

Unity and Truth: A Historical Reflection

Gary Best

In the mid-eighties, I had an experience that I might tentatively call a vision, or at least a visual daydream that I am sure was initiated by God. I was asking God how he saw church. I had always significantly struggled with church, not the concept of it, but my practical experience of it. I had just been asked to cast a vision in an upcoming meeting for the idea of small "c" church, and I was feeling challenged to be prepared for this talk. Then, I saw very clearly in my mind's eye, a picture of what I immediately assumed was Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. We had been there for the first time a decade before. Because my background is education, my mind quickly began to connect the dots: a stained glass window is a wonderful example of a mosaic, which is of course a practical illustration of diversity within unity. I knew enough of the Bible to connect that metaphor with Paul's use of the physical body describing the nature of the church, another example of diversity and unity, and I thought, "I've got myself a talk!"

Almost immediately it seemed as though God was saying, "Watch this!" At this point, still in my mind, I realized that the massive stained glass window displayed a magnificent portrait of Jesus for all around to see. What happened next was astonishing. The entire window began to shift - every piece of glass constantly changing size, texture and colour - and yet, amazingly, the picture was always Jesus. I was watching a stained glass movie! I felt then that God was telling me, "Whenever anyone says 'yes' to my invitation, a constant and dynamic process of change begins as they become more like me. Therefore my church is just like you see: always moving, always changing, always growing and learning to love. If the church even remotely expresses this, the world around it will powerfully see me and be drawn to me. You could never build this, nor maintain it, but you can trust me and ask me for it."

It has been over twenty-five years since that visionary experience and I have dedicated my life to trusting God for that kind of church. Naturally, I have had a love / hate relationship with that vision. I have despaired repeatedly over the church's inability to embrace this reality to the point that I've wished that I had never seen what I did. But, I have also witnessed moments when it seemed like, for just a brief time, Jesus has shone through a united community, loving in the midst of its profound diversity.

Of course, looking back, the very idea of "diversity" seems much more difficult now than it did, at least to me, in the mid-eighties. Our major disagreements centered over things like "drums in church" which seemed so important at the time. Little did I imagine the major ethical issues that are now at the heart of so much disagreement, at least in the small corner of Christianity that is my world, the world of western evangelical Christianity. These issues are like jets lined up on a runway. As soon as we deal with one, we will have to face another. God only knows what we will yet have to face as the technological advances of the western world open up a whole new realm of things that could be done, but force the question, "Should they be done?"

What complicates this already herculean task, is the fact that our main strategy for dealing with these questions is to determine what the Bible says directly or indirectly about each of these issues. However,

today, perhaps like never before, the primary issue that is being challenged and debated is, "What is the Bible and how does it speak?" Our inability to reach sufficient consensus on this means we that we keep trying to arrive at common perspectives and conclusions while beginning from very different sets of presuppositions. A classic example of this is the present debates surrounding the inclusion of persons who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgendered, (LGBT) into the church. Frequently, different "sides" try to call each other to submit to what their view and understanding is, of how the Story of Scripture speaks to this issue.

What raises the bar on all of this is that these are not just theoretical exercises. Our disagreements are threatening to fracture many different expressions of church at the precise time when the church at its best and most united is dramatically needed. Sadly, as I listen to the "dialogue" around me, it feels more like diatribe. I hold little hope for our opposing views being resolved in the short to medium term. In spite of the intended good will of many parties on both sides of these issues, few are going to change their mind or position as a result of their conversation. How much less likely is it that our hermeneutical engagements are going to result in consensus quickly or easily?

The purpose of my reflection here is neither to weigh in on particular issues of disagreement nor to provide strategic clues as to how to identify the superior positions. I am not an academic nor a scholar, but a practitioner. This is presented, not as a definitive answer to the future of the church, but a modest and humble reflection and inquiry that may inspire better minds and hearts than mine to produce some really helpful work.

