

# Second Glance

*Sound Doctrine: A Charge to Christian Unity*

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"...That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." — JOHN 17:21

"THE PRESBYTERY OF SPRINGFIELD, sitting at Caneridge, in the county of Bourbon, being, through a gracious Providence, in more than ordinary bodily health, do make, and ordain this our last Will and Testament, in manner and form following, viz.:

*Imprimis.* We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one Body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in hope of our calling.

*Item.* We will, that preachers and people cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance; pray more and dispute less; and while they behold the signs of the times, look up, and confidently expect that redemption draweth nigh."

As a historian of the Stone-Campbell Movement, I have been thinking about these words a lot lately.

June 28 marked the 200th anniversary of the signing of that document known as the "Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery," from which these words come.

With all its idiosyncrasies and its unfamiliar historical context, it does point powerfully to one fact — the movement that came into existence with the signing of this document, the movement of which contemporary Churches of Christ are a product, was in its essence a movement reflecting Christ's own impassioned prayer, suffused with the burden of making the unity of Christ's church visible.

My charge to you is to be faithful to that heritage.

Many believe that the pursuit of visible unity inherently means weak or uncertain doctrinal commitments, the tendency to give up important shaping beliefs, the depreciation of strong convictions. Perhaps that is what some people think has to happen to pursue unity. I believe they are mistaken.

I would suggest that in order to work responsibly for and pursue visible Christian unity, one must have solid doctrinal convictions, must be able to explain them clearly and convincingly, and must be able to show what the consequences of not holding them would have on Christian belief and practice, all done with the utmost humility.

If you cannot do this, you really have nothing to contribute to the richness of conversations among believers that can and do deepen faith in marvelous ways. Always remember that doctrines are not ends in themselves — a doctrine is not a piece of information to master, data to catalog, words to say just right. Christian doctrine is transformative — sound doctrine, healthy teaching changes you; it makes a difference in the way you speak and act, in the deepening relationship with God and with God's creation, with the people of God and the people of the world — all of whom God loves! Sound doctrine produces a certain kind of fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Something is deeply wrong if you believe you are holding on to

sound doctrine, and the evidence looks like the "works of the flesh" described in Galatians 5: "...enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Too often we think and act as if the unity of Christ's church and "sound doctrine" were somehow in tension with one another, when in reality the unity of Christ's church is sound doctrine.

Ephesians 4:2-6 instructs "...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

Never be involved in causing a division in Christ's church. Some would reply that sometimes you must take a stand against error, and that is true. As people led by the Spirit of Christ, we must oppose those who manifest the works of the flesh in their lives and who seek to promote those works in the lives of others who claim to follow Christ.

Romans 16:17-18 and Titus 3:10-11 label those who cause dissension and division as sinful and self-condemned. Never be involved in the works of the flesh of quarreling, dissensions, divisiveness, factions. Never gather the troops to make an attack on someone or some group with whom you disagree. Rather suffer wrong yourself, allow yourself to be cheated (I Cor. 6:7) — and that may very well happen to you in the coming days of division Churches of Christ appear to be facing. You must be involved in the hard work — the work that will inevitably bring you attacks and wounds often from the very people you seek to serve — the work of reconciliation among the people whom God loves.

Even when others denounce you and separate from you, or when you inherit long-standing divisions, that does not let you off the hook.

Not so strangely, in the midst of historic opportunities for reconciliation, Satan is working his evil divisive power in the lives of Christians and Christian leaders. We must resist the temptation that would on one hand fill us with pride and keep us from being humble pilgrims, and on the other hand would keep us from being able to give a reason for the hope that is within us to anyone who would ask.

Refuse to rejoice over division among those struggling to follow Christ. "But we're right; these people have repudiated Christ by their stance on..." Have they? That's what has been said in every division in the history of Christianity.

Yes, there is false doctrine. But we of all people had better be careful to stick to those things scripture defines as a matter of disqualification as a Christian. Satan uses our pride to pervert an attitude of "fidelity to sound doctrine" to an attitude that we have been personally empowered to "save the church."

Would that we all would take the advice of T.B. Larimore when asked to take a stand on the issues of his day. He replied, "I would prefer to sit on the issues and stand on Jesus Christ."

If we were to do that, we would increasingly reflect the fruit of the Spirit and the truth of Ephesians 4:4 that there is one body.

That is sound doctrine. ▲