement to have an open dialog? Was there a way to have an open inclusive debate and then “come together at the water’s edge?”[[19]](#footnote-19)

 Our present day culture of social media may present similar problems. Anyone can post, blog, and tweet. Anyone can put a message into the public square, and yet, never have a face to face or heart to heart dialog. There is a value to freedom of the press, even in the church. However, if that freedom is not responsible or spiritual it can produce more damage than good. It would have been beneficial for our forefathers to heed the Matthew 18 format, hopefully, we will be wise enough to heed it today. The ACMS debate would provide the fuel for the fire and it would be the debate over instrumental music in the church that would light the match.[[20]](#footnote-20)

## A Capella and Musical Instruments

The last major issue contributing to the division between the Churches of Christ and the Christian Church was the use of instrumental music in worship. This became a quite contentious debate among the disciples. It is important to note that the ACMS debate and the instrumental debates were developing concurrently. It is also important to note that the more conservative group who would become the Church of Christ would use the lens of the first-century example and necessary inference to support their views when it came to the use of instruments in worship. While there was not a clear thus says the Lord, they would argue that there was no evidence for the use of instruments in the early church. They then made the inference that since there was no example of it being used, it then should be forbidden. To be certain, scriptures were used to support their position, however, the validity of their argument was not accepted by the majority of the Restoration Movement at the time. Eventually, the larger part of the movement came to believe that the absence of a clear directive from the Lord allowed them the freedom to exercise their own congregational judgment in these matters. It is interesting that those who were so fiercely opposed to outside influence from missionary societies would come to believe that they had the right to impose their conviction about instrumental music on another autonomous congregation.

There seems to be a tendency of conservative/fundamental Christianity to fixate on certain non-essentials and expect all others to conform to the pattern of their convictions. My grandparents were members of a church that thought movies, cards, and dancing was sinful. You can see the genesis of this if you watch any western where the theatre, gambling, and the saloon environments were unspiritual environments. Some churches forbid women to wear makeup or have short hair. They all have their cultural reasons for their convictions. In Christ, they are certainly free to develop their own personal convictions and opinions. But, why are we so motivated to impress our opinions on others, compelling them to conform to that which God has not clearly mandated as essential? Why are we so driven to fix everyone? Does it not in the end backfire on us?

Missionary Societies and instrumental music were heated discussions among the disciples. People had strong convictions about them but generally speaking, they were not willing to divide over them. This is why the controversy continued for several decades without splitting the church. It was the actions of the “Editor Bishops” that created the partisan divide. They stoked the furnace and then a certain few unyielding fellows blew it to pieces. It really was not their doctrinal positions that caused the divide. Honestly, it was not even methodology. It was the unbending ideologies in the hands of inflexible men that brought about division and separation.

Attitudes toward saloon culture, zeal supporting the Temperance Movement, and the wealthy northern churches who were the introducers of the “innovation,” certainly had its impact on the controversy.[[21]](#footnote-21) And while the disciples had deep convictions, they were unwilling to divide until persuasive and charismatic individuals became firebrands on the issue. Moses E. Lard and Daniel Sommer were among those who would stoke the fires of division. Lard was heralded as one of the greatest preachers in the movement. While he was flexible in other areas of opinion, he had no tolerance for the use of instruments in worship. While many were willing to leave the controversy in the realm of opinion, Lard outlined reasons for disfellowshipping churches over the matter. The vocal and influential would cast the die and eventually, the Church of Christ would withdraw. The actions we take in unchecked zeal can have irreversible damage, having a negative impact on countless lives. In his later years, Moses E. Lard, the man described as “the prophet of radicalism, literalism, and conservatism,” expressed regret for his rigidness.[[22]](#footnote-22)

“If I had my life to live over,” he quotes him as saying as the shadows lengthened, “I would not preach another gospel, but I would preach the same gospel in a different spirit. I would not allow myself to be stranded on the desert of dogmatism and narrow construction of the love of God, but I would preach with a new vision of its meaning, that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’[[23]](#footnote-23)

There is a lesson to be learned from his unfettered zeal in youth, and one from the humility and wisdom that came with age.

While social influences likely played a role in the divide, the real rub was based in their philosophical approach to interpreting scripture. They did not divide based on that which was clearly stated in the word of God. They differed where the scriptures were silent, where it was not clear. One thought it allowed freedom and the other believed it prohibited innovations that were not exemplified in the apostolic church. They clearly had opposing philosophies and instead of listening to each other they broadcasted their views toward one another. If a married couple does not learn to say, “What I hear you saying is” the eventual outcome will not be desirable. If one does not “seek first to understand, and then to be understood” then the chance of relational stability is greatly diminished. Marriages with poor communication skills will certainly suffer for it.[[24]](#footnote-24) If the patterns of unhealthy communication persist then the relationship will likely not survive the years. At some point, one or the other will lose hope and say enough. Church movements are not dissimilar and in 1906 those who would become the Church of Christ officially separated from the mainstream SCM.

## Baptism, Re-Baptism, and the Borders of the Kingdom

When a group of people begins to define the borders of “the one true church” based on specific knowledge rather than the Gospel of Christ they set out on an ever narrowing journey. The result can only lead to separation and division among God’s redeemed people. This process took place among the disciples who fueled division among the SCM. Not only would a contentious debate erupt over rebaptism that would threaten unity, but other smaller groups would separate themselves claiming they were the “One True Church” based on their specific held beliefs. In such cases, man becomes the author of the division.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The Churches of Christ separated from the mainstream SCM in 1906, but all along between the years of 1897 and 1907 hundreds of articles were written about another contentious debate regarding rebaptism. The controversy centered on those who had in faith repented, made Jesus Lord, were immersed in obedience but did not specifically understand the design or mechanics of baptism. This is to say, they did not understand the point in time that remission of sins was applied. We now call this Baptismal Cognizance and the discussion is resurfacing again within the Church of Christ and the ICOC.[[26]](#footnote-26) In our forefathers’ time it was simply called rebaptism, and eventually became known as the Tennessee and Texas Tradition. At the center of this debate were two publications. On the Tennessee side was David Lipscomb and the Gospel Advocate. They held that immersion done with faith was valid even if the person did not understand the mechanics, i.e. the point and time whereby their sins were forgiven. On the Texas side was Austin McGary who established a publication called the Firm Foundation for the express purpose of rebuttal of the Gospel Advocates position.[[27]](#footnote-27) He affirmed that a baptism without specific knowledge of its purpose (remission of sins) was invalid. Below are excerpts from a John Mark Hicks article describing the real rub between the two sides of the debate.

Other than the increasing distance between the Christian Church and Churches of Christ (ranging on issues from instrumental music and missionary societies to ecumenical federation with denominational bodies and higher criticism), the most discussed question among Churches of Christ in the papers was rebaptism. I counted over 200 articles–not including notices of debates, books and pamphlets about the subject–from 1897-1907.

The specific question was whether Baptists (or other immersed persons) should be reimmersed in order to receive the “right hand of fellowship” for entrance into a congregation of the Church of Christ. On the one hand, David Lipscomb, James A. Harding, E. G. Sewell, J. C. McQuiddy, Daniel Sommer, and others (including all the editors of the Gospel Advocate) argued that anyone immersed upon a confession of faith in Jesus is a Christian. On the other hand, Austin McGary, J. D. Tant, J. W. Durst, and others (including all the editors of the Firm Foundation) argued that only those immersed with a specific knowledge their baptism was the appointed means of salvation are Christian. This is the most well known difference, perhaps, between the Tennessee and Texas Traditions within Churches of Christ.

And further in the same article:

The “rub” for the Texans was that it expanded the borders of the kingdom beyond those identified with the Churches of Christ. The critical issue was that congregations were receiving unsaved people into their fellowship. This was, as Tant revealed, a gospel issue. At root the Gospel Advocate was teaching other ways that sinners may be forgiven and enter the kingdom of Christ” (McGary, FF, 1901, 8).

