

PROTAGONIST CORNER

Practical Ecumenism: Lament and Challenge

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I suggest that we begin to pray for Catholic and Episcopal bishops, Baptist clergy, Methodist District Superintendents, and Pentecostal preachers by name in worship on the Lord's Day.

It is a tragedy that ecumenism among major denominations is languishing, if not dying, in the latter part of the 20th Century. Ecumenicity (though not so named) has been real in the 1970's among conservative, independent, and neo-fundamentalist churches and movements, and among charismatics of all persuasions. For the rest of us, fragmentation is the norm.

There are many who now despise and fear the idea of a "super-church." That fear has been nourished by disappointment in and frustration with unresponsive church bureaucracy in every denomination. Often the culture of the church itself has become as standardized and homogenized as the televised world-view of corporate America. Underneath some ecumenical disinterest is a genuine desire to uncover one's own unique heritage as an avenue to decent personhood in the face of continuing depersonalization. Other people think that the issue of church union has prevented forward movement in areas of mission and service; or that church union is a red flag, symbolic only of further divisiveness and fragmentation. It has been—at least for the PCUS. Indeed, it is tragic that we who are Christians take so lightly the prayer of Jesus Christ that all who believe become one.

Yet for the church to speak for peace when her very existence is a testimony to internecine war does not promote belief in a Gospel of reconciliation. For the church to agree at the picket line but disagree at the Lord's Table undermines the very nourishment and calling which leads her to the picket line in the hope of promoting justice. For some Christians to pour energy and time into strengthening themselves at the expense of other Christians does not inspire anyone toward an understanding of the meaning of sacrificial love. For Presbyterians to maintain buildings that require heating and cooling right down the street from Methodists and Baptists and Catholics who do likewise does not lend great credibility to calls for a simple lifestyle from these same Christians who have recently discovered the urgency of energy conservation and its relationship to world hunger.

An Ecumenical Consultation of the PCUS at Kanuga Conference Center in 1975 put before the church two recommendations: there is the urgent demand of the Biblical imperative for visible unity, and our own first step toward that

unity is reunion with the United Presbyterian Church. At present it appears that reunion is lost, or if put to the vote, would bring such division in the PCUS as to make moral nonsense of attempts to further it. One is doubly disadvantaged as a Southern Presbyterian (a much more accurate name than PCUS), for we are twice removed in our talks with Lutherans and Catholics when we cannot get together ourselves.

All those features of our past which we can and ought to celebrate only prove God's greatness: that good can come out of every Nazareth. They prove that God can use the most misguided understandings of Christianity to raise up women and men committed to justice and peace and decency as the legitimate expression of the good news of Jesus Christ in the social order. It is cause for great thankfulness that our denomination can claim thousands of people of integrity and faithfulness in these days when it has not been easy to be either honest or faithful. And yet what other American denomination has any more sordid birth than we: born of a nationalist cause as surely as any state church in Europe, but self-justified at birth as a spiritual act?

And so the lament. Read well the challenge:

As preachers, liturgists, and theologians we have every obligation to pray and act for visible unity with every Christian—not just those with whom we share emotional, cultural, and theological sympathy. Not to do so is to give curious support to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church (which many people worked so hard to defeat in our relationship to the world) as it applies to denominational boundaries. For the One who became flesh for us calls us to take seriously and penitentially those brick and mortar, constitutional and ecclesiastical, extensions of His flesh and ours which are yet the occasion of division instead of unity.

Therefore I suggest we begin to pray for Catholic and Episcopal bishops, Baptist clergy, Methodist District Superintendents, and Pentecostal preachers by name in worship on the Lord's Day. It is especially important that we pray for those from whom we feel alienated. I suggest that we preach regularly (at least as frequently as we are required to celebrate the Lord's Supper) about the achievement of visible unity—there are so many texts that lend themselves quite clearly to this exposition. I suggest that we join or organize groups of Christians across denominational lines who practice as much of the faith as their consciences allow. I suggest that we apply seriously the connectional polity of our church to all Christians, recognizing that we are bound with them in the same broken body. In every local place we can see and move toward those deeper bonds through which the Spirit can give life. I suggest that the laity of the church are years ahead of us in this, that they long for far more ecumenicity than we ever provide leadership. And finally, I suggest that we can all pray from our pulpits for the day when we will no longer be able to afford the emotional or financial luxuries of denominationalism. That day may be moving toward us faster than we know or care to think.