

CHURCH UNITY AND THE REFORMATION TEACHING
OF JUSTIFICATION

Chairman: The question for this evening is on the subject of church unity. Is the current church unity movement compatible with the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith? In our Forum tonight we have a guest speaker - Pastor H. P. V. Renner, from the Lutheran Church at Nundah. Pastor Renner, how do you regard the Ecumenical Movement?

Pastor Renner:

As everyone knows, there is a very profound yearning for togetherness among Christians today. I believe that this is more than a sentimental desire to be in fellowship with each other. I think it is more than a contagion that has spread across the world - more than a reaction to the scandal and to the agony of dividedness. I think it is the fruit of an eagerness to see the will of the Lord done among us. I believe it is with a desperate endeavour to reach the end of the suffering and the frustration that sin and separation has caused in our world and in Christendom in particular. And I think too, it is possible to see in this yearning for togetherness an anxiety about the survival of Christianity.

So the cry is for union among churches. We note that even the word "ecumenism", which denominations once used quite proudly to describe the extent of their churches' world-wide influence, has now come to mean a kind of movement towards inter-denominational union among churches which had hitherto been separate. The cry, "In Jesus Christ, we are all one; let us forget our differences, and join in a happy fellowship", has attracted quite a large and enthusiastic chorus. But now in this confluence of denominations, I think most of you know that some of us Lutherans have been notoriously slow footed and quite cautious. And one might justifiably ask, why?

It is not that we want to cling jealously to our identity. You know that Luther hated the term "Lutheran". Neither do we necessarily want to preserve it. It isn't that we have forgotten the High Priestly prayer of our Lord either. And it isn't that we feel holier and more faithful to the truth than others. It is rather that in this haste towards and expression of the oneness in Christ Jesus, well meaning people have not come seriously to terms with the questions, "What is the nature of this Jesus Christ in whom oneness is to be found?" and "What is the nature of the oneness which Jesus Christ establishes?"

Sentiment and brotherly love are essential ingredients belonging to the atmosphere of any confluence of Christians, but we contend that they can never be the basis for union, i.e. union in Jesus Christ. Neither can the highly subjective experiences of those whose association with the faith is accompanied by ecstasies, signs, or speaking in tongues, or manifestations of sanctity and piety in any form. The unity of the church, we believe, does not lie in such phenomena, much of which is present anyway in non-Christian religions and associations.

The unity of the church lies in Him who is its Head and in the work of reconciliation by which He has gathered men out of their estrangement from God, out of the darkness of sin and death, and through the operations of His Holy Spirit, has made them sons of God, those who are justified by faith in Him. It is amazing, and I believe quite distressing, with

what facility people are able to name the name of Jesus Christ and to confess allegiance to Him, and at the same time re-mould and re-shape His nature in their own reconstructed ideas of Him so that His nature is disfigured into an acceptable and credible form. Only the Jesus Christ of Biblical revelation can be the Head of the Church. A Jesus who is an example only, an heroic moral reformer, or a wise pundit, or a man vested with divinity, or embodying in a symbolic way the character of the deity; a Jesus who is anything less than the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved is not the Jesus of the sacred Scriptures. And any group of people giving service to such an idea, such a construction which bears the name Jesus Christ, or to such a caricature of Him, cannot, we believe, be in communion with those who know and confess Him as God incarnate, virgin born, human and divine, crucified, bodily risen, king of kings, destined to return personally to judge the living and the dead. The two groups thus described are reaching out to two entirely different persons, two entirely different deities, two entirely different directions; and though they may even kneel side by side, in a church, in a building, they are really worlds apart.

The Fundamentals of Christian Faith:

Crucial in our search for the one Lord in Whom oneness is to be found, is a humble, earnest, and worshipful return to the sacred Scriptures in which this Lord is revealed to us. And crucial also is an acknowledgment and an acceptance of everything those sacred Scriptures make known about Him for our salvation.

Now at the heart of all that the sacred Scriptures make known about Jesus Christ is the truth that He is in Word and in deed the God of our salvation who has made complete atonement for our sins, so that by faith in Him we are declared just in the sight of God. Again, let me stress, it is a simple matter to give lip service to such a summary statement as "He who by faith is righteous shall live," and to declare that justification by faith is the basis of Christian unity. But if, as the history of theology has shown, by justification is meant both acquittal before the bar of a righteous God and the infused grace of sanctification, or the bestowal of the charismatic gifts of the Spirit, we know that there is an essential rift with those who hold that justification is nothing more, nothing less than the declaration of God that man is righteous in spite of his continuing state of sinfulness, (in spite of his charismatic impoverishment, if that is what some people emphasize). Again, if by faith is meant the capacity in natural man to accept what God offers in Christ Jesus, we know that there is an essential rift with those who hold that faith cannot be a human capacity. So entire is man's fall into sin that faith itself must be a gift of God.

