

CHURCH UNITY AND THE NECESSITY OF NONVIOLENCE

A lack of unity discredits the witness and work of the church for the world. This truth has long been emphasized by those concerned for the oneness of the church. However, the fragmentation that is the most conspicuous and damaging to the church's mission is the result of neither doctrinal differences nor organizational incompatibility among denominations. Rather, the church's sanction of war and the participation of its members in various forms of violence is the most glaring and harmful expression of disunity. No doctrinal consensus or restructure of church organizations will lead to a unity capable of witnessing to the gospel of God's grace to the whole world apart from a repudiation of war and violence on the part of the church throughout the globe.

According to the constitution of the World Council of Churches, the purpose of ecumenical efforts is "to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, and to advance toward that unity in order that the world may believe." In its unity, the church not only focuses its missional efforts but also more faithfully expresses the reality of the reconciliation intended by God in Christ. So long as the church does not disavow Christian participation in warfare, especially, though not exclusively, insofar as Christians might attack Christians, witness-bearing unity will elude the church.

In ecumenical conversations and in official statements, the importance of nonviolence to the unity of the church has received some recognition, but even these conversations and statements provide an occasion for fissures in the church to come to the surface because of differences relating to matters of war and peace in the various traditions. "Because of this wide diversity among the churches," wrote Marlin Miller, "any impetus toward common recognition that peace witness belongs to the faithful church's calling in the world encounters resistance even at the initial point of raising the question of the church's peace witness."¹ Explicit affirmation of the permissibility and even the responsibility of Christians to participate in wars was given confessional status in some traditions. For instance, it is stated within the Augsburg Confession (1530) that "it is taught among us... that Christians may without sin . . . punish evildoers with the sword, engage in just wars, [or] serve as soldiers. . . ."² Likewise, one of the Church of England's Thirty-nine Articles (1571) reads, "It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons and serve in the warres."³ The Westminster Confession (1646), speaking of Christian magistrates, states that they "may law-

¹Marlin E. Miller, "Toward Acknowledging Together the Apostolic Character of the Church's Peace Witness," in Martin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *The Church's Peace Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), p. 197.

²John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1963 [rev. ed., Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1973]), pp. 72-73.

³*Ibid.*, p. 280.

fully, now under the New Testament, wage war upon just and necessary occasion."⁴

Within ecumenical circles, there has been recognition of the problematic nature of war insofar as the unity of the church is concerned. The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches in its opening statement regarding international disorder stated, "We are one in proclaiming to all [that war] is contrary to the will of God."⁵ However, that unambiguous declaration was followed by the recognition that Christians have adopted several postures regarding war. Among them were (1) that Christians should not participate in modern warfare of mass destruction, (2) that Christians should defend by force national institutions of law and order since no effective comparable supranational institutions exist, and (3) that Christians are called to make an unqualified witness against war and to refuse military service. The statement further affirmed that the churches "must teach the duty of love and prayer for the enemy in time of war and of reconciliation between victor and vanquished after the war."⁶ This statement's acknowledgment of the differing perspectives found among Christians is in keeping with the ecumenical commitment to unity in diversity. However, diversity in the matter of the appropriateness of Christian participation in warfare keeps open the way for the most harmful expression of division.

Since the First Assembly, the World Council of Churches and related ecumenical bodies have issued statements and study documents calling for international cooperation, the cessation of atomic weapons tests, nuclear disarmament, and a no-first-strike policy. In particular, the indiscriminateness of weapons of mass destruction evoked much of the ecumenical reaction to the problem of war. In responding to international issues, the World Council of Churches often has had one of its organs formulate a position that would become the basis of representation to governments. "Whether at the UN or with individual governments and politicians, all considered it imperative for the ecumenical movement to transcend the threats to peace and contribute to a better international order."⁷ But, while concern for harmonious relations between nations has been an important item on the ecumenical agenda, the incompatibility of a united church with Christian participation in warfare has not received equal emphasis. It is not simply the needs of the world of nations but the nature of the church itself that demands nonviolent alternatives to war.

Walter Muelder identified four inherent aspects of a tendency toward pacifism in the ecumenical movement.⁸ First is the awareness that "ecumenical" is more encompassing than "international." International presupposes barriers, borders. A fundamental disunity, an over-againstness of separate and sovereign powers is assumed. "Ecumenical" pertains to that which is supranational. It pre-

⁴Ibid., p. 220.

