

Categories of Truth, Interpretive Consensus, and Soul Liberty: Church Membership in the Balance

Practical Ministry Formal Response

Aldersgate Forum

Thursday, February 15, 2007, 1:30 P.M.

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I greet you this afternoon in the lovely name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I must confess that I am deeply humbled by the challenge and opportunity of this forum as we begin a dialogue concerning a very important issue in the Conservative Holiness Church. The subject matter at hand is of great importance to me as a pastor and has the potential of being revolutionary to our efforts of preservation and evangelism. I trust we will depart from this event having begun a journey that will truly bless the efforts of God's great kingdom.

My responsibility today is to present to you a very *practical* pastoral response to the presentation of Dr. Philip Brown "Categories of Truth, Interpretive Consensus, and Soul Liberty: Church Membership in the Balance." Please understand that by *practical* I will speak much of my own opinion. My job is not to necessarily dissect the biblical or historical validity, but to respond as a Pastor that is endeavoring to lead people to Christ and build the leadership of my local congregation in order to impact our world for Christ Jesus.

Therefore, as you will notice, my paper is not written as a scholarly presentation, but a practical presentation.

Also, I did not receive Dr. Phil Brown's final copy he sent to me this week. For some strange reason it did not transfer, so I have not had the opportunity to directly consider several pages in his presentation.

And so, I will respond from a very *practical ministry* point of view in accordance with what was presented to me as "Guidelines for a Formal Response Paper."

I wish to take this moment to commend Larry Smith in his opening challenge to us that was so powerfully articulated and passionately delivered and want to say that I will gladly endorse by my signature for what it is worth.

I wish to commend my counterpart William Snyder for his energy and effort in traveling this great distance and preceding me with his formal response from a theological perspective. Thank you, Bro. Snider; you service the CHM in many ways.

I wish to commend Dr. Philip Brown on what I believe to be an exceptional and scholarly work. I appreciate his willingness to become vulnerable in this forum to our evaluations, critiques and I hope affirmations.

Today, Dr. Brown, you have pioneered this discussion, and I can only rejoice that it has escalated to this level of importance. I remember bringing this subject up in passionate concern and the discussion was not readily appreciated, or more accurately, feared.

Dr. Brown your responsibility and journey has been a lonely one I am sure and will continue to be, and I applaud your courage and astute effort to bring up a very delicate subject that is on every pastor's heart with precision and grace.

I wish to state that I certainly do not consider myself an authority on this subject, nor do I consider that I have every angle of these issues being discussed completely figured out.

However, every since I began pastoring fourteen years ago (1993) I recognized that we had a serious problem in how we have categorized truth and formulated our membership rosters,

and the longer I have pastored the more I am convinced of this problem. I have been faced with this great dilemma in both churches that I have been privileged to minister, both of which God did and has blessed us to have many new converts which contributed to the substantial growth of both churches to which I bow to give the Lord all credit – He is the marvelous Savior.

I have ministered at Findlay, Ohio for the past twelve years and I have been blessed to see multitudes of people come to know Jesus Christ.

I would note for you that the growth we have experienced was not the transfer of people from other conservative holiness churches, in fact, in both cities that I have pastored, we were the only Conservative Holiness Church present. The people being reached were right from our community, many of which have little history of church let alone the conservative holiness tradition.

I too am concerned that our churches have so few members. In preparation for this response I talked with several pastors who minister in holiness churches with what we would consider larger attendances yet they confess to me of having barely thirty members on the roster. Based on my experience and discussion with other pastors I would agree that Dr. Brown's statistics that *less than* 35% of our congregations are actual members. It is true of Findlay.

I have talked with pastors who are being extremely creative in involving their converts in their churches and conference leaders who simply “wink” at their efforts knowing themselves that many of our church manuals or disciplines make this matter of membership extremely detailed, awkward, irrelevant and even somewhat embarrassing.

