

"Can't we all get along?"
or

A CHRISTOLOGY THAT ADDS
WITHOUT DIVIDING

Craigville
Theological
Colloquy
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The Christian Connection churches' principle of
UNITY in Scripture, not uniformity of creed

The following are rough notes toward my part in a foursome forum opening the Colloquy by presenting the christologies of the four streams forming, in 1957, the United Church of Christ. My part: "To the christology of the UCC, what is the contribution of the folks who founded Craigville, the members of the 'Christian Connection' churches [whom I'll call variously "these Christians" or "the Connectionalists"]?"This Thinksheet supplements #2560, "The Biblical-Broad Christology of the Christian Connection Churches."....On our theme, Elisabeth Hilke (who's doing a history of these folk) & I have shared archival materials we've dug up--more from her than to her.

My name is WE, & I am a trinitarian. I am SO t. that always the flowers I grow & Loree arranges for the Craigville Tab. proclaim the Trinity: 3 flowers stand out-- usu. on 1 stem, to proclaim the Unity. After an ecumenical worship here a few Sundays ago, I said to the RC priest, "The bouquets are always trinitarian not only as a honor to the Holy Trinity but also to fight off unitarianism." He's very fat, & his tummy rollicked with laughter. I hadn't thought the joke very funny; but then I thought, if it's as funny as that priest thinks, I guess I'll try it on some other folks. Not many days later I did, & the stranger, instead of laughing, gave me a grim look. You guessed it: he turned out to be a unitarian.

Were the Xn Con. churches that founded Craigville, & here in Craigville in 1897 joined with the Congregationalists in the first merger--talks leading in 1957 to the formation of our UCC, trinitarian? Nope. Unitarian? Nope. What then? Latitudinarian. They believed that a few doctrines are public & all the rest private, & they subsumed the number in God under the right of privacy.

They made a value-judgment between two FACTS: (1) The fact that both trinitarians & unitarians can make strong cases out of the Bible, & (2) The fact that the Bible calls Xns to unity. They choose to hear the Bible's call rather than to become partisans for either theological case made out of the Bible. They observed with sadness & dismay the internal strife & external scandal of the trinitarian-unitarian controversy, & they pled "Can't we all get along? Can't we agree that Jesus Christ is Lord without adding divisive philosophical polemic to this NT affirmation of unity?"

They believed that Jesus calls all Christians to his spirit of love & unity; & that fighting over doctrine, because it violates this spirit, betrays Jesus. Because being anticreedal would violate this spirit, they were instead only noncreedal. But they did proclaim & live by five principles generally accepted by their churches South & North. In archival materials I've found them often stated. The closest they ever came to an official statement, as far as much search has discovered, was in THE FIVE CARDINAL PRINCIPLES OF THE XN CH. DEFINED, ed. by M.L.Hurley (1886, Xn Bd. of Pub., Raleigh, N.C.). In 130 pp., various leaders expound one each principle, as follows: X the Head of the Church; The Name Xn to the Exclusion of All Party or Sectarian Names; The Scriptures of the O & NT as Sufficient Rule of Faith & Practice; Christian Character the Test [of membership]; & Private Judgment, the Right & Duty of Every Believer. (I thank Elisabeth for a xerox of this book, which was part of 2.3 lbs. of archival Xn Con. material on our theme that she sent me Federal Express. We'll all soon be indebted to her for a highly competent history of these Christians.)

To grasp these Christians' Xology, one needs to note, further, these facts: (1) Most of their leaders described themselves as "evangelical," a term not too different in meaning now & in the denomination's origins (very late 18th c. & 1st 3rd of the 19th c.)....(2) They were radically bibliocentric, as in the slogan "Where the scriptures speak we speak, where the scriptures are silent we are silent." This scruple applied not just to the Bible's content but also to its lg.: "All sentiments & opinions of the church should be expressed, as nearly as possible, in Scripture language, as least likely to be misunderstood or to give offense" (17, PRINCIPLES & GOV'T. OF THE XN

CH. (1867ff, Xn Bd of Pub/Elon C., NC)....(3) They were essentialist, discerning mts. as mts. & molehills as molehills, as in the slogan "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things charity."

