

Restoration Forum XXV

Presentation – Where Did We Go From Here? – Our journey of unity through the Restoration Forums since August of 1984.

Chris DeWelt

Once we recognize brotherhood it is incumbent upon us to assume the responsibilities of family!

My wife and I come from different backgrounds. Carol grew up in Oklahoma and has deep roots with her family. You might say that Carol's family is religious about annual family reunions. In fact they often meet in a church. She was shocked to discover that my immediate family was so far distant from our uncles, aunts, and cousins, that I could barely name even the closest ones and was unsure if I could point out any of them on the street (except for my crazy uncle Ray – my mom's younger twin brother). When dad moved to Joplin from San Jose, California in 1957, our family connections were disrupted significantly. The costs of travel and communication in those days were substantial. In thirty five years of marriage, Carol has helped me with my lack of familial familiarity by encouraging "us" to get together, to call, to write, etc. She even encouraged me one time to look a little deeper and we discovered a whole branch of DeWelts that no one knew existed.

I believe that our sojourn through the Restoration Forums has been somewhat like Carol patiently guiding me back to my own roots and finding people that I would never otherwise know. What a blessing! What fun! Finding family.

So, where did we go from here? Where we went from here has a lot to do with what happened here. Unlike the “lie of Satan” commercials that tell you what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas – what happened in Joplin in 1984 did not stay in Joplin and it was the beginning of a wonderful blessing for many people.

Where did it all begin? The Restoration Summit – August 1984

The “Restoration Summit” – Perhaps the heat was God’s reminder that He is serious about unity. Family reunions often take place on hot summer days. That particular day, **August 7, 1984**, it was very hot, when a little over **one hundred men** gathered on the campus of **Ozark Bible College** in Joplin, Missouri. **Fifty plus** leaders came from the non-instrumental Churches of Christ and **fifty plus** leaders came from the Christian Churches / Churches of Christ. Those who attended are all listed by name in your program booklet. Each of them came **not as representatives** of any official sort, because that is impossible in two groups which have autonomous and independent congregations. However they did represent the thinking and the faith-journey of more than **two million Christians**. They came looking for dialogue. They came to bridge two long divided branches of a movement that is dedicated to unity based upon truth.

Yes, the weather was hot and the fellowship was warm. No doubt some questioned if a meeting of this nature would work at all. Later a few who came and participated would suffer from **accusations of merger schemes and compromise**. But this was not an unrecognized risk going into the meeting. There existed (and I believe that it exists even more

strongly today) a deeply felt need that something had to be done about a deplorable division. Respected leaders like **Don DeWalt, Sam Stone, Furman Kearley, and Reuel Lemmons** were involved in leading the meeting.

After the first Restoration Forum, **Rubel Shelly** (from the a cappella churches) summarized the spirit of the Forum in an article where he highlighted four things absent, four things he discovered about the conservative Christian churches, and three suggestions for follow-up. [I have included the text of his article at the conclusion of my written presentation.] Rubel's observations and thoughts were very helpful. He pointed out that it was not an attempt at merger, nor was it a debate, nor a brawl. He was pleased to find a commitment to Scripture and mutually shared views on the basic doctrinal issues. His most telling observation concerning fellowship was that "we" each have little knowledge of each other.

Yes, the beginning was very important. The gathering here in Joplin, more than any other event or effort, set the tone for all of the Forums that would follow. After calling the first gathering "Restoration Summit," the name was changed to Restoration Forum. Those who had come very much wanted to continue the dialogue.

Once we recognize brotherhood it is incumbent upon us to assume the responsibilities of family! And those responsibilities of family include getting together.

Where Have The Restoration Forums Been Conducted?

In the program booklet there is a complete listing which shows you where the Restoration Forums have been held. Allow me to point out a few things concerning our journey together:

1. The Forums have covered a very **large area** geographically, including one Forum outside the United States in Alberta, Canada.
2. In the second year, two Forums were held, one in Tulsa, the other at Pepperdine. Since that time it has been an **annual event**.
3. The Forums have **alternated** between Christian Church/Church of Christ and a cappella Church of Christ locations. This has been by design.
4. Thirteen of the Forums were hosted by Christian Church/Church of Christ folk. Of those, ten took place where a college campus was the principle venue. On three occasions the host has been a local church.
5. Eleven Forums have seen hosting provided by a cappella brothers and sisters. On four occasions this has been on college campuses. The other seven meetings have been in **church buildings**.
6. The meeting in Bethany in 2000 was unique. Church of Christ members of the ad hoc committee provided leadership in securing the facilities related to historic Bethany College, a Disciples of Christ setting. Disciples of Christ members participated with us in that particular event as well as at other Forums.
7. The Forum programs have been put together by an **unpaid “ad hoc”** committee which has been open to anyone who wishes to give input. Those who have served on this committee have

included: Victor Knowles, Doug Foster, Tom Burgess, Dennis Randall, Chris DeWelt, Monroe Hawley, Marvin Phillips, Ken Idleman, Calvin Warpula and a number of others.

