

Review of *Divided We Fall*

Book: Luder G. Whitlock Jr., *Divided We Fall: Overcoming a History of Christian Disunity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017)

The history of the Christian church concerning the cause of Christian peace and unity has not been very glorious. Over the centuries, there have been many divisions within what is purported to be the one catholic and apostolic church. It is common among Roman Catholic apologists to attack Protestantism for all the divisions in the church, an accusation which conveniently ignores the history of divisions prior to the Reformation (i.e. the division between the early Catholics and the Monophysite and Nestorian churches, the Great Schism between Medieval Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy), as well as the lengths to which dissension was snuffed out harshly (e.g. the crusades and inquisition against the Albigensians, the condemnation of John Wycliffe and the condemnation and burning of Jan Hus). After all, if you wipe out the opposition, then of course there is only one church left! Even more important is that despite a focus on institutional unity where the Magisterium is able to more easily rein in the clergy (a system which by definition promotes some form of unity), Roman Catholicism post-Trent nevertheless has split offs in the Old Catholicism (rejection of Vatican I) and Sedevacantist (rejection of Vatican II) sects. Even now, with the continuing liberalizing trends in modern Roman Catholicism under Pope Francis I, it is not inconceivable that one or many splits might soon occur within Roman Catholicism. So much for unity in the self-proclaimed one “Catholic” church!

Protestantism of course has fared worse, precisely because of its focus on spiritual unity around truth as opposed to institutional unity. With the arrival of the Enlightenment has come individualized religion and much division in the church, as pietism and revivalism reigns supreme in late 18th century religion to the current day. It is a wonder that many more church splits have not occurred, as Christian orthodoxy and confessional fidelity have been corroded within much of Protestantism. Broad Evangelicalism, whether in its Old form or the New Evangelical form, claims to promote evangelical unity, yet in history and practice what it has caused is a weakening of orthodoxy and confessional purity in the churches.

Nevertheless, Christian disunity is lamentable, as Jesus desires his church to be united (Jn. 17:21). But how can unity be achieved? In this light, Luder Whitlock has written a book on that topic. He first goes through the biblical foundations for Christian unity (chapter 1), looks at the history of the church (chapter 2), then goes through some theological loci like the communion of the saints (chapter 3) and the issues of ecumenism, schism and sectarianism (chapter 4). Lastly, he looks at some challenges and concerns on church unity and suggest constructive steps that can be taken to move towards unity and community (chapters 5-6).

In this review, I will like to analyze Whitlock’s book on the topic, and evaluate his proposal.

Historical Issues

By and large, Whitlock's brief walk through church history is accurate. However, one major problem of his historical analysis is his simplistic understanding of the history of Evangelicalism, especially in its relation to the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. The first problem comes when he takes an uncritical view of the Great Awakening, asserting it as a positive movement that had united many Protestants together (p. 62). While certainly there was much unity within Protestant churches during the Great Awakening, and I am certain God has used the Great Awakenings (both the First and part of the Second) for His glory and the salvation of many, there are problems with the understanding of the First Great Awakening as a wholly positive movement. As D.G. Hart has pointed out in his book *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*, pietism was introduced into Protestantism through the First Great Awakening.¹ The First Great Awakening also caused a split within American Presbyterians between the Old and the New Sides.² Old Evangelicalism therefore, whatever its merits or demerits, should be considered a separate movement from Reformation Protestantism.

Even more problematic, and Whitlock's second problem, is his gloss over the rise of the New Evangelicalism. In his description of the rise of the New Evangelicals (pp. 65-6), there is no understanding that the New Evangelicals are different from the Old Evangelicals.³ Those who reject the New Evangelicalism are just glossed over as "fundamentalists" who have a "more sectarian identity" (p. 65). New Evangelicalism is positively portrayed (p. 123-132), in contrast to the "separatist Fundamentalists" (p. 124). Now, Whitlock can be pro-New Evangelical all he wants, but surely he should be honest to history and recognize that New Evangelicalism is not the same as Old Evangelicalism. Furthermore, to paint Fundamentalism as being "sectarian" without doing the necessary work to prove it seems to be the pot calling the kettle black. Who gets to determine who is sectarian and who is not?

