

“Who concerning the Truth Have Misaimed” — 2 Timothy 2:18

Misaiming concerning the Basis for Arriving at the Oneness of the Faith

Misaiming: “The festive celebration of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* on October 31, 1998 has commonly been recognized as marking a new beginning in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic relations and also in the wider ecumenical world. Not only did the document manifest an agreement on one of the most crucial theological questions behind the Reformation breach, it did it in a way which gave form and name to a particular type of agreement in legitimate differences, a *differentiated consensus*...

“Differentiated consensus assumes not mere tolerance but legitimacy or even desirability of differentiation on the level of theological expressions or experiences of lived faith. Differentiated consensus thus at least partly stands on the hermeneutical assumption that particular historical contexts cannot be disregarded in the pursuit of theological truth and that the achieved agreement reflects the diversities of historical situations without endangering the acquired agreement” (Minna Hietamäki, “Merely Partners in the Fishing Business? Theological Issues in *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries*,” *Ecumenical Trends*, January 2006, pp. 1-2).

Truth: The Christian ecumenical movement with its desire to repair the “Reformation breach” is both ongoing and productive from the vantage point of human considerations and activity, but the means that are adopted to assist believers in arriving at the oneness of the faith can be both ineffective and counterproductive from the vantage point of the divine economy, as presented in the one true declaration of God—the Bible.

The purpose of the ecumenical movement in general is to promote unity among various religions. This propensity can be seen in Christendom in the desire to promote a visible testimony of unity in order to counter the damage done to the testimony of Jesus caused by schisms, divisions, and sectarianism. In many respects the ecumenical movement is a response to a deep realization of the difficulty in reconciling sinners to God when unbelievers can easily point to the lack of reconciliation among those who name the name of the

Lord. When unbelievers accurately observe the great beam of division in the eye of believers (Matt. 7:3), the god of this age, who works to frustrate the illumination of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4), can easily blind their thoughts with dark accusations of hypocrisy. The desire for reconciliation is laudable, but the means that we choose to accomplish genuine reconciliation should not, in turn, rely upon the limiting and corrupted wisdom of this age (1 Cor. 1:20; 2:6).

The quotation above is a sterling example of an attempt to accomplish the divine goal of John 17:20-21 through fallen, human methods. Despite the good intentions, there is no real possibility that a reconciliation produced through the methodology of differentiated consensus will have any impact on believers truly being one or being perfected into one (vv. 22-23). The methodology of differentiated consensus is highlighted within the context of longstanding efforts by Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians to come to a mutually acceptable faith position regarding the truth of justification.

According to Minna Hietamäki, progress has been made in regard to resolving the tension between these two branches of Christendom through discussions that recognize the legitimacy and “even desirability” of accepting, rather than simply tolerating, differentiated positions in relation to “theological expressions or experiences of lived faith.” Rather than examining differing views in the light of the Scriptures to determine whether things are so (Acts 17:11), the methodology of differentiated consensus offers a painless way for agreement by suggesting that there is something of value inherent in understanding the responses of each group within the historical context that produced their differing positions.

What is astounding about this approach is the assumption that the mere historicity of a theological position somehow confers a legitimacy that supercedes the authority of the Bible. Longstanding errors are still errors. Adopting this methodology, one apparently could, given valid historical explanations, find justification for an agreement to disagree on the need for unity itself by finding what is of value in some being “of Paul” and what is of value in others being “of Apollos”

(1 Cor. 1:12). On crucial matters of the faith (Jude 3), long held positions mean nothing in and of themselves; only the Word of God matters.

The Lord's expression of His desire in John 17:22-23, concerning the believers being both one and being perfected into one, immediately follows His entreaty concerning the believers being sanctified in the truth: "Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth" (v. 17). When the holy and spiritual element in the truth of the Lord's word is received and implanted into the believers, there is a spontaneous sanctification that joins believers as one and separates them from the elements of the world, even elements that have been historically reified into systematized structures of thought. The traditions of men can simply be the traditions of men, having no divine or eternal value. To consent to accept rather than to examine theological expressions that may be at odds with the truth is merely to shake hands over a still-dividing fence. Only the truth can truly abolish irreconcilable differences that derive from adherence to fallen elements of the world, especially the religious world, and it will abolish these differences when it is allowed to stand unchallenged against the "diversities of historical situations." In many respects, the truth is both a part of history and apart from history, just like the Word, Christ, who was a part of history through His incarnate humanity and apart from history in His eternal divinity. History alone is not the determinant of truth; it is only the stage upon which the truth is allowed to break forth and shine.

Differentiated consensus cannot serve to resolve conflicts over what is and is not the truth as it relates to the contents of the faith. It also has no value in addressing differing expressions of lived faith, which are assumed to be related to general practices according to conscience; i.e., eating meat or not eating meat (Rom. 14:2-3). The generality that is needed when believers encounter fellow believers, who are engaged in different practices that are not in and of themselves violative of the faith, comes from seeing and living in the reality of the Body of Christ. In the Body it is possible to receive others as Christ has received them and even to supply those who are weak in the faith so that the kingdom of God can be built up in righteousness toward ourselves, peacefulness toward others, and joy toward God (v. 17). The building up of the Body of Christ to be the kingdom of God assumes that the members of the Body are growing and maturing until "we all arrive at the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, at a full-grown man, at the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). The methodology of differentiated consensus forestalls and even frustrates the organic building up of the Body by enabling and even encouraging believers to

remain in historical systems of thought that may be utterly at odds with the divine revelation contained in the Word of God.