I agree with Dr. Brown that there is a biblical identity of a specified body of worshipers known as the New Testament church. While I agree that “membership” is not directly labeled as such in the Bible, yet I completely agree that there were indeed the distinguishing characteristics that identified the believers, the church, from the un-churched. I would agree that “membership,” while it is not a biblical label, is certainly a biblical concept.

I applaud Dr. Brown's effort in dividing our core essentials into the four categories of truth. On the basis of my experience I find the grid can only be helpful and it certainly turned the lights on in my mind as to the relevance of these categories of truth and their weighted levels of importance.

In my experience I have found that, sadly, many of the “less weighty” matters are indeed the “more weighty” matters to us. It is not the basic fundamentals that we are dividing over and excluding people from our membership over, but it is the “less weighty” matter of Scripture that have been drawn as lines of division in the sand. For example, it is not “salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ” or even the call to holiness that separates us. Therefore, our practice indeed speaks louder than our words. In many cases, our haunting and perceived legalism, how ever well intended, seems to surface to divide us from those of the common faith.

In our membership process and leadership selections I have found that little care is given to how the person worships God, whether they witness to others consistently, and if they have an eagerness for the Word that can easily far surpasses the majority of our eligible members that sit unmoved by everything with the exception of the thermostat or the volume of the organ.

I think that we need to understand what our culture understands “membership” to mean. What does it mean to the young lady who rises from the altar with her face glowing beneath the glistening of her repentant tears and she says to you “I want to be a member of the church,” or “I want to join the church?”

I think this is important, since “membership” is not a biblical word with a biblical definition. If we are going to use the word “member” or “membership,” we must understand it

within the context of language and cultural meaning. Synonyms for the word “member” are such as “associate,” “affiliate,” “constituent,” “part of,” “limb,” “joined.”

In order to gain some cultural understanding I asked a large number of diverse people from within and without the conservative holiness church this question; “Tell me in one or two words what does it mean to you to be a member of something?” The overwhelming responses were; “to belong,” “to be a part of,” “identify with,” “family.”

I have found with new converts that among the first things they want to do are be baptized, join the church, and do something for the Lord. We have preached and taught them that the old life must go, the old friends must go, the old hangouts must go, the old affiliations must go, and we have reached out to them with arms of love, acceptance and grace, and they gladly starting cutting all their ties all the while thinking they have a found a new home, a new identity, a new family, a new place where they can belong, a new beginning, a new love.... But then we tell them, as saved as they are and as eager as they to walk with God, we just can’t let them belong to us yet.

Yes, we say they are welcome. We encourage them to tithe. They’re the first ones to show up at work days. They’ll do the ugly jobs around the church; all the while we are trying to convince them that we love them. However, the truth is, we do *not* accept them when we tell them they cannot belong or affiliate with us because of certain things that only biblical teaching, Holy Spirit conviction, and years of spiritually maturity will bring about.

I have found this matter extremely frustrating. I remember an occasion when I fretted about a man I was working with, trying to lead him to Christ. I knew that if he were to be saved and would then want to join our church, it would cause a problem. *Think of it*, a man being saved from an awful life of sin, a problem! I made a turn in my ministry as a result of that event. I was privileged to lead that man to Christ. And, yes, it worried people in the church, and sadly he never became a member. He never could tell his old cronies that he now belonged to that holiness church.

I remember Joyce, a former neighbor of ours that was culturally very rough, walking up my driveway one afternoon and saying; “Pastor, I sick and tired of my life, I want to become a ---- member of your church!” That day God spoke to me and said, “Cravens, how far does that poor lost lady have to chase you before you’ll get over what others will think of *you* and introduce her to *me*?” I made another turn in my ministry that day. I led Joyce to Christ. She died, and I preached her funeral and told her story of grace to a chapel full of lost sinners. However, she never was “saved enough” to be a member, to able to belong to our church.

When I have had to decline the membership request of a person who had truly been converted and was walking obediently with the Lord, I recognized their disappointment that ran deep. They never dreamed it would be so difficult to belong to the church.

I grew up in a home where it often seemed that my parents, affected by their past, were more accepted and appreciated in their pre-converted lives by organizations such as the V.F.W., the American Legion, etc., than they ever were by the conservative holiness church.

