

1927

# The Open Membership Question

P. H. Welshimer

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.acu.edu/crs\\_books](http://digitalcommons.acu.edu/crs_books)

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Welshimer, P. H., "The Open Membership Question" (1927). *Stone-Campbell Books*. 277.  
[http://digitalcommons.acu.edu/crs\\_books/277](http://digitalcommons.acu.edu/crs_books/277)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Stone-Campbell Resources at Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Stone-Campbell Books by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ ACU. For more information, please contact [dc@acu.edu](mailto:dc@acu.edu).

# THE OPEN MEMBERSHIP

---

## QUESTION

---

By P. H. WELSHIMER

Correspondence Between an Elder in One of  
Our Christian Churches and P. H. Welshimer  
Minister, First Christian Church  
Canton, Ohio



---

## THE QUESTIONNAIRE

---

P. H. WELSHIMER, Canton Ohio.

*Dear Sir:*—The city church, with which I am identified, faces a practical problem in church union. A Presbyterian, a Baptist and our own congregation have appointed committees which are working together to find a basis for organic union. These churches are near together in an over-churched community. We are out of the realm of theory altogether.

It seems to many of us that we ought to proceed with a program which would conserve our own convictions, but which would not thwart those of the other man.

As a businessman, I am anxious to find out the mind of our representative men, both conservative and liberal, in this matter, and am, therefore, sending out this questionnaire to over one hundred such men.

Our minister has proposed a program about as follows: To preach and practice only immersion. To immerse all new members coming upon profession of faith. To refuse to baptize all infants. To receive all accredited Christians from other denominations, who cannot accept our preferred form of baptism, into full membership in the united congregation.

It seems to me that this program gives

full scope to our own convictions as disciples, and at the same time gives proper credit to the intelligence and convictions of other Christians who may seek our fellowship. We cannot hope to win the whole world to our position, and we can not deny that Presbyterians, Methodists, and others, are Christians.

I am told that in England the Baptists practice some such plan, and that they finally immerse ninety per cent of all those who join their churches.

I learn that several of our churches, in good and regular standing, practice what is called "open membership" with happy results.

We have been taking about union for one hundred and fifty years. Do we really want it? Are we willing to make any concessions to attain it? Are we willing to grant any freedom of opinion to the other man? Have we a right to insist upon doing the thinking for the other man? Did not Christ found the Presbyterian Church as much as He did ours?

We open the Communion to all worshippers, and then deny them the right to fellowship with us. Is this logical?

What fault have you to find with the program set forth by our minister? Can you suggest a better one that has any prospect of making good? I will thank you for an early and concise reply.

*Very truly yours,*

(Signed by an elder of the church)

---

## REPLY TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

BY P. H. WELSHIMER

---

*My Dear Brother:*—Your questionnaire has been received, and with pleasure I make reply.

The committees seeking a basis for organic union will find their task comparatively easy if they will be content to accept the basis already given in the Scriptures. For men to make a basis that will stand is practically an impossibility. Christ prayed for the unity of Christians. He then, through the apostles, established the church. That church was composed of immersed, penitent believers. The Acts of the Apostles gives us an authentic history of that church in matters of essential doctrine and polity. The churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, and everywhere else, as described in the Acts, were in agreement on all fundamental things. There were not many churches, but one church, in that day, with congregations of believers in various cities. The basis of union *then* should be the basis of union *now*. When the basis of union given by inspiration was abandoned, divisions began; and divisions will cease only when that basis is restored.

