

## REVIEW OF THE CRUX

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Purpose: To convince the audience that while The Crux has many good points, it takes some positions that need to be clarified or modified so that those reading it will not be misled.

Introduction:

- A. Thankful for the opportunity of being part of this W. B. West Lectureship. There is much power in this room for good. Preachers, teachers, professors, writers, leaders of the next generation. How you deal with the issues we are discussing tonight will have a major impact on the future of the church and thus the salvation of many.
- B. I've never met Jeff before. Neither of us seeks controversy. We both seek to know the best way to determine God's way for ourselves and how to share that with others.
- C. Some things I like in The Crux.
  - 1. Statement of belief in the inspiration and authority of scripture.
  - 2. Good discussion of the post-modern mind and how we are challenged to reach those with this view. I like that the book recognizes that not everyone today thinks this way and we should not over-generalize.
  - 3. We should have a caring spirit about each other and not divide the church over non-essentials.
  - 4. We should not take scriptures from their context and make them mean something never intended.
  - 5. The tone of the book is intended to pull people together rather than to divide.
- D. But there are also points with which I differ. Since you have just heard a speech which agrees with the book, I will spend my time primarily in exploring points which I believe need clarification or modification.
- E. There are four major themes of the book I want us to study tonight:
  - 1. Their concern about our being "exclusive."
  - 2. Their calling us a "new branch on the tree."
  - 3. Their proposed hermeneutics that calls on us to do such things as determining what is essential by how close it lies to the cross.
  - 4. Their affirmation of the statement "We claim to be Christians only but not the only Christians."

Subject Sentence: To examine these four themes we will pose six questions.

Body:

- I. What does it mean to say "We claim to be Christians only but not the only Christians?"
  - A. First, let's look at what The Crux says. The authors want "to be Christians only but not the only Christians" (26. Also see 134-140; 149-151). "What we are saying is that our 'reason for being' does not depend on the claim that we are the only Christians" (135). "By getting rid of the notion that we have to be the best or the only Christians, we will be free to reexamine ourselves and our teachings seriously without the nagging fear that we might end up losing our identity" (151).
  - B. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Let's explore it a bit.
    - 1. Who is the "we" in this statement. Maybe "we" means the Stone-Campbell Movement. Thus, "We, of the Stone-Campbell Movement, claim to be Christians only but not the only Christians." This seems to be the view of The Crux. Let's see how they describe the Movement. It says, "We [the

Stone-Campbell Movement] came into existence without any such claim [to be the only Christians] and have continued to exist in three centuries without the necessity of it” (135, 138). They say, the Stone-Campbell Movement “. . . formed a new branch of the family tree” (103). “[By] the early 1900’s Churches of Christ were regrouping and moving ahead in what they believed were the authentic intentions of the founders” (114). So, The Crux says, we, the movement founded by Campbell and Stone and now in our third century of existence, believe that we are Christians only but not the only Christians. Are you uncomfortable with that? I am. Would you evangelize by saying to someone, “I represent the Stone-Campbell Movement and we claim to be Christians only but not the only Christians. Would you like to join our movement?” Actually, I disagree with both Stone and Campbell on several issues and I do not consider myself a member of a movement they started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Are our lives devoted to promoting the Stone-Campbell Movement? Do we preach to urge people to become part of this religious movement? As Paul might say, I was not baptized into the name of Campbell. I owe Campbell and Stone, and many other religious thinkers, a very important debt for their courage and for setting many on a path of better understanding of Scripture. These have impacted my life for good. I’m glad for us to know more about their history. But I am not a member of the Stone-Campbell Church and have no desire to promote that movement or to make a denomination of it. I would not, therefore, subscribe to a statement that says “I am a member of the Stone-Campbell Movement which claims ‘we’ are Christians only but not the only Christians.”

