

*Polar Star or Shooting Star:
Ecumenism's Challenge Today*

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Following my mother's death this February, my sister and I went through her desk looking for a safe deposit box key while also exploring the artifacts of a long and well-lived life. It took a later word from our brother about the forgotten secret compartment in the desk to find the key. But in the meantime we discovered many other treasures. One was my mother's "watchword" card which was given to her at her confirmation in 1926. It is the tradition in many United Church of Christ congregations to offer a scripture text to a young person being confirmed, a word that can provide a kind of centering through the ebb and flow of life's joys and sorrows. (Mine, given to me at that same church forty years later, was "Put on the whole armor of God." It is a text that has served me well in these ten years as General Minister and President!) On this old yellowed card, signed by her pastor, was typed her watchword text from the gospel of John: "You are my friends if you do what I command you."

We like to think of ourselves as a community of friends in the church, bound together by shared beliefs, shared convictions, and above all, shared affections. This is a nice thought, and this may work in a local church, though I've rarely found a congregation where beliefs, convictions, and affections were fully shared. All the evidence points to the fact that we tend to be a body of people who don't look alike, don't think alike, don't act alike, and who, at times, don't even like each other! When we consider the church universal, the notion of mutual friendship as a basis for life together grows even more problematic. Our beliefs differ in significant ways, our convictions frequently diverge, and our affections can and do easily grow cold, particularly under the influence of diverse cultures on distant continents that often find themselves sharply at odds. An ecumenism based on shared friendship can easily turn the polar star of unity

into a shooting star – bright and spectacular for an instant – but quickly lost, occasionally rejected, and in either case soon forgotten.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about the dangers of grounding our ecumenical vocation and our search for Christian community in the illusion of easy friendship:

On innumerable occasions a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image. . . . God will not permit us to live in a dream world even for a few weeks and to abandon ourselves to those blissful experiences and exalted moods that sweep over us like a wave of rapture. For God is not a God of emotionalism, but the God of truth, (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 35).

Bonhoeffer's problem with the illusion of community is that it draws our attention away from the true source of community, grounding it instead in our own arrogant pretensions and fragile emotions: "Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial," (p. 36). He then makes his point crystal clear: our community "can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by the one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. The bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting," (p. 37).

This brings us back to my mother's watchword: "You are my friends if you do what I command you." Christian community, the unity of the church, is not about the friends we have gathered, made, or found. It is, in fact, about the friends we *didn't* choose. Christ does the choosing. Our community is built not of mutual belief, conviction, or affection, but in the Christ who has named us friends. The Second World Conference on Faith and Order in Edinburgh, Scotland, put it well in 1937: "Unity does not consist in the agreement of our minds or the consent of our wills. It is founded in Jesus Christ Himself, who lived, died, and rose again to bring us to the Father, and Who through the Holy Spirit dwells in His Church. We are one because we are all the objects of the love and grace of God, and called by Him to witness in all the world to His glorious Gospel," (Leonard G. Hodgson, ed., *Second World Conference on Faith and Order*, p. 275). Or, more succinctly, in the words of the First Assembly of the World

Council of Churches in 1948, “Christ has made us His own, and He is not divided,” (in Kinnamon and Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement*, p. 21).

As most of you know, early leaders in the movement that became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) understood that the unity of the church was a fact, not a project, a gift not an accomplishment, and that it is grounded in the Christ who names us friends rather than in the friendships we nurture or maintain. Thomas Campbell famously declared that “the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one.” And Barton Stone’s *Christian Messenger* was sent forth under the masthead that read, “Christian union is my polar star.” In that magazine’s first issue, he said, “If we oppose the union of believers, we oppose directly the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, the spirit of piety, and the salvation of the world,” (in Colbert Cortwright, *People of the Chalice*, p. 101). Mark Toulouse recalls the words of our old friend Kenneth Teegarden, “The ideal of Christian unity is to Disciples of Christ what basketball is to Indiana, hospitality is to the South, and nonviolence is to Quakers,” (Mark Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship*, p. 79).

