

Quest for a Lost Identity.

On one occasion I recall my parents advising the family that, '*it was best not to think too much.*' It was not an anti-intellectual statement but a way of saying we should avoid being, melancholic, or paranoid about life. They were sound words, but if we get it right, a healthy realism that celebrates the positive aspects of life and our digital age we will also be alert to life-changing aspects that subtly shape our thinking. Today we live in a culture where self-ism and sexuality are so central and given such importance that it is easy to lose a healthy perspective on the meaning of life and what it means to be a person of worth created in the image of God..

There is a serious quest to find an answer to the question, "Who am I?" "How can I find satisfaction when it comes to my identity?" This question finds expression particularly among those who battle with same-sex attraction and gender dysphoria where the focus is on an anxious need for people to define their sexuality and gender.

It is pointed out that in a world where identity is linked with seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, sexuality and identity becomes core, a non-negotiable part of you, while on the other hand your religious identity is seen as much more peripheral. (David Williams. CMS) This has a significant effect on a number of defined areas of life including how the Uniting Church understands its own corporate identity, its mission and Christian marriage.

While we have known for some time that when it comes to sexual orientation there is a fluidity about the various stages that we pass through, today's *popular* view claims that sexuality is a given unchanging, genetic fact. On the other hand, at the same time, it has become *popular* to think that gender identity is a pure social-construct and therefore a matter of personal choice. This means it is easy to conclude **that how you feel is what you are** at your most fundamental core. A person then can actually choose to be male or female and to claim it as an authentic identity!

Christians affirm the dignity of every human being and with compassion they need to stand with those who experience this personal pain and profound confusion. However, we should not play-down or ignore the consequences of the social individualism of our time that seems to offer freedom that is not freedom at all. It is not freedom because it leaves us with no identity beyond that which we have chosen and make up for ourselves. This view of life and type of social tyranny against the created order and God can only result in people still being confused, lonely and lost.

The Dilemma of Losing the Way

The Christian Church is not isolated from this quest for identity. In fact a growing uncertainty has been a long time in the making. Sadly, this has intensified in recent years due to the public debate around abuse, sexuality and marriage. The church is a cautious institution and cautious about quick change but with the rise of biblical criticism over the years, the adapting of tradition to new insights, the dominance of liberal theology and the loss of familiar patterns, a corporate grief has been felt. Many have been concerned with serious questions about belief and direction in the name of progress.

The tensions of theological diversity has always been part of the church's journey and in a positive way this tension has both highlighted and refined the breadth of the rich

heritage entrusted to us by the saints. However, there have been periods in history when the people of God have lost their way and been morally and spiritually seduced by surrounding cultures. This has resulted in a compromised gospel and a loss of both identity and mission momentum. This was like Israel of old, the pre-reformation period and the church of 18th century England. In a similar way sadly a loss of confidence and Christian integrity in our message seems to have re-visited the Church today.

In their life time, John and Charles Wesley were troubled and concerned enough to give themselves to the 'Holy Club' in Oxford to seek renewal through adopting a range of strict life-style disciplines before they discovered the power and gift of God's grace. Wesley later discovered the strong theme of **Covenant** was central to scripture and he wanted his people to remember it. Every communion and at the beginning of every New Year; first beginning on December 25th 1747, he urged Methodists everywhere to renew their Covenant with God. From 1755 an annual Covenant Service was held and it was eventually introduced in Australia in 1812.

The Church's Covenant Identity

In his lecture, *'The Renewal of the Church.'* W.A. Visser'T Hooft pointed out that unlike the world religions, the ideologies or social constructions of our time the Church has a totally unique origin. Visser'T Hooft based his case on an interventionist God, the unique birth and identity of the Christian Church of Christ. A God who reaches into history, who changes lives and who calls us to pray, "Thy Kingdom Come." He described the Church as the rightful successor to Old Testament Israel and to the God who binds himself to us in 'Covenant.' Renewal is explained not as a mere innovation for the sake of change or adaptation to recent historical developments. Nor did Visser'T Hooft describe renewal as replacing the Church that began at Pentecost with, *'some newly invented religious institution or movement.'* He made it clear that,--- *'the renewal of the church –can only mean the renewal of the Church as it lives in history?'* The Covenant that God established with his people in history is not an abstract concept belonging to the musty pages of the Bible or a neat theology but a present, dynamic, living relationship that binds God to pursue and renew his people through the corridors of time. The Church is the special focus of Gods concern and interest so there is a sense that the renewal of the church is inevitable because, *'an unrenewed Church obscures and denies the faith that the Body belongs to the living Christ, who is the Head.'*

This means when it comes to the way the Church understands itself and to owning its identity that unlike the ideologies of our time we are not a self-made people. The Church is not a mere socio-political or human/religious institution. Our identity and self-understanding has been given to us from a source outside of ourselves. The Church is not the result of how we feel about ourselves or something that we, or history itself has created. **We are a called people whom God has chosen to live with in a binding Covenant.** Through Christ we share in nothing less than a living, dynamic relationship with the Living God. To understand this we need to grasp the significance of what the 'Covenant' relationship means.

The Covenant God made with Israel was never a provisional agreement. It was never a contract that either party could withdraw from or that could be denounced whenever God or Israel happened to get tired of it. It was not like a human contract/agreement between a purchaser and vendor. It has been said that there was no *small print*, no out-option to Covenant. The Covenant was not a bilateral contract between two equal

parties. God was not rewarding Israel for their goodness. Covenant expressed God's total love, it was God's choice of Israel regardless of how odd they might have seemed to other people. In fact, the Covenant that God made that he would be Israel's God and they would be his people implies only one right and privilege: that is, that they would serve God and live in communion with him. It was a little like receiving a binding gift out of all proportion to anything that you had done or deserved. It was a gift that you couldn't successfully ignore or claim as your right.

