

**In Response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*:
A Perspective from within Churches of Christ**

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As a Stone-Campbell history side note, W. T. Moore wrote an article on “Baptismal Regeneration” in the 1898 *Christian Quarterly*.¹ In his closing remarks he suggested that representatives of “evangelical churches” should meet to find a mediating position on baptism.

I am not without hope that an irenicon could be found which would be acceptable to all parties on the vexed and vital questions which I have discussed in this article. Would it not be a wise conclusion of the nineteenth century if a representative convention could be called to meet somewhere within the next year or two in order to consider the whole matter of peace with respect to the baptismal controversy? If peace could be declared at this point Christian Union would then be more than a probability within the near future.

It appears that W. T. Moore anticipated something like BEM, though he thought the outcome would be a general rejection of infant baptism. Nevertheless, he envisioned an ecumenical meeting where common ground might emerge that would unite Christians.

Some southern Stone-Campbell members did not let his suggestion go unnoticed. C. E. Holt in the *Firm Foundation* regarded it as another fruit of a general digression. Holt dismissed such a convention as improbable but “if it should be called, the plan which it would suggest would be as bad, if not worse than the disease which it proposes to cure” and it would be nothing but a “compromise.”² He continued:

The very idea that a number of clerical despots, in convention assembled, with their minds poisoned with sectarian tenets, and their understanding darkened with human theology, should be able to invent a plan by which the baptismal controversy could be amicably and scripturally settled is perfectly preposterous.

This is a perspective, of course, that yet speaks among many in Churches of Christ.

Though the Lima document appeared over thirty years ago, just about the time I began an academic teaching career among Churches of Christ, its theology, proposals, and searching consensus have been the fodder for constant discussion within the Christian world. While I have occasionally used the document in both

¹ W. T. Moore, “Baptismal Regeneration: the Fundamental Error of Christendom,” *The Christian Quarterly* 4ns (January 1898) 1-31.

² C. E. Holt, “Notes from Tennessee,” *Firm Foundation* 14 (1 February 1898) 35.

undergraduate and graduate classes, this is my first time to offer any public response to the document.

In general, the strength of BEM is its theological orientation to each of the elements, but the weakness is its radically institutional character.

Strength: Theological Orientation

The strength of this document is its theological reflection, specifically the theological introductions that preface the discussion of forms and practices. They are titled, "II. The Meaning of Baptism," "II. The Meaning of the Eucharist," and "I. The Calling of the Whole People of God."

Generally, the theological summaries of baptism and the Lord's Supper are excellent theological paradigms. They provide a broad framework in which people may think theologically about these sacraments. Baptism is "participation in Christ's Death and Resurrection," "Conversion, Pardoning, and Cleansing," "The Gift of the Spirit," "Incorporation into the Body of Christ," and "The Sign of the Kingdom." The Eucharist is "Thanksgiving to the Father," the "Memorial of Christ," the "Invocation of the Spirit," the "Communion of the Faithful," and the "Meal of the Kingdom." These are solid theological orientations that provide a wealth of perspective for further elaboration and reflection.

Woven into these theological introductions are three themes that I think are particularly significant and specifically illuminating for the Stone-Campbell Movement.

Divine Presence and Action. There is a strong sacramental emphasis that highlights divine presence and action. While Churches of Christ have resisted sacramental language, we have emphasized its reality in Baptism and Assembly though less so in the Lord's Supper. By sacrament I mean that God acts through faith in Christ to effect eschatological pneumatic grace through the concrete experience of water, bread, wine and gathering. In other words, these are authentic means of grace by which believers participate in the reality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and experience the communion of the Triune God. This is everywhere assumed and often articulated in BEM.

Ministry of Jesus. Unlike much of classical theology, the reference point for sacramental theology is the person (incarnation) and ministry of Jesus that culminates in his death, resurrection, and ascension. Rooting the sacraments in the "Christ Event" is paramount, and more specifically rooting it in the actions of Jesus as a minister of the kingdom of God is illuminating. The ministry of Jesus is the ministry of the church as it proclaims and prefigures the Kingdom of God. The meals of Jesus that "proclaim and enact the nearness of the Kingdom of God" during his ministry are continued in the Eucharist. It is not merely that the Last Supper institutes the Eucharist, but that the Eucharist arises out of and participates in the meals of Jesus during his ministry. The Eucharistic meal is a meal that embodies the ministry of Jesus. And, of course, baptism is grounded in Jesus' own baptism. This reorientation of theology to the ministry of Jesus needs more emphasis, but it is a welcome aspect of BEM.

