

"Boasting: Self-righteous Collective Superiority as a Cause of Conflict"

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Self-righteous Collective Superiority as a Cause of Conflict

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Introduction

The Faith and Politics Group has issued a number of documents on the Northern Ireland situation from the perspective of Christian Faith. This present one attempts to look at one issue which is an underlying cause of conflict in different situations, including Northern Ireland. That issue is self-righteous collective superiority. In **Part One** we consider a number of examples of how this manifests itself and the basis people find for it. When strongly held, it can make the resolution of conflict very difficult because it works against compromise and the reaching of agreement.

The roots of self-righteous superiority lie deep within us all, both at the personal level and as part of a collective. Our need to differentiate ourselves from others; the quest for truth and transcendence; our yearning for belonging, order and security; our concern for identity; the will to live and flourish; our sense of particularity; our wish for recognition, significance, esteem and justice; all contain within them the possibility that they will overreach themselves and create a sense of self-righteous superiority. Further, a sense of superiority, particularly when linked to religious superiority, can encourage a will to power and a desire to dominate others. This is considered in **Part Two**.

It is our contention that the Christian Faith can free us from such delusions of righteousness even though we all fall back into them from time to time. **In Part Three** we *exam*}. ie new belonging together in Christ which does not exclude or promote superiority and look at the writings of Paul that condemn collective self-righteous boasting of superiority. In Paul's letter to the Romans he writes about justification through grace by faith, but since he is writing in the context of conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians, what he writes has direct implications for the resolution of inter-community conflict.

These issues inevitably raise questions about truth. We make a number of points about truth in **Part Four**. Developing positive relationships with others both personally and collectively is vitally important and we make a number of suggestions in the Conclusions. At the end of this millennium marked by much international, ethnic and inter cultural conflict we dare to proclaim the Good News that reconciliation between enemies is possible through Christ.

Part 1. Manifestations of Superiority

The Irish Inter-Church Meeting produced a report on sectarianism in which it is stated that one universal source of sectarianism is *"assuming the superiority of one's own community"*. When communities are in conflict this assumption of superiority makes reaching an accommodation much more difficult.

This sense of superiority, experienced in many different ways, is a major hindrance to reconciliation and the solving of problems in relating one community to another. When a community convinced of its superiority demonises another community, it feels that the *other* should eventually give way to what is inherently superior. There is therefore no urgency to understand the other side, seek a solution, or search for compromise.

Many people who would not admit to sectarian, racist or extreme nationalist attitudes nevertheless feel that the collective group to which they belong is superior to others. A feeling of collective superiority is often not recognised by those within the group, though it may be obvious to those outside.

Derogatory comments about another community, for example, are often accepted without questioning their truth. Sometimes it simply takes the form of overlooking the other side. It means that within one group it is regarded as important not to be curious about what the other group is really like. A teacher from Dublin took part in an exchange scheme with a school in Northern Ireland. When asked what had struck him most about the experience he replied, "lack of interest." During the whole time he spent in the school no one asked him what it was like to be a teacher in Dublin.

Likewise, many in the Republic of Ireland would prefer not to have to think about Northern Ireland.

Sometimes collective superiority manifests itself in aloofness **and disdain**.

This is often associated with class differences. There are elements of class disdain in the attitude of many to those in the Republican and Loyalist movements. In turn this can cause a strong reaction resulting in a desire to reverse the positions rather than confront the feelings of superiority. Many Communist regimes which started with the intention of treating everyone equally have ended up treating with disdain others with whom they disagreed.

Those who have strong **ideological convictions** find it hard even to listen to those with different convictions. Ideology when it is unchallenged produces a sense of superiority which can merge into idolatry - a sacred position. Some forms of Republicanism and Loyalism convince their adherents that their position is ideologically so superior and absolute that compromise is impossible.

Paradoxically those who for various reasons are made to feel collectively inferior often feel superior by virtue of being **victims**. There is something glorious about being an underdog. There is a link between inferiority and superiority which is part of the dynamic of rivalry. There is evidence in Ireland of a cult of victimhood which makes reconciliation with former oppressors very difficult.

Many people construct a negative identity for themselves - an identity based on opposition to others. With this negative identity they often boast of being superior to others but underneath are uncertain and afraid. Marc Gopin, a Jewish theologian, says:

There is often great identity confusion in many parts of the world, particularly among those who are violent in the name of religion, as to what their religious identity really is as an in-depth experience. It is for this reason that we see in violent situations or even conflictual situations that identity is defined by who I am not. It is what I have called a negative identity. A negative identity is not a very pleasant identity. It needs conflict and misery in order to sustain itself. If identity is essentially negative, if there is a deep doubt or lack of vision as to a substantive identity that can be conceived without the enemy, then there is no choice but to recreate the circumstances in which conflict with an enemy is necessary.

A community often covers over **uncertainty, fear and internal tensions** by finding a common external enemy. The finding of an enemy creates community cohesion and a sense of superior difference. A sense of superiority can also be a cover for self-hatred. Some people have to find others to hate more than themselves. In all of this identity is found in being over against others.

One of the most difficult forms of superiority to detect from within is the superiority of those who believe that they **think and act rationally**. Those who cannot rationalise their feelings are despised and avoided by those who regard themselves as rationalists. As a result the "chattering classes," as they are sometimes called, have very little influence on everyone else. In practice, we delude ourselves if we think we can persuade people by rational argument to stop feeling a sense of rivalry with another group.

Neither can the fears and uncertainty that generate religious dogmatism be dealt with by purely rational means. Even those who engage in ecumenical discussion and activities are sometimes guilty of feeling superior to those who for various reasons do not. When a religious group feels superior to another group the rivalry prevents one side hearing let alone influencing the other.

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This even applies to people who see themselves as ecumenical. Pastor David McConaghie of the Elim Pentecostal Church has this to say about ecumenists:

I find it really annoying when I hear ecumenists saying that people like me are fostering hatred... Ecumenists, say they are tolerant, but they apply a double standard. They have to accuse me of being anti-Catholic. They can't see me as acting out of conscience, of adopting a rational, intelligent, mature position. They criticise the tenets of the faith that I hold, yet they say they are not anti-evangelical or anti-Protestant.

In a situation of serious conflict a community which feels superior for any reason can feel justified in getting rid of, or scapegoating, the inferior who is causing trouble, rather than attempt reaching any accommodation. This is classically expressed in the doctrine of Caiaphas: *"it is expedient that one person die and that the whole nation not perish"* (John 11:50). The sacrifice of scapegoats becomes necessary to preserve a sense of superior difference. It may start with the thought of getting rid of just one person, but can proceed to whole groups of people.

Basis of Superiority

A sense of superior difference can be based on power or size, culture, race, gender, age, morality or religion. Since this document is about collective conflict we will consider only the grounds which ethnic groups, communities and nations use to justify their feeling of superiority.

a. Power

Feeling superior is often linked to feeling part of something bigger and **more powerful** than the rival community. In the Czech Republic there is an area that used to be called the Sudetenland. It looks under-populated and has a feeling of former glory that has now gone. That is not surprising because after the Second World War almost 2.5 million German speaking people were forcibly removed from the area. Before the war started, despite being a minority, the Sudeten Germans felt superior to their Czech neighbours. They refused to learn the Czech language or feel part of the Czech nation. Nationalist feeling was easily aroused in Germany to run to the defence of people of the same culture. The Nazis used what they called threats to their fellow Germans in Czechoslovakia to dismember the country in 1938.

Another example is Bosnia where the Serbs feel related to the Slav/ Orthodox family, the Muslims are mainly descendants of the civil servants of the Ottoman Empire and the Croats were part of the former Hapsburg

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Empire. Conflict in this area is not just local rivalry but can be traced back to these former links that made one group feel superior to another and at the same time fearful of them.