Misaiming concerning the Proper Expression of a Local Church

Misaiming: "CKS proceeds to investigate the complementarity of Lutheran and Roman Catholic ecclesial structures from a common description of 'local church'. Both of the churches agree on the description of local church but differ in its application and in the theological understanding of its realizations. While both of the churches agree that local church means a church which 'has everything it needs to be church in its own situation,' the Lutheran churches would by this description mean a congregation and the Catholic Church a diocese (21-22, 34). Nevertheless both of the churches in reality recognize the necessity of both the immediate face-to-face community where the word is preached and sacraments administered and a larger regional community. Therefore CKS can conclude that both of the churches 'have each grasped an essential dimension of the church' (83)" (Minna Hietamäki, "Merely Partners in the Fishing Business? Theological Issues in *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries*," *Ecumenical Trends*, January 2006, p. 5).

Truth: In the same article that presents the misaimed methodology of differentiated consensus, there is an illuminating demonstration of its foolishness when it is applied in the service of reconciling different understandings about the structure of the church as reflected in Lutheran and Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Hietamäki's article is a review of a jointly produced Lutheran-Roman Catholic document, *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries*. This document (hereafter CKS) applies the methodology of differentiated consensus to different conceptions of the church and finds common ground based on the "complementarity" of the Lutheran and Roman Catholic positions. Complementarity implies that "differing expressions, theological thought forms or structures contribute in a positive way towards acquiring a more complete view on the issue at hand" (2). In effect, complementarity suggests that there is the potential for value in a variety of theological thoughts, which can broaden our understanding of the truth. The principle of complementarity also rests upon an undeclared acknowledgement that many faith positions may be unnecessarily narrow and overly excluding of others if pressed to the point of dogmatic insistence.

The application of this principle to the structure of the church is instructive. Both CKS and Hietamäki focus on the differences in Lutheran and Roman Catholic

understandings of ecclesiastical structure, pointing to the immediacy of a congregational setting that informs the Lutheran perspective of a local church and to a regional, diocesan setting that informs the Roman Catholic perspective. Hietamäki argues that there is no real conflict between the two positions but that, in fact, each has something to offer the other because each has “grasped an essential dimension of the church.” Regrettably, neither of these “reconciled” positions grasps the essential dimensions of the church, either local or universal, as presented in the Bible.

As revealed in the Bible the local boundary of the church corresponds to the boundary of the locality in which the believers reside. A practical local church is always associated with a city (Acts 11:22; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1; Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). There is no structural unit for a local church that is smaller than the city, and even when a church is associated with a house, it is clear from the context that the particular house was the gathering place of all the believers in that locality. The practical oneness of the Body of Christ is maintained by this divine ordination because it eliminates any basis for believers to exclude other genuine believers from fellowship. Those whom Christ has received, we should receive practically, and our receiving is tested not by meeting with those who may be in agreement with a particular creed, practice, or teaching of ours but by our willingness to receive and accept all those who name the name and call upon the name of the Lord in our

particular place, our particular city. Thus, a congregation, as a self-selected subset of the believers, is too small to be considered a local church according to the biblical standard. It is either a division or a local sect.

There also is no structural unit for a local church that is larger than a city. When geographical areas larger than a city are mentioned in the New Testament, the word for *church* is plural in number (1 Cor. 16:1, 19; Gal. 1:2, 22; Rev. 1:4). The only exception to this is in Acts 9:31, when the singular form is used in reference to the universal church, which at that time practically existed only in the area bounded by Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. A structural unit for a local church that is larger than a city, that is, a diocese, ultimately requires layers of human organization and hierarchy, which replace the headship of Christ and the authority of the Spirit. Thus, a diocese, as a self-erected subset of believers, is too large to be considered a local church according to the biblical standard.

When two errant teachings concerning the local church are reconciled by relying upon a human methodology that honors historical aberrations more than the truth in the Word of God, has anything really been gained? Is there any real basis for celebration? And is the product of such a contrived reconciliation anything more than a reflection of fallen human wisdom, all of which will be set aside (1 Cor. 1:19).

by the Editors

Footnote from the Recovery Version of the Bible

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give to eat of the **tree of life**, which is in the Paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

tree of life: God’s original intention was that man should eat of the tree of life (Gen. 2:9, 16). Because of the fall, the way to the tree of life was closed to man (3:22-24). Through the redemption of Christ, the way by which man could touch the tree of life, which is God Himself in Christ as life to man, was opened again (Heb. 10:19-20). But in the church’s degradation, religion crept in with its knowledge to distract the believers in Christ from eating Him as the tree of life. Hence, the Lord promised to grant the overcomers to eat of Himself as the tree of life in the Paradise of God, as a reward. This is an incentive for them to leave religion with its knowledge and return to the enjoyment of Himself. This promise of the Lord restores the church to God’s original intention according to His economy. What the Lord wants the overcomers to do is what the whole church should do in God’s economy. Because of the church’s degradation, the Lord came to call the overcomers to replace the church in the accomplishing of God’s economy.

The eating of the tree of life not only was God’s original intention concerning man but also will be the eternal issue of God’s redemption. All God’s redeemed people will enjoy the tree of life, which is Christ with all the divine riches as the redeemed’s eternal portion for eternity (Rev. 22:2, 14, 19). Because of religion’s distraction and the church’s degradation, the Lord in His wisdom made the enjoyment of Himself in the coming kingdom a reward in order to encourage His believers to overcome religion’s distracting knowledge in teachings and return to the enjoyment of Himself as the life supply in the church life today for the accomplishing of God’s economy.