The “rub” for the Tennesseans was the sectarian attitude that undermined the obedient faith of others. Lipscomb stressed that simple obedience to Jesus through faith was all the motive required for effectual baptism (see his “[What Constitutes Acceptable Obedience](http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/dlipscomb/dlsin.html)“). To require more is to undermine simple obedience itself because it is no longer faith but education, knowledge and doctrinal precision that determines acceptable obedience. Such a spiral ultimately destroys assurance because when knowledge becomes the ground rather than faith one can never be sure they know enough about their obedience for their obedience to be accepted. A faith in Jesus that moves one to obedience is sufficient faith no matter what else they know or don’t know or even falsely believe about their baptism. [[28]](#footnote-28)

David Lipscomb, the Gospel Advocate, and those who held to the Tennessee Tradition did make an exception in the event a person had not been baptized into the name of Jesus.[[29]](#footnote-29) Which was the case of the disciples in Acts 19: 1-7. The Tennessee side held that “for the remission of sin” is associated with the promise or the outcome and not associated with the command. [[30]](#footnote-30) Therefore, if one in faith surrenders his life to Jesus with a repented heart and lacks the knowledge of the exact point in which his sins were forgiven, it does not for that reason nullify his salvation. Faith is the required response and not knowledge. Those in opposition, the Texas Tradition, held that understanding “remission of sins” at baptism was part of the command. If they were to accept the Tennessee Tradition then they would subsequently have to accept that many are saved outside of the Church of Christ. Eventually, the Texas Tradition became the mainstream thinking in the Church of Christ. The result was a more exclusive and sectarian view of those who were saved. There are those who have maintained the Tennessee perspective within the Church of Christ and to my knowledge, this view is making a resurgence among them. [[31]](#footnote-31)

Long before the Tennessee and Texas Tradition debate arose Alexander Campbell had clearly communicated his views on this subject.

The mature Campbell’s views on baptism are more complicated than ours, which frequently is an exercise in reductionism. Campbell’s theology of baptism certainly affirmed the rite was for remission, though he strongly denied that cognitive comprehension of that fact was required by God —only submissive faith that was obedient. He based this view on the New Testament itself. Thus Campbell never made specific knowledge of remission the litmus test of biblical baptism. On the contrary he believed such a position was sectarian to the core and a denial of the principles of the restoration movement itself.[[32]](#footnote-32)

And,

Alexander Campbell responded in 1831 to a question about rebaptism put forward by Andrew Broaddus, a prominent Baptist minister. Campbell, who consistently addresses Broaddus as “brother,” says that though baptism is associated with remission that is not the total New Testament witness concerning the subject. He says,

“Remission of sins is, indeed, connected with baptism; but so is adoption, sanctification, and all the blessings of the new institution.” Campbell goes on to comment, “To be baptized for the remission of sins exclusively, is not what is meant by putting on Christ, or by being immersed into Christ. I know some will say the candidates which they immersed a second time did not rightly understand baptism the first time. Well, I am persuaded they did not understand it the second time; and shall they be baptized a third time!” [[33]](#footnote-33)

One would be hard pressed to find anyone in the SCM churches that would deny the design of baptism being for and unto the remission of sins. We certainly should teach and expect members to hold a biblically sound view of its purpose and design. Yet, we must be careful not to go beyond what is written.[[34]](#footnote-34) As we have seen, inference and deduction in the event of silence or uncertainty can lead to the division when one or the other takes a hardline or dogmatic view. One sees permission and the other for prohibition. The Pharisees were frequently enthralled in similar discussions, but Jesus had an amazing ability to not take the bait, to steer around controversy, and land on what was truly important faith. When we make logical deductions and inferences in regard to disputable matters we create unproductive controversy and we enter into a territory that belongs to God alone.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.[[36]](#footnote-36)

It is safe to say that we are saved by grace through faith and not saved by obedience through knowledge. [[37]](#footnote-37) Acts 2:38, among many other verses, clearly teaches at baptism we receive forgiveness of sins and we are added to the body of Christ. Yet, it seems clear that the same verse has two commands and two promises. [[38]](#footnote-38) That is if one repents (includes lordship vs 36 and faith vs37) and is baptized (two commands) he/she will be given remission of sins and the Holy Spirit (two promises). Can a promise be a promise and at the same time be a command? If you say to your son or daughter “you need to wash the car and vacuum the interior, and if you do I will give you ten dollars and buy you ice cream” it has two commands and two promises. The ten dollars is not a command and neither is the ice cream, it is a promise. So when we boil it all down, the question at the center of the debate was and is, does a person need to have specific knowledge of the exact moment his sins are forgiven? If that person does not have specific knowledge does that consequently make them lost?

I hesitate to share examples because they tend to be limited and they break down upon examination. However, for the sake of illustration, I will share two. My wife and I stood before a minister and were married. At what exact point did we actually become married? Was it when we placed the rings on each other, or when we kissed, or the pronouncement, or was it when we signed the marriage certificate? Perhaps it was when the certificate was filed and stamped by the registrar? To be honest, I do not know the answer. This does not for that reason nullify our marriage. Or suppose my wife and I take a road trip from Los Angeles California to Phoenix Arizona and I fall asleep along the way. While sleeping, unaware to me, we cross the state line into Arizona. Does my lack of knowledge that we crossed the border mean that we are still in California? That conclusion would be incoherent and absurd. If I thought I was in California but actually in Arizona would I be protected by the laws of California or by the laws of Arizona? The answer is obvious. The illustrations are not perfect but I trust that you get the point.

If I required a complete knowledge of faith when I was baptized then I would certainly be lost today. If I required a complete knowledge of repentance, the same would be true. I surrendered to Jesus when I was baptized, but I can tell you that I did not know fully what that meant. God has torqued, twisted, and mashed my surrender button for thirty-six years and I am still learning what surrender means. I understand that some may disagree with my conclusions. In the past, I disagreed with my conclusions. The truth be told, one side can reason one way and the other side can reason another. Not everything is crystal clear in scripture and I think God intended it that way. Not that we would argue and quarrel, but rather, that we would in love of Christ find unity in our diversity. Thank God that we do not have to get our life and doctrine perfect to be in the kingdom of God!

We must be careful not to drill down on ever narrowing views of doctrine and create a mindset that excludes those who do not exactly fit our own perception of the truth. Salvation does not rest on perfectly understanding and obeying New Testament doctrine; it is based on obedience to the gospel of Jesus. Making inferences and deductions about the salvation of others based on how perfectly they obey the first-century pattern will not lead to unity. Respecting and allowing unity in diversity to exist alongside deep convictions is not antithetical to the other. In fact, it helps us to grow closer to God by listening to one another and to the Spirit. It steers us away from entrenched ideologies and doctrinal bias. Unity will not come by doctrinal purity, it does, however, come by the Spirit of Christ.[[39]](#footnote-39) It is my conviction that God unites us by the Gospel and not by sectarian doctrinal positions. Carl Ketcherside in The Twisted Scriptures explains this concept well:

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned (Mark 16:15,16).

Incredible as it may seem, this has become one of the "twisted scriptures." As a result, that which was ordained to save the world is used to divide the church. That which was designed to be glad tidings to hungry sinners has become sad news to harassed saints. All of the confusion stems from the fact that many have lost the scriptural distinction between the gospel, the Message to lead men to believe in Jesus as the Son of God; and the doctrine, which is a course of instruction for the training, development and growth of the children of God.

He further writes:

Before we deal with the scriptural connotation involved let us understand why, what has become a traditional interpretation, is conducive to division and destructive of unity. The common fallacy assumes that all of the apostolic epistles are part of the gospel of Christ and any exposition of the doctrine contained in these letters is preaching the gospel. Since Jesus makes salvation contingent upon believing the gospel, and superficial students generally confuse belief with knowledge, it is further assumed that those who do not subscribe to the orthodox interpretation placed upon every passage thereby "reject the gospel." Each sect, party or faction, thus makes its traditional explanations and deductions "the gospel" and we end up with as many "gospels" as we have parties.

 It is easily understandable that the ones who so reason will conclude that only those who are allied with the party will be saved, and all others are outside the pale since they have not "obeyed the gospel" (that is, subscribed to the unwritten partisan creed). But we learn from observation, experience and the sacred scriptures, that we do not all have the same degree of knowledge. God has made us all to differ in the intellectual realm as we do in the physical. We can no more all think alike than we can all look alike. No two of us on earth attain to the same identical degree of knowledge about everything at the same moment. As Will Rogers remarked, "We are all ignorant, but just about different things."