In light of this, what are we to make of the fact that the ecumenical movement today often feels listless, that the ecumenical institutions that have sought to embody it are often weak and frighteningly threatened, and that church after church has once again grown preoccupied with its own confessions, traditions, and commitments so that even ecumenical engagement becomes an opportunity to defend who we are and have been rather than discover together who we might become? Nearly twenty years ago a group of Protestants and Catholics in France reminded us that Christian identity and conversion are not competitors. One demands the other. “Identity and conversion,” they said, “call for each other; there is no Christian identity without conversion; conversion is constitutive of the church; our confessions do not merit the name of Christian unless they open up to the demand for conversion,” (Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches*, p. 15). And yet, everywhere we find today Methodists defending their Methodism, Lutherans their Lutheranism, Catholics their Catholicism, Presbyterians their Presbyterianism, United Church of Christ members and Disciples defending their movements and traditions, as if defending a parochial identity, rather than submitting to

mutual conversion, is the proper ecumenical task. How is it that the polar star of unity has been replaced by a shooting star, and often by merely the memory of it at that?

Today I want to explore three reasons. First, to return to my opening theme, the happy dream of Christian friendship as the foundation of unity has smashed headlong into the hard realities of sharp theological differences that endure, moral conflicts that persist, and arrogant assertions of truth that offend. To be blunt, the ecumenical arena doesn't feel quite as friendly as it used to feel. Second, we have learned to settle for the significant but partial ecumenical accomplishments that have been achieved, rather than see them as the foundation for the ecumenical vocation that yet lies before us. And third, we have lost sight of the truth that our brokenness is sin, a denial of God's gift and design. Disunity has grown respectable, a status quo that fails to scandalize or convict, and therefore does not cry out for conversion. When friendliness fails, when comfortable cooperation suffices, and when sin is rationalized and excused away, we have lost sight of our polar star and all we have left is the occasional shooting star, a thrill that inspires only until the shadows fall.

When the Vatican issued a set of "Reflections" last year on the nature of the church and appeared to go more than a little out of its way to remind us that we Protestants are not "churches in the proper sense," we may be willing to acknowledge that the members of the Curia in Rome may be God's friends, but we may not feel overly friendly to them ourselves. When the leader of the Missouri Synod announced to the national Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1997 that, if they voted to enter into full communion with three churches of the Reformed tradition as well as the Episcopal Church, he would consider them to have abandoned their confessional commitments, I found myself affirming that he was a child of God, even a friend of God, but my feelings toward him and his church were decidedly cool! When the Reformed Church in America passed an action at one of its Synod's calling for dialogue with the UCC on issues of human sexuality "in order to move us toward a more biblical understanding," I was prepared to continue viewing them as "church in the proper sense," but it would not be true to say I was not in an affectionate mood. And when a seminarian, baptized and confirmed in the United Church of Christ, decides to join a Baptist church and tells me with enthusiasm that he will be re-baptized, my friendliness

toward the American Baptist Church that seems willing to ignore the validity of his baptism is challenged.

Each of these vignettes is true, and each reflects the sharp divisions that separate Christians today. How we understand the nature of the church, how we confess the apostolic faith, the faith of the church through the ages, where we find ourselves on difficult moral questions like homosexuality and abortion, and how we view our sacraments are often far more powerful centripetal forces in the life of the church than are the bonds of friendship. The recent Reformed – Roman Catholic dialogue in this country seeking a renewed mutual recognition of one another's baptism has foundered on the shoals either of Reformed experimentation with the language of the baptismal formula or on Catholic insistence on guarantees of Reformed fidelity to the traditional formula. Deep friendships were developed over the course of years of study and reflection together. But, in the end, deep friendships were not enough to overcome theological divergence and institutional defensiveness.

Friendship can, of course, move the ecumenical movement forward. It is one of the profound gifts of the ecumenical movement for many of us, and it can be an instrument of our growth in unity. But ultimately we will discover, often painfully, that we are the friends we didn't choose. Thus it is the Christ who calls us friends who must remain the bright light of a polar star. The ecumenical movement does far more than invite us into friendship with the friendly. It calls us into relationship with those who, to us, feel wholly other, strange, alien and at times even hostile – namely, the friends we didn't choose. But what makes the ecumenical vocation incredibly demanding is also good news: The unity given in Christ is ultimately far more powerful and enduring than friendships which so easily fall before our disagreements.

