A PROPOSAL TOWARD THE REUNION OF CHRIST’S CHURCH

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GRACE CATHEDRAL
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Text: Romans 15:5-7

“Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be like-minded one toward another according to Christ Jesus! That ye may with one mind and with one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another as Christ also received us to the glory of God.”

This is a significant occasion. When I received the gracious invitation from your Dean and Bishop to preach in this pulpit, on this particular morning, it became clear to me at once that the occasion demanded not only as good a sermon as God might enable me to prepare and preach, but also a sermon that would deal with the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ realistically—neither glossing over divisions with politeness nor covering them with optimistic generalities.

Led, I pray, by the Holy Spirit, I propose to the Protestant Episcopal Church that it together with The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America invite The Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ to form with us a plan of church union both catholic and reformed on the basis of the principles I shall later in this sermon suggest. Any other Churches which find that they can accept both the principles and plan would also be warmly invited to unite with us.

I hasten to make it clear that at this stage this is not an official proposal. My position as Stated Clerk of my Church’s General Assembly gives me no authority to make such a proposal officially on behalf of my Church. I speak...
this morning as one of the ministers of my Church privileged and required to
preach under the Word of God. I speak as a minister especially privileged—
and therefore under a special requirement—especially privileged to have
represented my communion for the past nine years in many formal and in-
formal relationships with other communions both inside and outside the
ecumenical movement. I speak as one minister of Jesus Christ who believes
that God requires us to break through the barriers of nearly 500 years of his-
tory, to attempt under God to transcend the separate traditions of our
Churches, and to find a way together to unite them so that manifesting the
unity given us by our Lord Jesus Christ, His Church may be renewed for its
mission to our nation and to the world “that the world may believe.”

Before setting forth the basic principles of the union propose, it is, I
think, important to make clear the compelling considerations that have
moved me to believe that union ought now to be sought by us and to clear
away some possible misunderstandings of reasons and motives for seeking
it.

Why union?

First of all I am moved by the conviction that Jesus Christ, whom all of us
confess as our divine Lord and Saviour, wills that His Church be one. This
does not mean that His Church must be uniform, authoritarian, or a single
mammoth organization. But it does mean that our separate organizations,
however much we sincerely try to cooperate in councils, present a tragically
divided Church to a tragically divided world. Our divided state makes almost
unbelievable our common Christian claim that Jesus Christ is Lord and that
He is the Prince of Peace. The goal of any unity or union in which we ought to
be interested was clearly stated by the Central Committee of the World
Council of Churches last summer. The unity sought is primarily a local unity,
“one which brings all in each place who confess Jesus Christ as Lord into a
fully committed fellowship with one another.” The World Council statement
emphasized that the unity sought “is not one of uniformity nor a monolithic
power structure.” The point of church reunion is not to be found chiefly in
national or international organization; it is found most fundamentally in local
communion and common witness in all the places where men live.

In October, I was at a political dinner at which I had been invited to give
the invocation. A gentleman introduced himself to me as we were waiting to
go in to the tables and asked me what Church I represented. When I told him,
he said, “My wife is a Presbyterian. I am an Episcopal. We go happily to
each other’s church. Why don’t you Church officials do something about
bringing our Churches together?” Many such ordinary Christians wonder why we continue to be divided.

In the *Christian Century* last January, Bishop Pike wrote, “... of this I am sure: The Holy Ghost is on our side whenever we break through the barriers between Christian bodies. He will increasingly provide guidance to show the ways in which we can defeat the complacent obstinacy of our national Church bodies in this regard.”

And I am sure that Bishop Pike agrees with me that there are many complacencies in local churches among members and ministers that must be disturbed by the Holy Ghost if Christ’s will for His Church is to be accomplished in our time and place. For although many American church members are ready to criticize their church leaders for inaction, I fear that just as many are complacently happy in the divided state of the Church.

Another clear reason for moving toward the union of American Churches at this time came home to me with compelling force during the presidential campaign this fall. The religious issue was, you will remember, quite generally discussed even though all the high level politicians attempted to avoid it as much as possible. Now that the election has been decided and nobody really knows how much the religious question figured in the result, I recall the issue to remind you that one result is clear. Every Christian Church, Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican, and Roman Catholic has been weakened by it. Never before have so many Americans agreed that the Christian Churches, divided as they are, cannot be trusted to bring to the American people an objective and authentic word of God on a political issue. Americans more than ever see the Churches of Jesus Christ as competing social groups pulling and hauling, propagandizing and pressuring for their own organizational advantages.

