

***“The Union Heaven Gave Us:” The Doctrinal Practice of Christian Unity
in the Church of God. – A Response***

MaryAnn Hawkins
Anderson University
School of Theology
June 21, 2006

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to Dr. Strege’s paper. I appreciate greatly our commitment, as a church, to continue to dialogue about ‘who we are’ and ‘who we need to be’ in God’s Kingdom. **Disclaimer:** I am responding as a missiologist, not an academician.

In the early 1990s, Rev. Nelson Obwoye, a Kenyan church leader, and I were having a discussion. We were having difficulty understanding each other’s point of view. Nelson suggested that we were looking at the same issues, looking into the same house, if you will, but through different windows, so we were seeing different things. He then suggested that we look together through other windows, to see what we might find. I extend that invitation to you, as we look into a couple of different windows, for the next few moments.

My husband and I have just purchased an historic home here in Anderson. If you look into the first room at the front of the house you’ll see a gigantic oak fireplace. It is original with the house. There’s also a turn of the century *Storey and Clark* pump organ. These pieces speak to history. Dr. Strege has provided an excellent view into the historical room of unity in the Church of God. Thank you Dr. Strege.

If you look into another room at the front of the house, you’ll find my husband’s office and library. On the shelves of the floor to ceiling book shelves you’ll find numerous commentaries, a plethora of Bibles in various translations, and other resources

and study books. Dr. Strege has also reminded us of our doctrinal commitment to unity as a foundational truth of God's Word, highlighting John 17; Ephesians 2:14-22; and, Galatians 3:28-29. Again, thank you Dr. Strege.

The room next to the library, in our home, is what I consider to be our East Africa Museum. Though Dr. Strege did discuss some of the racial reconciliation issues that have transpired in our history, nothing was said about the issue of unity with the leaders [or congregations] of the church of God in other countries. During the days of colonialism I fear we did little to advance the doctrine of unity; instead, we practiced colonial paternalism – treating the church in other parts of the world as 'lesser' siblings. What should our attitude and practice be toward those who follow Christ in other nations? We have a primary Asian church leader with us on the grounds this convention. During a meeting on Saturday he listed the "kind" of missionaries that are needed. Two items stuck out to me: Missionaries who will respect national leadership, and choose a relationship of partnership. Respect. Partnership. We were not in Kenya long when we learned an acronym: TIA – This is Africa. Kenyans really didn't need to hear 'this is how we do it in America!' As North Americans, we continue to hold the vast majority of power and resources. Should that be a reason for our presumed superiority?

Around toward the back of our house we can look into another window. This room is obviously the kitchen, but in the corner stands a treadmill. This is the room where we exercise [or practice] what we believe – or say that we believe. I would agree with the quote from Dr. Hines: "the Church of God deserved an 'A' for its message of unity, but an 'F' for its practice" [p 18]. There have been some significant steps toward unity and reconciliation in recent years, but we're certainly not finished.

Race: Dr. Strege mentions the work done toward racial unity between the Caucasians and African-Americans in the Church of God. Are we aware that there is also work to be done among the Hispanics, Asians, and the First Americans? I've been delighted to hear of the talks between primary CHOG leaders of these racio-cultural groups and our General Director. I'm glad we've *started* the dialogue.

Shortly after we returned to the States, an individual commented to us about the vision for the South Bay Church of God in Torrance to be a multi-cultural congregation: "Torrance has always been a white, middle-class church, it will always be a white, middle class church." Since heaven, obviously, won't be white, middle class, and the community surrounding the Torrance church is not white, middle class, that statement is nothing more than racial prejudice - and in my opinion **MUST** be confessed as sin.

Other prejudice: We must not allow ourselves to believe that race is the only source of social disunity in the church: sex, age, and social status must also be considered. If you are wondering if you have prejudice in any of these areas, or practice prejudice in any of these areas, ask yourself (1) who has the *right* to speak into the life of your [my] community of faith ... to bring a word of correction or even a word of question or clarification; and, (2) when a derogatory statement [however mild] is made, what group is maligned and what is the response of those who hear it?.

A sociology professor at Marymont College in LA shared an interesting illustration that bears repeating: Prejudice is like being on a moving sidewalk at the airport. We simply move along with it – like life. We may not be overtly prejudiced, but 'going along with' the prevailing attitude speaks to our agreement with it. To bring

reconciliation, which is the precursor to unity, we must get off the sidewalk and stand against the prevailing attitude.

Ecumenism: Participation in ecumenism and dialogue for purposes of cooperation are to be applauded. These efforts across denominational lines must continue. But, is it sufficient for those in leadership to simply go, and participate? How does ‘Joe Blow’ or ‘Jane Doe’ in the pew even find out that we’re doing such a thing? We must proclaim AND model the unity in partnership, on every level to reach those without relationship with God.

Missiologists and sociologists use three terms to talk about the relationship between groups of people: exclusion, inclusion, and pluralism. Dr. Stregé talked about our period of *exclusion*, ending somewhere around 1930 when C E Brown took leadership with Warner Press. *Exclusion* says, “you’re not like me, I don’t want to have anything to do with you” – be it doctrine, race, language, dress code, music or whatever. *Inclusion*, on the other hand, says, “come be like me.” At first, *inclusion* looks like it is the answer to our need for, indeed our call to unity. But inclusion really simply asks the other to give up their doctrine, race, language, dress code, music, or whatever. This is not unity, it is paternalism. The third term is *pluralism*. *Pluralism* asks the question “where are we alike...[and] might we build relationship starting here?” *Pluralism* does not ask us to give up what we believe; to compromise, it does ask us to engage others without contempt or condescension. I whole heartedly agree with Dr. Stregé’s statement on page 22 “...unity transcends and overcomes all of the categories and differences the world customarily uses to rank and divide people and by which we often polarize ourselves;” and I sincerely believe that C E Brown’s statement that “divisions within Christianity

constituted both a problem and a reproach on those content to live in disunity” [p 10] is as true today as it was when he penned it.

When you get clear to the back of my house, you can look down the alley. The folks from whom we purchased the house did not put a gate in the back yard fence – for security reasons. I would suggest that residing in the alleyways of our spiritual lives are the ‘other’ religions of the world. In many ways we have blocked them out – for security reasons. Just last week I had the opportunity to attend the annual meeting of Missiologists in Chicago. The primary conversation of the first half of the meeting centered on the development of dialogue between Christianity and other religions. A primary question that was asked was “how incarnational should we be?” If we take Paul’s description of Jesus in Philippians 2 as the ideal [as prescriptive rather than descriptive] we have some work to do in this area. Yet, very possibly, it will be our choosing to lay aside our power, our achievement of the ‘great American dream’ and the investment of our resources that will be the difference in our living in unity.

How we choose to pursue unity...

- within our own ranks: race, sex, age, economics;
- within the broader Christian church [protestant, catholic, orthodox];

that will determine how we are perceived by those outside Christendom. This is the formative factor in whether we have opportunity for dialogue, or whether we [who have the truth of Christ crucified and risen] will ever have the opportunity to share.

Unity, my brothers and sisters, is a choice. Christ calls us to it – and prayed it for us. Do we dare to be obedient?