

“Who is My Brother?” – A Response to F. LaGard Smith’s Five-Fold Fellowship Model

Introduction

The book, “Who is My Brother?”¹ by F. LaGard Smith provides the theme for the 2006 International Teachers’ Seminar². It carries the subtitle, “Facing a Crisis of Identity and Fellowship”, and includes a “five-fold” model for guiding Christians in their fellowship with others. Particular attention is given to interaction with those who share a faith in Jesus, yet hold differing theological perspectives. Central themes include the importance of keeping the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3), avoiding divisions among Christians (I Corinthians 1:10), and maintaining doctrinal integrity (1Timothy 4:16). Some general details from the publisher are provided as follows:

“This is a book about Christian fellowship. Who is a Christian? Who is not? With whom do we share kingdom participation as brothers and sisters in Christ? How should we regard those who have never been spiritually reborn in the same way as first-century believers? Indeed, how should we treat those who have in fact been born again into the kingdom?”

These issues have concerned me for many years and served as the inspiration for an article I wrote entitled, “Baptism Revisited”³ as well as an *Evangelistic Bible Study Series*⁴ I assembled in an attempt to communicate the gospel message in a manner that is doctrinally sound without incorporating a sectarian bias. These issues are particularly relevant to those of us with a history in the International Churches of Christ (ICOC).

The book is divided into the following three sections:

- I. The Quiet Revolution
- II. The Five-Fold Fellowship
- III. Rethinking Sacred Cows

Smith begins section one by identifying what he considers “A Clear and Present Danger” (the title of chapter one). Generally, the “danger” the author is concerned about is a “pendulum swing” among some leaders within the churches of Christ. Although he acknowledges that historical focus on doctrine has often led to church division, he is concerned that some are compromising doctrinal integrity in order to promote unity with believers whose baptismal experiences differ from the example observed in Acts 2 (immersion of repentant believers for the forgiveness of sins). Smith is concerned that such compromise will “open the door” to compromise on a myriad of other doctrinal issues. Accordingly, he considers it imperative that the errors of the “so-called unity movement” (page 27) within the churches of Christ be corrected. It is clear from the “open letter” in the epilogue of the book that Smith considers Max Lucado to be one of the primary contributors to the “quiet revolution” he considers so dangerous to the doctrinal integrity of the churches of Christ. Although not specifically stated, a reference on page 151 seems to suggest that Smith would also categorize Rubel Shelly in a similar manner. Interestingly, Shelly was cited in the acknowledgments page of “Baptism -The Believer’s Wedding Ceremony”⁵ as one of the reviewers who provided feedback for Smith’s early drafts of that book.

After explaining in section one why he considers the doctrinal stance of the “so-called unity movement” to be flawed, Smith moves on to section two, which is the primary body of the book. In this section, he develops a five-fold model of fellowship, which is summarized as follows:

- 1) Universal Fellowship – the common identity all humans share as descendants of Adam who were created in the image of God. We are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves and this command is not conditional upon any spiritual status.

¹ http://www.amazon.com/Who-My-Brother-F-LaGard-Smith/dp/0966006003/ref=pd_sxp_f_pt/104-5442108-5307965?ie=UTF8

² <http://www.douglasjacoby.com/dajacoby/home.nsf/Article/A97D768A18E58288852571320054F37C?OpenDocument>

³ <http://www.douglasjacoby.com/dajacoby/home.nsf/Article/38F2926439AE20AA88256F3300495931?OpenDocument>

⁴ <http://www.douglasjacoby.com/dajacoby/home.nsf/Article/E6E9AF5F39420088852570B500632C63?OpenDocument>

⁵ <http://www.amazon.com/Baptism-Believers-F-Lagard-Smith/dp/089225422X>

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- 2) Faith Fellowship – the common bond Christians have with others who share a faith and commitment to Jesus but have not been immersed as the scriptures direct. This would include those who have been baptized as infants or not yet immersed as believers. The author concludes that these individuals are “not family” although they may be “like family” as a result of their strong faith and commitment.
- 3) In Christ Fellowship - the common bond Christians have with all others who are recognized as Christians as a result of their faith, repentance, confession, and immersion for the forgiveness of sins. This is fellowship with others that are recognized as brothers and sisters in Christ. Smith also recognizes that some believers (Baptists, for example) also have a genuine faith and commitment to Jesus and have been immersed; yet believe that they were saved prior to their immersion. Smith tentatively acknowledges that such people “might” actually have become Christians at the time of their baptisms. He recommends that “In Christ” fellowship with such individuals be contingent upon re-educating them regarding the biblical nature of baptism, namely, that it is “for the forgiveness of sins” and not a “post salvation ceremony”. Presumably, those who accepted this perspective on baptism might be “extended the right hand of *In Christ Fellowship*”.
- 4) Conscience Fellowship (Close Family) – A subcategory of “In Christ Fellowship” that shares common convictions with regard to “matters of conscience”. An example would be the churches of Christ that share a common bond with Christians who only utilize *a cappella* singing in worship. Though “Christian Church” members who utilize musical instruments in worship are also accepted for “In Christ Fellowship”, they are excluded from “Conscience Fellowship” with church of Christ members because of differences associated with “matters of conscience”. The separation between groups such as these is considered to be acceptable and is likened to the parting of ways of Paul and Barnabas as each took their own path to serve the Lord.
- 5) Congregational Fellowship (Immediate Family) – A subcategory of “Conscience Fellowship” comprised of members of a local congregational church.

The third section of the book explores the biblical basis for church discipline, what actually constitutes “false teaching”, and the possibility that God may ultimately grant clemency to “godly but un-immersed” believers in Christ. Finally, in the epilogue, Smith includes an open letter to Max Lucado in which he appeals to Max to return to a stance on baptism and fellowship more consistent with the five-fold fellowship model detailed in section two of the book.

Although Smith wrote this book in 1997, the controversies he addressed remain central to discussions within the churches of Christ. A book entitled “*The Jesus Proposal*”⁶ was written by Rubel Shelly and John York in 2003 in an effort to provide “a theological framework for maintaining the unity of the body of Christ” (the subtitle of the book). Shelly and York seem to represent the perspective that Smith regards as “dangerous” in section one of “*Who is My Brother?*” A central theme in “*The Jesus Proposal*” is the problem of sectarianism and its impact on the advancement of the gospel.

Differing Paradigms: A Matter of Hermeneutics

Having a spiritual history in the ICOC as compared to the “mainline” churches of Christ, I do not typically encounter the level of zeal Smith maintains regarding the issue of “instrumental music”. The local congregation I attend primarily sings *a cappella*; however, we occasionally have songs that are accompanied by a band. Accordingly, our “congregational fellowship” does not embrace the conviction that God disapproves of the use of instrumental music in worship. I found it very interesting that on page 150, Smith described an interaction he had with some brothers from the conservative Christian Churches as follows:

⁶ <http://www.rubelshelly.com/content.asp?CID=10653>

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“When at one point I mentioned the restoration rubric, “We speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent,” it was as if a lightning bolt struck. What I had always read into that restoration phrase as restriction was, to them, liberty. No wonder we had always understood “the argument from silence” to forbid the use of instruments, while they understood the “freedom of silence” to permit instruments! We didn’t just disagree over instruments. At a much more fundamental level, we disagreed over hermeneutics.”

Earlier in the book, on page 58, Smith stated, “It’s a matter of hermeneutics. What kind of lenses are you looking through when you read Scripture? What prior assumptions have you made about the way in which Scripture is to be distilled and applied?”

These observations and questions are very relevant in explaining why those of us with roots in the churches of Christ have emphasized certain issues. Although the culture in the ICOC has differed from that of the mainline churches, the foundational values that developed in the churches of Christ following the separation from the Christian Churches has had a significant influence on our theology.

The Basis for a Restrictive Paradigm

Isaiah 66:1-2 TNIV

¹ This is what the LORD says: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? ² Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?” declares the LORD. “These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.

Philippians 2:12-13 TNIV

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Both the Old and New Testaments reveal the importance of remaining reverent toward God and his Word. Clearly, such an attitude is essential if we hope to be close to God. It is evident that Smith is concerned about a “pendulum swing” from an overemphasis on restriction to an overemphasis on liberty. To emphasize this concern, on page 252 Smith cites various examples of God’s swift judgment on those who failed to obey *precisely*. Indeed, there are numerous examples that serve as a warning to those who would dare to be presumptuous about God’s expectations. A few examples are presented as follows:

- Nadab and Abihu are struck dead because they “offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command”. (Leviticus 10:1-3)
- Moses is denied entrance into the Promised Land because God instructed him to “Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water”. Instead “Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff”. God provided the water Israel needed, but he rebuked Moses and Aaron, saying “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.” (Numbers 20:8-12)
- After Saul presumptuously offered a burnt offering at Gilgal (which he was not authorized to offer), Samuel rebuked him, saying, “You have done a foolish thing. You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the LORD’s command.” (1 Samuel 13:1-14)
- After God commanded Saul to “go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them” (1 Samuel 15:3), Saul deviated from God’s instructions, explaining to Samuel “I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was

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devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God at Gilgal.” But Samuel replied: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.” Samuel went on to explain, “You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!” (1 Samuel 15:10-26)

- When Uzzah touched the Ark of the Covenant, contrary to the command of God (Numbers 4:15), “God struck him down, and he died”. (2 Samuel 6:5-7)
- Even under the New Covenant, Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead because they “lied to the Holy Spirit” as they attempted to deceive others regarding the magnitude of their contribution. (Acts 5:1-11)

There are other examples, but these should suffice to remind us how serious of an offense it is to be irreverent, presumptuous, or flippant with regard to God’s holiness. The following verse provides direction about the attitude we should maintain before God.

Hebrews 12:28-29 TNIV

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our “God is a consuming fire.”

In view of these scriptural examples, it is easy to understand the emphasis on “acceptable worship” and the issue of “unauthorized practices” that have been so prevalent among churches of Christ. These concerns certainly contributed to the development of a paradigm of *restriction*.

Consequences of a Restrictive Paradigm

On page 27, Smith states, “*Our own splintered fellowship would be sufficient reason alone to conduct serious unity talks among ourselves.*” In addition to the separation that developed between the Christian Churches and the churches of Christ over the issues of instrumental music and missionary societies in 1906, many other issues served as the basis for subsequent schisms within the churches of Christ.⁷ Some examples include the “one-cuppers” (those who believe that the use of only one cup during the Lord’s Supper is acceptable), the “non-Sunday school group” (those who believe that Sunday school, mentioned nowhere in the Bible and unheard of prior to the 18th Century, is wrong), etc. On page 137, Smith describes three women from a congregation in England that utilized straws to sip communion so as to maintain adherence to the “one cup” practice while at the same time taking precautions to minimize personal risk during flu season. Though Smith does not share this same conviction regarding the use of “one cup”, he expresses a similar concern over “technicalities” in his “open letter” to Max Lucado on page 252. Smith cites several of the previously mentioned examples of God’s punishment of Saul, Uzzah, etc. as he appeals to Lucado regarding the issue of promoting unity at the expense of doctrinal integrity. It is from this same restrictive paradigm that Smith poses some questions for the reader to consider.

- “*Will there be souls in heaven who never attended a Church of Christ? No doubt about it. Deborah, Daniel and David will be telling stories about how they used to worship God in the days before Christ and his apostles. And maybe even some brothers and sisters in Christ who worshipped down the street from us. Should we snub them because they never associated themselves with us? On the other hand, would we have any right to snub God if he decided that baptized believers forfeited their salvation by remaining in doctrinally rebellious denominations?*” (Pages 224-225)
- “*Will some of God’s singers in heaven have been used to singing with instruments? Absolutely. Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun will likely be in the heavenly chorus. And maybe some of the hymn writers of more modern times who wrote their songs of faith to be accompanied by instruments. Will we refuse to sing with them if they step up on the risers in the throne room? Or, if it turns out*

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restoration_Movement#Church_of_Christ_schisms

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differently, will we shake our heads disapprovingly at God for having chosen not to honor their faith solely because in this one area they preferred to “sacrifice” rather than to “obey”? (Page 225)

The “lens” of a restrictive paradigm impacts peoples’ view of God, worship, fellowship, etc. This perspective appears to have shaped Smith’s view of acceptable boundaries of fellowship.

