

Letter to the Members - South Florida Church

Written by John Brush

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This letter was printed and handed out to the members of the South Florida Church of Christ on Sunday September 4th in response to the issues facing our brotherhood today. We know that God's Spirit will move us to the unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17 if we continue in study of the Word, persevere in prayer and believe in and trust each other as we all search for God's wisdom and direction.



Brothers and Sisters of the South Florida Church:

It is a great honor to be in the South Florida Church of Christ. The hearts of the Christians here have been made obvious from the response to the Special Missions Contribution, the Southeast Family Bible Conference, the number of new Christians added to the body, many of our brothers and sisters coming back to our fellowship, and the recommitment to the biblical principles of loving one another. Our core values and driving force have been articulated and taught so we know what fuels us in our desire to follow Jesus. A long range plan for the church as a whole and for each region has been brought before the church. We humbly recognize that we still have much to change and rebuild. In spite of the challenges before us, we believe these are exciting times for the church.

The reason for this letter is to inform you of a controversy that is brewing in our fellowship of churches. Many of you may have already read the article written by Kip McKean entitled "The Portland Story" and the responses of many leaders from different congregations. For those who have not, we urge you to read these in order to be informed of the issues facing our brotherhood. Your ministry leaders can assist you in getting copies of these. You can also find Kip McKean's article and the responses at www.icocinfo.org. Kip McKean is 'calling people out' of existing churches to what he considers a higher standard of commitment to counter the lukewarm faith and fruitlessness he has perceived in the churches during the last couple of years. The letters are detailed responses to specific issues raised by that call. Many of the churches and individuals have a longer and more personal history with Kip than we do in the South Florida Church and the responses reflect those various levels of interaction and dialogue.

We have spent much time with different groups of men and women as we try to decide how we will respond to the issues raised. We have met with most the elders in training and some of their wives for their input and direction. The Board of Directors has been consulted. The ministry staff has met for hours in discussion, Bible study, and prayer as we agonize over the controversy. There have been many phone calls to elders and ministry

leaders of many congregations for advice and counsel in dealing with the heart wrenching events. From all of these discussions, there are several core values which we will hold to. These convictions have not been developed as a reaction to the past or created by inaction and apathy. They have come from deep Bible study, prayer, meditation, discussion and study of the history of Christianity.

1.) Unity is based on the Bible and maintained by relationships, not from any organizational structure. (Ephesians 4:1-16) In our church and throughout the fellowship of churches, we are to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We want a brotherhood. We need the input of others inside and outside of our congregation for wisdom and inspiration. Our call is to follow Jesus and be brothers with all who do the same because of our common faith, not an organizational structure or outside authority. At the same time, we understand the importance of churches working together uniting their resources to better serve God's people and reach the lost. The Florida Missions Council has been an example of this. The Council has aided in better meeting the needs and developing deeper relationships in the churches we support. We trust in God's guidance as we continue to discuss these issues. The world will be won as we powerfully teach and preach God's Word united with the sincere love for each other that was commanded by Jesus.

2.) Matters of opinion cannot be enforced on each other. (Matthew 22:37-40) The Bible is clear that we need to love God more than anyone or anything else and love him with all of our being, we are to love each other as Christ has loved us, we must go into all of the world and baptize for forgiveness of sins, and that we must obey his commands. God leaves it up to us on how to carry these out in our daily walk with him. He did not create a legalistic code to follow. We will continue to preach the Bible with all of the authority and force God gives us, but we will not create lines where the Bible does not create them. We are free, within the principles and parameters set forth in the New Testament, to develop our own methods in obedience to the commands and directives of the New Testament. They may be different than somewhere else, but that is not a reason to draw another line of fellowship.

3.) Critical talk and slander are things that God hates. (Proverbs 6:16-19) Unity and relationships are not fostered with comparisons and disparaging remarks. This is true in our fellowship here in South Florida and among our fellowship of churches. Churches and Christians who are struggling need our prayers and help. The weak need our support and confidence, not derision or abandonment. Anyone who stirs up controversies and divisions is divisive. We pray that Kip will change and recognize the hard work and perseverance of so many who have led the churches in the good times and bad. We pray that he will not create divisions in the local churches with his rhetoric or any actions he may take in the future. We pray he will help the weak and bear with those who are struggling in their faith.

4.) The criteria for what is a healthy church include more than baptisms and growth. We are to grow and save the world; that is clear in the Bible. It does not spell out what that means. Many of the churches of the

New Testament were not fast growing, but ones that had to work through the unique challenges of their city and culture. Others did grow to be large churches. God was with both of them as long as they were totally devoted to him and his word. Nowhere in those churches was anyone called out except if they were teaching false doctrine or if people were continually sinning. The criteria for what is healthy cannot be based on opinions or personal preferences. The spiritual health of the members and maturing them into the image of Christ are necessary components to any healthy fellowship. Numerical growth is not the only proof of God's favor or spiritual health.

The issues raised in these letters require biblical convictions and not be decisions based on feelings or personalities. Many times in the past we have responded too quickly based on relationships or familiarity. We have been drawn to churches that seem to be growing quickly. Time was not given for deepening roots into God's Word. We call each member of this fellowship to commit themselves to a deeper study of God's Word as we explore these topics. We are developing Wednesday night and Sunday School classes dealing with biblical unity, divisiveness, deep one another relationships and many other topics. We are asking that each member devote themselves to attending these so that each one of us can stand before God on their own convictions and determination. We must take this call seriously. Forces of Satan will continue to attack and the only way to stand is through the strength of the word and the Holy Spirit living in us.

We must learn about ourselves in these situations. Some of the criticisms raised in Kip's article are valid and apply to the South Florida Church. Lukewarmness in our relationship with God, lack of commitment to our love for each other, and the absence of evangelism are issues we must face in light of the Scriptures at a congregational level. We urge each member to honestly examine their 'spiritual health' and get the spiritual assistance needed to make changes that would be pleasing to God.

As our brothers in Boston said in their letter of August 28, "It is a time of uniting, not dividing. We do not intend to be a church centered on a reaction to Kip or anyone else, but a church focused on building up the Body of Christ and making more disciples." We pray that the recent events will lead all of us to a deeper faith and commitment to be the disciples that Jesus desires us to be as we rely on his grace and mercy.

If you desire to discuss these issues more, see your ministry leaders or any of the elders in training. Times of discussion can be arranged to aid all of us to develop deeper convictions in these matters.

John Brush,

For the Ministry Staff and Leadership of the South Florida Church of Christ