

THE GRAND DESIGN

by

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Jesus asked the infirm man at the pool, "Do you desire to become whole?" (hugantlo). "To become whole," used here, enjoys a synonymous link with benotes (oneness), and sozo (to be saved). When Jesus prayed that the church be one He asked for harmony, integrity, wholeness, whole salvation, health of the church (Jn. 17:20,21).

The genius of the movement called, "The Reformation of the Nineteenth Century," by our venerable teacher, Dean Everest Walker, lies in our fathers' desire to see reality whole and in their willingness to help the Christ perfect unity in His church. They understood from Jesus' prayer (Jn. 17:20,21) that the unity of Christians like that enjoyed by the Father and Son is a pre-condition to winning the world to the faith.

Jesus' prayer for unity is the motivation behind the establishment and progress of the European Evangelistic Society, led by Dean Walker, Earl Stuckenbruck, and William L. Thompson for many years. The unity imperative inspires the continuing work of the Society through the Institute for the Study of Christian Origins which, according to Australian brother, Donald E. Stewart, is, "the most strategic thing that the Restoration Movement has done in the 20th. century."

In 1809, Thomas Campbell, grieved over a fragmented church known by various nicknames which presumed to take out or enhance the name of the Christ, issued a call to unity. In the manner of Jefferson he wrote for the church the "Declaration and Address." He said: "It is the grand design and native tendency, of our holy religion, to reconcile and unite man to God, and to each other, in truth and love, to the glory of God, and their own present and eternal good."

The "design" is the Lord's, first, and therefore must

be the church's intention. Campbell went on to say: "...union in truth is our motto. The Divine Word is our Standard; in the Lord's name we display our banners."

Let us now consider briefly three things which belong to the nature and work of truth which is the basis of the "grand design." The points are these: Truth, Ever-Unconcealing; Truth, Ever-Liberating and Truth, Ever-Prioritizing.

Truth Ever-Unconcealing

The identification of Himself with Truth (Jn. 14:6) means that Jesus is the sum-total of unconcealment (revelation). We may grow in His likeness from one degree of splendor to another while we behold the face of Truth (II Cor. 3:18). He and His love-letter to mankind are living and active, always revealing. As John Robinson, a Pilgrim Father, put it: "The Lord hath more truth to break forward from His word." This is because the very nature of truth is revelation, universal openness, "glasnost."

Leaders of the classic movement urged all to keep Him, the truth, central to experience and to consider our opinions as only relatively important. It is in whom we believe, not what all we believe that saves us. With His Spirit in us (Jn. 14:16-18; 16:13), our character will manifest the living Christ to the world.

Truth is the opposite of concealment and forgetfulness. Truth flows, energizes, "emerging and rising, the spontaneous unfolding that lingers" (Heidigger). Truth (aletheia), the opposite of hiddenness, is formed by adding a negative prefix (a), to lethe. Lethe is from the verb, lanthanu, meaning, "to forget." Truth is literally "not lethe," not hiddenness, not forgetfulness.

You recognize Lethe as the mythological river in

Hades, the river of forgetfulness, oblivion, the place of the dead. Milton speaks of Lethe this way:

A slow and silent stream,
Lethe, the river of oblivion, rolls
Her watery labyrinth; whereof who drinks
Forthwith his former state and being forgets---
Forgets both joy and grief, pleasure and pain.

Truth, like Word, is event, reality, sincerity in action. It is something that is done (Jn. 3:21); it is public. Because truth is ever-revealing we are assured by Jesus: "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden, that will not be made known." (Mt. 10:26).