Concerning Britain, David Marquand, the British political scientist, writes: *Imperial Britain was Britain. The iconography, the myths, the rituals in which Britishness was embodied were of necessity, imperial, oceanic, ex-European: they could not be anything else. Empire was their reason for being British, as opposed to English, or Scots, or Welsh.*

At its very least Britain has traditionally given many people - English, Scots, Welsh and Irish - a sense of belonging to something big and above all powerful. Power, of course, is not only about being big in numbers and size, it is very much to do with technological superiority, particularly as manifested in advanced weaponry. Until the middle of the nineteenth century small arms in the non-western world were able to measure up to those of Europe, but by the second half of that century European arms were vastly superior. The battle of Omdurman (1898) was portrayed in England through pictures, as hand to hand fighting, but it would be better described as butchery because the weapons used by the British forces could fire rapidly to a distance of a thousand yards and no Sudanese got nearer than three hundred yards. They were slaughtered in thousands at *"insignificant loss to the victors"* according to Winston Churchill, then a war correspondent. Few people questioned such victories even though eleven thousand Sudanese warriors died and hardly any of the sixteen thousand wounded survived while the British lost forty eight soldiers. Might seems to have been assumed to be right. The other weapon that enabled slaughter and devastation to be carried out from a great distance and with safety was the gun boat which was to become the symbol of imperialism. Successful war confirmed a sense of European superiority.

b. Biological difference

The slaughter of "inferior" races by European imperial powers was at first justified as bringing Christian civilisation to dark places but this justification was, for many, replaced by the theory that the superior human races would *inevitably* overcome the inferior. Scientists began to discover species that were extinct and had to suggest reasons why this could have happened. Charles Darwin thought the explanation lay in some species being better adapted to the environment than others. Only those that adapted survived. In a letter to Lyell in 1859 Darwin considers the possibility that even within the human races there could be a kind of

biological patricide with the *"lesser intellectual races being exterminated."* In 1871, Darwin came to the conclusion that:

At some future period not very distant as measured in centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races.

Istven Lindquist in his book *Exterminate the Brutes* propounds the theory that this extermination of people regarded as inferior by the imperial powers of Europe was continued in the Second World War when Germany carried out similar atrocities to "inferior" people in Eastern Europe. There is evidence to suggest that the British Empire was regarded as a model for Germany. National Socialism fits into this mainstream of European history far more comfortably than most of us want to admit. What it did was to turn European imperialism on its head and treat some Europeans as Africans had been treated.

c. Culture

Superiority in size becomes linked to superiority in **culture**. What is it that attracts a people towards the more powerful power despite living on the circumference of its influence? One reason is that the connection enhances their sense of being superior to the native population. Feeling superior in power and having a superior culture justifies trying to educate the natives. Frank Wright points out that this was often done with the wrong motive of eradicating the *"inferior and superstitious"* culture of the native peoples.

Regarding Ireland Frank Wright writes:

Until the 1820s the largely Protestant-endowed Education system had provided the only funded education in Ireland. In Ulster, Catholics made use of it and there had been little sign of religious discord over educational issues. Then the opponents of Catholic emancipation started what they called the Second Reformation with the declared purpose of using the education system to "enlighten" Catholic children. This is the background to the present system of separate education.

Another form of trying to eradicate what was regarded as an inferior culture was the changing of local names. The famous Czech spa generally known as *Karlsbad*(German) is now in an independent Czech Republic called by its original name of *Karlovy Vary*. "America" is an invention of its discoverers. For Columbus the names of places in the language of the indigenous people were unimportant, as was their culture. He gave the places he "discovered" new, "Christian", names. Naming was thereby an act of claiming the land. The playwright, Brian Friel, treats this issue as exemplified in Ireland, in his play *Translations*.

Sometimes very small cultural differences are elevated in importance to emphasise the difference between one cultural or ethnic group and another. This can give rise to ridicule but in certain circumstances it can even lead to violence as Jonathan Swift accurately observed in *Gulliver's Travels*. In his fictional war between the Lilliputians and the Blefuscudians eleven thousand people die rather than break their boiled eggs at the wrong end. How the letter "H" is pronounced seems to be very important for many people in Ireland.

d. Purity

A sense of collective superiority can also be linked to purity. Religious purity often prohibits contact with those of different beliefs that might lead to a blurring of distinction. There is a fear of contamination by association. This partly explains the reluctance of many Protestants to become involved in any ecumenical meetings. The resultant separation increases a sense of superiority. There is a myth of a *pure* ethnic identity and hence that there can be an ethnically pure state or territory. The Nazi movement in Germany tried to start a process aimed at producing a nation free of all non-Aryan contamination.

In general the desire for purity leads to the desire to get rid of or eliminate all that is impure. Impure people are people who do not belong to us and are therefore regarded as a source of danger. In its most extreme forms it can lead to expulsion and even extermination.

Marc Gopin remarks that often those who are zealous for their particular religious grouping, desire not just to be pure and un-contaminated by the stranger, but often seek to break boundaries and try to **consume** or dominate the stranger. Speaking from the terrible Jewish experience of persecution, he says, the central challenge of human existence is *"how to meet the other without consuming him"*. There is a tendency for zealous religious people to want others to become like them, just as there is a tendency for zealous nationalists to want to swallow up those whose identity is different. The desire for purity motivates either the drive to push out those who are different or try to swallow up and consume them.

e. Morality

In any situation of conflict no side will initiate an attack on the other until they have made their moral superiority clear to all on their own side. Before declaring war on another nation, a nation or alliance of nations will try to justify the decision on the grounds of stopping cruel treatment of some minority in that area even though the invasion may cause much more

suffering. A major recent academic study of "humanitarian intervention," by Sean Murphy, reviews the record after the Kellogg-Briand pact of 1928 which outlawed war, and then since the UN Charter, which strengthened and articulated these provisions. He writes:

In the first phase the most prominent examples of "humanitarian intervention" were Japan's attack on Manchuria, Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, and Hitler's occupation of parts of Czechoslovakia. All were accompanied by highly uplifting humanitarian rhetoric, and factual justifications as well. Japan was going to establish an "earthly paradise" as it defended Manchurians from "Chinese bandits." Mussolini was liberating thousands of slaves as he carried forth the Western "civilising mission." Hitler announced Germany's intention to end ethnic tensions and violence, and "safeguard the national individuality of the German and Czech peoples," in an operation "filled with earnest desire to serve the true interests of the peoples dwelling in the area."

When conflict breaks out the propaganda of both sides will try to demonize the other. The other side will be regarded as not only morally inferior but evil. The Serbs regard themselves as victims of aggression from Croats, the Ottoman empire, and now NATO. With this background of fear of further victimhood they in turn demonise the Albanians who live in Kosovo as justification for having driven them out.

The Tutsi people came to central Africa as conquerors and labelled the local people "Hutus" which means "slave" or "servant". The European colonisers of that part of Africa maintained and exploited these distinctions. When the Hutus sought to rid themselves of Tutsi domination by genocide they first labelled the Tutsi people "cockroaches."

Imperialist powers justified the "white man's burden" as necessary because of the moral inadequacies of the "inferior" cultures. The practice of polygamy, suttee (the practice of burning widows), etc. were often cited without being conscious of injustices in their own countries. On the other hand, Thomas Davis, Yeats and de Valera used "anti-materialism" as a distinguishing mark of Irish culture making the Irish morally superior to the English.

According to Vamik Volkan, an international conflict analyst, many paramilitary leaders have a sense of being victims themselves due to physical violence, rejection by peer groups, or breakdown of family relationships. They then find their primary identity in their ethnic group. Concluding from their own experience that passivity will bring further trauma, they take action against those they regard as the "enemy." Projecting the cause of their victimisation on others they feel a moral

justification for what they do. When conflict has ceased, it is important to find a role for them in their ethnic group. Some could be encouraged to play a role in *restorative justice* - helping to heal relationships within their own communities.

f. Religion.

At a conference on sectarianism, organised by the Peace Committee of the Presbyterian Church, a Ballymena elder said that one of the chief causes of sectarianism amongst Presbyterians was a sense of religious superiority over Roman Catholics. Sometimes this is based on a sense of being a chosen people, but more often on what they regard as their superior doctrine of justification by faith and not by works. In fact in Northern Ireland this doctrine, perhaps above all others, became the touchstone of religious superiority. In their recent book *Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland, 1600-1998* John Brewer and Gareth Higgins show that while there are various forms of anti-Catholicism amongst Protestants, all include a sense of superiority, and a defining of one position over against another. Indeed, for many Protestants, the need for a clear cut division between the two traditions is so great, any suggestion of finding common ground or ways of working together seems to pose a threat of instability. Roman Catholics also have a sense of religious superiority. There was the claim that the Roman Catholic Church alone was the one true church - now modified by Vatican II to state that the Roman Catholic Church is the church in which the fullness of truth subsists. Such understandings have affected and still affect the issue of mixed marriages.