 Any attempt to secure unity upon the basis of uniformity of knowledge or conformity in deductive or inferential processes (i.e., doctrinal interpretation) is doomed before it begins. It must inevitably end in dividing that which it seeks to unite. For this reason, those who make such attempts must always resort to creation of external authoritarian power structures in order to compel conformity. This is generally done by investing a person or group with an aura of infallibility so that all non-conformity with the orthodox creed can be equated with rebellion against God. To dissent is to "deny the authority of the scriptures." Every individual who desires to be regarded as "loyal" must surrender his right to reason and think upon God's revelation to the "power bloc" and "unity" is maintained by legislation handed down, as well as by fear of social rejection by the group accompanied by reprisal for dissent.[[40]](#footnote-40)

It is the Gospel that unites us as brothers and sisters in Christ. God is the one who sets the boundaries of the Kingdom by the Gospel of Jesus. As Ketcherside well said,

Any attempt to secure unity upon the basis of uniformity of knowledge or conformity in deductive or inferential processes (i.e., doctrinal interpretation) is doomed before it begins. It must inevitably end in dividing that which it seeks to unite.

It is our faith and obedience to the gospel that unites us in Christ. The Hebrew writer tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God.[[41]](#footnote-41) To my knowledge, the Bible does not teach without knowledge it is impossible to please God. It does teach that grace and peace come from knowing God and that increasing in your knowledge of Him will keep you from becoming ineffective and unproductive. [[42]](#footnote-42) Personally, I have not found scripture that teaches that one must understand the mechanics of baptism for it to be effectual. So here in lies the crossroad, can I be in error (and I may be) and still be saved? Can I be incorrect in my understanding of who is in the kingdom and who is not and still be saved? I believe I can, and I believe you can too. Is not God a God who “rewards those who earnestly seek him” in faith? [[43]](#footnote-43) My complete understanding of doctrine is not what makes me right with Jesus, but my faith and obedience to the gospel message do. My understanding, or lack thereof, does not change the borders of the kingdom. God is in charge and he does not need my council. However, I can be assured of this that our mutual faith and response to the gospel does bind us together into the body of Christ. Now, Paul taught that we should watch our life and doctrine closely.[[44]](#footnote-44) I am not discounting the importance of sound doctrine, I am saying we should be careful in our judgement of who is and who is not in the Kingdom.

Is it possible that the Church of Christ and the ICOC hindered their growth by the acceptance of exclusive and sectarian ideologies? The SCM was on its way to becoming one of the fastest growing movements in history. The Church of Christ grew from 159,000 in 1906 to nearly 2.5 million in the 1950’s to 1960’s, however, the membership as of 2015 has fallen to about 1.2 million. [[45]](#footnote-45) The conservatives tend to blame the liberals among them for not respecting the “old paths’ and for introducing “innovation”. This intolerance continues to plague the Church of Christ and it has a diminishing effect on its membership. For example, The Oak Hills Church of Christ was the largest Church of Christ in the nation and when they introduced the option of instrumental music they were left out of the national Church of Christ directory the following year. The progressive’s claim that dogmatic, legalistic, and fundamentalist attitudes contributing to the decline. [[46]](#footnote-46) They are stating that their children are leaving and rejecting the Church of Christ. Others suggest that is it because we are living in a post-modern culture and that all denominations are shrinking. Yet, this does not seem logical as many other non-denominational churches are growing rapidly across the United States. It seems to me that those who accept sectarian ideologies eventually collapse under the weight of their own exclusive and judgmental attitudes. There is a law of reaping and sowing at play and if a church is not filled with grace then it will certainly not grow by the power of His grace.

You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.’” So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.[[47]](#footnote-47)

There is diversity within the SCM regarding baptism, rebaptism, and the borders of the kingdom. Some may soften the necessity of teaching that baptism is the point and time of salvation. They may simply stress that it is a command of Jesus and should be observed. Others emphasize only those understanding baptism being for “the remission of sins” will be saved. Still, there are those teaching a conservative doctrine of baptism and yet refrain from dogmatically excluding those who may not completely understand the mechanics of baptism. These can still hold to deep convictions regarding the design of baptism and yet take a non-judgmental, non-exclusive, attitude toward those who have surrendered in faith and have been immersed into the name of Jesus. While the diversity of opinion does exist, we are fortunate that we are not the One who decides. The gospel is what unites us as brothers. Unfortunately far too often it is doctrinal positions that divide us. May God help us to unite and may we in unity be “free to differ, but not to divide.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

## Is Silence Really Golden?

The ICOC has a history beyond the Boston Movement, the Crossroads Movement, or even the Church of Christ. Our history is rooted in the Stone-Campbell Movement which formed as independent groups who rejected denominational hierarchies and united under the idea of *“Christians only, not the only Christians”*. They adopted mottos such as *“In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”* which is credited to Rupertus Meldenius.[[49]](#footnote-49) It has in other terms been adopted as *“In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, love.”* [[50]](#footnote-50) The SCM adapted the above in similar forms from the Reformation Movement and unfortunately, it was eclipsed in the SCM by a motto given by Thomas Campbell. Leroy Garrett addresses this motto “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak, where the Scriptures are silent we are silent” as well as anyone.

But none of the mottoes, original or borrowed, has blown up in our faces like this one that Thomas Campbell bequeathed to us. It is, unfortunately, the one we’ve paid most attention to. Others that might have turned us in the right direction we have virtually ignored, particularly Barton Stone’s great dictum, “Let Christian unity be our polar star.” And there is one that we have blatantly disobeyed: “We are free to differ but not to divide.” It is the motto that we all have memorized and practiced the most that has boomeranged on us, serving as fodder for our multiplicity of divisions: Where the Scriptures speak we speak, where the Scriptures are silent we are silent.

As to whether we have failed the motto or it has failed us depends on what Campbell meant by it or how we interpret it. Campbell never expanded on what he meant by it. He first introduced it to the Christian Association of Washington, the para-church entity he organized in 1809 when he launched his movement to unite the Christians in all the sects. When it was pointed out that if he followed such a rule he would have to give up infant baptism, he conceded that such might be the case, a decision he finally made. But Campbell never examined the broader implications of his motto as a rule of interpretation, such as whether something is forbidden if it is not expressly stated in Scripture, or if we are authorized to act only “where the Scriptures speak.”

Because of what Campbell says in his “Declaration and Address” it is highly unlikely that he intended his motto to be supportive of “blueprint hermeneutics,” which underlies all our factions, each of which says of its particular “issue”: We are being silent where the Bible is silent, whether it is Sunday school, instrumental music, societies, or the sponsoring church. [[51]](#footnote-51) In that unity document Campbell recognized the principle of unity in diversity, and at one point referred to “the general rule of obedience” that allows for “some variety of opinion and practice.” He went on to say that such diversity existed in the apostolic churches without any breach of unity, and that it can be true today.[[52]](#footnote-52)

The first generation of the SCM preserved unity out of sheer will. Barton Stone coined the motto “Let Christian unity be our polar star”. Yet, the second generation had less respect for diversity and the lines between that which was essential and that which was opinion became increasingly blurred. Some within the movement became more sectarian and exclusive in their thinking. Rejecting “We are free to differ but not to divide” they fixated on being right over and above their quest for Christian unity. Leroy Garrett aptly communicated how “where the Scriptures are silent we are silent” backfired and did not serve the movement well. Some believed that silence provided freedom to choose, others believed that silence prohibited the practice. Neither views are necessarily harmful unto themselves. What makes either destructive to unity is when one imposes their view on the other; thereby replacing grace with judgment and unyielding dogmatic pronouncements. Thomas Campbell did not intend, as Garrett states, to promote “blueprint hermeneutics”, however, sides were taken and bias was supported by opposing publications. The debate over issues became heated, yet, at the core was ideologies rather than sound hermeneutics. The love of Christ was replaced with a battlefield; a civil war ensued and brother turned against brother. The narrative being played out on the national stage, namely the American Civil War and the attitudes surrounding it, had a dramatic effect on the SCM. Eventually, the battles within the SCM would have its toll and the Church of Christ would secede from the SCM union in 1906. While the United States of America would remain one nation, the unity of the SCM would not survive.