2. Maybe “we” means American churches of Christ. So, those in American churches of Christ claim to be Christians only but not the only Christians. But I have been to many parts of the world, as have many of you. I have many brethren with whom I am very close in the gospel who are not in American churches of Christ. I don’t want to construct a “we” that separates me from them.
3. Perhaps “we” is American churches of Christ and those churches we have planted around the world. But nearly every missionary who stays very long abroad will tell stories of those who learned the gospel message outside of any contact with us and who later learned about our preaching the gospel. Clyde Antwine tells such a story of a woman he met in former East Germany. She was under communism but was reading a Bible. She concluded that she needed to be baptized by immersion for forgiveness of sins and so went to the only church in town which the communists let operate which had a baptistery. She asked the preacher there to baptize her for forgiveness of sins but he said that is not what we teach. She said, “I understand that, but I want you to baptize me in that way. So he agreed. Now she comes to hear Clyde. Is she already a member of Christ’s church? Of course. I don’t want to draw lines between us and such people. Such a “we” is too limited.
4. Maybe “we” means congregations, wherever they are, that have “Church of Christ” above their door. But we all know that is not a biblical position. “Churches of Christ” was only one of the terms describing the early churches and, while it is an appropriate designation, using that name should not be the distinguishing mark.
5. So who is the “we” of “we want to be Christians only but not the only Christians?” Frankly, I can’t find an antecedent of “we” that is suitable.

6. So, let's examine the statement itself.

The first part, "We want to be Christians only," suggests it is better to be "a Christian only," only a member of the body of Christ and, thus, not consider His body as segmented or divided. And I agree with that.

Yet, the second half of the statement suggests that "we," whoever that is, are only one of the segments of the body of Christ for there are Christians beyond our segment. Thus, the statement first denies there should be segments (be Christians only) and then affirms that there are segments (not the only Christians). A segmented body of Christ means a body divided into denominations.

I submit, then, that this statement is contradictory on its face and is not a proper way to express our relationship to Christ. It denies what it affirms.

If, then, this statement is not a proper way to describe our relationship to Christ and to other Christians, how should we do it? That brings us to question two.

## II. How does the Bible define the concept of the church?

- A. Acts 2:47—"the Lord added unto them daily those who were being saved." By the end of Acts 2, the Lord was adding those who were saved each day to the body of those previously saved. Thus, a body of the saved existed and newly saved people were added to it daily. Paul told the Colossians, in a similar way, they had been translated out of the kingdom of darkness "into the kingdom of God's dear son" (Col. 1:13). The scriptures refer to this group of the saved as the body of Christ, the church of Christ, the kingdom of Christ, the family of God, and in other ways. So who was added to this body? The saved. Who did the adding? God
- B. And The Crux would seem to agree. "The statement in Acts 2:47 that the Lord added to the church those who were being saved implies that ultimately God alone knows who is in and who is out" (96).
- C. But how was one saved so the Lord could add him? Just a few verses previously, Peter had told believers in Jesus to repent and be baptized for forgiveness of sins. So, those who had believed, repented, and been baptized for forgiveness of sins were those the Lord was adding daily to the body of the saved.
- D. Was this plan followed throughout the New Testament? Paul to the Galatians—"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." (Gal. 3:26-27). Baptized into Christ—thus into His body, the body of the saved. Paul also writes to the Corinthians in a way that suggests the same: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13).
- E. With this, The Crux agrees. "*We believe in baptism of believers by immersion for the forgiveness of sins*" (249). "[W]e believed that God acted in baptism to (among other things) forgive sins and move one from the Kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of light. This was and has continued to be an essential belief for Churches of Christ" (122). The Crux says further that God is "calling people into a relationship with him and incorporating them through baptism into the body of His Son. That body, is the church . . ." (173). They, in fact, call this one of the non-negotiables (248-249).
- F. So we agree that believers who repent and are baptized are saved and God adds them to the body of the saved, the church. The Bible defines the church, then, as that body composed of those God put there because they were saved by responding to His grace as He has asked. Everett Ferguson calls this view one of our contributions to the larger Christian world—the clarification that "what saves also makes one a

member of the church” (Christian Studies, No. 18, 46). That brings us to question three.

