

WHAT KIND OF UNITY?

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2007

In 1957 the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church united to form the United Church of Christ. What an odd couple! How did two denominations so apparently different in ethnicity, regionalism, socio-economic class, history, and liturgy, get together? When we consider that each of these two denominations was a recent merger of two denominations, the diversity becomes all the more remarkable. Congregational and Christian movements came together in 1931. The Evangelical Synod of North America and the Reformed Church in the United States merged in 1934. What did these four groups see in each other?

The answer lies within the motto of the newly formed United Church of Christ, "That they may all be one." (John 17:21). All four groups had a passionate desire for Christian unity. A 1934 study of American denominations ranked the Reformed Church, Congregational Christian Churches, and the Evangelical Synod, one, two, and four, respectively, in favorable attitudes toward church union. This was what they held in common. However, their beliefs about unity differed. An examination of these four understandings of catholicity (Christian unity) can broaden our understanding of unity, and of some of the tensions that have existed in the United Church of Christ. In the second and third decades of the Twentieth Century, spokespersons of the four groups articulated their understandings of catholicity in

published articles. These articles reveal the attitudes toward unity that shaped the United Church of Christ.

Evangelical Synod

The Evangelical Synod grew out of the labors of European missionary societies among German Americans. These societies believed, “that the subdivision of the one Evangelical Church into different denominations is an aspect of human limitedness.”¹ Many of the Evangelical Synod members came from “unionist” churches in Germany. These were churches formed in 1817 and afterwards by the union of Lutheran and Reformed state churches. In liturgy, polity, and denominational identity, the Evangelical Synod and its members were overwhelmingly Lutheran. But this was a Lutheranism that valued spirituality and service to the world over doctrinal purity.

Julius Horstman (1869-1954), editor of the Evangelical Synod’s English language paper from 1906 to 1939, wrote several articles in the *Evangelical Herald* in 1917, under the title “That They May All Be One.”² This series commemorated the 400th anniversary of the Reformation and the 100th anniversary of the Evangelical Union in Germany. For Horstman the distinctive mark of the Evangelical Synod was Christian unity. Horstman’s vision of unity began with the unity of God and continued through the unity of Creation to “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” and finally to “one body and one spirit” (*Ephesians* 4:4-6). He concluded,

. . . unity is God’s fundamental law. . . . We believe in the one body of Christian believers because there is one God, one creation, one revelation, one race of men

and one way to salvation. Anything less than one body of believers, the true unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, would be contradictory to the very being of God and to His whole plan and purpose for mankind and the world.³

Horstman saw this unity wherever he looked:

The whole earth, the arrangement of land and water, the passing of the seasons, the adaptation of the products of the earth and sea to the needs of men and animals, the laws of nature working together in perfect harmony, the heavenly bodies traversing their gigantic orbits with unerring precision for thousands of years, certainly present a marvelous unity of plan and providence down to the most infinite detail.⁴

From this perspective the issues that divided Christians were insignificant. True unity began with the Spirit:

The greater our loyalty to Jesus Christ, the more tolerant do we become toward the opinions and beliefs of others who are also sincerely loyal to Him, and the more pronounced will be the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace which leads to the highest degree of cooperation and service.⁵

The Evangelical Synod did not seek the false unity of uniformity; rather it celebrated the diversity that existed in a Synod united in Christ. Horstman pointed to practical symptoms of division— inefficiency and ineffectiveness— but the underlying issue was always spiritual. Councils of Churches and cooperation were only the first steps toward the union God intends.

The Evangelical Synod valued the creeds of the Reformation and its own *Evangelical Catechism* for their teaching value, but it opposed a confessionalism that treated any humanly composed creed as infallible. God's vision of unity in the church would come as people focused on Christ. "The larger the Cross of Christ looms up, the more the differences of doctrine fades into insignificance."⁶

Congregational

Williston Walker (1860-1922), Newman Smyth (1843-1925) and Raymond Calkins (1869-1967) outlined Congregationalist views of catholicity in *Approaches Toward Church Unity*⁷ in 1919. Hubert C. Herring (1859-1920) wrote "The Congregational Churches and Unity," which appeared in a multi-denominational collection, *Christian Unity: Its Principles and Possibilities*⁸ in 1921. All four of these men were influential leaders in the Congregational community. Walker was professor of Church History at Yale. Newman Smyth, the center of controversy in 1881 when he was rejected from the faculty of Andover Seminary for his liberal views, served as pastor of First Church, New Haven, for twenty-six years. Calkins had served churches in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Portland, Maine, and Cambridge, Massachusetts. Herring, formerly General Secretary of the Congregational Home Missionary Society, was from 1914 to 1920 the Secretary of the National Council of Congregational Churches.

