

A Reflection on Mission, Unity and Other Things

I write this in the week of celebrations surrounding Great Communion Sunday. Once again I have been reminded of the beginnings of the Stone-Campbell Movement around the Declaration and Address, of aspects of our deeper story, including the plea central to our movement's beginnings, summarized so succinctly by Gordon Stirling: 'pleading for the unity of all Christians by restoring New Testament Christianity, in order to win the world for Christ'.

That unity aspect of our 'plea' has always been a unity of the whole church of Christ on earth, under the Lordship of Christ, and through the manifestation of New Testament practices. We have always been comfortable being involved in interchurch conversations, often taking a lead above and beyond the size of our 'tribe', because of our freedom, flexibility and imagination. These ecumenical conversations are seen as an evidence of our movement's story being lived out; but usually only as one step towards the fulfilment of the second part of Jesus' words in John 17: ...'that we all may be one...that the world may know'.

Ecumenism is a Christian experience, a gathering together of like-minded and like-Spirited individuals and communities, who share a unity deeper than some of the diverse ways their worship and mission and ministry is expressed, all with the purpose of celebrating and proclaiming the Kingdom. Healthy ecumenism is spacious enough for 'tribal' distinctives to be held on to (and indeed to be celebrated), all within the soil of all that is held in common about God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, best discovered in a living faith relationship with Jesus. This type of ecumenism has little room for a 'dumbing down' of the uniqueness of Christ and his central, crucial role in the salvation story. Respect is diminished when one tribe's distinctives are hidden or underplayed.

The same is true of inter-faith conversations. We do little to enhance the conversation's meaning and purpose when our Christian distinctives are allowed to be lost in the messy sea of a vague god-ianity or Universalist spirituality that downplays or dismisses the place of Jesus Christ. However nice it might make us feel, we most fully give and receive respect in those conversations when we communicate our distinctives, in warm, transparent, non-judgemental yet courageous ways, as we would expect others to also do with their story. We must never lose sight of the reality that Christianity is an evangelistic faith. However, it must be said that there is still value in interfaith conversations, as long as we recognize them for what they are, and not for what they are not.

Dr David Wilson, a former Melbourne City Councillor (part of MCC when it made the decision re PWR) and former Principal of Kingsley College (Wesleyan), put it this way to me last week:

'In a nutshell, I regard the PWR as a sociological exercise before it is a theological or spiritual one.

Religions are sociological constructs and they are here to stay. In their best forms they have good values and a lot of common ground and we can do a lot of good in the world through working together in that common ground. It's not a *truth question* for me.

My theological 'OK' for this is Paul on Mars Hill (Acts 17). He found some good common ground from which to work.'

I'm all for healthy ecumenism. It may not always get my best energies, but it gets a fair bit some weeks. I am also committed to restoring New Testament Christianity, and to effective, authentic, contextual, mission and evangelism. These activities don't always get my best energies either. But each is central to my Churches of Christ roots. My life and work is often built around discovering a balance of these important things.

I don't put much time into interfaith dialogue, even the type described above, some, but not very much. I am aware however of others who do, people who become gracious representatives of our Christian distinctives, and not-so-secret-agents of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. I encourage these people in their mission and ministry. Public events like December's Parliament of World Religions needs people who will so respect others involved in the event by telling the Christian story honestly, openly and with courage (in the same way that others will tell their story...).

It may be helpful to also reflect on a related comment from Sharon Watkins, General Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), who, when selected to give the sermon at the National Prayer Service that wrapped up the Presidential inauguration week activities in January, a service designed to celebrate America's diversity of faith, made this statement:

'I am truly honored to speak at this historic occasion. My prayer when I preach is always that God will use me to bring a Gospel message that is uplifting and appropriately challenging to those who hear it. I hope that my message will call us to believe in something bigger than ourselves and remind us to reach out to all of our neighbours to build communities of possibility.'

My learnings (so far!) about all this?

- Let's be involved in the mission of our Lord Jesus Christ. And let us have the conversation/s that will help us be clear about what mission is; and what mission isn't. Texts like Matthew 28:19-20, John 13:34-35, Acts 1:8, Acts 2:38, John 14:6, Acts 4:1-12, Matthew 5-7, Micah 6:6-8 (among many others) help us clarify mission.
- Let's be in a range of ecumenical conversations, communicating the Stone-Campbell story and its distinctives, without arrogance or superiority, but simply as another way of being the people of God in New Testament ways in these days, and of expressing unity in that diversity. Let's find and celebrate common ground, and at the same time maintain and communicate our distinctives.
- Let's be in conversations beyond our more familiar Christian tribes and groupings. Let's not however mistake these conversations as 'unity', or a restoration of New Testament Christianity; let's realize what they actually are, healthy conversations with people who share some moral and other values, as well as a commitment to a human cohesion and peace (or 'shalom') of communities and nations. Again, let's find and celebrate common ground, and at the same time affirm and communicate the distinctives of our Christian faith and worldview in word and deed.
- In other words, in those latter conversations, let's echo the model of the Apostle Paul on Mars Hill in Athens (see Acts 17:16ff), and in every situation be ever ready to, with bold sensitivity and clarity, present 'an account of the hope that is within us', the story of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that we have been invited into and included within, and that all the world is invited into too.

**Paul Cameron
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