

A RESPONSE TO THE PAPER ON CHRISTIAN UNITY
THE THIRD ANNUAL DOCTRINAL DIALOGUE ON JUNE 26, 2006

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I consider it a great honor to have been assigned this task by the Center For Christian Leadership. I also enter this task with great concern that I provide an adequate response to Dr. Streges' paper on the subject of Christian Unity. In the life of the church there are many great challenges that must be confronted in the days and years to come, if the Lord tarries. There can be little doubt that the subject of unity and its impact on our society and the church is one of them. The answers that we arrive at on this subject will certainly shape what the Reformation Movement will look like for years, and maybe generations, to come.

Dr. Streges' paper dealt with a historical overview of theological statements and practice, consulting the scripture on the topic of unity, and the church as the restoration of Babel. The final two sentences seem to summarize Dr. Streges' overall conclusion. He states:

The church stands as God's alternative to human confusion and power arrangements. If the world is to understand that its orders can bring neither peace nor salvation, then the unity of all Christians cannot be simply an ongoing discussion topic, but the practice through which the world comes to believe that God sent Christ to be its savior.

This conclusion could not be stated in a clearer manner than our good brother has done. It is a joy for me to give agreement to it even though I might arrive at the same location in a different manner.

Historically it would appear that there certainly has been a shift in the way the Reformation Movement has interpreted the Book of Revelation and how we have seen our position in the historical picture of the church at large. Prior to the 1930's there appears to have been a general consensus that Warner, Riggle, Smith and others were right in using the church-historical method to interpret the book of Revelation. This is

clearly indicated in a sermon preached by H.M. Riggle in June 1927 at Anderson Camp Meeting. In that sermon he stated on the subject of who we are that:

We stand opposed to every false and corrupt system of religion, have come out of and renounced all these and it is our aim to restore to the general church the government, unity, purity, gifts and power that were so prominent in pristine days...First—a falling away, a great apostasy from the primitive state. Second—God’s people led into spiritual Babylon and held captive under man-rule, ecclesiastical hierarchies, sects, and creeds of men. Third—their return in these last days back to Zion, to the same unity, purity, and power that characterized the early church...God has called us out as a people.”¹

In Merle Strege’s book *I Saw The Church* he draws a very clear picture of a march away from the church-historical method.

After 1930 the ecclesiology of the standard literature began a steady decline at Church of God schools where the historical-critical method was taught. That literature did not disappear, but it found little favor in the places that could have given it institutional credibility—preeminently the movement’s colleges but also the publishing house.²

This move away from this common message certainly did not produce all the doubts and changes that have become part of the landscape of our day but they certainly had a part to play in the manner in which we deal with the question of unity.

In 1956 A.F. Gray wrote about the question of unity from a perspective that appears to have been shaped by the same sort of thinking that was in the minds of our early pioneers.

A leading feature of the movement was a strong plea for the full unity of the church with a vigorous protest against denominationalism as the main obstacle preventing this accomplishment. The movement, then, may be described as the great moving force of the Word of God and the Holy Spirit throughout the whole church,

¹ H.M. Riggle, *The Reformation’s March to Victory*, Gospel Outreach, 1986, p.5-6.

² Merle Strege, *I Saw The Church*, Warner Press, 2002, p. 221.

purifying and uniting God's people in one true spiritual flock. It is not to be identified with any organized group of people but can no more be confined than the tides of the ocean. Nevertheless, those who accept its spirit and message naturally become the spearhead of its forward progress.³

Unity has been, and continues to be, a concern for many within, and outside, of the Reformation Movement. While many have asked the question of whether the "come out" message produced an isolationist outlook there are two greater concerns that must be addressed. First, is the "come out" message of the past a biblical one and, secondly, what has the rejection of that message produced?

Of course, there will be great controversy concerning whether the "come out" message is biblical. Those who have rejected the church-historical method of interpretation will say it is not. Those who still adhere to it will say that it certainly is biblically sound. Simply because some in the past, and present, may insist that it means total isolation does not mean it is necessarily so.

