

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTENDOM AND FOR NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE

As far as I can tell there is a prayer that Jesus offered to God that has been unanswered. It is recorded in John 17: 20-2.

“My prayer is not for them [the disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, **that all of them may be one**, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – **so that they may be brought to complete unity**. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Where is the unity among all Christians that Jesus prayed for? I see little evidence of it. What I see instead is great disunity among Christians, which has often led to schism within the Christian Church, both across denominational boundaries and within many denominations. In that light, I will address three themes in what follows: (1) Why is there such great diversity in Christian belief?; (2) A failed attempt to create unity in the midst of this diversity of Christian belief; (3) My modest proposal for creating unity in the midst of this diversity of Christian belief. I will then close by suggesting some implications for all of Christendom and for Northwestern College.

Why is There Such Great Diversity in Christian Belief?

In a nutshell, I believe that one major reason for there being such diversity in Christian belief is embedded in the suggestion I made this morning that our particular Christian beliefs are deeply informed by our social locations, what Nicholas Wolterstorff has called our “particularities.” Such particularities include our gender, race, social/economic status, and our personal biographies, including the Christian traditions in which we have been raised or have been immersed.

This is not to deny the centrality of the Biblical record for our understanding of the Christian faith. But, it is to suggest that the Biblical record is not self-interpreting. Everyone brings an interpretive framework to their reading of the Bible, which often leads to differing interpretations. That doesn't mean that any interpretation will do (as a relativist might say). One reason for a diversity of Christian beliefs may be bad hermeneutics. We need to bring to our Biblical interpretation sound hermeneutical principles that reflect the best results of the work of Biblical scholars and theologians. But, I believe that even when using sound hermeneutical principles, Christians may still disagree as to the meaning of certain biblical passages or the most adequate harmonizing of Biblical passages that seem to give contrasting messages, and I believe such disagreements often reflect the diversity in particularities among the various interpreters of the Bible.

Let me illustrate this claim by sharing with you a portion of my personal pilgrimage, which has shaped my belief as to this one reason for the great diversity of Christian belief.

One of the aspects of my Christian pilgrimage for which I am most thankful to God is that I have been immersed, in different times and places, in a diversity of Christian traditions, three to be exact. I committed myself to becoming a follower of Jesus Christ in a pietistic Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, New York, where I was then nurtured through my college years. The truth that I gleaned from that immersion in pietism was that deeply felt religious experience was important. But there was also an underside to that immersion – a failure to adequately value the life of the mind, for fear that “thinking too deeply” might water down the legitimate importance of “feeling deeply.” At its extreme, this failure expressed itself in a mindless emotionalism.

On the theological side, I was brought up to believe in Luther's 2-kingdom theology, based primarily on one interpretation of Romans 13. I had no problem with that at the time because it resonated with the narrow view of God's redemptive purposes that I had

embraced as part of my pietist upbringing; the view that God only wishes to redeem individual persons.

After my upbringing in the pietist Lutheran tradition, I was eventually immersed in the Reformed Christian tradition, first through the influence of faculty colleagues at Gordon College, and then, with no holds barred, at the other Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, where back in the 80s, you were not much if you were not Dutch (Dutch Calvinist, that is). The truth that I gleaned from my in-depth immersion in the Reformed tradition was the importance of “thinking deeply” about one’s Christian faith. But there was also an underside to that immersion – a temptation toward an arid intellectualism, as if to be a human was to be “a brain on a stick” (in the words of Peter Gomes from Harvard). At its extreme, I ran across some severe Calvinists who haven’t felt anything in years.

On the theological side, I was pointed primarily to the teaching in Colossians that the work of Jesus Christ was intended to redeem all of Creation, not only individual persons, a much broader view of God’s redemptive purposes that I then came to embrace.