The SCM started with noble intentions to reject creeds, denominational hierarchy, and authoritarian leadership that was common in their day. They sought a union based in biblical truth and congregational independence. Yet, as the second generation came into its own, ideological and doctrinal lines began to be drawn by publications and personalities to the detriment of unity within the fellowship. Unity in diversity was not respected. The model in Matthew 18 was not observed. Names were mentioned in open letters and publications, characterizations were not kind or charitable. The quest for being right became more important than the mutual relationship they shared in Christ. The “Search for the Ancient Order” took primacy over “the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”[[53]](#footnote-53) [[54]](#footnote-54)

There are various efforts to reunite the SCM after more than a century since the split. It seems that the churches taking a more a more progressive and centrist view are the congregations that are growing more rapidly. These moves are certainly aiding in this effort. At the same time, there are still those who are intolerant to diversity and will likely continue to exclude themselves from those who think, practice, and worship differently. It is quite likely that those who hold such positions will continue to dwindle in membership as those who think more inclusively and embrace diversity will continue to grow. On the other end of the spectrum, The Disciples of Christ have embraced more liberal views of inspiration and adopted denominational leadership models. While we will not find common ground in these areas we should still in love refrain from judging those with whom we disagree. Individuals can still obey the gospel and at the same time hold incorrect doctrinal views. Salvation is not predicated on our rightness, but rather, on His righteousness. It is the Gospel that joins us together as sons and daughters under a gracious God. Whether by knowledge, deduction, or inference, whether by doctrine, culture, or attitude, we should not divide what God has joined together. If one in faith makes Jesus lord, repents, and is immersed in the name of Jesus then God promises remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Unity in Christ is based solely on the gospel of Christ. Men create tribes and borders and men author division in the body. It is incumbent on us to:

Live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.[[55]](#footnote-55)

With respect to the Independent Christian Church / Churches of Christ, one could argue that they, throughout the years, have held the more centrist position within the three larger branches of the Stone-Campbell Movement. They have in many ways been the protectors of the SCM spirit as Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, and the founders of the SCM would have envisioned. Since our departure from the Church of Christ, we (ICOC) have matured in many ways and have moved away from many of the unhealthy practices we once held. To be sure, we must continue our efforts to be led by the Spirit and follow the will of Him to which we belong. It is encouraging to me that as we mature we are finding that we have much more commonalities with the Christian Church and with those more progressive thinkers within the Church of Christ than previously thought. I am convinced that strengthening these bonds will not only mutually benefit us all but will foster a spirit of brotherhood that will help us reach a lost world. Certainly, there are cultural differences among us that would likely prohibit full and complete merger as one fellowship. However, we have much in common that would allow us to cooperate and learn from one another. As I have said previously, it may be a simple cup of coffee or a lunch that promotes unity and an environment of mutual growth and learning. Maybe it is the extension of the “right hand of fellowship” that would keep us from unhealthy assumptions of one another. Maybe in our generation, we can break the age-old patterns that have divided us, and continue to divide us. Maybe, by the will of God, we can embrace the prayer of Jesus in John 17. That we can become one not based on perfection, performance, or hermeneutic philosophy, but rather, by the “unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

Ours is not to criticize, judge, or label those who have gone before us. We should, however, be wise and learn from the history that they have laid out for us. As Eleanor Roosevelt once said:

Learn from the mistakes of others. You can’t live long enough to make them all yourself.

Time is a precious commodity and we must be careful not to relive the mistakes of those who have gone before us. If we are good students of history we can save ourselves, and our children, from many unfortunate outcomes. We will never eliminate them all, and we will certainly make our own that future generations will learn and grow from. May we choose to build our future wisely.

A little over 100-years ago the Church of Christ separated from then the larger mainstream SCM. At roughly 105,000 in membership, we (ICOC) are not quite the size of the 1906 Church of Christ. The next 50-years would see extraordinary numerical growth. They surged to approximately 2.5 million members by the 1950’s, only to plummet to about half of that number currently. While it is possible that we in the ICOC may yet see our largest period of growth yet in the ensuing years, it is our responsibility to learn from the past and move forward building wisely. What will our children say about the narratives that we have adopted or will adopt? What will they say about our Christian worldview? What conclusions will they draw from our ability to manage conflict, disagreement, and/or diversity of thought and practice? We all want them to be proud of us! While I love the principles and the dreams that were laid out by our forefathers in the SCM, I am not particularly proud of the way the SCM has conducted its self in the light of that dream. We have not done unity well in the SCM. That DNA will certainly have a bearing on our future one way or the other. While their past is water under the bridge, we must now glean from it what we can and move to a future that our children would be proud of. I believe, the ICOC can have our best days forward. I believe we have the opportunity to be a standard-bearer for the future of the SCM. We have before us the opportunity to grow with balance and integrity. Let us extend the “right hand of fellowship” to the broader SCM with love and zeal for the future. Let us learn from each other and reach out to a lost world. Let us renounce any exclusive and sectarian philosophies that may still remain among us. Let us grow the Lord’s church and be an example of those who hold firmly to our convictions but leave judgmental attitudes in the past. Let us reflect on the words of Leroy Garret speaking of Thomas Campbell’s vision of the apostolic church and the church today:

Campbell recognized the principle of unity in diversity, and at one point referred to “the general rule of obedience” that allows for “some variety of opinion and practice.” He went on to say that such diversity existed in the apostolic churches without any breach of unity, and that it can be true today.[[57]](#footnote-57)

## Lessons and Considerations for the ICOC

If we look to the past and glean no application for how we live currently, then we have certainly wasted our time. We should heed the advice of Eleanor Roosevelt who warned that we cannot live long enough to make all mistakes ourselves. And in so doing, we hope to shape a better future for our children and theirs. If we choose this course we will welcome honest evaluation. We will do so consistently and continuously. We will do so with courage and conviction, humility and grace, and we will do so with any and all. We will seek wisdom from those with whom we differ, and those who make us uncomfortable. We will value input from those who may be unconventional, and those who imperfectly or unpleasantly present their message? We will courageously seek wisdom from a diversity of thought rather than an assembly that will support our own bias. In other words, we will be humble before God and our fellow man.

Before proceeding to the discussion of lessons and considerations that we in the ICOC may take away from the SCM, I would reaffirm what was said at the outset of this paper.

I do recognize that we have hundreds of churches spread across the globe. That each congregation has its own personality and culture. I understand that any attempt to address our movement as a whole may contain generalities that may or may not apply. I pray that this will not be received as criticism but rather as observations and a request for consideration.[[58]](#footnote-58)

With these thoughts in mind, let us consider that in any organization there can be a difference between stated views or culture, and that which is actually experienced. Whether in a corporation, a marriage, a family, or in a church, our view of who we are and what we communicate does not always square with what is experienced. It is also important to note that in any large organization, such as the church, there are subcultures that function and communicate differently. Therefore what may be true for one may not be true for all. The important thing is that we must not let our perception or bias be the determining litmus test. No individual, no group or culture sees itself clearly. If we wish to see clearly we must reach out to those who would give us clarity. As we do so, let us consider how we may develop a culture that promotes growth and sustainability, tolerance and inclusion, and let us seek best practices that will promote solidarity and at the same time protect conservative hermeneutic principles.

### Valuing Unity in Diversity

There seems to be a need in human nature for some to gravitate to exactness, to the letter of the law, or to conformity. Some have a greater need for the clearly defined, rules of engagement, uniform practice, or dictums. Others have a greater need for diversity, unrestrictive environments, and collaboration. They thrive and need creative environments that allow for individual expression and creativity. There are examples of successful organizations on either side, and there are those who have been able to marry together the strengths of each.

Jesus was not a conventional leader and He did not start a conventional movement. His leadership style did not mirror our classic western corporate leadership model, and it did not conform to the patterns of leadership in His time either. [[59]](#footnote-59) Yet, he was clearly purpose driven, he was incredibly disciplined and focused. Furthermore, his core leaders were incredibly diverse in character and profession. Jesus did not entrust his movement to Ph.D.’s in organizational management. He entrusted it to 12 disillusioned leaders who had scattered under stress and had gone back to their previous lives. His church was not built by branding a corporate model and structure to be replicated in every nation. In fact, as the church in Jerusalem grew to a sizable population, Jesus allowed it to be struck by persecution. That event scattered the disciples around the known world. It was the Spirit that led the church and not a well-oiled leadership model. This does not diminish the value of studying and applying effective leadership, it simply means that the success of the church does not rely on highly structured models. It does not rely on control of the message and/or practice. It does not require uniformity or conformity. It can be argued that the church does much better in an environment that respects and values unity in diversity.

