

On Being Civil and Committed: Reclaiming a Great Tradition

Lecture By

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At

United Church of Christ Fall 1996 Conference
St. John's United Church of Christ
Grand Rapids, Michigan
October 6, 1996

Prepared Text

I am honored to be invited to address you at this Fall Conference. I come to you as one recently released from a denominational affiliation, which I am certain is no news to anyone here. On Tuesday of last week, the Classis of Muskegon, RCA, signed a separation agreement with Christ Community and accepted the resigning of my ordained status within the Reformed Church in America. I mention this because it gives me a new sense of freedom. The experience is one of being unleashed and, with that, a sense of entering a much larger world.

This sense of release has been mine now for some time as I have been emotionally removed from the RCA since February when the Classis judged me out of bounds. And I have found that I have moved into a state of being able to identify with a much larger community of faith than ever before.

In the 60s, I spent four years in Europe. I found that a richly enlightening experience as I was able to look at my own nation from afar, from a distance. Being immersed in the culture of The Netherlands, I was able to view my own country with the eyes of my Dutch neighbors. That was a transforming experience. I came home, but I've never been the same. I had been broken loose from a narrow nationalism and had come to appreciate another culture, people, way of structuring government, society.

I tell you this because it reflects something of what I feel as I come into your fellowship today. I come with a deep appreciation for who you are as the United Church of Christ. I have been aware of you, knowing a few of your clergy, learning much from the work of your Walter Brueggemann, being aware of the cutting edge positions you have taken as a denomination. But, more recently, I have had

a more intimate look at the UCC. Over these past months I have received several letters of encouragement from UCC folk and I am indebted to your Conference Minister, David Reece, for his supportive presence and counsel. I have had the sense that I am not alone and that I am not outside the great mainstream of the Christian tradition. In your fellowship I would never have been called in question.

I never suspected I would be in my present position. Over the past twenty-five years I have carried out my pastoral ministry, nurturing and shaping a faith community as I myself have continued to probe the biblical story and reflect on Christian faith formulation in light of our contemporary context. I have been straightforward in my preaching and teaching at home and I have attempted to engage the RCA in theological reflection through my writing in *Perspectives*, a journal founded by the RCA in 1985 to stimulate theological discussion. I carried out my calling to think the faith seriously and responsibly and I had a genuine concern to effect theological renewal within the RCA.

Suddenly that was challenged, not because of theological positions set forth in writing, but because at Christ Community we offered our chapel for use by the Metropolitan Community Church of Muskegon, a denomination that ministers to marginalized folk, especially the Gay/Lesbian community. Once the investigation of our ministry to that community began, it soon broadened to my theological positions, which had been in print in the journal of the RCA for a decade. The investigation became a nightmare; the matter took on a life of its own. The result was that I was judged outside the parameters of RCA confessional statements. I resigned my ordination in the Reformed Church in America, which has, after some months of negotiation and a good deal of anguish, now been recognized by the Classis of Muskegon.

You did not gather today to hear my story, but that recent experience is so fresh and vivid in my mind that you must recognize that it forms the context of what I want to say to you today. My experience causes me to want to affirm the spirit and posture of the UCC. All human institutions have strengths and weaknesses and I'm sure as you experience the UCC from the inside there are elements you value and aspects you might want to change. But, as one who views you from the outside, let me call you to appreciate and value the liberal spirit that marks you as a denomination. I use liberal not as a catch word or as a label for a certain theological persuasion, but in the sense of a spirit of openness; liberal as large, broad, generous in contrast to narrowness of outlook, of mind; in contrast to meanness of spirit, to bigotry and dogmatism. I use liberal in the sense of magnanimity.

It is that spirit that I find marking you as a people and I want to suggest that, because that is so much a part of your culture, you might take it for granted, but you must never take it for granted. And beyond that, Liberalism as a name for that 19th-century theological development that marked the progressive wing of

Protestantism in its mainline expression has taken a beating in the last half century and especially in the last couple of decades.

One hears the claim, "Liberalism is dead," and not infrequently there is a certain satisfaction in that claim as though what Liberalism's critics always claimed has proven true - that it held forth an inadequate Gospel, a faulty view of scripture and a flawed theological vision. As sign of Liberalism's naiveté concerning the radical darkness that again and again erupts into the human scene, the demonic that lurks in the wings of historical movement, one hears reference to the preeminent journal of liberal Christianity, *The Christian Century*, named around the turn of the century that was to be the century in which the Kingdom of God came to flower - *The Christian century*. Then one is reminded of the bloodshed, violence and horrendous evil that has manifested itself in this century now nearing its close, and one hardly dares confess the least affinity with the great Liberal ideals that fired the imagination of the spokespersons of that movement.

