

REFORMATION ECUMENISM REFRAMED

James R. Payton, Jr.

Redeemer University College, Hamilton, ON, Canada

As is commonly recognized, the Protestant Reformation led to the repeated splintering of Western Christianity. Attempts at the time to preserve or re-establish the unity of the Church in Western Europe—what can be described as “Reformation ecumenism”—are *terra incognita* for most people, even Reformation scholars. This article addresses that desideratum in a preliminary fashion.

In the introduction this article surveys the divisions among Protestants that arose in the wake of the Reformation. Then it considers the contrasting approaches toward dealing with disagreement as espoused by two figures whose influence on others was preponderant. This leads to considering the three main Reformers who engaged in unitive endeavors.

Then it points in a preliminary fashion to intra-Protestant ecumenical endeavors, followed by the broader ecumenical initiatives that led to remarkable, although ultimately unsuccessful, achievements—including Catholic-Protestant agreement on the doctrine of justification. This issues into a broad overview of ecumenical approaches manifested subsequently, leading to the stimuli that generated the ecumenical movement beginning with the nineteenth century, followed by a consideration of the attitudinal changes within Roman Catholicism during the twentieth, which have led to an ecumenical openness that has borne remarkable fruit in many ways.

Introduction

The Reformation divided Protestants not only from Roman Catholics but also from each other. The initial intra-Protestant split opened up with the conflict between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli over, of all things, the Lord's Supper, the sacrament of unity!¹ That division split the "Evangelicals" (as they were then known) already by the mid-1520s and was never truly healed. While the Wittenberg Concord of 1536 brought a temporary truce to this tension, within only a few years the conflict resumed. By the 1540s, it had not only divided Lutherans from Reformers again: it had also divided Luther's followers into "Genesio-Lutherans" and "Philippists"²—sometimes referred to derisively as "Crypto-Calvinists."³

While the Reformed segment of the Reformation avoided internecine strife over the Eucharist, divisions arose over the doctrines of predestination (in continental Europe) and questions of church government (in the British Isles)—the latter leading to distinct Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Independent, and (in due course) Baptist churches. Later, Methodists were split from Anglicans. This pattern, rooted deeply in Reformation-era soil, has continued to the present: there are more than 33,000 Protestant denominations in the world today, which draws an ironic parallel with Jesus' words: "that they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe" (John 17:20–21).⁴

1. In the Apostle Paul's discussion of the benefits of sharing the Lord's Supper, he urged, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17, ESV).

2. For background and fuller information, see Bente, *Historical Introductions*.

3. The Augsburg Confession of 1530 offered a strictly Lutheran perspective, but Melancthon's edited 1540 version softened the wording enough that the Reformed were able to accept it.

4. The actual total, as calculated from the data listed in Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 16 is 32,768; however, according to the Center for Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (which must calculate the number in a significantly different fashion), the number is considerably higher—about 47,000.

The divisions that arose during the Reformation, as well as efforts to overcome them, can best be understood by taking stock of the two leading figures whose influence was preponderant in the Reformation era. Their particular perspectives and approaches shaped and directed the attitudes and endeavors of other Reformers. The two were Martin Luther and Desiderius Erasmus.

Little needs to be said about the perspective of Martin Luther (1483–1546) in this regard. Even a scant acquaintance with Luther’s conduct in any of the controversies in which he engaged is enough to show that the Saxon reformer’s viewpoints had sharp edges and hard lines.⁵ For the purposes of this study, it is important to recognize that he was trained as a scholastic theologian, a training that led him, as with others who received it, to a default perspective primed for debate and disputation, not dialogue or discussion. While Luther repudiated much of the doctrine he had been taught in his scholastic training, the default pattern persisted: he remained, as one Reformation scholar has described it, “a typical mendicant theologian, with all the loud violences of the breed.”⁶

