

## WHERE IS THE UNITY?

My text this morning is a prayer that Jesus uttered many years ago that has yet to be answered

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 (John 17: 20-22, NIV)

Jesus prayed that “Christians may be one”; that “they may be brought to complete unity.” What a marvelous hope; a hope that has yet to be realized. Unity among Christians has remained elusive ever since Jesus uttered this prayer

I believe that the disunity among Christians, past and present, is scandalous and must surely grieve God.

Some people blame the current disunity on the two great schisms in the church, the first being when the Eastern Orthodox Church split off from the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in 1054. The second great schism was the Protestant Reformation in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

As the story goes, the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church was united until these two schisms, with all Christians seeing eye to eye on all issues of doctrine and church practice.

The problem with that story is simply that it is not true.

Limiting myself to Protestantism, it is true that when we Protestants disagree with one another about doctrine or church practice, we have excelled at “picking up our marbles” and simply going to another church or starting another church or denomination consisting of like-minded people who agree with us about everything.

I am told that in South Korea alone, there are some 70 different Presbyterian denominations. But the story that this can all be traced to the Protestant Reformation is false. Disagreements among Christians about issues of doctrine and church practice have been with us since day one; since the very beginning of the Christian Church.

For example, the Christian Church in Corinth was riddled by factions. As recorded in 1 Corinthians 1:11-13, the Apostle Paul writes: “For it has been reported to me ... that

there are quarrels among you....What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or "I belong to Apollus,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' **Has Christ been divided?"**

Similarly in the Church in Galatia, there was a big split prompted by the inroads made into the church by the Judaizers, Jewish Christians who insisted that gentile converts to the Christian faith should submit to the Jewish rite of circumcision and respect certain ritual distinctions between pure and impure foods. Commentators say that it was this split in the church that prompted Paul's letter to the Galatians in which he pleaded with the members of this church to resist the blandishments of the Judaizers.

If divisions and factions about doctrinal and church practices have existed in the church from the very beginning, it will be instructive for us to consider the way in which these divisions and factions were handled in the early Christian Church, which will give us insight into two possible dimensions of "hoped-for" Christian unity; one having to do with a "method" for navigating strong disagreements; and one having to do with finding some "common ground" that transcends our disagreements.

First, as to a biblically informed method for dealing with our disagreements, we are exhorted to deal with them "peaceably."

Romans 12: 18 says that "so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

In Ephesians 4: 1-4 we read that Paul literally "begs" the members of the Christian Church in Ephesus to seek for unity:

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to **maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**"

These biblical teachings call into question the "conflict," verbal and otherwise, that often accompanies strong disagreements in many of our churches and denominations.

But, you may ask, how can I avoid "verbal conflict" when I am convinced that what I believe about the issue at hand is in accordance with God's Truth about the issue, and the person who disagrees with me is all wrong?

That is a real challenge. It calls for an unusual combination suggested in 1 Peter 3:15.

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you for a reason for the hope you have. **But do this with gentleness and respect**

In a piece that he posted on my web site [www.respectfulconversation.net](http://www.respectfulconversation.net), Richard Mouw, the former President of Fuller Theological Seminary had an interesting reflection on how this verse was treated in the church in which he was raised. Paraphrasing Richard, his church emphasized the importance of knowing exactly what you believe and stating what you believe with clarity and deep conviction. So far, so good! Richard embraced that exhortation. But he wondered why his church paid so little attention to the second part of this verse, which calls for Christians to express their deep convictions “with gentleness and respect.”

When I hear or read expressions of strong disagreement in our culture, and sadly, in many of our churches and denominations, I too often find a total lack of “gentleness and respect.” What I too often find instead is demonization of those who disagree, resorting to “name-calling” and questioning of motives, implying, or saying straight-out that those who disagree with me are “inferior” Christians who do not hold to the authority of the Bible (when the truth generally is that those who disagree with me also hold to the authority of the Bible; they simply have differing interpretations of selected biblical passages).

The “gentleness and respect” that I dream of finding is characterized by the creation of safe, welcoming spaces where we recognize that those who disagree with us are also deeply committed Christians, who want to be faithful to their understanding of the biblical record as much as you do, which recognition prepares the way for us to talk respectfully about our disagreements.

As I never tire of saying, I believe that to create such welcoming spaces for respectful conversation about disagreements with another person is a deep expression of love for that person. If you combine that claim with the teaching of Jesus that “By this shall everyone know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13: 35), you readily see that one potential sign of Christian unity is that we **we will be one** in expressing our disagreements with “gentleness and respect.”

But, even if that seemingly impossible dream comes true, is there any hope for Christian unity beyond our “method” for engaging one another? Is there any hope for a measure of Christian unity about the substance of our beliefs, which seem to be all over the map?

As preparation for addressing that question directly, let me suggest that it is not necessarily a bad thing that Christians disagree about some important issues related to belief and practice. In a fascinating book titled *Unlearning Protestantism*, Gerald Schlabach, a Catholic theologian who was raised in the Mennonite Church, presents a marvelous analysis of the tension that has always existed in the Christian church between “loyalty” and “dissent.”