It seems strange that the greatest positive word in language is burdened with a negative prefix. Perhaps for hundreds of years the Greeks had been more interested in concealment of reality than revelation. Is that strange? Was not Socrates made to drink the cup of hemlock because he "corrupted" the youth in the pursuit of truth? Concealment was part of the "wisdom" of the world (see I Cor. 1:18-25). The "wisdom of the world" required the (tongue-in-cheek) "foolishness of God" to dramatize the unacceptability of academic wordiness as a way of life. The so-called "foolishness of God" was the wisdom and power of God, not in mere words but also in action. This wisdom was made manifest in the "folly" of the cross-demonstration. Talk alone is foolish when it presumes to be the faith. As Chrysostom said it: "For since they prided themselves on it (the philosophers), He (God) lost no time in exposing it. For what sort of wisdom is it, when it cannot discover the chief of things that are good? He caused her therefore to appear foolish after she had first convicted herself. ...He cast out Plato for example, not by means of another philosopher of more skill, but by the unlearned fisherman. ...the Greeks demand of us a rhetorical style, and the acuteness of sophistry. But preach we to these...the cross."

The attempt to hide reality lingers on in the "flesh" of the world. One of Ibsen's characters points out that illusion is the stimulating principle. Rob the average person of this and he/she has nothing left. Eliot's Becket says: "Human kind cannot bear much reality." Many prefer hiddenness to the truth, which is defined by Francis Bacon as "naked and open daylight." The Christmas song puts it poetically: the Rose of Sharon is a "rose e'er blooming."

Our fathers saw truth reflected in the negatives as well as in the positives, in both humane and "unhumane" literature. They agreed with Erasmus who said that wherever you see truth you can look upon it as Christianity.

When I first saw Heiddiger's statement that truth is unconcealment, I asked myself, "What does this Nazi have to say about truth?" (Hitler knew so much about truth that he committed suicide in his desperate attempt to conceal it.) When I traced the word in the Greek, I found the philosopher to be etymologically correct. The truth about truth may come from strange places.

Did not a great apostle say to the Greeks that "God has not left Himself without witness?" (Acts 14:17; Rom. 1:18-21). He was not ashamed to cite choice sayings of pagan Greeks. "For we are indeed His offspring," (Acts 17:28) is one such quotation. He was thankful that they knew some truth although they usually changed it into a lie (Rom. 1:25).

The most fantastic quote in the New Testament is an aphorism expressed by the Greeks in the 5th. or 6th. century B.C., and written in Aeschylus' play, "Agamemnon," line 1602, I believe. Had it not been a common saying some might accuse Jesus of plagiarism. He quoted it from heaven to Saul when the persecutor was reminded that it was hard to "kick against the pricks."

Whether we see truth in life or literature, it will

never be exhausted. New questions of truth open up new facets of Jesus. And it all belongs to our fathers and to us.

Truth Ever-Liberating

Jesus declared that when we know the truth we shall be liberated from bondage (Jn. 8:32). He adds this: "If the son sets you free you shall be free indeed," implying that truth is embodied essentially in His person.

In Christ, therefore, our boundaries are steadily being pushed back. Astronomers can see in the so-called "red shift" on a kind of videotape that the universe is rapidly expanding. (Many believe that eventually it will fall in on itself until it is compressed so tightly that it will explode (the big bang) and send its fragments out again. Perhaps this is what Peter envisions: after the universe melts with fervent heat this will be the time when we look for new heavens and new earth wherein dwells righteousness. (II Pet. 10:13). By asking questions of the cosmos we are obtaining new unconcealments of the reality of Him who is the Word-Creator of the universe. We will not have the total returns on Christology before we understand the universe He created. Do not despair, we have already shot the moon.

Our fathers realized that our liberation in Christ means that we are free to preach truth; that we need not heed any "custom, school or fashion" which abhors our freedom. The churches I have served expected me to preach from the whole context of truth. In more than 42 years I have never been reprimanded for doing it.