I saw first hand the pain that often brought tears, anger and frustration. I thought then, why should the church treat them like this? The church people would always express their confidence in them, but they just never could fully belong. They were treated like God’s step-kids, or a distant spiritual relative – never like they were of the immediate family. My parents just wanted to feel like they belonged. They often said they didn’t want to be in leadership, they understood they didn’t deserve it, but they did want to belong to the church.

I have ministered to many genuine Christians who have felt the same way. I am no longer adding to their pain so that they feel more lost after conversion than prior to it. In fact, I would rather have a membership roster full of people who didn't feel like they deserved it, than some of those on my membership role that thinks they do deserve to be there. I feel this very practically...

You see new converts are so excited that Christ has transformed them, received them, made them new creatures with "old things passed away," it's devastating when their first rejection often comes from the church that reached out to bring them in. You, who led them to Christ, must now turn them away until they believe every little thing "less weighty" thing just like you do or someone else does who does not even exist in your setting.

Categories of Truth: Levels of Importance

I wish to affirm what Dr. Brown says regarding **Categories of Truth: Levels of Importance**. I do not think that any bible scholar among us could debate this matter that truth has levels of importance with the requirements of equal obedience.

Category 1: Fundamentals of Faith and Practice Practical Response

I would affirm with Dr. Brown that we must start by re-affirming the fundamental truths of Christianity. There are unmovable core beliefs that are absolute to one's salvation and walk of holiness.

I found Dr. Brown's chart on **Categories of Interpretive Consensus Regarding Scriptural Truth** to be most helpful, and it is certainly a great launching pad which can help guide our development of making church membership relevant.

Category 2-4: The Adiaphora that Divide

My one critique Dr. Brown is that you use words we *practical* people can understand. "Adiaphora" sounds like an effort to speak in tongues or some dreaded disease and maybe it is (humor).

Let me say that I can only affirm that you have articulated our distinctive, core values extremely well. I found it interesting in studying the chart of what we *will* divide over and on what level of importance that the division occurs, and what we will tolerate in each other concerning biblical issues. We will divide over what we call "worldliness" issues, but tolerate biblical interpretation issues as you defined.

In the environment of the conservative holiness church, I sense that we have tottered over the line of elevating secondary truths to the level of primary truth and as a result we have recklessly judged, and possibly misjudged, other people as a result.

I feel passionately that we often violate Romans 14 and much of Galatians in that we are excluding people from belonging to our churches on the basis of distinction over lesser weightier matters.

Soul Liberty: Applying Categories of Interpretive Consensus

I agree with Dr. Brown that we need to give room for others to be able to think freely within the safety of Christian consensus. I believe in the necessity of the "twin ballasts of the church."

This concept helps us to use freedom accompanied by accountability. It enables to us to find that dynamic equivalence necessary for communication and relevancy.

Church Membership in the Balance

Again, with less than 35 % of the people attending our churches qualifying for membership, I think we are fools to not probe into the discovery of the reason for this and endeavor to construct a biblical and practical resolution.

I agree that church membership is in the balance and the scale is tipping in the direction of foregoing the unavoidable.

Many of us have quit even talking about membership, and we hope no one brings it up. If they do we quickly give them some fancy, creative response that makes church membership even further irrelevant.

I understand the hesitation of broadening membership as a result that our membership is on the same level as leadership. I understand that in the church I pastor a full member can be elected as a delegate to Annual Conference and even General Conference where issues of the Discipline are decided upon.

So, I believe that we need to correct this single-level membership. And we cannot make just one adjustment without the other adjustment concerning leadership

Church Membership: A New Testament Practice

I too have considered the validity of church membership. The longer I pastor and spend myself for the Kingdom of God, the less tolerant I am for stuff that doesn't work. I am not interested in idling away my time just analyzing, critiquing, assuming, all the while keeping one eye on my political thermometer. I have discovered church membership a burden to struggle with instead of a blessing to rejoice in.

