

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. WHAT - THE CONTENT OF THIS STUDY

Studying the division and discord in the history of Christianity must be seen as an act of contrition. Study is a first step toward repentance for embracing and tolerating the division Jesus prayed would never mark His followers. This study is not only to give us more knowledge of facts, but to embrace the formational realities of this fragmented history that have shaped who we are and who we are becoming in Christ.

In doing that we will inevitably have to tell the history of these divisions and how they came to be. This means that we will have to sit with, and not run away from, narratives of pain where wounding and injury have occurred. These wounds, while often ignored, lie open still today for the world to see.

What is your personal story in relation to the church? How have you experienced disunity and division?

II. WHY - THE IMPERATIVE OF THIS STUDY

Why study church divisions at all? Why embrace a difficult narrative that is sure to bring up feelings of pain, frustration, anger, at times doubt, and step into an area that reflects our ignorance, biases, assumptions, and arrogance?

- A. **Jesus Prayed for our Unity** - Jesus prayed for you and me, and for our leaders and churches. What did he pray? Was it for doctrinal purity, for servant hearts, for effectiveness in missions? All these are good things, so it is all the more amazing that Jesus prayed instead for our unity. His language that we may all be one as he and the Father are one, is language that reveals the heart of Jesus for his followers in knowing the Father, and in knowing one another.
- B. **Salvation and Reconciliation** - At the core of salvation is our reconciliation to God and one another. The apostle Paul speaks of this directly in his letters to the Romans and Corinthians. The God who is at work in the world reconciling his enemies to himself in Christ, is also the God at work in the world to reconcile men and women to one another in the church.
- C. **Nature of the Church** - We are told in the scriptures that there is one body and Spirit, one hope, faith and baptism, one Lord, and one God who is father of all. The nature of the church is stated well in the creed when it is called 'one holy catholic and apostolic church.' To deny its unity and oneness is to deny its essence. We are called to be eager to guard this unity in the bond of peace through the mutual bearing of love in patience with one another.
- D. **The Trinity** - God reveals himself to us in trinity, a diversified unity such that the Son could say with the Father that he was one with him. The redeemed are renewed in this triune community and belong in Christ to it. It then reveals that at the heart of Christian community is diversified unity.

III. WHO IS THE CHURCH?

Due to the extreme diversity of views among various traditions and Christian denominations, finding a uniform definition of who the church is becomes a challenge. Catholicism define the church in its relation to apostolic succession and the sacraments, Orthodoxy emphasizes the conciliar nature of the church and finds the church in the bishop, while Protestant traditions accentuate the church in terms of confession of faith and individual salvation, and Messianic Jews formed in the Judeo and covenantal roots of the faith.

With this challenge in mind, this course will be focusing on the church in the following ways:

- A. **Nicene** – While there is disagreement as to the nature, number, and authority of Councils in the church, nearly every tradition can affirm the theology of the Nicene Creed. First confessed in 325 at Nicea in what was known as the Creed of Nicea, it was further affirmed and expounded upon in 381 at Constantinople in what is known as the Nicene Creed. While some aspects of it are still a point of contention among Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and especially Messianic Jews, it is either explicitly taught in all these traditions or its theology implicitly held to.
- B. **Who Does This Exclude** – Heretical groups that deny the essence of the Gospel as expressed in the *regula fidei* and the creeds. These are those who may claim Christ nominally, but do not hold to his Gospel and present varied forms of what is another religion. This is a study of the church and its divisions, not a history of interfaith dialogue.
- C. **The Church as We are Defining It**
 - i. Messianic Jews
 - ii. Roman Catholicism
 - iii. Eastern Orthodoxy (Orthodox Christian Church or Orthodox Catholic Church)
 - iv. Assyrian Church of the East
 - v. Oriental Orthodox Communion
 - vi. Protestant – In the vast diversity of expressions and denominations.

