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REMEMBERING OUR ECUMENICAL HERITAGE

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The Christian faith makes the bold claim that God incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth and entered into human history. Not all religions make historical claims which stake out specific locations on the timeline of lived experience. It is an aspect of who we are as Christians that we mark our relationship with the Creator in a way that both transcends the confines of time (*kairos*) and brings it close to us through an inherent involvement in our days, years, and eras (*chronos*).¹ The relationship between the Christian life and history is underscored by our sacred liturgies which rehearse for us – and involve us – in the story of faith. We recall the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.² We recall the communion of saints of which all Christians of the

¹ The New Testament uses a few different terms to convey different meanings of time. *Kairos* refers to the fullness of God's time interacting in human history. The incarnation, for example, is the ultimate *kairos* event. *Chronos*, by contrast, is a bit more mundane. It refers simply to the sequential passage of time and events in human history.

² Indeed, early Christians used the theologically rich term *anamnesis* to express something even more profound than an intellectual recalling of previous events. The term *anamnesis* refers to a kind of mystical "making present" what has occurred before. Robert Louis Wilken is quite eloquent on this point in *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 33-34. See also "A Service of Word and Table 1" in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 6-11.

² Apostles' and Nicene creeds are in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 880-81.

past, present, and future are gathered together in the eternal presence of God (Hebrews 11). To keep an eye toward the historical is, in a very real way, to keep one oriented towards the most essential elements of the living faith of those who walk along the Way with Christ Jesus.

History is, likewise, an essential tool and practice for those whose life and ministry includes calling Christians to remember the necessity of unity. History is, in itself, a pursuit that unifies those called by Christ Jesus. History gives us perspective to see beyond one moment in time towards a more encompassing view of the work of God and God's creatures. History helps us to think and act with an honesty of motivation that frees us from being driven away from our mark by currents and winds of fears, passions, and tumults. History is a tool – a discipline of both the heart and mind – that is integral to the pursuit of Christian unity in the Christian life.

As a discipline of both the heart and the mind, however, it is important to stress that history can be used poorly and even wrongly. It is a discipline which requires seriousness of consideration and sometimes our discipline in history – as in Christian devotion – is less faithful than it ought to be. A simplistic "proof-texting" of historical events which shuts down conversation instead of promoting it must be firmly rejected. It is also not right to say – as some do – that all perspectives are valid. Some data are unreliable. Much data upon which historical interpretations rely is missing (never having been retained or discovered). And the overlay of biases (conscious and unconscious) can taint the reliability and appropriateness of a historical portrayal. By necessity, all histories should be, and remain, open to review, to testing, revision, and, if necessary, to partial or full refutation.

For United Methodists the right use of and growth in historical understanding may sound somewhat analogous to the Spirit-led growth in personal and social holiness which has

been the animating lifeblood for the Methodist movement for generations. John Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* illustrates this spirit of correction and growth in holiness:

Love is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment.' It is not only 'the first and great' command, but all the commandments in one. 'Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise,' they are all comprised in this one word, love. In this is perfection, and glory, and happiness: The royal law of heaven and earth is this, 'Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.' The one perfect good shall be your one ultimate end. One thing shall ye desire for its own sake, -- the fruition of Him who is all in all. One happiness shall ye propose to your souls, even an union with Him that made them, the having 'fellowship with the Father and the Son,' the being 'joined to the Lord in one spirit.' One design ye are to pursue to the end of time, -- the enjoyment of God in time and in eternity. Desire other things so far as they tend to this; love the creature, as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take, be this the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought and word, and action, be subordinate to this. Whatever ye desire or fear, whatever ye seek or shun, whatever ye think speak, or do, be it in order to your happiness in God, the sole end, as well as source, of your being.³

The Methodist movement was based on telling stories of growth and development (and "backsliding") as people sought to learn from one another's testimony and the testimony of the Holy Spirit in their efforts to grow more perfect in love. Recording the history of the Methodist movement for Wesley was not only to "get the facts right" but was a way to learn from experience that the movement might continue to grow in its pursuit of holiness corporately and as individuals. History was filled with God's dynamism.

John Wesley's own work as a historian of the Methodist movement and as author of the four-volume (!) *Concise History of England* illustrates that he viewed history in a more dynamic way than many modern Westerners do today. Allan Nevins describes history as a kind of

³ *The Works of John Wesley, 3rd Edition, Volume 11: Thoughts, Addresses, Prayers, and Letters.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 366-67.