I do find membership defined in the Scriptures, however. I likewise see the evidences of a distinctive body of worshipers conducting the needed responsibilities, accountabilities and supportive roles. I do not find a clear biblical chart that would define the visible requirements with the exception of the emergent exercise of baptism, the communion, and the gathering of believers.

Church Membership: Not an Open Door to Church Leadership Roles

I have become deeply persuaded since I started pastoring that our greatest mistake with church membership is that we have said by designed structure that *membership equals leadership*. I believe this is *the* colossal mistake in this matter of church membership. I have said this for years and am delighted that somebody much smarter than me agrees with me (it's a rare moment).

If we broaden our membership to include all whom Christ has included, I am absolutely persuaded that we must have a set of criteria for leadership that has higher expectations and is truly biblical.

I affirm Dr. Brown's conclusion that we must separate the criteria for church membership from those for church leadership.

If I were to be able to choose the leadership of our church apart from the membership of our church, it would revolutionize the impact of our church. I would choose leaders based upon their level of engaged worship and illustrated holiness. This would be a fresh start to a new day for all of us.

We often have the wrong people as gravity leaders (those who have naturally fallen into hollow pockets of leadership during unplanned vacancies), and this puts them in a very negative

light. Do we realize that some people are conservative holiness simply because it best fits their stingy lifestyles; maybe I should say personal preferences? They wear worn out clothing, don't spend money on certain entertainments because they are frugal, not because they are necessarily spiritual. However, because we have escalated categories 3 and 4 to a primary category for membership some are brought in as result who do not have the gifts of leadership, while other are forfeited membership who have the gifts of leadership, and so the least gifted become what I call gravity leaders.

With under-paid pastors, we worship in duct taped churches, with gifted custodians influencing ministry efforts as we are trying to communicate the gospel to a very challenging culture.

New Testament Church Membership Focus: Discipleship not Governance

I found Dr. Brown's interpretation to be exact concerning membership being for discipleship not governance. In fact, I would even go further to question our whole elective processes in which we appear more American than we are biblical. Isn't it amazing to you that the membership decides by a popular vote who will be their Bible teachers and not the Shepherd (the spiritual overseer)? There is much to be said about this, and certain elected officers hold our churches in captivity, all because our democratic sensitivities are more important than the effectiveness of the church itself. I am not saying that we need tyranny, but we need a system such as "term limitations," or some other suggested remedy in which to remove the dead weight. Often these people are good people, just outside of their gifts.

Is it just me, or does it seem strange that a pastor would be called to lead the church spiritually, yet he loses all of his leadership authority when the annual elections roll around? I know our laymen like this practice, but has it proven to have a positive spiritual result? And how many times we could have used a gifted teacher for one of the classes, but they were not a member because they went to a rodeo or an amusement park while on vacation?

Membership is considered, at least in the churches in which I have had experience, as being the governing body to which the leadership is ultimately accountable too. While the leadership, including the pastor(s), certainly must have a system of accountability, there is the prevailing thought that the pastor is to be kept in check and not easily allowed to move the work of the church forward without a democratic consensus of the membership.

In my opinion, Dr. Brown has accurately identified one of our great ills in this section. That is, we have not accurately recognized that "discipleship not governance is the focus of New Testament church membership." Instead our concept that membership equals leadership has contributed to this misconception.

I can only hope that the tools offered in Dr. Brown's presentation will make it to our local churches for ratification.

Categories of Interpretive Consensus and Two-Tiered Church Membership

I agree with Dr. Brown that our membership requirements have far exceeded the New Testament requirement as he defined for us in his paragraph "**Categories of Interpretive Consensus and Two-Tiered Church Membership**".

I pastor in a church conference that allows, although I dislike the labels, a three-tier membership; Junior Member (youth less than eighteen years of age), Associate Member (Adults

that make a confession of faith and will commit to studying the Discipline), Full Member (Adults that meet all the General Rules of the Conference that are required and therefore given full rites and privileges of the church). I can only say that our Associate Membership has been a saving grace for me. Although I do not like the labels I do like the principle, and believe that we have a beginning for a good structure that works biblically and practically.

