

PREFACE

This is a work of ecumenical history, an effort to view the Christian Church's story as a single whole. It has grown out of the Mennonite Catholic ecumenical dialogue in which the author has been deeply involved, but it has become something much broader—a history of all the movements which over the past two millennia have sought to follow Christ with complete intentionality.

As my research has progressed over the past decade it has become increasingly clear that the Mennonite Catholic story is only one chapter in a much larger story—the estrangement between those who view Christian faith in institutional terms, and those who view it primarily in personal terms.

And as the dialogue between North American Mennonites and the Benedictine monks of Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, MN has progressed over this same period it has become equally clear that two distinct forms of Christian intentionality have emerged over the past 2,000 years, one celibate and monastic, the other non-celibate and evangelical.

My personal history is deeply rooted in these movements, and it would be dishonest not to disclose it. My paternal family has been Amish or Mennonite since the seventeenth century, and my parents were Mennonite pastors. I grew up in a community that was both Mennonite and evangelical, and I was formed by both traditions. I fully expected to live out my life in the Mennonite community, but in the 1960s a rather surprising series of events brought me into membership in the Roman Catholic Church and that is where I have spent the past forty years.

I have deep commitments to both my Mennonite heritage and to the Catholic faith which I now practice with great devotion, and I do not find

them exclusive. I have referred to myself as a Mennonite Catholic. I do so in much the same way that others refer to themselves as Polish Catholics, or Hispanic Catholics or Black Catholics.

But my fundamental commitment is to the unity of the Church. I have come to believe that the disunity of the Churches is not only unfortunate but unacceptable, and that the unity of the Church is not something we can attend to when other more important things have been dealt with. I am deeply convinced there is nothing more important than the unity of the Church and nothing that can justify our continued acceptance of our disunity.

Having said that I hasten to add that I do not share the view of those who believe the unity of the Church can only be achieved by all Christians submitting to Roman authority—at least in its present forms. That may be what the Spirit is leading us toward, but recent events do not appear to indicate that. I do not know how we will eventually be brought into greater unity, but I do know from our experience in the Mennonite Catholic dialogue that a shared study of history will necessarily play a key part in that process.

We are not disunited because those of us now living have chosen to be divided into several major traditions and dozens of autonomous denominations. We are members of disunited churches because they are the ones which existed when we came on the scene, and we had either to join one of the disunited Churches that exist or else belong to no Church at all.

There is no Christian tradition, no denomination that does not share some responsibility for the disunity of the Church. Pope John Paul II has clearly stated his conviction that the Roman Church bears some responsibility for the Church's present divisions and that is a point of view which the research reported in this book supports.

Looking to the past will never by itself heal our divisions, but until we understand how we have come to be divided we will be powerless to deal with them. And we will never understand our divisions until we have together looked at their causes—not in an attempt to assess blame or to defend the status quo, but in a common charitable search for new perspectives that will enable us to relate to each other in new ways.

It is in that spirit that I offer this book to my fellow Christians.