

# Ecumenical Preaching

Colleagues,

Steven Kuhl recently sent me today's offering. It first appeared twelve years in a publication that later went out of business. You will join me, I'm sure, in agreeing with Steve about its fitness for a rerun as the monumental Reformation anniversary looms. For more on that, see the Afterword.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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## The CORE of Ecumenical Preaching

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by Steven C. Kuhl

Forty years ago the Second Vatican Council issued its *Decree On Ecumenism* (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964). While that decree did not start the ecumenical movement, it certainly expanded it, bringing into the movement the largest body of Christians in the world: the Roman Catholic communion. Not only did that decree add to the numbers of those involved in ecumenism, it added enthusiasm, momentum, and hope. Ecumenism, as the council articulated it, is not a luxury to be entertained as time permits, but an essential characteristic of the church catholic. Indeed, it is an expression of the deep yearning of the church catholic, a sign of prayer being answered, specifically, the high priestly prayer of none other than the head of the church himself, Jesus Christ: "that [his disciples] may become completely one" (John 17:23 [NRSV]).

As an ordained preacher of over twenty years in the Lutheran Communion (ELCA), I have great appreciation for the steps Vatican II took in ecumenism. Because of those steps, I share with most of the preachers who read these pages this fact: We have no experience of a time in the church when ecumenical preaching (preaching in intentionally ecumenical gatherings) wasn't practiced. Moreover, most of my experience in ecumenical preaching has happened on the grassroots level, usually in conjunction with the local clergy associations—and I suspect that is the experience of most other preachers as well. On the grassroots level, ecumenical gatherings happen for all kinds of reasons—from annual, community-wide Thanksgiving or Good Friday services to midweek Lenten and Advent devotions to times of national mourning and national crisis. Without exception, at the center of these ecumenical gatherings stands preaching.

Ecumenical preaching, therefore, must always be aware of the diverse Christian experience of the people who gather and knowledgeable regarding the variety of Christian traditions represented. To that end, there is no better ongoing preparation for the task of ecumenical preaching than for preachers to participate regularly in their local clergy associations. Only through such association will ecumenical preachers gain the needed sensitivity, trust, and courage to preach the word that is intended to unite them. In addition, the ecumenical preacher must remember that the people who gather are already deeply Christian in their faith. Above all else, they come believing that they share such a bond in Christ Jesus with fellow Christians from other traditions that they can both give common expression to that faith through prayer and song and be nurtured in that faith through word and preaching. Therefore, the task of ecumenical preaching is the task of preaching generally—to share the good news of Jesus Christ and to rally and unite the people of God in that good news—and the burden that every ecumenical

preacher bears is exactly that which St. Paul expressed: "If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16 [NRSV]).

### **The CORE of the message**

At the risk of being cute, let me suggest that at a minimum ecumenical preaching is always about proclaiming the "CORE" of the Christian message. That is, ecumenical preaching is **catholic**, **orthodox**, **reforming**, and **evangelical**. These words, each of which has special significance for four major Christian traditions, represent aspects of the Christian message that are indispensable to good ecumenical preaching.

First, ecumenical preaching is "catholic" with a lower-case "c." The word "catholic" comes from a Greek word that is usually rendered "universal," but that may just as well be rendered "according to the whole." Ignatius of Antioch records the earliest use of the term "catholic" and defines it this way: "Wherever Jesus Christ is there is the catholic Church," i.e., church in its totality (*Letter to the Smyrnaens*, 8.2). Catholicity, therefore, does not mean uniformity, but totality, a diversity that finds unity in Jesus Christ. To use the language of Vatican II, we might say that the church catholic, the church in its totality, "subsists" in every local assembly where Jesus Christ is proclaimed and present. While the assembled body of Christ in any given place is only *part* of the world-wide church, and while the full extent of the diversity of that world-wide church's prayer and song is only *partially* expressed in any given local assembly, nevertheless, every local assembly is theologically and Christologically church in its *totality*, the church catholic, the body of Christ in that place. Ecumenical preaching needs to be aware of this catholic character of any local assembly and

name it for the sake of the assembly.

Second, ecumenical preaching is “orthodox” with a lower-case “o.” The word “orthodox” comes from two Greek words: *ortho* meaning “straight” and *doxa* meaning “opinion.” Historically, to be orthodox means to be committed to the “right teaching” about God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and Jesus Christ (the Son incarnated, fully divine and fully human, yet one person). But the word *doxa* also means “glory,” as in doxology. Accordingly, right teaching is inseparable from right praising, as the old dictum *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing) underscores. To highlight this fact, ecumenical worship services would do well to include the marks of orthodoxy in the liturgy itself. They should include the ancient teaching symbols of the church orthodox (the Nicene and the Apostles’ Creeds and the Lord’s Prayer) and draw on the central liturgical actions associated with that orthodoxy in Christian baptism (sprinkling, laying on of hands, anointing, and so on), so that ecumenical preaching might explore the meaning of these symbols and actions as a shared heritage. Of course, chief among the marks of orthodoxy is Holy Scripture itself. Accordingly, ecumenical preaching needs to be quite self-consciously biblically rooted, but in a way that understands the “root” of the Bible to be Jesus Christ himself as he is identified in the teaching symbols and liturgical actions of orthodoxy.