- 2 The Con. Xns derived two inferences from their doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture for faith & practice: The use of nonscriptural terms (such as trinitarian & unitarian) is (1) unnecessary & (2) pernicious, the latter because leading to & expressive of unity-destroying partisanship. (By factionalism in 1980, the Democrats lost the White House; by unitedness under Ron Brown in 1992, they may have regained it.) (Right at the beginning of his Cor. corr. [1.1.13: "Is X divided?" or "X is divided" or, some MSS, "X cannot be divided"], Paul confronts factionalism as fatal to Xn life, work, & witness.) Thus the authority of scripture is negative as well as positive. In PRINCIPLES & GOVERNMENT (op.cit.), every phrase, almost every word, in chap.4, the theological exposition immediately following the statement of the 5 principles, is footnoted with at least one biblical ref. "No great error is like to be imbibed, or propagated, while all strictly adhere to the law & to the testimony [ie, to the biblical language] (17f)." And it is time & again assumed that "scriptural" & "evangelical" are, theologically, synonyms. Note this in the Xology sec.:

"THE SON. Avoiding all theological disputations concerning the person & offices of X, the Xn Ch in common with other evangelical chs, holds to the following scriptural sentiments: The LJX is the only begotten son of God; full of grace & truth, the Saviour of the world, the Word which was in the beginning with God, & was God, & by whom all tgs were made, who is the brightness of the Father's glory, & the express image of his person, & who upholds all tgs by the word of his power, the Alpha & Omega, the 1st & the last; G manifest in the flesh, who being in the form of G, thought it not robbery to be equal with G, one with the Father. ¶He is the mediator between G & man; the Prophet, Priest, & King; head of the ch; the heir of all tgs, & judge of the world. ¶The LJ was wounded for our transgressions bruised for our iniquities, and with his stripes we are healed; he bore our sins in his own body; he is our advocate with the Father, & makes reconciliation for sin; he died for our sins, that we might live with him; through him we have access to the Father & peace with God, and through his name alone we can be saved."

Being that biblical, what saved them from crashing down on the rocks of the fundamentalist errorless-book dogma? Their determination not to go beyond what the Bible here & there says of itself. In my devotional reading this morning, Paul says (1Cor.7.12) "I'm giving you my opinion, I don't have it from the Lord [Jesus]." Their word about the Bible was that it was "sufficient," not perfect; & that its sufficiency was limited to "faith & practice," not inclusive of history & science.

On matters of faith & practice, they did not speak together where the Bible does not speak. Eg, they spoke on baptism, but not together: as to the mode & subject (infant, confessor), "every one should be fully persuaded in his own mind (28)." But is that workable within a congregation? Certainly. For 10½ years I pastored a church with that liberty, & I never heard anything but approbation of the policy, which the church & I agree to as one of the conditions of my becoming their pastor. That church is now in the UCC, but during my time it was a local ecumene, a community church virtually recapitulating, albeit unconsciously, the Xn Con. chs's vision & spirit. The church we built has a 10' rose window with "Jesus is Lord" in the center, surrounded by symbols of the subordinate secondary derivative authorities on which members could have differences without disrupting the spirit of unity. There was some friction over my social action, but never over doctrine.

In his autobiography (Cincinnati, 1847), Barton Warren Stone (who experienced the 1801 Cane Ridge campmeeting, a landmark in the history of religion in America) asserts that the creeds or confessions of faith or standards (though their function is internal unity & purity) function, "through the subtilty of the evemy [the devil]," function as "separating walls,...setting aside the word of G, or at least binding...to understand the Scriptures as stated & explained in the Creed, on pain of being accounted unsound in the faith, or excommunicated from the church....The people have the privilege of reading the Scriptures to prove the standard to be right;

but no privilege to examine it by Scripture, and prove it to be wrong. For if any should do this, he forfeits his privilege in that church, and must be cast out as a heretic. Or, if he chooses to withdraw, he must be excommunicated as a schismatic (231)."

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Further, Stone attacks the imperfection of all creeds, as leading believers astray--in contrast to the Spirit-illuminated Scripture in the hearts & minds of those who've experienced "living religion" (notice the two requirements if Scripture is to function as [232f] "the infallible word of G"): "If G had not given us a perfect rule, we might have some excuse for working with a crooked one of human make (232)." As a Presbyterian, he then goes into great detail to prove the Westminster Confession one of the crooked rules, a rule full of internal contradictions. The unity worth having is that the Spirit gives (as among the different denominations at Cane Ridge 1801-4): "Whenever religion revives, the church is inclined to forget" creedal divisions (245; but dead religion squelches new life, "in order to preserve uniformity in the church. Thus the living must be slain, that they may hold communion with the dead").