Our fathers saw no need to establish seminaries (from the word, "seed," or semen") that artificially inseminate doctrines which hedge in and perpetuate sectarian systems. If we are sanctified in the truth (the word being truth, Jn. 17:17) we have no need to

protect ourselves from truth as a whole. The Hebrews at Sinai were able to stand in the terrible presence of God because they wore the protective grace-coat of dedication (sanctification, holiness) prescribed of God (Ex. 19:20-25). We too may stand the heat of bare truth because we wear the grace-robe of Jesus. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Being holy persons, then, and rooted and grounded in love, we love the truth which liberates. Should we not, therefore, comprehend with all the holy persons (saints) the breadth (platos) and length (mekos) and height (hupsos) and depth (bathos) and know the love of God which surpasses knowledge? (Eph. 3:18,19).

We must live in these dimensions if we are to correct the heresies that surface in every generation since the post-apostolic age. Within them we can help liberate Christendom from sectarianisms which elevate errors and even relative truth to centrality of the faith.

We are both conservative and liberal: conservative, in the sense that we hold to the truth that is delivered once-for-all to the church; liberal, in that we are liberated and therefore free to preach and live the living word.

What we usually call "liberalism" is merely sentimentalism, grounded in doctrines with no truth basis. Fundamentalism can be just as sentimental. It can dote on a half-truth separated from the whole truth. For example, it can define belief-alone as the whole of faith and leave out commitment or obedience ("obedience of faith," Rom. 1:5, 16, according to Calvin, nothing other than faith itself).

We conserve all that is of the Word and we are free to find the truth's new facets which study unconceals. Being liberated, we are therefore free to explore the far-reaches of truth. Loving the living truth, we are then emboldened to shake ourselves free of the false

doctrines of our vested interests. Let us mention one or two. First, the pagan doctrine of determinism, in essence, fatalism.

In Homer's "Iliad," written circa 1000 B.C., the sack of Troy is delayed into the tenth year because of a continuing quarrel between King Agamemnon and his greatest warrior, Achilles. As part of the spoils of war, Achilles had been given by the army the beautiful girl, Briseis, whom he keeps on his ship during the siege. Agamemnon, being the King and commander of the Greek army, decides he wants Briseis for himself and takes her. The Greeks cannot win so long as Achilles sulks and refuses to fight. When the two are finally reconciled Agamemnon explains to his army that he could not help what he did because Zeus and the Fates put the madness in his heart. The Greeks did not say the the devil made them do it, God did. Hector, chief warrior for the Trojans, expresses the point that many Calvinists emphasize when he tells his wife not to worry about his possible death because his life is in the hands of the gods. If death is ordained, no use to worry about it anyway. When Achilles finally slays Hector he, himself, dies an early death because the fates determined it. It seems that his mother, Thetis, who sought to make him immortal by baptizing him in the River Styx, did not do a thorough job of it. (Preachers take note.) She did not immerse his heel which remained vulnerable.

The notion that we have no control over our destiny is, to this day, taken up by many Calvinists who suppress the truth. In the Blue Ridge Mountains, earlier in this century, a funeral was conducted for a young man named George. He had come home drunk and tried to kill his stepmother. In the ensuing struggle the gun shot and killed him. One of the several preachers participating in the funeral waxed eloquent, saying:

Little Georgie-a, is a-walkin' the streets of glory-a
He done exactly what the Lord wanted him to do-a
When the Lord pulled the foundations of the earth-a

He planned for Little Georgie to be born-a
And to get drunk-a, and to try to shoot his
stepmother-a
And to have the pistol go off and shoot himself-a
And he fulfilled God's purpose-a
And he's gone the way God wanted him to go-a
A man can't die before his time comes-a, no how
Nor in any way nor in any time except as God planned-a
If he did-a, what would he do when his time comes-a
Would he die again?*

The preacher might just as well have gone on to explain that the three fates worked it all out and even Zeus could not have set their decree aside. Clotho spun his thread of destiny, Lachesis determined how far it would stretch and Atropos cut his thread. Much of Calvinism is nothing more than warmed-over pagan mythology.

There is a Christian doctrine of Providence (from pro-vidéo) in the truth of Christ. God desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (I Tim. 2:4-6). He made possible our liberation through the Mediator, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for many. God ordained through the gospel to give us grace but on the condition of faith (Eph. 2:8). God gives opportunity to become Christian to all those who respond positively to the gospel invitation. Even God, however, does not make us Christian without our act of will.

