

Cry for Unity

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Restoring the Radical Edge

'Like Christ', but what does that really mean?

Someone once said that 'Jesus put a face on God' by coming amongst people and touching, lifting, embracing and caring for them in their hurts and needs. As we embrace Christ's radical mission, recognising that the Father sends us even as he sent Jesus, [Jn 20:21] then we too wear the face of God in our generation. It's still God's intention to walk into our cities, towns and rural areas touching and lifting the fallen, broken, hurting and dying of humanity. We must refuse to fossilise if we're to avoid becoming a church 'having form without power'. [2Ti 3:5]

As the 'future church' we need to strip ourselves of any unacceptable religious overlays obscuring God's love for people. This is imperative as we are faced with a generation with little idea of who Jesus is. Most unbelievers see the Christ the church portrays as so gentlemanly in behaviour and attitude, wanting to be at peace with everyone and please all, that Jesus the revolutionary teacher, the controversial prophet, the passionate preacher, and the implacable opponent of religious hypocrisy has been obliterated. As the late Anglican Archbishop William Temple once remarked, 'why any man should have troubled to crucify the Christ of liberal Protestantism has always been a mystery.' [1]

In reality Christ, the supreme restorer, was the most radical man that ever walked the earth. The people of his day recognised an authority in his teaching - an authority previously unseen. [Mt 7:29] He was the first of a new order of mankind. His incisive and unapologetic preaching concerning the demands of the kingdom of God incensed the Pharisees, Sadducees, lawyers, and other representatives of the power structures of his time .

When Christ entered the Temple at the commencement of his ministry and found the outer courts turned into a market place, he wasn't just a little 'put out' by the fact the Gentiles had been expelled from this area - a place designated by God as a place of prayer for Gentiles (all nations). He did not say to himself, 'oh, I must report this offence to be discussed at the next Temple business meeting'. Jesus exploded with fiery, prophetic passion and drove the merchandisers out with a whip of chords. [Jn 2:15] He confronted hypocrisy head on while warning his disciples against its insidious creeping deception, [Lu 12:1] Jesus constantly challenged attitudes that obscured the heart of God, and forced legalists to show themselves for what they were in the process. Walking with his disciples through the cornfields on the Sabbath knowing they would eat from the corn [Lu 6:1]; healing on the Sabbath day knowing it would offend the priests [Mt 12:11-12]; prophesying

the destruction of the Temple from its own steps, and then speaking of rebuilding it in three days knowing they would not understand he was speaking of his own body in death and resurrection [Mt 26:61]; all these provocative actions were undertaken with the full awareness that they would provoke angry inflexible legalistic responses from the religious hierarchy.

What is our response to religious legalism and hypocrisy in the church today? How much longer will we tolerate the intolerable, support the unsupportable, negotiate the non-negotiable? Should we blindly and unquestioningly continue to do this? How much longer will we continue to financially support self-declared homosexuals as bishops and priests in churches? Or entrust our money to churches with investments in the arms industry; or in corporations exploiting 'cheap' labour in third world countries? Or salary priests who deny the Virgin birth or resurrection of Jesus Christ? Is it not time for passionate prophetic confrontation again?

Jesus calls us to embrace a radical lifestyle to follow him as true children of the kingdom. On meeting the rich young ruler who 'trusted in his riches', he demanded that the man sell everything and give the money to the poor [Mt 19:16-26; Lu 18:18-27]. The problem was not simply that the man possessed wealth but Jesus saw that the man's wealth possessed him. Jesus was saying, 'Am I sufficient for you if everything else was gone, would you be content in your relationship with me, or am I one more amongst your many possessions?' His was a call to radical discipleship. Submission to Christ as Lord, breaks the hold of materialism on you. Peoples' pursuit of money, and other material things so frequently sears conscience, undermine intentions, blunt testimony, and neutralises zeal. We are to be stewards not slaves of possessions. It does not matter that Paul said the world is 'passing away' [1Co 7:31]. Our eyes are fixed beyond the material for the prize of our high calling in Christ (Phil.3;14)

Jesus' radical actions were not moments of human weakness or intolerance, but expressions of God's heart. Radical Christianity will always be passionate, jealous as well as zealous, and white hot for the divine interests involved.