My primary question is this: "How can we posture ourselves as Christ's followers towards those with whom we have significant disagreement around issues which we consider highly important, even essential to our faith?" To that aim let me begin, not with a theological or theoretical argument but by re-visiting a time in the history of western Christianity when there was a similar crisis of unity.

Peter Meiderlin and a Call to Unity

In the early 17th century, "Christian" Europe was in the midst of one of its most prolonged, destructive periods, the Thirty Years War. One of the primary reasons for this was that Europe was virtually bankrupt and the armies that represented the two "sides," Catholic versus Protestant States, were largely self-funded. What they managed to secure via rape, pillaging and destruction was their reward. The carnage went on, quite literally for 30 years. Sadly, much of this violence was carried out in the name of Christ and his kingdom. While there were, as always, many political and economic factors in the war, the dramatic fracture of the Church in the sixteenth century was at least a major contributing element. That fracture was centered on disagreements that were considered essential to orthodox faith.

This was certainly not the first time that the church had struggled with disagreement over faith and practice. Almost from the outset of the church, there were difficulties in defining how following Jesus would be worked out, especially as the Gospel began to expand into different cultural contexts, as the Jerusalem council illustrates.¹ This struggle to achieve unity in the face of disagreement continued

¹ Acts 15:1-30.

through the first three centuries as the inability of the church to achieve any kind of significant centralization and control was a distinct limiting factor. The fact that the church, confronted with general marginalization and sporadic persecution, had not developed much of a centralized hierarchy, established buildings, or even defined canon, ensured that there would be a comparatively high level of diversity.

The Romanization of the church under Constantine, however, brought significant change. An empire required conformity to everything it deemed important, not diversity within unity. As the church increasingly gained a prominent position within Roman society, it meant that disputes regarding doctrine, faith, and polity needed to be resolved and placed within a singular authority structure.²

From Constantine to the sixteenth century, the western church, the Great Schism and a few competing popes aside, was characterized more by uniformity than diversity – though there was more diversity in practice than in theology. There was little sustained disagreement on essential or significant issues simply because diverse perspectives would be eliminated through ostracism, banishment, or death (for example, Origen [posthumously], John Chrysostom, or Jan Hus). The Reformation, however, fractured this previously enforced "pseudo-unity." With each position having its own "enforcers," there seemed to be no path to unity outside of bloodshed with achieved or restored dominance.

In 1627, in the middle of the previously mentioned devastation and violence, came a heart cry. It came from a Lutheran Pietist named Peter Meiderlin, who was using the pseudonym Rupurtus Meldenius. His concern was that all the contending for truth was in essence destroying the truth itself. As a result of his hope for a renewed consensus, achieved not by the end of the sword, but by recapturing God's heart for unity, he penned the following: "In necessariis, unitas; in dubiis, libertas; in omnibus, caritas."³ While we are more familiar with the later Catholic version which captures somewhat the same essence, Meiderlin's translated version is the one we will explore: "In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, freedom; in all things, compassion."

Meiderlin's concern was to greatly diminish the first category and limit the causes for extreme conflict and enforced unity. For him, necessary things would require that:

- The great majority of orthodox leaders agreeing that they were absolutely necessary for salvation,

² Constantine, for instance, was less interested in the theological outcomes of the councils than he was concerned with ensuring that there was a single, enforceable answer to which state force could be applied to ensure some measure of uniformity. As time went on, the position of the church and the empire became increasingly enmeshed (i.e. the church became the official religion of the empire, then pagans were suppressed, etc.) At least by the time of Augustine, within an increasingly crumbling empire, the combination of church / state banishes and even executes dissenting positions [i.e. the Donatists]. Of course, to be fair, this is not to say that no diversity existed – in fact there was a wide range of expression within the church during this period. However, when the authorities wished to act, the ability to act was increasingly present.

