

13th Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture on Christian Unity¹
Council of Christian Unity/School of Theology for the Laity/Brite Divinity School
Hosted by East Dallas Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Dallas, Texas
Sunday, June 14, 2015 (Third Sunday after Pentecost)

“One in the Spirit”

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When it comes to the state of the Church there are many things about which we must worry. As former congregational pastor and regional minister, and now a theologian-in-training, the ails of the Church ever consume my thoughts and my spirit. When we look at the attendance sheets or the spreadsheets, it seems that there’s much to worry about regarding “Church.”

Worrying, of course, is not *entirely* bad. There *is* much to worry about in the church. Yes, membership is diminishing in *some* sectors. (Let us not forget that among some of our racial/ethnic communities, Disciples are experiencing some growth.) Yes, denominational giving is down. And yes, the church is facing an onslaught from without: external forces are at play as well. Secularization and globalization seem to question, respectively, the church’s relevance and loyalties. There is much about which to worry.

Yet, the biggest concern I have, from my brief yet broad experience in the Disciples movement, has nothing to do with money or members. After all, Jesus did plenty with twelve moronic fishermen and a motley crew of other questionable characters. And the messianic bank account was not very impressive. Yes, human and financial capital is vital for the Church’s work and witness; yet deeper still is a more indispensable lifeline which I worry about even more.

¹ I am humbled and grateful for this prestigious invitation to be your 13th Stalcup Lecturer on Christian Unity. I’d like to thank the Stalcup School of Theology for the Laity, the Council on Christian Unity, and Brite Divinity School for your invitation to me and your work to pull this together; and to East Dallas Christian Church for your hospitality. Joe and Nancy Stalcup, Robert Welsh, Newell Williams, Eilene Theilig, and Deborah Morgan Stokes, *muchísimas gracias con todo mi corazón.*

The Disciples' biggest challenge in this day and age is regarding its identity. The Church generally and Disciples specifically are having an identity crisis. And this crisis emerged from the shifting crosswinds of political, economic and cultural forces. The Church has long been pushed to the sidelines (no longer “mainline”) of the cultural marketplace in the North Atlantic (Anglo North America and Europe), while the Church in the so-called Global South has experienced phenomenal multiplication.

Globalization have both truncated and flattened our world in the twenty-first century, to borrow the language of Thomas L. Friedman.² The Church has experienced a similar shrinking and a flattening of its own vision of itself. Amidst the fear of “closing shop,” we have resorted to maintenance mode as the Church. In such a mode of existing, the immediate and expedient have primacy. Yet, when these values of immediacy and expedience become the *modus operandi*, the Church cannot be the Church. For the Church—that divine and human institution—is called to *cosmic* tasks that call for faithful patience, not immediate gratification.

A flat, small Church is what we've become. We do not know who (or what?) we are.

Related to our flattened, uncertain identity, the Church generally and Disciples specifically have as a consequence lost its sense of mission. Because it is unsure about its identity, it is equally uncertain about its mission. Ecclesial identity shapes missional contours.

With this depleted self-image, ecumenism—which has been our “polar star” according to Barton Stone—has been dimmed and is no longer guiding us toward the “true north” of Christian unity. Since the immediate and expedient have become the values of the day, hard work of ecumenism—which is neither expedient nor immediate—has been *devalued* gradually as a foundational premise upon which churchly affairs are to be built.

In the popular imagination on the pew as well as in the homiletical rhetoric of the pulpit, the gift and challenge—the grace and task—of Church unity has been demoted to a tertiary concern. And as our excuse? Well, we tell ourselves that we are leaving it to the professional ecumenists to speak with the other traditions, in hopes that we can easily call a Presbyterian or Moravian minister in case we're ever in a crunch between ministers.

Notice what has happened here. We are compartmentalized the work of ecumenism to the Council on Christian Unity. We have relegated the work of Christian unity to *an office* in Indianapolis or Geneva or San José, Costa Rica. Yet—hear this, Church!—the Council on Christian Unity does not do ecumenism *for us*; it does that foundational work *with us*.

Hence, we need a new way of imagining ecumenism for Disciples today, one that is faithful to the biblical witness, that honors the ecumenical passion of our Stone-Campbell heritage, that furthers our works with sister communions, and that has the robustness to respond to our society today. How can we Disciples reclaim ecumenism, not as a office or a person, but as our ecclesial vocation?