I then had the privilege of being immersed in the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition at Messiah College in Pennsylvania. The truth that I gleaned from that immersion was that what you say you feel and what you say you believe to be true in your mind are barren unless you live it all out in your daily life. And that is not “works righteousness.” Rather, it is a recognition that the bottom line for Christians is how they live, which, sad to say, sometimes starkly contradicts what they say they believe or feel. But, there was also an underside to this immersion – a temptation toward uninformed activism, running around seeking to do good without an adequate theological foundation to define the “good.”

On the theological side, I came to embrace a synthesis of the Reformed conviction that God intends to redeem all of creation with the Mennonite conviction that the means that God has ordained for Christians to partner with God in that redemptive work should be peaceful, rather than coercive or violent.

So what do I conclude from these in-depth immersions in three different Christian traditions? First, I dare to assert that every Christian tradition has captured some aspect of Truth (with a capital T), the complete “Truth” that only God fully understands. Secondly, no Christian tradition has captured all of the Truth (with a capital T) as God understands it. Thirdly, therefore the various Christian traditions should be in conversation, in order to learn from each other’s particular emphases, and to avoid the undersides to which each tradition may be susceptible.

Let me now couch these conclusions in language that is pertinent to the raging debate within Christian circles relative to “postmodernism” and its cousin “perspectivalism,” which is also the source of much of the debate relative to the perceived weaknesses and strengths of the Emergent Church movement. Since this is not a presentation on any these movements, about which I do not claim great expertise, let me limit my remarks to those that may clear away some underbrush, preparing you for respectful conversations long after I have left your campus.

There is no single entity that can be labeled postmodernism. There is a “hard postmodernism” that holds that there is no such thing as “Truth” (with a Capital T), as God fully knows it. There are no “meta-narratives,” only local stories. Proponents of a hard postmodernism say things like “all truth claims are merely true for some people,” or “the truth claims of religion are **no more than** personal or communal choices rather than the truth of reality” (emphasis mine). And, proponents of a “hard postmodernism” hold to what I would call a “hard perspectivalism,” which holds that “all claims to truth are finally **no more than** different perspectives” (emphasis mine).

I believe that Christians must reject such a hard postmodernism, since we believe there is “Truth” that God fully understands. And, I believe we must reject the related “hard perspectivalism” since we believe that some claims to truth coming from particular perspectives are closer to “Truth” (as God understands it) than are some other claims to truth coming from some other perspectives.

So, where does that leave me? It leaves me embracing what I call a “soft postmodernism,” which holds that there is Truth (as God fully understands it), but, as a finite, fallible human being, I have only a partial glimpse of that Truth’ which corresponds to my embracing a “soft perspectivalism,” which, while agreeing that our claims to truth are indeed informed by our particular perspectives (our social location), holds that this does not imply that any one claim to truth is as good as any other claim to truth (truth claims must be tested for their adequacy – more about that in a minute).

D. A. Carson, who is quite critical of “hard postmodernism” and “hard perspectivalism” and, in his view, their corrosive effects on the Emergent Church movement, seems to embrace what I have called “soft postmodernism” and “soft perspectivalism” in the following extended quote from *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*.

“As we read the biblical text and read the culture, we ourselves have a social location...there is some insight in the postmodern insistence that the readers themselves are socially located and that this social location plays a contributing role in their interpretations...We are finite beings and our knowledge is always partial...we are most likely to be closest to the objective truth of the text if we encourage people with different backgrounds and social contexts to contribute to the discussion as to what the text means. By bringing our different backgrounds and presuppositions to the text, each group is more likely to overcome its own hermeneutical blind spots. **This does not mean that each reading is as valid as every other reading**, which is what the more radical wing of postmodernism avers...But it does mean that all of us inevitably interpret things out of a particular framework (pp. 51-52, emphasis mine).