Religious superiority is not; associated with belief in an exclusive possession of the truth that alone saves. How this assurance is expressed or implemented from one tradition to another: claims about the inerrancy of Scripture, the infallibility of the Pope, privileged access to the Eucharist, conditions for the validity of baptism, experience of the Spirit, to name but a few examples.

Ancient rivalry and division between Catholic and Protestant have conditioned us to believe that one set of beliefs will always be held over against another. The rise of nationalisms in the 19th century seemed to offer escape from the world of religious differences and sectarianism. However, as Frank Wright has stated, *"nationalisms are not merely like religions - they are religions"*. Nationalisms seek to recreate the sacred. They use terms such as chosenness, purity and sacred land. However, the nation - not God - is to be worshipped by the people. These ideas can also be the basis for collective superiority.

Superiority Questioned

We will show in Part Three that boasting on the basis of any of the above is challenged by the Christian Faith. However, it is important to point out that some judgements made about groups of people in the past are now seen to have been wrong. A growing body of evidence is showing that when economic, educational and other circumstances are right, many ethnic groups, thought by some to be inferior, have flourished. E.g. some Western archaeologists when they saw an ancient site in what is now Zimbabwe thought it must have been built by the Chinese because they regarded the Shona civilisation in Zimbabwe as inferior and so incapable of producing such impressive structures. It has now been shown that their imperialist judgement was wrong. The site is now known as "Great Zimbabwe". The "Celtic Tiger" is another example of a people, formerly regarded by some as lazy, who have developed what is now recognised as the fastest growing economy in Europe.

Part 2. Superiority and Domination

National superiority supported by a belief in divine sanction has been used to justify the **domination** of one nation over others. The ancient Babylonian empire is an example of this desire to dominate seeking divine sanction. The name Babylon means "Gate of the God Marduk". The building of the Tower of Babel with its top in heaven was to provide a gate for the god Marduk to meet with the Babylonian king to arrange matters on earth. The Babylonian empire had forced everyone to speak the same language. Imperial architects strive to make their name great by erasing the names and language of simple people and small nations. According to the writers of the Book of Genesis, God disapproved and shattered this totalitarian project by causing linguistic confusion. The Book of Revelation significantly refers to Rome as another Babylon. After the fall of the Roman empire those who believed in the divine right of kings saw the king as a representative of God and with similar powers, subject only to God. King James VI and I made a speech to Parliament on 21 March 1609 in which he said *"The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth ... Kings are justly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth."* The prophets and many Christians have opposed these assumptions, but the role of religion has generally been to give support to a power in their struggle to gain and keep dominance. If opposing the enemy is given divine

sanction or religious significance this helps to further unite the nation in its struggles. In the case of Britain most of the countries it opposed were Catholic and so a Protestant established church linked to a Protestant monarchy generally gave this support. The British historian, Linda Colley, suggests that a vigorous anti-Catholic Protestantism was a very significant shared element in forging a British national identity in the 18th century. In Spain there seems to be evidence that the persecution of Protestants arose not just because they were heretics in the eyes of the Catholic Church, but that they were also thought to be traitors to the national cause or spies for the enemy.

Europe's belief in a world mission and its civilising role had a strong religious component. It is largely in the 20th century that this essentially syncretistic relationship has been clearly exposed to the benefit of both European Christians and the churches in former colonies. The superiority of European Christian civilisation was often used as an excuse for conquering land and engaging in acts of barbarity against indigenous people. The Spanish conquest of parts of South America was sanctioned by the Church. The Pope instructed the Conquistadors to recite a document to the Indians before using physical force. This demanded that they

recognise the Church as *Governess of the World and Universe*. If they did not do so then the deaths and destruction that resulted would be their own fault. James Wilson in his book, *The Earth shall Weep-A History of Native America* writes that it was generally believed by the Puritan settlers in New England, after the Pequot War, that *"the killing and displacement of Indians who resisted the English enjoyed God's sanction"*. The continent of Africa also became the scene of land-grabbing by many European nations. Cecil Rhodes slaughtered Matebeli people and conquered what came to be called Rhodesia in the name of Christian civilisation but the search for diamonds was more than a side issue.

Alan Suggate relates how before the First World War religious people in Germany gave their unqualified support to the view that the German people must assert their superiority. Just before war broke out Ernst von Dryander, Chaplain to the German court, declared:

Looking to the state that reared us, to the fatherland wherein lie the roots of our strength, we know that we are going into battle for our culture against the uncultured, for German civilisation against barbarism, for the free German personality bound to God against the instincts of the undisciplined masses .. and God and German piety are intimately bound up with German civilisation.

At about the same time the Bishop of London was saying:

I think the Church can best help the nation by making it realise that it is engaged in a Holy War, and not be afraid of saying so. Christ died on Good Friday for Freedom, Honour and Chivalry, and our boys are dying for the same things ... Mobilize the nation for a Holy War!

Rudyard Kipling seems to express a similar view that British civilisation must be shared with "lesser breeds."

*If, drunk with sight of power, we loose Wild
tongues that have not Thee in awe - Such
boastings as the Gentiles use, Or lesser
breeds without the Law - Lord God of
Hosts, be with us yet, Lest we forget - lest we
forget!*

Protestants and Catholics in Ireland have used a sense of superior difference as a reason for trying to gain dominance over the other. The Protestant establishment of the 18th and 19th centuries certainly felt superior. Ulster Protestants when they take pride in being British also sometimes feel superior to those who do not claim to be British. Many of the imperialist generals were from Ulster stock. William Craig as minister of Home Affairs in the O'Neill administration, defended Stormont against the charge of discrimination against Catholic lawyers in judicial appointments on the grounds that they were

"educationally and socially inferior." This sense of superiority is a combination of religious, cultural and national feeling. It is often to be found amongst people who are individually very humble before God and other people. After partition Protestants in the South of Ireland found themselves in a society in which the Roman Catholic Church was by far the most important institution. There was a pervasive Catholic ethos, sometimes enshrined in law and even in the Constitution. And there was the pressure caused by Catholic regulations concerning mixed marriage.

The *apartheid system* in South Africa was based on selected readings from the Book of Genesis suggesting that some tribes were forever allotted the position of "beavers of wood and drawers of water." The whites believed that they were chosen to have the dominant position in society. Those parts of the New Testament that pointed in the opposite direction were ignored. Eventually even the Church which had supported these views came to regard them as a heresy.

There are many other examples of religious belief being used to justify the domination of one group by another. Bitter experience has taught some of the dangers of national feelings of superiority but there is also evidence that this lesson has still not been learnt. It is our contention that a rediscovery of Christian insights can help to lessen these dangers instead of increasing them.

PART 3. Christian Faith and Collective Superiority

The Christian Faith has often been intolerant and produced feelings of superiority in groups of people. We believe this should not have happened and that, on the contrary, the Christian Faith should expose feelings of superiority and set us free from them.

a. Israel according to the flesh (1 Corinthians 10:18)

The examples of self-righteous collective superiority which we have examined have this in common: the unity of the collective is created by comparison with, and exclusion of, or domination over, some other group. It is created in rivalry. At the time of the birth of the Church, there was rivalry between Jew and Gentile. Most Jews believed that if God was calling Gentiles it was through the Jewish people - i.e. Gentiles were first to *become* Jews before they could appropriate the promise made to Abraham. The movement away from such rivalry is illustrated by looking at Paul (Saul) in his identity as a member of the Jewish nation, Israel according to the flesh, before his experience on the Road to Damascus, and Paul in his new identity as a member of the Christian community.