Add to this century's bludgeoning of the liberal vision the rise of the Religious Right with its rhetoric of righteous indignation over the societal chaos and turbulence coming to expression in the 60's - the collapse of values and crumbling of the foundations of family, church and nation, and it is clear that any claim to hold and advocate the Liberal vision is a sure formula for being written off as a hopeless Don Quixote, dreaming an impossible dream.

Perhaps it is best to begin with the admission that the classic Liberal vision was flawed. Under the spell of evolutionary development that so permeated every sphere of the human endeavor as this century dawned, there was a dangerous naiveté and shallow optimism that marked the thought of Protestant liberalism. The Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man was as glaring in its sunny optimism as in its sexist expression. The Kingdom of God was coming through rational human effort and goodwill. The arrogance of Western civilization's paternalistic attitude to the rest of the globe and the exploitative colonialism were well masked under a facade of good will, for the most part sincere, of bringing light to the nations, liberation to those enslaved in heathen darkness. The darkness would retreat before the dawning of the light of the world, Jesus Christ. John S. B. Monsell caught the spirit of the 19th century in his hymn, penned in 1863:

Light of the world, we hail Thee,
Flushing the eastern skies;
Never shall darkness veil Thee
Again from human eyes;

Too long, alas, withholden,
Now spread from shore to shore;
Thy light so glad and golden,
Shall set on earth no more.

There is something here that stirs the soul. There is a grand vision of light and love enveloping the whole human family. But then this "Christian Century" moved into unprecedented darkness and the manifestation of the demonic such as could not have been imagined. The great wars, the Cold War, the anguish of the Middle East, the agony of the Balkan countries - as this century draws to its close, we must recognize that the amazing breakthroughs in science and developments in technology have only increased exponentially the potential for the human family to destroy itself, its environment and its grandest vision.

Liberalism reacted against the orthodoxy locked in a 17th-century paradigm of Protestant scholasticism which was defensively reacting against the rise of the modern in the wake of the Enlightenment. Liberalism scrubbed the dour doctrine of original sin, emaciated the Evil One with the promise of progress through education and saw everywhere in historical development the upward movement of the evolutionary drive.

But, instead of the Kingdom of God - disaster dawned.

I cannot rehearse the whole theological, social history of the last half of our century, but only mention the names of Karl Barth and the reversal of the liberal tide on the continent with his Theology of the Word and God - the "Wholly Other"; Reinhold Niebuhr and his powerful recognition of the darkness that continues to threaten and the demonic that breaks out again and again.

Liberalism has been chastened and put on the defensive. And we are now faced with a vociferous Religious Right marked by fundamentalism in biblical interpretation, arrogance in claim to be the Christian voice and belligerence in claiming its right to determine "Christian values," willing if possible to legislate its social agenda.

Well, before we dispose of the Liberal vision, let's take a closer look at where we are in the cosmic journey and whether or not there are contained in that vision essential insights and attitudes that cannot be lost if we are to fulfill our calling to follow the way of Jesus, live under the reign of God, and be agents of Shalom in the world.

In a society locked in culture wars where reasoned discourse and respectful dialogue is all but a lost art, *I believe there is a critical need for a resurgence of the liberal vision*, duly humbled by the experience of this century, taking account of the reality of historical existence as it has been experienced in this century, the most violent ever. My contention is based on my conviction that a world marked by global consciousness, technology that has made the world a neighborhood and the fact of religious pluralism demands an open mind, a gracious spirit and an all-embracing compassion.

Global consciousness marks our world. For the first time ever, humankind is experiencing a common history. The beautiful picture of this lovely planet suspended against the black background of spacial darkness is reproduced on posters and postage stamps. Our kind has set foot on the moon and looked back on the earth - beautiful, fragile and obviously an interconnected whole. That view of our world from beyond us is a symbol of the reality of our human existence. We are one and belong to each other and all the barriers that divide - national borders, tribal turf, religious enclaves – erode before the compelling reality of one world spinning out its destiny in cosmic space.

The image of the planet as one, indivisible whole is being translated into existential experience through the marvels of the electronic age, the wonders of global communication. Being one of the few human creatures remaining who owns not a computer and cannot even type, I am an anachronism, a dinosaur, left in amazement before it all. Through the enthusiasm and genius of one of our young members, Christ Community has a Web Site. On August 22, 1996, an article appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* describing our controversy with the Muskegon Classis. *The Times* puts their copy on the Internet and they referenced our Web Site. Within the next 12 hours, our Web Site went crazy recording over 200 'Visits' from around the world. There are no walls high enough or impermeable enough to stifle the word that goes out into space and returns to earth as the falling rain.