² See his *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

In preparing for this Stalcup Lecture, I read all—at least I think all—the New Testaments passages which speak of the unity of the Church: Jesus’ intercession in John, the Pauline exhortations on our baptismal oneness in Christ, Paul’s metaphor of the one body with many, even the Preacher in Hebrews and the doctrine therein of the power of assembly. I even stopped by the ever-beautifully Book of Revelation and its throne room scene where we see twenty-four elders—representing a united people of God—gathered *together* in its doxological orientation toward God—

“Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.”³

Interestingly, while there are vast differences in theoretical frameworks and theological aesthetics, there is one subtle yet profound similarity: One all cases, Christian unity is affirmed in light of the Church’s spiritual practices or sacramental rites. In other words, the biblical witness to unity is *always* sustained by some form of spirituality, sacramental or otherwise.

When, in 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks to the unity of the Body, he does so in reference *to the Church’s worship* and especially *to the Lord’s Supper*.

In Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians, the Pauline witness draws *on baptism* to highlight our oneness in Christ.

In Hebrews, the spiritual discipline of *gathering for worship* is deemed indispensable because the Church is one and expresses its oneness by the mere act of assembling.

In Revelation 4-5 mentioned above, that is, the heavenly throne room scene, the celestial witness to unity is expressed *liturgically*.

And in John 17, Jesus’ prayer that his disciples be one, as he and the Father are one, is... well... *a prayer*. Jesus here does simply teach or exhort unity; he bathes in prayer, drenches it in doxology. Archbishop Bernard Ntahoturi of the Anglican Church of Burundi contends that the very idea and purpose of unity of the Church *emerges* from Christ’s prayer in John 17.⁴

Christian unity is always framed by or couched in the Church’s spiritual practices or sacraments: Never spoken of in the abstract, as simply some metaphysical reality (though that, it is); but *always* in connection to, or incubated by, the sacramental life and spiritual disciplines of the Church. The spirituality of gathering, prayer, worship, font, table: the jugular vein of our unity as Church!

³ Revelation 4:8 NRSV

⁴ In “What is ecumenism...and why does it matter?” *YouTube*, published by the Episcopal Church, on Nov 11, 2013, accessed June 10, 2015, URL = <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMAOb2DyWVI>>.

Hence Disciples—nay, all Christians—cannot compartmentalize ecumenism as a separate ministry. Because ecumenism is not only our ministry (Let's go deeper still.) For Disciples, at our best, ecumenism is *our spirituality*.

This begs a follow-up question: what do we mean by “spirituality”? I have read or heard many working definitions in my wonderings in church and academia, too many to list here. But none (in my opinion) best captured the sense and connotation of the term ‘spirituality’ than did the late great preacher from Harvard’s Memorial Church, Rev. Peter J. Gomes. Gomes defined spirituality as “a craving, a hunger, a thirst.” He states,

“Spirituality is... the expression of a desire to come as close to God as is possible and to invite God to come as close to us as God chooses, and to demonstrate that closeness through the experience of lived love.”⁵

As Disciples, we crave and thirst for God by struggling to embody with all Christians the unity that is already ours in Christ.

For Disciples, at our best, ecumenism is *our spirituality*. Ecumenism is

“the expression of a desire to come as close to God as is possible and to invite God to come as close to us as God chooses, and to demonstrate that closeness through the experience of lived love.”

But there’s more to this ecumenism-as-spirituality thing! In the Christian tradition, Methodist theologian Justo González (the *fifth* Stalcup Lecturer on Christian Unity) posits, spirituality is not defined by the *human* spirit, but by the Holy Spirit.⁶ Basing Christian spiritual on our inner being alone, argues González, would be “soulish”, not “spiritual.”⁷ Thus the spiritual practices and sacraments, which proclaim and enact our unity in Christ, are made efficacious not by our spirits but by the activity of the Holy Spirit.

It should not surprise us then that there is a link between role of the Spirit in Christian unity and Her role in spirituality and the sacraments, at least as She has been conceived historically in the Church’s affirmations of faith throughout the ages. In Ephesians, we are challenged to make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”⁸ God as Spirit is the reconciling God, or as Diana Eck (the *twelfth* Stalcup Lecturer on Christian Unity) affirms, the Spirit is the “thread of connection” in the world,” the “Go-Between God.”⁹ The Catholic theologian Anselm Kyongsuk Min concurs and writes,

⁵ Peter J. Gomes, “This Spirituality Thing” (sermon), *The Memorial Church*, date unknown, accessed June 12, 2015, URL = <<http://memorialchurch.harvard.edu/late-reverend-professor-peter-j-gomes>>.

⁶ See his *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 157 ff.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ephesians 4:3 NRSV

⁹ Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 121, 126.

