

A Piece of Theology of Glory

At the recent meeting of our youth in Toowoomba a man who is involved in RE classes in schools gave an interesting talk. One does not sometimes directly contradict a guest out of courtesy. Something he said, however, demands further reflection. It was the kind of comment one hears frequently today in this so-called “ecumenical” age. He was saying that the various denominations should get together in working to address serious religious ignorance among the youth of today. He said, in effect:

In heaven there won't be many denominations. All will be one. There we shall all get along with one another. So we should make an effort to get along with one another here and now.

We have to admit that the argument is plausible. Didn't Paul speak in that way when two Women at Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, found it hard to agree? He mentioned, as a Gospel reason, that their names were written, with the rest of his fellow workers, in the Book of Life!

A good way to reply to this would be to see the difference if the argument had run:

In heaven there won't be many different doctrines. All will confess the same. There we shall all confess the same. So we should make an effort to have the same teachings here and now.

See the great difference? In fact that man took a very commendable line on a series of doctrinal issues, like commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible, and affirmation of creation against evolution. However, he said that he deliberately kept away from anything that might be controversial, and simply referred children who were interested back to their own churches.

The heading “A piece of theology of glory” is a reference to a point Luther made early in his reforming career. The opposite of the theology of glory is the theology of the cross. Now the church is hidden, in apparent defeat, under the cross. Men see her “rent asunder” and distressed by heresies. Yet the church invisible that will appear in glory is not rent asunder, nor is the church invisible here on earth rent asunder. Christ's prayer, “that they may all be one” has always been fulfilled. All believers in Christ of all times and places have always been one through the Word of the Apostles. To say that is to be ecumenical in the right sense of the word. However, visible oneness belongs to the glory to come.

In fact, the way the second argument is put above points to the real task of Christians when they work seriously for unity. The unity of the church is to be sought, not in doctrinal compromise, or in deliberately avoiding points of difference, but in the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments (*Augsburg Confession*, Article VII). That is how to be truly ecumenical when we seek the unity of the church under the cross. Any kind of co-operation in sacred things, teaching, and evangelism without unity in the Gospel ignores the admonitions of Scripture to mark and avoid those who persistently teach error (Gl 1:8-9; R 16:17). Here the church under the cross must avoid false prophets both within and without, and find its right doctrine of the church in the visible marks of the church, the right teaching of the Gospel, and the right administration of the sacraments.

A further comment on the prevalent falsely ecumenical spirit of our age is that it is a continuation and extension of some of the false attitudes of Pietism. This was a movement in the churches of the West, which reacted against the period of “Orthodoxy.” Lutheranism was profoundly affected by it at the time. It still is today. The criticism was that Orthodox Lutherans were spiritually dead. The cry was: “Deeds, not creeds.” The view was that doctrine divides. Working together in mission across doctrinal divides was the way to get Christians together to confront the anti-Christian forces of the world. The people of the world would believe in Christ only if Christians dropped the differences over which they squabbled. On the contrary, when people of the world do believe they are no longer world. Here under the cross our concern must be the one church invisible, through the true marks of the church.