In answer to Dr. Brown's request for suggestions concerning the labeling of the two-tier system of membership I would like to suggest that we label Level 1 Members as "*Members*". I would like to label Level 2 Members as "*Deacons*". And I would like to label our ministers (possibly a Level 3) as Pastors, Ordained Elders and Bishops. I have found that un-churched people understand these labels, that they have biblical and historic meaning which identifies their roles within the authority of the church. I personally do not like our Conference overseers called presidents, superintendents, moderators, etc... these terms mean nothing to those new in the church and it certainly waters down the authoritative position of spiritual leadership.

The Nuts and Bolts of Level 1 Membership

Regarding Dr. Brown's "Nuts and Bolts of Level 1 Membership, Prerequisites, Commitment and Benefits of Level 1 Membership," I believe we need to recognize that there will be those who are saved, yet they will never reach the maturity of Level 2.

I think it is important that while discipleship, accountability and the transfer of biblical information is essential is must not be sterile. We must remember that church is not a laboratory in which we are training mice, and we can just discontinue or eliminate the project without deep concern of casualty.

Membership, discipleship, accountability is all based on relationship *first!*

I am concerned about the statement in the presentation that reads, "Third, if a person can not honestly say that they are committed to continuing discipleship toward Level 2 membership, accountability, etc... and annual renewal requirement would automatically remove them from membership if they choose not to renew it."

The reality is some people do not aspire to membership or involvement beyond that of simply serving the Lord and belonging to the body of worshipers. What about them?

What about people who are mentally, physically or academically challenged? What about people who have come to Christ later in life and there are just some habits of life style that may never change? For example the elderly man who lives alone and like to watch the new channel.

My point is I would hesitate referring to Level 1 with a sense of it being an "intermediate stage" or referring to it as a partial belonging, or having not yet arrived until you have graduated to Level 2 Membership.

For the previously stated reasons I would graciously ask Dr. Brown to reconsider his wording in "Commitment Level 1 Membership, Commitment 4. This commitment indicates that Level 1 membership is "intended to be temporary and transitional". I would rather it read something like; "This commitment may provide you with the ministry of Level 2 Membership (Deacon) if desired."

I would agree with all the listed benefits of a Level 1 Member however, I would add the following suggestions that my experience tells me is important; fellowship within the body of believers, the opportunity to contribute one's gifts and resources in the lives of others and a sense of belonging as a member of the Body of Christ. These items are hinted to but they are extremely important to clarify.

While I certainly would encourage these to be hammered out in greater detail, I applaud Dr. Brown for launching us with great insight into this matter.

The Nuts and Bolts of Level 2 Membership

I could not agree with Dr. Brown more that a Level 2 Member be expected to come to a higher level of consensus as divided on the chart of “Categories of Truth”.

Regarding the prerequisites, commitments and benefits of Level 2 Membership I can only agree with the premise and declare that this model would be a wonderful tool to have to steer us through the further development in hopeful execution of a distinction between members and leaders within the church.

Benefits of a Two-Tiered Church Membership Model

Let me quickly touch on this section of the presentation.

I strongly believe that Dr. Brown’s list of significant benefits is all correct. The second benefit being huge in my estimation that “such a model would provide *a bridge* across which people can move as they are enlightened by the Spirit and disciplined by the church into full conformity with our best understanding of the theological and practical requirements of Scripture.”

Church is different than a classroom. We have to be able to allow people to progress at their own speed as God leads them, without expelling those with genuine hearts for Christ who may not yet, or ever measure up to all four of our categories of truth and their debated levels of importance.

Opportunities for Development

I find that Dr. Brown articulated well our common frustration for those desiring to win the lost to Christ. The discipleship material out there requires a tremendous amount of time to read through and alter to fit the message of biblical holiness.

I strongly suggest that we join our resources to facing this opportunity of change for the cause of souls. I am willing to contribute my limited resources to this cause, the Lord being my helper. Let’s write the material. Let’s share the resources. Let’s engage our culture. Let’s educate our people to change.