³ H.J.M. Nellen's article in 1999 challenged this long held consensus of Meiderlin's authorship by pointing out that it was first used some years before by an apostate Croatian bishop who fled to England, Marco Antonio de Dominis (which may explain why Baxter picks up the quote sometime later). Nevertheless, Meiderlin's use of this phrase and his intentions for it are what I am focusing my thoughts around. For more detail concerning authorship see <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/augustine/quote.html>

- They were clearly attested to by all of Scripture,
- They were present in the universal confessional statements.⁴

Needless to say, his document didn't accomplish much in bringing this about for it was brushed aside in the power circles of his day. However, the importance of the document today goes beyond what it was actually able to practically accomplish. The heart cry of Meiderlin resonates with a similar longing in our time that is being felt throughout the church, particularly among the young.

Meiderlin Today

Whenever I teach on this topic I ask the audience this question, "If you have an emotional reaction or fear about what is going to happen with respect to the major issues of disagreement taking place within the church today, is it:

- a. "That truth is going to be surrendered in exchange for political and / or cultural expediency, resulting in a unity in which we lose our authority to be God's thermostats (helping to regulate the temperature of our surrounding culture) and become simply thermometers (where we reflect the temperature around us rather than around God)?"
- b. "Or, that we will miss an invitation from the heart of Jesus to give unity a chance, and sacrifice it once again, on the altar of our various perspectives of truth?"

In surveying the emotional rather than the cognitive response of my audiences, often in multi-denominational settings, I find almost always the group is split right down the middle. It goes without saying that our emotional responses, while being influenced by our theological and hermeneutical reflections, also play a part in directing those decisions.

In Jesus' farewell discourses in the Gospel of John, there are two powerful moments where he addresses the importance of unity for the future of the Gospel invitation. Of course, we cannot know what Jesus was able to see and understand looking ahead into the coming centuries of the church. We can assume, however, that the timing of these statements underlie their importance to Jesus, his disciples, and to us.

John: 13:34-35: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

John 17:20-23: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to

⁴ For further historical background on Meiderlin's book in 1620, "A Prayerful Admonition for Peace to the Theologians of the Augsburg Confession" see the following link containing an article by Hans Rollmann - http://www.acu.edu/sponsored/restoration_quarterly/archives/1990s/vol_39_no_3_contents/rollmann.html

complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Jesus considered unity, a genuine and freely chosen unity, to be absolutely essential to the ongoing integrity of his invitation. How could the enforced unity prevalent in many of the ensuing centuries embody the heart of his call to his disciples? While the author of Hebrews will later encourage people to wholeheartedly submit to their leaders, Peter and Paul are both careful to point out that all submission is ultimately "to the Lord" and that we ought only to follow the example of our leaders "as [they] follow the example of Christ." Inherent in this is the danger of assuming that the perspectives and truth claims of any power structure, including our own, fully represent God's intended truth.

Walking Out Meiderlin's Statement

How could we put this simple quote into practice?

"In necessary things, unity"

Behind this statement is an assumption that for a functional working group to exist, there must be some form of authority structure which, in an agreed upon relationship with the group as a whole, makes decisions about and defends certain prescribed beliefs and boundaries. Without this kind of definition of identity and purpose, no group can continue to exist. In this I agree fully with Tim Keller where he states "Every human community holds in common some beliefs that necessarily create boundaries, including some people and excluding others from its 'circle.'"⁵ Illustrating this, Keller gives the example of two groups: an LGBT advocacy group and an Alliance Against Same Sex Marriage group. Each group has core beliefs that create boundaries that would exclude members from participating in the other, although it would be hoped that there is thoughtful and respectful dialogue between the two, despite their inherent disagreements. He goes on to say, "Any community that did not hold its members accountable for specific beliefs and practices would have no corporate identity and would not really be a community at all."⁶

Regardless of how a particular group understands authority and makes decisions, ultimately those things that are deemed "necessary" for the group's sense of identity and purpose must be clearly defined and defended. Meiderlin is not saying that our only hope for unity, is "simply surrender essentials; put everything in the doubtful category." On the contrary, while he would challenge us today as he did in the seventeenth century to think long, hard, and prayerfully about the length of our "essentials list," he would affirm that there are some things that, if taken away, would cause the salvation story itself to lose its intended meaning.