## **The Gospel vs. Wrong Connections**

We should be concerned about the preaching of the gospel as we find it in the Scriptures. It is not up to us to protect the convictions of other men. You will find that the attempt to conserve one's own convictions, and at the same time use care not to "thwart" those of others, will result in acrobatic preaching. To do this, one will have to become such a professional dodger that he will soon lose all convictions he may ever have had. In giving the great commission, Jesus instructed the disciples to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." They were to be teachers of men. It was their mission to upset wrong convictions and to get people right. Paul discovered upon one occasion that Peter had some convictions regarding circumcision which were not in harmony with the will of Christ. He proceeded to contend with Peter, face to face, and the discussion ended in changing Peter's convictions. The church needs radical men, who will lay the ax at the root of the tree. This spirit of compromise is rapidly sapping the vitality of the church. The rugged gospel knows no compromise. The fact that men differ should by no means be the cause of our setting about to make a basis on which all can concur. It is ours to teach men to accept the basis already given. It is not our basis; it is Christ's, and we can not—should not at-

## *Membership Question*

tempt to—improve upon it.

Your minister's program to preach and practice only immersion, to immerse all new members coming upon profession of faith, and to refuse to baptize all infants, is excellent, it is Scriptural. Thus far we are with him, because he is with Christ and the apostles. He will preach and practice immersion because the Christ, to whom all authority was given, and who later delegated authority to the apostles, commanded immersion to be practiced. He knows that, in the New Testament, immersion is the form of Christian baptism, and that it was commanded of Christ and practiced by the apostles. He has a "thus saith the Lord" for that step. He refuses to baptize all infants because the Scriptures do not teach infant baptism. Infant baptism is both unscriptural and antiscritptural. It smacks of paganism, not of Christianity. In these steps he is right because he permits divine authority to lead him.

### **An Inconsistent Position**

If, from the Scriptural teaching, it is correct to practice immersion, and incorrect to baptize infants, by what authority will your minister, or anybody else, "receive accredited Christians from other denominations"—people who have been sprinkled either in infancy or in adult years? In receiving them, does he not sanction the substitution which they have received for baptism? And is it

not inconsistent to accept the substitute when performed at the hands of another and then refuse to perform that substitute himself, when one comes in all good faith, requesting it? Convictions which will cause one to be disturbed at one's own performance of a deed, and then gladly extend his hand in approval of the performance of the same deed by another, are queer things indeed. Was not Pilate, who turned the Christ over to the mob, as guilty of His death as the mob who ordered the nails driven through His hands?

### **An Impractical Basis**

If the Presbyterian, the Baptist and the Christian churches of your city unite only in having one roof over their heads, and all pay into the same treasury, and listen to the same preacher, but do not in fact agree in the teaching of the Scriptures on some of these fundamental matters of faith, will it be a united church, and will it be practical? How can it be? "The only way we can be one is to go in the one way." Christ said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." The very fact that your minister will preach and practice only immersion and will refuse to baptize infants will in itself be the cause of discord. If the people from the denominations, who have been sprinkled, are to be received into full fellowship in the united congregation, will it be treating them fairly, and will it not "thwart" their convictions,

### *Membership Question*

for their minister to preach these things on which they do not agree?

Suppose this case, which is not improbable: The church fills up with unimmersed people, and by and by the unimmersed are in the majority, and they insist that the minister preach affusion and practice the same for those who desire it, and the minister refuses. He is dismissed and a minister called who is in sympathy with their views. Will those of the Christian church, who are now in this amalgamation, be content to listen to a man preach who preaches and practices affusion? If not content, they will withdraw, and what has become of your union? It would seem rather difficult, would it not, under those conditions, "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace"? If "accredited Christians from other denominations" ask to have their babes baptized, and your minister refuses, will not this necessitate the establishment of an affusionist church in the neighborhood, for the accommodation of such people, permitting them to visit the neighboring church, that the request for infant baptism may be granted? Or will there not be the necessity of securing an associate pastor who does believe in infant baptism? And if the associate occupies the pulpit, will your minister permit him to preach his convictions? Do you believe the unity of the Spirit can obtain under these conditions?