The Impact of a Restrictive Paradigm on Baptismal Theology

On the first page of Chapter One (page 17), Smith states, *“Of all of the doctrines unique to the churches of Christ, none has been more central than the absolute necessity of adult, faith prompted baptism for the remission of sins.”*

He went on to say on page 18, *“...our particular understanding of New Testament baptism became a wedge between us and others. That wedge, in turn, widely fostered an attitude of exclusivity which admitted no doubt that we were the only Christians.”*

He also added, *“There has never been a general acceptance of the so-called “pious un-immersed”, or those whose only “baptism” was as an infant, or even those who were baptized believing they were already Christians. Among the churches of Christ such believers were never commonly regarded as Christians or accepted as brothers and sisters in Christ. Given our particular beliefs regarding baptism, therefore, it would have been unthinkable for us to fellowship as Christians anyone who did not share our view of baptism, both in understanding and personal experience. Consequently, ours has been a closely-drawn, exclusive circle of fellowship.”*

On pages 19-20, Smith continues the discussion, stating, *“...one’s view of baptism contributes significantly to one’s view of fellowship. The more narrow one’s view of baptism, the more narrow the acceptable bounds of fellowship. Or to put it another way, there is an interdependent relationship between baptism and fellowship: An exclusive view of baptism prompts an exclusive view of fellowship; whereas, an inclusive view of fellowship demands a non-exclusive view of baptism.”*

Though Smith recognizes the problem of division that has plagued the churches of Christ, he is deeply concerned that unity is being pursued at the expense of doctrinal integrity, particularly as it relates to the issue of baptism. It is from this perspective that he states on page 73, *“Unlike other matters of doctrine... Christian birth is a threshold question. Before there can be unity among the family of God, believers must first be in the family of God.”*

Similarly, on page 113, Smith states, *“Because what it takes to become a Christian is a threshold question, we’ve simply got to get that right before we do anything else.”*

Again on page 120, Smith states, *“...it is God, not we, who determine the boundaries of “in Christ” fellowship. Neither “in Christ” fellowship nor “in Christ” unity is something we ourselves can define, limit, or regulate, since being “in Christ” involves the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. That is why biblical baptism is such a watershed act of obedience. It is the point at which God has chosen to call us into his fellowship.”*

On page 122, Smith states, *“One of the most difficult challenges of “in Christ” fellowship is embracing the fact that the bright line between Christians and non-Christians is both inclusive and exclusive. It’s a line of demarcation: no unbaptized believer is a Christian; no biblically baptized believer is not a Christian.”* Again on page 123, Smith states, *“Being a biblically-baptized believer is a watershed line of fellowship.”*

Smith reiterates his point on page 125 concerning the definition of the word “Christian”. Regarding believers who have not been biblically baptized, Smith states, *“They are believers because they believe, but they are not Christians.”*

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On pages 41-42, Smith states, “...the texts pertaining to Christian birth are clear and unequivocal: baptism is an essential prerequisite to forgiveness, salvation, and kingdom fellowship.”

It is evident that Smith wrestles with the dilemma associated with the “pious un-immersed”, citing on page 106, “What makes the question of Christian identity more difficult, both for ourselves and for those who might be looking from the outside, is the disturbing fact that there are un-immersed believers who very often put to shame immersed believers who ought to bear the fruit of the Spirit but don’t. Spiritually speaking, these un-immersed believers can be more “like family” than our own Christian family.”

He goes on to state on page 107, “...these faithful, God-fearing, worshipful men and women are believers, but not Christians. They are believers because of their faith in Christ; but they are not Christians, having not yet put on Christ through the saving act of baptism.”

In Chapter 12, Smith considers the possibility that God might grant “clemency” to the “pious un-immersed”, but maintains that they should not be considered “family” or included for “in Christ” fellowship in this life. He considers those who extend inclusive fellowship to such believers to be guilty of “a doctrinal departure of disastrous proportions” (page 50). He attributes the emergence of this movement to biblical illiteracy within the church; namely, church members are failing to confront preachers for doctrinal error (page 53).

On page 156 Smith states, “The current call for wide-open “in Christ” fellowship with all “whose faith is in the cross and whose eyes are on the Savior” – regardless of baptism – presents the most challenging threat of all to conscience fellowship.” He then poses the question, “How in good conscience can we have fellowship with brothers and sisters who are undermining “in Christ” fellowship?” On page 157, Smith states, “With so much at stake the time is almost certainly coming when conscience fellowship will demand a separation from those who are currently advocating wide-open “Christian” fellowship with those who have not been united with Christ in biblical baptism.” He concludes chapter eight on page 158 by stating, “Never will our various “close families” within the universal body of Christ be at greater distance than when we must separate from our ecumenically-minded brothers and sisters in the extended family.”

The Basis for a Paradigm of Liberty

There are a number of scriptures that support the position that a paradigm of *liberty* rather than *restriction* is more consistent with the spirit of the New Covenant. Consider the following passages:

2 Corinthians 3:4-6 TNIV

⁴ Such confidence we have through Christ before God. ⁵ Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁶ He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

2 Corinthians 3:17 TNIV

¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Galatians 5:13-14 TNIV

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Clearly, “freedom in Christ” is not a license for sin. Nevertheless, the New Covenant specifically conveys a message of freedom or liberty for the purpose of promoting love. This ideal is facilitated when people are not excessively preoccupied with compliance to regulations. Hence, there is strong biblical support for an emphasis on *liberty* that is consistent with the “spirit of the law” as compared to an emphasis on *restriction*, which corresponds more directly with the “letter of the law”. Indeed, Jesus corrected the Pharisees for their “legalistic” focus while neglecting the “spirit of the law”.

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Matthew 23:23 TNIV

²³ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

It is evident that Jesus considered some issues to be “more important matters” that correspond to the “spirit of the law” as distinguished from the “letter of the law”. Indeed, the Pharisees’ preoccupation with the “letter of the law” at the neglect of the “spirit of the law” did “kill” their relationship with God. Recognizing this human tendency, God provided an answer for us in the New Covenant, as reflected in the following scriptures:

Hebrews 8:6-13 TNIV

⁶ But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. ⁷ For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁸ But God found fault with the people and said: “The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ⁹ It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. ¹⁰ This is the covenant I will establish with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ¹¹ No longer will they teach their neighbors, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. ¹² For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” ¹³ By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.

1 Corinthians 2:12-16 TNIV

¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. ¹⁴ The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. ¹⁵ The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, ¹⁶ for, “Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

God established the New Covenant with his people so that every family member would have a “direct line” to him by his Spirit. In this way, God himself would place the “more important matters” on the minds and hearts of his people. No longer would they be isolated because of their sin (Isaiah 59:1-2), oblivious to the “spirit of the law” while pursuing a futile attempt to satisfy the “letter of the law”. No longer would God’s people be slaves to “the letter that kills”. Rather, they would benefit from the “Spirit that gives life”. The Pharisees that Jesus confronted in Matthew 23 did not have the “mind of Christ”. In view of these passages and the examples Jesus set, it is difficult to conceive how anyone who is truly “in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25) and who has the “mind of Christ” could ever feel compelled to sip communion through a straw (or engage in any number of similar, “hair-splitting” practices). Clearly, this is not the mentality God intended to promote when he poured out his Spirit and established the New Covenant.

The Transition between the Old and New Covenants

Under the Old Covenant, there were severe penalties for violating laws regarding circumcision, diet, Sabbath keeping, etc. Consider the following:

Genesis 17:9-14 TNIV

⁹ Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. ¹⁰ This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² For the generations to come

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every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. ¹³ Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

Exodus 4:24-26 TNIV

²⁴ At a lodging place on the way, the LORD met Moses and was about to kill him. ²⁵ But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son’s foreskin and touched Moses’ feet with it. “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me,” she said. ²⁶ So the LORD let him alone. (At that time she said “bridegroom of blood,” referring to circumcision.)

Exodus 12:17-19 TNIV

¹⁷ “Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. ¹⁸ In the first month you are to eat bread made without yeast, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day. ¹⁹ For seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses. And anyone, whether foreigner or native-born, who eats anything with yeast in it must be cut off from the community of Israel.

Exodus 31:12-15 TNIV

¹² Then the LORD said to Moses ¹³ “Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy. ¹⁴ “ ‘Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it is to be put to death; those who do any work on that day must be cut off from their people. ¹⁵ For six days work is to be done, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day is to be put to death.

Under the New Covenant, transgressions that were once capital offenses are no longer even relevant. Consider the following:

Colossians 2:16-23 TNIV

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸ Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such people also go into great detail about what they have seen, and their unspiritual minds puff them up with idle notions. ¹⁹ They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. ²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” ²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Galatians 6:15 TNIV

¹⁵ Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation.

These scriptures reflect a significant transition in God’s expectations between the Old and New Covenants. The basis for the transition is reflected in the role of the Law along with what Jesus did to fulfill the Law.

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The Role of the Law

Romans 3:19-20 TNIV

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

Romans 7:7 TNIV

⁷ What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”

Galatians 2:21 TNIV

²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

Galatians 3:19-25 TNIV

¹⁹ What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. ²⁰ A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one. ²¹ Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. ²² But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. ²³ Before the coming of this faith, ²³ we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was put in charge of us until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

It was never God’s expectation that humans would attain righteousness through the Old Covenant law. The purpose of the law was to make us aware of our sin and our need for forgiveness. The law served a temporary purpose by acting as a “supervisor” or “guardian” until the New Covenant was established.

The End of Hostility

Ephesians 2:11-20 TNIV

¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— ¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

Hebrews 12:18-24 TNIV

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.” ²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of

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the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Galatians 5:18 TNIV

¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Hebrews 4:16 TNIV

¹⁶ Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

When Jesus died on the cross, he “destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations”. In Deuteronomy 7, God warned Israel, his chosen people, not to intermarry with foreigners who would turn their hearts away from him. In Ezra 7, God called his people to separate from the peoples around them and from their foreign wives who had led them into idolatry. The Gospels contain extensive evidence of the hostility that existed between Jews and Gentiles in the first century. Jesus’ sacrifice eliminated the barrier that caused the hostility and also made it possible for the Gentiles, who were formerly without hope, to find peace with God. Whereas in the days of Moses, God was unapproachable on the mountain, it is now possible to approach God with confidence as sons and daughters.

God as “Abba”

Romans 8:15 TNIV

¹⁵ The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.⁸ And by him we cry, “Abba,⁹ Father.”

Galatians 4:6-7 TNIV

⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba,³ Father.”⁷ So you are no longer slaves, but God’s children; and since you are his children, he has made you also heirs.

Ephesians 1:3-6 TNIV

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

Matthew 7:7-11 TNIV

⁷ “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.⁸ For everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock, the door will be opened.⁹ “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

James 1:5 TNIV

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

Hebrews 12:7-10 TNIV

⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?⁸ If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate children at all.⁹ Moreover, we have all had parents who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live!¹⁰ Our parents disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.

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Our adoption through Jesus was planned from the beginning. Ultimately, God always intended that we have a relationship with him based on “sonship” rather than “duty”. As humans, even though we are sinful, we have a great capacity to love our children. Our Holy Father’s love for us is immeasurably greater than our love for our children. These passages make a statement about how God feels about us. Indeed, as Christians we have the right to address God as “Abba”, which is generally comparable to “Daddy” in terms of the intimacy it represents. There is a significant difference in the closeness to God that is available to us under the New Covenant as compared to what existed under the Old Covenant. God does not want us to be so intimidated that we are afraid to approach him. Jesus has destroyed the barrier that separated us from God so that we can approach God with confidence, knowing that he loves us. God does not want us to view him as some type of faultfinding “Cosmic Drill Sergeant”. Although he will indeed discipline us for our own good, the basis is that of a loving Father who wants the best for us – not a callous judge who is just looking for a reason to punish us. The image of the father in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 provides a powerful representation of the attitude God has toward us. Our theology must represent God as the loving Father that he is. In view of these scriptures, it is crucial that we do not allow a *restrictive* paradigm to distort our view of God’s expectations under the New Covenant.

