

# Bonding Through Diversity, Pt 2

## Handling Scripture Responsibly – Solid Foundations

Lee Acres Church of Christ

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### 1. Lee Acres Relational Commitment

- A. Allow the characteristics of love from 1 Corinthians 13 to govern our dealings with each other.
- B. Always maintain open-minded communication.
- C. Focus on our faith foundations.
- D. Strive toward principled compromise in areas other than our foundational beliefs.
- E. Maintain the attitude of Christ by “emptying ourselves” into each other’s lives
- F. Let all of our dealings be governed by fervent prayer.
- G. Do not be fearful of individual thinking.
- H. Cooperate with our elders’ decisions and maintain a loyal relationship with our congregation.

### 2. Solid Foundations – Core Beliefs

- A. In our increasingly pluralistic culture, churches are experiencing the need to clarify “core beliefs” to help establish faith boundaries and guide congregational life. The idea is that within the parameters, there must be unanimity, but outside those parameters, there is liberty. It is a modern version of phrase from our Restoration tradition: “In matters of faith, unity. In matters of opinion, liberty. In all things, charity.”
- B. Observations on how the New Testament expresses core beliefs.
  - 1. The N.T. never provides a comprehensive list of core beliefs or moral code, **even though the challenges of unity in diversity would have seemingly called for them**. The O.T. provides the Decalogue, the Levitical Code, etc. The N.T., however, does not provide a standard list of doctrinal beliefs and practices.
  - 2. Clarification: These beliefs and practices certainly existed, but there is no one place where they were comprehensively described for universal conformity.
  - 3. In the N.T., essential beliefs and practices were affirmed and clarified as the context required, i.e. **belief statements were brief and usually limited to the issues at hand**. The *context* called for and gave rise to the clarification.

#### Examples:

Acts 10:34 – Peter, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

1 Corinthians 5:11 – “But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler.”

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 – “Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

1 Corinthians 8:4 – “So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that ‘An idol is nothing at all in the world’ and that ‘There is no God but one.’”

1 Corinthians 15:3-5 – “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.”

Ephesians 4:4-6 – “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

Philippians 2:6-11 – “...who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Colossians 1:15-20 – “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

1 Timothy 3:16 – “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”

Hebrews 6:1-2 – “Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.”

1 John 4:2 – “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.”

4. Note again that in all these New Testament examples, not only are the statements limited to that which was needed for the context, but they focus on what is conspicuously and universally true. ***The truths expressed in these statements, though expressed contextually, are firmly established, not dynamic.***
5. At other times, clarifications of belief and practice were ***provisional***, helping parties enter gradually into the implications of the gospel.

Example: James to the Jerusalem Council, Acts 15:19-21 – “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

### C. Observations from church history on the expression of core beliefs – the creeds

1. For those unfamiliar with *creeds*, they are statements of essential, foundational beliefs, and are a significant part of Christian history. Many of them date back to the early centuries. Some are intended for universal use, while others are designed to express the beliefs of a particular denomination. For good reason, Churches of Christ have hesitated to use creeds in congregational life (see point 4 below), yet they have enjoyed good use in some of our schools as starting places for teaching Christian doctrine. For example, in a course I taught for many years, the Apostles’ Creed was the baseline for describing the basic tenets of Christianity. The Apostles’ Creed did not come from the apostles themselves, obviously, but was constructed to summarize essential apostolic teaching, thus the name. There are several variant expressions of this creed, but the one most commonly used is the eighth century version (<https://carm.org/apostles-creed>). One can find many guides to the creeds on the web. A site that discusses the full range of formulations and their history is *The Creeds of Christendom* (<http://www.creeds.net>). One should not subscribe to any particular creed, but may find helpful teaching from synthesis of those that have been used through the centuries.
2. Positively, these creeds clarified core essentials, *i.e. those truths which because they are true the Christian faith exists and if they were not true the Christian faith could not exist*. Even in our time, there are movements harkening back to these creeds to reaffirm that which transcends cultural overtones by returning to ancient expressions.
3. Negatively, creeds were constructed not as celebrations of unity but as battle lines against the encroachments of heresy. They were lines of demarcation between truth and falsehood. The process was divisive by nature and usually involved an enemy on the other side. Certainly, churches today could be non-adversarial in such a process, but church history at least tells us this quest is prone to conflict.
4. Churches of Christ have historically refrained from the use of creeds. This is a healthy part of our tradition, going back to Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone. This was, in fact, the fundamental issue of the Campbell-Rice debate in 1843. The idea was “no book but the Bible, no creed but Christ,” which actually meant that once a person made the Petrine confession of “you are the Christ” (Matt. 16), and was baptized into Christ, this was sufficient, and began a

person's growth into understanding Scripture. There was also the desire to stay away from the divisiveness of creeds. Even with this, both Thomas and Alexander Campbell believed the creeds had some value in helping new Christians understand the essential teachings of the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> Also, throughout the early history of the Restoration Movement, Campbell and others felt the need to affirm certain "gospel facts" or "moral facts." In 1832, Alexander endorsed the Apostles' Creed as a faithful rendition of the "gospel facts."<sup>2</sup> On occasion, Campbell would rehearse his essential beliefs for those who inquired.<sup>3</sup>