⁵*Man's Disorder and God's Design*, vol. 4: *The Church and the International Disorder*, The Amsterdam Assembly Series (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 218.

⁶Ibid., p. 219.

⁷Robert S. Bilheimer, *Breakthrough: The Emergence of the Ecumenical Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), p. 157.

⁸Walter G. Muelder, "Pacifism and the World Council of Churches," in Thomas A. Shannon, ed., *War or Peace? The Search for New Answers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), pp. 154-155.

supposes a unity given by Christ and fostered by the Spirit, which theologically requires a visible, organic form whereby the church serves human unity.

Second, ecumenism reveals that national churches bound by national loyalties cannot credibly combat militarism. A supranational standpoint is required. Only the church that clings to its global identity and owes the nation nothing but the truth can withstand the separated nations' insistent calls for allegiance during times of international hostility. "Only a global strategy—not national 'just-war' strategies—can fulfill the reconciling requirements of the Church's given unity and the unitive vocation of the Church."⁹

Third, in the frequently used formula, "unity of the Church, unity of humankind," there is an inherent pacifism. Within ecumenical circles, there is widespread agreement that the unity of the church is not simply for the church. The unity of the church is to further the unity of humankind in keeping with the purpose of God. The church can in no way serve to heal divisiveness by reflecting the divisions of the world—race, class, nation—in the life of the church. Rather, these divisions are to be transcended so the church can be a true sign of the future that God has promised.

Fourth, the ecumenical process itself is nonviolent. The religious wars of the past have been repudiated as contrary to the purpose of the church. Neither convictions nor unity can be coerced. Violent maneuvers have been put aside, replaced by conversation, joint study, negotiation, and an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit. In view of these things, Muelder maintains, "Ecumenism has slowly and steadily raised the moral consciousness of its participants and moved them in the nonviolent direction. . . ."¹⁰

A thoroughgoing commitment to nonviolence has been criticized by detractors as contrary to meaningful political responsibility. However, too often discussions of Christian responsibility to the state have failed to consider the prior responsibility the Christians in one state have to Christians in another state. Consequently, the visible unity of the church is allowed to be sacrificed on the altar of national interest. While voicing a need to uphold "natural orders" within society, Christian thinking has sometimes seemed insufficiently cautious about the demands nations are prone to place upon all citizens, especially in times of crisis. José Comblin has observed, "National strategy tends to incorporate the whole nation into the national survival plan, to make it the total and unconditional object of each citizen's life."¹¹ For the Christian, national survival cannot be an absolute end. The integrity of the church and its witness transcends national interests and even national survival. Insofar as the churches throughout the world fail to repudiate the Christian participation in warfare, our oneness in Christ will be seen as dispensable and subject to the Christian's loyalty to the separate nations. Only a nonviolent church can be united adequately in order to witness to Jesus as Lord that the world might believe.

Political leaders have long claimed a right to the loyalty and support of Christian citizens and others by asserting that the nation has a special place in

⁹Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 155.

¹¹José Comblin, *The Church and the National Security State* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 72..

God's plan for the world. This is not unique to the United States. As Russel Nye wrote, "All nations . . . have long agreed that they are chosen peoples; the idea of special destiny is as old as nationalism itself."¹² While this claim may be somewhat an overstatement, still there is certainly evidence that many nations have claimed a unique divinely sanctioned role in the world. A recent comparative study concluded that "not just 'many' Western societies, but perhaps most of them, have found divine appointment a natural component of nationalist enthusiasms."¹³ By means of an ideology of election, political entities are endowed with spiritual significance so that citizens imagine their willingness to fight, not just as a matter of citizenship but as an expression of fidelity to God, though these actions lead to pain and suffering for the church in another nation.