To bring closure to this extended aside, the remaining question is “how does one judge one particular claim to truth to me more adequate than a competing claim?” In biblical scholarship, one appeals to sound hermeneutical principles. In interpreting the claims to truth in other areas of discourse, one appeals to “criteria for evaluation” that are considered appropriate by the practitioners in the given area of discourse (e.g., criteria that natural scientists or social scientists consider appropriate for evaluating scientific theories that have been proposed for consideration, such as explanatory power, simplicity, and fruitfulness for ongoing research).

So, getting back to the fundamental question as to why there is such great diversity in Christian belief, my response, in summary form, is that one of the primary reasons for there being such a diversity of beliefs on the part of Christians is that we come to our reading of the Bible and all of life with differing perspectives, differing interpretive frameworks that reflect the unique particularities of our social locations. That does not seem to bode well for any hope of creating unity among Christians, a topic to which I now turn, starting with an attempt to create unity that I think is bankrupt.

A failed Attempt to Create Unity in the Midst of the Great Diversity of Christian Belief

One conceivable attempt to harmonize “diversity” with “unity” within Christendom is captured by the succinct phrase “On essentials unity, on all else diversity.” That slogan sounds good in theory, and it would even fit on a bumper sticker. But, I think it is totally unworkable in practice because of the impossibility, as I see it, of reaching consensus among all Christians as to the “essentials” of the Christian faith. What one Christian may think of as a non-negotiable essential of the Christian faith, another Christian may consider to be non-essential. We are all familiar with numerous examples. Is one particular view of baptism essential? Some Christians say “yes,” some say “no.” Is one particular view of the end times (eschatology) essential? Some Christians say “yes,” and some Christians say “no.” Is one particular view of how God created the universe essential? Some Christians say “yes,” and some Christians say “no.”

Let me give two more extended examples. First, Jim Belcher in his recent book *Deep Church* seeks to define a third view of the Christian Church “Beyond” the Traditional Church and the Emerging Church. He does so by suggesting that the “essentials” of the Christian faith, the elements of “Mere Christianity” (to borrow a phrase from C. S. Lewis) are contained in three historic creeds: the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed; and the Athanasian Creed.

But, not all Christians share that definition of the essentials of the Christian faith. For example, Ted Grimsrud, a Mennonite theologian has difficulty with the fact that the “Apostles” creed goes right from the birth of Jesus (“born of the virgin Mary”) to the death of Christ (“suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried”), without any reference to the life that Jesus lived and some of his most important teachings (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount). The essentials of the Christian faith for those in the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition focus on day-to-day discipleship that translates into an ethic of peace and service and the importance of Christian community.

Besides, there are a number of Christian traditions that pride themselves in being “non-creedal.” That is true, for example, of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America, the church body that emerged in the USA from the Swedish branch of the pietist movement in Scandinavia (in which I was also immersed for a number of years). The “Covenanters” recognize their “indebtedness to the early creeds and confessions of the Church,” but they say that their church is “non-creedal, a life movement in which both the Spirit and the Word are of ultimate importance for a living faith” (*Covenant Affirmations*, Covenant Press, 1976). So, it will not work to say that all Christians agree that the historic creeds and confessions of the church capture the essentials of the Christian faith.

A second extended example can be drawn from the Doctrinal Statements that many Christian denominations and para-church organizations have accepted. Of particular interest for our purposes here are the Doctrinal Statements that have been adopted by many Christian Colleges and Universities, NWC included. From your website, I see that NWC has a clearly articulated 8-point Doctrinal Statement, to which I assume all members of your faculty and staff are expected to subscribe. It is no doubt fair to say that NWC has decided that the elements of your Doctrinal Statement captures what you believe to be the essentials of the Christian faith. Many other Christian colleges also have adopted Doctrinal Statements that they believe capture the essentials of the Christian faith. But, although I haven’t read all of these Doctrinal Statements, I am guessing that no two of them define the essentials on the Christian faith in exactly the same way.

So, in a nutshell, I don't think it is possible to attain Christian unity by seeking agreement as to the "essentials" of the Christian faith. There is too much diversity of belief as to what those essentials should be. So, what to do? Let me make a proposal.

Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom and Cross-Pollinate

Rather than bemoan the lack of agreement across Christian traditions and institutions relative to the "essentials" of the Christian faith, let us look at this as a redemptive opportunity. Relative to Christian colleges, let each such college express its deep commitment to its understanding of the essentials of the Christian faith by having that understanding inform very deeply the education it offers its students and the scholarship carried out by its faculty. Let the ministry of Calvin College be deeply informed by what it views as the essentials of a Reformed expression of the Christian faith. Likewise, let Goshen College be guided by its view of the essentials of an Anabaptist expression of the Christian faith, and let the ministry of Asbury College be informed deeply by its understanding of a the essentials of the Wesleyan tradition.

For schools not having a denominational affiliation, like NWC and Gordon College, let their respective Doctrinal Statement be the basis for the their curriculum, co-curriculum, and faculty scholarship. Each college should be deeply committed to drawing out the implications of its understanding of the essentials of the Christian faith.

But, each such institution should not succumb to the hubris of thinking that its understanding of the essentials of the Christian faith has fully captured God's understanding. Whereas each institution's understanding of Christian essentials may have captured in a profound way one aspect of Truth (with a capital T) as only God fully knows it, that institution needs to combine its strong **commitment** to its understanding of essentials with an **openness** to refining its understanding, and even possibly correcting it, on the basis of the insights of those from other Christian traditions who view the Christian essentials differently. And, the only way to do this is through cross-pollination; through creating forums for conversation with those from other Christian traditions who

have a different perspective on the essentials, so that those embedded in each tradition can uncover some **treasures** in the other traditions.

Where, Then, is the Unity in the Midst of this Diversity as to the Essentials of the Christian Faith?

If Christians cannot agree as to the essentials of the Christian faith, how can the unity among Christians that Jesus prayed for be forged? Your own “Statement on Unity at Northwestern” is a good place to start.

Reading from your website: “we affirm our commitment to biblical unity within the diversity that exists in the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12: 12-26). It is our desire that every person in the Northwestern community be accepted and valued, regardless of gender, race, color, social status, ability/disability, ethnicity, or gifts. We believe that because Christ has reconciled us to God, and to one another, we must seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4: 1-6).”

I commend you for that affirmation. I hope and pray that it doesn't just exist on your website, but is practiced in your daily engagements with one another at NWC. In light of what I have shared with you today, I might be tempted to recommend adding one more phrase to it, the second verse in the passage from Ephesians 4 that you cite: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

Tucked away in this fine statement on unity is a phrase that I would like to use as a starting point for an additional reflection on the nature of the ideal of unity among Christians: “because Christ has reconciled us to God.” What all Christians have in common, now and throughout all past ages, is that they are a people who, despite their differing beliefs about all the essentials of the Christian faith, have been reconciled to God through the redemption provided by Jesus Christ. In my own words, Christians are people who have made a **commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.**

Combining this elaboration with snippets of what you already say in your Unity Statement and what I have shared with you this morning, here would be my succinct statement on the ideal of unity among Christians: **We as Christians are unified by our shared commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and are committed to engaging one another in respectful conversations regarding our diversity of beliefs about other aspects of the Christian faith with humility, openness, patience and love, with the goal of learning from one another.**

For the sake of enabling me to complete my presentation, let me assume, for the time being, that you can live, more or less, with my proposed statement on unity. If you will grant me that assumption, at least for now, let me draw out some possible implications for Christendom and for NWC.

Steps Toward Unity Within Christendom and at Northwestern College

If there is any validity to what I have shared with you today, then there will be little hope for Christian unity if I take the position that I can only “fellowship in unity” with those other Christians who agree with me on all the essentials of the Christian faith. At best, that can only create unity within a certain sub-set of Christians, as, for example those within a given Christian tradition. At worst, it may mean that you can only have fellowship with a very small group of like-minded Christians.