The SCM set out on a course to restore “first-century Christianity”. They were looking to return to the pattern of worship in the apostolic church. Yet, using that model is highly subjective depending on the lens you use. In my view, the goal of the apostolic church was not to create a model for all others to follow. The goal of the first-century church was to follow Jesus, and He gave them the Spirit as a guide.[[60]](#footnote-60) So let’s try putting the Holy Spirit into a leadership model box, shall we? Jesus speaking to Nicodemus says:

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”[[61]](#footnote-61)

Now, it is important to note that there was structure, leadership, and leadership models in the early church. However, there was also the allowance for diversity and the leadership of the Spirit.[[62]](#footnote-62) One only needs to look at the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 as a case model for this discussion.

It would seem that two things happened, in reference to diversity, within the SCM that contributed to the division. First, those holding to a more rigid or conservative view were inflexible in their hermeneutic approach. They viewed their position as right and all others as wrong. They viewed those who were “in error” as not being in fellowship. Consequently, they developed an exclusive and sectarian view toward all others who differed from their understanding of scripture. They viewed being right with God in conjunction with doctrinal purity. This creates a superiority by knowledge, which was the practice of Gnostics who authored much division within the early church. Secondly, those who held the more open hermeneutic view (more balanced in my view) could have yielded their freedom in Christ in order to preserve the unity.[[63]](#footnote-63) Often there is a middle path if we can hang in there, listen to one another, and be led by the Spirit. If we can refrain from labeling and diagnosing one another we have a better chance at preserving the unity. It is when we become entrenched in our thinking that irreconcilable differences develop, where it becomes impossible to live at peace with the other. [[64]](#footnote-64)

Now some may argue a case for conformity based on John 17:20-23. Fortunately, being “one in mind all of the time” is not the intent of Jesus when He used the word “one”, or when He prayed “so that they may be brought to complete unity.” [[65]](#footnote-65) In fact, the New International Version (NIV) loses something in translation. A more literal translation such as the New American Standard Bible (NASB) better communicates the original meaning. It reads, “that they may be perfected in unity”. The Interlinear Bible (literal translation) reads almost exactly the same, “that – they might be – perfected – in – unity”. The idea here is that we are in a process of being perfected in unity, individually and collectively. None of us have arrived at the place where all others need to unite. Christian unity is better served when we focus on uniting ourselves to Jesus. Let us learn from one another and refrain from fixing and steering one another.

Another may argue by citing 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 as a proof-text for conformity. It is true that Paul exhorts the Corinthians to agree and not have divisions among them. That they should be “made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.”[[66]](#footnote-66) Contextually, he is speaking to a group of disciples that had succumbed to partisan politics and were fighting and quarreling among themselves. The teaching here is not about conformity to a pattern, but rather, unity in the presence of diversity. Paul is teaching about a process of coming together in the face of diverse thought. That when they disagree they should come together and “be made complete”. The Greek root word for “made complete” is καταρτίζω (kä-tär-tē'-zō) and is defined “to completely and thoroughly repair or to adjust, fit, frame, mend, or restore something that has been rend or torn”. The idea is to mend or knit together something that has been torn. Forming a “same mind” and presenting a “same judgment” becomes much easier when we adopt the above mindset. None of us have a full or complete understanding of the mind of God, His word, or doctrine. God is not looking for conformity within congregations or individuals. He is looking for a people who would come together with a desire to adjust, fit, frame, mend and restore that which has been broken.

Certain groups and individuals within the SCM did not embrace the above understanding and consequently traded unity of the Spirit for a false unity based on conformity. We in the ICOC have made this mistake in the past. We have since made positive changes that are leading us to a better future. As new challenges, issues, and controversies arise let us not make the same mistake again. May we embrace one another with the Spirit of Christ who would have us unite in love, and value unity in diversity.

### Media, Platforms, and Publication

The ICOC in its formative years was less accepting of diverse opinions, views, and practice. However, since 2003 we have grown in our openness and acceptance of diversity. We have become more accepting of diversity in practice, in methodology, and insight or contrasting views. While we have grown, from my limited vantage point, we have much more work to do in this area. There is a growing tide of staff and non-staff members willing to speak up. The question is what will happen as individuals feel more courageous and free to communicate their convictions, opinions, and views? How will we handle this? How will the “leaders” among us respond when staff or non-staff have contrasting views from theirs? How will the “rank and file” member in the public square (social media or digital platforms) respond? [[67]](#footnote-67) What will happen if those with differing views are rebuffed, marginalized, disparaged, or discounted? Can we keep our communication positive and beneficial or will it go negative to the detriment of all? Will we respond in a way that would make Jesus proud or in a way that would encourage and empower the enemy?

What lessons can we glean from our SCM brothers who have gone before us? Is it not that we should be very careful about what we write? Language is very important and we must be careful how we use it. The SCM widely used journals and publications that created much controversy. It was not the media that led to the 1906 division, it was the way that the media was used. The media was used in such a way that valued being right over and above relationship. Their positions became more important than people. Their convictions led to controversy rather than collaboration and consideration. Paul told Titus:

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.[[68]](#footnote-68)

We must not think that we are above making the same mistakes. We are a passionate people who feel strongly about our faith and our practice of it. We can go down the same road that our forefathers took. We should certainly protect ourselves from doing so.

It is one thing to publish a position paper. It is quite different to side brother against brother, group against group, or publication against publication. With the advent of social and digital media, anyone can post or publish material. When we do publish material we should do so with great care and respect. We should be careful about mentioning names. We should not malign, disparage, or call into question the motives of one another. We should be careful not to label, diagnose, or make inferences about one another. We should not disparage, discount, or demean one another because we disagree or see things differently. Many in the SCM did not adhere to these principles and the consequences were dire. It seems wise that before we disagree with one another in the public square we should first diligently labor to agree one on one. Jesus gave us a model for conflict resolution and it is still the gold standard.

If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.[[69]](#footnote-69)

If you disagree or take issue with what a brother or sister has said, written, preached, or taught then Jesus tells us to take it to that brother or sister alone. Do not call, or email, your friend and express your concern or disagreement about someone else. Do not go to your leader. Do not post your disagreement. Do not write an article on your website or blog. And for the sake of Jesus and His church do not get up and preach or teach about it in front of your congregation or small group. Do not do it, period! If it is that important to you, follow Matthew 18. Pick up the phone, drive across town, or buy a plane ticket if you have too. Get on your knees with each other and let the Spirit guide your actions. But, whatever you do, do not divide the church over your opinion or position. “We are free to disagree, but not to divide.”[[70]](#footnote-70)

Jesus also gave us a pattern to follow in the event that you realize someone has something against you.

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.[[71]](#footnote-71)

In other words, as far as it depends on you go and make it right.[[72]](#footnote-72) Jesus tells us that our first priority is “to go and be reconciled”. We should not procrastinate because we are uncomfortable or fearful. We should take the initiative and go.

If we wish to sustainably grow the church, and not perpetuate our propensity to divide, then we must take these things seriously. Let us seek unity of the Spirit over and above our perception of what is right. Let us build “our” relationship with God and each other, being careful not to compromise either for the protection of our positions or principles. Let us leave room for grace and the leadership of the Spirit. For God is able to make even the weak to stand.[[73]](#footnote-73) Every one of us has been wrong, even when we thought we were right. Have we not all at some point seen something as black and white, only to find out later that our perspective was compromised or incomplete in some way? There is no doubt that interconnectivity, digital platforms, and social media will continue to increase in popularity. They are great and useful tools that can and will have a positive impact. Yet, the very thing that can be used for good, can also be destructive. And if he can, Satan will use it to divide our fellowship. Let it not be so!

### Pride, Arrogance, and Humility

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.[[74]](#footnote-74)

But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.[[75]](#footnote-75)

If humility had been employed leading up to the division between the Church of Christ and the Christian Church it may have never happened. If they had heeded “lean not on your own understanding” and if some had not been “wise in your own eyes” then the outcome would have likely been quite different. I have studied SCM church history for many years now and from my perspective humility was the needed medicine for the patient. Unfortunately, it was in short supply during the second generation of the SCM. Certain men were unyielding, harsh, and unkind. They engaged in monolog and not dialog. They did not have ears to hear, nor eyes to see. They were overbearing. They were wise in their own eyes and they caused more damage than good. “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”[[76]](#footnote-76) That is exactly what happen, the unity between them fell.

