

A Study in Pursuit of Reconciliation within the Body and Bride of Christ



*And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of
many generations; you shall be called
the repairer of the breach, the restorer
of streets to dwell in. - Isaiah 58:12*

I. HOW IS GOD AT WORK?

Oneness and unity in the church is a mystical reality in Christ, but it is also an attribute which must be worked toward, just like holiness. Where there has been disunity, and peacemakers have been called to bring reconciliation. It is a reality that the Spirit is at work in the world manifesting through those who are in Christ, in spite of our fragmented history of discord and division. The Spirit does not engage this alone, but works in the hearts of those in whom he indwells, and has been actively at work to bring the prophetic voice of our greater union with God and one another.

Often those who have carried this message faced opposition and antagonism not from the world, but from those who are in Christ. In spite of this, many boldly risked their own well-being to bear and bring this message.

Caspar Schwenckfeld von Ossig, a contemporary of Luther whose works influenced Anabaptists and later Pietist and Puritans, attempted to find a 'middle way.' Catholic and Protestant leaders, such as Cardinal Gasparo Cantarini, Martin Bucer, and Philip Melancthon, gathered prior to the Council of Trent in 1541 in the Regensburg Colloquium, an attempt at dialogue between the two groups. In his attempts in the early 17th century at developing a unifying theology, Georg Calixtus, was accused of syncretism and rejected by Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed groups alike. Recently, attempts like the Church of South India, where indigenous Anglican churches were successfully merged with Presbyterian, Methodist, and congregationalist churches to form a regional church, show that attempts to reconcile the many Protestant divisions are at work.

Before engaging the lamentable history of division, it is necessary then to look to the ways in which there is hope for greater unity in the body of Christ. Along with that is also the need to recognize the present dangers that seek to undermine this work.

II. SIGNS OF HOPE

What then are these signs of hope that division and disunity are not the final statement of the Christian narrative? Outlined below are five ways in which greater union and unity is being formed in the church:

- A. **Mission Movement** – With the rise of mission societies and global outreach came a necessary cooperation among various Christian traditions. Working in immense geographical areas with limited resources, the challenge of presenting a single interpretation of the Gospel became imperative. Many natural divisions among Western Christianity did not make sense in its new cultural encounters.

William Carey in 1810 suggested an international missionary conference to build such cooperation, but it would take another century until that finally happened. In 1910 in Edinburgh, Scotland, the World Missionary Conference was held. This would give rise to various

ecumenical movements, such as the Faith and Order Movement and the Life and Work Movement, and would culminate in the World Council of Churches (WCC), established in 1948. In 1961 the International Missionary Council also joined the WCC which is now comprised of most mainline Protestant traditions, some evangelical groups, as well as many eastern traditions, such as the Assyrian Church of the East, most Orthodox jurisdictions, and the full Oriental Orthodox Communion.

The missionary imperative of the church in its witness to the world continues to push greater dialogue, cooperation, and fellowship among traditions that are stepping into a global Christianity.

- B. **Charismatic Movement** – Emerging out of the Holiness movement in the early 20th century, Pentecostalism started through the ministries of men like Charles Parham, an evangelist and healer, and William J. Seymour, leader of the Azusa Street Revival . Pentecostal movements, such as Azusa, brought down racial barriers as well as denominational ones. This was considered the 'first wave' and was followed in the 1950's and 1960's by a 'second wave' that impacted mainline Protestant groups and Catholics in what is known as the Charismatic Renewal Movement. A 'third wave' impacted evangelical Christianity in the 1980's with what is also called the Signs and Wonders Movement through ministries like the Vineyard Church and its leader John Wimber.

A Pew Study in 2011 estimates the number of charismatic Christians at 305 million, with 160 million estimated charismatic Catholics via the World Catholic Report. The charismatic revival of the 20th century has shaped a common experience and bond by showing that the Holy Spirit is not restricted to, limited by, or held only within any one tradition.

- C. **Messianic Movement** – Flowing out of the Reformation, an opportunity for theological re-evaluation developed that allowed for greater dialogue with the role and purpose of Israel in God's redemptive plans. In the 19th century, the Hebrew Christian movement formed, as well as specific missions to Jewish communities. This, with the establishment of Israel in 1948 and especially following the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, gave rise to the formal movement of Messianic Judaism.

Recent discoveries, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls of the Qmran community, have also led to increased scholarship surrounding the Judeo roots of the Christian faith. This 'rediscovery' of Christianity's Jewish foundations gives hope for healing and restoration of the many divisions that ultimately fall along arrogant, cultural monopolies of the faith. While Messianic Judaism is still in its infancy as a movement, it will continue to play a vital role in ecumenical dialogue and in reconciliation efforts within the church.

- D. **Restored Dialogue and Interest Among Traditions** - In 1962, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council, addressing the challenges brought by the Reformers in a way previously not engaged by prior councils. Significant statements, like *Unitatis Redintegratio*, opened the door for greater dialogue and fellowship with Protestants by recognizing their baptisms and through the formation of what many would describe as a more 'evangelical' emphasis on laity engaging the scriptures.