III. Today, if a person believes, repents, and is baptized for forgiveness of sins, will God add him to that same body?

- A. Just after Peter announced the terms of admission to the body of the saved, he said, “For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39).
- B. If, then, one obeys the same teaching today, would God still keep that promise? The apostles, whom the Holy Spirit guided into all truth, taught this consistently everywhere they went and for as long as we have a record of what they taught. Thus, it was part of “the faith” once for all delivered unto the saints (Jude 3). It was God’s permanent plan.
- C. So let’s say a friend comes to you asking what to do to have his sins forgiven. Wouldn’t you give him the answer Peter gave on Pentecost in Acts 2, or that Jesus gave in Mark 16:16, or that Ananias gave Paul in Acts 22:16, or that Philip taught the Samaritans according to Acts 8:12?
- D. Since you would want to give your friend only a message you could be sure of, you would tell him from Scripture how to be saved. You would say, “Confess your faith in Jesus, repent, and be baptized for forgiveness of sins; then God will add you to the body of the saved.” This was the consistent message in the apostolic age and so it is what you would tell your friend.
- E. But before you speak to your friend, you remember that Paul, John, Peter, and Jude all speak of a “departure” that will come from “the faith,” from “the truth.” And you remember in history of those who began to teach and practice differently—some began to baptize infants and to baptize by pouring or sprinkling. Others came who said salvation was “by faith only” and so baptism was not necessary at all.
- F. Maybe you should give your friend one of these other answers instead of the one we read in the New Testament. Some of these would be easier to do and quicker, and would be more like what people around us teach. But surely you don’t want your friend to stake his soul on any of these different answers so you would give him an answer of which you can be sure. You would advise him to believe, repent, and be baptized for forgiveness of sins because that answer comes from Scripture. And The Crux agrees. It says this teaching is not negotiable. And that is true.
- G. But how did we come to agreement on this point? By turning to Scripture for the answer. We rejected the teaching of those through history who had offered something different. We didn’t even use as our source those who, after the first century and through intervening years, gave the same answer as Scripture. We looked back to Scripture as the standard by which to answer spiritual questions and we found the teaching and practice of the early church to be clear and consistent on this question. We have concluded, further, that if people over the years have given answers that are different from the answers in Scripture, and thus were part of the departure, we should not follow them.
- H. So by what process have we drawn the conclusion that baptizing believers for remission of sins is an essential, a non-negotiable? By going to the teaching of Scripture. Actually we have used the concept of restoration, of going back to the beginning. According to Hebrews 1:1-2, God spoke first through the prophets and then through His Son. God’s Son not only spoke while He was on earth, but promised to speak through the Holy Spirit whom He would send the apostles. The Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into “all truth” so they could reveal it to others (John 16:13). He also commissioned the apostles to teach people “to observe all”

that He had commanded them (Matthew 28:20). Paul said, 1 Corinthians 14:37, that what he wrote was “the Lord’s command,” and John wrote “See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you” (1 John 2:24). Everett Ferguson says this statement from John calls on us to use “what was ‘at the beginning’ as the standard of Christian teaching and practice” (Ibid, p. 45). So, we believe the apostles carried out their prophetic mission and that the New Testament is the record of the Holy Spirit’s revelation God preserved for succeeding generations. Their words are the seed, the word of the kingdom (Matthew 13:19), which can be planted in any age and any place. We can find in Scripture, then, the answer to the question of how to be saved and should follow that teaching and not something different taught in the years since.

- I. This was the very process Alexander Campbell said he used to come to conclusions about baptism. The Crux quotes him as saying in the Christian Baptist of 1826, “I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me” (91). In his Christianity Restored, after carefully establishing from Scripture that baptism is for remission of sins, Campbell quotes from a number of other sources who generally agree with this view. His list includes the epistle of Barnabas, Hermas, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, and the following creeds: Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, the Confession of Bohemia, the Confession of Augsburg, the confession of Saxony, the Confession of Whittenburg, the Confession of Helvetia, the Confession of Sueveland, the Westminster Assembly, and finally quotes the Greek and Roman churches, Calvin, and Wesley. Then Campbell adds, “But we fear lest any should suspect the views offered, to be a human invention or tradition; because we have found so much countenance for them in the works of the most ancient and renowned christian writers, and the creeds of ancient and modern reformers. We can assure our readers, however, that we have been led to these conclusions from the simple perusal, the unprejudiced and impartial examination of the New Testament alone” (236). So, (1) we concluded earlier from Scripture that baptized believers were added to the body of the saved, (2) The Crux agreed, and (3) Campbell says he did the same. But wait! What does The Crux say of this? “The things that Campbell and other leaders of the Movement came to believe concerning church organization and the Lord’s Supper are not surprising—they reflect the theology of their Reformed ancestors. Admitting this does not diminish the validity of any of those positions. It merely acknowledges the obvious—that we are human and cannot help being influenced by those who have come before us. Despite Campbell’s statement above, human beings simply cannot detach themselves from all prior human thought and create their beliefs and practices as if nothing had been done before. Many of our most basic beliefs—our emphasis on Scripture, our rejection of predestination, our emphasis on congregational rule by elders and congregational autonomy—all have precedents in the Reformed thought of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (92). “Our spiritual and intellectual ancestors [include] Calvinists and Arminians, Puritans and Anabaptists, European intellectuals, and American popularizers” (81). Further, they say “To assume that everything we believe and practice came straight from the text of Scripture is to ignore the human channels through which they came to us and through which God works” (90). So, what we practice came to us through “human channels” where God was working—the Reformed Church, Puritans, Anabaptists, and others. Then again The Crux says, “[A]s humans we have no choice but to begin where we are. No one can begin at the beginning. God is timeless and he is Truth, but we are neither. When we come to the Bible, we come from where we stand” (74). So, while urging us to think of ourselves as members of the Stone-Campbell Movement, The Crux denies the foundation principle of restoration on