It is important that we value humility above all in our leaders. It is crucial that we do not protect or promote those who lack humility. In 2003, God discipled us for our pride and arrogance. He chastised us for allowing the angry and overbearing to lead us. It was a painful time for all of us. For some, it was more painful than others. Yet, God led us through that time and we are better for it. I believe God has dreams to use the ICOC to reach hundreds of thousands, if not millions for Jesus in the future. However, I am convinced we need to finish the work that was started in 2003. We need to be a people known for our humility, and our leaders must lead the way humbly as servants.

Certainly, a great many of us are embracing a whole-hearted commitment to serve and lead with humility. They have become, and are becoming, good listeners. They are those who are learning and seeking, to collaborate with their flock. They are people who can take, and are seeking out, input and evaluation from those above and below them, as well as peers. [[77]](#footnote-77) They are leaders who build through consensus and pull their people in as stakeholders and co-heirs of the promise. They are those who are open and transparent themselves. They are open and transparent with the inner workings of the church. They are those who view no question or concern as off limits, or as a threat. They do not shut down dialog but rather open it up, and clearly, communicate that they appreciate and welcome it. They seek first to understand and then to be understood.[[78]](#footnote-78) They view fellow disciples under their care as partners in the faith and not as “the church that they lead.”[[79]](#footnote-79) I am fortunate to be in a ministry with an evangelist who is seeking to lead with these qualities. I am very grateful to God for him.

I am encouraged to see many adopting these practices and attitudes. It is my prayer that we continue to embrace and encourage these qualities in our leaders. Let us speak up when they are absent. Jesus had a few things to say about leadership.

It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant (diakonos: a servant, minister), and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave (doulos: someone who belongs to another; a bond-slave).[[80]](#footnote-80)

But the greatest among you shall be your servant (diakonos: a servant, minister). “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.[[81]](#footnote-81)

Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant (diakonos: a servant, minister) of all.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. “But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant (diakonos: a servant, minister); and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave (doulos: someone who belongs to another; a bond-slave) of all. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”[[83]](#footnote-83)

It is important that we embrace His model and be careful not to let the world creep into our leadership narratives. Let us be “free to disagree, but not free to divide”. Let us continue to move forward with humility, inclusion, and collaboration. Let us all have ears to hear and eyes to see, and let us not be wise in our own eyes.

### Exclusivism and Sectarianism

There is so much that I respect about the heart and soul of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Its original focus to “unite the sects” among Christendom. The focus to unite on essentials and allowing diversity in opinion. To be not the only Christians, but Christians only. To leave behind denominational doctrines and creeds, and unite on the word of God. The founders of the movement were highly intelligent and well-educated individuals and they had an incredible dream. They sought to reform that which had become fiercely divided and extremely sectarian. However, something went tragically wrong and manifested itself in the second generation. The enemy planted a seed that would produce bad fruit. A legalistic and sectarian exclusivism would infiltrate the ranks of the faithful. This attitude would have a devastating effect on the hearts of the disciples. That seed would bear fruit that was not in keeping with the dream of the movement’s founders. It was not healthy fruit and did not promote health among those who consumed it.

 Leroy Garrett, prominent SCM historian, for more than 50-years had been a “voice in the wilderness” until he went to be with the Lord in 2015. In his controversial book “What Must the Church of Christ Do to Be Saved?” he spoke clearly about the sin that has plagued the Church of Christ.

The sin that we must confess is our patent refusal to have anything to do with other churches and other Christians. In the old days we attacked other churches from the pulpit and mailed out tracts condemning “denominationalism,” implying of course that we were not a denomination. On the radio we “skinned the sects” and we debated anyone who had the nerve to take us on. We soon gained the reputation of believing that we were the only true church, the only faithful Christians, and the only ones going to heaven. We succeeded in causing other believers to resent us if not hate us. When they showed such resentment our response was that they didn’t really want the truth. In rejecting us they rejected God himself!

In recent years this “skin the sects” attitude has declined. We are now more mature, better educated, wealthier, and more responsible. Sociologists would say we are moving from sect-type church to a denomination-type, which is typical of religious bodies our age. But we are almost as sectarian and exclusivistic as we have ever been. We are now more subtle, more benign in our sectarianism. These days we may not talk about other churches and believers the way that we once did, but we still have nothing to do with them. It is as if other churches did not even exist. If it is a joint Thanksgiving or Easter service, no matter how glorious a service it may be, you can count on the Church of Christ having nothing to do with it. Even if it is a joint community effort involving all the churches, such as a campaign to help the homeless, we will not be in on it. It is now common knowledge that if the Church of Christ does anything it does it alone. The Church of Christ has nothing to do with other churches and other Christians (period!).[[84]](#footnote-84)

In the same chapter he goes on to say:

There is only one answer to all this: We must change our ways and confess that we are wrong. We are wrong when we imply that we are the only true church or that we are the only Christians. We are wrong when we suggest that people have to belong to what we call the “Church of Christ to be saved and to go to heaven. We are grievously wrong when we believe that if people are “not of us” they are going to hell.

In order to believe that we are right we do not have to believe that everyone else is wrong. Jesus warned his disciples against a self-righteousness that assumes that if others are “not with us” they cannot be doing the work of God (Mk. 9:38-39). Our own pioneers never thought of themselves as the only Christians and the only true church, forging the motto, “We are not the only Christians, but Christians only”.

Our preachers and elders need to say it before our assemblies, We have been wrong! I am positive it will have a revolutionary effect for the good. There is nothing we could do that would be more liberating for our people. And our leadership would be surprised as to how many would say they never believed that way anyhow!

Garrett wrote the above to the mainstream Church of Christ. Some within the Church of Christ have embraced him with gratitude for having the courage to articulately speak about what they were already feeling and thinking. In contrast, there are those who have heard his message and taken offense. As I read the above, I cannot help considering that this (with a few minor adjustments) could have been written to us in the ICOC. It is possible that some in the ICOC may take offense at Garrett’s words, and more particularly my suggestion that we might learn something from them. I certainly hope that that is not the case. We do, however, have the freedom in Christ to express our convictions, provided that we do so responsibly.

Certainly, we can point to many changes that we have made since 2003. I certainly would agree that we have made great strides. I am encouraged by these changes and I am grateful to those who have labored in faith to bring them about. Leadership can be a lonely place and a thankless role, and we must appreciate those who have ushered in reform. And so, I will repeat my admiration for those who held things together and forged change among us. Nevertheless, in my view, the water has not fully passed under the bridge. I am uncomfortable with the exclusive and sectarian attitudes that still exist among us. I am convinced that I am not alone in my concern. I believe Garret is correct when he said, *“In order to believe that we are right we do not have to believe that everyone else is wrong.”* We do not have to sacrifice sound hermeneutics to discard our exclusive attitudes. We do not have to look with judgment and criticism toward those who are not “with us” or “of us”. We are not the judges, nor are we God’s policemen. We are ambassadors of Christ, and it is important that our behavior is consistent with that role. [[85]](#footnote-85)

Is it possible that we in the ICOC have cleaned the outside of the cup in respect to these attitudes? Are we willing to look inside the cup, not to glance, but to really look? In fact, there are among us those who are looking deeply at these attitudes that plague us. There are those who have, over the years, called us to examine our view of grace. Those who have challenged areas of legalism. There are those among us, who are now reexamining our tendency toward exclusive and sectarian mindsets. Yet, why is it so difficult for us to discuss these matters openly? I am convinced that there are “prominent” leaders among us who would have us cast off these negative attitudes. I am also convinced that many within our ranks would be overjoyed if we did. Are we not building a house of cards by allowing these views and attitudes to exist among us? Many, maybe even half or more, of our fellowship would feel liberated if our leaders would fully embrace where we have been wrong in this area. They would be overjoyed if we would admit the error and reteach how we should view and speak and think about those who are not “with us” and yet are Christ followers. I can say as one person, they would not lose my respect, but rather gain it! I also believe that our members might start sharing their faith again, not because they “should” but because they are inspired to do so.