At least insofar as Western nations are concerned, the idea of national chosenness has involved a claim of an exclusive status, not only a unique destiny that could exist alongside other distinctive but equal God-given national destinies. "Indeed, at the very core of one nation's claim to legitimacy one is likely to find a conviction that this nation is exceptional and the recipient of God's unique attention and help," wrote William Hutchinson and Hartmut Lehmann.¹⁴ The belief in national chosenness has served to help foster the unity of the citizens as a people of one nation under God. The ideology of chosenness has also helped political leaders to justify the ultimate sacrifices demanded from a whole people during times of war.¹⁵

Against the advocates of this ideology of chosenness it must be asserted that the church exists not to protect present institutions, whether nations or denominations, but to be a precursor to the reign of God. As long as the church is divided along lines of nation, race, or class and its members are willing to kill to further the interests of one group or another, the church's practice speaks not of a promised future but of a sinful and hostile present. The future can be seen only as the church turns from the violence of competing powers to live the unity that is the gift of God. Stanley Hauerwas has asked, "How could the world ever recognize the arbitrariness of the divisions between people if it did not have a contrasting model in the unity of the church?"¹⁶ If the church does not repudiate the violence that too often accompanies divisions between competing bodies in the world, the church will likely be reduced to allowing others to set the boundaries of its service and love. The church will be incapable of showing the world anything it does not already see. In Christ, natural solidarities are broken so that God-given unity can be created.

Jesus did little to reinforce natural attachments and loyalties. To the contrary, earliest memories of Jesus, as given expression in the Gospels, suggest that Jesus considered the family, that most basic unity of love, nurture, training, and

¹²Russel B. Nye, *This Almost Chosen People: Essays in the History of American Ideas* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1966), p. 164.

¹³William R. Hutchinson and Hartmut Lehmann, eds., *Many Are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 15.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 294.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹⁶Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN, and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 100.

enculturation, as a threat to the faithfulness of disciples. Jesus is recorded as saying, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law" (Lk. 12:51-53 [N.R.S.V.]; cf. Mt. 10:34-36). So overwhelming was the required loyalty to himself in comparison to all other attachments that Jesus declared that disciples must "hate" family members and even their own lives in order to be his disciples (Lk. 14:26, Mt. 10:37). Jesus warned his disciples that family members would possibly betray them because of his followers' loyalty to him (Mk. 13:12).

In place of family as defined by bloodlines, Jesus envisioned a new family based on active faith. When his mother and brothers questioned his sanity and sought to bring him home, Jesus rebuffed them: "'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mk. 3:33b-35). The fragmentation of the family and the loss of natural kinship ties that Jesus anticipated for his disciples would not leave them without a family. Rather, they would be given a larger family. ". . . [T]here is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields . . . who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields . . ." (Mk. 10:29b-30a).

There is no suggestion in the Gospels or elsewhere in the Christian Scriptures that the family is intrinsically unspiritual or destructive. However, the family posed a threat to discipleship precisely because love and loyalty due to God in Christ alone is often bestowed upon the family. Hence, Jesus challenged that most fundamental of natural loyalties, by asserting that another family provides the true home of his followers. Jesus assured his disciples that he was an agent of division as well as an agent of unity. In fact, the unity he creates is inseparable from the division Jesus promised to cause. "To assert that He unites, without seeing clearly how He first of all divides," wrote Robert McAfee Brown, "is to assert a spurious kind of unity that will fool only those who dare not face the truth about themselves and their world."¹⁷ Jesus fractures all natural allegiances in order to reconstruct a more far-reaching unity from previously divided peoples.

In the words in the Gospels there is a recognition that love as much as hate threatens the disciple's loyalty to Christ and, consequently, to the unity of the church. Love leads one not only to nurture family members, friends, and compatriots but also to work for destruction of any who would threaten them. Animosity toward the enemy does less to inspire the soldier to fight and kill with steely determination than does the abiding affection for one's own. Violent actions, normally unthinkable, have been performed with furor when believed to be critical to the protection of loved ones. Jesus challenged the ways disciples are to relate to their families, transforming the expressions of his followers' love, leaving no room for violence. As Stanley Hauerwas has noted, "We care for one another not in

¹⁷Robert McAfee Brown, "'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites' . . . and Divides," *The Ecumenical Review* 26 (July, 1974): 436.

family bloodlines, but in Christ. The blood of the cross has forever qualified the blood of the family, making it impossible for us to spill the blood of others in the name of our families. This new eschatological family we call the Church, which now has our fundamental loyalty, makes peace possible. . . ."¹⁸

The church exists to be an agent of Christ-centered reconciliation in a world of division. The unity of the church is to display barrier-breaking possibilities that are thought impossible by those who take divisions of race, class, gender, and nationality for granted. In its oneness, the church is to be an announcement of what God intends for the world. The universality of the church calls into question the assumed necessity of warring parties whose differences set them apart. The unity of the church is a witness to the reconciling power of the gospel. When the church mirrors the fragmentation of the world, the gospel is obscured.