The Greatest Commandments

Matthew 22:35-40 TNIV

³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Mark 12:28-31 TNIV

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” ²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁷ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Luke 10:25-28 TNIV

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” ²⁷ He answered, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind;’ ³ and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” ⁴ ²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

Galatians 5:14 TNIV

¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

1 John 4:7-12 TNIV

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

In each of the synoptic Gospels, when Jesus was questioned about the most important command, he always cited Deuteronomy 6:5 (Love God with everything you have) and Leviticus 19:18 (Love your neighbor as your self). He stated that all of the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commands. Likewise, Paul stated that loving one’s neighbor as one’s self fulfills the entire Law. Jesus made it clear that there is no command greater than these. He advised an expert in the Law that if he fulfilled these commands, he would live eternally. John wrote that love is evidence that one has been born of God and knows God. He went on to state, “if we love one another, God lives in us”. Indeed, there are no more

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“important matters of the Law” (Matthew 23:23) than to love God and love our neighbors. One of the primary purposes of the “liberating” nature of the New Covenant is to “free us” from the “restrictive” nature of the Law so that we can focus on these priorities. It is crucial that we keep these priorities in mind as we evaluate issues related to Christian fellowship.

Mercy, Not Sacrifice

Matthew 12:1-8 TNIV

¹ At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. ² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.” ³ He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. ⁵ Or haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? ⁶ I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. ⁷ If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. ⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

Mark 2:27-28 TNIV

²⁷ Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

2 Chronicles 16:9 TNIV

⁹ For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him...

2 Chronicles 30:18-20 TNIV

¹⁸ Although most of the many people who came from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun had not purified themselves, yet they ate the Passover, contrary to what was written. But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, “May the LORD, who is good, pardon everyone ¹⁹ who sets their heart on seeking God—the LORD, the God of their ancestors—even if they are not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary.” ²⁰ And the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people.

Romans 2:11 TNIV

¹¹ For God does not show favoritism.

These scriptures communicate several critical points about the character of God, the “more important matters of the law” (Matthew 23:23), and the issue of “technicalities” as it relates to the paradigms of *restriction vs. liberty*. The comments Jesus made in Mark 2 provide additional insight into the nature of the Sabbath law; namely, God established the law to benefit mankind. He did not create mankind for the purpose of enforcing an arbitrary law. Technically speaking, David and his men, the priests Jesus described in Matthew 12, and the Passover observers in 2 Chronicles 30 all violated the “letter of the law”. Yet God did not punish them like he did Saul, Uzzah, or the various other examples that were previously cited. It is clear from the scriptures that God does not show favoritism. The only logical conclusion is that the issue of concern in these various examples was more than a simple matter of “technicalities”. In each case, it was an issue of the heart. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their lack of spiritual perception in failing to perceive that God is far more concerned with devotion than legalism.

Biblical Literacy and the Question of Fellowship

The back cover of the book carries the following statement:

“A quiet revolution is taking place within the church, raising troubling questions about identity and fellowship. Never before in the history of the restoration movement has so dramatic a change occurred in so short a time with such little opposition.”

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On page 53, Smith attributes such lack of opposition to a lack of biblical knowledge among the membership, stating, “...a biblically-illiterate church is a church perpetually poised on the brink of doctrinal disaster”.

It is a valid observation that too few Christians have a biblical knowledge that is commensurate with their years in the faith. Given the resources that are available today via the Internet (bible software, on-line bible courses, downloadable audio messages, etc.), there is little excuse for shallow biblical knowledge. At the same time; however, it is naïve to conclude that all of those who Smith would categorize as the “so-called unity movement” have adopted theological postures contrary to those Smith advocates as a result of biblical illiteracy. Some obvious examples are the authors of “*The Jesus Proposal*”⁸ and “*Down in the River to Pray*”⁹. Rubel Shelly holds a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. John York holds a Ph.D. in New Testament from Emory University and is a professor of New Testament at Lipscomb University. John Mark Hicks is also a professor of theology at Lipscomb University and holds a Ph.D. in Reformation and Post-Reformation History from Westminster Theological Seminary. Greg Taylor is managing editor of *NEW Wineskins Magazine*¹⁰ and holds a M.Div. from Harding Graduate School of Religion. The extensive experience these authors possess within the churches of Christ has enabled them to make relevant contributions to many of the issues of concern among Restoration Movement churches.

On page 20, Smith states, “*It is increasingly clear that achieving unity with others in the wider “Christian Community” has become a crusade among a new generation within the churches of Christ, and with it has come a willingness to sacrifice clear doctrinal teaching on the matter of baptism.*”

It is interesting how advocates of a particular doctrinal position can talk about the “clear teaching of scripture” on a matter by emphasizing certain passages and conveniently avoiding others that might weaken their case. In their book, “*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*”¹¹, Fee and Stuart make the following comment on page 74:

“For many in the Arminian tradition, who emphasize the believer’s free will and responsibility, texts like Romans 8:30, 9:18-24, Galatians 1:15, and Ephesians 1:4-5 are something of an embarrassment. Likewise, many Calvinists have their own way of getting around 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, 2 Peter 2:20-22, and Hebrews 6:4-6. Indeed our experience as teachers is that students from these traditions seldom ask what these texts mean; they want to know “how to get around” these texts!”

This same dynamic can be observed among believer’s who disagree about the nature of baptism. If one were to “Google” the phrase “Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?” an assortment of websites can be found that argue zealously that it is not. One such article is from “The Christian Apologetic and Research Ministry” (CARM).¹² An excerpt from this article is provided below.

Acts 2:38, *“Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”*

This verse is a tough one. It seems to say that baptism is part of salvation. But we know, from other scriptures that it isn’t, lest there be a contradiction. What is going on here is simply that repentance and forgiveness of sins are connected. In the Greek, “repent” is in the plural and so is “your” of “your sins.” They are meant to be understood as being related to each other. It is like saying, “All of you repent, each of you get baptized, and all of you will receive forgiveness.” Repentance is a mark of salvation because it is granted by God (2 Tim. 2:25) and is given to believers only. In this context, only the regenerated, repentant person is to be baptized. Baptism is the manifestation of the repentance, that gift from God, that is the sign of the circumcised heart. That is why it says, repent and get baptized.

⁸ <http://www.rubelshelly.com/content.asp?CID=10653>

⁹ <http://johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=53318>

¹⁰ <http://www.wineskins.org/page.asp?SID=2>

¹¹ <http://www.zondervan.com/cultures/en-us/Product/ProductDetail.htm?QueryStringSite=Zondervan&ISBN=0310246040>

¹² <http://www.carm.org/questions/baptism.htm>

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There are a myriad of similar websites that offer comparable explanations regarding the significance of baptism. Most within the churches of Christ would dismiss such arguments as mere “hermeneutical gymnastics” designed to “get around the clear teaching of scripture”. Yet sometimes we demonstrate our own interpretive agility when we explain why certain texts do not actually mean what others claim, “the Bible clearly teaches”. Some examples are as follows:

Romans 10:10 TNIV

¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

Galatians 3:2 TNIV

² I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?

Ephesians 1:13-14 TNIV

¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

1 John 5:1 TNIV

¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.

Honest students of the Bible will acknowledge the observations previously noted in *“How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth”*. Specifically, there are many passages that seem to “build a case” for a particular doctrinal stance, but there are also certain passages that “do not seem to fit”. It is easy enough to “poke holes” in various “denominational doctrines”. It is another matter to defend all of our own doctrinal positions without ever employing the same type of “hermeneutical stretches” we criticize when they are utilized by others. A book that illustrates this point is, *“Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology”*.¹³ The book explores eighteen controversial topics among evangelicals with two to four positions presented for each issue. In each chapter, the basis for a particular doctrinal position is presented, followed by a response to objections presented by those holding alternative views. The same process is repeated for each of the differing doctrinal positions surveyed in the chapter. An analysis of the various arguments reveals the truth of the following scripture.

Proverbs 18:17 TNIV

¹⁷ In a lawsuit the first to speak seems right, until someone comes forward and cross-examines.

Indeed, the Bible contains numerous paradoxes. While it is recognized that many of the controversial doctrinal positions are mutually exclusive (they can’t all be right), it is also evident that many are also not as “black and white” as some represent them to be. An awareness of this reality has prompted many to refrain from hastily drawing conclusions as to “who is and who is not a Christian”. Rather than simply being attributable to biblical illiteracy, this conclusion is often the product of a more extensive understanding of the nature of biblical revelation.

Bright Lines and Blurry Lines

Regarding the issue of Christian fellowship and the lines God has drawn, Smith comments on page 14, *“Ours is to speak boldly about bright lines where there are bright lines (because they are his bright lines) and so to proceed with deliberate, prayerful caution where the lines are more blurred, knowing that the areas painted in grey also come from a divine palette.”* Later, on page 130, Smith states, *“Where bright lines have become fuzzy over time, it’s not for us to squint and make well-intentioned attempts to force them into a scriptural focus. Rather, it’s time to get out a biblical brush and paint them bright again.”*

¹³ <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0801022762/102-3349496-7235319?v=glance&n=283155>

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Interestingly, on pages 127-130, Smith addresses the baptism controversy that was previously argued by David Lipscomb and Austin McGary in the late 19th Century (see the article, “*Churches of Christ and Baptism: An Historical and Theological Overview*”¹⁴). I also explored this issue specifically in my article, “*Baptism Revisited*”¹⁵. Briefly, the issue pertains to whether or not understanding that salvation coincides with baptism (rather than the point of faith) is essential for baptism to be acceptable to God. In other words, are repentant believers who were immersed as an act of obedience still lost if they believed their forgiveness preceded their baptisms? McGary argued that such people were still lost because they were not baptized “for the forgiveness of sins”. He established the journal, “*Firm Foundation*” in 1884 to promote this position and counter the views of “*Gospel Advocate*” editor David Lipscomb, who did not reject the legitimacy of such believers’ conversions. Lipscomb’s view, which was comparable to the view held by Alexander Campbell, prevailed among churches of Christ during the first half of the 20th Century. McGary’s view became the predominant view within the churches of Christ during the latter half of the 20th Century and still represents the majority position. Regarding the position promoted by McGary, Smith commented on page 130, “*I can only say that such a position is a tougher brief to argue than we’ve ever before admitted. Worse yet, if we’ve been wrong about it, then we have wrongly withheld fellowship from those with whom God himself is in fellowship.*” On page 128, Smith acknowledges that such “*believers who are immersed in order to obey the command to be baptized might nevertheless be regarded in God’s eyes as saved believers.*” He continues on page 129, stating, “*Given a type of baptism which is unbiblical in understanding, yet biblical in obedience, we are caught in the horns of a dilemma in a grey area between “faith fellowship” and “in Christ” fellowship.*”

On page 127, Smith states, “*In the New Testament there is not one case where salvation preceded baptism.*” Likewise, on page 129, he states, “*Search with a fine tooth comb and you’ll never find New Testament believers or disciples being baptized because they were already Christians.*” Concerning spiritual status, Smith states on page 123, “*Either a person is a Christian or a person is not a Christian. Either a person’s sins have been forgiven or they haven’t.*” Indeed, the greatest need of a person who is separated from God by his or her sins is to have those sins forgiven. It is a valid observation to recognize the connection between forgiveness and a person’s transition from being a non-Christian to a Christian. This conclusion is supported by the following verses:

Isaiah 59:1-2 TNIV

¹ Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. ² But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

1 Peter 2:10 TNIV

¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Another manner in which the distinction between the “forgiven” (saved) and the “unforgiven” (lost) is reflected in scripture is in terms of whether or not a person’s name is “written in heaven” in the “book of life”. This terminology is utilized in both Old and New Testaments as follows:

Psalms 69:28 TNIV

²⁸ May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.