To do justice to Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) requires a careful reassessment in view of the relevant research of the last two generations. Since the mid-sixteenth century, he has regularly been vilified by Protestants and Roman Catholics alike for failure to “side” fully with either. But since the late 1960s, with the quincentennial of his birth, Reformation-era scholarship has wrought a significant change in the estimation of Erasmus: it has shown that he was a genuine theologian, with a real program for renewing Christianity—one that was other than those of either the Protestant Reformers or the defenders of Rome. He was the recognized leader of Northern Christian Humanism. That movement, like its Italian counterpart, the Renaissance, wanted to renew and revitalize their day by a return *ad fontes*—but the movement Erasmus led saw those ancient fountains above all in

5. See the treatment in Edwards, *Luther and the False Brethren*.

6. Rupp, ed., *Luther and Erasmus*, 7.

ancient Christian sources.⁷ This led Erasmus to his prolific endeavors in editing and publishing the Greek New Testament and the works of the Church fathers. These were to serve as the necessary building blocks of his vision for renewing and reforming the Church.⁸

With all this, plus his urbanity and undeniable literary skill, Erasmus had enormous influence in his day on both Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars alike. By 1525, almost all the Christian humanists under the age of thirty had turned to Protestantism, while those over thirty had for the most part remained in the Roman communion. In 1530, Northern Christian Humanism had shaped all but two of the Protestant reformers (Martin Luther and Nicholas von Amsdorf). None of these Protestant leaders ever repudiated Erasmus. To be sure, they ended up differing with his perspectives on free will as expressed in his 1524 work, *On the Freedom of the Will*. Even so, none of them distanced himself from Erasmus. Indeed, in 1542 Martin Bucer described Erasmus as “the father of the Reformation,” and in a public oration in 1557 Philip Melanchthon—Luther’s close associate—praised Erasmus as one who prepared the way for the Reformation. Clearly, these leading Protestant reformers thought highly of and respected him.

Desiderius Erasmus distrusted the capacity of human reason for settling truth. In this regard, he stood with the Church fathers, who backed away from thinking they or any mere human could “explain” God and his ways.⁹ Erasmus preferred to stand with

7. For a discussion of the relationship of the Renaissance, Northern Christian humanism, and the Reformation, see Payton, *Getting the Reformation Wrong*, 52–71.

8. For a fine introduction to the reassessment of Erasmus, see Augustijn, *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence*.

9. Consider the declaration by Irenaeus of Lyons in the late second century, “God cannot be measured by the heart, and he is incomprehensible by the mind” (*Against Heresies*, 4:19, 2); the challenge posed in the fourth century by Cyril of Jerusalem, “If the very least of his works cannot be comprehended, can the one who made all things be comprehended?” (*The Catechetical Lectures* 6:9); and the declaration in the mid-eighth century by John of Damascus, “One should furthermore bear in mind that the ways of God’s providence are many, and that they can neither be explained in words nor grasped by

the *consensus omnium*, the faith he believed had been embraced through the ages by Christians, down to his day. With this orientation, Erasmus emphasized the importance of dialogue and listening, rather than debate and disputation: he was convinced that truth is not distilled at high temperature.

The opposing approaches of Luther and Erasmus in these regards set the stage for both the conflicts that arose and the attempts at healing them. Erasmus took to heart the biblical directive, “Be swift to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” For his part, though, Luther recognized that verse came from the Epistle of James (1:19)—and it is well known what Luther thought of the Epistle of James.

These vast differences in approach manifested themselves clearly in the arguments of Erasmus and Luther in 1524–1525 regarding the freedom or bondage of the will. In his 1525 response, Luther repeatedly attacked and vilified Erasmus—who, true to his own orientation, refused to respond in kind. In an 11 April 1526 letter to Luther, Erasmus complained that Luther’s 1525 diatribe was filled with personal abuse, but he said he did not want to dwell on that. He clarified what was far more important to him:

It is *this* that distresses me, and all the best spirits with me, that with that arrogant, impudent, seditious temperament of yours you are shattering the whole globe in ruinous discord, exposing good men and lovers of good learning to certain frenzied Pharisees, arming for revolt the wicked and the revolutionary, and in short so carrying on the cause of the Gospel as to throw all things both sacred and profane into chaos; as if you were eager to prevent this storm from turning at last to a happy issue; I have ever striven towards such an opportunity . . . It is the public disaster which distresses me, and the irremediable confusion of everything, for which we have to thank only your uncontrolled nature, that will not be guided by the wise counsel of

the mind” (*The Orthodox Faith* 2:29). Statements like these abound in the works of the Church fathers. (The citations here appear in Payton, ed., *A Patristic Treasury*, 101, 231, 455.)

friends . . . I would have wished you a better mind, were you not so delighted with your own.¹⁰

These two highly respected leaders of the Reformation era demonstrate two distinct approaches to dealing with disagreement. Each leader influenced three Protestant reformers who ended up playing significant roles in ecumenical endeavours in the Reformation era—Philip Melanchthon, Martin Bucer, and John Calvin.

Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) was a brilliant young scholar: by 1521, when he was appointed Professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg, he had already published three books. In that year, he became the Reformation’s first systematic theologian with the publication of *Loci Communes*. As a committed Christian humanist, he set about revising and rewriting the university curriculum at Wittenberg; he did it so successfully that his revisions were implemented at almost all German universities in the sixteenth century, including the Catholic ones.¹¹ For a while after arriving at Wittenberg, Melanchthon became a little Luther, aping his vigorous colleague’s attitudes and harsh orientation, but within a couple of years, he had found himself again and manifested significant differences from Luther in the way he interacted with others: specifically for our considerations here, Melanchthon was more open to dialogue. He had differences from Luther in this regard, but Luther trusted him.

Martin Bucer (1491–1551) is not as well known today as he was in the sixteenth century, when he served as the leading Protestant pastor and theologian in the free imperial city of Strasbourg. In 1539, John Calvin described him as a man “who because of his profound scholarship, bounteous knowledge about a wide range of subjects, keen mind, wide reading, and many other different virtues, remains unsurpassed today by anyone,

10. Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of the Reformation*, 241–2 (emphasis added); the Latin original is reproduced in Allen et al., eds., *Opus epistolarum*, 6:306–7.

11. In view of these monumental and wide-ranging endeavors, Melanchthon received the epithet *Praeceptor Germaniae*—“teacher of Germany.”

can be compared with only a few, and excels the vast majority.”¹² This gifted reformer was passionately committed to the unity of the Church and sought it diligently. Not long after the debacle of the Marburg Colloquy in 1529, where Landgrave Philip of Hesse brought Luther, Zwingli, and Bucer (with others) to try (unsuccessfully) to achieve agreement on the Lord’s Supper, Bucer published his 1530 Commentary on the Gospels. In the preface, Bucer railed against Luther’s stubborn refusal to consider any views on the Eucharist except his own as tolerable within the Protestant movement (without, to be sure, mentioning Luther by name): Bucer denounced an attitude that repudiated others simply because they do not speak and think precisely as required, noting that he had never known two people who thought exactly the same way, even in theology.¹³ For Bucer, nothing worse could be said of anyone than to be known as indifferent to or an opponent of the unity of the Church.

John Calvin (1509–1564) served as pastor in Geneva from 1536 to 1538, but with William Farel he was expelled by the city council. He travelled to Strasbourg and there became pastor of the French refugee congregation in the city. Calvin became fast friends with Bucer, his older colleague, from whom he learned so much (which he later implemented when he returned to Geneva in 1541) that a Reformation scholar has urged that what we call “Calvinism” could better be styled “Bucerianism.”¹⁴ Also deeply committed to the unity of the Church, Calvin travelled with Bucer to the religious colloquies of the early 1540s (to

12. Calvin offered these comments in the introduction to his 1539 Commentary on Romans, acknowledging Bucer’s 1536 commentary on the same book but excusing his own volume by pointing out that Bucer’s prolix work (which has been estimated to run in excess of 1,000,000 Latin words) was probably too lengthy and detailed for most interested readers.

13. Greschat, *Martin Bucer*, 104–5. At Marburg, Luther had excoriated Bucer for holding views on the Lord’s Supper that did not square with his; ultimately, Luther refused to extend the hand of fellowship to Zwingli, Bucer, and the others who did not affirm Luther’s perspective on the Eucharist. (Greschat gives extensive treatment in his biography to Bucer’s career-long endeavors to promote unity.)