Third, ecumenical preaching is “reforming” with a lower case “r.” One of the fruits of the sixteenth-century Reformation was the realization by the church catholic that the “the church is always reforming,” *ecclesia semper reformanda*. For the church to live in a posture that is always open to reform is not a sign of shame or instability or uncertainty. On the contrary, it is a sign of health and confidence that the word of God through which the church is created and sustained is a living word that forms

and shapes the witness of the church to meet the challenges of each new day. Traditionalism (the determination to “hang onto” past forms of faith) is the mark of a church that fears the reforming character of the living word; Tradition (the dynamic process of “handing on” the faith in forms that serve the gospel) is the mark of a church that trusts the reforming character of the living word. Ecumenical preaching would do well to proclaim the stories and instances of how the “tradition of reform” informs all of our traditions and how that may be one of the most vital aspects of the Christian tradition that the ecumenical movement has going for it. *Aggiornamento*, renewal, renaissance, reform—regardless of what we call it, the tradition of reform is a most valuable mark of the church.

Fourth, ecumenical preaching is “evangelical” with a lower case “e.” In light of the fact that the word “evangelical” comes from the Greek word meaning “to preach good news,” to say that ecumenical preaching is evangelical is almost redundant. Of course, preaching is preaching. Now it probably doesn’t hurt if preaching is done with rhetorical flair or witty humor or moving stories, but that is not what makes Christian preaching “good,” as in “good news” or evangelical. Taking a cue from the letter to the Ephesians, ecumenical preaching that is evangelical always has the salvation of the hearer (that is, the healing of the sinner) through grace, Christ, and faith as its overall story-line, a salvation that issues forth with great benefits—“good works”—for the world: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Ephesians 2:8–10 [NRSV]). Ecumenical preaching, especially, would do well to be clear on the story-line. For as the letter to the Ephesians underscores, that story-line is the source and

the summit of the church's unity: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (see Ephesians 4:4–6).

## **More to the CORE**

Any astute student of the ecumenical scene will notice that my "CORE" acronym leaves out one very important aspect of the Christian message that was trumpeted by the so-called Radicals of the Reformation. Therefore, we dare not forget that ecumenical preaching at its core is also "radical" with a lower-case "r." I suppose we could say the core message of the gospel is always "CORER," more radical than conventional church proclamation and practice is willing to entertain. Ecumenical preaching majors in reminding the church of that. We often think of the word "radical" today as meaning *intentionally* provocative, disruptive, destabilizing. While it may be all that, that's not *necessarily* its intention. The word "radical" comes from the Latin word *radix*, which means to get back to our "roots." The constant temptation of the church is to collapse gospel religion into civil religion, to confuse the church's "spiritual" agenda with the world's "secular" agenda, to seek the approval of the powerful and the wealthy rather than to identify with the weak and the poor. The "radical" nature of the Christian message does underscore God's "preferential option for the poor," as Mary virgin mild clearly expressed in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), and ecumenical preaching would do well to make that clear also.

By focusing on the CORE elements of the Christian message, ecumenical preaching attends to both the reconciliation of the world to God and the unity of the church, two realities that are intimately intertwined. For what is the church but the world being reconciled to God, and what is the mission of the church but to preach the reconciliation of the world to God, and where better to emphasize this than in grassroots ecumenical

gatherings, where the church in the midst of the world can witness to its oneness in Christ? This, among other things, is the meaning of Jesus' high priestly prayer as he prays "that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me" (John 17:23 [NRSV]).

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## **Afterword**

I wrote this piece in 2005 while teaching at St. Francis Seminary, Milwaukee, and had it published in a Catholic magazine called *Preach*, which is now defunct. Come to think of it, association with now defunct organizations or institutions seems to be the story of my life. McDonnell Douglas Corporation, the company where I worked as an engineer: defunct. Christ Seminary-Seminex, which nurtured and shaped me theologically: defunct. The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, which ordained me for ministry: defunct. St. Francis de Sales (Roman Catholic) Seminary, which launched me into teaching: defunct. Thankfully, what has not gone "defunct" in the midst of all this is the preaching of the Word. That God graciously sees fit to let remain forever, which brings me back to the article.

As one responsible for teaching Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations at St. Francis Seminary, I was asked to write an article on "ecumenical preaching." As we now commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, it seems to me that the article is still timely. For as Robert Bertram once noted, one of the distinguishing features of confessing the faith for the Lutheran Reformers was the insistence that it always seeks to be ecumenical, meaning, it is always "interest[ed] in churchly consensus as reunion." [Robert W. Bertram, *A Time for Confessing*, ed. Michael Hoy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2008), p. 8.] And wouldn't you know it. That "interest" is

at the forefront of this 500 commemoration of the Reformation. After 500 years, we seem to have come, at least, this far: We, the churches who have our roots in the Reformation, no longer see what happened back then as simply a sectarian act of everyone asserting their rights to private opinion, but as an ecumenical act aimed at “churchly consensus” and “reunion” in the Gospel.

To be sure, the later rise of Enlightenment ideology clouded us into thinking that the enduring contribution of the Reformation was all about the right to private opinion in matters of conscience. And unfortunately, we can still see that interpretation of the Reformation shaping the two most recent films on the subject: both Rick Steve’s Luther and the Reformation and the upcoming PBS documentary “Martin Luther: The Idea That Changed the World.” (Perhaps more on this another time.) This is not to say that the political (First Amendment) right to private (meaning, free from governmental interference) opinion in matters of Religion/Conscience is not an important political “spinoff” consistent with Reformation thought. Indeed, we see its seeds already in Luther’s treatise, On Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed, where he begins to set forth his two kingdoms teaching on the relationship of Spiritual and Secular Authority. But that is not the “Big Idea” of the Reformation. The Big Idea of the Reformation is not private opinion in matters of religion and conscience, but churchly consensus that we are reconciled to God and one another through the forgiveness of sins, the daily dying and rising with Christ. That’s why preaching is ecumenical.

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