Luke 10:20 TNIV

²⁰ However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Philippians 4:3 TNIV

³ Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

¹⁴ http://www.acu.edu/sponsored/restoration_quarterly/archives/2000s/vol_43_no_2_contents/foster.html

¹⁵ <http://www.douglasiacoby.com/dajacoby/home.nsf/Article/38F2926439AE20AA88256F3300495931?OpenDocument>

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Hebrews 12:22-24 TNIV

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Revelation 3:5 TNIV

⁵ Those who are victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out their names from the book of life, but will acknowledge their names before my Father and his angels.

Revelation 13:8 TNIV

⁸ All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb’s book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.

Revelation 17:8 TNIV

⁸ The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because it once was, now is not, and yet will come.

Revelation 20:12 TNIV

¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

Revelation 20:15 TNIV

¹⁵ All whose names were not found written in the book of life were thrown into the lake of fire.

As for the emphatic statement that salvation never precedes baptism, there are examples during the ministry of Jesus in which forgiveness was granted independent of baptism, even though “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” had already been preached. Consider the following:

Mark 1:4-5 TNIV

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

John 3:22-26 TNIV

²² After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. ²³ Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. ²⁴ (This was before John was put in prison. ²⁵ An argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. ²⁶ They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.”

John the Baptist began his ministry by calling people to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. The concept of immersion was not foreign to first century Jews. As noted by Hicks and Taylor, “*the practice of water immersion in Israelite religion foreshadowed baptism in the Christian faith. The ritual baths of Levitical priests and the mandated ceremonial washings for cleansing in Leviticus lead to Christian baptism through the ritual baths of Second Temple Judaism.*”¹⁶ Additional evidence of ritual immersions and the pools that made it possible for 3,000 people to be baptized on the day of Pentecost is documented in the article, “*Archaeology and Christian Baptism*”¹⁷ Jesus and his disciples also baptized,

¹⁶ John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray*, 2004, p.32

¹⁷ http://www.acu.edu/sponsored/restoration_quarterly/archives/2000s/vol_43_no_2_contents/grasham.html

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and in time, people made the transition from following John to following Jesus. Accordingly, “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” was the initial way people received forgiveness during the ministry of John and Jesus. Later; however, Jesus granted forgiveness completely independent of baptism, as reflected in the accounts of the paralyzed man of Matthew 9:2-7 and the “sinful woman” of Luke 7:36-50. Additionally, there is the often cited example of the “thief on the cross”, which is reflected in the following passages:

Matthew 27:38-44 TNIV

³⁸ Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁹ Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” ⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. ⁴² “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. ⁴³ He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” ⁴⁴ In the same way the rebels who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

Luke 23:39-43 TNIV

³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ Jesus answered him, “**Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.**”

Evidently, the “thief on the cross” initially insulted Jesus before having a change in heart that prompted him to appeal to Jesus in faith. Like the previous two examples, it is recognized that this event occurred while the Old Covenant was still in place. Hebrews 8-10 describes the transition that took place between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Accordingly, it is understood that many of the arguments offered by Evangelicals with regard to the “thief on the cross” fail to recognize that the Old Covenant was still in place while Jesus hung on the cross. Nevertheless, there are several observations that merit consideration regarding the salvation of the thief on the cross. It is unknown how much time transpired between the time when the thief insulted Jesus and the time when he appealed to him for salvation. In “*The Narrated Bible*”¹⁸, which includes comments by Smith, Matthew 27:44 was omitted from the interwoven harmony of the gospels. According to Smith’s chronology, there appear to be no miraculous events (darkness, earth shaking, etc.) until after the thief’s appeal. Conceivably, he might have been exposed to Jesus’ ministry or heard of him previously, yet never responded in faith. Perhaps there had been an opportunity for him to respond to the offer of a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”, but he had not. The scriptures do not provide any additional information on the thief’s background. All we know is that as he hung on the cross, he transitioned from a critic to a man of faith and Jesus did not reject his appeal. Jesus’ response to the thief is reminiscent of the responses of God that were previously cited from Matthew 12 and 2 Chronicles 30.

Acts 8:14-17 TNIV

¹⁴ When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. ¹⁵ When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptized into ² the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷ Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Although members of Restoration Movement churches have offered numerous commentaries regarding the distinction between the “indwelling Holy Spirit” and the “miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit”, the text in this passage does not specify such a distinction. Presumably, the believers were forgiven when they were baptized. Arguably, this anomaly was purposeful in convincing the Jews that salvation was in fact for the Samaritans also. Nevertheless, the text does not specify as to whether the “indwelling Spirit” was

¹⁸ http://www.harvesthousepublishers.com/books_nonfictionbook.cfm?ProductID=6902392

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imparted during baptism or only upon the “laying on of the apostles’ hands”. In any event, this example is “atypical” of the normative pattern of conversion under the New Covenant.

Acts 10:34-48 TNIV

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. ³⁹ “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” ⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” ⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Again, no clarification is offered in the text with regard to a distinction between the “indwelling Holy Spirit” and “miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit”. It has been argued by members of Restoration Movement churches that Cornelius and his family were still lost prior to their baptisms as recorded in Acts 10:48. It has been explained that just because “the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message”, as recorded in Acts 10:44, that is no proof that they were saved. As evidence for this view, it is noted that the Spirit “came on” Balaam and he “spoke his message of prophecy” (Numbers 24:1-10). It is noted in several New Testament scriptures that Balaam did not have God’s approval (2 Peter 2:15, Jude 1:11, Revelation 2:14). Conversely, it must be recognized that the 120 believers cited in Acts 1:15 and Acts 2:1 were the ones that “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4) on the day of Pentecost. Presumably, these “believers” were already forgiven and were “waiting for the gift the Father promised” (Acts 1:4). Peter commented that Cornelius and his family had “received the Holy Spirit just as we have”. Clearly, Cornelius and his family were in a different place spiritually than Balaam was at the time they spoke in tongues. Moreover, the idea that God would impart the spiritual gift of tongue speaking to believers whom he had not yet forgiven seems to conflict with the traditional understanding of the message of Isaiah 59:1-2. Like the case with the Samaritans, it is logical to conclude that this “atypical” conversion pattern was purposeful in order to convince the Jews that salvation was for the Gentiles also. Regardless, it cannot be stated conclusively that Cornelius was not saved prior to his baptism without employing assumptions about Peter’s words in Acts 10:47. The reality is, there are differences in the patterns of salvation observed among those who were baptized by John and Jesus, the paralytic of Matthew 9, the “sinful woman” of Luke 7, the “thief on the cross”, the 3,000 on the day of Pentecost, the Samaritans of Acts 8 and the Gentiles of Acts 10. In view of these observations, Smith’s statement on page 127, “*In the New Testament there is not one case where salvation preceded baptism*” is an example of assuming the conclusion.

A Matter of Time

As Smith has detailed in his emphasis on the importance of baptism, the question as to “when a person becomes a Christian” has been of critical concern within the churches of Christ. Ultimately, the answer to that question is that a person becomes a Christian when God forgives the person’s sins and “writes his or her name in the book of life”. The position among those in the churches of Christ has generally been that forgiveness occurs at baptism – period! The previous examples have demonstrated that such was not always the case. Even in the post-Pentecost era, it cannot be proven definitively that God only forgives sins at baptism. The most supportable position that can be promoted is that the “normative pattern” of

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conversion under the New Covenant involves forgiveness and receipt of the indwelling Holy Spirit coinciding with the immersion of repentant believers. The urgency of baptism observed in the New Testament supports this understanding. To go beyond this posture and insist on a definitive “point in time” of salvation may actually incorporate a fallacy of reasoning attributable to a failure to recognize the distinction between our finite place in time and God’s infinite nature. Many within the churches of Christ have been exposed to John Clayton’s lessons about “*The Nature of God*”¹⁹ that is based on the book, “*Flatland*”²⁰. The illustrations convey the idea of a 2-dimensional being’s incapacity to comprehend a 3-dimension object (a sphere) as an analogy of 3-dimensional man’s incapacity to comprehend an omnipresent God who had no beginning and is unbound by time and space. Some scriptures that convey God’s “higher dimension” as it relates to time are as follows:

Isaiah 46:8-10 TNIV

⁸ “Remember this, keep it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. ⁹ Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. ¹⁰ I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’”

Ephesians 1:3-6 TNIV

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he ² predestined us for adoption to sonship ³ through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

2 Peter 3:8 TNIV

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

The Bible describes Christians as having been “chosen in Christ before the creation of the world” and “predestined for adoption”. Conversely, Revelation 17:8 describes non-Christians as those “*whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world...*” Like many other topics, there is a diversity of perspectives among believers with regard to God’s relationship with time and the nature of divine foreknowledge. Some relevant books that explore these issues are “*God & Time: 4 Views*”²¹ and “*Divine Foreknowledge: 4 Views*”²². Similar to the previously mentioned book, “*Across the Spectrum*”, each of these books offers four different vantage points with critiques and responses for each of the various positions. These books are useful in illustrating how differing views about God and his relationship to time shape theological understanding. An awareness of these issues is relevant to the topic of “when a person becomes a Christian”. Given the controversial nature of how “God’s time” relates to “man’s time”, it is important that we are careful not to inadvertently impose our finite vantage point on God, especially when we are exploring the questions of “when a person becomes a Christian” and “who is and who is not a Christian”. In an article entitled, “*Who Created God?*”²³, John Clayton addressed the following point: “*One question which inevitably comes up in a discussion of this nature is what is the origin of God? If God created matter/energy, and designed the systems that have propelled matter into its present arrangement, who or what accomplished that for God? Why is it any more reasonable to believe that God has always “been” than it is to say that matter has always “been”? As Carl Sagan has said, “If we say that God has always been, why not save a step and conclude that the universe has always been?” (Cosmos, p. 257).*” After presenting a number of scriptures to address the issue, Clayton provides the following summarizing statements:

“If God is a being that is unlimited in time, and if He has access to every piece of time as if it were now, the question of who created God is an invalid question. The problem is like asking a student to draw a

¹⁹ <http://www.doesgodexist.org/Phamplets/Flatland.html>

²⁰ <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ea/FL.HTM>

²¹ http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0830815511/sr=8-1/qid=1156483285/ref=pd_bbs_1/002-3157166-9000847?ie=UTF8

²² http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0830826521/ref=pd_sim_b_2/002-3157166-9000847?ie=UTF8

²³ <http://www.doesgodexist.org/Phamplets/WhoCreatedGod/WhoCreatedGod.html>

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four-sided triangle. The terminology is self-contradictory. When asked “Who or what created God?,” we are making the assumption that God was created. If God exists outside of time and space, and if He is the Creator of time and space, He obviously was not created! God began the beginning! This is why He says, “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.” God created time. The statement of Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” is making reference to the creation of time. The reason that things like heat death, the expansion of the universe, and the depletion of hydrogen do not apply to God is because He is outside of time. God has always been. He not only began time; He will also end it. When time ends, all matter and all mankind will enter eternity—a timeless condition free of the negative things that time brings upon us now.”

The skeptic’s question is invalid because it assumes physical limitations on God that are inconsistent with the biblical revelation. In a similar manner, it is possible that some of our reasoning with regard to “when a person becomes a Christian” may also employ certain invalid assumptions, especially if we assume that “God’s time” definitely corresponds to “our time”. In view of the observed variations in the manner God granted forgiveness in the New Testament, along with the uncertainty associated with the issues of God’s relationship to time, the nature of foreknowledge, etc., it is speculative to define “who is and who is not a Christian” solely on the basis of assumed “bright lines” that delineate “when” salvation occurs.

What about the “One Baptism”?