14. Pauck, ed., *Heritage*, 77–92. From my perspective as a Bucer scholar, though, this enthusiastic statement is a considerable exaggeration.

be considered below), where Reformation ecumenism found its broadest and deepest accomplishments.

Reformation Ecumenism

The early 1530s saw a series of important steps, led by Bucer and Melanchthon, to achieve intra-Protestant ecumenism. Extensive labors eventually produced a path to agreement on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The Wittenberg Concord of 1536 was the denouement of that journey. Even though that agreement would ultimately not hold fast, it showed an openness to pursue ecumenical unity within the Protestant camp during the Reformation era. Bucer and Melanchthon played the leading roles in this initiative. This positive result led to an openness to pursue an even wider, more extensive unity—that between Protestants and Roman Catholics. This openness found expression in the religious colloquies of 1540–1541.

The division of Western Christendom caused pained anguish to Melanchthon and Bucer and, in due course, the young Calvin from the Protestant side, and to many Christian humanists within the Roman obedience. The question they all faced was pressing: How is it possible for the Church not to be one, as confessed in the Nicene Creed? On both sides of the division, each individual knew figures on the other side well: some had been fellow students during their academic training, and many corresponded with each other across the divisions in Church commitment which they now embraced. Those on both sides readily acknowledged that their own Church was seriously flawed in many regards; even so, their correspondence often appealed to the recipient to come to the other side, the “right” side. Eventually though, this correspondence began to take on a different tone.

It is not surprising that these continued contacts, and the mutual respect they reflected, given the confession that the Church is and must be one, led to attempts to discuss and define both what actually separated Protestants and Catholics, and also what

united them.¹⁵ This correspondence sought to find ways to come back together, for a genuine reunion and a significant reformation of the reunified Church.¹⁶ Neither is it surprising that political leaders saw promise in such undertakings, especially Emperor Charles V, whose holdings in the Holy Roman Empire had been ripped apart by the ecclesiastical division. Scholars in his own court became aware of the correspondence between Catholic and Protestant leaders of Christian humanist background and proposed to the emperor a way forward. Following their advice, in due course, the emperor sponsored a series of religious colloquies in the early 1540s. He intended these to be serious discussions between the theological leaders of both sides within Germany. The discussions were to deal substantively with the actual differences in theology and practice, and come to agreements that could serve as the basis for a reunion and reform of the church throughout Germany.

Significantly, those whom Charles V invited and on whom he pinned his hopes in these meetings were the *piores et eruditiores* (“the pious and learned”), a common designation at the time for Christian humanists. The recognized leaders of this select group on the Protestant side were Melanchthon and Bucer. John Calvin accompanied his Strasbourg colleague as an advisor (but he was unable to vote, since he was not himself German).

The emperor summoned and sponsored colloquies in 1540 and 1541 in Hagenau, Worms, and Regensburg.¹⁷ Preliminary warnings and directives issued by temporal lords to the respective participants brought some obstacles, but eventually they moved into the controverted issues. Lengthy discussions, intense

15. Martin Bucer was especially prolific in that regard: among his more notable contributions was his 1533 “Furbereytung zum Concilio” (“Preparation for the Council”), available in Stupperich, ed., *Bucers Deutsche Schriften* 5:259–362—in which Bucer argued that Catholics and Protestants had found agreement, among other controverted topics, on the doctrine of justification, all through respectful dialogue.

16. The seminal, and to this day the premier, treatment of this remains Stupperich, *Der Humanismus*.

17. The best treatment of the religious colloquies of 1540–1541 is Augustijn, *De Godsdienstgesprekken*.

arguments, and considerable wrangling made for a slow process, as the participants endeavored to spell out precisely a common perspective on a range of issues that had been vigorously contested. Eventually, remarkable and significant agreement was attained. At Regensburg, the last of the colloquies, building on advances in understanding and appreciation attained earlier in Hagenau and Worms, the Catholic and Protestant representatives reached agreement on the doctrines of humanity, the freedom of the will, original sin, and—especially remarkably—justification. However, they could not reach agreement on issues discussed subsequently, the sacraments and the papal office. With that failure, the colloquies could not serve the purpose hoped for by the emperor, so they did not bear lasting fruit, and the results they did attain have remained largely unknown.