Does not history show that where these

differences in doctrine exist they are seldom preached upon? It is altogether unlikely that your minister would preach very many sermons on baptism, and would he say very much against infant baptism, if he knew that a considerable number of his membership were not in sympathy with his views? And if these things are not preached, how will the rising generation and the people of the world know very much about them? The facts are, a considerable number of preachers in our fold at the present time, boast that they no longer preach on first principles and they delight in speaking disparagingly of those who do preach upon them. If some of our men, preaching for the churches which do not believe in, or practice, "open membership," seldom, if ever, preach a sermon on baptism now, when the people are not opposed to it, by what logic can we expect a man ever to preach upon it when many of his congregation are opposed to it and others are lukewarm?

### **"Where the Book Speaks"**

You speak of the people "who cannot accept our preferred form of baptism." It is not *our* form, it is simply the form we find in the Scriptures. The contention should not be with us, but with the Author of baptism. Paul said to the church at Rome (Romans 6:17): "But thanks be to God, that, whereas ye were servants of sin, ye became obedient from the heart to that

### *Membership Question*

form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered." The only form of doctrine which one can obey in becoming a Christian is baptism, and, in speaking of this form, Paul says, in the same chapter, third and fourth verses: "Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life." He reasons here that they are no longer servants of sin, because they have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered unto them, or, in other words, they have submitted to the righteousness of God in obeying the exact command of God. Therefore, instead of compromising with believers in Christ on the question of baptism, which is so clearly set forth in the New Testament, it is our duty to teach them; and the facts are the denominations practicing affusion are not taught on this subject of baptism.

Denominational preachers seldom preach upon baptism. One, here in Canton, said to me, at a ministers' meeting, that he had not preached a sermon on baptism for twelve years, and did not think he would ever preach upon the subject again. He said that in his church the matter of baptism was settled, and it was not necessary to preach upon it. If there are many of his

kind in the world, and I believe there are, the denominational world surely needs some Scriptural teaching on the subject. Furthermore, practically all denominations, especially the ones with which you desire to unite, admit that immersion is Scriptural baptism; but one of them—the Presbyterian—suggests that affusion will do as well. Now the question comes as to whether we have any right to accept a substitute suggested by the Presbyterian Church in place of that form of baptism—immersion—which was submitted to by Christ, commanded by Him and preached and practiced by the apostles. If the Presbyterians are really desirous of union, why not accept the baptism which they already admit is Scriptural baptism, and which they themselves practiced during the first hundred years of their history? Doing this, they will in no way “thwart” their convictions. This they can do and lose nothing that is vital. Is their desire for union strong enough to cause them to do this?

### **Authority in Christianity**

The whole contention resolves itself into the question of authority in Christianity. Christ said: “All authority is given unto me.” He then delegated authority to the apostles. And there delegation ceased. They have delegated it to no one else. He said to Peter that what he would bind upon earth would be bound in heaven, and what he

### *Membership Question*

would loose upon earth would be loosed in heaven; in other words, that He would give His endorsement to the laws set forth by Peter, but He did not tell Peter that he would have the right to set forth any law which he might desire. Peter was to receive the law of Christ by inspiration. The Spirit, accompanying the will of Christ to Peter, enabled him to receive it exactly as Christ desired. Peter, then, as the mouthpiece for his Lord, spoke only that which the Lord authorized. This being true, Peter's requirements were ratified in heaven. Peter, on Pentecost, stipulated the terms upon which remission of sins was granted, and those whose sins were remitted were added to the church; and we have no authority to change that plan. We cannot endorse the reception into full fellowship of congregations of believers, people who have not complied with the conditions stipulated by the man to whom was given the keys of the kingdom.