Community is like a large mosaic. Each little piece seems so insignificant. One piece is bright red, another cold blue or dull green, another warm purple, another sharp yellow, another shining gold. Some look precious, others ordinary. Some look valuable, others worthless. Some look gaudy, others delicate. As individual stones, we can do little with them except compare them and judge their value. When, however, all these little stones are brought together in one big mosaic portraying the face of Christ, who would ever question the importance of any one of them. If one of them, even the least spectacular one, is missing, the face is incomplete. Together in one mosaic, each little stone is indispensable and makes a unique contribution to the glory of God. – Henry Nouwen

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER AS OUR GUIDE

I. CHRISTOCENTRIC

- A. We look first and foremost to the living and triune God.
- B. We recognize that what unites us is Christ. His life, death and resurrection.
- C. We fix our eyes on the author and perfecter of our faith.

II. CONFESSION AND IDENTIFICATION

- A. We do not isolate ourselves from our past or our present.
- B. We identify with the sins of the church, as they are now, and historically.
- C. We confess these sins and seek repentance.

III. FAITHFUL REMEMBRANCE

- A. Our hope is not in ourselves, but in the faithful and steadfast love of God.
- B. We remember Jesus' promises towards his bride, the body of Christ, and his prayers for us.
- C. We proclaim these promises to God and one another and ask for his remembrance of them.

IV. INCARNATIONAL PRAYER

- A. We acknowledge our role in being ambassadors of reconciliation.
- B. We intend in our heart to act in the unique ways in which we can.
- C. We pray that God would bless and cover these offerings and invite his holy will to be done.

OVERCOMING SEEDS OF DISCORD

I. COMMON GROUND

- A. We must establish a sense of being for one another.
- B. We start by telling our own stories.
- C. We learn to listen to one another.

II. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

- A. We confess our ignorance, of our shared story and of one another's story.
- B. We acknowledge the lies we have believed in our histories.
- C. We affirm truth as it presents itself.

III. PROCLAMATION

- A. We have learned to embrace isolation and sectarianism, we must move towards reconciliation.
- B. We begin by praying for one another and for the church as the bride of Christ.
- C. We proclaim the promises of God towards his bride.

IV. WE CONFESS TO ONE ANOTHER

- A. We confess our personal sins and heart attitudes.
- B. We confess the sins of our history.
- C. We confess the sins of our collective story.

HOW DO WE APPROACH HISTORY

I. AVOID ANACHRONISM

Anachronism by definition is an error, it is the false appropriation of our own ideals, values, and belief upon another. It is chronological displacement and when applied in the study of history it distorts, confuses, and misrepresents those whose shoulders we stand upon. This is a practice of honesty, looking faithfully at the lives of those who have gone before us and honoring their stories as such.

II. SHARED HUMANITY

While it must be stated above that we are not to read our own worldview and beliefs into another, we must also recognize the common foundation of all of history, our shared humanity. History happened in the past as it happens now, with individuals and societies moving along trajectories that were often unevaluated and without foreknowledge of what the future would hold. The history of the church reveals that men have always been prone to sin and God has always been at work calling men back to Himself.

III. CRITIQUING VERSUS CONDEMNING

When evaluating one must by nature critique. A critique though is to assess the correctness of something and when looking specifically at church divisions, it is imperative that these studies be faithfully represented. When evaluating history, one must critique it. A critique serves to assess, and furthermore to discern what was good and what was harmful in our past. However, critique must avoid contempt or condemnation. The moment an individual determines that they are beyond the sins of another, it is the moment that they will inevitably repeat them. In this avoidance of arrogance in assessment, it must also be noted that right and wrong, the black and white aspect of history, come in packages that are gray. There is a biographical, cultural, and relational aspect of every story, and some of that will be lost when looking back on history. In assessing and critiquing, it becomes necessary to determine the appropriate backdrop against which this is done.

IV. CONTINUITY

A movement of the modern era is one of isolation. This has created a discontinuity with our past and it is necessary that this be overcome to avoid repeating the oft overlooked failures within it. Succinctly put, the past effects us and has shaped our own belief systems and grids through which we view life. We have a continuity with the past that is affecting our collective future. We must then embrace this continuity and choose not to isolate ourselves from our history. We are not studying a body of empirical information, but a memory.