The first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Willem Visser't Hooft, reminds us that

We do not come together as people who have to begin by finding a common foundation for their relationships. That foundation has been laid; the starting point is given. We seek koinonia, because there is koinonia in our common submission to Christ, not to an inactive Christ but to the living Christ who gathers His scattered children together. Whatever obstacles we see in front of us, we

remain hopeful about the outcome of our encounter because Christ is at work among us, leading us back to the one fold of which He is the shepherd, (Visser't Hooft, *The Pressure of Our Common Calling*, p. 73).

The polar star of unity cannot rely on friendship alone for its guiding and directing power. All too often we have assumed that to be the case, and so have watched ecumenical passion flame out when friendships cool and our illusion of unity disintegrates before the heat of disagreements and the allure of introversion and self-centeredness. Either we grow disillusioned with friends, or we declare, "So who needs friends anyway?"

A second reason for today's malaise in the ecumenical movement is, ironically, the fact that we have made much progress. Relationships among many churches have grown polite, even cordial. Public anathemas are rarely cast at one another. Christians are welcome, for the most part, in each other's churches and often at each other's tables. Churches of widely diverse traditions frequently join forces in ministries of compassion and service, particularly in times of crisis. Councils of churches have gathered into fellowship an impressive array of churches that were not even on speaking terms only a century ago. Members freely move from church to church without benefit of full communion agreements or formal acts of mutual recognition. Ecumenists speak of "reconciled diversity" as a proper goal of the journey of unity, a reminder that unity is expressive of a flourishing diversity even as that diversity honors an inherent unity. But the very phrase can imply a kind of surrender to status quo, a "settling for" what is rather than a longing for something more. The multiplicity of the churches fits comfortably and conveniently in the American consumer culture where our spiritual market thrives on ecclesial diversity and, at times, even competition, friendly or otherwise.

Now, I would contend that even this is too rosy a picture of the state of the unity of the churches today. Without denying the incredible progress that has been made on the ecumenical journey, I would argue that we are currently seeing a regression, a renewed fascination with distinctive identities at the expense of what we hold in common, and even within the ecumenical movement itself a kind of re-confessionalization that is placing more emphasis on our confessional or denominational families than on the wider unity we seek. Many of my colleagues invest more time and

energy in intra-confessional ecumenism – the Lutheran World Federation, the Anglican Communion, the World Methodist Council, or the soon to be established World Communion of Reformed Churches – than they invest in inter-confessional movements like the World or National Councils of Churches or in the implementation of our full communion agreements. It is hard to deny that success has bred a kind of complacency.

Philip Potter, one of the giants of the ecumenical movement, offered this stirring vision of the goal of the ecumenical movement in his address to the Vancouver Assembly in 1983. Using the image of the “house” and the “household” from the Greek *oikos*, Potter said,

The ecumenical movement is the means by which the churches which form the house, the *oikos* of God, are seeking so to live and witness before all peoples that the whole *oikumene* may become the *oikos* of God through the crucified and risen Christ in the power of the life-giving Spirit, (Potter, in Kinnamon and Cope, *The Ecumenical Movement*, p. 55).

Absent this kind of theological horizon, this kind of polar star if you will, ecumenism is quickly reduced to organizations and institutions, each important, but at most penultimate. One of Potter’s predecessors as General Secretary, Visser’t Hooft, spoke pointedly of the danger faced by the ecumenical movement in general and the World Council of Churches in particular, fearing that

the unity which the World Council promotes will in fact turn out to be the static institutional unity of the self-centered church rather than the dynamic unity of churches which fulfill their common missionary calling, (Visser’t Hooft, *The Pressure of our Common Calling*, p. 38).

And he says further, that for churches to think that they’ve done enough when they cooperate with each other is a “false conclusion. For unity in Christ,” he writes, “is unity in the deepest convictions and unity which embraces all of life. Those who accept cooperation as sufficient are in danger of retarding the growth of that true unity,” (Visser’t Hooft, p. 18). This, it seems to me, is precisely the situation, the danger, the safe accommodation, and the complacency we face today.

