

Why I Cannot Ratify the ICOC Plan for United Cooperation Alan Rouse

Introduction

I have just returned from the 2007 International Leadership Conference in Los Angeles. The past few days have been filled with inspiring messages, practical teaching, vibrant singing, and encouraging fellowship. As always, the fellowship with much-loved brothers and sisters was the highlight of the conference. I am very encouraged to confirm that we continue to share all of the important things in common. We hold to the same core doctrine. We are striving toward the same goal and are engaged in the same mission. We are facing many of the same challenges. We continue to learn from one another as we try various ways to meet the needs in each of our home congregations. I believe God is at work in every church. He is not finished with any of us yet. We are His sons and daughters, and for that reason we are united.

Throughout the conference, both in the scheduled sessions and in the fellowship, the Plan for United Cooperation was a frequently visited topic. Roughly 70% of the former ICOC congregations have ratified the Plan. Based on public comments by speakers as well as on numerous side conversations at the ILC, it is clear that many of those who have ratified the Plan do not understand why 30% of the churches have chosen not to ratify. The natural human tendency is to fill that void of understanding by assuming the worst. Those negative assumptions can destroy the unity between churches. While I cannot speak for all those who have not ratified the Plan, I believe it would be better for the sake of unity to explain why I cannot ratify. It is in that spirit that I am writing this paper.

Creating a faction

The first sentence in the Plan for United Cooperation states:

The purpose of the following paper is to affirm and enhance the unity of the family of churches known, since 1992, as the International Churches of Christ.

To accomplish that purpose, the document defines shared doctrinal beliefs and a federated organization of churches. Those who ratify the Plan will make up a functioning organization within the larger Christian church, through a system of delegates and regional discipling groups. The Plan defines who is in and who is out. Those who are in will interact and cooperate in a defined way. Those who are on the outside will be excluded from participation in many important ways. By definition, this is a faction within the body of Christ.

Creating a faction within the church is a very serious matter. The Holy Spirit, through the apostle Paul, warns us that those who create factions within the

church will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal 5:19-21).

The church in Corinth was going down this road, forming factions behind Paul, Peter, and Apollos, different leaders with different styles and methods. Note that these men all believed in Jesus, called Jesus their Lord, and proclaimed the same gospel. But there were differences of style and method. And factions were forming based on those differences.

This led to Paul's admonitions in the first four chapters of the first Corinthian letter. Paul wrote that they must have no divisions among them, despite their acknowledged differences in style and method. In 1 Cor 3:10-15, Paul lays down the standard for dealing with different approaches to church building. First, there can be only one foundation, and that is Christ. But there can be variations in the manner of building on that foundation. Some methods are superior to others. The superior methods are determined, not by short term results, but by being tested by fire on the Day. Then in chapter 4 he says:

1Co 4:5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

1Co 4:6 Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.

Paul admonished the Corinthians to stop aligning behind certain leaders, and to stop passing judgment on their methods. Likewise, we are to accept those who practice different methods of church-building, without passing judgment. And we are instructed not to form factions based on such differences.

Christian Unity and the Plan

Gal 3:26-29 You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

It was wonderful to witness nine people being added to the church on Sunday afternoon of the ILC. Nine precious souls were added to the Lord's church as they made Jesus their Lord and were immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Before being baptized, each person in turn was asked the same two questions. First, they were asked if they believe the basic gospel facts about Jesus. Then they were asked to confess that Jesus is their Lord. They were not asked their position on the Plan. They were not asked what they believe about the role of

women in the church, nor about their position on divorce and remarriage, nor about any other issue on which we might have a strong opinion. They were only asked those two questions about Jesus. That is consistent with biblical instructions about salvation:

Mar 16:15-16 He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Rom 10:9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Making Jesus Lord encompasses repentance. It goes beyond simple repentance, because when Jesus is Lord you will continue to repent in the future, each time you become aware of a new area of sin in your life. Becoming a son of God does not require knowing every matter over which one needs to repent. What it does require is a commitment to continue to learn the Lord's will and to obey what is being learned.

So Christian conversion involves three things:

- 1) belief in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for our sins;
- 2) making Jesus the Lord of your life; and
- 3) being baptized into Jesus.

As stated in Gal 3:26-29, when we do that we become sons of God. All who have done so are one in Christ Jesus, and are heirs of the promise of God. And all who are sons of God are our brothers in Christ.

The members of our family of congregations are not the only ones who have done this. We are not the only sons of God. In fact, we are only a small minority of those who have been adopted as sons of God. In particular, the mainline churches of Christ and the independent Christian churches teach the same conversion doctrine. Those who have obeyed that same gospel are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We have no right to treat any of them as second class members of the family. It may well be true that we have discovered some more effective methods and materials for building a church (although our losses in recent years suggest that improvements were needed!) But as I've already discussed, we are prohibited from forming factions based on preferred methodologies. So we must not build walls between us and them. We must not define a faction excluding them.

To bring about unity among all Christians (that's what we all want, right?), we need to take down barriers and to eliminate unnecessary distinctions between groups of Christians. The Plan for United Cooperation does the opposite.

As one who has made Jesus Lord, I cannot in good conscience ratify a document

that, in my view, creates a faction in the church. This is a matter of conscience and a salvation issue for me. Those who would persuade me to ratify anyway are urging me to place myself under the condemnation of Romans 14:

Rom 14:19-23 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

United Cooperation

The churches in the southeast never stopped being united and cooperating during the past few years, despite the fact that these churches have not ratified the Plan. We continue to take up special contributions to support missions. We meet periodically to discuss funding for missions in Africa and the Caribbean. We have sent members to visit churches we are helping in Africa. We have brought in speakers from around the world to share with our congregation. We have jointly organized and attended multiple regional conferences, both for leaders and for the whole membership. Each summer our children come together from these same congregations to attend a summer camp together, as members from these congregations take time off work to work in the kitchen and in many other ways to make the camp experience a success. The elders from my congregation have visited with the elders of one of these churches in another state to share experiences and encourage one another. Leaders from several of these churches are attending the Athens Institute of Ministry together to deepen their understanding of God's Word. We have had joint services with some of the nearer congregations. We have had joint teen activities, joint campus activities, joint single activities... All of these things continue to take place without the need to sign a document written by men.

The Way Forward

I completely trust the motives of those who proposed the Plan for United Cooperation, and those who have ratified it. I ask for the same trust in return. There were some important goals that I believe motivated the Plan, including a desire to continue providing needed support for missions, to sharpen one another through discipling relationships, and to encourage one another to continue carrying out the Great Commission. I think we would all be better off to stop talking about the Plan for United Cooperation, and to talk instead about those important goals behind the Plan. The Plan, while well-intentioned, is an obstacle for some of us. In the spirit of love, I appeal to the ratifiers of the Plan to include the non-ratifiers in the process, and to take the obstacle out of the way.