Cuomo's nomination of Clinton highlighted "the politics of inclusion," but Demo Convention solidarity could be achieved only by the strong hands of Clinton & Ron Brown. The Xn Connection churches polity of inclusion, too, had to be paid for by a steady resistance to theological & ecclesiological pressures for uniformity--a resistance that ruled out their merging with the Disciples.

But to live in a house domestic or ecclesial, you must do more than have building materials delivered to the site. You must have a plan & the power to insist on its being followed. While the Connection Xns stoutly rejected creeds, their five principles did function as a building plan for each congregation & for area, state, & national relations among congregations. Call the principles a protocreed, for they stop short of prescribing how & what to think while building & inhabiting the house. The mood of the nation in the birth-time of these churches was liberty, & that mood was bottom-line for them. Others more feared disorder, they more feared "tyranny over the minds of men."

To come at this from another angle, they feared dogma, official doctrine, more than disunity. If your dog-ma jumps on my dog-ma, I'm the underdog (which is bad for me) & you're top dog (which is bad for you). Indeed, they believed that the only unity that does not lead to disunity is "Unity Through Community" (the title of my presentation of the American-&-Canadian community-church movement to the World Council of Churches--published in the 8 May 57 XN CENTURY). Theology should be a handmaiden to this unity; Christology should comport with & obey, not fight, our Lord's prayer "that they may all be one" (Jn.17.21). Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is both liberty & unity. In an old Congregational communion phrase, "not because you must but because you may."

Of course there were ironies in the outworking of the theory. In cultic competition, Con. Xns' broadmindedness often lost out to the sharpermindedness of the other denominations & the narrowmindedness of the fundamentalists. In self-defense, their leaders became polemically irenic. Partly in self-defense, in 1931 they merged with the denomination closest to them in spirit, the Congregationalists--just as, beginning in 1957, hundreds of community churches joined the UCC (though the National Council of Community Churches continues, weakly, to the present time).

In its feature article "The First Christians" (20 Apr 92), U.S.NEWS & WORLD REPORT rightly reports (62) that the "early Xn movement was as divisive as the modern church." The myth of pre-catholic unity is an anachronistic back-reading from catholicism, which is Christian unity by dogma. The particular configuration of a church is a function of how it responds to the impulses to liberty, order, unity, & survival.

Both movements, the Xn Connection & the community-church phenomenon, failed to produce an adequate supply of clergy & to retrain clergy from other denominations. A few Sundays before I became pastor of Community Church, Morton, Illinois, there were only nine souls in worship, including the pastor! What had happened? They'd had a modernist pastor, & $\frac{1}{2}$ the congregation left to form a fundamentalist church. The next pastor was fundamentalist, &--you guessed it--the other half left to form a liberal church. Loree & I saw the mess as a challenge to work with the few toward a local ecumene for the many. The devil is smarter than

people & had riven the Body of Christ in that midwestern community; but God is smarter than the devil (which is one of my "principles").

4 "Jesus Christ Frees & Unites" has been the theme of many church gatherings (eg, the UCBWM 1976 annual meeting). The Connectionists stressed that he unites only in continuity with his freeing: unity must be in harmony with liberty. Thousands of articles in their publications--their HERALD OF GOSPEL LIBERTY (1808-) was America's first religious periodical--drum in this message, often pumgently: "A wart on a man's nose gets far more attention than it deserves," so let's be more impressed by similarities than by peculiarities (Edwin B. Flory, HGL May 17, 1927; "The world has the problem of living together very much on its mind, & it is to be hoped it will soon get the problem very much on its heart"). In this light, the Connentionalists' xology was, had to be, biblical-latitudinarian.

Indeed, feminine. Preaching a unity transcending sex, race, & creed, they were feminist. If we Christians are equal before God in worship, does that not commit us to equality of opportunity in education & work? But here I am making another point: the Connectionalists' xology was feminine--caring rather than controlling, appreciative rather than acquisitive, theologically humble rather than arrogant, bent on harmony rather than mastery....My mother had a fractious brood of independent souls, her first child being my father. But by a wisdom of love I have learned increasingly to appreciate, she kept us together as this family, who continue to love one another dearly. Eg, this from a letter to me 49 years ago (1 Dec 43): "I am most thanking God that our family love each other so much & that we are through this fellowship growing closer each day to our Heavenly Father, who gives us a song in our hearts & a leadership which is a joy to follow."

I close with the words of the refrain of J. Foley's communion hymn, much used among us in the UCC: "One bread, one body, one Lord of all, one cup of blessing which we bless. And we, though many, throughout the earth, we are one body in this one Lord."