

Diversity in Faith – Unity in Christ

By Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr.

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Book Review by

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This is a book addressed to the Church, to the Christian community. It is not an apologetic to instruct the inquirer in the content of Christian faith; rather, it is an explanation of the respective postures, attitudes and nuances of orthodoxy, liberalism and pietism. Guthrie's purpose is to enable self-understanding within each of these camps and thereby to create the possibility of understanding across the spectrum of the Church.

Although a broad spectrum of the Christian community might agree on a basic definition of what it is to be a Christian, as soon as the discussion gets to specific theological, ethical and practical implications of Christian faith, division will be immediate - "Churches choose up sides, get red in the face, and either yell at each other or refuse to talk together at all." To address the all too often rancorous divisions within the Christian community, indeed, within the same confessional family, denomination and local congregation, Guthrie suggests as a starting point the question: "Why is it that people who read the same Bible and talk about the same Christ, even when they belong to the same church, have so much trouble getting along with each other and committing themselves to a common Christian witness in the world?" His answer is that, before conversation begins, we all bring certain "conscious or unconscious presuppositions about the meaning of Christian faith and life that determine what we are able and willing - and unable and unwilling - to hear from scripture, from fellow Christians, or even from God!"

Thus Guthrie sets for himself the task of identifying and clarifying the presuppositions operative and determinative of the respective postures of Orthodoxy, Liberalism and Pietism. Part I is divided into four sections (Liberalism being treated in two sections, Moralism and Social Activism). Each section is divided into a "In defense of ..." and "Criticism of ..." This first part is largely descriptive with Guthrie giving a fair and balanced analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of each position.

Part II is Guthrie's positive contribution toward transcending the division - "Beyond Orthodoxy, Liberalism, and Pietism." He suggests as a key to getting

beyond the three conflicting positions, the concept of “witness.” A Christian, he contends, is first and last simply a witness to Jesus Christ and to begin there, he claims, will enable one to avoid the weaknesses and combine the strengths of the three positions described in the first part of the book. The last three chapters discuss what it means to witness to Jesus Christ, to the suffering love of God, and to the liberating power of God. Guthrie's discussion is helpful and convincing.

This book would make a fine text for an adult education class in which there was a serious purpose to deepen one's own understanding of the faith and commitment to Christian service, while broadening one's perspective on the essential unity of the faith that comes to expression with varying accents and nuances. A more gracious spirit within the Church and a more effective witness without would result from a study of this text.