

Reformed Catholicity in the Bible Belt

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I grew up on the north side of Chicago. My parents were evangelicals and I was raised in the faith. I graduated from a large public high school in which practicing Christians were very few and very far between (though nominal Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox were in abundance), which meant I had to navigate high school with very few Christian friends.

Our local evangelical church – the only one in our suburban area – was a melting pot of all kinds of evangelicals. Calvinists and Arminians, credobaptists and paedobaptists, charismatics and cessationists were all thrown together into this non-denominational congregation because, quite frankly, there weren't many options. While there was certainly lively debate over theological issues, I remember them being generally friendly and rarely acrimonious. We all knew we were playing on the same team, whatever our various differences. Our church officially subscribed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and had a moderate liturgy, but there was always a lot of pastoral flexibility as the elders sought to maintain both the peace and purity of a very mixed church body. We were a genuinely “catholic” congregation, meaning we had both diversity and unity.

I moved to the South for college. Suddenly, I found myself surrounded by numerous Christian friends and a vast array of campus ministries. Evangelical churches were on virtually every corner, with every tradition, sub-tradition, and sub-sub-tradition of evangelicalism represented. I found quickly there is a real reason why the South has become known as the “Bible belt.” This part of the country has more Christians than any other region. It's considered the last

bastion of a collapsing Western Christendom, the one place left in our country where being a Christian is not only culturally acceptable but even socially advantageous.

But that isn't all I noticed. Understandably, the churches and ministries I got involved in were much more homogenous, theologically and otherwise, than the church in which I grew up. It seemed that different sorts of Christians rarely interacted with one another, so I missed the kind of give-and-take theological discussions that surrounded me in my youth. Further, I noticed the plethora of options tended to produce a "consumer" mindset amongst Christians; church "hopping and shopping" were quite common.

After college, I moved on to pastoral ministry. I have served churches in Texas, Louisiana, and (for the last nine years) Alabama. Birmingham, AL could make a good case for being the "buckle" of the "Bible belt." Birmingham has been named one of the most "religious" or "biblical" cities in the U.S.

in [survey](#) after [survey](#). [Only 6%](#) of people in the state of Alabama identify with the "nones" category that is rapidly growing in other parts of the country. Not long after we moved to Birmingham, I read a newspaper article that bragged about how two of the ten fastest growing churches in the country were located in the Birmingham metropolitan area (needless to say, mine wasn't one of them!). Birmingham doesn't just have churches on every corner – it has mega churches on every corner.

A nearby pastor I got together with shortly after moving to town told me that his church had recently hired a demographic group to do some studies to help them as they were making plans to do a plant. The pastor informed me that, based on their research data, the demographers had told him "this is the most churched zip code in North America." Of course, that was the very same zip code in which I

was trying to get a fledgling church off the ground! With so many churches in the area, what kind of role could my small church possibly hope to play? Where did we fit into the larger ecclesiastical landscape of our city? How should we relate to the generally larger churches around us? The temptation was to try to grow my church by critiquing the way all the other churches around us did things, but I knew that wouldn't be healthy or God-honoring in the long run.

I certainly think there are many great things about living and ministering in the "Bible belt." But there is also a glaring problem with the way we do church down here. The abundance of churches does not necessarily translate into a more thoroughly Christianized culture. If there are so many Christians and so many churches here in the "Bible belt," relatively speaking, why do we seem to make so little difference? Why is our influence so proportionally small compared to our overall numbers?

There are no doubt many valid answers to that question, but central among them is our lack of unity. Turf wars, obsession with numbers, the pursuit of celebrity, the desire to build the next ecclesiastical empire, denominational and inter-denominational rivalry, and theological wars over secondary issues all work against any kind of practical catholicity and cooperation amongst congregations.

But here's the rub: Churches that are competing against one another are not going to be effective in reaching the world or influencing the culture. Growing up in Chicago, I was happy just to meet another faithful believer, and whether he was a Presbyterian, Baptist, Anglican or Lutheran was secondary so long as it was clear he held to Nicene orthodoxy. "Mere Christianity," ala Richard Baxter and C. S. Lewis, is a real and meaningful concept.

