**The Unbreakable Church**

**Christian Unity and Church History**

**Chris: Scripture and Church Unity—the essential lesson**

**Steve: The reason you are interested in this topic. What should we do now?**

**Me: Practical examples in history that can inform us what works.**

A Church History Perspective on Unity and Division in God’s Church

Introductory comments:

As a fellowship of churches, we are feeling some centrifugal forces, tending toward division over what seem to most of us to be non-essential teachings in the church.

Most of this is in our US churches. Overseas they are wondering what is going on with us. Issues such as response to racial justice questions, women’s role and other on the progressive vs conservative or republican vs democratic list of issues are affecting us. Even Covid response has been a divisive question.

Reminder: None of these fall into the essentials of Christianity, right???!!!

 The question at hand: How will we maintain unity and how will we remain a worldwide family in the face of the kinds of issues that come up? And how will we do this without losing that thing we value so much, which is being a kingdom-oriented church which is a city on a hill and a growing, world-changing, dynamic counter-cultural people of God?

As we look at church history, we will see two inexorable and to some extent opposing methodologies to create Christian unity:

**Ecumenism:** The overarching impulse toward maintaining unity in the body of Christ at almost any cost. This, after all, was the cry and call of Jesus on the night he was betrayed.

John 17:22-23 …may they be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them, even as you have loved me.

Ephesians 4:3 Make EVERY EFFORT to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

As is found in many Christian churches: Unity is our polar star.

But… are there things which ought not to be sacrificed in the name of unity?

Are there limits to where ecumenicism ought to take us? Who do we unify with?

**Restorationism:**

The restorationist/patternist says definitely yes. There are limits.

Yet, the restorationist, in his/her heart has the same goal in mind: Christian unity.

This is the desire to “restore” or maintain a church as much like that established by Jesus and his apostles as we possibly can. The church in Jerusalem was paradigmatic for us. What they were we want to be. Our job is to be the church anticipated by the New Testament. We want to restore the teaching, the practice and the spirit of the New Testament church itself.

We have been in this camp.

Restorationists/Patternists avoid creeds. Our only source of authority is the Bible.

We say the way to end division is to agree on one document and one only, which is the Bible.

Ephesians 2:20 …built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ as our chief cornerstone.

These two trends have played off one another for 2000 years. What can we learn about this from church history?

I. Early church

The early church has many challenges to unity. Yet, they were remarkably successful.

Most of them were theological rather than on church practice (but they had them as well, for example over the date of Easter)

Judaizers (grace vs law)

Gnosticism (nature of Christ as man)

Marcionites, Docetism Overly stressed the deity of Christ vs his humanity, going so far as to deny he was human. He only appeared (docetist) to be human.

Montanists This group practiced modern-day prophecy, speaking in tongues, but was also more strongly dedicated to personal purity and strong on sin. Tertullian was a Montanist.

Novatianism (discipleship) Split over the question of whether those who had lapsed under the persecution of Decius in mid-third century should be allowed in the church.

Arianism Claimed that Jesus was not God—that he was the first created being. “There was a time when he was not”

The early church had a shocking level of theological diversity in its ranks. These groups worshipped together!!! Why?

1. No or limited creeds without authority.

2. Intense desire to be unified.

3. Persecution.

Before Novatian (mid-third century) there was only one church.

How did they maintain this unity?

In considering reasons for division we need to consider

Orthodoxy (right teaching) vs Orthopraxy (right practice)

and

Heterodoxy (different teaching) vs Heteropraxy (different practice)

But finally, the church split after the creation of the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Creed.

Monophysite (One nature, and that divine. God in a bod) Became the Coptic Church of Egypt and Ethiopia.

Nestorian Church of the East Christ virtually two separate persons. Mary, Mother of God (Orthodox) vs Mary Mother of Christ (Nestorians) Nestorius virtually made Jesus into two separate persons.

These creeds became the basis, both for unity and for division.

The most famous: The “Great Schism” 1054 Rome and Byzantium split over “filoque” and the Son.

Did the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father (Byzantium, Nicene Creed) or from the Father and the Son (Rome filoque)

II. Reformation and Anabaptists in particular

During the Middle Ages and even the Reformation, Unity was maintained by Christendom within political spheres.

As long as church/state unity was maintained, church unity was sustained

But Christendom began to break down.

**Hussites**  John Hus 14th century. John Hus was burned at the stake at the Council of Constance in 1415.

Bible as the only rule of faith.

Only the Lord’s Supper and baptism as sacraments.

Renounced Purgatory, indulgences, simony, masses for the dead, reverence of saints, the use of relics and images of every kind.

But…. They soon fractured into ever-smaller radical and disunified groups over issues like end-time prophecies, modern-day revelation.