Along with Vatican II, a growing openness to ecumenical engagement within the Orthodox Church led to the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. Several popes and eastern patriarchs have since recited the Nicene Creed together without the contested *filioque* clause, and Pope John Paul II, along with Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, relegated 'the excommunications of the past to oblivion.'

This restored dialogue has manifest itself beyond just clergy and into lay and academic circles also. In many Catholic churches you will find Protestant and Evangelical worship songs, and among these latter groups is a renewed interest in liturgical worship and a faith anchored in the traditions of the past. Schools, such as Fuller Seminary and Notre Dame, long standing institutions of specific traditions have opened the door for faculty from other traditions.

- E. **Persecution** - It is odd to add such a horrific reality as that of persecution to a list of signs of hope, but when speaking of unity in the church, persecution has been one of its greatest catalyst. It is what some call an 'ecumenism of bloodshed' and a 'unity of suffering.' There is much to be said about common experiences and common enemies in bringing forth greater cooperation, but the willing sacrifice of the martyrs calls forth something deeper within the faith.

As persecution becomes more prevalent within global Christianity, so also does unity. The *adiophora* (non-essentials) that are at the foundation of so many divisions, give way to the greater foundation of our shared confession and faith in Christ. Persecution is a tragedy in that it reveals the antagonistic powers that oppose the work of Christ, but it is also to be embraced in that the one who was perfected in suffering, also brings wholeness to the church through it.

III. OBSTACLES

Just as God is at work in the world to bring reconciliation, there is an enemy who wishes to oppose that work. It is necessary then to recognize the potential barriers to the work of reconciliation.

- A. **Pluralism** – While similar in some ways to liberalism and having some overlap in terms of application and understanding, pluralism is an acceptance of all faiths as valid forms of knowing and accessing God, and focuses on promoting the co-existence of these faiths. This then challenges the exclusive message of salvation in Christ and can become a stumbling block to works of reconciliation. It is true and necessary that Christians must engage in interfaith dialogue and cooperation in its witness to the world and embracing the shared humanity of all who are created in the image of God, but it must also be careful not to confuse the language and nature of ecumenical dialogue with that of interfaith engagement. These two are separate realities and must be approached as such.

The message of toleration among religious groups is both a gift and challenge. It allows for greater cooperation in the societies and nations in which these faiths find themselves, but the message of Christ continues to be both inclusive and exclusive. It is inclusive in that it does not allow another human being to elevate themselves above another and shows that salvation in the Messiah is available to all who put their faith in him. It is exclusive in that it claims there is one way to knowing God and that is in and through the person and work of that Messiah.

Pluralism thus when moving beyond societal cooperation and into the realm of knowing and accessing God, becomes an obstacle to the work of reconciliation as it is found in Christ and the church.

- B. **Liberal Theology** – At its core, liberalism is a framework or worldview focused on equality and freedom. When applied to the faith it presents another set of propositions and a foundation of authority that confronts historic and traditional components of Christianity. This challenges many of the core tenants of the faith, and while using the language of toleration, equity, and reconciliation, can transform the exclusive message of salvation in Christ and lead to a more pantheistic understanding that elevates experience as the primary authority in religion.

Many Christian traditions have adopted liberal theology, making it a delicate issue within ecumenical dialogue and works of reconciliation. While liberalism is more a worldview with a challenging framework for knowing and accepting what is authoritative in the realm of faith and not necessarily deviant in and of itself, its application to the faith creates a slippery slope that can ultimately usurp the foundational tenants of Christianity. This means that binary approaches to those traditions that have embraced liberal theology are not sufficient, but must be dealt with in terms of contingency. Liberal theology then will continue to be a threat and danger to Christian unity as it attempts to redefine what Christianity is in the world.

- C. **Traditionalism** – Historian Jaroslav Pelikan defined tradition as the 'living faith of the dead.' In contrast he defined traditionalism as the 'dead faith of the living.' If liberal theology can be one extreme end of the spectrum of Christian thought, then traditionalism represents the other end.

Rooting practices in the cultures and experiences of the past in such a way as to oppose change, it can hinder development when that change is aimed at bringing healing and restoration from past wounds. Emphasizing the practices and expressions of how truth has been understood and engaged by prior generations, it can prevent further dialogue of that truth when encountered by practices and cultures that present diversified forms and understandings. Rather than the codification of dogma, it presents a codification of practice by placing form above function and can be a barrier to reconciliation when fellowship and belonging are defined by these specific forms.

IV. RECONCILIATION TODAY

While there will always be obstacles that those working towards reconciliation in the church will have to overcome, there are many ways in which this work continues to be engaged. Below is a selected example of groups and movements that are seeking honest dialogue and relationship in pursuit of deeper unity in the Body of Christ.

- i. Lausanne Catholic-Evangelical Dialogue
- ii. Wittenberg 2017
- iii. Towards the Jerusalem Council II
- iv. John 17
- v. Christ the Reconciler
- vi. And many others...