which Stone and Campbell said they stood. It says the Scriptures were not their primary source, and they mainly got their views from other religious writers.

- J. So, we thought we had agreed about how one was baptized into the body of the saved. We looked past those who had departed from Bible teaching and went back to the New Testament as the source. Alexander Campbell said he had done it this way. But then The Crux throws us a curve. It says we cannot escape from following those who have spoken in the time between us and the New Testament. If they offer an idea that turns out to be scriptural, we really got it from them and not from Scripture, no matter how much we thought we got it directly from the Bible. If this were true, only those totally ignorant of all that has happened between the first and twenty-first centuries could get something directly from Scripture. So, the less you know about church history, the more you can use the Bible. That would truly make us captive to our time and culture.
- K. But are we so bound by our culture? Can we not escape from our own time and place to go back to Scripture?

1. Campbell was not bound by his culture. The strongest cultural influences on him were those of his Presbyterian upbringing, but he left the influence of that culture for something else. His culture said, for example, to sprinkle babies. If culture is so confining, how could he reject it? When he had to decide whether to baptize his infant daughter, however, he did escape his culture and concluded he would not practice infant baptism. He broke with his culture. The reason? Because of what he read in Scripture. He could do that.
2. Also we are not bound by culture because there are too many differing, and even conflicting cultural influences at any one time. Jacques Barzun, one of the great observers of culture in our time, said, “the notion of western culture as a solid block having but one meaning is contrary to fact. The West has been an endless series of opposites—in religion, politics, art, morals, and manners.” (From Dawn to Decadence, xi) Of course we are influenced by thoughts in our culture. But there are too many diverse elements at one time for culture to control us. We can decide what factors from culture will have that influence and how much they will have. One is not locked in the culture of his/her time. As Everett Ferguson said, “Another danger is indentifying the Restoration principle with Lockean philosophy and Common Sense Realism. The Restoration principle is not dependent on this, and rejection of this philosophy does not entail rejection of restorationism” (Ibid, p. 45).
3. Further evidence that we are not bound by our culture comes from the fact that people from many different times and cultures have come to similar conclusions from Scripture about how to be saved. Some had heard of church history, others had not. Some had heard of John Locke and others had not. Some were in Western culture and some were not. With the Bible alone as their guide, they all concluded that believers should repent and be baptized for remission of sins and that if they do so, the Lord will add them to the saved, the church. If time allowed, I could cite examples from Scotland in the eighteenth century, many independent groups in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, twentieth century India, twentieth century France, Kenya, Nigeria, Jamaica, Germany, Poland, Ethiopia, Italy, and Spain. There is even a very interesting case of men in a Federal prison in Oklahoma with nothing but a Bible who studied it and began a congregation of their own practicing baptism of believers for remission of sins. Only later did these men learn about churches of Christ who followed similar practices.

4. All of these cases and many more suggest that it is possible for people in any age and in any culture to study the Scriptures and from them learn the way of salvation. The restoration concept is valid. God inspired men to write the Scriptures and oversaw their preservation so people of all cultures and all ages could come to the one standard and from it learn how to respond to His grace. God intended the gospel to be the seed which, planted in any culture and any century, would produce those He could add to the saved. So, contrary to the statements of The Crux, we, Campbell and others can and have gone back to Scripture, back to the beginning for the basis of our faith.
- L. So does God still add those who believe in Jesus, repent of their sins, and are baptized into Christ for forgiveness of their sins to the same body of the saved He did in New Testament times? Yes! We can return to Scripture, obey its teaching and be added to the same body of the saved.

