

Recentering: My Theological Journey in Churches of Christ
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I graduated from Freed-Hardeman University in 1977, and I remember well the discussions of “Crossroads” and the beginnings of a discipling ministry that grew into the Boston Movement and then the International Churches of Christ. I began full time teaching in higher education among Churches of Christ in 1982 and am now in my thirty-ninth year, including the last twenty years at Lipscomb University. The history of the International Churches of Christ and my own vocation have spanned the same years. Yet, our paths have only occasionally crossed, though I have known some from our years together at Freed-Hardeman, others because they were students in classes or encounters at various events, and several through social media friendships.

My knowledge of the ministry of the International Churches of Christ is sporadic rather than systematic, though I have read Stanback’s *Into All Nations: A History of the International Churches of Christ* as well as reading several books by leaders within the movement. Consequently, I hope you will forgive any errors that arises out of my ignorance or lack of understanding. But my task is not to reflect on your theological interests and development but upon my own.

Studying and teaching the Bible, historical theology, and systematic theology in both the church and the University for almost forty years, I have traveled my own theological journey with significant twists and turns. Through personal tragedies and theological controversies, I navigated a faith journey that I did not expect or desire when I graduated from Freed-Hardeman. I am grateful for this opportunity to process this with you in this forum.

The most basic definition of theology is “faith seeking understanding.” Believers begin with a basic first-order sense of allegiance to Jesus whom the Father sent in the flesh through the power of the Spirit for our sake. This personal, core commitment is faith, allegiance, or trust in what God has done for us through Jesus in the Spirit. When this faith seeks deeper understanding or yearns to fully perform the drama of God’s redemptive story, believers pursue a deeper theological interest to grasp the breath, depth, and height of God’s love. As I reflected on my own personal theological journey in the context of Churches of Christ, I have identified five areas where development in my understanding has impacted my theological commitments. These areas are: (1) Doxology; (2) Hermeneutics; (3) Pneumatic Unity; (4) Sacraments; and (5) Discipleship.

For the purposes of this paper and conference, I will not seek to defend my development as much as explain it and identify what promise it has for our future performance of the biblical drama and future communion among Christ-followers.

Doxology

By “doxology” I mean the praise or worship of the transcendent God whose thoughts and ways are beyond my understanding. This contains two major concerns. First, it affirms the transcendence of God which means that our thoughts about God always fall short of the fullness of God. This entails a significant dose of epistemological humility as we recognize that we not God and God is God. Second, it means our theological statements about God are fundamentally doxological, that is, they are statements of praise that do not fully comprehend God though they communicate the reality of God to sufficiently perform the drama. We approach God through the lenses of awe and wonder rather than primarily through the lenses

of intellectual comprehension and philosophical coherence. Third, worship fuels mission. Filled with the wonder of God and basking in the grace of God's good gifts, we embrace our mission as participants in the mission of God.

For example, the Psalms, as we might expect, ooze the doxological commitments of their authors and illustrate a doxological approach to theology. For example, Psalm 62 arises out of the experience of a believer traumatized by assaults, whether physical, spiritual, or emotional (62:3-4). Despite this trauma, the Psalmist calls the people to trust God at all times and pour out their hearts because God is a refuge for believers (62:8). The ground or basis for this exhortation, despite the circumstances, are two affirmations about God in 62:11-12. The Psalmist confesses:

Once God has spoken;
twice I have heard this:
that power belongs to God,
and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.

Believers are empowered by a sense of God's identity, which arises out of worship, especially through communal liturgy. This worship is a response to God's story or God's acts in history which not only ground the worship of Israel but evoke it. The Psalmist has heard the story. The assemblies of Israel rehearsed the story of God's gracious work, for example, in the Exodus where God demonstrated divine power and steadfast love. It is not so much the rational evaluation of God's work or a philosophical assessment of God's deeds but the rehearsal of God's history with Israel in liturgy or worship that yielded this confidence. Israel's experience of God in the Exodus grounded their worship, and their worship fueled their participation in the mission of God.