4. It is important to maintain our tradition's uneasiness about creeds, especially as boundaries of fellowship. On the other hand, such statements can be helpful on a congregational level to help us in an ongoing quest to articulate foundational truths, to help new members and inquirers understand our essential affirmations, and to provide some boundaries for our policies and practice. ***In all cases, they should be subservient to the words of Scripture, which alone bear authority.***

### 3. Core Beliefs and the Acceptable Range of Diversity

- A. The New Testament presents **three tests to govern our unity in diversity:**

#### 1. The theological test of orthodox belief

- a. **Unity enjoyed:** Affirmation of those truths that are foundational to the existence of the Christian faith (1 Timothy 3:16); submission to apostolic teaching and authority (Acts 2:42); growing in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:14-18).

**Latitude:** Difference between the sincerely misguided (e.g. Acts 18:24-28) and the intentionally misleading (1 John 4:1-3) and between those who are developmentally progressing (Acts 15:19-21) and those who are insistently regressing (2 Peter 2:20-22).

**Note:** From the apostolic perspective, attitude and posture are as important as content. Yet, the "content" issues that constitute the "hills to die on" are more foundational and universal. The issues Paul, Peter, and John fought over in the epistles were either central faith affirmations (e.g. 2 John 9-10) or congregational behaviors that mitigated against good faith development (e.g. 1 Timothy 1:5-7, 18-20). The apostles allowed for latitude and facilitated patience and growth on most subjects, with restrictions as needed in context.

- b. **Unity disrupted:** Deceptive, divisive, immoral or greedy attempts to lead others astray (Acts 20:29; Romans 16:16-18; 2 Corinthians 11:13-15; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; Titus 3:9-10; 2 Peter 2); denial of foundational truths (Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Timothy 1:19-20; 2 John 9-10); defiance against apostolic teaching and authority (1 Corinthians 14:36-37; 2 Corinthians 13:10-11, "listen to my appeal")

<sup>1</sup> See Paul M. Blowers, "Creeds and Confessions," in Douglas A. Foster, editor, *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 253.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Christian Baptist*, volume 5, issue 5, 396-397, with Campbell's response to Spencer Clack's inquiry as to what he believed.

## 2. The moral test of holy living

- a. Unity enjoyed: Abhorrence of sin, penitent and confessional forsaking of sin. (Ephesians 5:3; 1 John 1:5-2:2; 1 John 3:7-8)
- b. Unity disrupted: Impenitent, insistent, licentious practice of sin, especially when others are led astray (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 6:9-11), or when one's influence in an area of liberty may lead another into sin (1 Corinthians 8:8-13).

## 3. The social test of love and unity

- a. Unity enjoyed: 1) Endeavoring to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-3); 2) placing the interests of one's brothers and sisters above one's own (John 13:34-35, Philippians 2:5-11); 3) cooperatively placing oneself under the guidance of godly leadership (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Hebrews 13:17)
- b. Unity disrupted: Sowing discord or in other ways demonstrating unloving behaviors (Titus 3:9-10), especially in an unwillingness to confess brotherly wrongs and reciprocate in conciliatory gestures (Matthew 18:15-20).

B. Each of these tests is equally important, regardless of the issues you entertain.

C. Note, however, these three "tests" do not include many of the issues our churches sometimes divide over.

1. Not every faith question is a "core belief," and in fact most are not. We must provide room for growth, diversity and forbearance on issues outside these foundations.
2. Not every moral struggle is a matter of discipline, and in fact most are not. We must provide room for growth, and practice an environment of grace that allows us all to learn even from our own failures.
3. Not every difficult relational struggle within the church is a matter of divisiveness, and in fact most are not. We must encourage positive behaviors, while letting "love cover a multitude of sins," and recognize none of us is at our best when we face challenging times.

## Lee Acres Church of Christ Faith Commitment

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### Our Spirit

With reverence and humility we express this faith commitment, lifting before our members and inquirers beliefs that express our relationship with God. We do not wish to repeat the mistakes of history and omit an important detail or, conversely, deceive ourselves into believing we have incorporated the fullness of God's revelation. We offer this statement to provide clarity. Yet, we do not want to put at risk our cherished identity as a place of Christ-like love and compassion, which is at the core of the message of Christ. We want all who long for God to feel at home among us. While God's truth is unchanging, our understanding of that truth is dynamic and progressive. We commit our growing faith to a merciful God who will sustain us amidst our imperfections.

### Our Confession

Statements of faith, by nature, run the risk of conveying smugness or legalism. To the contrary, we confess we are not everything we should be. As sinners, we never fully measure up to what God wants us to be. We make errors in judgment, and we have our blind spots. We are imperfect reflections of the spirit and teachings of Christ.