The 1541 Regensburg Book, Article 5: De iustificatione hominis

The agreement on justification has received surprisingly little attention, and it had not been translated into English until recently.¹⁸ The participants in the colloquy were, for the Catholics, Gasparo Cardinal Contarini, Julius Pflug, John Gropper, and John Eck. The Protestant participants were Philip Melanchthon, Martin Bucer, John Pistorius, and John Calvin. (Only the official representatives appointed to the colloquy, however, were allowed to be signatories to the statement: Pflug, Gropper, Eck, Melanchthon, Bucer, and Pistorius.)¹⁹

18. As a Reformation scholar, it was surprising to me to discover that the agreement attained on the doctrine of justification had not appeared in English, so a few years ago I translated it, but I have not previously published it. I offer it below, with some introductory comments about who participated. (In preparing this paper, I discovered that this Regensburg article has recently been published in English translation in Lane, *Justification by Faith*, where it appears as Appendix I [233–8]; I have not had the opportunity to consult this translation.)

19. Ellipses indicate material not included in this translation. Nothing of substance to the presentation or argument has thus been elided: the omitted portions included only further statements or citations to the same effect as what had already been stated in the translated material. Information provided in

. . . A person's heart is turned unto God by the Holy Spirit through Christ. This happens through faith, by which a person, believing certainly all things that have been taught by God, assents with utmost confidence and without a doubt to the promises given to us by God (Who, as it is stated in the psalm, is faithful in all His words [Ps 145:13]). In this way the person receives assurance through the promise of God, a promise of forgiveness of sins by grace . . . the imputation of righteousness, and innumerable other gifts.

So, it is reliable and sound doctrine, that the sinner is justified by a living and efficacious faith—for through it, because of Christ, we are pleasing and acceptable to God. We call that faith “living” which is worked in us by the Holy Spirit—a faith in which, truly repenting of the old life, we are raised unto God and genuinely take hold of the mercy promised in Christ. By that living faith we are convinced that, on account of Christ's merit, we have received the remission of sins and reconciliation as God's gracious gift. Because of that, we cry out to God, “Abba Father” [Rom 8:15]. However, no one obtains this without love (which heals the will) also being simultaneously infused—so that a saved will, as Augustine says, may begin to keep the law.

Thus, a living faith is one that lays hold of the mercy in Christ, believes that the righteousness which is in Christ has been freely imputed to the one believing, and at the same moment receives the promise of the Holy Spirit and love. So then, that faith is justifying faith which works through love [Gal 5:6]. Even so, it is certain that we are justified—that is, accepted and reconciled to God—by the faith which takes hold of mercy and the righteousness that is imputed to us on account of Christ and His merit, and not on account of the worth or perfection of the righteousness communicated to us in Christ.

Further, although one who is justified receives and has through Christ “inherent” righteousness—as the apostle says, “you are washed, you are sanctified, you are justified” [1 Cor 5:11], etc. (because of which the holy fathers used the phrase *to be justified* for receiving an inherent righteousness)—nevertheless, the believing heart does not rest upon this righteousness, but only upon the righteousness of Christ given to us (without which there neither is nor can be any [inherent] righteousness). And so, by faith in Christ we are justified, or are “accounted righteous”—that is, accepted—through His merits,

square brackets was not part of the original document: such information either provides references for biblical citations or antecedent ideas.

and not on account of our worth or works. Because of inherent righteousness, we are called righteous, since we do those things which are righteous—according to that passage in John: “the one who does righteousness is righteous” [1 John 3:7].

And although the fear of God, repentance and humility, and other virtues must always increase in the regenerated, since their renovation remains imperfect and great infirmities cleave to them, nevertheless it ought to be taught that those who genuinely repent can always be sure, with a most certain faith, that on account of Christ the Mediator they are pleasing to God, because Christ is the Propitiator, High Priest, and Advocate for us, Whom the Father gave to us, and all good things with Him . . .