Under the same caption, "justification by faith", diametrically opposed theologies can be accommodated. It is quite possible to have togetherness in such circumstances, but it is not possible, we contend, to have oneness in Jesus Christ in such circumstances. Either we would say, "Christ alone is our salvation (as we sing in the hymn), and we contribute nothing to our salvation; or "Christ is not alone our salvation and we have a part to contribute." To confess Him as Saviour and Lord, in our opinion, does not mean both points of view. To accommodate both points of view is to divide the house against itself, in which state, the best that can be hoped for is not church union but a kind of agglomerate separateness.

What is desperately needed for true church union is the return to the Sacred Scriptures themselves, where the gospel, that great basis for union, is presented to us faithfully by the Holy Spirit through His chosen servants. True unity will

come when we allow the gospel to call us with unimpeded clarity, out of our alienation from God, across the barrier of sin, into an unconditional faith in Jesus Christ. When we allow that to happen, I believe we will understand what true union really is. Only the unadulterated gospel of God in all its theological depth and all its simplicity (and not human negotiations - let alone human circumlocutions, amendments, compromises and appendages to this gospel), can gather divided man into God's communion of saints.

Chairman: Thank you very much Pastor Renner. We are deeply appreciative of those stimulating remarks. Friends, dialogue with Rome seems to be the fashion today. I have a news item here from Christianity Today of December 3, 1971.p.45

"Pentecostals to Rome

Pentecostal theologians - in Rome - for official dialogue with Catholics? Yes, this month. A team, representing the classical as well as neo-Pentecostal ends of the movement, will meet there, according to an announcement made at the annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, which convened in Des Moines following the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America (see preceding story).

Killian McDonald, Catholic theologian and Benedictine monk, broke the news to the thirty-five members present. 'This has greater meaning for the Secretariat in Rome than dialogue with Lutherans, Presbyterians, or Methodists,' he urged. 'And it would be embarrassing and narrow, to say the least, if you Pentecostals should remain silent, waiting for Rome to announce this historic event.'

But Pentecostals, especially their educators and theologians, have come a long way since the days when the pope was attacked as anti-Christ in Luther-style. No negative ripple followed...."

Religious boundary lines are becoming obsolete. Denominational groupings are becoming irrelevant. The Bible says, "We have a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well if ye take heed." 2 Peter 1:19. What light does prophecy throw on the question of union with Rome? John Brinsmead, would you answer this question for us?

John Brinsmead

If charity would cause us to forget or set aside what is written in Revelation 17, we are blinded by false charity. The prophecy of Revelation 17 presents a description of a certain church. It is so plain that he who runs may read it.

In prophetic symbolism a woman represents a church (Jeremiah 6:2; 2 Corinthians 11:2). A pure woman represents a pure church as presented in Revelation 12. A corrupt woman represents a corrupt church as in Revelation 17. Now let us examine the identifying characteristics of this corrupt church brought to view in the prophecy of Revelation 17:

1. She is a corrupt church. "...the great whore." verse 1. "With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication." Verse 2. "The mother of harlots and abominations of the earth." Verse 5.
2. She is a wealthy church. "...decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand." Verse 4.
3. She is a mother church. "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother..." Verse 5.

4. She is a persecuting church. "And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." Verse 6. Historians tell us that millions were put to death by the ecclesiastical system which ruled during the Dark Ages and Medieval period.
5. She is a powerful church. "...which reigneth over the kings of the earth." Verse 18.
6. She is a politically affiliated church. "With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication." Verse 2.
7. She is the purple and scarlet church. "...arrayed in purple and scarlet colour." Verse 4.
8. She is a world-wide church. "...the great whore that sitteth on many waters." Verse 1. "That waters which thou sawest where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues." Verse 15.
9. She is the seven-hilled city church. "The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sitteth." Verse 9. "And the woman which thou sawest is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth."

It is not necessary for me to name this wealthy, world-wide, persecuting, "mother" who has ruled the world from the famous seven-hilled city. The Reformers had no difficulty identifying this great anti-christ of Bible prophecy. God has left this vital information on record so that we need not be in the dark about the present church unity movement. And as the book of Revelation repeatedly says, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

Chairman: Is the church unity movement in Protestantism a sign of spiritual bankruptcy? We will now hear from Dr. Zwemer.