Lastly, Whitlock glosses over the failure of New Evangelicalism. The apostasy within the New Evangelicals due to multiple compromises of the faith is overlooked, despite much evidence to the contrary.⁴ Unity is important, but, as Whitlock himself states on the issue

¹ pietism (small 'p') is "the effort to define the Christian religion apart from its particularities and locate its essence in 'the heart.'" [D.G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2002), 21]

² Hart, 36-7; Stephen A. Marini, "The Great Awakening," in Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience* (3 volumes; New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 788

³ See Iain H. Murray, *The Old Evangelicalism: Old Truths for a New Awakening* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005). Murray and the Banner of Truth could hardly be termed "fundamentalist" except in the most uncharitable of descriptions.

⁴ See Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), Ernest Pickering, *Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church* (2nd ed.; Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2008), George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), Richard

of theological error, “if compromise occurred, the existence of the historic Christian faith for which they have sacrificed so much would be jeopardized” (p. 121). The compromises of New Evangelicalism have been pointed out again and again both by confessionalists and fundamentalists, and it is sad that Whitlock chooses to ignore them. It almost seems that Whitlock, consciously or subconsciously, is framing the narrative a certain way so that those who reject his view would be viewed as “sectarian” or worse.

Theological ideas

This brings us to chapters three and four. Whitlock is correct in pointing out the importance of the communion of saints, and in stating that the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy has transformed many evangelicals “far more than they realized” (p. 111). That being true however does not imply that the opposite in New Evangelicalism is true. As an example in seeking truth and love and unity, Francis Schaeffer was put up on a pedestal (pp. 74-6) in his promotion of “true spirituality.” Schaeffer was a former fighting fundamentalist who turned from the system and decided to focus on winning people for God. Now, there are many things good things about Schaeffer and certainly there are problems with Fundamentalism, but in the larger scheme of things, just as the opposite of an error is not necessarily the truth but could be another error, so likewise, Schaeffer saw the coming disaster within New Evangelicalism before his death.⁵ One can learn from Schaeffer without moving into New Evangelicalism. And with the benefit of hindsight, we can say that Schaeffer’s move towards New Evangelicalism was not the best decision he could have made.

With that, let us go into the issues of ecumenism, sectarianism, and schism. With regards to sectarianism, Whitlock defines it as “an exclusive claim to truth... the claim of being entirely right, with a superior claim to truth compared to any other religious group...” and where “theological beliefs or confessions are no longer open to revision in the light of Scripture or important new information,” being a denial of catholicity (p. 99). Now, the problem with this definition is not that it is wrong, but that it is exceedingly broad. Christianity claims to be the only way, so is that “sectarian”? Evangelicals claims that a denial of inerrancy is not acceptable within the churches, so is that “sectarian”? The definition is therefore not helpful because it cannot determine what “sectarian” actually means, so it is not so much false but useless.

“Schism” is “a separation from the organized church without just cause” (p. 104). Just like “sectarian,” the problem with such a definition is that it is ultimately useless since what exactly is a “just cause”? Of course, we can say that some causes are most definitely not just, like for example separating because the church calls the service at a time you

Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals: The Story of the Emergence of a New Generation of Evangelicals* (New York NY: Harper & Row, 1974), Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1978)

⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984)

disagree with. Even the examples Whitlock uses as illustrations show that the concept is easy to grasp in principle but hard to actually apply.

Lastly, Whitlock looks at the ecumenical movement and shows how the main ecumenical movements are not acceptable to Christians because of their rejection of the faith (pp. 115-7). In contrast to those, Whitlock supports “evangelical ecumenism,” which is basically the New Evangelical project. We have however shown in the previous section that New Evangelicalism has compromised on the faith. But doubling down on the project in version 2.1 through organizations such as The Gospel Coalition (TGC) and Together for the Gospel (T4G) merely resets the timer without solving the real problems. Already, we have already seen compromises and the slow apostasy within the New Evangelical Calvinism in the “woke church movement.” Will Whitlock call out his fellow New Calvinists for their current hateful rhetoric on race issues in for example the MLK50 conference?

