

Belonging (Part One)

“Left everything and followed him”

Reflection 14 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

This series of reflections on “A New World in the Morning,” is built on the recognition that we live in a time of transition, a time of great cultural, economic and religious shifts. Old forms are dying. New forms are being born. Church attendance, for instance, is declining almost everywhere in all church traditions in America as they did a few generations ago in Western Europe. And yet everywhere there are also signs of spiritual quest. People are asking questions they’ve never asked before. People are open to new possibilities they’ve never considered before. In fact, it is likely that we are on the front edge of a great global spiritual awakening. But not without change. Not without substantial change. And not without many, many people weighing church in the scales and finding that it comes up short.

So now I take up something that perhaps troubles people more than anything else, and that is the whole notion of thought control in church, that wide-spread notion that we must be identical in our doctrine and practice, that we must see all the mysteries of God in exactly the same way or we cannot be in fellowship or communion with one another. In some ways, this was the promise of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment – that if all could be free to think for themselves they would all come to think the same things. Really? Does that really make any sense? Freedom to think for ourselves, and we’ll all think alike?

Well, what it did do was rob us of our spiritual joy and vitality, turning us all, to one degree or another, into doctrinal vigilantes always on guard against those who see things differently from us. It was a prescription for sectarian squabbling, for endless division, for competing citadels of orthodoxy each eventually with smaller and smaller numbers. And if only we few were saved, and if that excluded our mom or dad, our son or daughter, or our favorite aunt, so be it. It was a prescription for sadness, for religious melancholy, for perpetual fear that we too might be wrong, might be lost.

And it all came down to how we defined unity. In the church at first there was substantial diversity. In its very Scripture, there were multiple perspectives. I didn’t know that until I read Scripture, and quit the hard work of trying to force square texts into round holes. But yes, from the very beginning there were multiple perspectives. The church of the second century was incredibly diverse. And if the emperor Constantine in the fourth century tried to enforce uniformity, he substantially failed. For over a thousand years the church saw itself as one but there was a remarkable range of diversity in its doctrine, practice and organization.

There was of course the ever-present human tendency to wish that everyone might see things “the way I do,” but that was impractical. Always has been. So, yes, the church was one but it was unity in diversity, not unity as uniformity. It had no apparatus to structure itself in any other way. Until ...

Until in the eleventh century the Papacy now armed with the tools of canon law and a near monopoly on education sought to impose uniformity across Europe, an effort that reached its climax at the Fourth Lateran Council in Rome in 1215 under Pope Innocent III. Innocent III was

a formidable man, a medieval monarch in the fullest sense of the word. And when his great council determined that only those whose faith and practice were identical with that of the Church of Rome could be in fellowship with the Church of Rome, he had redefined unity as uniformity, as exact uniformity in doctrine and practice. And when three hundred years later Protestant groups broke away from the Church of Rome, they carried with them Innocent III's definition of unity, unity as uniformity, so that those in fellowship must think and act the same. The inevitable consequence was division over and over and over again, and the religious melancholy that goes with it.

Now I am still a restorationist. I'm not sectarian about it. I just figure we should all go back to our original texts and see them again in their living historical context. I figure every good Catholic and every good Protestant is a bit of a restorationist. For our purposes right now, here's why this matters. Maybe we have it backwards how people come to faith.

I have a friend who loves our church family but he's not sure he believes everything we believe here. He's also not sure he's prepared to behave the way we all behave here. I figure that's good. But he figures he can't belong here until he gets his beliefs and behavior "straightened out." It's the way he was raised. It's the way most of us were raised especially if we grew up in church, in any church. So for my friend, it's belief first, then behavior and then belonging.

But what if belonging comes first, then changed behavior, and then consequent beliefs? I love it when a whole new way of looking at things opens up. It was, I need to say, Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity after Religion* that opened up my eyes to this. She went back to the beginning, back to Jesus, and asked in what order people came to Jesus. Think about it. Did Jesus go around and find some people who had their doctrine and behavior all squared away and then allow them to belong, appoint them apostles? Or did he walk along the Sea of Galilee and invite first this fisherman and then that one, and then a tax collector, to "Follow me."

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week