We all recognize that Paul declared a "come out" message in 2 Cor 6:16-18. In the book of Revelation we see a call to come out of Babylon in chapter 18. The question is what are we to come out of? Using the church-historical method the answer would be false religions. In what appears to be a modified preterist interpretation Babylon is seen to refer to ancient Rome and is applied in our day to "any worldly powers with sufficient arrogance and self-absorption to usurp the place of God."⁴ Let it suffice me to say that both methods have weaknesses but that the question of the consistency of the methodology must be considered. If one does not use that same principle to measure other such symbols in the book of Revelation then it would appear to me that methodology would be flawed casting doubt upon it. The church-historical method, in this writer's opinion, gives the greatest consistency and is worthy to stand as the model to use.

The next question that must be asked is what has our current model produced? Has it been successful in producing this unity that we all seek? For instance, in Dr. Strege's paper there is reference to the World Council of Churches and the participation

³ A. F. Gray, "The Legacy of Our Pioneers, Gospel Trumpet (Jan. 7-21, 1956), p. 2.

⁴ M. Strege, 2006 Doctrinal Dialogue Paper, "The Union Heaven Gave Us," p. 25.

that we have had in commissions and other events. Have we seen greater unity in the church world due to these efforts? A recent publication reported on the World Council of Churches assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil this year.

*One of the announced goals of WCC leaders is to forge a greater measure of unity with those outside the WCC fold...The leading Orthodox bishop at the assembly, Hilarion Alfeyev, said the gap between traditional Christianity...and liberal Christianity...is only growing day by day...Cardinal Walter Kasper, who heads the Vatican's church unity office said that in the past all Christian churches had the same position on homosexuality 'but now there are not only divisions between our church and other churches, there are also divisions within churches.'*⁵

The question must be asked how can this produce unity in the church? Have all the councils, all the discussions, all the bi-lateral meetings produced any real unity?

But it would seem to a pastor who attempts to work within the state and national structures that we have established that a matter of great concern has to be what has the rejection of the church-historical method produced? While some would tell us that having a common goal would produce unity I do not think laying aside differences to work on a common goal will, or has, succeeded in this. A.F. Grey said:

*The early leaders of this movement felt that unity of spirit and purpose was not enough. Many today strive for nothing more than this, but these pioneers insisted that there must be also unity of doctrine. They believed that such unity could be found through accepting the whole truth as it is found in the Bible. They did not profess all knowledge, but they did feel that much truth had been made clear to them.*⁶

While temporarily setting aside doctrinal differences may give us more common ground to move forward in individual efforts it does not appear to change anything of real consequence where large groups are concerned.

⁵ E. E. Plowman, World, March 11, 2006, p.36.

⁶ A. F. Gray, "The Legacy of Our Pioneers," Gospel Trumpet (Jan. 7-21, 1956), p. 5.

It would seem that one of the great problems lies in a sense of independence rather than interdependence. We see this when our congregations grow to the size where they feel that they need no one other than themselves or smaller congregations feel that they do not want to be part of what they see as a retreat from truth. This isolates individuals and congregations from each other. Strong doctrinal foundations would help resolve these common errors concerning unity. How can we be satisfied with such anemic understandings of unity that often are revealed by the rejection of a common message and doctrine? Individuals come to our congregations and instead of coming out they are merely coming over and we appear to be happy with that. The question must be asked whether this is producing unity or division in the life of some of our congregations especially when we are at polar opposites in what we believe? Pastors are being ordained who do not believe in sanctification as a second work of grace or who have doctrinal outlooks that are opposed to what has generally been understood in the Reformation Movement and we call that unity. The damage of this is seen in congregation after congregation and yet we appear to believe that to have no doctrinal stance will help bring people to the church. Are we building the church or attracting a crowd? I wonder if we are not producing spiritual pygmies that can become purveyors of error.

Again, A.F. Grey made a comment that might be of help if we are to really be a movement in our day. He said:

The teaching of our pioneers could be elaborated further, but it is sufficient to say here that they proved their position to be practical in that thousands of true saints found liberty and unity outside of all organized sects, standing complete in their relations with Christ and with one another through their inward experience and their obedience to the Word of God.⁷

The doctrine of scriptural unity as understood in the Church of God Reformation Movement has revolved around the doctrine of sanctification. If that is true then we must be a people who practice holiness as presented to us in the Word of God. If that were done then racism, sexism, and elitism would all fall before the Person of the Holy Spirit

⁷ Ibid. 6.

in us. For unity to be a reality this must be lived among us in a practical manner that does not surrender truth in any measure but is established on the doctrine of the love of Christ lived out.