A world marked by global consciousness, bound together in community through communication and bowing in worship to God in churches, temples, mosques, ashrams and a variety of shrines - that is our present state.

In her book, *Encountering God*, Diane Eck narrates her own pilgrimage from Montana Methodism to immersion in Hindu religious culture in the Holy City of Banares. Teaching at Harvard, she has a task force of students fanning out over this nation of ours taking photographs of the places of worship of the multiplicity of faiths that are now a part of the American scene. The landscape is marked by religious pluralism - that is the fact of our time.

How will we respond to our time - named by many as Post-Modern? That term becomes almost useless because it is attached to such diverse dimensions of the present, but it may yet be usable for us if we define it in the context of our present focus on the movement we have described as Liberalism.

As mentioned above, Liberalism reacted against the stubborn orthodoxy of the 17th century. It welcomed the throwing off of authoritarianism and the ascendancy of human rationality as it emerged in the Enlightenment. But the Enlightenment reduction of reality to the measure of human rationality proved inadequate. There was a loss of the Mystery of the transcendent and the rule of human rationality was proven false by the eruption of evil in our century. The Modern period, marked by confidence in human reason to shape and control human destiny, gave way to a post-modern era, which in some forms denies the

existence of absolutes and dissolves into an abyss of relativism which allows of no claims to absolute certitudes.

In a more humble expression, post-modernism is marked not by the denial of the Absolute or of absolute truths, but by the denial that humankind rooted in concrete historical circumstance is able to grasp the Absolute or formulate absolute truth statements. Rather, there is a recognition that being human is to be limited to a relative grasp of the Absolute and that every truth claim is provisional, that human knowledge is cumulative, growing, and that human religious tradition must be living, open-ended and in need of constant revision.

If our world and our age is at all as I have set it forth, then it must be obvious that a brittle orthodoxy that claims a revelation of propositional truths that move through history unaffected by development and a strident fundamentalism that reiterates yesterday's answers to today's questions cannot meet the challenge of the reality of our world, cannot address with openness and sensitivity the moving target of the human condition.

It is for that reason that I affirm the posture and spirit of the UCC and urge you not to take it for granted and not to be intimidated by the raspy rhetoric of the Religious Right. I would encourage you, rather, to be faithful to your vision and be firm in your resolve to stand for those causes that represent the grace of God as it was embodied in the way of Jesus.

It is not for me to set your agenda; I call you, rather, to confidence in your historic posture and spirit. Yet, lest I leave everything vague and fuzzy, let me suggest some concrete challenges that will concretize how your posture and spirit might find expression.

Continue to lead the way in the matter of the ordination of gay/lesbian persons. I really do not know the history of how you came to your prophetic stance, but you lead the way on an issue that vexes those church bodies that are wrestling with the issue, to say nothing of those bodies that have not yet openly dealt with the issue. You are in ecumenical discussions with Lutheran and Reformed bodies and I know from my former church body you have been called to turn from your practice before some kind of union would be considered. Stand firm. Continue to lead the way.

The matter of sexual orientation tears the Church apart. Homosexuality is one of the most volatile issues with which the Church must deal. I did not choose to champion the cause of those of homosexual orientation. Ours was an act of hospitality to the MCC group. But, when confronted with the challenge to our action, I had to be true to my conviction. And my position is clear:

It is not a moral issue. For claiming that, I have been assaulted by a blind biblicism that fails both to take seriously the knowledge available to us today from the sciences and to exercise a responsible biblical hermeneutic.

In regard to the instance of the Byron Center teacher, also, we see the incendiary effect of the discussion of sexual orientation. When an issue elicits such response, one can be sure there is great fear, ignorance, and insecurity operating.

Out of that situation has arisen a group called Concerned Clergy in which the UCC is well represented. We must continue to stand for reasoned understanding, justice and compassion. I have been moved by the stories that have been told to me by those who have suffered from discrimination and rejection, spurned as less than human. You are the people to take the lead and break down the walls of suspicion and misinformation and replace walls with bridges of compassion and embrace.

I mention a second area in which I believe you have been prophetic and call you to continue - standing for and with the most vulnerable of society.

On the Sunday following the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill, I said in the sermon, "Congratulations, Mr. President. Congratulations, members of Congress. You have changed the face of welfare in this country. Now, when will you deal with the big issues facing this nation?"

Well, I got a little response to that. I was asked if I thought the state of welfare did not require change - was I arguing for the perpetuation of the current system? That, of course, was not my point. Rather, I was trying to indicate that we are selective in our indignation; that a stealth bomber or two would cover all the abuse of the system. And further, while I'm sure reform is needed, who, in the meantime, will watch for those who fall through the cracks?