As you inquire of us and visit us, you are likely to see our weaknesses as well as our strengths. We see them, too, and we are constantly praying that God will refine us into making maximum impact in the name of his Son. Yet, we also realize that God ministers powerfully to people through the Lee Acres ministry. We believe that God's love and grace toward us demand nothing less than a sincere attempt to be our best. We engage in this quest with humility and awe before God. We trust in God's grace to save us despite what we have made of ourselves and because of what he has made of us.

### Our Heritage

Our faith is shaped by our heritage of the American Restoration Movement of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that sought to restore biblical emphases that were lost through centuries of religious division and compromise. The aim of this effort was to disavow human religious authority and denominational hierarchies, and restore the believer's freedom to conduct their lives after the teachings of Scripture.

While our allegiance is to God and not a historical ideology, the spirit of this tradition remains with us insofar as it helps us adhere more closely to God's will. Thus Lee Acres is non-denominational, independent, and self-governing, guided solely by the scriptures. As each member exercises their individual freedom to study and gathers respectfully in fellowship to learn from others' discoveries, our corporate life is shaped.

Since we accept the Bible as a sufficient guide to faith, our established practice is not to adopt historical creeds or doctrinal statements. We appreciate all sincere attempts at summarizing important beliefs, and our statement bears similarities to some of the excellent statements from Christian history. Please understand, however, that the following list is only representative, not exhaustive.

### Our Affirmations

1. **God** is one being in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. He is the source of all creation (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1-2), which He sustains (Col. 1:17) and is in the process of redeeming (Rom. 8:19-22). God the Father loves us and desires that we have fellowship with Him as His children (1 John 1:3).

2. **Jesus** of Nazareth is the incarnation of God the Son. He is the Word become flesh (John 1:14), and He now holds all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). He is Savior and Lord. He made human salvation possible through His life, death on the cross, and resurrection. He ascended into heaven where He is now our high priest and advocate. He is head of the Church.
3. The **Holy Spirit** works actively in the world, seeking to glorify Jesus. The Holy Spirit convicts people of sin, righteousness, and judgment to come (John 16:5-11). The Holy Spirit indwells believers individually and corporately in the Church. The Holy Spirit develops within the Christian a pure heart which results in Christ-like character expressed in private and public conduct and action.
4. The **Bible**, the Old and New Testament Scriptures, is the uniquely inspired Word of God (2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Pet. 1:16-21). The Bible is the rule of faith and practice for Christians. We affirm that Scripture is the authoritative revelation from God by which we know God's will and Christ's authority. We seek to assert what the Scriptures clearly assert and allow freedom in other cases. We seek to understand God's original intent as conveyed by the inspired authors, and we seek to apply its teaching to the contemporary church and culture.
5. **Human beings** were created by God to walk in fellowship with Him. However, all (except Jesus) have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23) and must rely on God's grace and forgiveness. Every human from the moment of life is in the image of God (*imago Dei*), a person to be nurtured, protected, and developed.
6. People are **saved** by God alone through Jesus Christ alone. Salvation is God's sovereign gift, made possible through the all-sufficient work of Christ. Scriptures reveal an appropriate response to this free gift to trust in Christ's work on man's behalf (faith), express godly sorrow for sin and a willingness to redirect one's life toward God (repentance), humbly acknowledge the Lordship of Christ (confession), and identify with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (baptism). (Acts 2:38, 8:12, 10:47-48, Rom.10:9, etc.)
7. Each Christian has the responsibility to live a **holy life** (1 Pet. 1:16), to be changed increasingly to reflect Christ (2 Cor. 3:18), and to maintain regular practices of spirituality such as prayer, Bible study, and fellowship that help one realize the presence and power of God in this quest.
8. The **church** is the body of Christ on earth (Matt. 16:13-20), the visible community of believers throughout the world. Upon surrender to Christ, a person is added to the Church. In addition, the priesthood of all believers means each Christian is called to be a serving minister (1 Pet. 2:9-10). The Church's mission is spread the gospel (Matt. 28:18-20), and to practice good works which demonstrate the love and justice of God (Matt. 22:34-40).
9. The **Lord's Supper** is the celebration of the New Covenant, in which the Christian community remembers Christ and celebrates the covenantal relationship they have with Him and with each other. We celebrate the Lord's Supper in **weekly assemblies** (1 Cor. 11:17-34; Acts 20:7), which also provide occasion for instruction in God's word, communal prayer, financial offerings, spiritual songs, and other means of edification.
10. At the **FINAL COMING** of Christ, all humanity, including all people past and present, shall appear before Christ and be judged according to the scriptures. All believers shall dwell with God in the New Heavens and the New Earth, in the full realization of the eternal life that began when they were saved by Jesus. They shall experience the resurrection in which the body, soul and spirit will be redeemed from sin and made completely whole. The unrighteous will not inherit this same blessedness, but will experience judgment in keeping with God's holy will.