The origins of Churches of Christ, and the beginnings of my own faith as part of that tradition, were fundamentally shaped by rationality. In particular, we embraced (1) an objective reading of the Bible, (2) rational discourse about God, and (3) the impulse to fit God's work within the confines of a rational box. I subjected my Bible, and consequently my God, to critical intellectual analysis while all the while trusting in the truth of the object of my study, which trust has never wavered. I even completed a graduate degree in philosophy as well as one in theology to help with this pursuit.

I am certainly not opposed to philosophical inquiry, but it needs a heavy dose of humility. Reason cannot drive mission; it will burn out. Reason cannot exhaust God; it is too finite. Reason cannot explain all the mysteries of the faith; it does not have access. Actually, reason confesses the mystery. Of course, I have not rejected reason. I am reasoning with you in the present moment. But I have flipped the priority.

It seems that human rationality often presumes that it can describe or even prescribe the limits of what is possible for God. This rationalistic approach assumes a realist understanding of the attributes of God which believes those attributes can be truly known, processed, and delimited by human rationality.

The doxological approach eschews philosophical abstraction and exalts liturgical contemplation. The church is, first and foremost, a worshipping community which images God's character in our relationships. Worship calls us to be like the one whom we worship, and we worship the revealed God rather than the God of speculation. Rational understandings of God which constrain God are replaced with the praise of the God who is known through Scripture, experienced in life's situations, and encountered in corporate worship. Instead of rationalistic

and metaphysical grids, we seek God in a worship encounter and praise his attributes rather than trying to plummet the depth of their logical relations.

Consequently, our preaching and teaching about God should not be consumed with scholastic "problem-solving" but with praise, worship, and confession. It is the encounter with the living God through Scripture, worship, and life that has a meaningful impact on Christian lives. This means that the believer is worshipful, trusting, and confident through the trials and joys of life.

I am much more comfortable with mystery now than I was previously. I don't have to figure everything out. When it comes to some of the deep questions of our faith, such as the problem of evil, I am willing to plead ignorance and embrace a skeptical theism which essentially says my brain is too small to understand the work of God. I do not expect reason to satisfy all my questions. Worship, rather than the achievements of the human intellect, secures comfort and drives mission.

Hermeneutics

As faith seeks understanding, we do want to understand God. This search, however, is not through philosophical abstraction but through living within the narrative of the Biblical drama, the story of God. Our understanding of God is forged and shaped by our engagement with the history of God's work in the biblical narrative from creation to new creation. Consequently, how we read the Bible is of supreme importance. How we read the Bible will determine what the Bible means for us, how we understand what God requires of us, how we "do church," and how we pursue God's mission in the present.

Hermeneutics is the process by which we discern what is required, forbidden, optional, or expedient. Sometimes we think it is as simple as reading the Bible and doing what it says. For example, if the Bible says “X,” then we do “X.” But, actually, everyone introduces a middle step into this process. We recognize this middle step because we do not practice everything the Bible teaches. We make distinctions so that we do not simply reproduce ancient culture in the present, and we make distinctions about what is essential and what is optional. We make contextual judgments about dispensations, cultural settings, meaning of words, contexts, and many other factors. Hermeneutics is the middle step between the text and our practice of the text. Everyone has a middle step.

Growing up in Churches of Christ, I practiced a hermeneutic that sought an implicit blueprint for the work and worship of the church in Acts and the Epistles. We sought this blueprint through a filter of distinctions between generic and specific commands, an understanding of how a specified command excludes its coordinates, how the lack of implicit or explicit authorization forbids practices, and how to distinguish between expediency and prohibition when Scripture is silent in addition to many other rules for how the Bible authorizes. Consequently, I sifted through the commands, examples, and inferences within the New Testament to deduce a blueprint. That blueprint became the standard of faithfulness and the mark of the true church. And if everyone agreed upon and practiced the blueprint, we would be united! Finding and practicing the blueprint became the foundation of both my assurance (“was I in the right church?”) and unity among believers (if we agreed on the blueprint’s details).

The inadequacies of this approach as well as its subjectivity (every conclusion and most steps along the way were inferences) created doubts. As distinctions accumulated and inferences abounded, I began to realize the blueprint was more the product of human rationalization than it was explicit in God's story. It did not appear on the surface of the text, and if it was in the text, its pieces were scattered across a wide field. As I read Scripture, this is not how the apostolic witness called people to gospel obedience. They did not read Scripture or write Scripture with a blueprint lens. Something different was going on.