There is an angle on providence which many do not see. God predestined the ancient Israelites to take the Promised Land quickly. The paradox is that His promise was not realized by them because they chose not to take it all. As Joseph Sizoo reminds us: "the people did not meet the divine requirements."

It should be no secret that God's desires for unity are thwarted by the sectarian church which enjoys no symphony of fellowship but a cacophony of uncertain sounds. Even yet, He will liberate all who come to Him through the Son. It is our privilege to bring the

simple and profound good news to persons who desire to be freed by truth. Barton Stone finally realized that he was free to make his own response to the Gospel invitation. His sense of Calvinistic determinism was supplanted by joy in the truth.

The truth will free us, also, from a low anthropology which practically denies that we may grow in grace. Needless self-effacement comes out in many prayers which confess over and over again the sins that have already been forgiven. The oft-quoted prayer which implies that we have left undone all that we should have done and done everything we should not have done and there is no health in us, is a bit extreme. Even the sinful Corinthians are called saints (I Cor. 1:2). Can we not grow in grace in the family of God, can we not love God, the first-commandment imperative? (If we love God we should tell Him so. Let us not be like the reserved New Englander who loved his wife so much that it was all he could do to keep from telling her about it. God's love does not inspire our cold obedience nearly so much as fear does. Only love inspires us to do more than the letter of the law demands. Consequently we do because we love. When a rather troublesome elder is said to have died his fellow-elders debated as to whether one with a spirit like his could ever make heaven. Several voted no. Finally one of them said, "I think he'll go to heaven, all right, but he won't like God.")

Luke says that Barnabas was a good man and full of the Holy Spirit. Was he mistaken? We are a new creation and need confess only sins that become obvious to us in the continuing life with Christ.

On an Easter Day John Donne preached a sermon on death and life as King James I lay near death. Donne pointed out what man may be. He may choose to be merely Adam, red earth: Ishe, nothing but a sound; Enos, a "wretched and miserable creature." Best of all is the other "Hebrew man, Micheber, a man "accomplished in all excellencies, a man accompanied with all advantages; fame, and good opinion justly conceived."

To become McCheber, in Christ, of course, means freedom to be and to become. In Christ we do not need to diminish ourselves by singing the song, "O, To Be Nothing." Freed by truth, improvement is possible. We do not have to agree with O'Neill's character in, "The Iceman Cometh," that the best of our dreams are only pipe dreams. "For freedom did Christ set us free." (Gal. 5:1).

Truth Ever-Prioritizing

Without a willingness to honor priorities and relate them to one another the epithet, "grand design," would be just so much empty rhetoric. Unity in truth demands that we honor the Christ's priorities. The Word, in Truth, creates and relates the creation to itself and spreads the truth "from pole to pole;" truth, in word, defines the purpose and relative value of everything created. Jesus named the first priority: love; love of God, love of self (implied) and love of neighbor. On love hangs everything else. Without it, unity is not possible.

In love with Truth, we are motivated to courage and persistence in search of the "roots" of the church, quintessential Christianity which issued from the fountainhead where pristine faith was the purest.

Could we make classic Christianity more explicit to the world if we employed a certain old word which has largely lain fallow in the vocabulary of the populace until now? It is now a household word because it relates to enhancement of the family budget--it is a matter of life and debt.

The word is, "generic." Generic Christianity is what we advocate. Like "the medicine of immortality," which needs no additives to render it more therapeutic, and needs no brand names which are only rhetoric devices designed to give the generic greater distinction, generic Christianity is not improved by additives and brand names. They limit and diminish the faith with

their adjectival modifiers. Sometimes they are downright comical, a case in point being the name of a church I saw printed on its bulletin board: "Independent, Fundamental, Missionary, Pre-Millial, Bible Baptist Church." (This reminds me of the name of a course said to have once been offered by the University of Chicago: "Baptist Astronomy") Incidentally, it was a Methodist named, Rice Haggard, who recommended, in 1794, that the followers of the Christ should be known simply as Christians.