### **Restoration the Sure Road to Unity**

The question under consideration is not, "Are these people Christians?" We are not commanded to pass judgment upon the Christianity of any people. We are commanded to teach and preach the gospel. We are accountable to our Lord for that. Personally, I am not worrying over the union of Christians or trying to formulate any plan by which all believers can come

together. The thing that overshadows the union question is that of restoration. When we succeed in restoring the church of the New Testament in its doctrine and its life, placing it on the foundation of Christ and the apostles, we will then have union; not to have it will be an impossibility. In the early days of the Restoration movement, the Campbells, who were then Presbyterians, and, a little later, Baptists, like all reformers, saw only a part of the situation. Their first contention was to unite existing believers, and in the early day they would gladly have made concessions to do this; but careful Scripture study led them to see that permanent union was possible only in complete restoration; and from that day forward they became restorationists, being no longer Presbyterians nor Baptists. They were Christians only. They began with an attempt to unite denominations. They later saw that denominational unity was an impossibility, that the unity of the New Testament knows no denominational lines, and in that unity these lines must be erased, the whole being absorbed in Christ. Hence their attempt to reproduce upon this earth the church of the New Testament Scriptures.

### **Had the Apostles Been Quitters**

You state: "We cannot hope to win the whole world to our position." Why not? If our position is Scriptural, and it is, in time the world can be won to it. The world

### *Membership Question*

never will be won to it so long as we depart from the authority of the Christ and become compromisers. Compromise never gets anywhere. Only right can win. Nineteen centuries ago, when the little group of men stood in Jerusalem and looked out upon the great pagan and Hebrew world, one might have said: "What's the use of proclaiming the gospel? We can never hope to win the whole world to our position, therefore let's compromise. We will accept some things from paganism (which the church later did), and we will retain some things belonging to the Jewish theocracy." No, that was not their decision. Against great odds, with power they preached the gospel. It today looks more possible to win the whole world to this impregnable position of restoration than it did then to win this much of the world to Christ. Christian people are nearer together today than they were a hundred years ago. The signs are most hopeful. The disciples of Christ are the only people that can stand before the religious world and direct the tired, weary, denominational forces to the old path that leads to oneness in Christ. To depart in the least from that path means to sell out and become no more powerful than one of the denominations wearily seeking union. The whole world may not be won to our position in our day. It probably will not be; but if this position be of Christ, have we any right to doubt that it will ultimately triumph? It is the

only position that will stand. Every other, which must of necessity be man-made, will last no longer than the generation that makes it.

I cannot see the consistency in the Baptists of England requiring immersion of "accredited Christians from other denominations whom they have received into full fellowship in their church"; for with the Baptists baptism has no place in the divine plan of salvation. It is merely an ordinance to be observed in entering the local church; and if one has already been received into that church, why require him to take another step? Are there degrees of entrance into the Baptist Church? The New Testament teaches that penitent believers are to be baptized for the remission of sins. The Baptist teaching is that penitent believers, whose sins have been forgiven, are to be baptized to get into the Baptist Church. Therefore, if they have once been received into the Baptist Church when unimmersed, why immerse them, as they already have that which Baptist immersion procures?

You state that "several of our churches, in good and regular standing, practice what is called 'open membership,' with happy results." That was not the case with the Mondamin Avenue Church, Des Moines, Iowa. The facts are, I do not know of any church in the brotherhood, with the possible exception of one, practicing "open membership," in which there are not rum-

## *Membership Question*

blings in the congregation. Several preachers, when away from home, advocate "open membership," but haven't the courage, or have too much common sense, to practice it in their churches, knowing it will mean the disruption of the church.

### **The Union for Which We Plead**

You ask: "Do we really want union?" and "Are we willing to make any concessions to attain it?" Yes, we desire union; but it is *union* which we desire, not amalgamation and federation, ending in consternation. We desire the union that is possible only by a return to the church of the New Testament. We know the futility of the attempt to become wiser than our Lord, and the folly of attempting to improve upon His plan. It is because we desire union that we are unwilling to accept substitutes and a makeshift which can only work discord among believers. So far as making concessions is concerned, we have none to make; that has already been done, a hundred years ago. When the Campbells and their co-laborers walked out of Presbyterianism, and later parted company with the Baptists, they broke the shackles and became free men. They threw aside all humanisms and took their stand upon the simple word of God. Then, pointing to the things discarded, they invited the religious world, in like manner, to give up all things not in harmony with the teachings of Christ and

take its stand with them on the Bible, and the Bible only. We cannot make concessions today which are not ours to make. If it can be pointed out that we are teaching traditions of men for the doctrines of Christ, then these traditions will gladly be given up; but we have no authority to take hold of the things ordained by our Lord and thrust them aside. To do so is disloyalty to our King.