Moreover, the one who says, “we are justified by faith alone,” must at the same time teach the doctrine of repentance, of the fear of God, of the judgment of God, and of good works, so that the whole sum of preaching may stand firm—as Christ says, “preaching repentance and remissions of sins in My name”—lest this form of speaking [i.e., “by faith alone”] be understood otherwise than it has been preached.

This statement on justification met with a harsh reception and was repudiated, both in Rome and in Wittenberg. In Rome, Cardinal Caraffa (who later became Pope Paul IV) took Cardinal Contarini to task over it, and the Vatican as a whole took a uniformly negative view of the statement as conceding too much to the Protestants. In Wittenberg, Luther vigorously rejected the formulation of the doctrine in it. In a letter (10 or 11 May 1541) to John Frederick, Elector of Saxony, he dismissed the statement as “a defiled thing” and went on to point out his main objection to it: “The passage in Galatians 5 [vs. 6: ‘faith working by love’] does not speak of becoming righteous, but of the life of the righteous . . . This is the roguery of the papists . . . that one becomes or is righteous before God not by faith alone, but also by works or by love and grace which are called ‘inherent’ (which is all much the same). That is all wrong. And where they have that, they have everything, and we have nothing.”²⁰

From Regensburg, John Calvin offered quite a different assessment. In a letter to William Farel (also of 11 May 1541—

20. Luther, *Luthers Briefwechsel*, 9:406, 407.

and, thus, without cognizance of Luther's response), Calvin commented as follows:

Our friends in the commission have come to agreement . . . The debate in controversy was keen upon the doctrine of justification. At length a formula was drawn up which, on receiving certain corrections, was accepted on both sides. You will be astonished, I am sure, that our opponents have yielded so much, when you read the extracted copy . . . enclosed in this letter. Our friends have thus retained the substance of the true doctrine, so that nothing can be comprehended within it which is not to be found in our writings; you will desire, I know, a more distinct explication and statement of the doctrine, and, in that respect, you shall find me in complete agreement with yourself. However, if you consider with what kind of men we have to agree upon this doctrine, you will acknowledge that much has been accomplished.²¹

Similarly, in a 30 November 1541 letter to Landgrave Philip of Hesse, Martin Bucer spoke appreciatively of the statement adopted at Regensburg earlier in the year, urging that "in that agreed-upon article is comprised the entire doctrine of justification."²²

The belligerent pattern of the time called for hard lines and sharp edges, and the more accommodating endeavors urged by Christian humanism did not carry the day. In both the Roman obedience and within Protestantism, exclusion and anathema prevailed: The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent sealed this pattern for Rome, and the turn to Protestant scholasticism in both the Lutheran and the Reformed camps assured ongoing hostility.²³ Debate and division, with claims to exclusive truth, fed into and built on mutual condemnation. This pattern continued as the main pattern within Western Christendom.

21. Quoted in Bonnet, ed., *Selected Works of John Calvin*, 4:260.

22. Lenz, ed., *Briefwechsel*, vol. 2.

23. See the treatment of Protestant scholasticism in Payton, *Getting the Reformation Wrong*, 190–210.

Subsequent Unitive Approaches

Nevertheless, the ecumenical impulse toward discussion and attempted agreement urged by Desiderius Erasmus and Northern Christian Humanism did not entirely disappear. Periodically, voices spoke out against the harsh mutual condemnations and urged some sort of rapprochement. Among the Lutherans, George Calixtus (whose father had been a devoted student and follower of Melancthon) proposed the dictum of Vincent of Lerins (from the fifth century): “what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all”—thus, the foundational consensus shared by all Christians through the first five centuries, as a basis for reunion of Lutherans, the Reformed, and Catholics.²⁴ The French Reformed Church endorsed this approach in 1631. From among the Reformed, David Pareus (well-known as an expositor of the Heidelberg Catechism), in 1615 published *Irenicum* (“a call to peace”), pushing for the unification of Protestant churches.