The problem, it seems to me, is the location of the pattern. The pattern is not found in an implied blueprint in Acts and the Epistles. Paul does not call people to obedience based on a blueprint located in the practices of the church. Instead, he calls them to obedience based on the pattern manifested in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus. We conform to this pattern. We obey the gospel, which is the story of Jesus, rather than a blueprint we have inferred from the text but is not explicitly there.

Hermeneutics always involves inferences, whether one pursues a blueprint hermeneutic or a theological one. We cannot escape them; every application is an inference. But here is the significant point: *the pattern is not an inference*. On the contrary, it is the story in which we live. It is the narrative air we breathe. The pattern of God's work through Christ in the power of the Spirit is clear, objective, and formative. It is the story told in Scripture; *it is an explicit pattern*.

We will find unity when we confess the same pattern, and the shame of divisions among Churches of Christ is that we already confess the same pattern. Our pattern is God in Jesus through the Spirit, or our pattern is Jesus. Here we are united, and our hermeneutics (whether

blueprint or theological) must not undermine that unity but discern ways to faithfully embody it.

The Unity of the Spirit

Unity is the “unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4:3). It is created and empowered by the Spirit who is the creative power of God that breathes life into both the present age and the age to come.

The Spirit is the one by whom we commune with each other and with God.

Briefly, I offer five modes of visible unity that give expression to the underlying unity of the Spirit among believers. These five practices not only exhibit the unity of the Spirit but are also means by which the Spirit dynamically works among believers for both unity. The Spirit acts through them to manifest the unity that the Spirit has already achieved. At the same time, these practices are also transformative as they move us not only into a deeper experience of that unity but also function to transform us as exhibits of that unity.

1. Confession. We confess Jesus is Lord by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). Paul provides the ground of this point: “No one is able to say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). This is an orienting, centering confession. The confession arises out of the Spirit’s work, operates within the life of the Spirit, and lives in the community of faith because we have all drunk of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). This confession is, however, made in a context, that is, the divine drama, which is summarized in numerous places in Scripture (e.g., Acts 10:34-43). It shapes the confession of the lordship of Jesus and locates believers in the flow of the history of God’s people. We confess the Father as creator, Jesus as the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit as the communion of believers. Theologically, we acknowledge that

whoever confesses “Jesus is Lord” does so “in the Spirit.” We may embrace the unity of believers through this confession because it is the result of the Spirit’s enabling presence.

2. *Transformation.* We are sanctified by the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8). We all know the saying of Jesus, “by their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:16). Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit who indwells, empowers, and gifts us for new life in Christ.

Theologically, transformation is the goal of God’s agenda. Transformation is an effect of communion. God transforms us by the presence of the indwelling Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is evidence of our union with God. The fruit of the Spirit is the life of the Spirit already present in us. We may embrace the unity of believers through this shared, Spirit-empowered sanctification.

3. *Liturgy.* We worship in the Spirit (John 4:24; Philippians 3:3). The foundation of liturgy is the work of the Spirit. Our liturgical acts—not necessarily our precise liturgical forms—are deeply rooted in the work of the Spirit. Assembly, as communal praise and worship, is mediated by the Spirit. We worship the Father through the Son in the Spirit. Assembly, as an eschatological, transforming, and sacramental encounter with God, happens in the Spirit; it is a pneumatic event. This is what gives significance and meaning to assembly, and it is also the root of the unity we experience through assembly as the whole church—throughout time and space—is gathered before the throne of the Father in the Spirit. To recognize that (1) the Spirit is the means by whom we commune with and experience God, (2) this means is not dependent upon perfectionistic obedience to specified forms, and (3) the Spirit is not limited by such forms. This enables us to affirm the presence of the Spirit among those communities who do

not share the forms that we think are most biblical. In the Spirit we embrace the unity of fellow worshippers through our eschatological and sacramental encounter with God in assembly.