And this is at a time when the United States of America finds herself at a pinnacle of world power and leadership—needing for herself and the whole free world that kind of spiritual vision and inspiration that only the Church of Jesus Christ, renewed and reunited can give. Our culture, our civilization, our world leadership are under the materialistic threat of Marxist communism. But our culture becomes increasingly secular, our civilization becomes increasingly decadent, and our world leadership becomes increasingly confused precisely because their Christian foundations are undermined and eroded. And our divided Churches, all more and more sectarian in fact, are all therefore less and less Christian in influence.

Finally I am moved to propose this step of church union this morning because my proposal grows out of the convictions expressed in 1959 by thirty-four leaders of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, theologians and admin-

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administrators, from all over the world in an address to their fellow Christians, made on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Calvinist Reformation. We said:

“The occasion we celebrate (i.e. the 400th anniversary of the beginnings of Presbyterianism) makes invitations more appropriate than proclamations. We ourselves are ready to accept all invitations from sister churches to that comparison of opinion and experience in which Christians submit themselves afresh to the Lord of the Church. And we issue our own invitations to all who would, with us, put their traditions and systems under the judgment of Christ, seeking his correction, and ready to relinquish what he does not approve.

“All that we claim for the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches we would lay on the altar. We offer it all to our fellow Christians for whatever use it may be to the whole Church. With the whole Church we hold ourselves alert for the surprises with which the Lord of history can alter the tempo of our renewal, and for the new forms with which an eternally recreating God can startle us while he secures his Church.”

In this spirit and out of this conviction, I now propose the principles upon which a church union of the scope I have suggested may be even now possible of achievement under God.

**Principles**

Let me begin by re-emphasizing the requirement that a reunited Church must be both reformed and catholic. If at this time we are to begin to bridge over the chasm of the Reformation, those of us who are of the Reformation tradition must recapture an appreciation of all that has been preserved by the catholic parts of the Church, and equally those of the catholic tradition must be willing to accept and take to themselves as of God all that nearly five hundred years of Reformation has contributed to the renewal of Christ's Church.

Let me pause here to be quite sure that all of you understand exactly the sense in which I am using the word *catholic*. In common parlance in America we often talk about “the Catholic Church” and mean “the Roman Catholic Church.” That is not the meaning of *catholic* that I here use. At the other extreme all our Churches repeat the Apostles’ Creed in which we say, “I believe in the Holy Catholic Church.” All of us claim to be catholic in the strict sense of confessing that Jesus Christ has established one universal Church in all ages and in all places and that we are at least part of it. Here, however, I have used the word *catholic* in still a third sense when I speak of the “catholic
parts of the Church.” I refer to those practices and to those understandings of faith and order, of church and sacraments which are catholic in contrast to the protestant or evangelical practices and understandings. I refer specifically, for example, to the Anglo-Catholic or high Church practices and understandings of your own Church. When I say then that the proposal I make is to establish a Church both catholic and reformed, I mean one which unites catholic and reformed understandings and practices in an even broader and deeper way than that already present in your communion.

Such a union as I now propose must have within it the kind of broad and deep agreement which gives promise of much wider union than seems possible at the present moment, looking ultimately to the reunion of the whole of Christ’s Church.

First let me list the principles of reunion that are important to all who are of catholic tradition.

1. The reunited Church must have visible and historical continuity with the Church of all ages before and after the Reformation. This will include a ministry which by its orders and ordination is recognized as widely as possible by all other Christian bodies. To this end, I propose that, without adopting any particular theory of historic succession, the reunited Church shall provide at its inception for the consecration of all its bishops by bishops and presbyters both in the apostolic succession and out of it from all over the world from all Christian churches which would authorize or permit them to take part.

I propose further that the whole ministry of the uniting Churches would then be unified at solemn services at which the bishops and representative ministers from each Church would, in humble dependence on God, act and pray that the Holy Spirit would supply to all and through all what each has to contribute and whatever each may need of the fullness of Christ’s grace, commission and authority for the exercise of a new larger ministry in this wider visible manifestation of Christ’s Holy and Catholic Church. You will note that this proposal implies no questioning of the reality of any previous consecration or ordination, nor any questioning of their having been blessed and used by God. It does imply that a renewal of our obedience to Jesus Christ in this visible uniting of His Church can be the occasion of fresh indwelling of the Holy Spirit and a new charisma for us all.

I mention first this principle of visible and historical continuity not because it is necessarily the most important to the catholic Christian but because it is the only basis on which a broad reunion can take place, and because it is and will continue to be the most difficult catholic conviction for
evangelicals to understand and to accept. My proposal is simply to cut the Gordian knot of hundreds of years of controversy by establishing in the united Church an historic ministry recognized by all without doubt or scruple. The necessary safeguards and controls of such a ministry will become clear when I am listing the principles of reunion that catholic-minded Christians must grant to evangelicals if there is to be reunion between them.

