

The Reformation of the XXIst Century: A Reformation of Unity

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We stand at the threshold of a new millennium. The next Stalcup lecturer will be speaking to you in the year 2000. Meanwhile, in these last years of the nineteen hundreds, it is impossible to escape from all the millennium hype around us. If you don't watch out, Y2K will get you! Store up food and water. Stash away cash and gold. As I was preparing this lecture, a gun show was being planned in Atlanta under the motto, "Survive the Millennium." There is even a religious side to all this. Books on the Revelation of John have suddenly become best-sellers—I even have one coming out shortly! Predictions about the Armageddon are no longer limited to crazies—or perhaps there are now so many crazies that they are beginning to appear normal!

In all this hype, we hardly notice what is already happening around us. We are so preoccupied with the future, with that magic turn of the calendar from 1999 to 2000, that we hardly notice what is happening today, or how the world and the church have changed in the last decades. But the truth is that the changes in recent years have been such that even if the year 2000 brings nothing radically new, we still will have much to deal with.

The changes in the world should be obvious. My grandfather was a farmer. It used to take him about as long to go from his farm to the nearby town and back, as it took me this morning to come from Atlanta to Dallas. My father was a writer. I remember visiting the printing presses

with him, and being awe-struck at the great linotype machines that could set and justify a whole line of type on a single piece of lead. I, too, am a writer. My first computer, not so long ago, was an amazing machine with 64K of RAM!

While we may be aware of these changes in the world, we are probably less aware of the changes that have taken place in the church, which will determine the shape of the ecumenical enterprise in the 21st century. A hundred years ago, approximately half of all Christians in the world lived in Europe, and four fifths of all Christians were white. Today, one quarter of all Christians live in Europe, and three fifths of all Christians are not white. When I went to seminary, forty-five years ago, all our textbooks were either in English or translated from English or German. Today, all over seminaries in the United States, Europe, and throughout the world, students are reading books originally written not only in my native Spanish, but also in Korean and other third-world languages. When I began teaching, thirty-eight years ago, it was taken for granted that if you kept up with recent publications in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, you were up to date in theology. Today, some of the most creative developments in theology, and certainly in church life, are taking place in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. When I first joined a faculty of theology in the United States, thirty years ago, all my thirty-plus colleagues were male, and no one thought this was strange. Today, roughly one-third of all faculty and senior staff in that school are women—and there is general agreement that this is not enough.

And it is not only the big international picture, nor the faculties of theological schools, that have changed. Even though too often our local congregations try to ignore the changes around them, and remain as bulwarks of the society we used to know, all we need to do is look around and see how the church is changing, not just around the world, but right here in the United States, in Texas, in Dallas. The fastest growing sector of the Presbyterian Church in the US—perhaps the only growing sector—is in the Korean churches. Most major denominations are finding it necessary to publish materials in at least three languages and some in as many as thirty—and this, not for use overseas but right here in the United States. Right now, there are more than two thousand Spanish-speaking Baptist churches right here in Texas. In many congregations that share facilities, this new situation leads to tensions and even to conflict. Elsewhere, somewhat facetiously, I have referred to this phenomenon as the "garlic wars," as people of goodwill, some of them garlic-lovers and others garlic-haters, find themselves sharing the same space.

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Both world and church have grown at the same time more compact and more complex. It is the combination of these two phenomena, compaction or contraction on the one hand, and complexity on the other, that people today call "globalization."

Let us look first at the contraction. In terms of distance and ease of communication, both church and world have become astonishingly smaller, more compact. In my grandparents' time, "Around the world in Eighty Days" was a theme of fiction. During my parents' time, it became

possible to go around the world in less than eighty hours—although few people ever did it. Today, I can send a letter halfway around the world and get a response in less than eighty seconds! In many ways, Dallas is closer to Tokyo today than it was to Ft. Worth twenty years ago.

There has been a similar contraction of distances within the church. When the first World Missionary Conference met at Edinburgh in 1910, it took weeks of travel for the delegates to be assembled there. When they got there, they saw mostly people like themselves—whites from the North Atlantic. Today, representatives to world conferences can usually get there within 24 hours of travel. And a representative sampling of all Christians who gathered this morning for worship right here in Dallas would certainly be much more varied in ethnic, cultural, and theological terms than that momentous First Missionary Conference.

This poses serious questions for those of us who dream the ecumenical dream. Indeed, when I took my first steps in my ecumenical pilgrimage, I was convinced that our main agenda was to seek unity across some of the traditional issues of faith and order: How is Christ present in the Supper? What is the meaning of baptism? How and to whom should it be administered? What is the meaning of ordination? What are the requirements for an ordination to be valid? And so on. Today, while many of those issues remain, some of the greatest obstacles to Christian unity are among what we used to call "non-theological" issues—issues of culture, language, class, and gender. In the church that led me to write about garlic wars, people clearly share in one Lord,

one faith, and one baptism, but they do not share one cuisine—and because of that they are having difficulty sharing one space.