4. Practicing the Kingdom of God. We minister in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:18-19).

The Spirit anointed Jesus, led him into the wilderness, and empowered him for ministry in Luke 3-4. This is the ministry of the kingdom of God in which Jesus practices the kingdom by heralding the good news of the kingdom, exercising authority over the principalities and powers, and healing brokenness. Jesus is sent, and he sends disciples. This is the missional ministry into which disciples are called. This praxis is an expression of the life of the Spirit within the community, and the community of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, continues the teaching and doing of Jesus, that is, they continue to practice the kingdom of God. When disciples practice the kingdom of God, the Spirit is present. Where the Spirit is present, Jesus is present. This is a missional ecumenism. In the Spirit, we embrace the unity of believers through shared ministry, that is, shared participation in the proclamation and practice of the good news of the kingdom of God, which is the mission of God.

5. Spiritual Formation Practices. We pray in the Spirit (Jude 20). Disciples, united in prayer, are united in the Spirit. The practice of prayer (as well as other disciplines) is rooted in the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is present to listen and speak in these moments. When a community practices them together, or each member of a community practices them in their own walk with God, the Spirit works to unite us through shared experiences and shared communion. In the Spirit, we may embrace the unity of believers through the shared experience and communion in prayer.

Through the practice of these gifts, the Spirit mediates a proleptic experience of our eschatological unity, a unity that is already but also, in some sense, not yet. Together, we confess Jesus is Lord; together, we seek transformation; together, we participate in the eschatological assembly; together, we practice the kingdom of God; and together, we pray in the Spirit. That is, at least in part, the unity of the Spirit.

Sacraments

Sacrament names the mystery of God's action through the external means of water, wine, bread, and communal assemblies as we experience the story of God in specific moments. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and assemblies are dramatic rehearsals of the story through which God renews communion and empowers transformation. By faith, the community participates in this story and rehearses that story together as the church shares the sacramental reality together through water initiation, bread/wine nourishment, and gathering in the power of the Spirit.

These gospel ordinances have ordinarily been construed something like this. Baptism is the means of grace for justification through participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Lord's Supper is the means of grace for sanctification through remembrance of the death of Jesus and communion with the living Christ. The Lord's Day or the weekly assembly is the means of grace for communal worship through celebration of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. In this sense, they are not mere gospel ordinances that merely bear witness to the gospel, but they are also sacramental means through which believers experience the grace of the gospel in the Spirit. In other words, these gospel symbols mediate the presence of Christ to

his community. They are more than signs; they are participatory symbols through which God acts.

They are not substitutes for discipleship or transformation but rather moments of encounter with God through which we are moved along the path of discipleship toward entire sanctification. This kind of sacramentalism is not popular. Evangelicals and the positivistic hermeneutic typical in Churches of Christ have something in common—they ultimately disconnect the sacraments from discipleship and empty all sacramental imagination from these ordinances. Baptism becomes either a mere sign or a test of loyalty. The Lord's Supper becomes an anthropocentric form of individualistic piety. Assembly becomes either the ongoing public test of faithfulness (part of the definition of a "faithful Christian") which degenerates into a legalism or fundamentally a horizontal occasion for mutual encouragement which is susceptible to pragmatic consumerist ideology.

These sacramental moments mark our journey with God and the church of God. Baptism is a means of grace through which we encounter the saving act of God in Christ through his death and resurrection. We participate in the gospel and are renewed by the Spirit through our burial and resurrection with Christ. The Lord's Supper is a means by which we experience the presence of the living Christ and enjoy a renewal of future hope. Indeed, we experience that future anew every time we eat and drink at the Lord's table. It is an authentic communion with God through Christ in the power of the Spirit. Assemblies, wherever and whenever a community of Jesus' disciples gather to seek God's face (e.g., to pray), are moments when we draw near to the Father and Jesus in their eschatological glory by the Spirit. These assemblies participate in the eschatological assembly as the Spirit ushers us into the

heavenly Jerusalem where we share the future with all the saints gathered around the world and spread throughout time. Assembly, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are moments of communion, transformation, participation, and encounter.

This yields at least three significant points. First, the sacraments are *authentic encounters* with God. The sacraments are not bare or nude signs but means of divine action. They are divine gifts through which we may experience God as God comes to us in grace and mercy. God is not absent from the creation and only dwelling in the "spirituality" of our consciousness, but God is present through the creation as the Spirit existentially and communally unites us with Christ through water, through bread and wine, and through gathering.