“The distinctiveness of the Holy Spirit lies precisely... in being wholly relational and as such [is] the divine source of all relations, communions, and solidarities.”¹⁰

Hence as Disciples, we express our craving and thirst for God by seeking to embody and calling all Christians to live into the unity that is ours in Christ *by the power of the Holy Spirit*. We thunderously sing, “We are one in the Spirit,” because ecumenism is our charismatic experience, our Pentecost, our Upper Room experience!

Hermanas y hermanos en Cristo (Sisters and brothers in Christ), ecumenism is the charismatic font of our livelihood as a peculiar people called “Disciples of Christ.” Ecumenism is our very lifeline as a movement. Therefore to regulate it to an office, away for our quotidian ecclesiastical matters, is to relegate ourselves to death. (This would make the Council on Christian Unity our “spiritual director,” not our stand-in.) In our survival mode of being Church, which have rendered us flat and truncated, we have cut ourselves off from the one thing that gives us life, namely, this spirituality that hungers for unity among all people.

Ecumenism is our work; it is our spirituality. And our very livelihood as a “movement for wholeness”¹¹ is fortified when we work—when we *all* work—toward the visible and missional unity of the Church.

If ecumenism is the Disciples’ spirituality, what then are the contours or facets of our “ecumenizing” spirituality as Disciples? Put succinctly, how do we live out this ecumenizing spirituality? I conclude with three aspects of this spirituality and three correlating ways that we can theologically imagine the Spirit’s role in them.

Lamenting Spirituality—

Firstly, ecumenism as spirituality rebukes the evil of division, and therefore is a spirituality of lament. Now, I recognize these are strong words. Yet as Peter Ainslie (the first President on the Council on Christian Unity) stated, “I beg that you will pardon me if I speak too frankly, but these are serious times, and soft words will not suffice.”¹² Yet, the egregious nature of ecclesial brokenness must not be taken lightly nor addressed casually. It is brokenness.

The Presbyterian John Burkhart, in his treatment on worship, highlights that the Church’s primordial act of worship is simply gathering. Before any songs are sung or prayers recited, we have already worship by our mere assembling together. For in gathering, we denounce sinful

¹⁰ Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World: A Postmodern Theology After Postmodernism* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 110.

¹¹ “Disciples of Christ Identity Statement,” [www.disciples.com](http://disciples.org/our-identity/), accessed June 13, 2014, URL = <<http://disciples.org/our-identity/>>.

¹² In Michael Kinnamon, “Celebrating Our History as a Movement for Unity,” 25th Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity delivered at Christian Unity Dinner at the 2009 General Assembly, accessed June 7, 2015, URL = <<http://ccu.disciples.org/Portals/CCU/pdf/Final%20Kinnamon%20article.pdf>>.

scattering and proclaim a God who gathers in order to save.¹³ The Evangelical/Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz echoes this and defines “sin” as the “disruption of community” and “salvation” partly as the “re-orientation toward community.”¹⁴ Thus, this ecumenizing spirituality with which Disciples live out the Gospel must first grieve the brokenness of Christ’s Body.

Disciples are known for the weekly, open Table. What if, courageously so, we were to be known also for including in our liturgy a lament for the brokenness of the Church, of the Body of Christ, of the Temple of the Spirit? A shared jeremiad that denounces the disruption of community, maybe on the Feast of Pentecost, or Reformation Sunday, or World Communion Sunday, or maybe *every* Sunday?

Lamenting is the work of the Spirit through which the terrain is prepared for not-yet kingdom in-breaking in our midst. Paul tells the Romans:

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.”¹⁵

This ecumenizing spirituality is one of lament. As long as the church is divide, lament should always be on our lips.

Self-emptying Spirituality—

Secondly, growing out of our lament, an ecumenizing spirituality calls for a radical trust in the sustaining power of the Spirit of Christ, instead of trusting in our own self-preservation.

Therefore, an ecumenizing spirituality must call for *kenosis*; it is an self-emptying spirituality. Philippians 2—

“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind... [And how are we to achieve this unity and accord? Paul goes on...] Let the same mind be in you that was[a] in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, *but emptied himself* [ἐκένωσεν]...”¹⁶

This self-emptying spirituality is in one of our founding documents, where Barton Stone and the first “Christians” resolved

“that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.”¹⁷

¹³ Cf. John E. Burkhardt, *Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 35 ff.

¹⁴ Cf. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

¹⁵ Romans 8:26 NRSV

¹⁶ Verses 1-2, 5-7

¹⁷ *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* (1803).