The church in every nation must be receptive and open to the church in every other nation. No congregation or denomination can stand alone. Each is a part of the whole, a participant in the worldwide body of Christ. The true identity of the local church is not simply derived from the local culture and nation but is formed in relation to the universal church. Local loyalties must be conditioned and limited by this worldwide attachment that is created by the blood of Jesus Christ and fostered by the Holy Spirit. The reality that the church in every place shares is greater than the culture and nation in which the local churches reside. For the sake of the allegiance owed by the church in one place to the church in every other place it is essential that a distance—not divorce—from the culture occur. Without this taking place, in times of international conflict the church will tend to be, as it has been so often throughout history, a reflection of the hostile world rather than a redemptive witness to it.

As the church gives sanction to war and members participate in the violence of battle, a witness to the world is being made. Some may see the witness as one that expresses the church's relevance, national loyalty, or a concern for justice. However, it seems to me that the church's actions may imply other unfortunate messages. For instance:

1. The pursuit of national goals can be more important than church unity.
2. The witness given by a united church that the world might believe is dispensable in times of extreme crisis.
3. The loyalty Christians owe to their nation is more binding than the loyalty owed to brothers and sisters in Christ who live in a nation in violent conflict with their own.
4. Christians' killing Christians in war can be a necessary cost of furthering God's will in the world.
5. The unity of the church is of secondary importance to God's plan for the peace of the world.
6. Christ can sometimes be more truly honored by Christians' defending or pursuing national interests by violent means than by Christians' refusing to do anything that would maim and kill other Christians.

¹⁸Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 123.

7. Christians' killing Christians in time of war is irrelevant to the witness of the truth of the gospel.

Probably none of these statements reflects intended messages by those in the church. Still, to those outside of the church, such messages may be implied.

As long as Christians among nations in conflict flock to advance the agendas of their respective governments by force, they proclaim the irrelevance of the reconciling power of God. In essence, their actions announce that another cause has priority over that embodied in Christ that gave birth to the church. When the church allows itself to be fractured by war, it reveals that its center is not the one gracious Sovereign of all. Rather, the church—or pieces of it—recognizes something more worthy of its devotion than the One who called the church into being, drawing members from every race, class, and nation.

Unless the churches in the various nations learn to distance themselves from the cultures and nations in which they are found and cultivate a nonviolent, multicultural commitment to the church worldwide, unity will remain impossible. The witness of the church to Jesus Christ as the hope of the world will continue to be deplorably tainted by the violence of Christians' killing for nations. Only as the church derives its identity from and moves with its Sovereign will it be united. In its unity it will proclaim to the world the possibility of peace through Christ.

Miroslav Volf has offered a theological, confession-like statement that gives voice to the need for the ecumenical community to challenge the dominance of local loyalties in the life of the churches. It is well worth serious consideration by all concerned for the unity of the church and for peace for the world. It is written in the format of the Barman Declaration:

“You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

All the churches of Jesus Christ, scattered in diverse cultures, have been redeemed for God by the blood of the Lamb to form one multicultural community of faith. The “blood” that binds them as brothers and sisters is more precious than the “blood,” the language, the customs, political allegiances, or economic interests that may separate them.

We regret the false doctrine, as though a church should place allegiance to the culture it inhabits and the nation to which it belongs above the commitment to brothers and sisters from other cultures and nations, servants of the one Jesus Christ, their common Lord, and members of God's new community.¹⁹

For the church under the sovereignty of Jesus Christ to be open to all the diversity of humankind, it must be committed to nonviolence. Diversity cannot thrive where there is a possibility that the loyalty of one group of Christians to forces outside the church can be evoked and used against another group of Christians. It is necessary, as Volf's statement emphasizes, for Christians to recognize that in Christ they have more in common with one another—despite

¹⁹Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 54.

racial, class, or national differences—than they have with other citizens of their own nation who do not confess Jesus as Sovereign. No doubt, the very fact of the variety of the church's members can lead to tensions locally as well as globally. However, when nonviolent love is insisted upon, the variety becomes a witness to what God can do. The church's very existence points to One who is greater than the nations, making peace through Jesus Christ. The point of nonviolence is not for the church to preserve its purity or even to foster international harmony but to declare by unity a credible witness to Christ in order that the world might believe.

Craig M. Watts
Royal Palm Christian Church
Coral Springs, FL