We must remember that we are on a mission field and the heathen need educating.

Questions to Ponder

If you think this discussion is unnecessary or tangential, let me offer some questions that might direct our thinking, disturb our comfort as well as challenge our level of passion.

- How many members have you added to your congregation in your time as pastor?
- How many of those members (if any) are first generation Christians reached by your church and disciplined into a full membership status?
- How many of your converts are now in the leadership arena of your church?
- Consider your own success in answering the call of Christ to the harvest of souls?
- If certain people are truly Christians why do we feel obligated to preserving an identity that is more restrictive and exclusive than mere Christianity?
- Why have we felt compelled to exclude from our family those whom God has included in His family?
- Are there sinners in your worship and fellowship gatherings on a regular basis?

- Ask yourself this question and answer honestly; how difficult would your life become if one of those sinners your thinking of right now were to be converted Sunday and they would want to join the church?
- When will we, as this churches leaders, who largely agree with the majority of the categories of biblical truth, and who will confess that most of what has divided us over the years are indeed the “less weighty” matter start leading on the basis of the major things *first*?
- Why do we violate God’s Word by dividing among ourselves and excluding others from belonging to our fellowship over categories of truth that the Bible forbids us to divide over (Romans 14 for example)? How do we continue to justify these errors with a clear conscious?
- Do our membership requirements exclude Christians?
- What adjustments do we need to make to implement the necessary changes in order to follow a more biblical design within the body of Christ represented in our churches (such as receiving them into the church such as on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2) that would also incorporate a greater sense of piety in choosing the leaders within the church?
- Who is your church for anyway? God? You? Me? My kids? The un-reached?
- When will it become for us - His Kingdom first?
- Is the primary goal to be a “Conservative Holiness Church” (an ecclesiastical identity), or a “Bible Church” (a kingdom of God identity)?

Conclusion

Again, I compliment Dr. Brown with a salutatory ovation of gratitude for his invested skill, energy and burden to no longer ignore our dilemma but contribute to a course correction.

I do agree with Dr. Brown that the idea that minimized religion attracts people is unsupported. It has not attracted me. The truth is, however, it does attract a certain consumer. However, it does not transform and the turn over rate in those settings is at an astronomical percentage, one resource projected an 80% turn over rate.

I am convinced beyond reasonable doubt that our goal is still the transformation of souls not just the collection of souls. But neither is it the refusal of souls – souls for whom Christ has included in His fellowship to belong to my fellowship. Membership is belonging.

While I certainly have some strong concerns about being able to pastor my community within the boundaries implied by the Conservative Holiness Movement - I am here by choice. I was not born into a family that was accepted, or even wanted, in some of our churches in the CHM.

However, I am here and remain here as long as I can because I strongly believe in the message that is ours—in a life transformed by and in holiness and that impacts every fiber of our lives. I have watched it work in my heart and the hearts of those I have seen come to Christ.

Many of my dearest friends have jumped over the fence. To be honest, I understand some of their reasons and have been tempted to shed all the weights that seem to gum up our efforts to Christ’s great passion – the people passion. While I am devoted to the path of the godly, I am not interested in giving the rest of my life to fighting old wars and waxing old fears that are irrelevant to the man I talked to yesterday at the truck stop or the 24 yr. old cocaine/heroin/prescription drug addict that a nurse in our local hospital called two weeks ago

and asked if I would befriend him because he was suicidal and now he is on the verge of getting saved just any day. They want to know, "What does God have to say to me?"

You see, I have seen the shallowness of those generations that are trying to fill the God-void with self-centered worship and hyped programs and live their lives driven by lust and greed, and I have no hunger for it.

However, neither am I interested in our political maneuvers and ecclesiastical fears that blinds honest dialogue and hinders our responses to answering Christ's call of the great commission to bring people to Christ that they might become worshipers of the Almighty God of heaven and earth.

My assumption is, if this effort does not work on the street – it is not of God – God works in the street – just think of the incarnation.

By the way, I am not worthy to be a member of Christ's church either... but then there is grace.