Let me be clear: deliberately disruptive, contentious, odd, or anarchistic behaviour is not being radical. The message of restoration is radical in the sense that it goes to the roots or the fundamentals of an issue. When used in this sense, non-radical Christianity is a contradiction in terms. The thrust of the Spirit in our time is prompting the church to return to its roots in order to go forward to God's ultimate intention.

It is radical to pursue the genuine objective of rediscovering our true foundations - the bedrock of our conviction of faith in Christ - and uncompromisingly advance from there to overcome every obstacle in our way. We have to retrain our minds to think right about God and destroy the wrong mental images we have of him. He is not dour, angry, or quick to judge but neither is he a genial, smiling Santa Claus in the heavens. He is as Christ is. To see Christ is to see the Father. Jesus 'brought' the invisible God into visible being.

What About Our Traditions?

When restorers say it is important to discard traditions to rediscover authentic Christianity, this needs clarification, what tradition are we talking about. The word tradition literally means to 'hand on', and is used in its broadest sense to describe the process by which the faith is 'handed on' to each new generation. Prayer for the sick, laying on of hands, anointing with oil, the Eucharist, baptism - all are biblical traditions essential to the understanding, practice and outworking of authentic Christianity. In this sense, we refer to them collectively as the Tradition (upper case). Paul uses the word Tradition in this sense when referring to the Eucharist as he handed on what he had received as an essential element of the gospel. [1Co 11:23]

Other traditions (lower case) are customary ways different groups have of doing things, often peculiar to themselves. These are not part of the Tradition and should not be imposed upon other Christians or groups. For example, various expressive ways of worship, dancing, clapping etc. or the celebration of special days that are meaningful for a particular church but not necessarily for others. These traditions should be examined in the light of Scripture. Restorers call for the keeping of Tradition and a re-examination of all lesser traditions as to whether they should be continued or discarded. This is nowhere better expressed than by Richard P. McBrien who said, 'If a tradition cannot be rejected or lost without essential distortion of the gospel, it is part of Tradition itself. If a tradition is not essential (i.e. if it does not appear, for example, in the New Testament, or if it is not clearly taught as essential to Christian faith), then it is subject to change or even elimination.[2]

Radical Politics

People sometimes ask, 'Should the church meddle in political issues?'; but the fact that politics is about the use of power over people means the church is already involved. Politics affects people, which makes it an issue for the church. The question is not whether as Christians we should or should not be involved with politics but rather what issues should we be most concerned with, and what is the wisest course of action to be taken to express our convictions in this matter? As John Neuhaus has said, 'to build a world in which the strong are just, and power is tempered by mercy, in which the weak are nurtured and the marginal embraced, and those at the entrance gates and those at the exit gates of life are protected by both law and love.[3]

However, we also know that the working of the Spirit goes deeper than the reformation of political agendas or society and its institutions. God's purpose goes to the very transformation of the heart of man. The radical gospel recognises the fact that the cultural lifestyle of society is the consequence of the corporate action and convictions of man. That is why restoration calls for righteousness and justice in public life.

Although I have stated that being radical should not be seen as synonymous with social rebellion, that does not mean we are to isolate ourselves from the socio-

political debates on race, homelessness, abortion, gender, genetic engineering and the many other issues of our day. We recognise that the fundamental nature of our gospel will not allow us to be escapists; rather, it demands we radically involve in our times. In 1978 Gordon MacDonald said, 'for almost 70 or 80 years, the consistent typical preaching from our pulpits has been eschatological and prophetic, and we have trained our people to think "bail out" and to avoid serious responsibility for the world in which we live.' [4] It has not greatly changed since then. We must change our thinking in this area. Escapism is never an option; Jesus showed us that through his life and preaching. God demands involvement. The Cross is the ultimate proof of God's involvement.