Eschatological Kingdom of God. BEM often refers to the Kingdom of God and it usually has an eschatological import. This meaning, however, is not simply futurist but is also proleptic. The Kingdom of God is present in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and believers experience, participate in, and bear witness to the reality of this kingdom through the sacraments. This eschatological vision shapes our ethics, ministry, and hope.

One Caveat. The role of the laity is underplayed. The consistent emphasis on the sacramental function of the ordained ministry is given weight due to tradition rather than Scripture. The Stone-Campbell Movement has been a strong witness for the sacramental function of the priesthood of believers. The most significant example of this is the Campbell-Rice debate in 1844. One of the propositions Campbell denied was “Baptism is to be administered only by a bishop or ordained presbyter.”³ Nevertheless, even Campbell distributed to ordained presbyters the ordinary administration of the sacraments in a duly ordered congregation. Churches of Christ, however, following David Lipscomb and others, deconstructed this ordinariness and gave all priests (though not, unfortunately, priestesses) sacramental function. Priests may administer the sacraments and this does not belong solely to the class of ordained ministers.

Weakness: Institutional Character

I shall indicate what I mean by “institutional” after I have articulated some of the weaknesses that constitute what I mean by “institutional.” But this is exactly where “visible unity” is so difficult. The shared Eucharist, one of the most visible expressions of unity, is problematic precisely because the church is far too “institutional.”

Thomas Best warned Disciples (and the Stone-Campbell Movement as a whole) that BEM would challenge three fundamental presuppositions which have shaped our perspectives. These three central “attitudes” actually “underlie our positions on a whole range of issues in the belief and life of the church.” They are: (1) Sacramentalism, (2) Tradition, and (3) Authority. The first challenges our rationalistic symbolism and even latent Platonism with the mystical reality of how Christ is presented and re-presented to us. The second challenges our commitment to *sola Scriptura* with an “appeal to the Tradition itself as a standard of Christian truth.” The third challenges our sense of Christian freedom and “fear of authority” with the importance of the office of Bishop within the Christian tradition.⁴ These are insightful points and I will use them to guide my critique of BEM.

Sacramentalism. As one might gauge from the first section of this paper, I think the sacramental challenge is a fundamentally healthy one. The turn to sacramental thought is a good one if we understand the language as a means of grace. However,

³ Alexander Campbell and N. L. Rice, *A Debate Between Rev. A. Campbell and Rev. N. L. Rice, on the Action, Subject, Design and Administrator of Christian Baptism* (Lexington, KY: A. T. Skillman & Son, 1844) 567.

⁴ Thomas F. Best, “Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry, and Us: The Challenge of BEM for Disciples,” *Mid-Stream* 25.1 (January 1986) 20-22.

the sacramentalism within BEM undergirds its theology and practice of the “ordained ministry.” Best focused on this point as well as he believed the most challenging dimension of this perspective is “how certain persons can bring to us the presence of Christ” and whether “certain functions” are “restricted only” to a few.⁵

The Stone-Campbell tradition has always been inclined to think about the assembly as a sacramental moment even if we have never used that language. But the roots of its sacramentality are very different within our history than in the assumed history present in BEM. Whereas it is the representative presence of the ordained minister that constitutes the sacred moment in BEM, for Churches of Christ it is the gathering of the whole people of God in the name of Christ under the Word of God that constitutes the sacred assembly. This is not vested in any sort of sacrament of ordination but in the sacrament of gathering itself. Consequently, the third sentence of section 12 under Ministry should read “that the whole community gathered is a reminder of the divine initiative” rather than the presence of the ordained ministry.⁶

The focus on the “ordained ministry,” while understandable given the participants and challenges faced in this regard, skews the significance of the laity in the community of faith. Many have critiqued BEM for its relative inattention to the ministry of the laity, and in most of the participating churches with a three-fold ministry (bishop, priest, and deacon) that BEM recommends these are all clerical in nature. To sacramentalize the ordination of a few is to desacralize the ministry of the many.

Tradition. I would certainly agree that a naïve or bare *sola Scriptura* deserves challenging. The total exclusion of the Tradition or an anti-Tradition posture undermines the witness of the church through the ages. At the same time, Tradition is a double-edged sword. It cuts both ways, that is, in both negative and positive ways. The question of female ordination within BEM is a case in point. Here is a Tradition of the Church to which many cling and to which many object. How does one slice that cake on the grounds of Tradition? Nevertheless, the Tradition should be regarded, at the very least, as a valuable witness if not normative standard.

And here is the danger of Tradition in BEM. On the one hand it recognizes that infant baptism, apostolic succession and the three-fold ministry of the church—as but three examples—do not have the explicit witness of Scripture and yet these are highly recommended as inviolable parts of ecumenicity. Infant baptism must be recognized even though its biblical weight is questionable. The three-fold pattern must be adopted as a matter of Tradition without any clear trajectory within Scripture. And, most significantly, apostolic succession must be embraced so that the ecumenical church might have episcopal validation. The Stone-Campbell tradition stands opposed to each of these, and that opposition is present in the Campbell-Rice debate of 1844.⁷

⁵ Best, “BEM,” 20.