Could fear be the reason we allow these seeds to grow among us? In my experience, many of us have come to these same conclusions, to one degree or another. Some have developed their convictions by much study and consideration and are able to clearly articulate their beliefs. Some have derived their beliefs by more instinctual conclusions (one is not necessarily more spiritual than the other). In other words, they say or instinctually feel something like “I never really believed that.” If fear is the reason that we do not openly discuss this matter, then what is it that we are afraid of? Are we afraid that we will lose our distinctiveness and consequently lose our people? I personally know several former members of the ICOC who are now faithful followers of Jesus, who are in other parts of the SCM or have found other congregations where they could worship and serve the Lord. Is it possible that we have pruned, either actively or passively, more sincere disciples than we currently number? If that is so, how is that to our benefit? Is it possible that some are afraid of losing their position of leadership? Are we afraid of losing acceptance among our peers? I certainly will not assume that everyone shares my convictions. I also understand that this is a sensitive topic among our fellowship. However, if we have strong convictions regarding these things, and if we are giving into fear, then are we not serving man instead of serving the Lord? I am not saying that we should be divisive and disruptive. I am saying that we should be courageous and not be intimidated by our own perceptions of what people think or how we will be viewed.

As I developed deeper convictions about this subject my heart became greatly burdened. I felt torn between all that I appreciate in our fellowship and that which I believe needs to be reformed or untaught. The burden was associated with not being unified with the church; i.e. causing division. I began to feel pressure that I no longer belong or fit in because of my convictions. I began thinking after more than 30 years in the ICOC that I might better fit in another branch of the SCM. This was a very difficult place for me. Yet, I came to the conclusion that it was my own foolish thinking creating a spiritual trap. It is foolish for me not to share my heart’s burdens with those who I am closest to. It is not divisive to do so. On the contrary, it is healthy. Let the chips fall where they may, if what I believe cannot stand examination then I will get the discipling that I need. If the position of others cannot stand examination then I would hope it will be reexamined. What I found was liberating because I am not the only one in our movement that has these convictions.

So, is there apprehension to openly discuss the exclusive attitudes that we have held? Do these attitudes negatively affect our growth both numerically and spiritually? Are we holding on to antiquated and debilitating doctrines that we have inherited from our forefathers? Is there a negative effect on our enthusiasm to share our faith? Is it possible that a sizable portion of our fellowship is embarrassed by the critical, judgmental, and exclusive attitudes that some of our members and leaders hold? Is it possible that disciples would return if we were to openly renounce these beliefs and attitudes? And last but certainly not least, how does God feel about the attitudes we have held as a fellowship. If we believe the Spirit is at work in the conversion process. If we believe that we are not the only group where people can be saved and get right with God. If we believe that God determines the times in history and boundaries then we must ask ourselves “will our attitudes influence where God chooses to cause revival?”[[86]](#footnote-86)

It is certainly true that we have tempered our language. We are more politically correct in how we say things. We no longer say we are “the One True Church”. Yet, can we ask if our actions confirm this to be our core conviction? Could we talk about our lingo? What do we mean when we use the word “Kingdom?” Are we referring to the universal body of Christ or are we using it to describe ourselves? When we say “he is not a part of the church” what does that mean? Are we using it in the same way, to describe our family of churches? What does it mean when we say “he is not a disciple?” Is it code for he is not “one of us?” Or when we say, quote/unquote, “she is a Christian.” Does it not mean that they are a believer, but we suspect that they are not a “true disciple” / real Christian? And if this is so, how do we measure if God has accepted them or not? Is it because they have not been baptized in our church? Is it because they lacked knowledge when they were immersed? Is it because they do not share their faith the way that we do, or as much as we do? By the way, how are we doing with that? How about our congregations? Is it because they are not as committed as we are, if so, where do we draw the line on commitment? If there are those who are more committed than me, does that mean that I am lost? Does God judge according to our level of commitment or does he accept us because we have surrendered in faith?

It is right for us to call people to a surrendered faith! Jesus did and we should too. It is right for us to stand strongly for the doctrinal truth that we believe. The Apostles did and we should too. It is right for the ICOC to expect members to hold firmly to a conversion that involves faith in Jesus, repentance, lordship, and acknowledgment that sins are forgiven at baptism. These are right and they are good. However, do we have the right to judge someone’s eternal state in the event their “timeline” is not identical to ours? Should we express our concerns to them, certainly we should? Should we compel them to admit that they are lost and need to be re-baptized? That practice might be crossing the line. Is it possible that their baptism was ineffectual because they did not have faith, or repentance, or surrender to the Lord? Certainly, this may be the case. However, is not their conversion ultimately between them and God? I do not see where God made us the gatekeepers of the Kingdom. The Holy Spirit is the one who determines the borders of the kingdom. Should we not accept them in love if they have in faith made Jesus Lord and feel comfortable with their baptism? The Holy Spirit is the one who convicts the heart and He is the one who leads people to the truth. If there is something missing God is able to work that out. And will He, not Himself convict the heart if something is missing? Are we certain that we are equipped to accurately judge who is lost and who is saved? Are we certain that everyone in our own family of churches is right with God? This is God’s territory, He is better equipped to sort these things out. We should be careful about trusting our own cognitive abilities over and above the Holy Spirit.

What about churches or congregations? If one ICOC congregation has 80% totally committed (if that is definable) and another ICOC congregation has 50% totally committed does the one with less become a lost church? What if we compare an ICOC congregation to a Mainline Church of Christ congregation in the same light? Perhaps we compare a Baptist Church or a Community Church in the same light? What if we reversed the ratio and the church that Francis Chan started has more committed followers than an ICOC congregation? I feel foolish for speaking in these terms? Yet, have we not judged similarly. Are there not many of us who still judge in these terms? Is God pleased with us when we do so? Will he bless these attitudes?

## Conclusion

If we desire the unity of the Spirit then we must value unity in diversity. We must be careful as to what we publish and speak in the public square. We should first go to one another alone and resolve matters. Let us follow the pattern of Matthew 18 before we call one another out by name, either publically or in print. May the Lord give us a spirit of open dialog, but in so doing may He grant us a spirit of humility, love, and respect for one another. Should we not be a people who listen to one another and seek first to understand? Let us practice servant leadership. Let us be men and women who want something for each other and not something from them. Let us collaborate and reason with one another. And may we strive to learn from all. To learn from those “above us”, from our peers, and from those whom we serve. Let us be willing to be taught from any and all. From those who speak what we do not want to hear, and from those who speak it in ways we do not enjoy. Let us ask the questions that will yield answers we do not want to hear. Let the words of Jesus be true of us, *“But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.”*[[87]](#footnote-87)

Individuals and groups within the Stone-Campbell Movement did not handle diversity well and the results were dire. We have paid the price for their sins. In some cases, we have also sustained the sins of our fathers. Both, we and they, have blurred the lines between essential and opinion. It is love that will guide us through the grey areas, and not our quest for doctrinal purity. The simple gospel of Jesus is what unites the universal body of Christ. Nothing less and nothing more. Peter held the keys to the kingdom on the day of Pentecost. And, did he not teach that if we in faith repent and surrender, and are immersed into Jesus that we will receive two promises; the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit? Why do we complicate it beyond that? Why do we exclude those who in faith have obeyed and yet may not exactly match our doctrinal standard? Was it not James who said, “*It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”*[[88]](#footnote-88)

If we are to stand firmly on any doctrinal position, should we not be able to conclusively support it from the word of God? Any ambiguity combined with a dogmatic doctrinal stance is a recipe for disunity. We should be able to prove without prejudice or bias. We should do so without inference or deduction. We should do so without labeling, disparaging, demeaning, or marginalizing others. We can and should stand for biblical truth and our members should hold to a biblical conversion. However, as Garrett said, “*In order to believe that we are right we do not have to believe that everyone else is wrong.”* What we view as essential should not be supported by inferences and deductions, especially when it comes to someone’s salvation. And thus, we should leave the places of silence (or opinion) to God and God alone.

Those within the Stone-Campbell Movement have quarreled and squabbled over issues for more than 150-years. They have splintered the Lord’s church out of pride. They have divided over absurd partisan arguments. Charismatic leaders and “firebrands” have led the SCM churches into spiritual battles, and the aftermath has been devastating. We have an opportunity to renew the spirit of the Stone-Campbell Movement. We can be a people who revive the Spirit of Unity and the bond of peace. We can live free of judgment and legalistic attitudes. We can have that cup of coffee and we can work together with those who love the Lord. Let us realize that unity does not come from our rightness, but rather from His righteousness. Let us fulfill the dream of Barton W. Stone who said: “Let Christian unity be our polar star.”