On page 19, Smith speaks about the general consensus that exists among Protestant denominations about the universal body of Christ. He then states, *“When it comes to the “one baptism” of Ephesians 4, however, there is a curious, almost inexplicable blind spot. On that one, believers are all over the board.”* Again, on page 44, Smith takes issue with the rationale he attributes to the “so-called unity movement”, stating, *“If the circumference of fellowship is to be determined by “the central tenets of Christianity”, as suggested, then how about Paul’s own list, which he specifically associated with keeping “the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3-6)? If I’m not mistaken, Paul listed seven central tenets, not just six. Is Paul’s “one baptism” any less central than his “one Lord”, or his “one faith”? Has his “one baptism” nothing to do with the “one body”?* Smith continues his line of reasoning on this topic on pages 45-46 by quoting the following scripture:

Mark 16:15-16 TNIV

¹⁵ He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. ¹⁶ Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Smith summarizes, stating, *“If a person does not first believe in Jesus, there will be no personally chosen baptism. That said, is anyone prepared to contend from this passage that baptism is not inextricably linked with salvation, and by implication with Christian fellowship?”*

In examining this issue, it is useful to summarize some of the observations that can be drawn with regard to how baptism was viewed in the early church as compared to the generations that followed.

- The word, “baptize” means to immerse. The earliest baptisms were by immersion, consistent with the ceremonial “cleansings” that were practiced within Judaism prior to the ministry of Jesus.
- The prevailing view among the earliest Christians was that salvation coincided with baptism. This understanding is consistent with the urgency observed among the 3,000 that were baptized on the day of Pentecost, the Ethiopian eunuch who was baptized in the middle of the desert, the Philippian jailer who was baptized in the middle of the night, etc. Documentation of this understanding as reflected by the writings of the Early Church Fathers is contained in materials published by church historian David Bercot, including the book, *“Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up”*²⁴

²⁴ <http://www.scrollpublishing.com/store/more-heretics.html>

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- Infant baptism was not documented until the late second century. Its development was attributable to the “high view” of baptism held by the early church and the concern regarding the spiritual destiny of children that might die before being baptized.
- Even though the mode and timing of the practice of baptism was in transition, it was still recognized as being “for the remission of sins” in the early 4th century, as documented in the “Nicene Creed”.
- The doctrine of baptizing infants for the forgiveness of “original sin” developed in the time of Augustine, most likely as a justification for the established practice of baptizing infants. This doctrine is inconsistent with the message of Ezekiel 18, which indicates that guilt is attributable to an individual’s own sin, not those of an ancestor.
- The understanding that baptism was “for the remission of sins” was virtually unanimous among believers until 16th Century Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli²⁵ introduced the understanding of baptism as “symbolic” of salvation that coincides with faith. This perspective remains the prevailing understanding of baptism among Reformed theologians today.

Additional references for many of these observations are included in my paper, “*Baptism Revisited*”²⁶. More extensive documentation is included in the book, “*Down in the River to Pray*”²⁷. Many have concluded that the reference to “one baptism” in Ephesians 4:5 is intended to emphasize the illegitimacy of any baptismal experience that does not conform to this doctrinal understanding. According to this perspective, those who did not experience baptism in this manner are not believed to have experienced the “one baptism” that is acceptable to God. The prevailing view within the churches of Christ is that such people are “lost” because their baptisms were not legitimate.

In evaluating this position, it is useful to review some of the principles of biblical interpretation outlined in the book, “*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*”²⁸. The book describes the general steps of interpretation that are summarized as “*exegesis*” (the careful, systematic study of Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning) and “*hermeneutics*” (seeking the contemporary relevance of the ancient texts). On page 30, the authors state emphatically, “*A text cannot mean what it never meant*”. With this in mind, it is useful to explore some background information on the biblical text. “*Ephesians: Introduction, Argument, and Outline*”²⁹ by Daniel B. Wallace, Ph.D., Senior New Testament Editor of the NET Bible, offers the following valuable insights:

*“The apostle Paul opens this “Queen of his Epistles” with a greeting to the “saints who are faithful” (1:1-2). Immediately he launches into praise for God as a theological preface to the body of his letter (1:3-14): God is blessed and is to be praised because (1) the Father elected us in eternity past (1:3-6), the Son redeemed us in the historical past (1:7-12), and the Spirit sealed us in our personal and individual pasts (1:13-14). Thus Paul begins this letter with a reminder of the great things God has done for believers individually. **With this as a backdrop he prays that his readers will understand what God has done for them corporately** (1:15-23). Essentially, the prayer is a prayer for understanding the contents of the next two chapters (1:16-19). The reason Paul prays for them is because he is confident that they are true believers (1:15). The reason he is confident that God is able to answer his prayer is that the same power which raised Christ from the dead is available to these saints (1:20-23). Now Paul once again reminds his audience of the great things God has done (2:1-22). He begins by detailing individual reconciliation (2:1-10). First, he paints a dark picture of our former state: we were controlled by Satan and destined for hell (2:1-3). Then, Paul shows how we were delivered from this fate: God in his mercy saved us (2:4-10). Not only did he save us, but he also proleptically caused us to reign with Christ (2:5-6). Further, we are now to be a monument to him by doing good works (2:10). But God has not just done a work of individual*

²⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huldrych_Zwingli

²⁶ <http://www.douglasjacoby.com/dajacoby/home.nsf/Article/38F2926439AE20AA88256F3300495931?OpenDocument>

²⁷ <http://johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=53318>

²⁸ <http://www.zondervan.com/cultures/en-us/Product/ProductDetail.htm?QueryStringSite=Zondervan&ISBN=0310246040>

²⁹ http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=1332

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reconciliation. **He has also reconciled Jew and Gentile to each other by creating a new spiritual community** (2:11-22). First, Paul outlines the Gentiles’ former state. Individually, they were under Satan’s control (2:1-3); corporately, they were isolated from God’s people (2:11-13). But **when God saved them individually this had corporate ramifications as well: both Jews and Gentiles now constituted a new spiritual community, the Church** (2:14-18). **The same apostles who brought the good news of individual reconciliation of man to God also brought the good news of corporate reconciliation of Jew to Gentile.** Indeed, these apostles were foundational to this new spiritual community and Christ was the cornerstone (2:20-22). **The reason Paul stresses this corporate reconciliation, this organic unity, this new spiritual community, seems to be due to the Gentiles’ arrogance in the face of the Jewish roots of Christianity. A reminder—which composes the theological core of this epistle—that Gentiles are neither saved only as individuals (2:1-10), nor at all as those who supplant the Jews (2:11-12), was necessary in light of the historical circumstances of the letter. To make sure that the Gentile audience did not see Paul as replacing the apostles—and they themselves as replacing the Jews—he explains that his gospel is new in the sense that it was not revealed in the OT, but not in the sense that it was different in kind from that of the other apostles (3:1-7). Further, the content of the new, previously unrevealed, spiritual community is now made explicit: Jew and Gentile are fellow heirs, fellow body-members, and fellow partakers of the promise (3:5-6). Jew and Gentile thus were on equal footing in this new body. Not only could these Gentiles not claim superiority to Jews (and vice versa), Paul himself could not claim superiority to any Christian (3:8). But the Gentiles have been incorporated into the body of Christ not for their sake only, but even for the sake of angelic beings (3:10).** Having completed his major treatment on the “indicatives of the faith,” Paul prays once again for his audience (3:14-21). As with the first prayer, this one is a hinge between two sections. Paul’s prayer now is for their application. This is a fitting introduction to the last three chapters in which he turns these indicatives into imperatives. He concludes the prayer with a recognition once again of God’s ability to answer (3:20-21). The second major section of the letter begins with the applicational heart of the epistle: “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3). Then Paul gives a theological example of how unity and diversity hold hands: in the Godhead there is harmony, yet each member has distinct tasks (4:4-6), and no member is unimportant! If the members of the Trinity—the perfect example of unity—could have diverse functions, then all arguments that diversity causes divisiveness are futile.”

The controversies about baptism that developed after the Apostolic Age were unknown at the time Paul authored Ephesians. Clearly, a doctrinal treatise on the nature of baptism was not the theme Paul was stressing to his audience. Rather, it was an emphasis on the fact that Jesus brought peace to Jews and Gentiles alike, destroying the barrier of hostility between the two groups in order to create one people out of the two and in one body to reconcile both to God (chapter 2). Viewed from this perspective, it is clear that the various “ones” cited in chapter 4 are intended to reinforce the fact that Jews and Gentiles comprise one people of God (not two). Hence, there is “one baptism” (not two separate baptisms for the “Jewish Church” and the “Gentile Church”). This understanding is consistent with the message that precedes the “ones”:

Smith’s use of Mark 16:15-16 is invalid as a “proof text” for distinguishing “who is and who is not a Christian”. In his rebuttal to various claims raised by Bart Ehrman in his book, *“Misquoting Jesus”*³⁰, Daniel Wallace makes several relevant comments in his article, *“The Gospel According to Bart”*³¹. Consider the following:

“In chapters five and six, Ehrman discusses several passages that involve variants that allegedly affect core theological beliefs. ... Three of these passages have been considered inauthentic by most NT scholars—including most evangelical NT scholars—for well over a century (Mark 16.9–20; John 7.53–8.11; and 1 John 5.7–8).³¹ Yet Ehrman writes as though the excision of such texts could shake up our theological convictions. Such is hardly the case.

³⁰ http://www.harpercollins.com/books/9780060738174/Misquoting_Jesus/index.aspx

³¹ http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=4000

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“A glance at virtually any English Bible today reveals that the longer ending of Mark and the pericope adulterae are to be found in their usual places. Thus, not only do the KJV and NKJV have these passages (as would be expected), but so do the ASV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, TNIV, NASB, TEV, NAB, NJB, and NET. Yet the scholars who produced these translations, by and large, do not subscribe to the authenticity of such texts. The reasons are simple enough: they don’t show up in the oldest and best manuscripts and their internal evidence is decidedly against authenticity. Why then are they still in these Bibles?”

“The answer to this question varies. For some, they seem to be in the Bibles because of a tradition of timidity. There are seemingly good reasons for this. The rationale is typically that no one will buy a particular version if it lacks these famous passages. And if they don’t buy the version, it can’t influence Christians. Some translations have included the pericope adulterae because of mandate from the papal authorities declaring the passage to be scripture. The NEB/REB include it at the end of the Gospels, rather than in its traditional location. The TNIV and NET have both passages in smaller font with brackets around them. Smaller type of course makes it harder to read from the pulpit. The NET adds a lengthy discussion about the inauthenticity of the verses. Most translations mention that these pericopae are not found in the oldest manuscripts, but such a comment is rarely noticed by readers today. How do we know this? From the shock waves produced by Ehrman’s book. In radio, TV, and newspaper interviews with Ehrman, the story of the woman caught in adultery is almost always the first text brought up as inauthentic, and the mention is calculated to alarm the audience.”

“In retrospect, keeping these two pericopae in our Bibles rather than relegating them to the footnotes seems to have been a bomb just waiting to explode. All Ehrman did was to light the fuse. One lesson we must learn from “Misquoting Jesus” is that those in ministry need to close the gap between the church and the academy. We have to educate believers. Instead of trying to isolate laypeople from critical scholarship, we need to insulate them. They need to be ready for the barrage, because it is coming. The intentional dumbing down of the church for the sake of filling more pews will ultimately lead to defection from Christ. Ehrman is to be thanked for giving us a wake-up call.”

In his previous book, *“Baptism – The Believer’s Wedding Ceremony”*³², Smith acknowledged the absence of the ending of Mark in the most reliable manuscripts. In view of these observations and the lack of conclusive evidence that Jesus actually made the statements recorded in Mark 16:15-16, it is illegitimate to cite this text as a basis for defining the boundaries of Christian fellowship.

Ephesians 4:1-3 TNIV

¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Viewed from this perspective, it is evident that this chapter did not originally convey the message that has often been emphasized within the churches of Christ by those who have viewed it through a “restrictive lens”.

God’s Desire for Unity

While it is clear from the scriptures that God expects reverence and obedience from his people, it is also clear that he desires unity among us.

John 17:11 TNIV

¹¹ I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of ² your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.

³² <http://www.amazon.com/Baptism-Believers-F-Lagard-Smith/dp/089225422X>

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John 17:20-23 TNIV

²⁰ “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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.²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Ephesians 4:11-13 TNIV

¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

1 Peter 3:8 TNIV

⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

1 Corinthians 1:10-13 TNIV

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.¹¹ My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul;” another, “I follow Apollos;” another, “I follow Cephas;” still another, “I follow Christ.”¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into² the name of Paul?