So that brings us to question four.

#### IV. Should those in this body seek to bring others into it?

If there are “the saved,” is there also “the lost?”

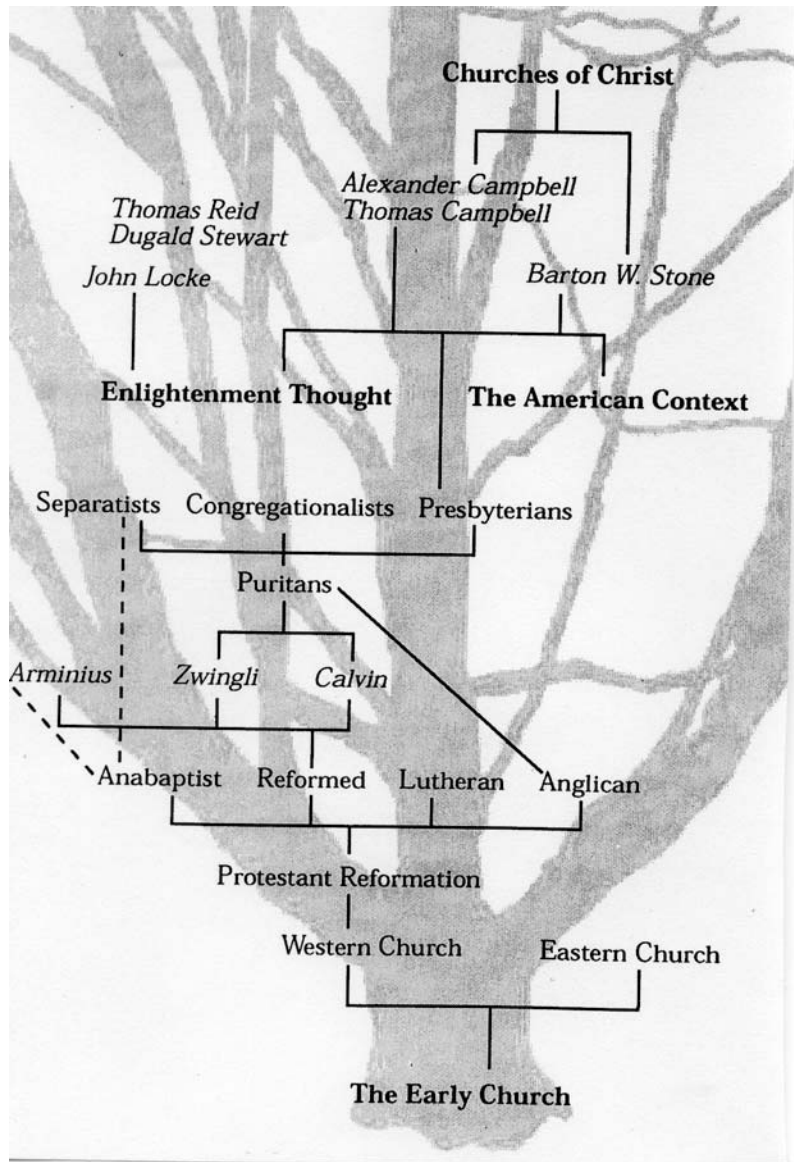
- A. Surely the Bible teaches some will be lost in judgment. Matthew 25:46—“these will go away into everlasting punishment” and Revelation 20:15— “he was thrown into the lake of fire.”
- B. So how should those whom the Lord has added to the body of the saved treat those who have not done what the Scriptures teach for salvation?
- C. The Crux criticizes what the authors term our “exclusivism” (23, 26-28, 124, 133-135, 150, 232). They say we have been legalistic and judgmental (27). They urge less isolation from those with whom we differ and a recognition that there are those in “other groups” who have “the true Christian identity of believers” (134). If one believes he is in one segment of the body and that there are other equally valid segments of the body (the definition of denominationalism), then this rejection of “exclusivism” would be consistent. So we shouldn’t think of our group of Christians as better than other groups of Christians. If, on the other hand, one believes that, having obeyed the “non-negotiable” command to be baptized for remission of sins, God has added him to the body of Christ, a view placing him in only one of many segments of that body is not acceptable. Those baptized on Pentecost were not added to just one part of the saved, nor does God, today, add those properly baptized to just one part of the body.
- D. The essential question here is not whether all the members of the body of the saved have always expressed themselves in a kind way to others. Some, in their zeal to reach others, have undoubtedly spoken harshly and been judgmental and should not have done so. The essential question, rather, is this: has God added some to Christ’s body and not added others. If that is the case, then we must ask what the Bible says about how those who have been added should treat those who have not been added. Should those in the body act as if there is no such distinction and, thus, lead those outside of Christ to believe they are perfectly safe and need to make no further response to God? Is that the attitude Peter took toward the Jews on Pentecost or toward Cornelius? Is that the attitude Paul took toward the Athenians or Felix or Agrippa? Didn’t God tell Ezekiel to be a watchman that warned, and that if he failed to warn he would himself be accountable (Ezekiel 33:8-9). Should we fellowship with those who have no promise from Scripture that God has added them to the body of Christ in a way that suggests approval of their lack of obedience? John warned us