The Church must make its voice heard on behalf of the voiceless ones. While we must be engaged in concrete aid and support to the poor and disadvantaged, we cannot make such efforts a substitute for an ongoing struggle for a more just and humane and compassionate social-economic order.

Finally, let me challenge you to the critical importance of interfaith dialogue. Hans Küng has said there will be no peace in the world without peace among the religions. Religion is a powerful force in the human situation and the militancy of the respective fundamentalism of Christianity, Islam and Judaism puts our world at risk.

In our world where the other is our neighbor, we cannot continue with a blind exclusivism that dogmatically affirms its truth to be the only truth, its way to God, the only way. Not only does that fail to build broad community and mutual respect, it also fails to realize the enrichment of spiritual insight and the enhancement of human wellbeing that dialogue affords.

I just returned from two weeks in Spain. I visited Toledo, site of the Council of Toledo in 589 - an important early Christian center that was conquered by the Moors in the 8th century, bringing with them their Moslem faith. For centuries

the Jewish, Christian and Islamic communities lived peacefully together until the 13th century when Christian forces conquered, driving out the Jews and Moslems, instituting the Inquisition, where it was convert or be banished or lose your life. We moved on to Cordoba where, in the middle of a magnificent mosque, the conquering Christians raised a cathedral towering over the surrounding mosque, sign of Christianity's triumph. And then it was Seville. There, the cathedral took over the mosque site. The tower of the mosque was kept intact, but the huge silver monstrance that served the cathedral was replicated on top of the mosque's tower - again a sign of the triumphalism of the Church. And when the Jews were driven out, the Jewish quarter was renamed Santa Cruz - The Holy Cross. In all of this I was struck by the arrogance of the triumphalist spirit that has marked so much of Christendom in its history, and I felt deeply the need for a different spirit to mark the Church in our day.

Just as the early Jesus movement discovered the wide embrace of God's grace for the Gentiles without demanding they become Jews, so is not the God of Israel, the God of Jesus calling us today to recognize that the grace that flows from the heart of God embraces peoples beyond the Christian Church?

These matters I mention are illustrative, not exhaustive. I use them simply as example of a spirit, a perspective.

My concern is, as I began, to call for a resurgence of a liberal tradition - chastened, to be sure - humble, acknowledging our limited insight and knowledge as part of our human condition; gracious, open to the other, the alienated, the vulnerable; passionate, finding in the way of Jesus the way of compassion; a liberal tradition that combines intellectual integrity with evangelical passion. Intellectual integrity - We need to think the Faith - to reflect on the biblical story in light of our historical context. We must know the story and the tradition that has shaped us. And we must be open to contemporary human experience, to all the knowledge afforded us in the full spectrum of human learning. Out of that reflection on the biblical story and the faith tradition in light of our present human experience, we have something to say and action informed by insight.

A mind open to the Word and the world. A heart passionate with the grace of God embracing the world in all its connectedness. A liberal tradition marked by humility, passionate, and full of faith. As we traveled through Spain we stopped in La Mancha and visited the windmills challenged by Don Quixote. Lunching in the village that was the setting for Cervantes' novel, I had my picture taken near a bronze sculpture of the strange warrior and I thought to myself, here was a fit hero for our time - Calling for the resurgence of the liberal tradition in our culture marked by a conservative tide laced with mean spirit, defensiveness and fear, we must dare to dream the impossible dream.

Do you remember Eldonza, the kitchen maid whom Quixote named Dulcinea, against her protest that she was nothing but a slut - no lady at all? Do you remember that scene where Quixote lies dying, disillusioned? She comes to him,

now having become the lady he saw in her while still in her rags, saying to him, "I'm your Lady Dulcinea," transformed by his naming her not as she was, but as she might become. Be true to yourselves. In an age of quite a different spirit, I challenge you to make your own these stirring lines from "The Man From LaMancha."

To dream the impossible dream,
to fight the unbeatable foe,
to bear with unbearable sorrow,
to run where the brave dare not go.

To right the unrightable wrong,
to love, pure and chaste from afar,
to try when your arms are too weary,
to reach the unreachable star.

This is my quest, to follow that star,
no matter how hopeless, no matter how far,
To fight for the right without question or pause,
to be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause.

And I know if I'll only be true
to this glorious quest
that my heart will lie peaceful and calm,
when I'm laid to my rest.

And the world will be better for this:
that one man, scorned and covered with scars,
still strove with his last ounce of courage,
to reach the unreachable stars.