An example of being radical in the right way is our response to poverty. Being radical does not mean we abandon all wealth in order to identify with the poor or oppressed. Becoming impoverished does not help the poor. Scripture tells us poverty is like a bandit, and that the poor are vulnerable to oppression. [Pr 16:11; Ecc 5:8] Let's reject the sentimentality that gives rise to hypocritical middle class clichés that speak of the 'blessing' of poverty, it's a curse, ask anyone who is poor. Instead, let's work together to set the poor free. Why imprison ourselves in the chains of poverty when we need to be free to deliver the poor from theirs? We are radical when we actively address the root causes of people's poverty and prophetically confront the powers that enslave. There is no need for poor to remain poor in our present world. It is the lack of compassion, etc. injustice and international self-interest, encouragement of debt and other factors. We must be different in the Christian community and prophetically challenge our world. That will possibly mean incurring the wrath of the very oppressors from which we seek to liberate others.

How Drastic Must The Changes Be?

The paradigms of many things are changing in this generation, and are no longer sufficient for what presently is, or for what is coming. We must escape the ruts of settling for the average, of accepting conventional wisdom, of falling prey to 'group think'. We must do more than merely think of changing; we must change our way of thinking. The changes God's people face are not cosmetic ones - they are fundamental, and will consequently prove much more disruptive than merely altering programmes, styles or objectives. This is why many people in historic/traditional denominations get angry. They see the proclamation of God's radical church as a frontal assault upon the denominational/ non-denominational church that they love and have grown up in. They do not want things to change; they want things to remain as they have always been. But change is an absolute necessity in our historic time frame. God has said that 'in the last days' he will 'shake all things . . .', and this with the intention that only the unshakeable will be able to stand. Having said this he immediately announces what it is that will survive the end time shaking; namely, the kingdom of God. [He 12:26-27] The kingdom of God is not merely a teaching, a theology, or a phrase; it is the present dynamic

reality of God's rule in this time/space world. Consequently, life in the kingdom of God is a radical experience.

We are being radical when:

- We embrace the gospel that joins us to others and their need, and cuts us free from the destructive influence of our independent self-will. (Rom. 12:4,5)
- We embrace the consequences of following his direction and Spirit regardless of consequences, which frees us from self-preservation and the fear of death. (Acts 4:18,19)
- We maintain a pioneering attitude rather than settling in self-comfort zones; we are pilgrims, not settlers. (Heb. 11:13-16)
- We live free of the slavish domination of the material and the temporal. Money can enslave; decisions, actions, directions, relationships, even ministry can be controlled by the desire for the temporal or money. (1 Tim.6:10)
- We confidently confront the powers of darkness that oppose us rather than allowing them to paralyse us in fear. (Mark 16:17)
- We do not wait for others to do what we can and should do for ourselves. It is not for us to wait for something to be done by others but for us to make it happen. (Gal.6:5)
- We refuse to compromise the truth to accommodate religious externalism, or protect any position or status we may have gained. (Acts 4:18,19)
- We remain resolutely committed to Christ as head of the church and refuse to fossilise in religious institutionalism. (Col.1:18; Gal.5:1)
- We live by faith finding our security in God's faithfulness to his word rather than in what we see. It is in this way that we experience the law of the Spirit: 'man does not live on bread alone but every word that comes from the mouth of God'.[Mt 4:4]

Isaiah presents the word of God as a living, active power package; when it leaves God's mouth it is on a purposeful 'round- trip' journey - and God will not allow it to return until it has accomplished the purpose for which it was sent.[Is 55:11] Every believer can be secure in this knowledge: if a word has been received from God, a word concerning family life, social relationships, ministry, church, health, finances, present, future - whatever; if that word has not yet come about, it still remains in force. God will not allow his word to terminate short of its purpose.