Dr. Zwemer.

I will state my thesis at the outset. It is this: The Protestant churches are turning to Pentecostalism and toward union with Rome because their alliance with secular and scientific humanism has failed.

We can explain this only if we look back into history to the close of the Middle Ages. It marked the end of a thousand years of human stagnation and corruption. The Dark Ages were the inevitable fruition of a system wherein men tried to find fulfillment through a mystical, spiritual experience.

At the close of the Middle Ages, two great movements arose. On the one hand, there was the Reformation which recovered that Pauline gospel which declares that human fulfillment is found only in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, there was the Renaissance - a movement to recover the ancient classical Greek ideal of fulfillment in this life through the reason, the rational processes, the ingenuity of men, and through the effort of men and through the exploitation by man of the resources around him, both human and material. The Renaissance was that great rebirth of classical learning which began in the 14th century and made tremendous creative contributions to civilization - in literature, the languages, the arts, in architecture, in medicine and science.

The Renaissance made a most significant contribution to the Protestant Reformation. With the Renaissance there came a breath of tolerance, and a freedom of enquiry which could

only promote the study of the Holy Scriptures. The Renaissance contributed outstanding Christian scholars like Wycliffe (earlier), Erasmus and Melancthon (later). The Renaissance brought the recovery of the ancient Biblical languages - Hebrew and Greek. It brought to the Reformers the original text of Scripture in Greek and Hebrew. It gave to the Reformation that engine for the distribution of the Word of God in the Guttenberg invention of moveable type.

So it is understandable that the humanistic revolution known as the Renaissance was most attractive to the Reformers and to those who succeeded them. Indeed it was not long before this Renaissance philosophy was introduced into the very halls of learning in the Protestant universities. History records that even Luther himself acquiesced to the request of Melancthon that the philosophy of Aristotle be taught at Wittenberg.

Now the contribution of the Renaissance in human civilization has been very great. It brought an age of enlightenment to the earth. It gave birth to the industrial revolution, the golden age of biology and medicine, with all its benefits to men. And this century has brought to us an unparalleled development in technology and science directly attributable to the thrust of the Renaissance.

The Protestant nations have been the leading nations to foster the spirit of the Renaissance. I think of my own native country, America, which in this century has witnessed the outburst of the computer age, cybernetics, the atomic age and the space age. It is an age that has come to fruition this last decade. It found its personal symbolism in the mystique of a young and dynamic president, John F. Kennedy, who proclaimed a new frontier for mankind, that man would not only explore this earth, but he would explore outer space and make his thrust to the moon. That hope has been fulfilled. Man has reached the moon. He has explored the lunar crust and he has found that it is dead. Returning to earth, he finds that the mystique of the age is also dead. All his triumphs are turning to ashes. He finds that his own earth is defiled. His own cities are polluted. All human classes are alienated. His very homes are divided and his children debauched, and all that he sought through the Renaissance (to unite men and to usher in the golden, millennial age), has ended only in division of men.

So, the Renaissance itself is dead. The disillusionment with secular and scientific idealism has created a tremendous vacuum. Modern man has not found fulfillment in brilliant human progress. The young and the old are dropping out. They are going hippie, they are going Pentecostal, they are going into the Jesus Revolution. Protestantism, which has been more enamoured with the Renaissance than with the Reformation, is greatly affected. Her alliance with humanism has failed. She now seeks alliance with her old foe - the Roman Catholic Church.

Chairman: Where is Protestantism going to go from here? What is the road ahead? Mr. Robert Brinsmead.

Robert Brinsmead

Modern man does not really know too much about the real distinction between Protestant and Catholic. The average Catholic and the average Protestant have very little insight into the essential difference between the two streams of thought. That a person calls himself a Protestant may not mean very much today. A few years ago, one of the world's leading German theologians took a chair in the theological

faculty in one of the leading Protestant universities in the United States. He observed that the real doctrinal insights of the Reformers were unknown in that great Protestant institution. If this state of things existed in the halls of learning, what might be expected among the common people?

There is a reason why Protestants in general have little knowledge about the great insights of the Reformers. Our age has been a very secular, scientific, and materialistic one; and the Protestant churches have been affected by the spirit of the age. In fact, Protestant societies have been the most progressive, the most scientific, and the most materialistic - in short, they have been most deeply affected by the spirit of the Renaissance. Protestant youth have been educated by the spirit of humanism far more than by the spirit of the Reformation.