While the reference to garlic may seem somewhat facetious, it is but a minor example of a much greater divide—or rather, of a whole series of divides. As Christianity becomes indigenized in various cultures and attempts to express itself within the parameters of those cultures, it also develops patterns and characteristics that may seem strange or even alien to other Christians.

But that is not all. Part of the entire picture is the fact that new voices have come to the foreground—voices that did not often make themselves heard in earlier times, voices from the former mission territories, voices of the poor and for the poor, women's voices. Such voices are not simply repeating, nor even translating, what was earlier said to them. They are taking a new look at the Gospel; they are taking a new look at Scripture; they are taking a new look at tradition; they are taking a new look at every point of doctrine. And what they are seeing and what they are saying is different from what others have seen or have said.

The result is a dizzying multiplicity of contextual theologies. There is feminist theology; there is womanist theology; there is *mujerista* theology; there is Black theology; there is Latino theology; there is African theology. . . . And within each of these there are innumerable varieties and nuances.

Thus, to Archbishop Temple's famous dictum that the most remarkable event of our time is the development of a world-wide church, we must now add a footnote to the effect that even more remarkable is the development of a truly world-wide theology. And, just as the church takes different shapes in different contexts, so does theology.

This changes the face of the ecumenical challenge. Ecumenism is very different from what I learned in earlier years, when I was led to believe that if we would just come to an understanding on the subjects that had traditionally divided the Church, Christian unity would be the result. Today, the issues that most divide Christians are not the presence of Christ in the sacrament, but issues of culture and economics; issues of class, of gender, of generations; and, most specifically, how these various experiences and perspectives find expression in different styles of worship and in different theological and social emphases.

Hence the title for this lecture: "A Reformation of Unity." That title could mean that the reformation of the 21st century will come through unity. I believe that, and it is important. But the title also means that the ecumenical task before us, as the new century dawns, is one of reforming our very notion of unity. We must not only reform the church by promoting its unity; we must also reform our very understanding of unity.

How are we to do this? I would suggest that we do it following the biblical model. But when I say this, I do not mean taking a particular biblical passage or injunction. I mean rather, looking

at the very manner in which the Bible is put together and using that as a paradigm for the church.

Look, for instance, at our New Testament. Its first four books are called "Gospels." They each tell the story of Jesus the Christ. They all tell the same story, but their story is not always the same! Indeed, the very variety of Gospels has provided ample fodder for skeptics and critics of the Christian faith. I personally remember more than one occasion when I wished we had only one gospel. My personal embarrassment has been shared by many in the church, where there have been repeated attempts to conflate all four gospels into one. Indeed, the first such attempt took place already in the second century, practically at the same time as the church was coming to a general consensus on including these four gospels.

What we often forget is that those Christians who decided to bind these four books, so to speak, in one cover were fully aware of their differences. They were neither ignorant nor naive. They knew full well what modern skeptics relish to point out, namely, that the genealogies of Matthew and Luke do not agree, and that John presents a chronology that is different from that of the other three. And they put them together, not *in spite* of their difference, but precisely *because* they were different.

The canon of the New Testament, and specifically the listing of these four books, came about as a response to the claims of people who had a single gospel—very often a version of the gospel

known only to them and their followers—and who claimed that this was the full and perfect witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Most notable among these was Marcion, who insisted that only Paul among the apostles really understood the message of Jesus, and who therefore produced his own New Testament consisting of the letters of Paul and a somewhat altered version of the Gospel of Luke, whose unique authority was based on his having been Paul's companion. Others had a Gospel of Truth, or a Gospel of Thomas--each of them supposedly handed down by those who really *knew* the secret teaching of Jesus.

Over against such claims, the church put together this varied collection of gospels and called it the *catholic* witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That word, "catholic," needs further clarification. We have repeatedly been told that it means "universal." Indeed, many Protestants who feel uncomfortable declaring in the Creed that they believe in the catholic church have been taught to say, "I believe in the holy universal church."

It is true that the terms "catholic" and "universal" both refer to the wide reach of the church. In that respect they are parallel. But in another respect, they are almost opposite!

Etymologically, the word "catholic" means "according to the whole," or "according to all." Thus, what the church did was to take four gospels, each of them according to a particular witness—a gospel "according to Matthew," *kata Maththaion*, another *kata Markon*, another

kata Loukan, and a fourth *kata Ioannen*. The church took these four gospels, put them together and declared that this was the "cath'olic" witness to the Gospel, the *kata*, the whole.