Until his *call* on the road to Damascus, Paul held the view that the Messiah would come to save and exalt the Jewish nation exclusively, but after his *call* he was convinced that the Messiah had come for all nations. We use the word *call* in preference to *conversion* because Saul was not converted from one religion to another but rather called to the specific task of bringing God's message to the Gentiles. Many Jews may have thought that what he was asked to do was a betrayal but Paul did not regard it in that way. He gives an account of his *call* in Galatians 1:11-24. At verse 15, he says:

*God, who had set me apart from the time when I was in my mother's womb,
called me through his grace and chose to reveal his Son in me, so that I should preach
him to the Gentiles.*

There are clear allusions here to the call of Jeremiah, (Jer. 1:5) and the call of Isaiah (Is. 49:1). The word *conversion* has the meaning of a complete turn around to something contradictory. What Paul experienced was a radical re-understanding of views already within his Jewish faith. This point is important because the term *conversion* is often used in Ireland to describe what happens when a Catholic becomes a Protestant or vice versa or a Jew becomes a Christian, as if those who belong to any of these traditions must be in total opposition. People of different branches of the Christian faith are also described as of different *religions*. These words are

used to exaggerate differences to the point where there can be no common ground between them. One result is that people avoid talking about these matters and so never find out what they have in common.

Paul, before his experience on the Road to Damascus, identified with the Judaism that had struggled against persecution and the erosion of their distinctive way of life by Hellenism. In fact he probably belonged to a faction within Judaism that outdid others in remaining faithful to their distinctive way of life. This took many forms but often focused on being circumcised, keeping strict laws about what to eat and what not to eat, and keeping the Sabbath; all practices that drew a boundary between themselves and the Gentiles, and marked them out as different. It was something to *boast* about as a collective. Feeling collectively superior merged into a feeling of collective hostility between Jews and Gentiles. This hostility had been inculcated with teaching such as is, found in jubilees 22:16:

Separate yourselves from the Gentiles and do not eat with them, and do not perform deeds like theirs, because their deeds are defiled, and all of their ways are contaminated and despicable and abominable.

This is how collective superiority becomes an exclusion of other groups, in this case the Gentiles.

Paul described himself at that period of his life as full of *zeal* (Philippians 3:6). In other words he felt that he must keep his distinctive traditions alive and persecute any who were watering them down by getting involved in mixed marriages or fraternising with people who were not proper Jews. The *model* Jewish zealot was Phinehas (Numbers 25: 10). Phinehas is remembered as the one who had maintained Israel's separateness by killing an Israelite who took a Midianite woman into his tent. This is also a phenomenon, that is known about in Northern Ireland. Many inter-church families in areas of tension in Northern Ireland have been persecuted.

Why had Paul persecuted the church? It was because of *zeal* to safeguard the privileges of Israel. Those privileges were seen as conferred on Israel through being chosen as a special people of God. Any group, such as the first Jewish followers of Jesus, who watered down the Jewish special identity by eating and fraternising with Samaritans and Gentiles was a danger to this special status of the Jewish nation and so justified being persecuted.

Then, on the way to Damascus, Saul experienced the executed Jesus as vindicated and raised from the dead, turned away from these attitudes and practices and felt commissioned to tell the Gentiles about the Good News

of Jesus Christ.

Before Paul's *call* he was preoccupied with "works of the law" which were deemed to prove the superiority of his nation. That phrase, "works of the law," is now recognised as a special phrase used at the time of Paul. In the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QMMT) the expression refers to the particular practice of the law that distinguished the Qumran Community from other Jews and made them superior as a group. In Paul's case "works of the law" distinguished the Jewish nation or way of life from Gentiles. It marked a boundary around Jews and limited the grace of God to those within the boundary. It was a way of demonstrating superiority by excluding others. It was something about which to *boast*. After his *call* Paul turns away from this attitude of emphasising boundaries to find a new identity in Christ that excludes none.

b. The new Israel of God (**Galatians 6:16**)

Paul's *call* then was an event that changed his relationship to the Gentile people around him. After this experience he finds in Jesus the basis for a new identity that does not exclude. This new identity, a new Israel, the Israel of God, gives no grounds for one group to *boast* or feeling superior to any other group. All Christians are members of this new community that does not exclude, but inevitably they will also belong to some other social grouping. Paul did not disown his Jewish roots. To give priority to their new identity in the new Israel of God Christians do not need to cut themselves off from their other identities but they do need to be critical of them.

Unfortunately in our western over-concentration on the individual we have tended only to see Paul's transformation in terms of a personal experience, leaving out the new identity that it gave him in a new community or humanity that did not exclude.

If we are to see the relevance of the Gospel for community relations we must understand that it is good news not just for individuals but for the formation of a new kind of community that is not based on rivalry. Three examples in the ministry of Jesus illustrate the importance of the new community that is not based on rivalry and exclusion.

Jesus chose twelve disciples, a clear reference to the twelve tribes of Israel. On the night when he shared his last supper with his disciples he made it clear that the new Israel will be founded on his death. Jesus calls not just for individuals to follow him but for the formation of a new Israel, a new humanity.

When Jesus announced in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry the *Year of the Lord's Favour* (Isaiah 61:1-3 - see also the year of jubilee 17

described in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15), the people approved of his gracious words. Then Jesus went on to tell of Gentile people who had received favour from the Lord and immediately the crowd, angry that Jesus should have included Gentiles, hustled him out of the town and would have thrown him off the cliff, but he passed through the crowd and walked away.

Jesus also attacked the purity codes that resulted in many people being excluded. He was strongly criticised for mixing with the "impure." Women suffered from the purity code and Jesus seems to have deliberately broken the purity rules. An example of this is found in Mark 5:25-34, where Jesus heals a woman who suffered from an issue of blood for twelve years. According to Luke 5:13, Jesus touched a man suffering from a skin disease and therefore impure. The man is also healed.

After the resurrection of Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit a new community was brought together that did not exclude, a new Israel. People from very different cultural and religious backgrounds, both Jewish and Gentile, formerly in rivalry, and boasting of their superiority for one reason or another, came together by faith in Christ. A fundamental Christian belief is that God in Jesus Christ became a victim of particular religious and nationalist ideologies.

From that position of victimhood and vulnerability he offered us forgiveness and the possibility of a new form of belonging and coming together without domination. This is the opposite of a belonging and coming together that is forced, as we shall see when we look at exclusion. It is, as the Catholic theologian, James Alison says: "*a new human way of belonging, of being-with, without any over against.*"

Sociologists may say that a community which is not over against another is impossible to conceive. Humanly speaking this may be so. It is nowhere suggested in the New Testament that the new community of the Church was without problems. There were times when relations became strained and sometimes one side indulged in boasting about their superiority to the other. Paul condemned this collective boasting. His condemnation of boasting has however often been interpreted as referring only to individuals, but he is in fact condemning the collective self-justification of one group over against other groups.

When Paul finds that even within the new community of the Church disputes and zealous arguments between groups can break out he does not advocate separation, or that one group exclude another, rather, he advocates a "*welcome to anyone whose faith is not strong,*" and then adds the comment "*but do not get into arguments about doubtful points*" (Romans 14:2-3.). Paul takes as an example the conflict which arose out of different ways of keeping Jewish feast-days. Some will say these days must

be kept holy by resting, others will say it is not necessary to stop working, and it is more sensible to labour on those days. Paul says both groups are free to choose their own way provided they do so "*in relation to the Lord*" (Romans 14:6). One group honours God by resting, the other by working. Neither group should **boast** about being superior, because both in different ways are acting to honour the Lord. Paul also says the two groups should do more than just tolerate each other. They should accept each other in Christ.

This is the relational basis for genuine tolerance of different ways of honouring God. Some congregations in Ireland have experienced considerable tensions over the wearing of hats, the introduction of organs, the use of candles and the position of the altar. Paul in his letter to the Romans not only calls for tolerance on such matters of indifference (*adiaphora*), he calls on groups who differ "*to welcome one another.*" That implies reaching out actively to include into one's circle others with whom we differ. It is an openness between persons, a readiness for relationships.

Many of Paul's letters are concerned with how God's new covenant could include people previously seen as excluded by the old covenant. It was a major problem for Paul that the Hebrew people regarded themselves as superior to Gentiles and exclusively privileged by God. How could the *inferior* Gentiles who had not the benefits of the civilising Law of Moses become full members of the new community of the Messiah without first becoming Jews? That was the key question. It was Paul's wonderful discovery that Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, believed "*before he was circumcised,*" in other words, before he knew the Law. It answers the question that was such a problem for Paul. Since Abraham was justified or made right with God by faith and not by keeping the Law there were no grounds for excluding Gentiles, because Abraham had been like a Gentile who comes to faith.