Second, the sacraments serve our faith as *moments of assurance* which our feeble hearts can grasp through materiality. God's promise is connected to the signs. Faith assures us that Jesus is ours as surely as are bodies are washed, our lips sip wine, and the people of God are gathered. The sacraments are means of assurance for disciples of Jesus.

Third, the sacraments are *communal experiences* of God. As God created community and redeems a community, so the divine presence comes to us in community as well. Baptism, Lord's Supper, and assemblies are shared experiences through which God is present to bind us together. We were baptized into one body, we eat the one body of Christ together, and we are the body of Christ in assembly united with the church triumphant as well as militant.

Discipleship

One of my favorite quotes from James A. Harding, the co-founder of Lipscomb University and the namesake of Harding University, is a comment on the practice of protracted meetings. "I

have observed,” he wrote, “that those speakers as a rule secure the greatest number of accessions who dwell most upon *escaping hell and getting into heaven*, and least upon the importance of leading lives of absolute consecration to the Lord; in other words their converts are much more anxious *to be saved than they are to follow Christ*.”¹

Discipleship, an obedient following of Jesus, has always been a central value of Churches of Christ. Unfortunately, sometimes this was reduced to particular ecclesial forms or minimized in other ways or even, perhaps, located in a particular practice or outcome. Thus, while obedient discipleship remained important, it was often expressed in some authoritarian attitudes about church attendance, obedience to elders, and/or communal submission.

When “Crossroads” began highlighting discipleship as a primary way of envisioning the Christian life, this drew on the resources of the tradition as well as contemporary movements within Protestant Christianity. I remember how grateful I was for that emphasis, and I was thrilled by the potential of that renewal, though many of my contemporaries did not share my enthusiasm.

I have always thought that the separation of Churches of Christ and the Boston Movement was lamentable. Churches of Christ, rather than embracing and pursuing the value of discipleship and disciple-making, began to fear the language of discipleship and discipling, and we lost, in general, our commitment to following Jesus through making others fishers of people. Though the International Churches of Christ have experienced their own struggles with understanding and practicing discipleship and disciple-making, it is time for Churches of Christ to learn from our brothers and sisters in the International Churches of Christ. I am grateful that

¹ James A. Harding, “About Protracted Meetings,” *Gospel Advocate* 27, no. 37 (14 September 1887) 588.

now there are strong movements within Churches of Christ for the renewal of discipleship and disciple-making, and I hope our two traditions might find some spaces like this to enrich each other, particularly regarding a theology of discipleship.

“Follow me,” Jesus says. Discipleship means imitating Jesus by entering into his life. We follow Jesus into the water and are baptized. We follow Jesus into the wilderness and seek solitude with God. We follow Jesus into intimacy with others and seek out friends with whom we can reveal our true selves. We follow Jesus to the tables of both the righteous and the sinner. We follow Jesus by taking up his mission in the world. We follow Jesus by apprenticing others just as he apprenticed his own disciples. Follow Jesus means participating in the mission of Jesus from baptism to the table, from heralding the good news to liberating the oppressed, and from solitude in the wilderness to discipling others.

The mission of Jesus depends on apprenticing others, discipling others in the faith. We do not become disciples of Jesus in solitude or alone. We become disciples through community and apprenticeship. Others took us under their wings. They taught us, modeled life for us, invited us to walk with them, and mentored us. The call to discipleship—the invitation to participate in the life of God through Jesus—involves discipling others. Following Jesus entails inviting others to follow him as well.

Ultimately, the kingdom is about discipleship—following Jesus—rather than a self-interested notion of “getting to heaven.” Christianity is about participating in the coming of heaven to earth rather than inheriting of a mansion in the sky.

Conclusion

I hope you are able to see a fundamental trajectory in my presentation. It is a movement from the wonder and awe of God's presence to participation in the mission of God. We begin with doxology, and this fuels mission. Moreover, doxology invites us into the drama of God's story. We enter this story through the reading of Scripture, and we rehearse in our assemblies and proclaim in our words, sacraments, and ministries. We seek to embody the story of God, and this is empowered by the presence of the Spirit who unites us, transforms us, and gifts us for the mission.

The church, moved by doxological praise and understanding God's story, experiences the communion of God's life through its sacraments and mission because of the work of the Spirit. Through this common practice, together we are apprenticed into the story of God as disciples of Jesus.