"bridge connecting the past and the present, and pointing the road to the future."⁴ We believe Wesley would have resonated with this idea. But sometimes his "bridge" confused things as much as it clarified them. Wesley's own assessment of the history of Britain, for example, reflected a sense of inevitability of ever-increasing liberty – even if he also condemned those whom he believed took liberty too far. Historians today rightly point out that Wesley's view of history as an inevitable march toward increasing liberty was a serious flaw in his work as a historian even though it also illustrates his hopefulness concerning human potential.⁵

Similarly, it is important to identify the missteps of Wesley as well as his triumphs with regard to the work of Christian unity. In recent decades it has become commonplace to make reference to Wesley's sermon, "A Catholic Spirit" when one wishes to emphasize how ecumenical the Wesleyan movement has been in the past. Indeed, Wesley's words are inspiring: "'If thine heart is as my heart,' if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: 'give me thine hand.'"⁶ The Methodist historian who is engaged in ecumenical efforts must also be mindful, however, of Wesley's less than charitable remarks toward, for example, Roman

⁴ Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History*, Revised ed. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday & Company, 1962).14.

⁵ It is important to stress, however, that Wesley was no radical democrat. More modern phrases like "power to the people" would have prompted strong qualification by Wesley who still believed in the divine right of kings and strongly critiqued, for example, the American Revolution after he first supported it. William Gibson, "'The Past is Another Country': Wesley's History of England," unpublished plenary presentation at the Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies, Oxford, England, August 2013. We wish to thank Professor Gibson for kindly making available a manuscript copy of his 2013 address.

⁶ John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit: Sermon 39," <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-39-catholic-spirit/>. Accessed on 29 September 2014.

Catholics as well as other groups.⁷ In the late nineteenth century it is sadly not difficult to find virulently anti-Catholic remarks as well among Methodist leaders.⁸

We do not make reference to these stories to give ourselves a brow-beating by airing the "dirty laundry" of our past; there is an important lesson here for persons engaged in ecumenism. It is not necessarily the case that more dialogue – regardless of its quality – will always and everywhere result in "progress" toward ever increasing levels of Christian unity. Sometimes ecumenical work takes steps backward. It is the task of historians and theologians who know who they are as Methodists and Christians to discern when that may be happening and to make "course corrections" as needed.

The notion that history is a bridge that we discussed above is an important concept in understanding the place of history in the Christian faith and in the pursuit of Christian unity. Like the minister who calls the people's attention to the story of faith in the recitation of the eucharistic prayer, the historian calls people's attention to their relationship with the past, the present, and the future. Historians practice what Rev. Dr. Robert Williams calls the "ministry of memory."⁹ They remember – by drawing together the scattered bits of what was with the scattered bits of what is – and they offer up interpretations that help people to make meaning of the vast scope of time and human experience. They help people to examine what has happened, what is happening, and what may happen, so that they may use their free will to live faithfully and responsibly in the present moment.

⁷ On John Wesley's anti-Catholic attitudes see David Butler, *Methodists and Papists: John Wesley and the Catholic Church in the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995).

⁸See, for example, Benjamin L. Hartley, *Evangelicals at a Crossroads: Revivalism and Social Reform in Boston, 1860-1910* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2011), 65-92.

⁹ Robert Williams was General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church from 2006 to 2014.

Christian unity, the assertion that the church is one, is a recognition that even in its diversity the church is interconnected, integrally related in its particularities. Ecumenical ministry is another kind of bridge-making. Its efforts are rooted in calling to mind the kinship of all Christians (in that we are all called to God in and through Christ Jesus). Its efforts also point to the present moment and offer up meanings that point out the unity (or lack of unity) of Christians now. And its efforts point the way to the road forward towards more dynamic embodiment of Christ's love in and among Christians throughout God's Creation.

These ministries of ecumenism and history are in important conversation with each other. They help keep each other honest in their tasks and in their achievements. The pursuit of faithful embodiment of Christian unity challenges historical interpretations to keep an eye towards the mission of Christ Jesus as something pursued on behalf of all Creation. Do our histories make the stories of some too grand and diminish the stories of others? Who of God's children are ignored? What of God's sacred creativity is spoken about and what is not? Histories cannot, in practical terms, include everything and everyone. But do they point to an honest portrayal of what has been included and what has been left out? Similarly, history challenges ecumenism not to overly simplify the story of Christian unity. It can ask many of the same questions that ecumenism can ask of the works of history. It can champion the forgotten, the excluded, and the oppressed.