As we said, there is evidence that even in the early Church this transnational community, based on the self-giving of Jesus Christ, had difficulties in overcoming tendencies to exclude on the basis of superiority. These tendencies became much more prominent as ethnic and national rivalry developed over the centuries throughout Europe. Religion and nationalism became mixed. Instead of **a new Israel that excluded none some began to see their own nation as a new Israel over against others.** In Ireland and in many other places the maintenance of cultural and religious boundaries took priority over the new universal identity in Christ. It is also a terrible condemnation of European Christianity that throughout the years when imperial powers justified the domination of other ethnic groups on the grounds of their cultural and religious superiority, this was not

sufficiently opposed by the churches. It is with shame that we have to acknowledge that Biblical justification was also sought for the system of apartheid in South Africa.

Within the church, a denominationalism, which sets one group of Christians over against another, is evidence that Christians are still tempted to exclude and find unity in one group by making comparisons with another. As we have seen, there is no ground for one group to feel superior to another. At the end of a millennium marked by Christians excluding one another it is time to make clear to a sceptical world that Christians can accept one another, differences and all. The image conveyed to the world of Christians fighting one another in Ireland can only be reversed when every opportunity is taken to bring Christians together from different traditions. Christians often underestimate how important such coming together is to create hope in the face of communal rivalry that appears to have no end.

This does not mean that Christians will cease to have any national or cultural identity, but it does mean that those identities must not dominate their lives.

It is our contention that the basis for the living together of different groups in society cannot be by the enforced ignoring of differences such as was tried in Tito's Yugoslavia because this does not heal relationships. The concept of a pluralist society in which any belief or culture is allowed provided it does not harm others is a considerable improvement, but without acknowledging a relationship with God that relates groups to each other in a way that brings healing, intolerance is always liable to return and result in further conflict. The new Israel like the old is to be a blessing for the nations of the world. This does not mean that the churches have all the answers to the political problems of the nations. The Irish Presbyterian, Terence McCaughey in his book, *Memory & Redemption*, says that when Christians meet together the most they can do is to *"agree only on directions, not on an agreed list of directives."* The new Israel is to be a blessing not so much by giving advice to the world but by being a truly non excluding community that can disturb the nations in a similar way that mixed marriages can disturb those who like to live in exclusive communities.

The nations also require to be blessed by people of faith, faith that can move mountains, i.e. the mind sets that make obstacles to movement. Jose Miranda points out that the expression *"the last judgement"* means *"God's justice coming at last."* Paul's Gospel *"deals with the justice for which the world and peoples and society have been waiting."* This requires faith that God will not give up on people who have acted unjustly, that

God will continue to work to bring **healing** to relationships that have gone wrong, that God desires the reweaving **of community**.

Just as within the new community of Christ, the new Israel, we often have to struggle to find ways to accommodate great diversity of opinion and practice so we need people who can work at reconciliation in and between the nations when the tide is flowing the other way. We need people who are concerned to find an **accommodation** in relationships rather than insisting on their own ideal of what is just. We need people who with enthusiasm carry out **obligations** arising from relationships that have been agreed. God it seems never leaves us without such people of faith for we believe that God has a greater plan for human life than never ending conflict, and that the new Israel has a vital part to play in that plan.

c. Justification. **(Romans 3:27-31)**

For some time a number of New Testament scholars have been moving beyond the old Protestant/Catholic disputes about the meaning of justification. Does God count someone as righteous even though they are not, *"grace imputed,"* or does God actually make the person righteous, *"grace infused?"* Or put more succinctly does the term *justify* mean *"make righteous"* (traditional Catholic) or *"reckon as righteous"* (traditional Protestant)? These questions all arise because people largely thought in Greek/Roman ways about justice as some kind of entity on its own that could be conferred on or inculcated into individual people. On both sides it became a matter very much to do with the individual. Am I justified? Will I be saved by faith or through the sacraments? In the Greco-Roman view of justice, relationships can be ignored so as to pronounce an unbiased judgement. Those who do wrong must be punished for what they have done so that the *Roman law court scales* can be balanced. In Greco-Roman thought righteousness/justice was *an ideal* against which a person measured him/herself, hence the expression "justice must be satisfied." The image of a blindfolded woman, sword in her right hand and scales in her left, sums up this view of justice. If this view is correct then God is unjust because God in dealing with Israel never steps outside the covenant relationship to gain a detached (blindfolded) position. God does show partiality. It is the partiality caused by a relationship. Hosea pronounces God's judgement on the disloyalty of Israel, but it is the judgement of One bound to Israel in a covenant similar to that of a husband and wife.

In Hebrew thought justice is something a person has only in the context of social relationships. A person is just if they carry out the obligations that arise out of a relationship. The Biblical idea of justice **can be described as**

fidelity to the demands of a relationship. God is righteous because he meets all obligations due to relationships entered into through creation, the call of Abraham, the covenant with Israel and the new covenant in Christ. People are righteous when they carry out the obligations laid upon them through their relationship with God and with the covenant community. Indeed the just individual is praised because he/she helps preserve the peace and wholeness of the community. People are righteous only when they meet claims that others have on them by virtue of their particular relationship. E.g. a king is righteous when he fulfils his responsibilities towards his people (1 Samuel 24:17). Our righteousness will be measured by how we as individuals and as a group fulfil our responsibilities towards others. What we cannot do is pursue an ideal of justice unrelated to others or unwilling to embrace others.

The relational and social character of justification is brought out in Paul's letter to the Romans where it is discussed in the context of the relationship between Gentile and Jewish Christians. In Rome, for a time, Jewish people were persecuted and driven out of the city under Emperor Claudius. When they returned the Gentile Christians had organised themselves in house churches.

Observance of the three major practices that defined ethnic Jews - circumcision, food laws, and festival observance - would have lagged considerably. The returning refugees were disturbed by the changes wrought in their absence, and a crucial struggle began. Should they all observe the Jewish law? Why or why not? How can they get along together if they don't all agree? Probably power, status, and leadership issues were involved as well.

Paul decided to write a letter to them to deal with this issue. In the letter Paul is primarily concerned not with individual salvation but with corporately redefining the people of God so as to include both ethnic groups. In Romans 1:1-15 Paul introduces himself and the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, explaining why he is writing. He begins with his main point in 1:16-18, that the Gospel he proclaims is powerful enough to bring salvation to both Jews and Gentiles on the same basis, that of faith. Everyone, both Jews and Gentiles, have sinned equally and deserve condemnation. Yet through the grace of God expressed in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile may be made righteous (3:21-26). Consequently there is no room for boasting on anyone's part, neither those who are circumcised nor those who are not, i.e. boasting as a member of either group (3:27-31):

Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes of Gentiles also; since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through

the same faith.

The New Testament scholar, Markus Barth, in an article *Jews and Gentiles: the social character of justification in Paul* expounding Galatians 2:14ff, writes:

Justification in Christ is thus not an individual miracle, happening to this person or that person, which each may seek to possess for himself. Rather justification by grace is the joining together of this person and that person, of the near and far ... it is a social event.

Justification means to cease scapegoating the other because both have sinned, having driven out (scapegoated) Jesus. To be *justified* is to be set right in and for that new relationship between Jew and Gentile made possible by faith in Jesus Christ. It is not possible to have individual justification without being concerned for just relationships with our neighbour and between communities, for that is the nature of God's Justice.

If justification involves a joining together of people then we cannot take pride in our individual justification while others are excluded. Unfortunately the Greek word *dikaioyne* can refer to *justification* or to *righteousness* or to *justice*. Many English translations reveal a bias towards *righteousness* and often the word *justice* does not appear at all in an English New Testament. Justice involves more than individual righteousness. There is an Italian saying, "*traduttore traditore*" - "the translator is a traitor." This particular translation into English has meant that many people think of righteousness as purely personal. This has resulted in many people thinking that they only have to think about their own righteousness without taking into account their relationship with others. However, just as God's righteousness consists in his faithfully acting out of the obligations that follow from his relationship or covenant with us, so our righteousness consists in faithfully and with gratitude carrying out responsibilities that arise from membership with others of that covenant. Within the covenant our responsibilities to our neighbour are part and parcel of our responsibilities to God.

The Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf, uses the word **embrace** to describe God's faithfulness in relating to us and his unconditional acceptance of us. That acceptance must involve us in accepting or embracing others.

Miroslav Volf puts it this way:

There can be no justice without the will to embrace... My point

is simple: to agree on justice you need to make space in yourself for the perspective of the other, and in order to make space, you need to want to embrace the other. If you insist that others do not belong

to you and you to them, that their perspective should not muddle yours, you will have your justice and they will have theirs; your justices will clash and there will be no justice between you. The knowledge of justice depends on the will to embrace. The relationship between justice and embrace goes deeper, however. Embrace is part and parcel of the very definition of justice.

All this is in contrast to self-justification which is always done over against someone else or some other group. Self-justification and sectarianism are very similar. Justification is to be set in a new relationship with God and with others who are different with the obligations of the new relationship.

d. The Spirit of God (Acts 2:1-13)

At Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2:1-13 an alternative to the imperial unity of Babel is created. Representatives of the nations are gathered in Jerusalem. All hear the apostles speak **in their own language**, not in a

*single imposed language. Pentecost overcomes the confusion and ethnic rivalry of the world not by returning to a cultural and totalitarian uniformity but by advancing towards a harmony with cultural diversity. We are told that before Babel the whole of humanity spoke **one** language. After Pentecost people from "every nation under heaven" hear the disciples speaking in their "own tongue." Pentecost does not bring about a forced linguistic/cultural uniformity. People, while still from diverse cultures, understand one another. In other words it is an alternative to the imperial, imposed unity of Babel. Earlier we mentioned many examples of imposed uniformity justified by imperial superiority. This event at Pentecost bears witness to a completely different harmony amongst the nations made possible by the Spirit of God. Paul uses the image of a body, with many different parts all of which are necessary for the functioning of the body as a whole, to describe the Church. In the letter to the Ephesians the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles is stressed but 2:15 makes it clear that this is not by ignoring differences. God's purpose is ... "to create out of the two a single new humanity, thereby making peace..." REB. To translate, "instead of the two of them" is inaccurate.

This is not something that can be achieved without difficulty. Soon after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost there was tension between the Greek speaking Jews from the Diaspora, and the Hebrews - probably the Aramaic Jews from Palestine - as a result of the needs of the Hellenist widows being overlooked. These were two linguistically and culturally distinct groups. The apostles call the whole community together and representatives of the injured party are appointed to take care of all the widows. The meeting, prompted by the Spirit, of Peter and Cornelius, a Gentile, is crucial to the

self-understanding of the early Church. However there is evidence that even Peter went back on what was revealed to him through this experience.

e. The language of the Powers (**Ephesians 6:12**)

Many people find the language of the *Powers* in Ephesians either totally incredible or else ununderstandable. However, faced with communal conflict and the need to give expression to something that is more than the sum total of individuals in any collective, this language is coming to be seen as referring to something that is real and important. All corporate bodies - business corporations, cultural and religious organisations, nation states - have an outer material or structural aspect and an inner spiritual aspect. Both aspects - the material and the spiritual - are referred to in the Bible using the language of the *Powers*. The Orange Order and the Republican movement are more than the total of the individuals involved. They each have an inner spiritual ethos which we must discern.

Walter Wink in his book *Engaging the Powers* has done much to bring to our attention the importance of the *Powers*. He makes it clear that the *Powers* are not intrinsically evil, they can do much good in encouraging people to work for the general good, but when they get above themselves and demand total commitment (idolatry), they can generate exclusivity, superiority and domination. People can put themselves in bondage to them.

The *Powers* that put Jesus on the cross were in many ways admirable. There was the great Jewish religious heritage represented by Caiaphas. There was the power of the Roman empire that offered order and a Pax Romana, represented by Pontius Pilate. People, it seems, on the whole accepted that the judgement on Jesus, made by these *Powers*, was for the general good. However the resurrection of Jesus after his crucifixion was God's vindication of him and showed up the danger of being in total bondage to these *Powers*. Many people may not accept that they are in bondage of any kind by their loyalty to any *Powers*, orange or green, past or present. They fear only the bondage that might be imposed by the other side. In the introduction we referred to the fact that people cannot be simply argued out of fears and narrow loyalties for which they may even be prepared to give their lives. Such a situation requires a liberating act of God so that these *powers, mind sets, loyalties* can be exposed and put in their proper place, bringing freedom to those in bondage to them. We believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus was such an act. Tragically this whole aspect of the Gospel has been to a large extent overlooked.

Sometimes when people from different traditions actually meet, the myths they have learnt about the other group, their mind-sets, are undermined

and they are set free to relate in a new way.

PART 4. Superiority and Truth

Truth is important. To say that it does not matter what we believe is not acceptable for Christians and people of many other faiths. Ignoring religious differences as if they were unimportant, or saying a plague on all your houses, are no solutions. We want to say a number of things about truth.

a. Holding that truth is important does not necessarily imply that one religious group should feel superior to another.

How can we hold fast to what we believe to be the truth and yet remain free from feelings of superiority? Within Christianity it is specially important that we find an answer to this question because we believe in the revelation of the Truth. The Truth indeed stems from God. Nevertheless, revelation is not a one-sided event. God's revelation in Jesus Christ is characterised by invitation and response rather than monologue. Both God and human beings act and react, speak and hear. Therefore people can at no time claim to possess the absolute truth. Christian faith implies a testing of faith against experience and in relation to the views of others. Indeed it is possible to reject the views of other Christians without necessarily feeling superior. Because Christians believe that nothing can separate them from the love of God they need not be afraid to learn from and be enriched by the insights of others. In fact feeling so superior to another Christian that we do not listen to what they are saying, may well be a sign of an immature faith. Can one not say that the Christian faith challenges all religious claims to absoluteness and all church claims to absolute authority? God's truth cannot be totally possessed by anyone. We receive God's revelation only in *earthen vessels*. Absoluteness lies in God, not in us nor in our statements of faith nor in our institutions.

b. Truth presented in rivalry becomes a weapon to put others down. The result is to distort important truths.

Over emphasis upon a doctrine so as to claim superiority of belief, instead of liberating, can enslave. The doctrine of justification by faith has a wonderful power to free individuals from fear, but it can also become distorted if used to prove religious superiority over against others who are depicted as watering it down. The doctrine of predestination has the power to make people feel special in their relationship with God, but it has led

Ulster Protestants to believe that because their destiny is in the hands of God, as a chosen people they do not need to work at relating to other communities. Marc Gopin, says that it is a mystery to him how anyone can read the prophets of Israel and come to the conclusion that chosenness (election) means superiority. Rather it is like the chosenness of a child by a parent who loves all her children and gives each a special task to accomplish. Irish Republicans often hold a secular form of this doctrine that makes them feel that their day will inevitably come. In both cases it has led to taking less responsibility for working out solutions to their relationships with opposing groups. The term "Catholic" reflects a profound truth about the Church but even this term can be a source of pride that excludes others especially if the term "non-Catholic" is used. All Christians could usefully remind themselves that to say that the Church is *catholic* without its being inclusive is a contradiction in terms. The vitally important emphasis on God's grace as the source of our salvation is fundamental to Christian belief, however, because of rivalry with Judaism from an early stage its Hebrew origins were often obscured and it was portrayed as being in opposition to Judaism. In fact, Jewish faith did not teach that salvation is earned through the merit of good works. This is a caricature of Judaism. Again in and again the Jewish people believed that God had chosen them not because they were better or stronger than other nations but simply because God loved them. Obedience to the law, for Jews, meant that they were *maintaining* their side of the covenant, not *earning* salvation by keeping the law.

A leader of the Qumran Community, and contemporary with Paul, could write as follows:

As for me, if I stumble the mercy of God shall be my eternal salvation. If I stagger because of the sin of the flesh, my justification shall be the righteousness of God which endures for ever.. He will draw near by his grace.