⁶ David M. Scholer, “The Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry Document: An Outline of One Baptist Reflection,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13.4 (Winter 1986) 122.

⁷ Campbell and Rice, *Debate*, 583, 587.

This use of Tradition does not consider the significant explicit counter-trajectories within Scripture itself (and often present in Tradition as well). The relation of faith, discipleship, and baptism runs counter to infant baptism. Also, the political and social implications that infant baptism has nurtured within the Tradition run counter to some biblical ecclesiology. The three-fold pattern is far too restrictive of the diversity present within the biblical witness and strangles the charisma of the church in terms of its ecclesial practices. Though apostolic succession has been “an instrument of continuity and unity within the church,” it has also “been an instrument of tyranny and division.”⁸

Authority. Free Churches, and especially Stone-Campbell communities, have a strong heritage of freedom. Indeed, their anti-authoritarianism has often given birth to a kind of anarchy and a lack of respect for spiritual authority within body of Christ. This is a real danger. But, at the same time, the kind of authority to which BEM invites churches to submit has the real danger of institutionalizing the very situation that gave birth to the Free Churches in the first place.

BEM recommends that non-episcopal traditions “accept episcopal succession and the laying on of hands by bishops as a sign of apostolicity and the continuity of the whole church.”⁹ To accept this is to deny the validity of the communities gathered by the call of the Word in the presence of Christ. To invoke the necessity of episcopal succession is to deny communities the freedom to exercise their gifts according to the presence of the Spirit in their midst and find their authentication in the presence of Christ grounded in the Word. It is to give a value to the Tradition that stands beyond or above the Word. This is essentially an authoritarian function of the episcopacy.

If “authority” is grounded in the historic episcopacy, then congregations lose their autonomy and freedom under the Spirit and Word. I think this is best illustrated in the recommendations for Eucharistic celebration. While BEM (Eucharist, III.28) recognizes diversity and does not desire absolute uniformity, it does recommend a liturgical renewal that includes many facets of the historic liturgy found in the episcopal traditions. There is no recommendation as to which elements of the Eucharistic liturgy “were unchangeably instituted by Jesus,” but liturgical reform has “brought the churches closer together in the manner of celebrating the Lord’s Supper.” Liturgical freedom is a difficult point of discussion since most want to avoid anarchy as well as uniformity. Liturgical freedom, however, is the expression of local communities led by charisma for the embodiment of Eucharistic meaning in different cultural and ethnic settings. This freedom, rooted in the freedom of the Spirit, should be preserved rather than constrained by episcopal traditions.

Hyper-Institutionalism. This is the loss of dynamic freedom that is restrained by an institutional structure. I suppose I look more to the charisma rather than the *episcopate* in that I would see the *episcopate* arising out of the charisma within the local body of believers over against the *episcopate* funneled through previous regional

⁸ Bruce G. Epperly, “A Faith Without Fences: A Disciples Response to *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*,” *Mid-Stream* 26.2 (April 1987) 185.

⁹ Epperly, “Faith Without Fences,” 184-185.

authorities. To call this sacrament is to place too much authority in the persona of the office rather than in the gathering of the people among whom the Spirit dwells. It is to depend on historical succession rather than being gathered by the Spirit in the presence of Christ under the Word of God.

As Stan Grenz wrote, the “underlying disagreement” is rooted in ecclesiology, that is, the basic nature of the church. Apostolic succession traditions emphasize “the historical continuity of the people of God,” which mainly resides in the “office of bishop, or perhaps in the whole people as they are in fellowship with that office. In contrast, the Reformation churches speak of word and sacrament as crucial to the essence of the church. The church is found wherever the believing community comes together so that the word may be spoken and the sacraments celebrated.”¹⁰

Conclusion

I have long loved the theological orientation of BEM. I wish our churches would study the document as a means of enriching our sacramental theology. But I cannot recommend the hyper-institutionalism as I have defined it above.

It seems to me that we might embrace a unity that is rooted in a theological understanding of the Christ Event though the visible unity for which BEM yearns is yet distant. Perhaps that is fine as long as the church is engaged in the process of communal sanctification. We seek the full manifestation of the unity of the Spirit while at the same time we acknowledge that goal will only emerge in the Eschaton. Our vision of unity should be tempered by an apocalyptic eschatological horizon—already, but not yet.

¹⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, “How Much Can We Mutually Affirm? BEM on Ministry,” *Reformed Journal* 37.11 (November 1987) 15.