2. The reunited Church must clearly confess the historic trinitarian faith received from the Apostles and set forth in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Here there is no real issue between the Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches. The difference that must be bridged is the issue between those in all our Churches who stand for a corporate confession of historic faith and those who fear that any required confession is too restrictive. A quarter of a century ago this would have been a sharper issue and more difficult to bridge. The tendency of the Presbyterian Church to be over-legalistic and of the Episcopal Church to be over-traditional have been modified by renewed theological and biblical understanding in our time. Equally the tendency in some of the so-called free Churches to suppose that no belief, that no confession of the faith, was necessary has given way to a general recognition of the necessity of corporate and individual confession of Christian faith as against the secular, humanistic, and atheistic ideologies of our times.

3. The reunited Church must administer the two sacraments, instituted by Christ, the Lord’s Supper (or Holy Communion, or Eucharist) and Baptism. These must be understood truly as means of grace by which God’s grace and presence are made available to His people. It will not be necessary, I trust, for a precise doctrinal agreement to be reached about the mode of operation of the sacraments so long as the proper catholic concern for their reality is protected so that, with the Word, the Sacrament is recognized as a true means of grace and not merely a symbolic memorial.

Much more could be said. Doubtless there are those of catholic tradition who would like even at this stage to add precise points to protect their consciences and convictions. The above, however, are the basic points and seem to me to be enough to be listed as basic principles if we are willing to add one more word. It must be agreed that every attempt will be made by those drawing up an actual plan of union to include within it those essentials of catholic practice and faith that will enable those of that persuasion to worship and witness joyfully and in good conscience within the fellowship of the united Church.

And now let me list the principles of reunion that are important to all who are of the reformation tradition:
I. The reunited Church must accept the principle of continuing reformation under the Word of God by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. A few years ago I would have felt that here was an issue on which no possible agreement could be reached. The reformation Churches have traditionally found their authority for faith and life in the Scriptures alone. So long as the wording *sola scriptura* is required, no bridge can be made between catholic and evangelical. But it is now clear in ecumenical conversations that Protestants generally have come to recognize the right place of tradition, just as catholics have generally become aware of the rightness of judging all tradition by the Scriptures as interpreted to the Church by the Holy Spirit.

The point that the Reformation tradition does require from a reunited Church is that God speaking through the Scriptures, must be able to reform the Church from age to age. While the Bible is not a law book or a collection of proof texts, it is God's instrument to speak His Saving Word to Christians and to the Church. If the catholic must insist on taking the sacraments more seriously than some Protestants have sometimes done, so Protestants in the reunited Church must insist on catholics fully accepting the Reformation principle that God has revealed and can reveal Himself and His will more and more fully through the Holy Scriptures. The reunited Church must keep Word and Sacrament equally and intimately united in understanding and appreciation.

2. The reunited Church must be truly democratic in its government, recognizing that the whole people of God are Christ's Church, that all Christians are Christ's ministers even though some in the Church are separated and ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament. You will have noticed that in the first catholic principle which I mentioned I proposed that the traditional three-fold ministry in the apostolic succession be established in the reunited Church. If evangelical Protestants are to enter such a Church with joy and in conscience there are several subsidiary points that must be made clear in the government and ethos of the reunited Church.

Episcopal churches should recognize that it will be with great reluctance that Presbyterians and Congregationalists will accept bishops in the structure of the Church. I should say, however, that there are many aspects of Episcopacy that American Presbyterians and other non-Episcopal Churches more and more generally recognize as valuable and needed. We Presbyterians for example need pastors of pastors quite desperately, and we know it. But we don’t need an aristocratic or authoritarian hierarchy, and we don’t believe a reunited Church does either. Furthermore Congregationalists and Presbyterians need to recognize how much of democracy is now practiced in
American Episcopal churches. In this diocese I remind you that presbyteries have been already established.

On the positive side we Presbyterians would offer to the reunited Church the office of the ordained ruling elder, elected by the people in their congregations to share fully and equally in the government of the church. It will be important for all entering this union to attempt creatively to develop a new form of government that avoids the monarchical, clerical, and authoritarian tendencies that have been historically the dangers of Episcopal Church government. Equally this new form of government must avoid the bureaucratic dangers that appear to be the chief threat of non-Episcopal Churches. It is the essence of Protestant concern, however, that decisions should generally be made by ordered groups of men under the guidance of the Holy Spirit rather than by a man who has personal authority to impose on others his decision or judgment.