As restorers we are called to live out a vision not live in a dream. The radical message of restoration is a call to stand in the liberty we have received in Christ. Isaiah's prophecy concerning Jerusalem in the last days was that she would rise up, shake the dust from her garments and release herself from the yoke round her neck. In other words, she was to take radical action on her own behalf.[Is 52:1-2] We must throw off the chains of false prophecies - as well as our own past wrongs

and mistakes for which we've repented and found forgiveness, and pursue the fullness of God's purpose for our lives.

Tomorrow's world will be ruled by the radical men and women of today's world, who live - as their spiritual forefathers did - in the light of God's purpose.
Locked Into The Past Or Liberating The Future?

Whenever a new move of the Spirit brings revelation to the body of Christ, there are always voices raised in opposition, 'prophesying' that it will eventually amount to little - since (they say) that is what has historically happened throughout previous generations.

As an organised movement, Pharisaism is traceable to the Maccabean period; but according to some scholars, it actually began as a restorationist movement in the days of the prophet Ezra. It was born in a season of revival as Israel returned to the land after 70 years of captivity in Babylon. The early Pharisees were zealous to continue Ezra's work of restoring the word of God to a central place in the life and experience of Israel, and were committed to purging Israel of all the evil practices espoused while in captivity. However, in process of time their commitment gave way to hypocritical externalism and a legalistic bondage to the letter of the law until some of them were among the prime movers in having Jesus killed.

Two thousand years of history since Christ has seen this tragedy repeated many times, with revival movements of one generation threatened by the 'new thing' and in fear of being undermined or overtaken they oppose God's visitation on this new generation. A thing only remains new if it continues to express new life from the heart. Jesus spoke of the necessity of keeping new wine in new wineskins, showing the need for continuing flexibility. He wasn't talking about a new experience of the Holy Spirit, expressing itself in new songs and ways in the congregation. A close examination of the passage reveals that he was responding to a question about why his disciples were not fasting. His response likened the disciples to new wine, which must not be poured into old wineskins. He was saying, in effect, that they must not allow themselves to fossilise in old patterns, forms and expressions of life. (Mar.2:18-22) We are already being poured into old wineskins if our concerns are locked into refining, redefining, restating and protecting what we already have instead of continuing to progress towards what lies before us. As the new wine of God we must not allow the expectations and intimidation of others to pour us into old religious patterns and forms. We are not called to conform to the old but to advance in the new. Restoration is only restoration if it continues to restore. Religious externalism is a terminal practice; its forms, methods, and practices are the death throes of that which was once vibrant with life.

As we enter the third millennium there is now a great possibility that everything will take new shape in this generation. It will be nearer what God is after than ever before: Christ in power in the streets of life, in peoples' homes and workplace, with the miracle of God's transforming power healing the minds and bodies of men and women. Hundreds of thousands around the world turning to Christ and all of this

outside the exclusive context of religious buildings and meetings. The main church concerns will not be the building programme, mission development, music ministry, etc.; but the power of God manifest amongst his people, his Spirit and word meeting their deep longing for spirituality. The people of God will no longer criticise or compete with each other, but unified in love will continue to move towards maturity as apostles, prophets and teachers live and minister amongst them.

The Cry For Unity

Whether it wants to or not, everything in history is moving, towards unification in Christ, the purpose of this ultimate fullness will continue to unfold in the age to come; but having tasted of the powers of the age to come, we should be manifesting the ultimate unification in Christ in this present age. The cosmic order of the age to come is the life of the Spirit infusing and ordering the life of God's people today. The manifestation of the unity of human society - longed for amongst the nations and foretold by the prophets – is that to which the church is called to now. (Jn.17:21)

Throughout successive generations testimony to the continuing desire for unity has run like a deep river of hope within the heart of the Christian church. Burdened voices have been raised in prophetic intercession for the working of God's Spirit to bring his people to unity. Richard Baxter, an outstanding Puritan pastor, wrote: 'no part of my prayers are so deeply serious as that for the conversion of the infidel and ungodly world. . . . [and] except the case of the infidel world, nothing is so sad and grievous to my thoughts as the case of the divided churches. . . .' [5]