The Covenant Breakers

Time and time again Israel failed to be loyal and to honour the Covenant with God. Israel underestimated and abused this unique relationship so the Lord mobilised the prophets of the Old Testament. Amos shows two sides of the Covenant when he prophesied, *"You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities"* (Amos 3:2) Israel is chosen and loved but at the same time they share the dangerous situation of being the special objects of God's interest. More dangerous than the worship of all the pagan idols is the choice of the chosen people to spurn God's love and to worship themselves. A new, unprecedented Covenant is described by Jeremiah chapter 31 when it is announced that the Lord will give a new heart of flesh to his people. (Ezekiel 36:26)

The message and ministry of Jesus installs this New Covenant and guarantees a future new creation. The miracles of healing are signs of the breaking through of the new creation into the old world. In his strategic death Jesus obliterates the dividing wall separating humanity from God and the Jew from the Gentile. Jesus becomes the pioneer of a new humanity, the head of a new people of God -- the Church. The Holy Spirit is poured out and brings transformation and God's power in a new age. In Acts Chapter seven, Stephen laments the broken old covenant as he says -- *'You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.'* However there is another side to this story. The Lord will not allow his people to forget him. Judgement falls upon Jesus, and as the *Lamb of God* he makes forgiveness possible. The heart-felt reality of God's love is known through the Holy Spirit and in an amazing way God indwells/captures the new people of God in Covenant. Through the darkness of constant failure the deeds of the Covenant-keeping God shine ever brighter.

The Awesome New Covenant Identity

Like Israel, over and over again the history of the church is that of losing its way, of murmuring and practising treason against the God who seeks to save and redeem it. Yet in a dynamic, creative way God faithfully renews the Church through history time and time again. Visser'T Hooft says:

"The most important contribution which the study of its own history (the Church) can and should make to the life of the Church is to teach it how its Lord operates through judgement and renewal -- such a presentation of Church history would show the extraordinary capacity for renewal which characterises the Christian Church and which distinguishes it from all other societies. It would demonstrate that there is at the centre of the story of the Church, as there is in the story of Israel, a dynamic which does not fit into the categories of idealist or materialistic philosophies of history. ---What is it that makes for the rebirth of the Church when everything in its own life and in the life of the world seems to point to its approaching death? Why is it that the great attempts to suppress it have so often led to its renewal?--- Calvin's word that the story of the

Church is a story of many resurrections, is true and its truth ought to colour and dominate our whole thinking about the present and future of the Church.” However this does not mean the Church is automatically renewed.

The Uniting Church

The writer of Hebrews attempts to shake the Church awake with a number of warnings about self-confident delusions and hardness of heart. It also says, The Lord disciplines those that he loves.(Heb.12:6) The danger for the Uniting Church is that it will take for granted that it is the Church of Jesus Christ and that it will live in institutional egocentricity with the false security of being a leading ‘progressive’ Church. Visser’T Hooft says: ‘*The promise that the gates of hell will not overcome it (the Church) is not given to every society which calls itself ‘Church.’ It is only given to the body which Jesus Christ calls “my Church”. And the great question which every part of the Church must ask itself with fear and trembling is therefore, ‘Are we in truth in the Church of Jesus Christ’?*

This brings us to the point of greater realisation and clarity about what it means to be the Church in 2018. As the Church in this generation we are not merely a bunch of separate, compassionate, humanitarian, social-justice institutions. **We are a called, covenant people, the objects of God’s Holy love and nothing less than his holy instrument in the world.**

The Uniting Church Basis of Union states that we are a pilgrim people on the way to a promised end. We are still in the situation in which we have no lasting city and we seek the city which is to come. (Heb. 13:14) This means we live by faith not by sight, with a certain hope and expectation that the kingdom will come at God’s appointed time. However we are a people under constant pressure to yield to forces which penetrate our life, which means the church needs the constant renewal of its life. This is made clear in the parable of the tares. The enemy, that is Satan has sown weeds among the wheat. In this world we will always be a ‘mixed company’. As St Augustine says: ‘*As long as she is here, the whole Church prays: forgive us our sins.*’ We are not without spot or wrinkle but through what the church has already received (forgiveness) we are confident about the future. That doesn’t mean we passively accept the contradictions between our calling and the reality of our life. It doesn’t mean we surrender biblical certainty, spiritual devotion or zeal for mission. **It means that in decline we are not surprised by the chastening hand of God’s judgement. It means that while the present is still dominated by the powers of self-belief, social expediency, deception, and apathy, the finality of these powers have been overcome in the victory of Christ. It means we certainly know who we are and we pray constantly and with confidence, “Thy Kingdom Come,” and for the renewal of the life of the Uniting Church.**

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Sources: (1) W.H.Visser’T Hooft, *The Renewal of the Church*, SCM Press Ltd 1956. A lecture at Mansfield College, Oxford. (2) David Williams, *The Pain-Pleasure World view*. CMS, Vic. Branch Matters May 2018, Vol 2, No4. (3) Sam Allberry, *Is God anti-gay?* 2015, the good book, p 46-47. (4) Vaughan Roberts, *Transgender*, 2016, the good book, p73.