"In doubtful things, freedom"

⁵ Keller, Timothy: *The Reason For God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*; Riverhead Books, Penguin Group, New York, 2008, page 39.

⁶ Ibid. p. 40.

This does not mean that only trivial, unimportant things will be doubtful, or that walking out this diversity together will be easy. While I believe that the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 was a glorious accomplishment for the church that released, in the words of Acts 15 "great joy throughout the church," I don't think for a minute that it was a light-hearted discussion nor was it painless to walk out in the aftermath. The concessions involved, which for Gentile believers seemed obvious, for Jewish believers were fundamental identity issues. They would have found it a great struggle to see these as "doubtful."

"Freedom" in this statement does not mean freedom to sever the relationship and go separate ways. It means to stay in the relationship, and to be resolved that matters of conscience for us are not necessarily transferrable to all others.

"Everything with compassion"

Meiderlin recognized that some disagreements are too essential in nature to be functionally overcome. Yet, he resolutely called all parties toward a common posture irrespective of these two possible outcomes:

1. If the issue is deemed to be "necessary," and it cannot be resolved, then realistically we are not able to continue in the same functional group. Since we will not be able to functionally work toward the same purposes and goals, then we must recognize that reality. Whatever path the disagreement takes, including separation, it should be pursued with compassion, sorrow, respect, and humility, where all parties extend the same grace and mercy to each other as Jesus modelled in his relationship with his own disciples, and with us.

2. If our disagreements, though painful and troubling, are not considered "necessary," as previously defined, then we must faithfully bless our diversity of conscience and withhold judgement, recognizing that it is before God that we all stand or fall. We must then as much as possible, hold to a posture of openness, walking together and desiring to learn from each other.

Meiderlin's statement seems to carry an underlying assumption that the two primary factions of Christianity in Europe during his time, by looking through a lens of love, could come to a unified position regarding what was truly essential to the faith. Almost 400 years later we have not achieved that common perspective nor, looking ahead, does it seem likely to be reached soon.⁷ This brings us to the central question of this reflection, "What do we do when differing authority structures within the Christian faith disagree on what either or both consider to be truly necessary things?" To this Meiderlin gives us no answer.

⁷ An interesting note concerning Meiderlin's lack of success in bringing about a tangible unity, even within the Augsburg confession, is that over time a remarkable reconciliation has taken place between the Catholic and Lutheran parts of the church and "justification by faith" is now more of a call to unity than a call to arms! And while we certainly have not come to a common understanding on all issues deemed central to our expression of the faith, over the past few decades there have been and continue to be taken many significant steps taken by Catholic, Orthodox and Protestants groups and individuals toward one another. The point is that while all is not lost, at the same time there are no quick answers.

What Do We Do With Other Authorities?

By what is taking place generally within at least western Christianity today, it seems that many groups assume that the responsibility to enforce orthodoxy and be the final arbiter of faith and practice for all those who claim to follow Jesus, is theirs and theirs alone. While this response may seem noble, how does it resonate with the tone of the New Testament and the example of Jesus and his disciples, particularly Paul?⁸

The entire New Testament is marked by the same powerful spirit of invitation that we see so dramatically and sometimes controversially expressed through the earthly ministry of Jesus. Jesus, of course, is fully aware of the serious consequence of failing to respond to that invitation, as he repeatedly reminds the Pharisees and other religious rulers.