The Congregationalists who founded the churches of New England had no intention of starting a new denomination. Most of the Puritan settlers of New England were not Separatists. They considered themselves faithful members of the Church of

England. They were planting the one catholic church, in its purified form, on American soil. As Congregationalists moved west from New England they cooperated with Presbyterians and often became Presbyterians, believing their differences were not sufficient to justify competing congregations. Congregationalists followed their own customs, but did not wish to become a distinct denomination. They carried out their work through voluntary societies in which any like-minded people could participate.

Herring traced the reluctant journey of Congregationalists through the Nineteenth Century to denominationalism, even as they protested with pronouncements of Christian unity every step of the way. In Herring's view, the Plan of Union with Presbyterians and the voluntary societies failed as experiments in catholicity because they were premature. Ironically, Congregationalists had to organize as a denomination before they could effectively pursue union with others: "Definite inner unity must precede effective outward co-operation."⁹

Walker and Calkins attacked some cherished Congregational traditions which presented barriers to union. In opposition to the Congregational habit of reading its polity into the New Testament and considering it normative, Walker argued that the evidence was insufficient; the church does not have a normative form of church government, but adapts to its environment. Calkins urged the re-introduction of the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, not to be interpreted literally, but as signs of unity with the church in all times and places.

All four Congregational writers saw the church as an evolving organism, rooted in the past, but changing as it adapted to new situations. Herring wrote,

It is wholly certain that each denomination must reach the point where it is ready to cast aside its name and all other unessentials in the interest of the higher ends sought. In like way it must be prepared for the sake of those ends to accept forms and methods wholly out of line with its past, provided always they do not involve disloyalty to conviction of truth or the sense of duty.¹⁰

Christian

The Christian Connection arose on the American frontier in the early Nineteenth Century as a reaction against denominationalism. From this Christian perspective, division arose most frequently from the action of synods and the imposition of creeds. The Christian Connection rejected both and called on people to unite with the Bible as their only creed and “Christian” as their only name.

Alva Martin Kerr (1875-1928), a minister of the Christian denomination, edited the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* from 1919 to 1928. Through its pages he raised his voice loud and clear for the social gospel, for peace, and for tolerance. But first of all he spoke for Christian unity:¹¹

Never yet has the Church made any honest attempt to study the matter of denominational division from the standpoint of Christ’s own opinion and desire. His will on the subject has never been sought by more than an occasional disciple.¹²

Christ's opinion and desire "that they may all be one," was for the Bible-believing Christian a command to be pursued with urgency and passion. Denominationalism was for Kerr a "curse" and a "sin." Denominationalism was not simply inefficient, it was wrong. Christian unity was not an incidental, but should be considered "first in every discussion of the church's obligation and duty."¹³

However Kerr did not support unity under any circumstances. Some efforts for union were misguided. He wrote, "Simply uniting with another church may not promote Christian union at all."¹⁴ Obedience to the will of Christ had nothing to do with large corporate organizations and everything to do with "the very character of Jesus Christ and the very genius and process of his gospel and the objectives and purposes of his kingdom."¹⁵

Reformed

In the Nineteenth Century the German Reformed Church had been radically altered by a theological movement named for the town in which its seminary was located: the Mercersberg Movement. Theologians John Nevin and Philip Schaff did not look upon the church as a collection of individuals. It was an "organism," an entity in its own right. As an organism it confessed its faith, it worshiped God, and it nurtured its young into faith. This organism gradually evolved from the past into the present and future. Christian unity had something to do with the unity of the church of the present with the church of the past as well as with other Christians of the current day. The church was not frozen in its past; through the working of the Spirit it would evolve into something new, while not rejecting its past.

George W. Richards (1895-1955), as professor of Church History at Lancaster Seminary (1899-1920), President of the seminary (1920-39) and President of the Evangelical and Reformed Church (1934-39), led his church into union.¹⁶

Richards revealed his Mercersburg Theology when in 1912 he rejected the proposed union with Presbyterians¹⁷ as an absorption. Richards described what he understood by truly organic union:

When two churches . . . by virtue of deep spiritual experiences . . . have brought them into closer fellowship with the Christ and have deepened and widened their Christian consciousness to such an extent that the new life can no longer be contained in the old forms, and that the two bodies by spontaneous spiritual attractions are brought into one, then we shall have union without evasion, compromise, annihilation, or a one-sided sacrifice of the smaller body. Then both churches will become something different from what they were, without losing the essential truth for which they stood; they will rather conserve the old and combine it with the new truth that is continually breaking forth from God's Word, and welling up in the hearts of His people. Out of the two there will come a new organism with a new life and a new name. A union on any other basis is doomed to be a mere coalition, a merger, and a forensic transaction without spiritual value.¹⁸

In 1926 Richards explained that a church is both a corporation and an organism. Corporate union was meaningless without organic union:

The churches must cease to be what they were separately, and become something other than they were, in the union. A new organism, containing the substance of the organisms that are united, must be created; and such creative power must come from God.¹⁹

Richards was not counseling passivity. Churches needed to stop resisting the Spirit, which was working for union, and instead flow with it, into spiritual transformation and a united church.