But let’s lay aside the contemporary issues for now. Whitlock agrees that truth is paramount for Protestants, and that sacrificing truth for unity is not an option, and that “for anyone to slight this commitment [to truth – DHC] is a serious matter” (p. 147). But Whitlock quotes approvingly from Richard Baxter and John Frame (p. 136). Now Baxter attacks Justification by faith alone while Frame through his defense of Norman Shepherd is questionable on that doctrine at best. It does not seem that Whitlock knows how to balance truth and unity, since after all one can argue that someone who cannot recognize error would see a defense of truth as “sectarian.” Thus, while Whitlock’s discussion on sectarianism, schism and ecumenism in theory is not false, they do not serve to advance the discussion on how one can actually identify these.

Practical Steps

Perhaps where this book is most helpful is the practical steps it calls us to do to promote unity, which are albeit limited in efficacy. Whitlock identifies impediments to unity as benign neglect, prioritizing other things, organizational dynamics, disagreements and theological differences (pp. 138-148). On the issue of where to draw the line on theological differences, Whitlock proposes an “anchored set,” as opposed to a “centered set” or “bounded set” (p. 156). All these models however do not really help us to draw any common line, and an “anchored set” is meaningless without a solid place for the anchor to be anchored in. This reviewer is a confessionalist, so obviously unity should be sought upon fidelity to a confession of faith and its associated documents. But Evangelicalism does not have a common confession of faith, and so the idea of an “anchored set” is not feasible.

Constructive steps that can be taken towards unity and community are to love one another, build trust, seek understanding, be kind, engage differences, seek the unity of the Spirit, have small groups and have pastoral relations (pp. 170-187). All of these are very helpful for Christian living in general. But they do not solve the problem with regards to the tension between truth and unity, but are mere steps we should all take in Christian love and life.

Many of them are steps taken upon essential unity (e.g. build trust, seek the unity of the Spirit), which are not steps taken when the basis of unity has not yet been agreed upon.

Perhaps what is good about this section is its recommendations for Christian living in communion with other Christians, but this reviewer does not see it as being helpful for actually speaking about Christian unity on the issue of truth.

A Proposal

In this light, I would like to propose an alternative model for Christian unity. First, we must delink the issue of personal relationships with ecclesiastical relationships. Acknowledging another person and loving that person as a fellow Christian must be seen to be a separate issue with regards to how one sees a church or a denomination. It is my contention that confusing the two are what causes much agonizing within the visible Church. How one interacts with believers, after determining them to be believers through confession of faith in Jesus, is to do so in love in accordance with the Scriptures.

On the ecclesiastical front however, we must reject the anti-institutional view of the church that pervades Evangelicalism. By delinking the individual from the institutional, we do not have to find a way to draw a line encompassing all believers within our movement, and so come out with concepts such as “bounded set” and “centered set” and “anchored set.” The church as institution should just focus on unity around a common confession of faith and its associated documents (Catechisms, BCO). Unity is to be sought in that way without a need to cover all Christians. As the Word goes forth, and we are continually reformed according to the Scriptures, both we and the standards, true unity will come to pass in God’s timing.

This manner of achieving unity is however counter-intuitive, because it make unity something no man can do. To be truly united according to this theory is to focus on the particular, what seems “sectarian.” Yet, I would assert that this is the best way to balance truth and unity in a way that brings glory to God, a way that most definitely does not include the compromises of New Evangelicalism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Whitlock’s book has some practical advice. As a book on Christian unity however, it falls short. Its simplistic reading of history results in downplaying the errors within New Evangelicalism, and thus the vision it promotes in New Evangelicalism 2.0, or 3.0, or 4.0, will not work. In contrast, I have suggested briefly an alternative way towards Christian unity. Whitlock’s practical steps are however helpful for promoting peace and unity among individual Christians, which we can all benefit from.