To explain what this means it may be well to refer to the argument of one of the church leaders who first wrote about this and who argued for this fourfold witness to the Gospel. This was Irenaeus, writing late in the second century, shortly after Marcion proposed his version of the Gospel, supposedly according to Paul. Irenaeus argues that, just as there are four winds and four zones to the earth and four covenants, there must be these four gospels, as so many pillars to the church (*Adv. haer.* 3.11.8-9). When I first read his argument, it struck me as rather simplistic, as if Irenaeus were simply arguing that because there are four of this and four of that, there must also be four gospels. But now, as I re-read the passage, I note that Irenaeus is saying more than that. When he speaks of the four winds or of the four covenants, he calls them the four "catholic" winds, the four "catholic" covenants.

It is here that we see the difference, and even the opposition, between "universal" and "catholic." What Irenaeus means is not that these four winds exist everywhere. What he means is that the four of them together form the whole wind. Suppose every other wind were eliminated, and only the north wind remained. The north wind would blow everywhere and would therefore be universal, but the cath'holicity of the wind would have disappeared. In this case, universality is the exact opposite of catholicity.

The same is true of the gospel witness. When the church insisted that these four gospels provide the cath'olic witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it meant that all four are true, but it also implied that any one of them without the rest, true as it may be, is not "catholic." (And here, let it be said in passing, we come to another misunderstanding of the word "catholic," as a synonym of "orthodox.") The Gospel of Luke all by itself may be quite orthodox and still is not the "cath'olic" witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is merely the Gospel *kata* Luke, and not the Gospel *kata* the whole.

This is what I mean by reforming our notion of Christian unity according to a biblical paradigm. Again, I am not saying that we should take this or that text as the guideline for the ecumenical enterprise. What I am saying is that we must take on the very understanding of truth and of unity that keeps the New Testament together. I could add, let it be said also in passing, that what I have said of the four gospels is not exclusive of this portion of Scripture. In the rest of the New Testament, we have other witnesses to the same Gospel: Paul, the deutero-Pauline material, the epistles said to be of James, Peter, John, and Jude, the Apocalypse of John. All of these contribute to the cath'olic witness to the Gospel. And, as scholars have repeatedly pointed out, in the very first chapters of Genesis we already have several different traditions woven into one—and woven in such a way that the different strands are still apparent.

The Reformation of the 21st century will be a reformation of unity, not only in the sense that it will be brought about by unity, but also in the sense that our very understanding of unity will

need to be reformed. It will have to be a cath'olic understanding of unity, a unity in which each part witnesses to the one Gospel of Jesus Christ from its own perspective, from its own experience, in its own manner. It will have to be a unity in which, so to speak, we find ways of binding all these different and irreducible expressions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in one single cover, as one single book.

How do we do this? I believe we can only do it by the power of the Spirit of God. Pentecost, which we have recently celebrated, is the miracle of unity par excellence. In Pentecost, the Spirit made one people out of Macedonians, Parthians, Phrygians, and all the rest. But note, that at Pentecost the spirit did *not* make all these people understand the language of the apostles. Rather, the Spirit made it possible for them to hear "each in their own tongue," in their *own*, multiple languages. At Pentecost the Spirit not only made one church of all these people but made them one cath'olic church, one church according to the Phrygians, and according to the Macedonians, and according to the Libyans. . .

How is the Spirit bringing this about in our midst? First of all, by making it quite clear that any claim to universality on the part of any part of the church is in itself a denial of cath'holicity, is in itself anti-ecumenical and sectarian. And this is true, not only of denominations but also of cultural incarnations of the faith. For too long, particularly among Protestants, we have acted as if the North-Atlantic incarnation of Christianity were normative, and we have sought to universalize it. That is sectarian and anti-ecumenical. For too long we have acted as if the male

experience of Christianity were normative, and we have sought to universalize it. That is sectarian and anti-ecumenical. Today there are those among us who disparage certain forms of worship for being too cold, while others reject forms that they deem too emotional and even disorganized. That is sectarian and anti-ecumenical. The catholic witness to the Gospel, the witness of the whole to the whole, requires that we do away with our tribalistic inclinations to claim universality for our own particularities.

Second, and with this I conclude, we must see the ecumenical Spirit of God working in our midst even in ways that cause us pain and discomfort. I alluded earlier to the manner in which the world has become smaller, to the point that daily we interact with peoples and cultures that a few decades ago existed only in faraway places. Right now, here in Dallas, there are large numbers of people whose native tongue is not English. Many of them are Christians whose modes of worship others among us might find strange. Many are moving into neighborhoods whose former residents feel threatened by them, and into churches where transition causes pain and fear. We may look at all of this as a threat. Many Christians do. But that is sectarian and anti-ecumenical. We may look at it as a challenge to mission—and there is value in that. But I suggest that, empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit of God, we look at it as the God-given possibility of pre-enacting, of foretasting, of announcing to the world, that great day of days when, as John of Patmos put it,

after this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white with palm branches in their hands.

They cried out in a loud voice, saying, salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.

Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.