### **True "Freedom of Opinion"**

"Are we willing to grant any freedom of opinion to the other man?" you ask? Certainly; that is one of the beauties of our position. Herein lie the liberty and Christian democracy of the Restoration movement. Liberty of opinion is cheerfully and freely granted on matters that are non-essential. Where the Bible doesn't speak, a man has a right to speak; but where the Bible speaks, it is ours to listen and obey. The things in which you desire to grant liberty of opinion are things about which men are not to have any opinion. They are positive, fundamental things, which have not been left to the opinions of men. They are facts to be believed. The Lord has spoken, having fully declared Himself. The law has been announced; it is not ours to form opinions about it, but to accept it.

To illustrate—since the day that Eve gave birth to her first-born, the laws concerning the bearing of children have not changed.

### *Membership Question*

That law ordained of God in the natural world has applied to all peoples and tribes under every sky for the past six thousand years. People are not going about expressing opinions concerning the birth of children. Or, if they do, all they can do is to be content with the expression of opinions, for the law goes on, fulfilled from day to day, and children are born, just as little Cain was born in the morning of history. On the question of nurturing the child that is born, there may be a variety of opinions. Some will prefer Mellins' Food for the baby; others, Horlick's Malted Milk; some, Cereal Milk. One mother will rear her youngster as a hothouse plant, while another will encourage it to live a rough-and-tumble life. These are matters of opinion, and they have a perfect right, when the child is born, to follow their opinions, but, mark you, their opinions do not upset the natural law ordained of God. So with the kingdom of grace; the laws of birth into that kingdom are established. We can only accept them, not change them; but on a thousand things which are mere expediencies we are to have the widest latitude in matters of opinion; and no one has any right to bind his opinions upon another or make them a basis for fellowship.

"In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, charity." The Lord has already done the thinking for the world on the fundamentals. It is ours to announce to the world the re-

sults of His thinking. If we are not to disturb the thoughts of another man, we will have to quit teaching. Following your argument, we should accept into full fellowship every Unitarian who desires to enter; and the Friends, who reject any kind of water baptism, should be freely admitted, and we must not attempt to teach them, or we should be doing their thinking for them. No, we will not do their thinking for them, but we will lay before them the facts so plainly that they will be able to think right themselves. And if they do not accept the New Testament position as offered, the fault is not ours. It is not ours to be concerned about the results, but we must be concerned about the giving to all people the knowledge of the Scriptures. We are not commanded to Christianize, but to evangelize, the world. Evangelization is man's part; Christianization is God's.

### **Is Christ the Founder of Denominationalism?**

You ask: "Did not Christ found the Presbyterian Church as much as He did ours?" Well, if He did, why did He wait fifteen hundred years to do it? Ours was established on the first Pentecost after His resurrection, while the Presbyterian Church was not founded until fifteen hundred years later. Ours was founded by the inspired apostles who were Christ's ambassadors. They came with authority from the crowned

### *Membership Question*

King, standing at the right hand of God. If Christ founded the Presbyterian Church, then He authorized affusion and infant baptism. And if Christ authorized affusion and infant baptism, why will your minister refuse to practice affusion and to baptize infants in his church? Is not one disobedient to Christ and disloyal to Him when he refuses to do His will? Can it be that, after fifteen hundred years, Christ decided that He had made a mistake, and that a church such as the Presbyterian was needed upon the earth? If He founded it, this must have been His conclusion, for you can lay down on a table the outline of the New Testament church and then place over it the outline of the Presbyterian Church, and the two do not coincide. They are not one and the same thing. If, as you contend, the Presbyterian Church was founded by Christ, then was not the Methodist, the Congregational, the Episcopal, and every other church, founded by Him? This would make the Lord the founder of denominationalism, and if He founded all the denominations, are you not in error in attempting to obliterate the Presbyterian and Baptist denominational lines in the union you desire? In this do you not contend against a work which you admit was the Lord's own doing?