Given the scriptural emphasis on Christian unity, the detrimental effects of disunity on the advancement of the Gospel must not be minimized. Some current statistics are helpful in understanding the world’s religious composition as well as the extent of division that exists among believers in Christ. The current world population is estimated to be approximately 6.65 billion people.³³ Based on recent estimates³⁴, the sizes of various religious groups are summarized as follows:

World Religion	Population	% of World	Christian Religion	Population	% of World
Christianity	2,100,000,000	32.55%	Catholic Church	1,100,000,000	17.0515%
Islam	1,300,000,000	20.15%	Eastern Orthodox Church	225,000,000	3.4878%
Secular/Atheist/Agnostic	1,100,000,000	17.05%	Anglican Communion	77,000,000	1.1936%
Hinduism	900,000,000	13.95%	Assemblies of God	50,000,000	0.7751%
Chinese Traditional	394,000,000	6.11%	Ethiopian Orthodox Church	35,000,000	0.5425%
Buddhism	376,000,000	5.83%	Seventh Day Adventist Church	16,811,519	0.2606%
Primal Indigenous	300,000,000	4.65%	Southern Baptist Convention	16,000,000	0.2480%
African Traditional & Diasporic	100,000,000	1.55%	Jehovah's Witnesses	15,597,746	0.2418%
Sikhism	23,000,000	0.36%	Mormons	12,275,822	0.1903%
Juche	19,000,000	0.29%	United Methodist Church	11,708,887	0.1815%
Spiritism	15,000,000	0.23%	Churches of Christ	2,000,000	0.0310%
Judaism	14,000,000	0.22%	Christian Churches & Churches of Christ	1,070,000	0.0166%
			Disciples of Christ	1,043,943	0.0162%
			International Churches of Christ	95,751	0.0015%

Statistics for the ICOC are based on estimates as of 2006³⁵. Percentage calculations are based on an estimated world population in 2005 of 6.45 billion. According to Dr. Timothy Tennent³⁶, in the year 1900, Christianity accounted for about 34% of the world’s population (estimated to be approximately 1.7 billion). At that time, Islam accounted for about 12% of the world’s population. By 2000, the world population exceeded 6.08 billion and Christianity declined to a 33% share while Islam increased to about a 20% share. Regarding the statistics for Christianity, it is recognized that these estimates are not reflective of those who are on the “narrow road” (Matthew 7:14). Nevertheless, it appears that the percentage of the world’s population that acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God has been declining. Undoubtedly, division among Christians contributes to the credibility issue of the Gospel message among unbelievers. At a

³³ <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/popclockworld.html>

³⁴ <http://www.adherents.com/>

³⁵ http://www.icocinfo.org/church_directory.html

³⁶ <http://www.biblicaltraining.org/class.php?class=W/M647>

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time when the Christian faith has received attacks from many fronts, such as the “The Jesus Seminar”³⁷, “The Da Vinci Code”³⁸, “Misquoting Jesus”³⁹, “Letter to a Christian Nation”⁴⁰, etc., it is vital that the Christian community not only provide answers to questions of faith, but also demonstrate a level of unity that promotes rather than impedes the advancement of the Gospel. For these reasons, “sectarianism” (often promoted under the guise of “defending the faith”) must be avoided. In the book, “The Jesus Proposal”, Rubel Shelly describes sectarianism on pages 62-63 as follows:

“What does it mean to be “sectarian”? And what is “sectarianism”? A sectarian is one who values his ideas, his conclusions on hard subjects, and/or his group of like-minded souls more than the truth. A sectarian is not simply someone with an opinion or point of view. He is the man who will not hear anything that challenges it. She is the woman who is so prejudiced in her belief that she refuses to face honest questions that surface in her own mind and assiduously avoids those who might call it into question.

...The antithesis to a sectarian is a person who is willing to follow the truth wherever it leads.

Sectarianism is a posture in things religious that defines Christian faith and practice by one’s distinctive interpretations of Scripture. It is a refusal to allow honest diversity in others and a demand for all-or-nothing conformity with her view as having exclusive approval from God. It is the minimizing or excluding of other Christians and judging that I or my group has a corner on the market of biblical truth.”

Unity is critical if those outside the family of God are to be drawn into it. Many have become disillusioned about Christianity because of extensive division and infighting that exists among those who claim to be Christians. God anticipated this problem and inspired Paul to address it in 1 Corinthians. Nevertheless, division has been rampant among those who claim to be followers of Jesus.

It is ironic to observe how the “Restoration Movement”, which was born out of an appeal for people to drop their sectarian biases and be “Christians only”, has experienced so much “splintering”. It is amazing to consider how people can have so many things in common and still find reasons why they can’t fellowship with each other. The restrictive paradigm certainly has contributed to this problem within the churches of Christ. Relatively speaking, people who share nearly uniform doctrinal convictions have divided over negligible differences, all in the name of maintaining “doctrinal integrity”. In my own congregation, I have observed splits in 1986 as well as 1994. Sectarianism has produced a myriad of splits within the “mainline churches” and division has been observed in the ICOC as well. Undoubtedly, sectarianism has been a contributing factor to the attrition rate we have observed over the years in our fellowship of churches. Accordingly, this issue mandates the same level of attention that we have historically applied to “matters of doctrine”.

The Will of God

In order to evaluate the validity of Smith’s proposal regarding fellowship, it is useful to examine the scripture that serves as the basis for the title of the book.

Mark 3:31-35 TNIV

³¹ Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” ³³ “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. ³⁴ Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

³⁷ <http://www.westarinstitute.org/index.html>

³⁸ http://www.danbrown.com/novels/davinci_code/reviews.html

³⁹ <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0060738170/002-2370443-0233646?redirect=true>

⁴⁰ http://www.samharris.org/site/book_letter_to_christian_nation/

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According to Jesus, the answer to the question, “Who is My Brother?” is “whoever does God’s will”. The same message is conveyed in a different manner in the following verse:

Matthew 7:21 TNIV

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Accordingly, the answer to the question, “Who is my brother?” is revealed by the answer to the question of what it means to “do God’s will”. A number of scriptures speak directly to this subject.

John 6:40 TNIV

⁴⁰ For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

Romans 12:1-2 TNIV

¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-7 TNIV

¹ As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. ² For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. ³ It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶ and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. ⁷ For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.

1 Thessalonians 5:15-18 TNIV

¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Peter 4:1-2 TNIV

¹ Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because those who have suffered in their bodies are done with sin. ² As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.

1 John 2:15-17 TNIV

¹⁵ Do not love the world or anything in the world. If you love the world, love for the Father is not in you. ¹⁶ For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful people, the lust of their eyes and their boasting about what they have and do—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

Luke 10:25-28 TNIV

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” ²⁷ He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind;’ ³ and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” ²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

John 8:51 TNIV

⁵¹ Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death.”

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Romans 8:13-14 TNIV

¹³ For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 TNIV

¹⁴ For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

1 John 1:7 TNIV

⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

1 John 2:3 TNIV

³ We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands.

1 John 3:14 TNIV

¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death.

1 John 3:18-24 TNIV

¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. ¹⁹ This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: ²⁰ If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ²² and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. ²⁴ Those who keep his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

1 John 4:12-17 TNIV

¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. ¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.

According to these scriptures, “doing the will of God” and “having eternal life” are equated with believing in Jesus, offering one’s self as a living sacrifice, refusing to conform to the world, being transformed by the renewal of one’s mind, being sanctified, controlling one’s body, living a holy life, abstaining from retaliation, rejoicing always, praying continually, giving thanks in all circumstances, embracing Christ’s attitude about suffering, being done with sin, living to please God, refusing to love the world, loving God and neighbors, obeying Jesus’ word, living by the Spirit, putting to death the misdeeds of the body, living for Christ rather than self, walking in the light, loving each other, being like Jesus in this world, etc. Other passages that validate the presence of the Spirit in a person’s life are as follows:

Galatians 5:22-24 TNIV

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

2 Peter 1:5-8 TNIV

⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and

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to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we explore the topic of Christian fellowship, it is critical that we keep scriptures such as these in mind, along with the recognition that “All the Law and the Prophets hang on the commands of loving God and neighbor” (Matthew 22:40). In this way, we will be able to convey the Gospel message in a manner that is free from sectarian bias.

Those Who Are Not “One of Us”

Mark 9:38-40 TNIV

³⁸ “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” ³⁹ “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us.

Smith examines the ramifications of this scripture in his chapter on “Faith Fellowship” (chapter 6). He wrestles with the issue of how we should fellowship with those who reflect the godly devotion emphasized in the previous section, yet who have not experienced baptism in a manner consistent with the “normative pattern” observed in the New Testament. It is evident that he is cognizant of God’s emphasis on “mercy, not sacrifice” (Matthew 12) as he explores the possibility that God may ultimately grant “clemency” to the “godly but un-immersed”. This “paradox” is considered in his chapter on “The Prospect of Eternal Fellowship” (chapter 12). It is interesting to note some of the comments Smith made regarding this issue in his previous book, *“Baptism – The Believer’s Wedding Ceremony”*⁴¹.

“Naturally, there are a number of individual exceptions who have not only nurtured a deep personal faith in Christ, but who have joined Him in His suffering. We cannot begin to count the many believers who have died for their faith, or who have sacrificed secular success to take the gospel to far-flung nations, yet who received only infant baptism.” (Page 162)

“Obviously, not all who have been baptized as infants or as young adolescents have suffered from a lack of faith and good works. Some of the most zealous missionaries and courageous martyrs in the history of Christianity were baptized involuntarily as infants.” (Page 180)

While acknowledging that such people “might” ultimately go to heaven, he asserts that their failure to participate in genuine, New Testament baptism on earth precludes them from achieving a “saved status” in this life. On page 106 of *“Who is My Brother?”*, Smith states, *“Among committed believers in Christ, by contrast, there is an intimacy of faith and worship which I find enviable. Their hearts are truly yearning for Christ as does mine, and their lives have truly transformed because of their faith. What am I to conclude? At least this: If they are not strictly “family” – and they are not – they are certainly very much like family, in virtually every way they think and act as those in the family would think and act.”* Smith goes on to state on the same page, *“...there are un-immersed believers who very often put to shame those immersed believers who ought to bear the fruit of the Spirit but don’t. Spiritually speaking, these un-immersed believers can be more “like family” than our own Christian family.”*

In many ways, Smith shares a common perspective with those he criticizes such as Lucado, Shelly (by implication), etc. All make distinction between “nominal believers” and “committed believers”. All promote baptism by immersion of repentant believers. All recognize the preference of God for “mercy, not sacrifice” and the inconsistency between the revealed character of God and the conclusion that God will condemn committed disciples of Jesus simply because of their erroneous understanding of baptism. The primary difference appears to be that Smith emphatically states that God does not forgive sins in this life except during the immersion of repentant believers. While remaining open to the possibility that God “may” grant forgiveness to disciples of Jesus who have not been “biblically baptized” on the Day of Judgment, Smith categorically classifies such people as non-Christians who are “not family”. In contrast,

⁴¹ <http://www.amazon.com/Baptism-Believers-F-Lagard-Smith/dp/089225422X>

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in a chapter of *“The Jesus Proposal”*⁴² entitled “Being God’s Child: Event or Process?”, Shelly cites the following scriptures to make the point that “Christians are those who “have been saved”, “are being saved”, and “will be saved” (page 141).

Ephesians 2:8-9 TNIV

⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

1 Corinthians 1:18 TNIV

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Romans 5:9 TNIV

⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!