Despite the protests by many Jews about the Christian distortion of their beliefs, Christians up until recent years have not taken such protests seriously. So too, many Catholics today strongly protest at the suggestion that they believe salvation can be earned. The following statement was issued recently by the Vatican regarding the doctrine of justification: "*Lutherans and Catholics share the common conviction that new life comes from divine mercy and not from any merit of ours.*"

Holding on to beliefs about what others believe despite their denials can

have disastrous consequences. However, this is always liable to happen when truth claims are presented in rivalry or with the purpose of putting down the other.

c. Holding that truth is important also means that we must continue to search seriously for the truth and not accept that long standing historical differences must be irrevocable.

1. In fact much progress has been made in reaching agreement on some Christian beliefs much disputed in the past. One of them is justification by grace through faith.

During the Middle Ages justification generally came to mean the act whereby God declared an individual righteous. Since medieval Catholicism was interested in the maturity and holiness of individual Christians it tended to see justification as happening at the end of the sanctification process. This created an anxiety in the minds of many as to what would happen to them if they died before having reached a state of righteousness. It led to redoubled efforts to attain justification by prayer, fasting, works of charity, frequent participation in the sacraments and ascetic practices of various kinds.

For the Reformers justification comes at the beginning of the sanctification process. When Luther finally realised that God justifies through faith he felt himself " to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. " It was a forensic or legally valid declaration of God's acceptance.

The old arguments of the Reformation are undercut when the relational character of God's righteousness is understood (see page 21ff). Through Christ, God enters into a covenant relationship with us whereby we are counted as in a partnership even when we often fail and sin. The covenant partner being in a living relationship with the life-giving God can hardly fail to be transformed. Can, for example, any husband or wife ever say they are unaffected by the relationship? This implies that in this relationship with God status is conferred but transformation is also brought about. The New Testament scholar, Eberhard Jungel, states that " with this the alternative between imputed justice and efficacious justice in our understanding of justice is superseded."

In the classical theories on the atonement, the work of Christ was not sufficiently related to God's intention to create a new humanity. Both the sola fideism (Faith alone) of Protestant orthodoxy and the sacramental penitential practice of Medieval Catholicism relied heavily on the juridical image to explain the work of Christ. Either it is God's declaration of acceptance after a long process of sanctification, or it is a forensic

declaration of a person's righteousness as if they were righteous. Either way it had little to do with the creation of a new humanity.

Justification and justice are interlocking concepts. It is not possible to have justification without justice. In the Catholic/Protestant disputes about justification both laid more weight on the judicial metaphor than Paul. After Constantine, when church and state became coterminous, the Roman law, which used terms like satisfaction and acquittal, became the metaphor for explaining justification. Today Biblical scholars are going back to the original Hebrew terms such as *tsedaqa* and *misphat* which point to a justice-making God.

It is due, at least in some part, to these new Scriptural insights that the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican have now reached a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification. For more details about this agreement between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church see Appendix One.

These two churches have struggled in their search for the truth and it appears that their efforts have been fruitful. If they had been content to regard their differences as permanent it would have shown a disregard for the truth. Differences between Christians should never be a reason for not meeting and continuing to search for the truth together.

2. There has also been some progress in recognising that important truths emphasised by one tradition cannot be ignored by other traditions without doing damage to the Church as a whole.

Gabriel Daly in a booklet entitled *One Church: two Indispensable Values- Protestant Principle and Catholic Substance* has highlighted two complimentary truths. The two indispensable values are God's presence and God's word. An emphasis on one or other alone leads to distortion. Gabriel Daly writes:

In a theology and spirituality of presence there is a danger that sacraments can claim holiness for themselves; whereas a theology and spirituality principally concerned with word can forget that God approaches us through the medium of symbols and that if we reject symbols merely on the grounds that they may promote idolatry, we may be blocking off the avenue between the invisible God and ourselves who live in time and space. In short, God too takes risks - including the risk of our idolatry.

3. In other areas there has been little progress, witness the recent document, *One Bread One Body*.

There has been widespread disappointment amongst many Christians from

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all denominations on the publication of One Bread One Body by the Episcopal Conferences of Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland, the teaching document on the Eucharist in the life of the church which presents general norms on sacramental sharing between Catholics and other Christians. This issue has been further highlighted by President Mary McAleese taking Communion at a Church of Ireland Service in Christ Church, Dublin.

It needs to be understood that there are important issues of truth involved in the area of worshipping together. The degree to which we are able to worship with people from another tradition shows the recognition we are able to accord to that tradition. Refusal to worship with them, or to limit worship with them, implies a negative evaluation - at least to some extent - of the other tradition. It can easily lead to a sense of superiority to people in another tradition.

The Catholic Church, along with the Orthodox Churches, sees eucharistic sharing as a sign of unity achieved, for to them eucharistic communion is essentially linked to full ecclesial communion and its visible expression. This eucharistic sharing can only take place then in the context of agreement on essential matters of faith and order, which we do not currently have. Thus agreement on the truths of the faith is profoundly important. Some evangelicals essentially take the same position - they cannot worship with Roman Catholics because there is not sufficient unity on the truths of the Christian faith. On these grounds a significant number of Presbyterian Moderators have been unwilling to worship with Roman Catholics.

This is a serious position and shows the importance of issues of truth. Issues of truth are matters of faithfulness. However, we must give an account to others of the hope that is within us, and thus the truth to which we witness (I Peter 3:15). This requires encounter and dialogue. But there can only be honest encounter and dialogue when there is the courage to explore, review and correct even those things which seem most certain.

In these matters we are in an evolving situation. Restrictions concerning participation in the Eucharist, where they existed between Protestant churches, have been gradually removed over a period of time. Michael Hurley points out in a review of the document in Studies:

The fact that Episcopal Conferences in other countries have not drawn the same disciplinary conclusions from the same doctrinal basis illustrates the secondary, changeable character of the latter section. For instance some other conferences do not ... restrict

the exceptional admission to communion of Protestants to "unique

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occasions", to "a one-off" situation...

The Eucharist is, however, both a manifestation of and a means towards that unity that is both Christ's gift and command. Enda McDonagh writes in *The Furrow*:

The Eucharist as expression and means of that unity should now be the focus of Church engagement. Preoccupation with difficulties should yield to concentration on possibilities. Agreed statements and occasional experiments should move to more systematic education and practice. At least this could be a millennial goal. After a millennium of Christian division and associated wars some deep transformation is called for if Christ's prayer for unity is to be taken seriously and if the world is to believe. ...the move to inviting and encouraging Christians to share Eucharist could revitalise the participating churches and help overcome traditional, associated hostilities. It would loudly proclaim jubilee and jubilation.

d. It is only a living relationship with Jesus Christ - and continued serious open seeking of him - which will lead us into more of the truth.

For Christians there is certainty of truth in Jesus Christ and yet we are able to acknowledge, at every stage on the way, the provisionality of our current understanding of the truth. Faith then becomes a journey and a search - a search for and a journey towards fullness of truth and abundant life. We go on that way with others who call on the name of Christ, who gather round the Bible and the Eucharist, and who are in communion with all those who have gone faithfully before.

How the Christian community is maintained in truth and how new formulations of faith are tested, are matters of vital significance. They raise the significant issue of authority within the Church which is the source of

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considerable disagreement between the churches. We are only able to note this here.

PART 5. Conclusions

a. All need to encourage positive feelings of identity

Before people can advance to new relationships of acceptance they need to be sure of their own identity. When our identity is strong and positive there is no threat produced in meeting the one who is different. On the other hand if there is a deep doubt or lack of vision as to our own identity, then we may find it necessary always to have an enemy. A negative identity needs conflict and misery to sustain it.

So, we need a strong sense of our own history, culture and denominational experience. Let us become more aware of the breadth of our heritage, not less, as some advocate. Look for and affirm the good things in it. Learn to take pride in the achievements of our own nation or cultural group without despising others. Cease creating a negative identity of our group by always thinking we are not like them. Let us not denigrate others through disdain, jokes, songs or attitude. Take an interest in the story of our neighbour. Look for and affirm the good things in those who are different. Try to build up their sense of worth as well as our own.