8. Very few participants in the Restoration Forums have received any honoraria for speaking. None of the ad hoc committee has received any compensation from the Forum for their service. The program expenses themselves have been covered more or less by the registration money and a few gifts, but the work of set up, travel, etc. has typically been borne by the local organizers and the participants.
9. Though many have contributed, it should be said that **Victor Knowles of Peace on Earth Ministries along with Doug Foster from Abilene Christian University** have spearheaded leadership and organization for the Forum efforts. Without their servant-minded encouragement, most of the Forums would not have happened.

Once we recognize brotherhood it is incumbent upon us to assume the responsibilities of family! And those responsibilities of family include communicating with one another!

What has been said at the Restoration Forums?

Many good things have been spoken at the Forums. In the very early years, my father published all of the addresses in a softbound format.

Through my own research, I estimate the number of main sessions with a speaker to be close to 180. This includes banquets, panels, preaching, academic presentations, and all main sessions. It does not include devotionals, prayer sessions or study groups.

However, it should be noted that this is in fact a significant understatement of what has happened. In many of the Forums (especially in the earlier years) nearly every presentation involved dual speakers from both “sides.” This means that well over 100 pairs of messages have been delivered along with those who spoke alone. In addition are those multi-member panels which have involved even more presenters. In all, the number of messages listed in your booklet is 353. A lot has been said. A great deal of communication has taken place.

Yes, the responsibilities of family include communication.

What kind of communication has taken place?

Without going into too much detail, here is how I would break it down.

About one half of the messages and presentations given at the Forums could be considered to be preaching. Preaching on unity, holiness, worship, and evangelism have led the way. As we hear one another’s hearts spoken from the pulpit, we come to see one another in a clearer manner.

The other half of presentations have been more or less equally divided into three areas: (1.) Themes that dealt with interpreting Scripture or with exegesis of specific texts (2.) Themes that told “you” who “we” are and, (3.) Themes that spoke of how “we” could work together more effectively in areas of evangelism, benevolence, and missions.

The communication that has taken place has been healthy and it has been open. Important issues have been discussed. We have not always gone away in total agreement, but family rarely does. More importantly, in recent years, a good deal of energy has gone in the direction of what we can do together to demonstrate to a watching world that we are members of the same kingdom.

The main sessions and the formal messages brought at the Forums have been important, but to me, some of the most poignant moments of the Forums have consisted of what I call the “informal talk.” I have been privileged to see brothers eating together, talking together, getting to know one another. The “informal talk” of the Forums has been the table fellowship, the laughter, the time to clarify and to listen. Sometimes the Spirit speaks to our heart when we are assembled and sometimes the Spirit speaks to our heart when we are at Steak and Shake. Jesus used both venues and He still does. .

I have observed on many occasions, first-time attendees, who arrive wondering what happens at a Restoration Forum. Will I be assailed by a wild-eyed fanatic? Will someone jump out and take my picture? Will anyone tell me to affirm or deny something? Will anyone smile at me? And just what do they mean when they do smile at me? I have also observed how these nervous thoughts quickly dissolve in an atmosphere of love, joy, acceptance, and peace.

In the formal and the informal moments of the Forums, I have observed many, many tears. I have shed many myself. Tears of joy. Tears of relief. Tears of regret. Tears for broken fellowship. Tears for restored fellowship.

Tears of commitment. Tears for brothers who have gone on ahead. Tears. God must have a long entry on His scroll of tears (Ps 56) for those shed at the Restoration Forums.

The spirit of the meetings has always been one of open-hearted love for our Lord and for one another. There has never been any element of “deal-making” or “back-room politicking.” All have been welcome. All could contribute. In the early days of the Forums, my father was harshly accused of having an agenda of control and merger. His use of the phrase “things on the drawing board” in the earliest issues of One Body caused some to read between the lines. Reading between the lines, in my view, often reveals more about the reader than the writer. His words to me, “Christopher, how in THE WORLD could anyone have thought such a thing!” were indicative of his heart in the matter. He simply shrugged and said “God bless their shriveled up souls.” Dad was a dreamer and the older he got, the more his dreams became common with his prayers and his immersion in the Word.