In the seventeenth chapter of John, Christ prayed for unity. If He is the founder of denominationalism, how would you harmonize the prayer with His denominational

creations?

The student of history well knows that the Presbyterian, along with other denominational churches, was simply a groping of good people in other years back toward the church of the New Testament. The church of Christ had swung away from its moorings, and after a thousand years of Catholic domination many peoples were inquiring for the old paths. The Presbyterian brotherhood has been one of those inquirers. I am not speaking disparagingly of the Presbyterian faith and cleanness of life and high purpose and moral courage and consecration. I fully recognize the sturdy Christian character of that people, but I am answering your question when I say that the Presbyterian Church, as an organization, was not founded by Christ. If it were so founded, are you not fighting against Christ—literally resisting His will—in attempting to destroy that organization by having it amalgamate with the Christian and Baptist churches of your city?

### **Open Communion Explained**

The right of an individual to commune with his Lord is not to be interfered with by another individual any more than is his right to pray to his Lord or to sing His praises or to testify in His behalf. In Communion, we are not communing one with another, but each individual is directly communing with his Lord. In Communion we

## *Membership Question*

are not ratifying matters of belief or opinions. Communion is an individual matter. We are not commanded to administer Communion to any one, nor to withhold it from anyone. Christ said to the disciples: "This do in remembrance of me," and "As oft as ye do this, ye do show forth the Lord's death until he come." Paul taught the Corinthians that a man should examine himself; that in communing one should discern the body and blood of the Lord. It is ours to spread the table, as did the early disciples, upon the first day of every week, thereby giving opportunity to every man who believes on Jesus Christ to exercise his own privilege and desire in appropriating this means of grace which Christ has given, by which the spirit may be renewed and his mind stirred up by way of remembrance. In this we are not appropriating unto ourselves authority, we are not changing laws nor tampering with ordinances. We are simply practicing the Scriptural plan.

### **A False Conception of Fellowship**

In the church of the New Testament, the membership "continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine," etc., whereas, in the reception of the unimmersed today, some of the membership will have departed from some of the apostles' doctrine, and, while apparently externally there might seem to be a fellowship in beliefs, the facts are, there would be a wide divergence. When

the apostles in Jerusalem, after some contention, extended the hand of fellowship to those who came up from Antioch, it was but an emphatic way of stating that they were in full accord on essential matters of faith. Will the Christian, Presbyterian and Baptist churches of your city, under your contemplated plan of union, be in full accord on such fundamental matters as on the steps into the kingdom? Evidently not. Then, in fact, you do not fellowship those denominations. Fellowship carries the idea of being in full accord, and you admit that you are not in full accord with the Presbyterian conception of baptism.

### **The Proposed Basis Unscriptural and Impractical**

In conclusion, the fault I find with the program set forth by your minister is this: It is not Scriptural, and it will not work. The one I suggest is that which has been presented by our people for a hundred and fifty years. It is Christ's. A century ago, it was discovered when men were in quest of truth. It is making good. Already two million of people are united; and with strict adherence to its principles, the living of the life that is consistent with our profession, and with the courage of John the Baptist, to declare all things whatsoever the Lord has commanded, the program will make good. While we camp at John 17, our marching orders are found in Matthew 28:

*Membership Question*

18-20. The One who offered the prayer likewise gave the great commission. They are in perfect accord, and we must not destroy the harmony—we must insist upon it.

*Sincerely*

P. H. WELSHIMER

Printed in U. S. A.