Once it is clear that we need no identity except that of Christ we can then be properly concerned with other high priorities. Next on the list is the confession of faith (creed) required of candidates of baptism. This confession, first uttered by Peter (Mt. 16:16), is also clearly implied in Acts 2:36-38. As the ABCs are an entry into the whole of the English language, the confession of Jesus as the Christ is an entry into the whole of the faith. This creed will never need revision, although we grow in the knowledge of the truth in the creed. To coerce babes in the ABCs to agree with statements of faith which only graduates in philosophy could possibly understand is to infect the faith with dishonesty from the beginning.

Related closely to these priorities of the church are: the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper, both of which preach the gospel by calling attention to the death, burial and resurrection of the Christ (gospel); the message of the church, the good news preached, taught and exhorted; the mission of the church, making disciples and teaching them the word of truth; and the ministry of the church, being humble service instead of kingly prerogative (See Mt. 25:31-40).

When ministers count kingly prerogative a thing to be grasped they are liable to both acute and chronic attacks of egomania which makes them susceptible to all of the "seven deadly sins" (pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, lust) except perhaps sloth. They, like Achilles and Agamemnon, may insist on taking their extra-curricular girls along to comfort

them in the battle. When the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is weakened by conventions and churches for fear that the preacher's kingly authority will be diminished then the preacher is incited to embrace the old theory of divine right.

Like King James I, who insisted that members of parliament should be lions under the throne, minister-kings might insist that their elders are lions under the pulpit. James' son, Charles I, attempted to lord it over parliament until the lions rose up and severed his head from his body.

Our only lion on the throne is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5). Under the throne, the preacher-servant is first among equals perhaps in the communication of the gospel and the elders first among equals pastoring or leading the flock. The rest of the hot polloi (hopefully) are growing up to perfection and participating in the leadership.

Our fathers saw such priorities as these in express commands of Christ or in the approved precedents set by the apostolic church. In the tradition of Sir Edward Coke who looked for democratic roots prior to the time of James I and Charles I, our fathers sought to understand the origins of the faith. Coke saw in such documents as the Magna Carta (1215) precedents which denied the king a position above the law.

In the spirit of Coke, Thomas Campbell called upon Christendom to reexamine the origins of the faith and embrace the truths commanded or manifest in the precedents of the Apostolic Church.

Conclusion

The grand design of unity in truth and love required from early times an epic struggle. The warfare will last until the church embodies the unity like that which the Father and Son enjoy with each other.

As you know, the style of an epic-poem as a genre of literature is grand, noble and heroic. The "Iliad" and "Odyssey" of Homer and the "Aeneid" by Virgil, describe warfare in which the gods participate. The battle of Troy is won by the Greeks only after the hosts of heaven give them the edge. They can not qualify for victory, however, so long as there is fundamental disunity between Agamemnon and Achilles. So long as the warrior sulks he can not overcome Hector and Hector must be overcome before the Trojans can fall. When the two giants are reunited they, and the gods together, bring the warfare to a close.

The principalities and powers and their petty potentates are fighting against the unity of the church. So long as the church is torn by division Christendom is a house divided against itself and cannot, with the Christ, win the world.

Unlike the epics of Homer and Virgil, the heavenly forces on our side are real entities. They fight together with us against a common enemy with the strength of Leviathan, that primeval dragon (Isa. 27:1; Ps. 74:14) that has always threatened the creatures of God.

Unity in truth is the grand design of our Lord and will remain so until the time when "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9). When the church is united as the Father and Son are united they will give us the victory.

Romans 8:19-21 (R.S.V.):

"For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing (unconcealment) of the sons of God (creation's priority); for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty (freedom) of the children of God."

*Davids, Richard C., The Man Who Moved A Mountain,
Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1970, p.5.

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