

Reclaiming the Point

A Vision for Unity

By Brandon Pierce

I want to start talking about Christian unity by telling a story about a time in my life that, so far, very few people besides me has found interesting. I'm not sure that's how rhetorical hooks are supposed to work, but let's give it a try. A couple of years ago I attended the International Thomas Merton Conference – an academic conference centered on the writings of the Trappist (Catholic) monk, Thomas Merton. It was a special conference because it was the centennial of his birthday that year. So they had some bigger names than usual on the docket. The biggest, at least as far as I was concerned, was the renowned theologian, (retired) Anglican archbishop, and wizard-look-alike Rowan Williams. That name may not mean anything to you, but in the world of theology this guy is a big deal. I was excited just to get to hear him speak in person. There are nerds of all stripes, I guess.

At one point in the conference I met up with a friend of mine who is a priest in the Eastern Orthodox Church. He and I had talked some online and were now able to meet in person. He was heading off to lunch and so I joined him. As luck would have it, my Orthodox friend knew Mr. Williams quite well – they had worked together in the past. So after my friend and I found a seat and began eating I suddenly found myself sitting across from the former archbishop of Canterbury and his wizardly eyebrows. I couldn't have been more excited! I introduced myself, he made some jokes about Texas; it was great. I was thrilled to get to have that opportunity to casually meet someone like that. The next day I met up with a couple of other Church of Christ folks who happened to also be attending this (mainly Catholic) conference. We were eating lunch together and I was telling them about my lunch the past day. They were understandably jealous. I was literally in the midst of assuring them that it actually happened when I looked up and saw Mr. Williams walking up the aisle in our direction. I suppose he was looking for a place to sit and I was a face he recognized, so he stopped at our table and asked if one of our empty spots were available. So there we sat: three guys from Churches of Christ, the former Archbishop of Canterbury (Anglican/Episcopal) in a cafeteria of mainly Catholic folks, with a smattering of Lutheran and Orthodox and who knows what else; all of us eating together, talking together, believing each other to be brothers and sisters in Christ, creating a mosaic of the Kingdom of God.

It took me a long time in life to even realize that Churches of Christ were originally founded on the notion of Christian unity. I knew we were all about the Bible and a cappella music and so forth, but it was something of a watershed moment when I realized that the “founders” so-to-speak of our tradition were mainly concerned with Christian unity. Barton Stone dismantled his own presbytery on the grounds of Christian unity saying, “We will that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large” because so long as they were Presbyterian they weren't allowed to fellowship non-Presbyterians. Similarly, Thomas Campbell got into trouble for serving the Lord's Supper to the wrong kinds of Presbyterians! This trouble lead to him forming a group of like-minded “non-denominational” Christians who could cross denominational boundaries. He wrote, “The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one. Consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and have manifest the same by their tempers and conduct,” and later on in the same text he wrote,

Division among Christians is a horrid evil filled with many evils. It's anti-Christian, as it destroys the visible unity of the body of Christ, as if he were divided against himself. It is anti-Scriptural, as being strictly prohibited by his sovereign authority in direct violation of Christ's expressed command, and it's anti-natural as it excites Christians to condemn, to hate, and oppose one another who are bound by the highest and most endearing obligations to love each other as brothers and sisters, even as Christ has loved them.

In these words we find a radical vision of Christian unity that attempts to break down the boundaries we have put up against people who may not think like us or share all of our beliefs. It is a message that still needs to be heard today. But if our tradition got started on such an auspicious foundation...what happened? People do not often associate churches of Christ with unity – usually the opposite. Even so, that impulse remains in our ecclesial DNA, and the church at Stamford is already an extraordinary example of our forefathers' and mothers' desire for unity.

Our age is characterized less by a denominational exclusivism than by a social, political, racial and ideological exclusivism. We don't worry so much what the Catholics down the street are doing so much as we worry what the liberals or conservatives are posting to Facebook. How can our church's legacy of unity help us in an age that is trying its very best to divide us? At the heart of Stone and Campbell's unity movement was the plain and simple insistence that we be unified rather than divided. There is no grand philosophical system, no knock-down argument, no key or secret or magic except that Jesus prayed that "they all may be one" (John 17:22) and the insistence that we do just that even, perhaps especially, when it's hard.

We have to insist that when we show up on Sundays there are people with whom we agree and disagree, and we have to insist on loving and respecting both kinds of folks. We have to insist that our churches are neither exclusively young or old, rich or poor, hetero or homo or trans, White or Black or Asian or Indian or Haitian; not either/or, but both/all/and. Perhaps the fact that the church (in general) is one of the last places where this actually happens is one, among many, reasons that people increasingly lose faith in the church as a place out of which to live their lives. What excites us more than anything about Stamford is that it is one of the few places where we have seen such unity, even when it is hard-won, even when it isn't particularly pretty. There is a beauty in the insistence on unity at Stamford that transcends whatever struggles and hardships involved. May we insist on unity, and so discover what Paul means on a spiritual and social level: "I consider that our present struggles are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

– Brandon Pierce