In stark contrast, I am proposing that Christians from any and all Christian traditions should be willing to say that I can “fellowship in unity” with all others who have made a **commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord**. It is that common commitment that binds us together as the Body of Christ, despite the diversity in our beliefs as to the exact meaning and implications of that common commitment.

The biggest obstacle to my proposal is our tendency to marginalize, or even demonize (with an unhealthy dose of name-calling) those who do not share our particular beliefs

about all the essentials of the Christian faith, considering them to be “inferior Christians,” if they are Christians at all.

The best way to overcome that obstacle is to “get to know on a personal level” those who have differing views about the essentials of the Christian faith, getting to know them well enough to see that despite these differences, they also are deeply **committed to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord**, so much so that you are pleased to fellowship with them in unity. But, this will be possible only if you are willing to talk respectfully with those who disagree with you. And, if you are willing to engage in such respectful conversation, you may discover what Carolyn Schrock-Shenk has suggested, that although your conversation may not bridge the differences in your beliefs, it **may** change your perspective about the person who disagrees with you, so much so that you will desire to fellowship in unity with that person (**you cannot predict beforehand the results of a genuine conversation**).

Again, that sounds like pie-in-the-sky naïve, wishful thinking. But, I have seen it work in my own experience. Let me give you an example from my own experience which some of you may find controversial (that may be OK since I get to leave tomorrow). While most statements of essential Christian beliefs would include the belief that God created the universe, there is disagreement among Christians as to “how” God created the universe. I personally know some Christians who believe that the special creation of man precludes an evolutionary process. But, I also personally know some Christians who believe that God’s means for the creation of mankind included an evolutionary process. And, by talking to and getting to know these persons who disagree on this issue on a personal level, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that these Christians on both sides of the Creation/ Evolution debate are deeply **committed to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord**. And, their differences about the means of God’s creation are not because the persons on one side of the issue have a higher view of the authority Scripture than the persons on the other side. As far as I can tell, the persons I know on both sides of this issue have a high view of the authority of Scripture. They differ as to the most adequate interpretation of both the relevant biblical passages (most notably, Genesis 1 &2), the

results of scholarship in selected academic disciplines, such as geology and biology, and the relationship between doing theology and doing science.

So, what to do? **Talk!** Seek to empathetically understand the reasons the other person has for the position that you believe is wrong. Earnestly seek for treasures in the other's position that you can embrace without compromising your position. And, if you can find no such treasures, I hope you discover by your getting to know the other person that he/she is also deeply **committed to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord**, even though you have stark disagreements as to how God created all that is, leading to your willingness to "fellowship in unity" with that person.

That is my prescription for Christendom in general relative to this thorny issue. But, what about NWC? You have a Doctrinal Statement that all your faculty and staff have subscribed to as capturing the essentials of the Christian faith. But, as I read your Doctrinal Statement, I find it to be silent as to the question of "how" God created the universe. To be sure, your Doctrinal Statement clearly affirms that "God is the creator of heaven and earth." But, I find no position taken as to "how" God created all that is.

In that light, I will dare to suggest that you need to avoid the mistake that some other colleges, churches and other Christian groups have made, which is to expect all of your faculty and staff to subscribe to an unwritten doctrinal position that is stricter than your written statement of doctrinal beliefs. That is the surest way to create conflict and shut down conversation in your community. If there is any issue on which your Doctrinal Statement is silent, you need to create a welcoming space for members of your community to safely express contrary beliefs. And, in the midst of those expressions of differing beliefs, you must embrace each other, having "fellowship in unity," because of your shared **commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord**.

Tomorrow, we will discuss an even more radical programming proposal for your consideration; that you **invite visiting scholars having a diversity of faith perspectives to your conversations at NWC**. In preparation for that discussion, please read my essay

in the *Christian Scholar's Review* titled "Dialogic Discourse: Christian Scholars Engaging the Larger Academy."

Harold Heie

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