While Protestants more and more recognize that a catholic understanding of the sacraments does not necessarily imply a clerical control of the Church nor the priestly abuses that introduced fear and magic into the medieval Church and chiefly caused the Reformation, nevertheless they hold the conviction as strongly as ever that clericalism and priestly control of the Church must be guarded against by a government of the Church in which lay people and ministers share equally.

It will be further important to continue to protect in the united Church the responsible freedom of congregations including the election of their pastors and the responsible freedom of ministers to answer the call of God received through the free action of the people. I may say that this ought to present no great problem since all our Churches are largely congregational in this respect. At the same time I would hope that all of those entering into such a union as I here propose would be concerned also to find a way in the context of such freedom to preserve the Methodist ability to find some place of employment of his gifts for every minister who is in good and regular standing. If the reunited Church is to have a dedicated and competent ministry, we must find a better way than any of us has yet found to recruit, educate, and employ a ministry avoiding on the one hand professionalism and on the other that kind of equalitarianism which produces disorder and anarchy in the Church.

3. The reunited Church must seek in a new way to recapture the brotherhood and sense of fellowship of all its members and ministers. Let me illustrate what I mean by a series of suggestions of what might appear on the surface to be minor matters but which if creatively resolved in the reunited
Church would not only remove many protestant misgivings but would, I believe, strengthen the witness of the Church to the world. Since it appears to be necessary to have certain inequalities in status in the Church as between members and officers, and as among deacons, presbyters, and bishops, let us make certain that the more status a member or minister has the more simple be his dress and attitude. Let us seek to make it evident in every possible way that in the Church the greatest is the servant of all. “My brother” is a better form of Christian address than “your grace.” A simple cassock is generally a better Christian garb for the highest member of the clergy than cope and mitre. And must there be grades of reverends, very, right, most, etc.? Do there even need to be any reverends at all? It is actually provided explicitly in the Union Plan of Ceylon that a Bishop shall not be addressed as “My Lord.” It would be my hope that those planning for a reunited Church would take the occasion to find many ways to exhibit to each other and to the world that we take seriously our Lord’s word, “You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant.”

Clearly connected with this will be such matters as finding a way to avoid too great inequities in ministers’ salaries, in the richness or grandeur of ecclesiastical establishments, lest the poor be alienated or the world conclude that luxury has sapped the soul of the Church. I speak in the full recognition of the spiritual value of this great Church and the rightness of completing it in beauty. Yet I speak for simplicity and brotherhood as ever being the requirement of Christ’s Church.

4. Finally the reunited Church must find the way to include within its catholicity (and because of it) a wide diversity of theological formulations of the faith and a variety of worship and liturgy including worship that is non-liturgical.

The great confessions of the Reformation must have their place in the confession, teaching, and history of the reunited Church just as do the ecumenical agreements of the undivided Church. I would hope that such a Reformation confession as the Heidelberg Catechism, partly because of its Lutheran elements, might be lifted up in some acceptable formula as having a proper place in the confession of the whole Church. And further, the reunited Church should, as led by the Holy Spirit under the Word, from time to time seek to confess its united faith to the world in new formulations appropriate to its place and time. Our two Churches, however, need to appreciate better than they have the fact that direct and joyful experience of Jesus Christ as
John Wesley knew it can be restricted too much by overreliance on creedal formulas. Our two Churches need to appreciate better than they have the liberating and creative inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the theological freedom of the congregational churches at their best.

Thus the united Church must avoid that kind of legalistic formulation of doctrine which on the ground of expressing unity of faith in fact produces a sterile uniformity which breeds alternately neglect and schism.

In worship there is great value in a commonly used, loved, and recognized liturgy. But such liturgy ought not to be imposed by authority or to be made binding upon the Holy Spirit or the congregations. More and more it would be our hope that in such a Church, as is here proposed, there would be developed common ways of worship both historic and freshly inspired. But history proves too well that imposed liturgy like imposed formulation of doctrine often destroys the very unity it is designed to strengthen.

Again there are many more things that those of the evangelical tradition in all our Churches would doubtless like at this stage to add as precise points to protect their consciences and convictions. The above, however, seem to be the essential and basic points which such a union as I propose would require if here again we are willing to add one more word. We must agree that every attempt will be made by those drawing up the plan of union to include within it those essentials of reformation faith and practice that will enable those of that persuasion to worship and witness joyfully and with good conscience within the fellowship of the reunited Church.