From talking to missionaries on the frontier mission field, I have noticed the same dynamic at work: Where Christians seem to be few and far between, and

missional concerns are preeminent, there is a greater desire for unity and fellowship with other believers despite differences in secondary matters. I've heard of Presbyterians and Pentecostals working together in Russia, Reformed and Roman Catholic Christians partnering together in Central and South America, and so on. Where Christians are more common, even a majority, it is easy to get comfortable and complacent. The urgency of the mission fades and churches are more likely to distance themselves from one another, attack one another over differences, engage in public polemics (e.g., using a sermon to bash the views of other Christian traditions), and seek to compete against each other more than cooperate with each other. In other words, the growth and success of churches in the "Bible belt" made those same churches hyper-sectarian (which is sure to be the undoing of the "Bible belt" in the long run, if there is no change).

Yes, there are many refreshing exceptions to Southern Christian factionalism, and I have been a part of some catholic success stories in my ministry, at least in a small way. While at Auburn Avenue in Monroe, LA, our congregation joined with Methodist and Roman Catholic parishes to build a house for a low income family under the auspices of Habitat for Humanity. The shared ministry project not only witnessed to the city around us, it also provided several opportunities to engage in meaningful theological discussion, particularly with the Roman Catholic priest. While disagreeing vigorously over a variety of issues (as you can imagine), we also found a lot of common ground, centered primarily around the Nicene Creed.

In Birmingham, our church has partnered up with Christians from other denominations in mercy ministry, youth ministry, and prayer ministry. We have done joint worship services with Baptists, Anglicans, and other Presbyterian denominations. I have been invited to preach in other congregations and we have had other local pastors preach in our pulpit. Mercy ministry in particular has

been a fruitful meeting place. After tornadoes ripped through the community surrounding our church in 2011, we had a “Caring for Cahaba” workday in which several churches came together to do a variety of service projects in the Cahaba Heights suburb of Birmingham. The principal of the local public school, the fire chief, and the mayor all recognized and praised our efforts. Tremendous good can be accomplished when God’s people come together to serve!

And yet the “Bible belt” on the whole remains grossly sectarian. Perhaps our sectarianism is becoming a “luxury” we can no longer afford. Indeed, I see the church’s loss of influence in the “Bible belt” as a parable of the failure of Western Christendom as a whole. The fabric of the Western church was torn by the “tragic necessity” of the sixteenth century Reformation. Christendom collapsed into secularism in the centuries after the Reformation because a fragmented church could no longer hold the culture together. Luther’s greatest fear was that after his death “many harsh and terrible sects” would arise.

Sadly, that fear has come to pass with a vengeance. The loss of theological and ecclesial cohesion has left the West scrambling for another center to tether itself to, such as reason, freedom, or equality. Each of these idols has been cloaked in the language and dress of civil religion. Of course, the splintering of the church left a power vacuum that has been filled by the modern nation-state. The loss of church unity and the rise of statist tyranny go together. If we dishonor Mother Church, we are bound to get the Nanny State. A church divided against itself is weak and is bound to be in full scale retreat. We will continue to surrender cultural ground until we repent of our ecclesial splintering and infighting.

I do not mean to reduce church unity to a means to an end. We should pursue unity because God calls us to it, apart from any cultural effects it might have. But

we should also remember that Jesus tied the effectiveness of our mission in the world to our visible unity in the eyes of the world (John 17:20-23).

If we learn to see the West, including the “Bible belt”(!), as a mission field, we will quickly realize that many of our petty fights and squabbles are trivial compared to the massive missionary task in front of us. Major theological differences exist and will continue to, and we cannot gloss over them, but we if we treat our brothers and sisters with love and respect and fellow partners in the Great Commission, then the world around us just might have to sit up and take notice. In the words of John Nevin, “A church without unity can neither conquer the world nor sustain itself.” But, of course, a united church will not only be sustained, she will go forth conquering and to conquer.

For more on what a catholic vision of the church looks like, go [here](#).