



University Christian Church – Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

Beyond Togetherness

Pentecost 6, b, July 12, 2009

John 17:11-23

I am sure that many of you find it interesting - maybe even puzzling - that our congregation is in good conversation and cooperation with our neighbor church, The University Ave. Church of Christ. Many of you know the history of what we call the three streams: the churches of Christ, the independent Christian churches, and our denomination, the Christian church disciples of Christ. Nearly 200 years ago we all came from the same stream of thinking, when Alexander and Thomas Campbell joined together with Barton Stone – what we now call the Stone/Campbell movement – lifted up two major foci:

- 1.) the drive to restore that beauty and holiness of the earliest Christian church immediately after Jesus time, and
- 2.) Make visible the Christ given unity of His church through a reunion of all the varied styles and denominational names of churches that claim to Jesus Christ as Lord. The three streams and started out together and were strong influence on the American frontier for the next 80 years. And then dissensions rose to the surface. And in what leaders of each of the three streams now come to regret, maybe means spirited things were said that divided the church's one from the other.

But things have begun to change. Just to demonstrate how positive these times of cooperation have been so far, Mary Lu told me of a comment from more than one of our sisters and brothers at the University Ave., Church of Christ at the conclusion of last month's vacation Bible school that we did together with them. They said, "It's really silly that we are 2 congregations. We should be one congregation."

However you want to characterize the relationships among these denominations, we must at least be clear that the call to all of us is to find a way to be the Church of Jesus Christ together. And I am not saying that because our forbearers in faith, Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone call us to that unity. No, I say it because it Jesus Christ calls us to that unity. Our Scripture lesson from John 17 this morning makes that abundantly clear.

Yesterday here in Austin all of the local congregations of these 3 streams began our second annual Stone-Campbell Forum on Christian Unity, gathering at UACC to first hear a panel of scholars from all three of the traditions spoke to two major questions one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The first was "How do we deal with John 17 in view of each of our perspective of Biblical Traditions?"

Yesterday's conversation about the matter was fascinating. I couldn't help but compare the comfort in conversation that our leadership yesterday exhibited. It was especially wonderful in view of so much Christian history where in each camp of Christians it seems that only those who believe like we believe could possibly be right, and only those who believe like we believe should be welcomed into our fellowship. Yesterday was a truly inclusive spirit. It was a model of how Christians ought to relate to each other that differ in theology or worship style.

It seems to me that many Christians are becoming more accepting of one another than former generations. That is unmistakably a good thing! But let me say word about one way in which some contemporary Christians have dealt with the issue of differences in belief. They have said that differences don't really matter. They say that all that really matters is one's sincerity and one's faithfulness. So I may claim Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, or Dr. Spock and Dr. Phil, as my saviors. You don't mind, do you?

Well, while I approve of the sentiment of tolerance, let us be clear what we believe does matter incredibly! What we understand or don't understand matters incredibly. How we translate what we believe can literally be a life or death matter for another.

With our Youth Mission heading down to the Mexican border yesterday for a week of service to the poor, I am reminded of an example from that area told here in Texas about a certain Mexican bank robber by the name of Jorge Rodriguez, who operated along the Texas border around the turn of the last century. He was so successful in his forays that the Texas Rangers put a whole extra posse along the Rio Grande just to try and stop him.ⁱ

Sure enough, late one afternoon, one of these special Rangers saw Jorge stealthily slipping across the river, and trailed him at a discreet distance as he returned to his home village. He watched as Jorge mingled with the people in the square around the town well and then went into his favorite cantina to relax. The Ranger slipped in and managed to get the drop on Jorge. With a pistol to his headⁱⁱ he said, "I know who you are, Jorge Rodriguez, and I have come to get back all the money that you have stolen from the banks in Texas. Unless you give it to me, I am going to blow your brains out." There was one great difficulty, however,

Jorge did not speak English and the Texas Ranger was not versed in Spanish. There they were at an utter verbal impasse.

But about that time an enterprising young Mexican fellow came up and said, "I am bilingual. Do you want me to act as translator?" The Ranger nodded, and he proceeded to put the words of the Ranger into terms that Jorge could understand. Nervously, Jorge answered back: "Tell the big Texas Ranger that I have not spent a cent of the money. If he will go to the town well, face north, count down five stones, he will find a loose one there. Pull it out and all the money is behind there. Please tell him quickly." The young translator got a solemn look on his face and said to the Ranger in perfect English,

"Jorge Rodriguez is a brave man. He says he is ready to die." ⁱⁱⁱ

There are two morals here.

First, it is absurd to say that what you believe doesn't matter as long as you are sincere. Of course it matters what you believe, for what you believe determines what and who you put your trust in.