Finally, the ecumenical movement struggles today because our brokenness no longer scandalizes us as a sin from which we need to be redeemed. With the exception of

interchurch families who must deal regularly with the painful realities of division at weddings and funerals, at the table and the font, the typical Christian in the United States is prepared at most to say that disunity is detrimental to our mission and perhaps an embarrassment. But listen for a moment to Karl Barth, the great twentieth century theologian, who wrote an essay in 1937 on “the Church and the Churches” in preparation for the Edinburgh Faith and Order Conference:

We have no right to explain the multiplicity of the churches at all. We have to deal with it as we deal with sin, our own and others’, to recognize it as a fact, to understand it as the impossible thing which has intruded itself, as guilt which we must take upon ourselves, without the power to liberate ourselves from it. We must not allow ourselves to acquiesce in its reality; rather we must pray that it be forgiven and removed, and be ready to do whatever God’s will and command may enjoin in respect of it, (Karl Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, pp. 22-23).

These are powerful words, but I am struck by how alien and strange they sound in our ears today. We simply don’t think of the church’s disunity in these terms. It doesn’t feel to us as “the impossible thing which has intruded itself.” No, the multiplicity of the churches is the norm, a condition that has taken up comfortable residence in our household of faith. In another context, Horace Bushnell, the 19th century New England Congregationalist, spoke of sin that is so conventional we fail even to notice it: “Sin is here and sin that wants salvation, but it is sin so thoroughly respectable as to make it very nearly impossible to produce any just impression of its deformity,” (Horace Bushnell in Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, vol. 1, p. 130). Visser’t Hooft draws the clear meaning of this failure: “The realization that the Church must be one because of its very nature and mission has not penetrated into the whole life of our churches; we are not yet thoroughly ashamed of our many ‘parties,’” (Visser’t Hooft, p. 24). Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, helpfully reminds us that denominations, properly conceived, are renewal movements preserving important dimensions of the Gospel in danger of being lost. But, Kinnamon tells us again and again, we have turned the adjectives of our names – Lutheran, Catholic, Methodist, etc. – into nouns. The renewal movement has become the object of preservation itself.

Polar star or shooting star? The challenge to the ecumenical movement today is not simply organizational. To be sure, there have been failures in leadership. To be sure, financial crises in the mainline churches have left organizations starved. To be sure, inflated ego, self-serving ecclesial or personal agendas, and leadership deficits have left their wounds. But at the core is a spiritual and theological challenge. It is about getting beyond the shock of the unfriendliness we encounter in the other and undoubtedly that the other encounters in us by accepting the theological fact that we are the friends we *didn't* choose, that we are called to be one with the friends Christ chose for us. It means measuring our progress or growth in unity not against the divisions from the past we have overcome, but against the vision of the "household" that is to be sign and instrument of God's design for the whole of creation, a vision that approaches us from God's future rather than our frequently over-cherished past. It means confession and repentance, an acknowledgement that what we're dealing with is not just inconvenience or embarrassment, but sin.

Barth asserts that "Homesickness for the *una sancta* is genuine and legitimate only insofar as it is a disquietude at the fact that we have lost and forgotten Christ, and with Him have lost the unity of the Church," (Karl Barth, p. 35). The great Indian ecumenist D. T. Niles puts it this way: "Men are not merely prodigal from their Father's home but have actually forgotten the Father's address," (D. T. Niles, *That They May Have Life*, p. 42). Perhaps the reason we feel so often today to be living merely with the memory of a shooting star, is that we have made unity, rather than Christ, our polar star. If in fact the ecumenical vocation is ultimately about the *oikos* of God in service of the *oikumene*, the ecumenical house in service of the cosmic household, then it is all about homecoming, and the welcome of the One – Jesus Christ – who calls us friend.

Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson relates this theme of friendship to the work of Sophia, or Holy Wisdom, the expression of divinity found in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Book of Wisdom we read:

Although she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets, (Wisdom 7.27)

Here Johnson finds her symbol for the communion of saints, that community that transcends and destroys not only our institutional walls and fences, but also the boundary between life and death. This friendship with God, mediated through Christ or Sophia-Wisdom, becomes for the divided church a sign of both judgment and promise, critique and hope. So I close with Johnson's vision as encouragement toward the polar star who is both the end and the beginning of the ecumenical vocation. Let her words be our prayer:

Down through the centuries as Holy Wisdom graces person after person in land after land, situation after situation, they form together a grand company of the friends of God and prophets; a wisdom community of holy people praising God, loving each other, and struggling for justice and peace in the world; a company that stretches backward and forward in time and encircles the globe in space,
(Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, p. 41.