In fact most people have a mixture of identities. In the course of life the mixture can change because, as we have good experiences of other cultures etc., we take something of them into ourselves and thus expand our own horizons. We have to think of strategies for peaceful resolution of conflict in divided societies that enable people to enrich each other's identity without undermining their own sense of identity. If we don't, a threat, perceived or otherwise, to group identity can create virulent sectarianism. Those caught in sectarianism cannot welcome the *strange other* while feeling that the very existence of their identity is under threat. Christians have been given a new identity that is trans-national and trans-cultural. It is *"elect from every nation, yet one throughout the earth"*. It is belonging to a holy nation. This new identity will not mean the obliteration of all previous differences but in this new international community there can be no room for national boasting. Ethnic identity, while still remaining, must count for less than the new identity given to us by the gracious call of God.

This millennium has been marked by war and slaughter on a scale never imagined before and often by people carried along by a national fervour that assumed that God was on their side. After the experience of the slaughter of war many reflected on its futility. Wilfred Owen in his poem "Strange

"Boasting: Self-righteous Collective Superiority as a Cause of Conflict"

Meeting" expressed the feeling of many:

"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."

"None," said that other, "save the undone years, The hopelessness."

Many others became disillusioned with the Christian faith. Each nation thought that God was on their side. Disillusionment sets in when they realise that this cannot be. Many people now say, "a plague on all religion" because it only supports division and conflict.

There is still in Europe far too strong a connection between Christian identity and national identity. National flags on church buildings are a sign of this. There can no longer be an equivalence between church and nation. Christians must begin to experience the thrill of belonging to a nation without land. Before the Falklands/Malvinas War the Pope brought bishops from England and Argentina together to share in a celebration of the Mass. In the past if Christians in Europe had felt a greater loyalty to their new identity in Christ and forged links with fellow Christians across all national and cultural boundaries this could have reduced the number of national conflicts. Instead Christians put loyalty to their own nation first and sought religious justification for extreme nationalism. As we approach the end of this millennium marked by ethnic struggle and cleansing it is hard to imagine a faith more relevant than one which gives people an identity that crosses national, cultural and ethnic barriers.

b. All need to have faith.

Abraham was a man of faith. He knew who he was - he had an identity - because he had a strong sense of being chosen by God. But he also knew that he was chosen to be a blessing to the nations of the world. He then in this faith took risks. He set out into the unknown, trusting only in God. That is still what faith means - taking risks confident that God will produce blessings for all from those risks.

In his commentary on Mark, *Binding the Strong Man*, the New Testament scholar, Ched Myers defines faith as **political imagination**. This political imagination is *the ability to envision a world that is not dominated by the powers*. It is the gift of being able to imagine a world that is different and then moving in that direction. It may mean moving into the politically unknown. Since this may mean acting in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulties it requires faith. **Faith** in this context is undertaking the apparently impossible because God can be counted on. It requires political imagination to envisage a new community that is "for all

peoples" and where there is mutual forgiveness. Surely it is faith of this kind that is needed to make advances in a situation like Northern Ireland?

c. All need to repent.

All need to repent of feelings of collective superiority, whether based on power or a feeling of cultural, moral or religious superiority. The cross is a judgement not so much of obviously evil people but of *good* people motivated by religion or ideology or a desire for law and order at the expense of some other group of people. Unionist feelings of British superiority have led to intransigence in Northern Ireland as has absolutist Irish Republicanism which ignored the existence of Unionists.

We need to repent of the hatred that exists amongst so many towards the other side. We need to realise that hatred breeds more fear and only love can cast out fear.

Christians in particular need to repent of reducing the Gospel to apply only to individuals so that many who, feeling individually humble before God, are at the same time comfortable with feelings of collective superiority.

d. All need to welcome the stranger

In a modern pluralist society there is room for many religious and political beliefs. There is also a growing separation of Church and State. However, when - within such a free society - there is a growing number of people who are content, outside the work place, to live within their own circle of like minded people or people with similar interests then there can be a lack of a sense of a wider community. A further symptom of this may be a growing disinterest in religion or politics. On the other hand in a totalitarian society such as the former Soviet Union and Tito's Yugoslavia the importance of the wider community was emphasised but at the expense of ignoring differences which were pushed into the background only to rise in more extreme form when the lid was taken off.

Paul in his letter to the Romans, according to the interpretations we have considered, is advocating that Christians should be committed to a different kind of society/community to either of the two described above. It is a community where, through meeting and sharing, healing takes place. It therefore requires its members to make a commitment to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ and actively reach out to **welcome others** who come from a different community or tradition. It does not require the imposition of a uniformity which ignores differences. Welcoming requires hospitality. In South Africa some of those who opposed apartheid began inviting people of a different culture into their homes to have a meal with

the obligation that those invited would arrange a similar meal with another family. This welcoming into each others homes had a remarkable effect as those who experienced it can vouch. Something similar is needed in Ireland. This hospitality must also be a feature of church life. Where possible Eucharistic hospitality should be practised and other non-Eucharistic occasions of worship used more frequently for ecumenical worship so that people experience what they have in common and recognise differences in that context. The practice of *agape meals* could be revived. Refusal to step out of one's own fold to listen to or speak to the other only confirms those within of the "rightness" and superiority of their own position or tradition. It is more than simply respecting others and then letting them stand outside. It is being ready at all times to relate to others who are different. It is to take positive steps to **welcome** others who are different on the basis that God in Christ has welcomed us all without demanding uniformity. Then, says Paul, glory will be given to God. God is glorified not with the victory of a "good" side over an "inferior" side, not

by one side proving their superiority, but by people with differences accepting one another, because of their common relationship to Jesus Christ.

Appendices

JOINT LUTHERAN/CATHOLIC STATEMENT ON JUSTIFICATION

According to Peter Hunermann, President of the European Society for Catholic Theology, an historic breakthrough has been achieved by Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians in producing an agreed statement on justification. Agreement on specific aspects of the doctrine and message of justification have been reached. For example " *by justification we are **both** declared and made righteous. Justification is therefore not a legal fiction. God in justifying, effects what he promises; he forgives sin and makes us truly righteous.* " LIRC, par 156.5

On 31 October 1999 in the German city of Augsburg 482 years to the day after Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the town church in Wittenberg representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican signed a joint declaration on justification. The following are some extracts from this joint statement:

3. The Common Understanding of Justification

14. The Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church have together listened to the good news proclaimed in Holy Scripture. This common listening, together with the theological conversations of recent years, has led to a shared understanding of justification. This encompasses a consensus in the basic truths; the differing explanations in particular statements are compatible with it.

4.3 justification by Faith and Through Grace

25. We confess together that sinners are justified by faith in the saving action of God in Christ. By the action of the Holy Spirit in baptism, they are granted the gift of salvation, which lays the basis for the whole Christian life. They place their trust in God's gracious promise by justifying faith, which includes hope in God and love for him. Such a faith is active in love, and thus the Christian cannot and should not remain without works. But whatever in the justified precedes or follows the free gift of faith is neither the basis of justification nor merits it.

26. According to Lutheran understanding, God justifies sinners in faith alone (sola fide). In faith they place their trust wholly in their Creator and

Redeemer and thus live in communion with him. God himself effects faith as he brings forth such trust by his creative Word. Because God's act is a new creation, it affects all dimensions of the person and leads to a life in hope and love. In the doctrine of "justification by faith alone," a distinction but not a separation is made between justification itself and the renewal of one's way of life that necessarily follows from justification and without which faith does not exist. Thereby the basis is indicated from which the renewal of life proceeds, for it comes forth from the love of God imparted to the person in justification. Justification and renewal are joined in Christ, who is present in faith.

27. The Catholic understanding also sees faith as fundamental in justification. For without faith, no justification can take place. Persons are justified through baptism as hearers of the word and believers in it. The justification of sinners is forgiveness of sins and being made righteous by justifying grace, which makes us children of God. In justification the righteous receive from Christ faith, hope and love and are thereby taken into communion with him. This new personal relation to God is grounded totally on God's graciousness and remains constantly dependent on the salvific and creative working of this gracious God, who remains true to himself, so that one can rely upon him. Thus justifying grace never becomes a human possession to which one could appeal over against God. While Catholic teaching emphasises the renewal of life by justifying grace, this renewal in faith, hope and love is always dependent on God's unfathomable grace and contributes nothing to justification.

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