In the same chapter, Shelly uses an analogy to compare physical life to spiritual life. From a physical perspective, he cites the various stages of development between conception and birth and poses the question, “At what point was this living being a human being?” Shelly goes on to define the term “Christian” as a “Christ follower” or “one who gives allegiance to Christ” and likens the initial point of faith to “conception” and baptism to “birth”, recognizing the maturing process that takes place in both physical and spiritual life. Some relevant scriptures are as follows:

Psalms 139:13-16 TNIV

¹³ For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. ¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, ¹⁶ your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Ephesians 2:10 TNIV

¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Shelly continues, stating, “*Whether reflecting on the creative miracle of God in producing physical or spiritual life, I prefer to affirm, nurture, and protect that life from its earliest formation. From the first evidence of passion for Jesus all the way to the maturity of a Christian who is willing to die for the holy name he wears, God is at work in the total process. And I want to be careful not to impede (i.e., abort) what God is at work to accomplish.*” Later in chapter 9, Shelly states, “*...salvation is best understood as a relationship that matures over time than as a single event. Ultimately, we are not to choose between event and process, of course, but to affirm both.*”

Shelly’s support of immersion of repentant believers is reflected in the same chapter when he describes counseling a devout woman who was baptized as an infant, but later became aware of the pattern of New Testament baptism from a seminary course she took in New Testament theology. She approached Shelly, requesting advice, and ultimately, she was immersed. In the chapter entitled, “A Clear and Present Danger” (chapter 1), Smith flatly rejects the notion of “process” as considered by Shelly and others. In spite of the “common ground” previously noted, Smith considers the doctrinal compromise of the “so-called unity movement” severe enough to merit the following statement from page 158:

“Never will our various “close families” within the universal body of Christ be at greater distance than when we must separate from our ecumenically minded, body threatening brothers and sisters in the extended family.”

⁴² <http://www.rubelshelly.com/content.asp?CID=10653>

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The Real Issue

Baptismal theology that is inconsistent with the understanding held by 1st century Christians is rarely the distinguishing characteristic that differentiates most “believers” from the New Testament Christians who were commended for their faith. The real issue of deficiency among most who claim to be Christians is a failure to embrace the message of the following scriptures:

John 12:25-26 TNIV

²⁵ Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

Romans 8:16-17 TNIV

¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 TNIV

¹⁴ For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Colossians 3:2-4 TNIV

² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your ¹ life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

1 Peter 2:21 TNIV

²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

1 John 2:3-6 TNIV

³ We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. ⁴ Those who say, “I know him,” but do not do what he commands are liars, and the truth is not in them. ⁵ But if anyone obeys his word, love for God ¹ is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: ⁶ Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

Those who embrace Jesus as Lord are called to serve him and follow him. We must share in his suffering if we hope to share in his glory. Jesus died for us with the expectation that we also should “die” to our selfish agendas and live for him. Christians are those who have “died” to this world, recognizing that “Christ is their life”. Jesus left Christians an example, expecting them to follow in his steps. Genuine Christians are distinguished by their obedience to his commands and commitment to live as Jesus did. Clearly, this level of commitment far exceeds the “easy believism” that prevails among most who claim the Christian faith. The greatest contribution the ICOC has made to Christian thought is not clarification about 1st century baptismal theology. Rather, it is the emphasis on “true worship” as reflected in the following scripture:

Romans 12:1-2 TNIV

¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Consistent with the message of Matthew 7, the majority of those who claim the Christian faith have never made the commitment Jesus expects from his followers. They are on the “broad road to destruction”. Relatively speaking, their confusion about baptismal theology is a peripheral issue. The issue of more

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central concern is that they have their “mind set on earthly things” rather than viewing their “citizenship as being in heaven” (Philippians 3:19-20).

Baptismal Theology as a “Test of Fellowship”

It is understandable why Smith stated on page 17, “*Of all the doctrines unique to the churches of Christ, none has been more central than the absolute necessity of adult, faith-prompted baptism for the remission of sins.*” In view of the introduction of infant baptism in the late 2nd century and the altered understanding of the nature of baptism introduced by Zwingli in the 16th century, there has been a significant departure from the teaching and practice of baptism as the early church understood it. The vast majority of believers in Christ practice infant baptism. The vast majority of those who practice immersion consider it to be a post-salvation ceremony, consistent with Zwingli’s doctrinal stance. Comparatively speaking, the churches of Christ represent an extreme minority of believers who promote the practice of baptism in a manner consistent with the understanding that prevailed prior to the time of Constantine and the “legalization” of Christianity in the 4th century. Accordingly, it is natural that the doctrine of baptism has been emphasized so much within our churches. Early church baptismal theology is definitely our “strong suit”. Given the “restrictive paradigm” that developed within the churches of Christ; however, baptismal theology became a “test of fellowship” in a manner unknown to Christians in the Apostolic Age. Although the early leaders in the Restoration Movement promoted the understanding of baptism held by the early church, they did not promote a sectarian emphasis on baptismal theology as a “test of fellowship”. This perspective is reflected in the following excerpt from Alexander Campbell’s “Lunenburg Letter” of 1837⁴³.

“Should I find a Pedobaptist more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immersed on a profession of the ancient faith, I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most. Did I act otherwise, I would be a pure sectarian, a Pharisee among Christians. Still I will be asked, How do I know that any one loves my Master but by his obedience to his commandments? I answer, In no other way. But mark, I do not substitute obedience to one commandment, for universal or even for general obedience. And should I see a sectarian Baptist or a Pedobaptist more spiritually-minded, more generally conformed to the requisitions of the Messiah, than one who precisely acquiesces with me in the theory or practice of immersion as I teach, doubtless the former rather than the latter, would have my cordial approbation and love as a Christian. So I judge, and so I feel. It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves; and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known.”

In time; however, the sectarian view of baptism promoted by Austin McGary prevailed among churches of Christ. Those with a differing view of baptism were categorically classified as non-Christians. The doctrine of baptism historically promoted within the ICOC has essentially been an expanded version of McGary’s baptismal theology. In addition to understanding that baptism is “for the remission of sins”; extensive understanding and commitment to the responsibilities of discipleship have been considered essential prerequisites to legitimate baptism. These criteria effectively excluded most outside of the ICOC for consideration as “saved” (including most within the churches of Christ). This perspective prompted many “re-baptisms” of believers who had already been baptized “for the forgiveness of sins”. Included in this number were some whose spiritual maturity had enabled them to be appointed as evangelists or elders. Since they were considered to be “non-Christians” prior to their rebaptisms, a dilemma was created in some congregations as a result of the biblical mandate that an elder “must not be a recent convert” (1 Timothy 3:6). In retrospect, many have concluded that such “rebaptisms” were unnecessary. Nevertheless, the mindset regarding “who is and who is not a Christian” (based on this baptismal theology) is still evident. It is still not uncommon to hear references that essentially equate the ICOC fellowship of churches with “The Kingdom”.

In fairness, the emphasis on thorough teaching prior to baptism has great value. “Cheap Grace” is so prevalent in evangelicalism that many embrace a message to “get saved” without ever understanding the

⁴³ <http://www.bible.acu.edu/stone-campbell/Etexts/lun16.html>

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call to “follow Jesus”. Untransformed lives often follow such “conversions”. Yet it is naïve to suppose that the ICOC is the only group seriously dedicated to Christian discipleship. Some excellent examples are reflected in the messages, “Soundly Saved” and “True and False Conversion” from “The Way of the Master” series⁴⁴. Although the speakers appear to subscribe to the view of baptism promoted by Zwingli, it has not stopped them from confronting sin in a manner somewhat similar to the methodology utilized in our studies about “sin” and “the cross”. They are also zealous about replacing the prevalent message of “cheap grace” with one that produces “godly sorrow”. Similar perspectives on evangelism are evident in the writings of Dallas Willard, author of “*The Divine Conspiracy*”⁴⁵, “*The Great Omission*”⁴⁶, and a recent article entitled, “*Rethinking Evangelism*”⁴⁷. Many others who are unaffiliated with the Restoration Movement have a similar zeal for discipleship.

While it is appropriate to correct those who have departed from the baptismal theology held by the earliest Christians, it is also appropriate to acknowledge that there is not a perfect correlation between baptismal theology and righteousness. There are those who have gained extensive biblical understanding prior to immersion in ICOC affiliated churches, yet have later returned to ungodly lifestyles. Conversely, there are those who never had the benefits of doctrinal clarity with regard to 1st century baptismal theology, yet have served as an inspiration to countless believers. Smith cites many of these by name on page 28 as well as a number of hymn writers on pages 110-111. Those who simply dismiss such believers as being “non-Christians” must reconcile “the fruit of their lives” with the implications of the following scriptures:

Romans 8:9-14 TNIV

⁹ You, however, are not controlled by the sinful nature but are in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life ⁶ because of righteousness. ¹¹ And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of ⁷ his Spirit who lives in you. ¹² Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. ¹³ For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.

1 Corinthians 12:3 TNIV

³ Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

It is no secret that many of “our own” that were “baptized right” struggle to “put to death the misdeeds of the body”. Conversely, there are “pedobaptists” like E. M. Bounds⁴⁸ (a Methodist minister), who literally “wrote the book” on prayer. Clearly, correct baptismal theology is not the “common denominator” among those who fulfill the greatest commandments. The point is not to minimize the importance of baptism. Rather, the point is to illustrate how “sectarianism” can cause us to “miss the forest for the trees” by drawing lines of Christian fellowship that are contrary to the “mind of Christ”. Moreover, making baptism the central issue has the potential to diminish credibility with those outside the Restoration Movement; thereby, limiting the opportunity to engage in discussions of the “more important matters” that are much more relevant to a person’s relationship with God.

A Proposal for Resolution

The issues of controversy related to questions of fellowship are a product of the challenges associated with maintaining doctrinal purity and unity among believers simultaneously. Both issues are of vital importance and Smith correctly acknowledges on page 20 that there is often the tendency to emphasize one at the neglect of the other. I concur with Smith’s assertion on page 130 about the need to educate

⁴⁴ <http://www.wayofthemaster.com/audiolessons.shtml>

⁴⁵ <http://www.dwillard.org/books/DivConsp.asp>

⁴⁶ <http://www.dwillard.org/books/GreatOmission.asp>

⁴⁷ <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=53>

⁴⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._M._Bounds

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others about “baptism’s true significance and purpose”. I developed a bible study entitled “Biblical Conversion vs. Religious Tradition” in a study series⁴⁹ I assembled for this very purpose. Furthermore, Smith’s five-fold fellowship model is useful in recognizing the differing levels of fellowship that are appropriate for people having differing theological stances. Indeed, the “universal fellowship” Smith spoke of reminds us of the divine command to “love our neighbors as ourselves”, regardless of their faith (or lack thereof). Similarly, the chapter on “conscience fellowship” illustrates the difference between “close family” and “extended family” among brothers and sisters in Christ. In the section on “congregational fellowship”, Smith describes the type of close fellowship that is possible among local congregations that share common convictions. This type of close fellowship is vital so that Christians can encourage one another personally in Christian growth.

The issues of controversy are related to the “bright lines” Smith “paints” concerning the distinction he makes between “faith fellowship” (believers in Christ who Smith regards as “lost” because of their lack of “biblical baptism”) and “in Christ fellowship” (those who are recognized as fellow Christians because of their baptisms). As previously discussed, the “bright lines” are often based on a “restrictive paradigm” (which has questionable correlation with the New Covenant), along with certain assumptions that cannot be proven. The consequence of this posture is sectarian division that has the potential to impede the advancement of the gospel. On page 27, Smith comments about the capacity of the “so-called unity movement” to actually promote unity with believers outside of the Restoration Movement at the expense of causing disunity within it. He then poses the question, *“Is that because some among us are embarrassed to be part of the churches of Christ?”* Many would answer that question with a resounding, “Yes”! On page 24 of *“The Jesus Proposal”*, John York describes a conversation he had with another passenger on a plane. After explaining that he taught religion at a small private college, the passenger inquired, *“What church?”* York responded, *“Churches of Christ”*. The passenger replied, *“Ah, the people who think they’re the only ones going to heaven!”* Indeed, the reputation is widespread, perhaps even more so with regard to the ICOC. If one were to “Google” the phrase, “one true church”, the top result⁵⁰ includes a reference to the ICOC.