If we apply the same need to test the claims of history to testing the claims of ecumenical endeavors, one place we might begin is to ask what we mean by 'a church divided.' Much has been written during the era of 20th century conciliar ecumenism about restoring the divided church and making it whole again. Indeed, Methodists in a number of different ways

have been among the most important leaders of Protestant efforts in ecumenism. Methodist layman John R. Mott (1865-1955) has been described as one of the key "architects" for the World Council of Churches' establishment in 1948. His work as an evangelist and organizer of student groups in the decades preceding the establishment of the World Council of Churches is a testimony to the power of friendship as well as administrative acumen for the sake of ecumenism. Since 1948 three of the six General Secretaries of the WCC have come from representatives of global Methodism: Philip A. Potter of Dominica in the Caribbean, Emilio Castro of Uruguay, and Samuel Kobia of Kenya all provided valuable leadership to the ecumenical movement in its efforts to heal church division and to "restore" lost Christian unity.¹⁰

The historian engaged in efforts to promote Christian unity, however, must question assumptions about "restoring" Christian unity which may not have been as unified even in the early church as we would like to think.¹¹ The ecumenical movement in recent decades has further understood Christian unity (especially among many in relation to Central and Western Europe) in terms of institutional unity – with "church" being understood as an institutional vessel of the Holy Spirit in the world.¹² However, was it ever true that some of the churches in Africa and Asia were institutionally bound to the Roman Catholic Church? Some of these churches are clearly as ancient as the Roman Catholic Church, but their histories have tended to

¹⁰ Paul Wesley Chilcote, "Evangelism in the Methodist Tradition," In *T & T Clark Companion to Methodism* (ed) Charles Yrigoyen Jr. (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), 231.

¹¹ The title of Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism is, after all, *Unitatis Redintegratio* which translated means "restoration of unity." See Austin Flannery (ed), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, New Revised Edition 1992*. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1992), 452.

¹² **Add reference. Fitzgerald? (Glen)**

be ignored if not wholly forgotten by the main stream of ecumenical endeavors in recent decades.¹³

The understanding of "unity" in an institutional formulation also stakes out a theological understanding of "church" that is at odds with other understandings of the workings of the Holy Spirit (not seen as contained in specific and necessary institutional vessels). Many Pentecostals, Charismatics, and other churches have ways of thinking about "church" which defy broad-brush definitions. A particularly good case in point here is with African Initiated Churches today.¹⁴ While many have said that appeals to these Pentecostal and Charismatic understandings of pneumatology¹⁵ are "church-dividing," the opposite argument can logically be made if the starting point for unity is understood to be Christ Jesus's call upon us rather than a unified, institutional church's ultimate claim to be Christ's shepherds on earth. If one accepts – and some do and some do not – that all Christians were once institutionally unified in one church, "church-dividing" means any diversity in polity and doctrine that is exercised outside of that frame. But, if one concedes that there have always been Christians who have lived in different institutional realities outside of that one, unifying, institution history gives a reality-check to what we can logically call "division" in the Body of Christ.

¹³ The Ethiopian Orthodox Church can trace its history at least as far back as the early fourth century. *The Acts of Thomas* which scholars estimate to be from around the year 200 has been described as the earliest account of the church far beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire (India). The early history of Persian Christianity is similarly rather unknown since, in seminary curricula, the early history of Christianity is largely limited to that which took place in the Roman Empire. On the early history of Christianity beyond the Roman Empire in Asia see Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 25.

¹⁴ Marthinus L. Daneel, *All Things Hold Together: Selected Essays by M.L. Daneel*, (Pretoria, Republic of South Africa: University of South Africa Press, 2007), 1-20.

¹⁵ Pneumatology is the study of the theology of the Holy Spirit.

This is an especially important example of the kinds of questions which history can ask of ecumenism. All of this is even more important as we prepare to mark the 500th anniversary of the 1517 start of what has been called the "Protestant Reformation." To be sure, the hatred, animosity, and bloodshed that followed cannot be condoned when seen in light of the command of Christ Jesus to love one another as he first loved us. But what of the birth of Protestant churches? What of the birth of Christian communities which preceded this particular dating of different ways of being Christian in Europe. (Jan Huss (1369-1415) and the Moravians come to mind as do the Waldensians who trace their "Protestant" origins to the late 1100s.) What of those whose origins as Christian churches come *after* the Reformation struggles (notably the Methodists)? Are we to see every one of these expressions of Christian faith as a mistake – or even a rebellion against God?

Or is there another way of looking at things? Instead of seeing the Christian church as a monolith that has broken into pieces that need to be gathered and reassembled, what if we instead use the metaphor of the living organism? If one looks at the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus – followed by Pentecost – as the beginning of the church in the world, the expansion of Christianity through new and contextualized forms (the cellular division and particularization of functions of Christian communities) could be understood as the growth – and not the fracturing – of the Body of Christ. The unity of that Body is Christ himself. The harmonious relationship among Christians (defined by love among each other and bold expressions of love towards those whose lives are lived outside the church) is the mark of integrity of the church. Here may well be an understanding that truly invites all Christians

without demanding they crawl back into an ecclesial institution which remains a poor fit for their way of following Christ which they hold dear.

These are practical examples of the questions one may faithfully and intelligently ask. These are core questions that history and ecumenism together can meditate upon in order to faithfully discern a way forward as we remember those who went before us and will come after us.