Radical Hussites: The Taborites. Took restoration to its logical conclusion.

As a restoration movement, unfortunately, the Taborites tended to fracture quickly and often.

At the time of Luther’s reformation there were 400 Hussite/Brethren churches with 200,000 members.

They morphed into the Moravian Church under Zinzendorf, which strongly influenced Alexander Campbell and the Restoration Movement.

Is our goal restoration or reformation?

**Anabaptists**

**The Anabaptist (rebaptizer) movement. 1525** and later. Began under Zwingli in Zurich.

Immersion of adults after repentance and confession of faith.

Bible the only authority. Separation of church and state.

Taught synergism, not monergism (God and man cooperate in salvation) Taught “prevenient grace.”

Viciously persecuted. Zwingli personally approved the drowning of Felix Manz. Burned at stake by Catholics, drowning by Lutherans and Calvinists.

Extreme pacifists.

Their ideal: To restore 1st century NT Christianity.

But, as the Hussites before them, they rather quickly splintered into various factions.

Jacob Hutter Hutterites. Very schismatic.

Menno Simons → Mennonites became legalistic and overly emphasized asceticism and separation from the “world.”

Swiss Anabaptists became the Amish

Anabaptists chose to remove themselves from the world rather than to influence it.

Conclusion: It is difficult for those seeking to organize around biblical principles alone to maintain unity and to grow over time. We need to find mechanisms to maintain unity and find the balance with regard to what are the essentials.

I do not have time to discuss the Haldanes, Sandemanians, and other restorationist/patternist NT Church groups, all of which tended to divide early and often.

III. Stone/Campbell Movement

 James O’Kelly  Methodist.  Rejected organization and creed of Methodism.  Established independent congregations.  We are “Christians Only.” (1784)

 Rice Haggard.  More the theologian than O’Kelly. 1804. “In opinions, liberty.”    “One thing I know, that whenever nonessentials are made terms of communion, it will never fail to have a tendency to disunite and scatter the church of Christ.”

“It is a fact, confirmed by history and observation that the more closely any body of Christians adhere to the Word of God as the only standard of faith and practice, the more firm and lasting will their union be.”

Hmmm…. Not so sure.

Barton W. Stone:

Had a crisis over Calvinism. Rejected double predestination.

Do you hold to the Westminister Confession?   “I do, as far as I see it consistent with the word of God.” (in other words, no!)

June 28, 1804   “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.”

           Denounced human creed. The Bible only.
          To be Called Christian only.
          Local church government only.
          Freedom of conscience, charity on matters of opinion.

These guys considered themselves reformers and uniters, not restorers.

Thomas Campbell. (1763-1851)  Born a Presbyterian (predestination).  Influenced by Haldanes, Sandemanians.  Moved to US 1807.

Alexander Campbell.  1788-1866 Thomas’ son.

Joined Thomas from Scotland 1809

The crowning event of the early years of the movement:

1831   Stone Christians and Campbell Disciples decided to form a unified movement.

Problems:

1.     Christian (Stonites)  or   Disciple (Campbellites)
2.  Emotional vs intellectual movements (preachers vs teachers)
3.     Teaching on baptism
4.     Ordination of ministers
5.  Doctrine of the Holy Spirit
much bigger problems than we have!
Hermeneutics:

Alexander Campbell sought the “facts” of the Bible.

Command, Example and Necessary Demonstrations.

Where the Bible speaks, we speak, where the Bible is silent, we are silent

 Weak on principles. Tended toward legalism.

The turning point: Were they a unity movement (a reformation) or a restoration movement?

Stone and Campbell favored reformation
Walter Scott, Benjamin Franklin, David Lipscomb and others moved toward restoration.  Sought “the perfect pattern.”

CoC restorationist/patternist Many divisions. One cup, Sunday school, instruments, premillennialism, etc… Many splinter groups. Oh, yeah, those guys…

Christian Church “Unity is our polar star. More committed to unity and willing to work with other groups.

Disciples of Christ Many went “liberal.” They became founding members of the ecumenical movement.

IV. Us

How will we maintain unity yet still have a dynamic Christ-centered counter-cultural church?

Can we create a culture which maintains the proper balance between unity on essentials and openness and variety in matters of less importance of opinion?

Will we be able to keep political and cultural influence within proper bounds?

A comment. Is formal unity even a good thing today? Might there be a legitimate, godly, saved group of disciples who will meet a need that the ICOC simply will not meet, or not as well as this other group?

Can we literally be all things to all people?

We need to be as many things to as many people as we can.

Our attempts to maintain unity need to reflect this.

There are biblical principles to be considered. For example Romans 14, 1 Cor 9, etc. But that is not the topic of my presentation.