Unquestionably, the ICOC has observed a significant attrition rate, particularly in recent years. Some have left because of waning spiritual commitment. Others; however, have retained their commitment to God, yet have left because of their convictions regarding lingering “sectarian bias”. Many have chosen to worship elsewhere as a matter of conscience because they no longer felt confident about bringing visitors into an environment where an “ICOC = Kingdom of God” mentality continues to exist. The issue of sectarianism is significant.

Doctrinal integrity and absence of sectarian bias need not be mutually exclusive goals. From a practical standpoint, there are ample scriptures that are capable of convincing “nominal believers” (including some who have been “baptized for the forgiveness of sins”) of their need for salvation, independent of any discussion of baptism. For most people who claim the Christian faith, baptism is a non-issue. The discrepancy between simply acknowledging Jesus’ resurrection and actually following him as Lord is sufficiently significant to distinguish those on the “broad road” from those on the “narrow road”. As for those who Smith would describe as *“more like family than our own Christian family”* (in spite of their lack of similar baptismal understanding and experience), it is not our role to judge them as non-Christians. Frankly, there are numerous biblical mandates for refraining from such judgment. In addition to the many scriptures that specifically prohibit “judging”, Jesus also taught the following parable that is relevant to this issue:

Matthew 13:24-30 TNIV

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. ²⁷ “The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ²⁸ “ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. “The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go

⁴⁹ <http://www.douglasjacoby.com/dajacoby/home.nsf/Article/E6E9AF5F39420088852570B500632C63?OpenDocument>

⁵⁰ <http://www.letusreason.org/Cult12.htm>

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and pull them up?’²⁹ “‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them.’³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’ ”

Ironically, some of Smith’s statements from *“Baptism – The Believer’s Wedding Ceremony”*⁵¹ seem to be in harmony with this perspective. Consider the following:

“Our role as believers is to study God’s revealed will for our own lives and to share with others our best understanding of what God wants us to do – aware always that our understanding may be wrong. That attitude is a long, long way from making eternal judgments about anyone’s spiritual destiny. We must be sure to leave that judgment to the Great Judge.” (Page 201)

“None of us can presume to know the eternal destiny of anyone, on the basis of any question of doctrine – be it predestination, charismatic gifts, the washing of feet, or even baptism. All we can do is give our best efforts to knowing God’s will, as revealed in his written Word.” (Page 201)

God knows “who is and is not a Christian”. Our perception is less precise. “Cheap grace” has given credit where it is not deserved. “Sectarian bias” has “condemned the innocent”. The latter error is more relevant to those of us with a history in the ICOC. Ultimately, God’s act of forgiving a person’s sins and “writing his or her name in the book of life” determines whether the person is his child or not. We might argue convincingly that the “normative” manner in which people received forgiveness during the Apostolic Age was during immersion. Conversely, we must acknowledge that we cannot prove that God always grants forgiveness only during immersion. There are New Testament examples in which forgiveness was granted independent of baptism, or at the very least, the exact timing of forgiveness is inconclusive without incorporating assumptions that cannot be proven. Nevertheless, Smith has a valid conviction with regard to the need to educate the ill informed about how baptism was understood and practiced during the Apostolic Age. In addition to the observations about baptismal theology previously noted on pages 20-21, it is appropriate to alert people to the following biblical examples and admonitions:

- Jesus submitted to baptism, in spite of his lack of any need for “forgiveness of sins”, in order to “fulfill all righteousness”.
- The Ephesian disciples of Acts 19 were humble enough to be “re-baptized” when it became evident that their previous baptisms were deficient.
- God looks with favor to those who “tremble at his Word”. In Joshua 1, he instructed his people not to turn from his commands “to the right or to the left”.

Rather than “passing judgment” on the spiritual status of those Smith would categorize as “like family”, it is preferable to challenge such people to decide for themselves if they have adapted their lives to the scriptures or vice-versa. Anyone who has not been baptized in a manner consistent with the “normative pattern” observed in the New Testament should be encouraged to imitate Jesus’ example and do whatever is necessary to “fulfill all righteousness”. The Ephesian disciples of Acts 19 had this attitude. Certainly, it benefited not only them, but also those they later taught – consistent with the message of the following scripture:

1 Timothy 4:16 TNIV

¹⁶ Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Such “like family” believers should be encouraged to pray to God for wisdom with regard to his will for them as it relates to the issue of baptism. God’s Word and his Spirit are more than capable of bringing about conviction among those who have deficient conversion experiences – without any sectarian judgment from us! This seems to be exactly what happened in the example previously cited about the woman who sought counsel from Rubel Shelly regarding the issue of baptism. Perhaps if those of us with a background in the churches of Christ did not have the reputation of “*the people who think they’re the*

⁵¹ <http://www.amazon.com/Baptism-Believers-F-Lagard-Smith/dp/089225422X>

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only ones going to heaven”, we might be more effective in inspiring those Smith categorizes as “like family” to actually follow Jesus’ example in baptism.

What if we share these explanations with devoted, “like family” believers and they don’t agree with us? What if they remain convinced that God has already forgiven them and that they have his Spirit and that they are already saved? What if they do not make a decision to be baptized in response to our instruction? How should we respond? It is not our role to judge them as lost and outside of the family of God. We do not have the authority to categorize them as “non-Christians”. God knows whether he has forgiven them or not. We do not. If they are lost, God can communicate that to them. We should learn the lesson from the parable of the wheat and the weeds and realize that matters such as these belong to God. It is recognized that such people will not be in the “close family” or “conscience fellowship” category that Smith described. Like Paul and Barnabas, we are likely to “part company” in terms of mission efforts. We are unlikely to partner evangelistically with anyone who has a “post Augustine” view of conversion. It is unlikely that anyone of this doctrinal persuasion would ever desire to “place membership” in one of our congregations. If they did, we would probably recommend that they consider another local congregation more conducive to their doctrinal convictions. For similar reasons, we would likely recommend that our single members limit dating and marriage to other disciples with whom they share a “conscience fellowship”. Such a stance would be consistent with “living up to what we have already attained”, as reflected in the following scripture:

Philippians 3:14-16 TNIV

¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Although we may not be “close family” with such believers that have differing doctrinal convictions, it does not mean that we are excluded from fellowship with them. We can still pray with them. We can still have spiritual discussions with them. We can still discuss the scriptures with them. We can still “connect” with them because of our common love for Jesus. Moreover, we are much more likely to influence their thinking if our acceptance of them is not contingent upon them “seeing things our way”.

Conclusion

Those of us with a history in the churches of Christ have been impacted by a “restrictive paradigm” that is much less reflective of the New Covenant than a “paradigm of liberty”. The consequences of this “restrictive paradigm” have been reflected in the “sectarian bias” that has developed within our churches. Many of us have often “missed the forest for the trees” as we have allowed the “test of fellowship” to shift from the greatest commandments to baptismal theology. The product of this sectarian bias has been extensive splintering that has not left the ICOC unaffected. In a world in which believers in Jesus as the Son of God are “losing market share”, our stance has contributed to the problem rather than contributing to the solution. With all of the “infighting” that exists among believers in Christ, it should not surprise us that we have a “credibility issue” that has contributed to the growth of Islam among theists and humanism among skeptics. Many of the “bright lines” we have cited to justify our stances actually reflect the shallowness of our biblical literacy rather than the depth of our theological understanding. In view of these realities, the last thing we need is one more division within the churches of Christ, as Smith seems to advocate with regard to the “so-called unity movement”. Although we do have much to offer other believers in terms of doctrinal education relative to the baptismal theology of the Apostolic Age, the issue of baptism is not the “real issue” of central relevance. The strength of our message in the ICOC has always been our focus on helping others understand that Jesus died for us with the expectation that we would live for him. There are numerous non-controversial scriptures that emphasize what it means to love God, love our neighbors, and be “living sacrifices”. If we promote these central issues without any sectarian bias, we will be more effective in achieving the kind of unity with other believers that will promote rather than hinder the advancement of the Gospel. Moreover, if we can lose the reputation of being viewed as “the people who think we’re the only ones saved”, it is likely that our teaching about New Testament baptism will be far more influential, extending well beyond the mere 0.065% of the world’s population that comprises the Restoration Movement.

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Smith’s fellowship model is useful in illustrating that different levels of fellowship are appropriate for different levels of spirituality. As descendants of Adam who were created in the image of God, we are all part of the human family. On a deeper level, we share a bond even with “nominal believers” whose faith in Jesus distinguishes them from atheists, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. Although these “believers” may not be Christians because of their lack of devotion to Jesus, the “common ground” we share with them can be a “stepping stone” that we can utilize to help them become genuine disciples. Among those who actually are part of God’s family, some possess differing theological perspectives that create distance between us. Others allow deeper fellowship because of their common stance on many doctrinal points. Closest of all are those within our local congregation with whom we share not only common perspective, but time together as well. Recognizing the differing levels of fellowship that correspond to differing spiritual and doctrinal stances is beneficial in helping us interact appropriately with people of various spiritual perspectives.

While “*Who is My Brother?*” raises many valuable questions and provides a number of useful guidelines for understanding appropriate levels of fellowship, it is also valuable to understand the perspective of those Smith critiques. For this reason, “*The Jesus Proposal*”⁵² is an equally vital book for understanding the issues facing the churches of Christ and the ICOC in particular. I do not concur with every position promoted by Shelly and York in this book. My response to the woman who sought Shelly’s counsel regarding baptism, her spiritual status, etc., would have been different than the feedback he gave her. Based on 1 Peter 2:10, I am persuaded that salvation corresponds more closely with “an event” as compared to “a process” (although sanctification is clearly a process). Nevertheless, I believe this book contains a wealth of very relevant information. In view of the issue of “sectarianism”, I consider it to be very helpful reading for those with a history in the ICOC. A “taste” of the theme of the book is captured in Rubel Shelly’s brief article, “*Loving the Person Who Isn’t One of Us*”⁵³. Also, “*Down in the River to Pray*”⁵⁴ provides extensive information about baptism that is very relevant to the issues raised by Smith. Balancing this information with the material presented in Smith’s book will provide valuable insights for navigating the future course of our fellowship of churches.

We have a rich heritage in the ICOC that has equipped us to bring the vital message of salvation to people all over the world. It has been exciting to witness how God has used us as we have committed ourselves to him and his mission. Yet our recognition of many of our mistakes in recent years has affected our confidence. Many have left our fellowship of churches and those of us who have remained have often lacked the zeal we possessed in “days gone by”. In retrospect, some of that zeal may best be described as “zeal without knowledge”. Conversely, some of the things we have learned in recent years may have left us disillusioned or less confident. Whatever the case, we all desire to see renewed zeal in our churches and to be used by God to bring many people to Christ. There are differing perspectives about what we need to do to “get back on track”. Some believe the solution is to restore the “central leadership” along with many of the church building practices that were utilized in the ICOC during the “expansion years”. Those who hold this perspective also advocate a “hard line” stance regarding “who is and who is not a Christian”. I am not persuaded that this approach offers a viable, long-term solution. The issue of sectarianism contributed significantly to attrition in the ICOC, particularly in recent years. Unless the issue is addressed, history is likely to repeat itself. Accordingly, the choices we make now regarding questions of identity, fellowship, Christian unity, etc. will have a significant influence on the future of our churches. I am persuaded that the general excitement among our members will be enhanced dramatically when we take steps to correct sectarian postures we have historically held. We have a message that people need to hear. We understand the difference between being a “nominal believer” and a “living sacrifice”. We have deep convictions about the “greatest commandments” and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Yet many of us have recognized that we are “not the only ones” who are truly committed to Jesus. We also perceive the theological flaws (not to mention arrogance) of equating our churches with “The Kingdom”. Eliminating sectarianism in our church culture will inspire renewed confidence and evangelistic zeal among our members. All of this can be accomplished without compromising doctrinal integrity. Furthermore, such changes have the potential to enhance our credibility

⁵² <http://www.rubelshelly.com/content.asp?CID=10653>

⁵³ <http://www.rubelshelly.com/content.asp?CID=19372>

⁵⁴ <http://johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=53318>

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and extend our potential influence. Accordingly, it is vital that we evaluate these issues thoroughly as we take steps that will determine the direction of our churches for the future.

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