The restorer's radical message and stance angers those with vested interest in the status quo or those desiring the continuation of their undisturbed comfort zones. Many claim that pursuing the unity of the church is at best wishful thinking, and at worst a devious ploy calculated to cause further division of the body by drawing people out of the traditional historical denominations and into obscure restorationist cults. They strongly assert that the unity we preach can only come about following the return of Christ; they vigorously claim that history is against unity happening this side of Christ's return. If this is true, then we must inevitably conclude:

History is sovereign. God is no longer God over all, but God is subject to the inevitability of history; therefore, history ultimately reigns.

Jesus' prayer for the church to be one will remain unfulfilled. This will have dire consequences, for Jesus plainly stated that the unity of the church would be the trigger for the world to believe. [Jn 17:21-22] If unity can only come after his return, then it will be too late for the world to believe, for his return is to bring judgment to the world and not a new opportunity for salvation. [Jude 1:14-15]

There will be no triumphant church to greet the Lord in his coming. Rather, a beleaguered remnant of surviving believers, defeated and divided, waiting to be rescued and suddenly transformed into perfection by the power of Christ in his coming.

Christ's bride, the church, will not be ready for the wedding supper since she will still be clothed in garments spotted by the world.

The unity of the faith will not have been attained, and the fullness of Christ will remain out of reach.

The 'Restoration' of all things spoken by the prophets will have been thwarted. Laying God open to the charge of either not having told the truth or not keeping his word.

Such a consummation to this age is unbiblical and unthinkable. Restorers believe that the purpose of God will succeed, that Christ is greater than history, that the unifying power of his Spirit is greater than any divisions between men, and that the power of his resurrection life in the church is greater than the combined powers of darkness ranged against her through the structures of men. Having said this, we do not believe unity is found by ignoring our differences, or pretending we are one by fellowshipping on the lowest common denominator of agreement.

Some years ago I was a member of a ministerial fellowship chaired by a prominent evangelical pastor in the city. He was under stress because of the significant growth of our church. His church had been the largest in the city; now ours had bypassed it in congregational size. He began denouncing us from the pulpit. Finally, I asked that we meet to discuss this. He refused point blank. At the next fraternal he proposed inviting an internationally renowned evangelical evangelist to hold a city-wide crusade, and asked that we all 'show our unity' by co-operating together in this programme. When my associate raised the question, 'Should we not first face our divisions?' - he lost his composure and launched into a highly emotional tirade, accusing us of being divisive if we would not co-operate!!

It's time to get real! To be united requires facing our difficulties and divisions in a forthright manner, and - in a mature way - deal with them. As someone said, we'd better grow up before we grow old! We should not remain paralysed by fear of what is involved or might happen, nor should we be intimidated by those in power positions seeking to hold on to the status quo. Let's talk, pray, and start person-to-person, one-on-one, church-with-church, until the wisdom of God manifests itself and reconciles the seemingly irreconcilable. Is it possible? I believe the key to achieving it lies with the emergence of apostolic ministries and teams. These apostles will provide, as we shall see in chapter 10, a very powerful advance in this direction by finding one another, covenant networking, supporting and securing the churches and people of God.

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- [1] [Readings in St. John's Gospel, MacMillan Press, New York, 1942, p. xxix
- [2] R.P. McBrien, CATHOLICISM Study Edition, Winston Press, Minneapolis, USA, 1981, p.66
- [3] Essay: The Christian and the Church, Transforming Our World, ed. James M. Boice, Multnomah, Portland Oregon, 1988, p.120
- [4] Donald E. Hoke, ed., Evangelicals Face the Future, William Carey Library, South Pasadena, USA, 1978, p.86
- [5] J. van den Burg, Constrained by Jesus Love, J.H. Kok N.V., Kampen, 1956, p. 27