not to treat those who do not hold the true doctrine in a way that suggests our approval of them (2 John 4-11).

- E. Does this mean, then, we should judge those whom we understand have not properly responded to God's grace as certainly bound for hell? Paul states clearly that when Jesus returns, those who have "not obeyed the gospel of our Lord Jesus" will be punished with "everlasting destruction" (1 Thessalonians 1:8-9). Surely God expects us to warn those who have not obeyed the gospel. But God has not given us either the authority or the responsibility of pronouncing final judgment as to what individuals will be lost or saved eternally. We cannot know the hearts of others as God does nor can we determine what allowance God will make for degrees of opportunity. God has not called us to judge the eternal destiny of others.
- F. God has, however, called us to teach. And we must teach what the Scriptures tell us to teach and only what they tell us to teach. We should treat everyone kindly and their views with respect. We must "speak the truth in love." We should seek contact with those whom we believe have not yet obeyed all that God has asked of them. But we must not act toward them in a way that suggests a greater degree of approval than the Scriptures would permit. To do so would be to fail in our responsibility to teach what Jesus has commanded. The Crux suggests that we be less "exclusive" and less isolated, but never tells us how we should do this and still be scriptural. Our culture today holds "tolerance" as one of its highest virtues. On every hand we are encouraged to accept every belief as equally good. Yet, we are at war right now with some who hold religious views the world generally does not believe are equally good with other views. A student from Yale wrote an interesting article in Newsweek of December 17 about how on her campus, because of the prevailing emphasis on tolerance, there was even a reluctance to call the deeds of 9/11 wrong. Surely, even in this time of tolerance, people have to agree that all views are not equally good. So, how shall we determine what views to accept? The Bible has much to say about false teachers and those who depart from "the faith." It says there is a correct teaching and there is a false teaching. We must let the Bible be our standard in determining what to accept and what to reject. And this standard must also determine those to whom we extend our close fellowship. Some, even of those who may believe in Jesus, are yet outside the body. We should seek to teach them but we should not treat them as if they were already inside the body. And so we come to question five.

V. Should we consider ourselves as members of an ancient or a modern body?

- A. The Crux, says "Our early 'parents' in the Stone-Campbell Movement struggled to understand God's will in their own time and place. In that struggle they formed a new branch of the family tree. They carried the traits of their ancestors with them, the bloodlines were clear" (103). And here is what they mean.



- B. If, however, one has followed God’s directions for accepting His grace in the same way those on Pentecost did, why would he be part of “a new branch” rather than part of “The Early Church?” The chart, however, suggests that “Churches of Christ” are further away from the early church than any others on the chart. And it suggests that since we have traits coming from all those groups in between, we are what we are primarily because of these groups and rather than because we have gone back to Scripture.
- C. The Scriptures predict that some will “abandon the faith” (1 Timothy 4:1) and John even tells of those who have done so (1 John 2:19). Those who apostatize by leaving the truth in doctrine and practice are the ones who establish a new branch. Those, however, who follow the teachings and practice of Scripture, in whatever century they live, are not a new branch. If it was wrong to depart, as the Scriptures clearly say it is, then it must be right to go back beyond that departure to the Bible to find what to believe and practice.
- D. I commend to you on this point, the book by Everett Ferguson: The Church of Christ. This book makes it very clear that the positions we have generally taken on faith and

practice have the concurrence of a wide range of scholars through the centuries. There is more agreement on what the Bible teaches on these issues than one might think. As Ferguson recently put it, “Our distinctives are for the most part not distinctive. They are mostly items everyone agrees are all right; others only say that something else is all right too” (Ibid, 48).