While Jesus never hesitated in calling the Pharisees and religious rulers of his day to account for their inconsistency in acting in harmony with their stated beliefs, it seems that he recognized clearly that he was not the final arbiter or judge in his relationship with them. His primary posture was always to invite them to life and to the fulfillment in himself of all the promises they hoped for. While he understood that their continued rejection of him would bring judgment upon themselves, he was quite content to leave that judgment to his Father. This is powerfully illustrated on the cross where he is being mocked and abused. His only response is a prayer to his Father, "...Forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." Peter later explained that the reason Jesus responded as he did was because "... he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."⁹

This reluctance to judge prematurely is shown in the response of the "pillars" of the early church, James, Peter and John, to Saul and Barnabas. Though there are certainly substantial disagreements in understanding what it means to fully enter the story of Jesus, as Paul will later attest,¹⁰ they extended "... the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me [Saul]."¹¹ Recognizing that Jesus himself had seemingly authorized Saul to a community quite separate from their own, they were hesitant in pronouncing judgment upon him and / or his teaching.

In the same light, Paul emphasizes in his second letter to the Corinthians that it is very important to understand the "sphere of our authority,"¹² where and with whom God has authorized our leadership, and where he has not. Where Paul knew that he had a relationship of spiritual authority, he never hesitated to call, correct, and discipline either the group, or individuals within that group - even to the

⁸ I am very aware that in attempting to answer this question, I am putting on the presuppositional glasses through which I view and understand the biblical narrative. What becomes clear to me I don't suspect will seem as clear to the group of people that I have just referenced. My focus however is less on changing them and more on calling myself to behave in a manner that serves and supports the heart of Jesus and the New Testament in particular.

⁹ 1 Peter 2:23

¹⁰ See Galatians 2:11-21

¹¹ Galatians 2:9

¹² 2 Corinthians 10:13

degree of exclusion¹³ – though even in this extreme circumstance, he appeals much more than he dictates.¹⁴

It is very interesting, though, to see how he responds where those lines of authority are not as clear. Paul's letter to the Roman church, while evidencing pastoral concern, is written prior to Paul having any direct contact or relationship with it. There is little doubt that the thrust of his letter, which called for a respectful honouring of the diverse conscience and contributions of both the Jewish and Gentile parts of the church, would have created some controversy. Most likely the Gentile believers would have welcomed his entreaty, and at least some of the Jewish believers would have responded less kindly.

If indeed Paul's letter to the Philippian believers was written from house arrest in Rome, (some argue for an Ephesian imprisonment), this reaction could help explain Paul's description of two groups of evangelists in Philippians 1. One group, likely Gentiles, is preaching in unity with Paul, advancing the story in a way that he would have if he were released. Another group, likely Jews, seems to be in competition with Paul, motivated by a very different purpose - to advance their version of the message assertively to take advantage of Paul's restriction.

What is surprising is Paul's response to this activity. Recognizing that God has not put him in a position of authority over the Roman church, he writes, in essence "let God be the judge of their motivations. At least the gospel is being preached." In other words, he entrusted the motives of those, for whom he was not responsible, to the God who judges fairly.

This posture is evident as well, in Paul's instruction regarding mixed marriages in 1 Corinthians 7. While he has some spiritual oversight in the lives of the Christian husbands and wives in these marriages, he has no authority over their spouses. His advice is that the relationship should not be broken but continued as long as it is possible to do so within an environment of peace. He remarks that the Christian's presence in the relationship opens a door for the blessing of God to flow into and through the relationship. "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"¹⁵ In other words, never underestimate the power of God working through our attempts to hold onto unity.

These examples echo the common sentiment that there is a Judge and unless he has clearly placed us in a position of authority with an individual or group, then we are not to judge. Even in those entrusted positions, of course, we are never acting in our own authority. We are only ever ambassadors who are to be careful to speak and do only that which is authorized within a process to be constantly worked out with fear and trembling.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 5

¹⁴ As an interesting side note, Jude describes a confrontation between Michael the archangel and Satan over the body of Moses. Even here, Michael is careful to point out that he is not exercising his own judgment and authority but is simply carrying out the "rebuke" of God, himself. It seems that we should exercise great caution before too quickly assuming the judgments of God exactly equal our own. Where and when we have been "spiritually authorized" is not something that could or should be quickly or simply "self-determined" but probably should rest on a wide number of validating factors – an important topic but beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:16

In our highly pragmatic western societies, we are generally not interested in pursuing a path that doesn't seem to have much possibility of immediate success. Taking control, hopefully with God's blessing and endorsement, in such a way as to achieve measurable results, seems much more desirable to us. Yet we are faced with the sobering outcome described in Hebrews 11: of all the people approved as men and women of faith "... none of them received what had been promised."¹⁶

What Does This Mean in Practice?