Who has come to the Forums?

The **normal attendance** at most of the Forums has been in the range of 100-150, some years less, some years more. On occasion, we have had large turnouts especially for special speakers or for an opening night. Many of those who began the Forum (including my father) had a vision of massive joint rallies involving thousands. This has not materialized and this may be more reflective of our culture than our program. Unity rarely seems to be popular. Maybe we should have called them “division forums” and tricked more people into coming. Seriously, the Forums have been much more a

work of leavening than one of gathering large groups to celebrate and search for unity.

Nonetheless, it is very important to observe that the people who have come have been very encouraging, and as the Forum has moved around the country, it **has involved many thousands of individuals in its history.**

As brother Monroe Hawley states so well in his book “Is Christ Divided?” – “The Restoration ideal cannot be fully implemented apart from a commitment to work for unity among God’s children.”

Who will Go From the Forums?

Some no doubt will ask, “Why are we ending the Restoration Forums? Why is this the Final Forum?” To this I would answer, that it is time to move to the next level. It is time to let the leaven do its work. The evidence of the fact that this is happening is everywhere around us. All the way from thousands who watched as leaders exchanged Bibles at the 2006 North American Christian Convention, down to two local preachers getting together to pray and have coffee once a week. The number of interactions between our fellowships have long been difficult to track or know. That is how it should be. The Forum never had an interest in controlling, only in communicating. And may these known and unknown efforts multiply and fill our one fellowship to such a degree that one day, you and I will be able to pick out family members on the street and say, “we are brothers!” “hola, hermano!” For most of us, it is not an issue of estrangement, it is simply an issue of ignorance and neglect.

But, once we recognize brotherhood it is incumbent upon us to assume the responsibilities of family!

We have come a long way. We still have a long way to go. So who will provide leadership for continued efforts toward unity? Efforts that will speak to a lost world that we are one and that we all follow one Lord? You are the answer to that question, dear brother and sister. You are the answer to the Lord's prayer for the unity of His own body. You are the answer. He has no other plan. He never did.

Some might think that it is for the sake of 2 million plus brothers and sisters that we are urgent in our call to recognize unity. Indeed it is important for their sake. But even more, it is urgent for the sake of the 2 billion who go to bed every night without a clear understanding that Jesus loves them and is not willing that one of them should perish. 2 billion souls who will die in their sins, without knowledge of the good news of eternal life, unless the family of God will take up the responsibilities of family! Let us hear again our Lord's prayer!

*"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 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.
(John 17:20-21 NIV)*

Rubel Shelly on the 1984 Restoration Summit

Four Things Absent:

(1.) It was not a merger attempt. Fifty men were present from conservative Christian churches, and the same number from the churches of Christ... Each man present represented his own personal views on any topic discussed.

(2.) It was not an exercise in compromise. Not one person at the discussion was of the opinion that doctrinal tenets and personal convictions are expendable for the sake of creating a false facade of unity.

(3.) It was not a symposium-debate on instrumental music in worship. A serious beginning was made to understand each other's view of biblical interpretation and to proceed toward a careful examination of the issues involved in search of the truth.

(4.) It was not a brawl. A beautiful spirit of love for God and one another as estranged brothers pervaded the discussion.

Four Things Discovered:

(1.) Conservative Christian churches are altogether different from the Disciples of Christ.

(2.) "They" are a mirror image of "us." ... the fact is that the two fellowships are more notable for our similarities than for our differences. Congregational autonomy, elders and deacons in each local body, respect for the infallibility of Scripture, focus on the atoning death of Jesus, repentance and baptism as the visible evidences / expressions of saving faith – these are the tenets of faith one expects to find in the New Testament church.

(3.) They exhibit integrity with the Word of God. It is simply incorrect to say (as I have!) that the use of instrumental music among them stems from a lack of respect for the authority of Scripture.

(4.) Each group has little awareness or understanding of the other.

Three Suggestions for the Future:

(1.) Brethren of goodwill can continue to meet, study the Word, and draw closer to God and one another.

(2.) Meaningful exchange can take place between the two groups of believers. On a national level... on a congregational level... on a personal level.

(3.) We can cooperate in many ways to represent Christ before a community.

¹ See article "Restoration Summit - History" by Alan Cloyd. Restoration Leadership Quarterly: Volume Fourteen, Number Four, Fall 1984.