

Excerpts

Excerpt from the Introduction

Christianity today manifests a wide variety of beliefs, worship patterns, organizational structures, community formations, spiritualities, ethical lifestyles, and ministries to society. Christians have often viewed this variety as a liability and have grieved the fragmentation of the body of Christ. Sometimes, in an effort to eliminate the diversity, Christians have sought to convert or to marginalize other Christian sisters and brothers. When Christian groups are intolerant of one another and refuse to cooperate with each other, it is indeed a great tragedy. Diversity in itself, however, is not an aberration, nor is it a sign of brokenness. Rather, it is a great strength of the church. Diversity may be the chief reason why the Christian church has thrived through the centuries and adapted in so many parts of the world. In the future, this rich variety in Christianity may be crucial for the survival of the church and for the effectiveness of its mission. Therefore, it is important that Christians celebrate and nurture differences as a source of strength and renewal.

The present diversity in the Christian church reflects a diversity that was there from the beginning. The present multiplicity of Christian groups is not a sign of the fragmentation of the body of Christ (except when we fight with each other). Rather, it is a sign of the rich diversity that was there from the start. In the earliest beginnings of the church, there never was a pristine unity that was somehow subsequently broken. A multiplicity of Christian visions, beliefs, practices and community formations is at the heart of the Christian faith in its origins. The early Christian movement reached out for the very purpose of creating and encompassing incredible diversity within the larger reach of God's reconciling unity.

Such diversity in the nation and in the church and in our daily lives is often frightening to us, despite our deep longing for the ties that bind us across differences. We are often uncomfortable with ambiguity and difference, preferring to be with "people like ourselves." Unfortunately, our churches themselves often reflect our avoidance of diversity, because they are so frequently made up of people of the same social group. In our daily lives, we relate to people different from ourselves, but often in very limited roles. Many of us do not really know people very well who are different from ourselves in economic level or educational difference or racial identity or language or political allegiance or religious affiliation — unless they are people whom we

have to figure out in order to survive! Our fear and avoidance of difference is fueled by the intractable religious and cultural wars throughout the world and the volatile ethnic conflicts that have flared up in our own country. We tend to have limited tolerance for diversity, perhaps because we fear that we may find no common ground with others and that unpleasant and harmful conflicts will be inevitable. We fear disruption or loss or assimilation or erosion of our own religious and cultural particularity.

But what if we faced up to our avoidance and began by honoring differences? What if we dared to take difference rather than conformity as the fundamental starting point for relationships? What if we faced our discomfort with ambiguity and chose to value diversity as the indispensable basis for mutual interdependence together? What if we discovered our unity through the courage to explore our differences? Our instincts may tell us to be cautious. Yet, following our instincts without reflection can be as dangerous as ignoring our instincts. Besides, Jesus proposed that our common salvation involved acting in spite of our instincts, such as loving our enemies or losing our lives for others rather than saving our lives. What if, like the early Christians, we assumed that there is no common ground for unity within human beings themselves and that God alone is the reality who unites us. In this way, we might discover that respecting and embracing differences among all people under God's creation is in fact the path to discovering and embracing the full measure of God's unity. True, we need to be savvy about points of view and beliefs that are destructive and dehumanizing. But we need to do that out of a fundamental commitment to the inherent value of diversity in God's larger embrace — and with a willingness to take risks.

Thus, attending to the diversity in the Bible can be a rich source of renewal for the church today. Diversity in the Bible is a rich celebration of the complexities of the human condition and of the manifestations of God in our midst. The multiplicity of belief and practice in the New Testament promotes openness and leads us to welcome others who are different and to learn from them. The very diversity in the canon redeems the limitations of each single writing and undercuts the human tendency to claim absolute truth for any one Christian belief system. It stands against intolerance and urges us to depend on each other for a full witness to the truth of God. It is a call to respect and celebrate diversity in the church and in the world as an expression of God's love of diversity in creation. ...

Excerpt from Chapter 1

In order to appreciate anew the diverse manifestations of early Christianity, it might be helpful first to see how we have eclipsed that diversity. For the most part, Christians have tended to level the diversity in the New Testament in three major ways: 1) we have harmonized the diversity by seeing the New Testament as one book in which all the writings agree with each other; 2) we have reduced the New Testament message to the lowest common denominators; and 3) we have leveled out the diversity by taking one part of the New Testament and then reading the whole New Testament through that lens, as if all the writings were saying what that one author says. In what follows, we will look more closely at each of these three ways in which we tend to dissolve the diversity in the New Testament.

The point is that each denomination and each ethnic group within particular denominations can celebrate their distinctive traditions and still be renewed by the traditions of others and by the diversity in the New Testament. Thus, there is more than one way to be faithful to the biblical materials. Here we are free to make choices without being exclusive and without thinking we have a corner on the truth. To say that we are right is not to say that others are wrong. We are called to make choices in a responsible way, in our relation with God and together with folks around us, about how we will be faithful to the biblical witnesses. At the same time, the experience of biblical traditions other than our own can correct a misinterpretation or imbalance and can broaden and deepen our understanding of the biblical tradition. However, the idea is not to choose one or the other tradition as correct or incorrect but to open ourselves to interpretations that go beyond our own. In the process, we may also come to appreciate contemporary groups that hold other texts and practices to be authoritative.

Ultimately, reading for renewal means to allow ourselves to be changed, to read with the expectation of being transformed, to read in the hope of being a new people. The biblical writings themselves were penned in order to be vehicles for the power of God, in order to grasp readers, to reorient them, to evoke responses, to create wholeness, to engender action on behalf of others. In a sense, the writings are not fully interpreted until their visions have become incarnate in our lives and in our communities. Ultimately, then, the biblical writings lead not just to interpretation but to action, to changed relationships, and to new communities.