1. We recognize that simply claiming to be a follower of Jesus doesn't make it so. However, arriving at the conclusion that someone or some group does not in any way belong to Jesus' story is not a decision that any group should make quickly or unilaterally. Paul would warn us if this judgement seemed too easy for us to make.¹⁷

2. It seems at present that the default posture in the case of disagreement between various perspectives and groups is to immediately distance ourselves as far as possible, so that there can be no confusion between ourselves and the other. Perhaps a posture that better reflects the spirit of Jesus would be quite different - our orientation ought to be one of reaching for the greatest possible unity that we can realistically hold. Our disagreement may be so substantial that there is very little that we can actually build together, but even then our posture should be steadfast, praying that God will truly be a Father to the other as he is to us, correcting and blessing them from a heart of love.

3. Within our own denominations and networks of churches, our polity will to some extent determine whether or not individual churches can continue to operate within the structure of the group. The more centralized authority is within the structure, the less likely that will be, although the process getting there should be generous and inclusive, and if at all possible, mutually embraced. The nature of the continuing relationship, even if not structural, should be focused on contending for unity instead of desiring maximum separation. In a more loosely defined network, the possibility of a continued relationship would be greater, though there would be limitations to the degree to which we could co-

¹⁶ Hebrews 11:39

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 4:1-5. My good friend Dr. Peter Davids has pointed out that this spirit is reflected in the various documents of Vatican II, particularly in Lumen Gentium, in three ways:

(1) While people move into the faith individually and are baptized individually, they are brought into the body of those being saved and together progress towards the wholeness that is in Christ

(2) While the full light of revelation is found in Scripture as interpreted by the Church, because of the light of natural revelation seen, among other places, in human reason, every person has access to some of the revelation of God. So everyone is potentially to some degree enlightened, assuming that they do not turn from or suppress the light that they have. God can use this light to draw them unto himself, and will indeed bring to himself those who follow such light as they have.

(3) Because of this divine wisdom in the world, those in the faith can work with even those who are not Christians, especially in social ethical tasks, but also in other areas of work. This is true of all people, especially Jews and Muslims, and how much more of those believers in Jesus with whom one is not in full communion? Thus one works together to the extent that one does not compromise one's own beliefs.

To condemn and exclude too quickly disregards this work of common grace leading to salvation and work at counter purpose to the powerful invitation of God.

work. Again, at the very least, even in separation, our goal ought to be to hold on to as much tangible unity as is possible.¹⁸

4. We don't believe that "...mak[ing] every effort to keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace..."¹⁹ means to analyze the truth so effectively that everyone must agree with your position. Unity is not something that can be solved theoretically and then applied. It is walked out in the crucible of actual relationship.²⁰

5. Unity does not mean compromise. It is not a game of "you give me this and I'll give you that." We continue to passionately embrace and explain with humility, love, and grace, our understanding of the grand invitation of Jesus and what it means to surrender to him. But we most powerfully invite when we live out our message instead of spending all our time and energy refuting the invitation offered by others.²¹

6. When others, Christians or not, inevitably raise the issue of our association with others who claim Jesus but do so in strikingly different ways, there is no more powerful explanation than the metaphor of "extended family." Although we may have severe differences with our grown siblings, we are still family and must do all we can to contend for at least some degree of unity that is heartfelt and genuine. We are the human family of God. Not unexpectedly we experience the same misunderstandings, confusion and conflict in that spiritual family that we do in our biological ones. However our confidence rests in the fact that we are not fatherless. God himself has confidently stated that he will build and mature his family with all of its warts and blemishes. Furthermore, that he will use it as a powerful witness of his presence in this world and the plan that he has to reconcile it to himself. The remaining question is,