One of the best known of all ecumenical utterances was presented in 1626 by the Lutheran Peter Meiderlin in his *Exhortation for the Peace of the Church*, in which he urged, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” During the eighteenth century, with the emergence of Pietism in both Lutheran and in Reformed circles, adherents came to a recognition of and respect for the teaching and practice of Pietists in the other camp, across the denominational divide so stressed by the Protestant scholastics. With this, Lutheran Pietists and Reformed Pietists came to experience each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, united by their common Christian faith and pietist commitments, despite what they had been told by the two groups’ respective scholastic theologians. This proved important for opening people up to ecumenical possibilities, and more than just personal experience of rapprochement took place. To name no others, Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), the

24. See the discussion in Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, 337–8, 373.

patron of the Moravian Brethren, showed genuine openness toward other traditions (including Catholics).

Even so, no particular effective initiatives emerged from these indications of ecumenical openness until the era of widespread missionary endeavors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As European churches sent missionaries to India and the Far East, those missionaries soon enough encountered the impact of the multiplied fractures of the Church. Those to whom they sought to bring the Christian message were confused by the competition and disagreements among the numerous different Christian denominations approaching them. The divisions among those who claimed to follow Christ hampered the witness to the gospel in these lands. One of the best-known evidences of this was the 1806 letter sent by William Carey, a Baptist missionary, back to churches in England, urging them to find a way to come together for the sake of an effective witness to the gospel. Similar concerns expressed by other missionaries spawned an awareness of the urgency of the problem. Discussions led to meetings and plans: in 1910 the first World Missionary Conference was held.²⁵ In only a few years this body was reconstituted as the International Missionary Council, which held its first meeting in 1921.

This missionary concern coalesced with solicitude in other areas to bear witness to the full implications of the Christian faith in ways not restricted to denominational loyalties. The “Life and Work” movement came together in 1925 under the motto “doctrine divides, practice unites,” with the purpose of bringing practical aid to the needy. The “Faith and Order” movement was intentionally ecumenical, holding its first international meeting in 1927. The World Council on Christian Education pursued ecumenical collaboration, holding its first international meeting in 1947.²⁶

In 1948, these movements coalesced into the World Council of Churches (WCC). The WCC’s constitution delineates the

25. See the treatment in González, *The Story of Christianity*, 438–40.

26. For a condensed overview of these developments, see VanElderen and Conway, *Introducing the World Council of Churches*, 22–30.

functions and purposes of the organization, and all of them point to unitedly witnessing to the Christian faith in its full ramifications (so, both “Word” and “deed” ministries). A fundamental purpose of the WCC is “to advance towards that unity [in Christ] in order that the world may believe”²⁷—an obvious reference to the prayer of John 17 and a recognition of the concerns long raised by missionaries.

Within Roman Catholicism, Vatican Council II (1963–1965) stepped forward into unquestionable ecumenical openness. *Unitatis redintegratio* (“On the Restoration of Unity”), the council’s declaration on ecumenism, turned sharply away from previously dominant Roman attitudes.²⁸ It acknowledged that Rome must also bear the guilt for the Church’s division in the sixteenth century, along with Protestants. It went on to emphasize that Protestants and Catholics share a common heritage in Christianity and to encourage dialogue in an atmosphere of mutual respect. It further urged these dialogues to start from what unites Roman Catholics and Protestants (now no longer denounced as “heretics” but embraced as “separated brethren”), recognizing that for centuries they had concentrated on what divides them. As an aid to this, the document acknowledged a hierarchy of truths (as to importance, essential status, etc.). The council led to the establishment of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and Rome has been busy in the decades since the end of the council, engaged in more than fifty bilateral dialogues with a wide array of “separated brethren.”

The most significant of these ongoing dialogues with Protestants has been the lengthy discussions with Lutherans. The chief result of this was the 1999 “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (JDDJ), agreed to by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation.²⁹ The process that resulted

27. This phrase is found in “Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches,” at “III. Purposes and functions,” the second paragraph. Cited in VanElderen and Conway, *Introducing the World Council of Churches*, 51.

28. An authorized English translation by Joseph Gallagher can be found in Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, 341–66.