Now, I must make a disclaimer. Here I am calling for the Church, *as a whole Church*, to risk self-emptying, and not a particular subset or group within the Church. As a privileged male, I am aware that the Church has told and even *demande*d that women, racial and sexual minorities, and the undocumented “empty” themselves, they say, for the sake of Church’s “safety” or what have you. And within the Church, I think there are some (like me, as a male) who should self-empty more than others. As the Catholic Rosemary Redford Reuther asserts, “[Christ is] the representative of a liberated humanity and the liberating Word of God, manifests the *kenosis of patriarchy*” and the Church, Christ’s body, should manifest likewise.¹⁸ (I digress.)

Ecumenism can only work if, as a whole people of God, we continually hold a posture of self-emptying: refusing to hold our convictions in such a manner that inhibits the ecclesial “other” from entering our theological space, or that fetters us from entering the “other’s” theological space. Elsewhere, I have called this “theological modesty.”¹⁹

This self-emptying need not lead to an obliteration of our identity or even of our existence; rather, it leads to a new way of existing in the world. And this way of existing is not reliance on human effort for wholeness but (surprise, surprise) on that of the Holy Spirit. Again, I quote Anselm Min,

“...the Spirit does not bear witness about herself or seek to glorify herself. The Spirit is the self-forgetting God whose sole purpose seems to create fellowship between the Son and human beings, and, in the Son, among human beings themselves.”²⁰

A self-emptying spirituality leads to a different mode of existing in the world, one that places radical trust in the Spirit of God who ultimate preserves and animates the Church to be the prophetic and liberating Body of Christ in the world, to the glory of God.

An ecumenizing spirituality is a spirituality of kenosis.

Expectant Spirituality—

And thirdly, not in spite of self-emptying but precisely because of, this ecumenizing spirituality leads us—like the whole of the Gospel—from death to new life, from emptying cross to death-shattering resurrection. In other words, because the Church more than us mere mortals, we can *expect* that God is in fact doing a new thing. As Pastor Deborah Morgan-Stokes preached this morning here at East Dallas Christian Church, “God is alive and well, and working in our midst.” Hence the ecumenizing spirituality is a spirituality of expectation!

Ecumenism as spirituality amplifies our vision of who we are as Church, and allows us to look deeply into the heart. And the truth of the matter—a truth that the Spirit illumines for the Church

¹⁸ Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology [with new introduction]* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 137.

¹⁹ José Francisco Morales Jr., “Exuberant Modesty,” sermon, preached during worship at the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, Indianapolis, Indiana, Feb. 9, 2014 <unpublished>.

²⁰ Min, *The Solidarity of Others...*, 110.

through the work of ecumenism—is that *the Church* is not the heart of the matter for God. The world—nay—the cosmos is!

“For God so loved the world (κόσμον) that he gave his only Son...” This led the early Church apologist Maximus the Confessor to speak of the “cosmic Christ.”²¹ If there is anything that the ecumenizing spirituality teaches us is that we the Church are God’s *penultimate* concern, not God’s ultimate concern. God’s *ultimate* concern is the renewal of all that is. And by God’s grace, by Christ’s incarnating solidarity, by the Spirit’s power, we are invited to join God in bringing about the new heaven and new earth.

Here, what begins an ecumenical effort for visible Christian unity expands into an interfaith mission. For here, because of this cosmic vision of Christ and of God’s redemptive plan, we are moved by the Spirit of creation²² beyond ecclesial unity toward the unity of all creation.²³ And this work of “new heaven and new earth” is too great for just one subset of the human family.

Expectation! Being church is not small affair. Being church moves us *beyond church*, for God’s plan is cosmic. It’s cosmic!

In coming together, as Church and as a human family, we can expect that God to do something greater still, something beyond the sum total of the individuals or partnerships forges. For our work is of cosmic proportions. Together, we work, knowing that...

Brokenness won’t have the last word, healing will!
 Disintegration won’t have the last word, wholeness will!
 Injustice won’t have the last word, liberation will!
 Oppression won’t have the last word, freedom will!
 Fear won’t have the last word, love will!
 Death won’t have the last word, life will!

This is the hope engendered in our coming together as a Church and as a whole human family.

This is our task, that we only can do together, as one Body, empowered by one Spirit. And to do this cosmic work, we need a spirituality that emboldens us for the task. That spirituality is called ecumenism.

²¹ See: St. Maximus the Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Paul M. Blowers & Robert Louis Wilken, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).

²² Cf. Genesis 1:2—“the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind [or ‘spirit’] from God swept over the face of the waters.”

²³ St. Paul writes, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” (Romans 8:19-23 NRSV)

May ecumenism be *our spirituality*. May it be the expression of our desire to come as close to God as is possible and to invite God to come as close to us as God chooses, and to demonstrate that closeness through the experience of lived love, expecting that the Spirit is lead us onward toward the new heaven and new earth.

May it be so!