¹⁸ Of course the counter argument can be made that the Catholic church with its highly centralized structure has been much more successful in embracing diversity than most Protestant groups. Though Catholics have a "position" on almost issue of faith and practice, it seems that great patience is exercised in the enforcement of these positions. It seems that they have great confidence that ultimately keeping diverse groups within relationship will be most successful in "bringing them around" so to speak. In fact, it may be that the ultimate result is a helpful adjustment to both groups.

¹⁹ Ephesians 4:3

²⁰ While I don't believe that maintaining a posture of reaching toward the greatest possible unity will result in continuing institutional unity in every case and around every issue, I do believe that such a posture is the only thing that will enable us to walk with love and respect in the confusion of polarized positions. Another good friend, Dr. Peter Fitch, reminded me of the Jean Vanier's caution about groups being too quick to isolate because of differences of belief and practice. Vanier (Community and Growth) encourages us instead to look for "seeds" of life that the Spirit brings – their hunger for God and their desire to live passionately and fully in his story. While I wholeheartedly agree with Peter and Vanier, I do also recognize the great challenge of practically working out how to actually functionally build and lead together with significant and central areas of disagreement.

²¹ Some years ago, a year after a major disagreement resulted in a substantial part of the church movement of which I was a part leaving and pursuing a new association, myself and a few other leaders from our group visited them. We stood together to affirm above all else our unity as joint members of Christ's body (even though our differences were so acute that it was not likely that we could functionally build together). Our stated posture reflected the true posture of our hearts – we wanted to reach toward whatever unity we could and trust God for more in the future. That decision (on the part of both parties) I believe has blessed both us and the larger church in Canada.

"Will we trust in his commitment and in his ability to complete what he has promised and will we in turn commit ourselves to the task of learning to love as extravagantly as he does?"

Recently, while in New Zealand facilitating discussions on these issues, one of the pastors made me aware of John Wesley's comments sometime after the death of George Whitefield - an account found on numerous sermon illustration sites:

"One day, after Whitefield's decease, John Wesley was timidly approached by one of the godly band of Christian sisters who had been brought under his influences and who loved both Whitefield and himself:

" Dear Mr. Wesley, may I ask you a question?"

" Yes, of course, madam, by all means."

" But, dear Mr. Wesley, I am very much afraid what the answer will be."

" Well, madam, let me hear your question, and then you will know my reply."

"At last, after not a little hesitation, the inquirer tremblingly asked, ' Dear Mr. Wesley, do you expect to see dear Mr. Whitefield in heaven?'

"A lengthy pause followed, after which John Wesley replied with great seriousness, 'No, madam.' "His inquirer at once exclaimed, 'Ah, I was afraid you would say so.'

"To which John Wesley added, with intense earnestness, ' Do not misunderstand me, madam; George Whitefield was so bright a star in the firmament of God's glory, and will stand so near the throne, that one like me, who am less than the least, will never catch a glimpse of him.'"

Of course there is a significant backstory to this statement. While initially the partnership of Whitefield and the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, was, as described by John, like "heaven on earth," by 1740 they were divided into two sometimes quite bitterly opposed camps. The issues were central: Whitefield's Calvinist versus the Wesleys' Arminian understanding of grace and strong differences as to the responsibility to organize and manage conversions. The early 1740's were marked by separation and at times conscious competition between them.

Yet over time, though no merger of the two camps was ever realized, Whitefield and the Wesley's did achieve a remarkable reconciliation that is reflected in the illustration above. As Dr. J. D. Walsh notes:

No merger of the two camps occurred, but there was at least reconciliation between the leaders. This "closer union in affection" continued with hiccups, but no serious interruption, to Whitefield's death. In 1755, Charles Wesley could write happily, "Come on, my Whitefield! (since the strife is past) / And friends at first are friends again at last."