29. Originally accepted on 31 October 1999, as *Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre*.

in JDDJ followed the pathway of seeking a “differentiated consensus”—a consensus on basic truth, but with recognition and, significantly, allowance for differing ways of explicating related issues. JDDJ makes no pretense to total doctrinal agreement, but it affirms and celebrates substantial enough agreement that the remaining differences are no longer regarded as church-dividing:

The present *Joint Declaration* has this intention: namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ. It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.³⁰

This approach is different from the 1541 failed endeavor at Regensburg, when the desire to come to “straight lines and hard edges” long expected in scholastic circles continued to dominate expectations. Both the Vatican and Martin Luther repudiated the 1541 Regensburg agreement on justification, with both sides expecting precision and full statement. But the Protestant representatives at Regensburg—Martin Bucer, Philip Melanchthon, and John Calvin—were all Christian humanists. They had embraced Desiderius Erasmus’ desire to recognize and affirm the *consensus omnium*—which set forth a basic consensus that would have allowed for variations in expression.

The approach taken with JDDJ has shown rich ecumenical promise. In 2006, the World Methodist Council was welcomed by the original signatory churches to sign on to the document, with the addition of its own codicil detailing the implications Methodists see arising from justification. In June 2017, the World Communion of Reformed Churches received a similar privilege and also signed onto JDDJ, adding a codicil that elaborated an emphasis on social justice as inherent in the Reformed approach to the doctrine of justification. Most recently, on 31 October 2017, the Lambeth Conference of Anglicanism

30. Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration*, “Preamble 5,” 10–11.

signed on to JDDJ. What has taken place in the last two decades constitutes a reframing of the ecumenical impulses that were stymied during the Reformation.

In the current post-Christendom world in which contemporary Protestantism finds itself, one still finds adherents of the approach epitomized by Luther, demanding sharp edges and hard lines as one denomination assesses another and responds to it, seeking virtual identity in perspective and practice or else turning away from any proposed relationship with the other church body.³¹ This approach assures significant commonality among those few denominations which “make the grade” for relationships, but it is out of touch with post-Christendom realities, in which the answer to a frequently republished tract from one of these denominations—“Are You Looking for a Faithful Presbyterian Church?”³²—would elicit (as it has elicited over the years) a fatigued, “No.” For most denominations, though, the Erasmian approach has carried the day, seeking to identify a basic commonality in a shared consensus, while recognizing and allowing for different emphases in teaching and practice.³³ This allows not only for greater rapprochement among many

31. Among the Lutherans, such groups would include both the Wisconsin and the Missouri synods; among the Reformed, one could number the Canadian and American Reformed Churches federation, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the broader affiliation, NAPARC (North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council).

32. This has periodically been reprinted and redistributed since the late 1920s by Great Commission Publications, the publishing arm of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

33. I have witnessed this in my own ecumenical involvements. The Christian Reformed Church in North America has, over the past generation, significantly revised its ecumenical charter twice, moving from the earlier restricted approach of seeking virtual identity to a more flexible one. The Reformed Church in America also embodies this Erasmian approach: this can be seen in the “Formula of Agreement” it has, allowing shared ministries and transfer of clergy, with three other denominations—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, and the United Church of Christ. This is also the pattern embraced in the WCRC (the World Communion of Reformed Churches), an ecumenical body comprised of 233 denominations from 110 countries, comprising some 100 million members.

denominations, but also for greater collaboration in seeking to embody the Christian message, with its twin concerns for truth and justice in a post-Christendom world desperately in need of both.³⁴

Conclusion

With the developments of the burgeoning ecumenical movement among Protestant churches, the changes in direction undertaken by the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican Council II, and JDDJ, Western Christianity has entered a new period. Reformation ecumenism succumbed to frustration in the sixteenth century. But the approach to dealing with doctrinal disagreement as embodied and articulated by Desiderius Erasmus, to be “swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger,” to engage in open dialogue and respectful discussion, an approach assimilated by the chief ecumenists among the Protestant reformers, has come to the fore. The situation of Christianity in the contemporary Post-Christian world is vastly different from the one in which those Reformers lived; that has surely had its impact on the readiness of Christians who differ with each other to try to find ways to come to shared perspectives. In this new situation, Reformation ecumenism has been reframed, in the desire that the apostolic message that the Father has sent the Son into the world might be heard and believed (John 17:21).

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34. Following this pattern, the denomination to which I belong, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, has engaged with over 300 other organizations in relief and education efforts around the world.

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