1. <http://evidenceforchristianity.org/> [www.douglasjacoby.com](http://www.douglasjacoby.com) <http://www.cwacademy.net/> <http://christianprofessionalsconference.com/> and more [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Commonly attributed to Meldenius. While origin is debated – it is generally thought not to be St. Augustine. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The American Restoration Movement and the Stone-Campbell Movement are synonymous. Branches include but are not limited to: the Church of Christ, the Independent Christian Church / Churches of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, and the International Church of Christ. The SCM is historically connected to other restoration movements such as the Haldanes, Glassites, Sandemanians These groups tend to produce rapid initial growth followed by splits and eventual decline. Sectarianism is considered a major contributor to this pattern. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rick Atchley & Bob Russell, Together Again: Restoring Unity in Christ after a Century of Separation, Standard Publishing (copyright 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Father of Alexander Campbell, Thomas Campbell wrote the Declaration and Address which became a major influence to the SCM. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hebrews 4:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ephesians 6:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Acts 1:2, 13:2-4, 15:28… [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1 Corinthians 13:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 2 timothy 2:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See footnote 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Disciples of Christ / Independent Christian Church – Churches of Christ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ben Brewster, Torn Asunder-The Civil War and the 1906 Division of the Disciples, (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing, 2006), pp.41 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ben Brewster, Torn Asunder-The Civil War and the 1906 Division of the Disciples, (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing, 2006), pp.58-59 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 1 Corinthians 4:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Leroy Garrett, Stone Campbell Movement, College Press (copyright 1981) p628 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restoration_Movement> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Stone Campbell Movement, Leroy Garrett, College Press p.460 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. To me, 'bipartisan foreign policy' means a mutual effort, under our indispensable, two-party system, to unite our official voice at the water's edge so that America speaks with one voice to those who would divide and conquer us and the free world. Arthur H. Vandenberg (US Senator, 1928–1951) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Matt 18 format [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The instrument was a centerpiece in the saloons of the day. The TM (opposing alcohol consumption) had gain significant strength in the 19th century. There were strong feelings about the excess behaviors of men in the 1800’s. TM was generally led by women the TM eventually led to prohibition. The instrument was seen by some as an unholy alliance. Southerners were economically devastated by the American Civil War and generally it was the wealthier northern churches introducing instruments into worship, contributing to attitudes. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Leroy Garrett, Stone Campbell Movement, pp. 466 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Leroy Garrett, Stone Campbell Movement, pp. 467-468, (quoting J.J. Haley, Op. cit., pp 109,115) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Stephen Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Simon & Schuster (copyright 1989) Habit 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Non-Institutional Churches of Christ (“Anti”- Churches of Christ – a label they reject) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\_churches\_of\_Christ\_(non-institutional)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_churches_of_Christ_%28non-institutional%29) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Baptismal Cognizance–a Deeper Look, Gordon Ferguson: <http://gordonferguson.org/?s=baptismal+cog>

What about baptismal cognizance? If a person is unaware at the point of baptism that this is when we are saved, is that person therefore not saved?, John Oakes: <http://evidenceforchristianity.org/what-about-baptismal-congizance-if-a-person-is-unaware-at-the-point-of-baptism-that-this-is-when-we-are-saved-is-that-person-therefore-not-saved/>

Rebaptism: The Real Rub, John Mark Hicks: <http://johnmarkhicks.com/2009/01/30/rebaptism-the-real-rub/>

Rebaptism Reviewed: David Lipscomb, Bobby Valentine: <http://stonedcampbelldisciple.com/2009/02/22/rebaptism-reviewed-david-lipscomb/>

Alexander Campbell, Rebaptism & Sectarianism, Bobby Valentine: <http://stonedcampbelldisciple.com/2009/02/18/alexander-campbell-rebaptism-sectarianism/> [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. A Church of Christ publication [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FiSCM\_Foundation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Firm_Foundation) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. <http://johnmarkhicks.com/2009/01/30/rebaptism-the-real-rub/> [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. <http://stonedcampbelldisciple.com/2009/02/22/rebaptism-reviewed-david-lipscomb/> [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Acts 2:38 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. From my reading and to my knowledge the following hold views similar to the Tennessee Tradition: Max Lucado, Rubel Shelley (I Just Want to Be a Christian), F. Legard Smith (Baptism – The Believer’s Wedding Ceremony), Rick Acthley (Together Again, by Rick Atchley & Bob Russel), Leroy Garrett (What Must the Church of Christ Do to be Saved?, SCM e-Prints, October 2010, Stone Campbell Movement, College Press, copyright 1981) [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. <http://stonedcampbelldisciple.com/2009/02/18/alexander-campbell-rebaptism-sectarianism/> [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. <http://stonedcampbelldisciple.com/2009/02/18/alexander-campbell-rebaptism-sectarianism/> and Millennial Harbinger, 1831, p. 483 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. 1 Corinthians 4:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Romans 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Romans 14:1-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ephesians 2:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Repent and be baptized / For = GK. εἰς , eis (a preposition) – properly, into (unto) – literally, "motion into which" implying penetration ("unto," "union") to a particular purpose or result. / unto or into two promises - forgiveness of sins, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ephesians 4:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Carl Ketcherside , The Twisted Scriptures, (no copyright 1965), chap. 4 Gospel and Doctrine [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Hebrews 11:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. 2 Peter 1:1-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Hebrews 11:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. 1 Timothy 4:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. <http://www.christianchronicle.org/article/church-in-america-marked-by-decline> and <https://www.21stcc.com/ccusa/> [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. <http://www.michaelhanegan.com/blog/the-state-of-the-churches-of-christ-a-case-study> [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Romans 14:10-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Restoration Movement slogan “We are free to differ, but not free to divide” [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rupertus_Meldenius> [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. <http://mercystreet.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=77927> [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Hermeneutics is the science of biblical interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. <http://mercystreet.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=77927> [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ephesians 4:2-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Search for the Ancient Order: A slogan referring to the restoring apostolic Christianity and the title of Earl Irvin West’s four volume history of the Restoration Movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ephesians 4:1-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ephesians 4:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. <http://mercystreet.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=77927> [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Page one of this document (bottom) [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Classic or traditional western leadership models such as those developed by, and followed, the industrial revolution. These models are being replaced and redefined in the 21st Century. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. John 14:25-27; Acts 1:4-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. John 3:8 NASB [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Acts 13:1-4 Paul and Barnabas sent off by the Holy Spirit [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Romans 14, Romans 15:1-4, Ephesians 4:2-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Romans 12:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. ἓν (hen) One / GRK: ἵνα ὦσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἕν - Interlinear that they might be perfected in unity [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 NASB [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. I hesitate to use rank and file as it creates a division in the fellowship of believers based on clergy and laity. However, I would question if we have dealt significantly with this issue of clergy / laity within our fellowship. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Titus 3:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Matthew 18:15-17 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Restoration Movement slogan. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Matthew 5:23-24 [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Romans 12:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Romans 14:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Proverbs 3:5-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. James 4:6-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Proverbs 16:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. “Above and below” used for a lack of a better term, the term is used in reference to leadership roles and not to diminish the priesthood of all believers. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Stephen R. Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Simon & Schuster (Copyright 1989) Habit 5 pp.235 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. In my view we should reconsider this term “the church that I lead”. In the light of servant leadership I am not certain it conveys what Jesus or the apostles with have us convey. From a NT perspective, who is it that leads the church? Who is it that has the role of overseers? What is the NT role of an evangelist, and what should it be today? What is the role of a minister, and what should it be today (διάκονος Strongs G1249 – This is a word we should consider studying as we reconsider titles – it might be more apt to say roles instead of title)? This is another paper unto itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Matthew 20:26-27 [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Matthew 23:11-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Mark 9:35 [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Mark 10:42-45 [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Leroy Garret, What Must The Church of Christ Do To Be Saved, SCM e-Prints, 2010, Chapter 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. 2 Corinthians 5:20 NASB [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Acts 17:26 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Matthew 13:16 KJV [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Acts 15:19 NIV [↑](#footnote-ref-88)