In the last few years there have been some profound changes taking place. Until recently, the scientist was like the High Priest of society. But not any more. There has been a real reaction against the illusion of scientific infallibility. Secular and scientific progress has not brought man his much sought after fulfillment. The most developed societies are the most affected by the feeling of emptiness that comes through failure to realize fulfillment. Take developments in the United States as an example. Young people from high class homes are turning to hippie-type movements. Some of the oldsters say with disgust, "They live in the wealthiest nation on earth, yet they are not satisfied." Those who criticize the hippies may sometimes be more stupid than the hippies, for they think that man can live by bread alone - or automobiles, television, and the affluence of suburban materialism.

Modern man has been drunk with the dream of secular and scientific idealism. He has aspired to create an ideal environment and to find his fulfillment in human progress. There has been a rude awakening. The most developed societies are foremost in discovering that man cannot find fulfillment and satisfaction in materialistic achievement. In the wake of the great disillusionment there is a great spiritual vacuum. Multitudes are now bent on finding satisfaction in a spiritual experience. Hence we are confronted with the phenomena of neo-Pentecostalism and the Jesus Revolution.

Those involved in the Jesus Revolution are often young people who have unsuccessfully tried to find fulfillment in the things of the flesh - in drugs and in sex. They have not changed their aim. They have only changed their method. Now they are desperately trying to find fulfillment and satisfaction in spiritual experience. This pronounced trend toward religious experientialism is having a tremendous impact in the world. Neo-Pentecostalism is jumping the denominational barriers and making many of the old religious groupings obsolete.

Now the crucial point which I wish to make is this: This great outburst of religious experientialism (which is especially manifested in neo-Pentecostalism and the Jesus Revolution), which is directed toward finding satisfaction in a spiritual experience, is in harmony with the classical thought of the Medieval Church. In short, this religious trend definitely belongs to the Roman Catholic stream of thought. I will now direct my remarks to explain this central thesis.

Christian versus Greek Philosophy

The Greeks were the greatest idealists the world had ever known. They were committed to the vision of man finding fulfillment and satisfaction by means of his own self-development. Although this ideal gave promise in the classical and

golden age of Greece, the failure of the Greek ideal was never more apparent than it was in that morally and spiritually bankrupt civilization at the time Christ was born.

The Christian message turned the Greek world up-side-down. In the first place it declared that fallen, sinful man cannot find fulfillment and satisfaction in his own experience. But in the place of man's failure it brings in the gospel a message of faith and hope. Man does not have to seek satisfaction in his own work or in his own experience. By faith he may find his satisfaction in God's work in Jesus Christ and in the saving experience of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Word of faith declares that our fulfillment is found in Jesus Christ, the One perfect, ideal man (Col. 2:10 NEB). Christ is our righteousness, Christ is our life, and all that He has done and all that He is in His perfect humanity is ours by faith. The gospel brings also a message of hope, for instead of expecting life to be fulfilled within the historical process, the believer looks to the Parousia - the second appearing of Christ - when all that he now possesses only by faith will then be realized by visible reality.

Yet this great truth of righteousness by faith was lost through the development of Romanism. The fathers of the early church were educated in Greek philosophy. They tried to harmonize the learning of Greece and the truth of the gospel. They took the Greek ideal - human fulfillment and satisfaction - and tried to achieve it by the Christian means - grace. This "marriage" was the foundation of the Catholic system. Men became absorbed in the pursuit of finding satisfaction in a spiritual experience. Their own spiritual experience became the primary object of their concern. To understand this is to understand the heart of Roman Catholicism.

Thus the church lost the great Pauline truth of justification by faith in God's work in Christ; it finally sought justification by God's work in its own experience. Absorbed in subjective experientialism, the church lost the hope of the Parousia - the return of Christ. This pre-occupation with trying to achieve fulfillment through one's own spiritual experience led to the stagnation of the Dark Ages.

Then came the Reformation, which was a revival of the faith and hope of the New Testament. The Reformation insight was embodied in its great doctrine of justification by faith. Briefly, what did this doctrine mean to the Reformers?

Because of their understanding of "original sin" (the sinful nature of all men), the Reformers clearly saw life could not be fulfilled within the historical process. With or without grace, no man could find fulfillment and satisfaction in his own experience. This discovery was the foundation of the Reformation. In this context, their message of justification meant this: Instead of looking inward to his experience, the believer looks outward to Christ's experience for him; rather than look inward to his own work or even to God's work in him, the believer looks outward to God's work in Jesus Christ. The righteousness which makes a believer acceptable in the sight of God, said the Reformers, was not some quality that God poured into the soul, but it was the personal righteousness of Jesus which remained inherent in Christ and resided only in heaven. Now with this rebirth of the truth of justification by faith, there came a rebirth of eschatological hope. Those who accepted the truth of the Reformation looked forward in hope to the coming of Jesus when life would be fulfilled by visible reality.

