

Beyond Christian Unity
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February 3, 2008

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Wilkes-Barre, PA
Mark 9:38-41

I recently heard about a man who was crossing a bridge. He saw another man standing on the edge, about to jump off. As soon as he saw what was happening, he ran over to the man and cried out,

“Stop. Don’t do it.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” he asked.

“Well, there’s so much to live for,” he replied

“Like what?”

“Well, are you religious or atheist?”

“Religious.”

“Me too. Are you Christian or Jewish?”

“Christian.”

“Me too. Are you Protestant or Catholic?”

“Protestant.”

“Me too. Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?”

“Baptist.”

“Wow. Me too. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?”

“Baptist Church of God.”

“Me too! Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?”

“Reformed Baptist Church of God.”

“Me too. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?”

He said: “Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915.”

With that answer the man yelled out, “Die, heretic scum,” and pushed him off.

This past week marked the 100th anniversary of witnessing to the need for Christian unity – via the week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The joke was, as you easily could figure out, an expression as to how much further we need to go – before we reach some form of Christian Unity. In fact, for many of us who represent particular expressions of the diversity of Christianity, our hope and witness transcends the desire for just Christian Unity, to a rapprochement with other religious faiths, from Judaism, to Islam and beyond.

Many of us have come to realize that Christian Unity is not the mass production of one Super church – where all Christians reflect the same cookie cutter beliefs and cultural heritage. No! It is naïve to seek this type of unity, the belief that one can, or should eradicate ones cultural anchors. Thank God, we have come a long way, from high levels of mistrust, hatred, and misinformation when it comes to major Christian denominations. I’ve shared with you before, about my 1950’s home with a Catholic father and a Presbyterian mother. The 50’s were a time of division and mistrust between Catholics and Protestants. I lived some of it in my own home. Remember my story about years later asking my beloved mother, “didn’t you promise to bring your children up Catholic, when asked by the priest, just before getting married?” Whereupon, my loving and kind mother replied, “Yes, I lied.”

I'm sure my "cultural heritage" has informed my respectful stance toward both major sections of Western Christianity – Catholic and Protestant. And since those shaky 50's, the great Eastern Orthodox Church has come on my radar too!

Thank God for Vatican II! Whatever rethinking is taking place it greatly enriched our culture, and brought us (Americans) closer together.

A week ago Thursday, I once again attended Saint Peter's Cathedral in Scranton, for the annual "Christian Unity Service," where Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Episcopalians, Polish National Catholics, Church of the Nazarene, and more worshipped together. The Bishop of the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America preached the Homily. A Lutheran Bishop in the pulpit, as the Catholic Bishop sits listening but 15 feet away! At the luncheon in the rectory, I sat and conversed with an Assembly of God Pentecostal, and the Bishop of the National Catholic Church.

Also, according to yesterday's New York Times; last week, almost 15,000 Baptists from 30 Baptist associations gathered in Atlanta (as they describe the event), to put aside theological and political differences to commit themselves to Jesus' call to help the poor.

Allow me to briefly expand this vision, of unity. Not naïve, but constructive unity.

One of my favorite biblical texts is Mark 9:38-41. Thank God it's there!! For all the narrow parochialism that certain Biblical texts have been used to exclude – to the point of hatred and violence – thank God for the few texts like this that give us a glance that difference is not degenerate!

How progressive, this Jesus!!

"Teacher, teacher – we saw this stranger doing good things, using your name! You know what we did? In no uncertain terms, we read him the riot act, and told him to cease and desist from doing any more good deeds. He asks why. We asked, "Are you one of the 12?" He said, "No!" "Then we dissed him good!"

Off the bridge he went!

And Jesus, the Ecumenist, insisted his own disciples cease and desist from anymore ridiculous and harmful behavior! "Fellows, how thick are you? If he is doing good using my name – what's the beef? Hey, pay attention! Read my lips!" No new...(oh, wait – wrong speech)

"He who is not against us is for us!"

My friends you know that religion in our world is on the rise. The secularization theory of the past few generations – was wrong. Religion is on the increase!

Even beyond the divisions in our own Christian Faith, we have much to be concerned about in our relations with other religions – especially Islam. Listen to how "An Open Letter to Call From Muslim Religious Leaders to ...multiple Christian Leaders begins (recently written) – "Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians."

These Islamic leaders have said it. "The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians." Western Politicians, Intellectuals, Clergy, you in the pews, need to play catch up on the history, cultures, theology(ies?), and mindset(s) of the Islamic religion.

We must go beyond Christian unity, and expand our reach to others who offer “good deeds” in the name of their God and prophets/leaders. We also must learn who is not against us and who is.

Our work is cut out for us. May we offer the cup of understanding, and may we receive the cup of understanding.

Then all will receive God’s reward!

Amen.