

COMMENT

The Protestant Reformation's Surprising Gift of Unity

On Sept. 12, 2017, a remarkable thing happened. An astonishingly diverse group of Protestant Christian leaders released a Confession of Faith designed to demonstrate the unity among Christian believers who trace their heritage to the Protestant Reformation.

The confession is called "A Reforming Catholic Confession" and was signed by leaders ranging from Anglican to Pentecostal and from Armenian to Calvinists. (See story in Sept. 21 issue of *The Alabama Baptist* or online at www.thealabamabaptist.org.) The idea for the confession was birthed in the mind of Jerry Walls, a professor of philosophy at Houston Baptist University in Texas. Timothy George, founding dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham, was co-chairman of the group's executive committee.

The new confession comes as evangelical Christians and others prepare to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation which is dated from Martin Luther nailing his famous 95 Theses to the Wittenberg Castle Church door on Oct. 31, 1517.

Core elements of Christianity

Some point to today's large number of Protestant denominations as a failure of the Reformation. Walls counters saying the new confession demonstrates the remarkable togetherness that exists throughout the world among Protestants on the core elements of Christianity.

One leader of the new confession movement explained disagreements among Protestants look bigger than they really are because the many groups share so much in common.

Drafters acknowledge the confession does not say everything every group would like but it does express what all the groups agree on. Considering signatories come from Anglican, Anabaptist, Baptist, Free Church, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Nazarene, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and more, agreement on core elements will surprise many.

Like me, most who read the confession will find it an excellent statement, and, I believe, would willingly add their own names to it if asked.

What "A Reforming Catholic Confession" puts in formal terms for all to see may be what has been happening in local churches for years. Protestant Christians (including Baptists) have



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By Bob Terry

been acting as if they have more in common when it comes to what they believe about God, salvation, the Bible and the Christian life than they have differences.

In 1980, Southern Baptist life was astir with the news that Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) President Adrian Rogers was to be the featured speaker at a "Washington for Jesus Rally" sponsored by Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker and other nationally known religious personalities from the evangelical world. Up to that time Southern Baptists had shied away from participation in such events and many urged Rogers to cancel.

After the event Rogers met with state paper editors and was asked about his participation. He responded that he would fellowship with any Christian or group of Christians who acknowledged the one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father of all as stated in Ephesians 4:4-6.

Rogers held to that position and so did most of the SBC presidents who followed him. Today Southern Baptists are leaders in much of the evangelical world.

Members of Baptist churches also followed that example. Today it is not uncommon to hear someone joke that Baptist is the largest religious background of members of this Methodist church or that Presbyterian congregation or some other community church fellowship.

At the same time Baptists have received members from many evangelical backgrounds. When such people present themselves the usual concern is about their salvation experience and whether they received New Testament baptism, meaning did their baptism follow their salvation experience. Coming from another church "of like faith and order" is not as important as it used to be.

Denominational identity also may be wan-

ing, at least among Baptists. More and more churches omit Baptist from their name, some because they believe the identity hinders people from coming. Use of denominational literature continues to trend downward as churches write their own material or turn to Christian publishing houses rather than denominational specific outlets.

Speakers and conference leaders seem to transcend denominational lines. This is true for churches as well as denominationally sponsored events. The ministry of the speaker or conference leader is the greatest value. As a result the same speaker may be at a Baptist church this month, a Methodist church in a neighboring city next month and a nearby Presbyterian church the following month.

It is as if we are all fishing out of the same pond. Despite different denominational identities we study the same material, read the same books and hear the same speakers.

Generally speaking, more and more magnifies what evangelical Christians hold in common. Less and less emphasizes individual denominational distinctives. Even pastors move from denomination to denomination.

One result of all of this is more nondenominational or community churches and fewer denominationally identified churches. Another result is closer cooperation among churches of a community in sharing Christ through joint missions and ministries.

A few years ago a keen observer of Baptist life commented that he was confident Baptist beliefs

(our theology) would continue until the Lord's return. He was not so sure the Baptist denomination would last that long. He may be right.

The new Reforming Catholic Confession is a wonderful reminder that no denomination is alone in the work of our Lord. All have many ministry partners and God is at work in them. After all, God's call was to build up His Kingdom. None was called to build up a denominational kingdom.

Body of Christ

Locally and nationally, a growing appreciation for one another and closer cooperation with one another in Christian service can only be positive, for Jesus prayed that His church "might be one" (John 17).

At the same time, Baptists have understandings and perspectives to offer the entire body of Christ. Hopefully these distinctives will not be lost as the body of Christ goes forward. 🙏



For more stories about the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, see pages 4-5.