Now just as Greek thought captured the early church in the development of Romanism, so again Greek thought captured the Reformation church in the development of the Renaissance.

As we have seen, the Renaissance was a revival of classical Greek thought. It grew up alongside the Reformation. Its humanistic philosophy gave great promise. Consider the brilliant achievements of the Renaissance - the arts, sciences, discoveries, material advancement. It gave to the world a dazzling display of human progress. Humanism promised man unlimited progress, indeed human fulfillment and satisfaction through the unparalleled development of human powers and earthly resources. Now in contrast, what did the Reformation offer man? Sola fide (solely by faith)! And poor little sola fide seemed so unspectacular that the sons of the Reformers became much more enamoured with the spirit of the Renaissance than with the spirit of sola fide.

But we have again reached the great turning point in history. Men are realizing that the achievements of humanism are not so brilliant after all. Protestantism stands at the crossroads. Before her there are two alternatives.

Two Roads Ahead

The popular trend right now is to say, "Human fulfillment cannot be found in the pursuit of secular, scientific, and materialistic values. Satisfaction for man can only be found in spiritual values and through a spiritual experience." Among the Protestants, Pentecostals and the Jesus Revolutionaries are foremost in moving in this direction. If Protestantism moves in this direction then it will be a return to the very principle of Roman Catholicism.

Is this possible? It is not only possible, but a study of the thirteenth chapter of Revelation will show that prophecy foretells this startling development. First of all, this chapter brings to view a leopard-like beast, which the Reformers had no difficulty in recognizing as a description of the Papal system. The prophecy shows how this beast would receive a "deadly wound". Revelation 13:3. The Protestants recognized this to be a prophecy of the Reformation whose truth of justification by faith inflicted a mortal blow on the Papal power. (See Introduction to King James Version of the Bible). But the prophecy of Revelation 13 goes on to describe how that "deadly wound" would be healed, and once again, the entire world would wonder after the beast. Obviously, this could only take place if the Protestant world lost that great truth which broke the Papal power in the sixteenth century.

The prophecy describes the very thing which will lead the world back to Rome: "He doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of man, and deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by means of those miracles which he had power to do in the sight of the beast." Revelation 13:14. Thus, he "causeth the earth, and them which dwell therein to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed." Verse 12.

This fire from heaven, which deceives men to return to their allegiance to Romanism, is undoubtedly some demonstration of spiritual power which appears to be the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It appears to be heavenly fire as at Pentecost (see Acts 2:2,3). Fire is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. It is significant that this neo-Pentecostal development is often called "fire from heaven" by those who experience it and advocate it to others. It is significant also that this Pentecostal development is not only sweeping through the Protestant bodies, but it is now being received with great favour by Roman Catholics. In fact, leading Roman Catholic theologians and prelates are endorsing Pentecostalism as a genuine religious experience which is in harmony with the classical doctrine and experience of the Medieval Church.

Thus does Bible prophecy show us where the religious world is heading right now. Protestants and Catholics are going to unite in one desperate, final effort to establish a kingdom of God on this earth, - a scheme of human betterment which will promise men their much sought for fulfillment and satisfaction.

There is another alternative before Protestants. The Bible indicates that a remnant will accept this alternative. This will be a thoroughgoing revival of the truth of New Testament Christianity and the great Reformation truth of justification by faith. This will mean three things:

1. A full and final abandonment on the part of God's people of the hope of ever finding fulfillment and satisfaction in their own experience.
2. A reaffirmation that our fulfillment and satisfaction is found alone in Jesus Christ. This means that it is His experience that is of supreme importance and is the object of our concern, and not our own. It also means that God's people must glory in what God has done in Christ and not in what God does in their own little experience.
3. A confession that our hope is in the personal and visible coming of our Lord Jesus Christ who alone can bring the lives of God's people to fulfillment. This means that the Christian hope is not in any scheme of human betterment in this life. It is not in a kingdom of God to be set up down here by men, neither is it in grand religious alliances of human devisings; but their hope is in the kingdom that God will establish "without hands". (Daniel 2:45). When Christ comes and rolls up the scroll of time, then it will be that God's people will actually possess by visible reality what is now theirs only by faith.

Thus, there are two alternatives before Protestants today: either they turn back to the Catholic system of trying to find satisfaction in religious experience or they turn forward to a hope in the return of Christ who alone can fulfil history.

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