Schlabach cites what he calls the “Protestant Principle”: “Because all human institutions fall short of God’s standard, they are always subject to ‘prophetic’ critique and reform” (p. 24). But he suggests that Protestants have gone overboard with that principle, when critique and calls for reform become so intense that they lead to factions and schism where dissent trumps loyalty.

In contrast, Schlabach applauds the Catholic Church for their “doggedly loyal commitment to ‘hang in there’ with those with whom we disagree” (p. 32). But he suggests that the Catholic Church has also often gone overboard by suppressing dissent in the name of loyalty.

As evidence he presents short vignettes of five Catholic dissenters who were at one time punished by the Catholic hierarchy for their “radical beliefs” (some by being barred from teaching and preaching), but who now are applauded for the positive changes that they brought about. In Schlabach’s words, they provided a necessary “updating” of the Catholic tradition (the Italian word for such updating being “aggiornamento”).

Schlabach’s advice to all Christian traditions is that if no dissent is allowed the tradition will become moribund, it will become a “dead tradition.” So every Christian tradition must find that tricky balance between loyalty and dissent that enables the tradition to stay alive. The Reformed Church has embraced that quest for balance when it calls itself “reformed and always reforming.”

Is there a standard for helping us to find that tricky balance between loyalty and dissent? I believe the standard lies in the idea of “authority,” properly understood. Let me briefly explain.

A Catholic friend of mine once asked me what I took to be “authoritative,” since I didn’t accept the teachings of the Catholic Magisterium (in particular, the pronouncement of the Pope) as my final authority. In brief, my response was that I believe in the ultimate authority of the “Truth” (“Truth” with a capital “T” as only God fully knows it).

No Christian tradition, Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, Anabaptist, or whatever, has a complete understanding of “God’s Truth.” Likewise, no Christian organization or institution has a corner on God’s Truth. Therefore all Christians need to be involved in “conversations toward Truth,” both within and across their traditions, organizations and institutions, so that together, as the one body of Christ, we gain a clearer understanding of the truth as God fully understands it.

This authority of “Truth” is pointed to at the beginning of the great love chapter in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13, where some signs of “Christian love” are enumerated. We read the “Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It

does not insist on its own way.” The writer then adds the key words that “**love rejoices in the truth.**” Yes indeed!

So, every Christian church, denomination, tradition, organization and institution needs to create a safe, welcoming space for dissenters, for those who believe that some of their current beliefs and practices are not in accord with God’s Truth and need to be “updated.” And we must engage in “conversations toward Truth” with dissenters characterized by gentleness and respect. This common method for navigating strong disagreements is the first dimension of my hoped-for “Christian unity.”

But even if my dream as to how Christians should engage with other Christians with whom they disagree is realized, is there any hope for “unity” as to the substance of the beliefs and practices of Christians, which seem to be all over the map? I believe there is. A hint is given in the book of Acts, a record of the early Christian Church.

Let us return to the major disagreement I noted earlier as to how in the early Church Jewish Christians should navigate the fact that gentiles were being converted to the Christian faith.

As I noted earlier, some Jewish Christians were upset that new gentile converts were not circumcised. Acts 15:1 states that “certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’.”

A council of Christians, referred to as the Jerusalem Council, was called together to talk about this matter, apparently in a respectful manner, I might add. During this council, Peter arose and spoke these words of wisdom, recorded in Acts 15: 7-9.

My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit. Just as he did to us; and **in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.**

Praise be to God! The gentiles, just like the Jewish Christians, **had their hearts cleansed by faith** in the finished redemptive work of Jesus Christ. It wasn’t agreement about circumcision that united them; it was Jesus Christ. That was the common ground that held them together.

That answers the question that Paul posed to the Christian Church in Corinth after chiding them for their quarrels about whether they belonged to Paul or to Apollus or to Cephas. Do you remember that question from about 14 minutes ago? – **Has Christ been divided?**

No! No! A thousand time No!

Jesus Christ is the center that should hold all Christians together. Christians over the years have proclaimed this central truth in a variety of ways; one such way being to say that all Christians are committed to “**Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.**” I like to say it in an even simpler way: “All Christians aspire to be **followers of Jesus.**”

Whatever words you choose to point to the centrality of Jesus, there may be disagreements as to exactly what these words mean and what the implications should be for ARC and all churches. So, let us talk about such disagreements with gentleness and respect. But, let us never forget that it is Jesus Christ who holds us together.

This truth was once simply and eloquently expressed by Karl Barth, who was arguably the most influential Christian theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Barth wrote countless profound books and essays on theology during his illustrious and productive career. The story is told that toward the end of his life, someone asked him if he could briefly summarize his theological beliefs in just a few words. He is reported to have said, “**Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.**”

[At this point in the liturgy, Philip & Rose De Koster will, from their seats, start singing this well known chorus in its entirety as the rest of the congregations joins in, after which the sermon will be concluded with the words “Amen, thanks be to God!”].

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January 4, 2015