The relationship was described by one of Wesley's preachers as "agreement to differ." Whitefield was welcomed to preach among Wesley's societies. Wesley lent Whitefield one of his best preachers, Joseph Cownley, for work at the Tabernacle. Whitefield refused to build Calvinistic chapels in places that already had a Wesleyan society. Wesley agreed to the reverse.

More than once Whitefield acted as mediator when the Wesley brothers fell out, notably when Charles sabotaged John's marriage prospects to Grace Murray.²²

I thought of this illustration recently during conversations with two friends and former colleagues. Both have adopted over time a way of understanding how scripture speaks that has led them to re-think their position on some significant issues. Knowing these men as I do, I know that what motivates them most of all is a keen pastor's heart to welcome all to the wonderful invitation of Jesus.

In the course of our dialogue, while I share significant affinity with their perspective on the Bible and how it speaks, I realized that I could not agree with some of their conclusions.²³ At the same time, I recognized that I fully endorse them as people of character who know and wholeheartedly desire to honour and serve God. I know them. They love Jesus and love the Word of God. They certainly know it better than I and have a devotional life that puts mine to shame. They have a deep love for people and have seen, and continue to see, the fruit of God's Spirit in their lives and in the lives of their people.

This creates a dilemma - as it should. But like Wesley, if I err, I want to err on the side of trusting God's ability to lead his people in his ways. I believe that God "... will build [his] church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."²⁴ From this confidence, I want to see others primarily with eyes cleansed with the salve of love as described in 1 Cor. 13, trusting in God's ability to correct and adjust my brother ... or me. It doesn't mean changing my position but it does mean guarding my posture.

Ephesians 3 paints an inviting picture of how God has always intended to bring together the mosaic of his church and in doing so, present a powerful picture of his Son to the waiting world. That dream was put in my heart over thirty years ago and continues to burn in me today. It is more personally difficult and challenging than I ever suspected, though I might have expected so considering the backdrop of the Jewish / Gentile challenge in the early church. Toward that day I will continue to "work out my salvation" – what it means to be fully formed by Jesus – with the confidence that my efforts are not futile. God himself is committed to this task and he will bring about "... the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."²⁵ Keeping my eyes fixed on that goal gives me the confidence to reach for the wisdom, grace and understanding I will need to navigate as a "non-anxious presence" in our present troubled waters.²⁶

²² <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1993/issue38/3834.html>

²³ These "conclusions" are actually much more nuanced than many would claim. Often in these kinds of discussions, I think that our differences seem to center on whether we ought to celebrate and embrace any incremental "steps" toward grace and holiness or whether we should require a wholesale turning / repentance that is recognizable as orthodox discipleship of Jesus.

²⁴ Matthew 16:18

²⁵ Ephesians 1:9-10

²⁶ An expression coined by Edwin Friedman, in *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Seabury Books, Church Publishing Inc., New York, 2007, page 233.

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There are a number of friends that I consulted in the process of writing this paper. Whether they agreed with me or not, each encouraged me that the conversation was an important one and that my attempts to further that conversation could be valuable and helpful to the process. As many of them have done in the past, they all gave me invaluable insight and understanding into aspects of this discussion that I lacked on my own. In many cases, they helped me to choose language that would not distract or divert from the central thrust of what I was trying to say. They also helped me to identify ideas and arguments that simply didn't have enough depth to warrant inclusion. Deep thanks to Dr. Peter Davids, Dr. Peter Fitch, Don Rousu, Jeremy Wiebe, Matt Croasmun and Caleb Maskell. The formation of the basic concept behind this paper took place in a day-long dialogue with David Ruis here at Dominion Hill. Finally Gordie and Kathleen Lagore added both key insights and extensive editing to bring this piece to a place where it could be read and understood. Thanks to all!