- E. So we can be and should consider ourselves to be members of the ancient body to which God added the saved and not think of ourselves as members of some “new branch” started in the nineteenth century. We can learn from Campbell and Stone and those who worked with them to point people back to Scripture, but let us not think of ourselves as members of such a movement rather than or in addition to the church to which God adds the saved.

And so we come to question six.

#### VI. How should we approach Scripture to learn God’s will for us?

How should we understand God’s offer of salvation, the response He asks, and the life He asks us to lead as members of the body of Christ?

- A. How would The Crux answer this question? Here is the short version.
  1. Approach the Bible as inspired. “We uphold their conviction that the Bible is a divine witness, the revelation of God, inspired by the Father through the Son by means of the Spirit to convict and form his people” (156).
  2. Approach the Bible humbly (163).
  3. Approach the Bible recognizing its themes, genre, plot, story, context, and setting (179-181).
  4. Approach the Bible by recognizing its core, “that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, the Son of God” (170). “All of Scripture is important, but . . . the Bible itself makes it clear that the importance of every teaching is relative to the center” (194).
- B. I would agree with much of this, although as they have said, these points do not cover it all. But let’s examine especially the suggestion about measuring importance by how close a matter is to Christ. The Crux says, for example, that baptism is important because it is close to the cross—a representation of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. And the Lord’s Supper is important because it is in memory of Jesus death. That seems pretty simple. Just decide how near a Bible teaching is to the cross and that will tell you how important it is. Certainly we all believe in being Christ-centered. But how do we determine how close to the cross a Bible teaching is? How close to the cross is praying? How close is singing? How close to the cross is telling the truth? Or avoiding sexual sin? Or repentance? Or church discipline? Or self-control? Or divorce? Or murder? Or covetousness?
- C. Using Jesus’ death on the cross as a focal point for the gospel message is certainly right. Deciding a teaching’s importance by determining how close to the cross it is, however, is using a very subjective method of making such a decision. Closeness to the cross cannot be our only measure for determining importance. First, because the Bible does not direct us to use this method for deciding which of Jesus’ teachings are more important. And, second, because of the difficulty of deciding—who is to decide and by what measuring rod will he decide how close something is to the cross? This method of determining essentials is highly subjective. If I want to divorce my wife, I might decide that “marriage” is not very close to the cross, and so not a salvation issue. And if you want to lie on your income tax, you might decide that’s not close to the cross and so will not affect your salvation. This plan would leave us with no certain means to know what God considers essential.

- D. I believe there is a better way to tell what things are essential.
1. First, Jesus says we must keep His commandments. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments (John 14:15). This statement includes all His commands. He charged His apostles: “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). All, then, Jesus and the apostles have commanded is important and we should make every effort to follow all of it. We cannot push something they have taught to the side as “not close to the cross.” The Crux says “not much of Scripture fits the category of ‘rules’” (159). Is a command a rule? Call it what you will, Jesus told the apostles to teach His commands so, whatever they taught Christians to do, we should do, whether it seems close to the cross or not. In 2 Thessalonians 3:14, Paul said “and if any one does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him so he may be put to shame.” Here Paul made no distinction between close to and far from the cross.
  2. Jesus and His apostles often help us to know what is essential by connecting their commands either to a promise of eternal life or a warning of eternal destruction. “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). Those who departed from the revealed way of worshipping in the Lord’s supper were told they were guilty and were eating and drinking damnation or condemnation on themselves (1 Corinthians 11:29). That would make following all commands about worship to be very important. “All liars shall have their part in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone” (Revelation 21:8). Be baptized and wash away your sins (Acts 22:16). These are just a few of the samples. If a promise of heaven or a warning of condemnation is connected to a practice, then surely we should consider it essential, regardless of how close it may seem to the cross.
  3. There is certainly a value in establishing a strong personal relationship with Jesus. I ought to seek to please Him with all I do. We must recognize Christ and His sacrifice as the centerpiece of God’s plan for salvation, even as Walter Scott described in 1859 when he wrote his book about the Messiahship of Jesus lying at the core of the Bible story. This concept helps us to put the message of Scripture together properly.
  4. As we seek, however, to determine what doctrines and practices are essentials in the Christian faith, and thus vital for us to believe and practice, we cannot just ask how close they are to the cross. This subjective measure could lead us to set aside something the Scriptures make a matter of salvation. The apostles were guided into all truth and were told to teach what Christ had commanded. We must, therefore, take all of their teachings seriously and seek to follow all of what they said as closely as we can. Certainly all of those things to which they attach a warning about salvation or damnation should receive our careful attention.
- E. Using “Christ at the core” hermeneutics along with other suggestions from The Crux, such as discarding biblical silence and treating the Bible primarily as a story, would lead to less exactness and certainty in understanding Scripture. The Scriptures do not encourage this more flexible approach. Those who have followed such a path in the past have typically moved far from where we as a body have stood. Christ said to do both the weightier and the lesser matters (Matthew 23:23). So some of the hermeneutical methods The Crux proposes are good, but I would raise a strong caution about others.