Reflections

As ardently as these four communities hungered for unity, they would not accept unity at any price. The Evangelical Synod did not participate in Lutheran mergers because that would mean the rejection of its unionist beliefs.²⁰ The Reformed Church rejected a union with Presbyterians which would have been absorption.²¹ And Congregationalists finally gave up on getting an agreement with Episcopalians to share clergy in small communities.²² Congregationalist Newman Smyth reflected, “What we desire to see is not grudging concession, but a willing acceptance of the treasures of each for the common enrichment of the united church.”²³

The United Church of Christ is diverse, even in our understanding of unity! Christian unity can be simple obedience to the command of Christ. Or it can be a desire for harmony with the very being of God. It may be the healing of historic

separations that were never intended. It could become the flowing together of many traditions into a new organism. However understood, the desire for organic church union was essential to the nature of the church. It had to be a “unity of the Spirit,” not just a corporate merger. Although rooted in the past, it was to be a new creation, requiring the sacrifice of some cherished traditions.

NOTES

1. Quoted in David Georg Gelzer, “Mission to America: Being a History of the Work of the Basel Foreign Missionary Society in America” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, New Haven, Ct, 1952), 50n. Translated by Stan Ehrlic.
2. Julius H. Horstman, “That They May All Be One” *Evangelical Herald* 16:13:4-6; 16:18:5-6; 16:22:5-6; 16:26:5-6; 16:30:5-6; 16:35:5-6,8; 16:39:5-6,8. See also by Julius Horstman, “What Does the Evangelical Synod Stand For?” *Evangelical Herald* 16:31 (2 Aug 1917):1; and “The Unity of the Spirit” *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* 47:2 (Mar 1919):119-25.
3. *Evangelical Herald* 16:18 (3 May 1917):4.
4. Ibid.
5. *Evangelical Herald* 16:18 (3 May 1917):6.
6. *Evangelical Herald* 16:30 (26 Jul 1917):6.
7. Newman Smyth and Williston Walker, eds., *Approaches Toward Church Unity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919).
8. Robert E. Speer, chairman, The Committee on the War and the Religious Outlook, *Christian Unity: Its Principles and Possibilities* (New York: Association Press, 1921).
9. Speer, 47.
10. Speer. 52.
11. Articles by Alva M. Kerr in *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* on the subject of Christian unity include: “Certain Other Principles Touching Union” (10 Jan 1924):27-29; “Is Competition the

Life of the Church?" (15 Apr 1925):363-64; "The Ominous Silence of the Churches and Religious Periodicals" (6 Sep 1923):843-44; "Practicing Our Present Unity" (12 Mar 1925):243-44; "Two Principles Touching Union" (22 Nov 1923):1107-10; "Working Toward Christian Unity" (4 Feb 1926):88-89.

12. *Herald of Gospel Liberty* (6 Sep 1923):843.

13. Quoted in Alfred Wesley Hurst, *The Fun of Being an Editor: The Life and Work of Alva Martin Kerr, Editor of The Herald of Gospel Liberty, 1919-1928*. [Elon College, N.C., 1976], 36.

14. *Herald of Gospel Liberty* 4 Feb 1926: 88.

15. *Herald of Gospel Liberty* 12 Mar 1925: 243.

16. See the following articles by George W. Richards: "The Reformed Church in the Twentieth Century" *Reformed Church Messenger* 99:1 (3 Jan 1901):2-3; "The Report of the Committee on Closer Union with the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A." *Reformed Church Review* 4th series, 16:1 (1912):95-111; "The Historical Significance of Denominationalism" *Reformed Church Review* 4th series, 23 (1919): 92-102; "Is Church Union Attainable?" *The Crozier Quarterly* 3:4 (Oct 1926): 387-402.

17. George W. Richards, "Joint Report of Union," and "Report . . . on the Closer Union with the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A." *Living Theological Heritage*, ed. Barbara Brown Zikmund (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001) vol 6, selection 47.

18. Richards, "Report of the Committee," 109.

19. Richards, "Is Church Union Attainable?" 398.

20. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Where Shall We Go?" *Living Theological Heritage*, vol. 4, selection 61.

21. Richards, "Joint Report," and "Report" *Living Theological Heritage* vol 6, selection 47.

22. "The Lenox Proposal." *Living Theological Heritage*, vol. 6, selection 8. Smyth and Walker, "A Statement of the Views . . . on the Church, the Eucharist, and the Ministry." *Living Theological Heritage* vol. 6, selection 9.

23. Smyth and Walker, *Approaches Toward Church Unity*, 159.

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