The second moral is that there are often folks out there who will twist and spin the truth for their own benefit even if it puts another person or another denomination's good name at risk. Sometimes it's intentional and sometimes it is just the lower tendency of human nature to make yourself seem smarter and right at the expense of someone else.

At yesterday's conference the second question the panel of scholars grappled with was: "How do we implement John 17 from our perspective in the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ?"

There were some profound thoughts shared about steps we might take to become One with one another and One with Christ in God's will. There were ideas for the denominations, for clergy gatherings, for local congregations to worship, or serve, or as in our case here, joint education ventures. But I would like to focus with you for a moment on what an individual Christian such as yourself might do to "implement John 17," that is, to witness to the Oneness – not that we are to create in Christ- but that we are to acknowledge as a gift.

The first challenge is to beware of what the Bible calls "party spirit"- to bring us together by hating them together. Democrats can unity by battling against Republicans and vice versa. As President Obama acknowledged this week , both Americans and Russians have strengthened their national resolve by casting the other as an irreconcilably evil foe.

This week all over the world millions of Christians are celebrating the birth of one of the great leaders of the Protestant Reformation John Calvin. Calvin was born 500 years ago this week and his teaching, preaching, scriptural interpretation have heavily influenced Protestantism worldwide. It is an interesting historical truth, however, that part of the strength the relationship we in the Stone/Campbell movement derived 150 yrs. was greatly influenced by our relationship to Calvinism. We all utterly rejected it. Making a common theological enemy drew us together....even, as in this case, when the supposed "enemy" was really just another facet of the many splendored diamond that is the Church of Jesus Christ on earth.

Beware of any attempt to tell you that any other who claims the name of Christ is evil or utterly wrong. That holier-than-thou and the more-knowledgeable- than- thou attitude undermines the clear teaching of Jesus.

Remember Jesus' prayer, "that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." That prayer of Jesus for us goes WAY BEYOND MERE TOGETHERNESS.... All the way to Unity... a deep and abiding, loving unity of Spirit in Jesus Christ.

B.J. Pierce is the name of a man who grew up participating in Disciples congregations and Ch. Of Christ congregations depending upon whichever was available in the little towns his family where his family moved. Having experienced the richness and the Christian love of both camps, having heard one of the 3 streams of the Stone/Campbell movement rail against another so unkindly, and feeling a great desire for each camp to understand the other – B.J. has become a major tool of the Holy Spirit here in Austin to help all of us in the Stone/Campbell movement heal our broken relationships. In an address to all three streams of the Stone/Campbell Movement some time back, B.J. said,

“Brothers and Sisters in Christ, nearly 175 years after those wonderful events that took place at the old Christian Church on Hill Street in Lexington, KY that brought us together as a people, we their heirs here in the Greater Austin area have a wonderful opportunity to carry on that original vision. However, that doesn't necessarily mean re-hammering the merger of our three (3) streams. Whether we recognize it or not, God has already completed the merger. Our responsibility is to simply recognize and celebrate our common heritage and acknowledge our Brothers and Sisters in Christ and learn how to cooperate.

Like Barton Stone's Christians and Alexander Campbell's Disciples, we may not come to full agreement on every doctrinal issue. Like you, I am not here

today to apologize for what I believe. I hold precious those truths I have been taught from a Child to my current age.

Neither am I here to minimize the importance of any of the doctrinal beliefs of anyone in this room, but I am here to tell you that I have come to the conclusion that I cannot restrict fellowship only to those who agree with me on every point of my interpretation of doctrine. The Architect of the Great Wall of China could have taken lessons from some of us in each of our Streams on how to put up obstacles that no one could overcome. At age 56, I'm tired of building walls, I'd rather build bridges.

This journey we're taking of reconciliation is long overdue. Even though we are saved by grace we have two God given responsibilities, our mission and our purpose as a people. Our mission is to carry the good news of Jesus Christ to the world while our purpose is to build up the body of Christ. When you put it in its proper perspective, both our mission and purpose lead directly through Jesus final prayer for the Unity of his people in John 17 to the very foot of the cross.

You see, when I kneel before the Lord at judgment, I believe the final question that will be put to me, as the Lord God looks into my eyes, will not center on those all-important theological questions of:

and then he lists several fo the theological issues that have divided the 3 Streams. He concludes:

You see, I firmly believe that God's final question will simply be 'how much did you love me and how much did you love your brothers and sisters?'

I have a lot of brothers and sisters in this room this morning and I think I'm simply going to love on you. I want to be able to give God the right answer.”^{iv}

Amen.

ⁱ Attributed to John R. Claypool in an unidentified sermon

ⁱⁱ From **A Church United** by King Duncan

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^{iv} B.J. Pierce is Chairman of the Western Hills Church of Christ Unity Committee and a Stone-Campbell Movement Historian.