Here I would insert the assumption that all would understand that the reunited Church must remain in the ecumenical movement and its councils. It must be no less—it must be even more concerned beyond itself, recognizing that its reunion was but a stage and a step toward that unity which Christ requires His Church to manifest. This means also that the reunited Church must provide that such relationships of fellowship, cooperation, and intercommunion as the several Churches now have will be continued; this despite the difficulty and tension that such ambiguous relationships will continue to cause.

In conclusion I would remind you that precise ways of formulating such a reunion as I have sketched have been worked out in several ways particularly in the sub-continent of India in the several plans of union there. One may ask why they have preceded us in this, and alternately why we should look to their example for light and inspiration toward union here.

The answer to these questions is a simple one. Christians in India recognize themselves to be a small and beleaguered minority in a pagan and secu-
lar world. They have realized full well that they could not afford the luxury of their divisions. I submit that even though our numbers and wealth and prestige may be greater than theirs, we too need to recognize that we cannot afford longer the luxury of our historic divisions. It is because of this conviction that I have felt impelled to preach this sermon.

There are two results that I pray may, under God, come from it. If there is support for what I have said in my own Church, any or all of our presbyteries may, if they will, overture the General Assembly which meets next May asking that Assembly to make an official proposal. I further hope that the Protestant Episcopal Church, by its own processes will also take an early action in this direction so that in your General Convention next fall the invitation to the Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ may be jointly issued to proceed to draw up a plan of union to which any other Churches of Jesus Christ accepting the bases suggested and the plan developed will be warmly invited to join.

Now I have not forgotten that this is a sermon and that it is an unconscionably long time since I announced my text. To you who have patiently listened to my longer than usual exposition, I ask one thing more: that you pray for the reunion of Christ’s Church and that as you think about it and examine your own heart and mind, you do it in the spirit of the Apostle Paul when he addressed the saints and bishops and deacons of the church at Philippi.

Paul wrote, “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” The Apostle continued: “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”

If you, dear friends, and all others who consider and discuss this proposal do so in this spirit and from this motive, I have no fear that the eternally recreative God will find His way to renew and reunite His Church.
Ascription: Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost. Amen.
RESPONSE

James A. Pike,
Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California

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I cannot proceed with the liturgy without saying an enthusiastic Amen to what this great Christian leader has said, under the Word of God, in this Cathedral Church dedicated in its founding document to the promotion of the unity of Christ’s Church. I believe that I speak for you all when I say that the response to this sermon should be the same as that which we sang in response to the Gospel: Glory be to thee, O Lord: Praise be to thee, O Christ.

Just as Dr. Blake has not spoken officially for his own Church, I cannot speak officially for mine. But as a Bishop in the historic succession, which the preacher regards as an element in the united Church, I can say that his prophetic proclamation is the most sound and inspiring proposal for the unity of the Church in this country which has ever been made in its history. I hope and pray that his plan will be received by the four Churches—and others—in the Christian spirit in which it has been offered and that definite action toward its fulfillment will soon be forthcoming. I shall certainly labor to this end.

But that I am not alone in what I know will be a warm response throughout my own Church is clear not only from the fact that the Lambeth Conference of 1958 (consisting of 310 Bishops of the Anglican Communion assembling from forty-six countries) gave general approval to participation by our diocese in the area to current unity plans, based on the same principles, in North India, Pakistan and Ceylon; but also from the fact that at Lambeth we said the following, which I quote from the Lambeth Report:

“Physician, heal thyself—such is the challenge which comes with ever increasing urgency to the Church today, as the Church seeks, in obedience to
Christ, to proclaim the word of reconciliation in the midst of a world torn by divisions and conflicts ...

“We fully recognize that there are other forms of ministry than episcopacy in which have been revealed the gracious activity of God in the life of the universal Church. We believe that other Churches have often borne more effective witness, for example, to the status and vocation of the laity as spiritual persons and to the fellowship and discipline of congregational life than has been done in some of the Churches of our communion. It is our longing that all of the spiritual gifts and insights by which the particular Churches live to His Glory may find their full scope and enrichment in a united Church.

“The unity between Christian Churches ought to be a living unity in the love of Christ which is shown in full Christian fellowship and in mutual service, while also, subject to sufficient agreement in Faith and Order, expressing itself in free interchange of ministries, and fullness of sacramental Communion. Such unity, while marked by the bond of the historic episcopate, should always include congregational fellowship, active participation of both clergy and laity in the mission and government of the Church, and zeal for evangelism.

“Such is the vision we set before ourselves and our own people, calling them to regard the recovery and manifestation of the unity of the whole Church of Christ as a matter of the greatest urgency.”

Today the Stated Clerk of The United Presbyterian Church has for Christians in our country made that vision more clear and that urgency more evident. Glory be to thee, O Lord; Praise be to thee, O Christ.