Conclusion:

- A. The Crux says much that is useful.
- B. Some of its concepts, however, I believe, will lead us away from, rather than closer to the intent of Scripture. Here are a few samples.
  1. The Crux calls on us to “reaffirm what is best about the Stone-Campbell Movement,” (27) but denies their most basic position that their beliefs and practices “came straight from the text of Scripture” (90).
  2. The Crux says “baptism of believers [is] for the forgiveness of sins” and no salvation is possible other than “by his work in baptism” (249). Yet they say we should admit “the true Christian identity of believers in other groups” (134). Are these baptized believers? If so, God added them to the same group as He did us and they are not in “other groups.” If they are not baptized believers, then how, according to the statement of The Crux, did they obtain a “true Christian identity?”
  3. The Crux says “The gap between us and the text would be too broad for us to close without the activity of God’s Spirit who works . . . to lead us into all truth.” (164. See also 168, 193). John 16:13 is cited as a source for this teaching. But Jesus’ statement there is a promise that He will send the Spirit to reveal all truth to the apostles so they can teach it and record it for us, not a promise the Spirit will reveal to us today what the apostles meant. If the Spirit leads us to the meaning of what the apostles wrote, then why do we not all see everything alike? And if only those with the Spirit can understand Scriptures, how can a non-Christian understand what to do to be saved?
  4. The Crux says there are theological grounds for “affirming a capella singing in our churches” (246). But they also say instrumental music is not “an issue addressed in scripture, either explicitly or implicitly” (247). If the Scriptures have nothing implicit or explicit about it, how could there be theological reasons not to use it?
  5. These are just a few of the wrong directions in which The Crux would lead.
- C. In sum, we ought to be as exclusive as the Scriptures tell us to be—no more, no less. We are not a new branch on the tree. We should not determine what is essential just by how close it seems to be to the cross. And the statement “we claim to be Christians only but not the only Christians” does not give a scriptural view of the church.
- D. The heart of my message is this. Christ built His church. God added to it those being saved. We today can be members of Christ’s church in the same way people became members in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. As members of it, we must be concerned about those who have not yet believed, repented, and been baptized for remission of sins and should lovingly bring to them the word of salvation by the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus. As we seek to live in Christ’s body, we seek to glorify God and to “contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).
- E. Let me close with a reference to the story Jerry Rushford has written about Christians on the Oregon Trail. Many of those who made this journey were members of the churches of Christ. As they got to Oregon, they established churches and thrived. By 1871 they had more members than any other religion in that area with over 3,500 members. By the 1880’s, however, some among them said they had been too narrow. They needed changes in their worship. They should be less isolated and take part in “inter-faith” meetings. Some agreed and some disagreed. The result was division and both sides declined. Within thirty years, the non-instrumental churches were down to a third of their former numbers. Let’s work to avoid such a situation in our

time. Let's stand firm on the truths that can be known from Scripture. Like first century Christians, let's proclaim God's plan of salvation to all who have not obeyed it. Let's demonstrate to the world that is possible for the church Jesus built in the first century to exist today. May God bless us to this end.