

Christian Restoration Movement Solidarity Slogan Pre-history

[D.L. Burris Abridgement of the Hans Rollmann Research]

In a poem written for a church dedication, Hoffmann Von Fallersleben wrote:

Augustine of Hippo says:

In necessariis unitas,
In essentials unity,
In dubiis libertas,
In doubtful things liberty,
In omnibus autem caritas,
But in all things love. ⁽²⁾

The poet then continued by interpreting the famous saying from its very end:

Yet I say: not only in all things,
But before all things
And thus I praise [Christian] love. ⁽³⁾

The saying "In Essentials, Unity; in Non-essentials, Liberty; in All Things, Charity," has become in one form or another a key motto claimed by the Restoration Movement. It is rivaled perhaps only by that other dictum which asserts that "we speak where the Bible speaks, and are silent where the Bible is silent." And yet Hoffmann von Fallersleben, although a contemporary of Stone and Campbell, had probably never heard of the Restoration Movement. What, then, is the tradition history of "our motto," if it is so widely known that it can also be used at a dedication ceremony of a Roman Catholic church in Germany?

In what follows I shall only attempt to highlight the major stages in the history of the famous saying for which the German theologians and church historians have coined a special term. They call it the "Friedensspruch" or "**Peace Saying**."



PETER MEIDERLIN (RUPERTUS MELDENIUS)

The Peace Saying was not as von Fallersleben and others have alleged coined by the Catholic church father Augustine. ⁽⁴⁾ It is rather the product of an irenic Lutheran theologian living in Augsburg during the early seventeenth century with the name of Peter Meiderlin. ⁽⁵⁾

In the publication which contains the saying he used the Latin anagram of his German name: Rupertus Meldenius. Meiderlin lived in a very troubled time, a time exposed to the ravages of the Thirty Years War and one of much strife between Lutherans and Calvinists as well as a period of internal discord within Lutheranism itself. In this so-called "Confessional Age," the Lutheran movement became a battleground for competing political forces such as the territories of Saxony and the Palatinate. But especially vexing for the soul of the religious reform movement, were the numerous doctrinal disputes which in part had their origin in the theological differences of the Reformation leaders themselves. In the period after Luther's death, there emerged an intense competition as to who represented the Lutheran theological heritage most authentically. An early attempt to forge an authoritative doctrinal norm binding for everyone produced the Formula of Concord (1577) but resulted also in much cantankerousness about the legitimacy of the formula. The period that followed has also been termed the age of "Lutheran Orthodoxy," in which theologians increasingly would use scholastic philosophical means to define more specifically their Bible-oriented faith, which became tied to the emerging Lutheran confessional norms.

A new wave of theological disputes spread through the protestant universities during the early 1600's which cannot be detailed here sufficiently but is documented and studied amply in a protestant doctrinal history such as the one by Otto Ritschl. ⁽⁶⁾

It is thus not surprising that amidst external war and internal strife, theologians and church leaders would eventually plead with their church for that which Christ had promised his disciples according to the Gospel of John: Peace. Hardly anyone was more serious about peace than Georg Calixtus, a theologian from Helmstedt who sought a common basis among the warring theological and ecclesiastical factions. Although he stood firmly in the Lutheran camp, Calixtus felt that the articles to be believed should be limited to the essentials and that only that was binding what had been the common possession of Christendom during the first five hundred years of its existence: the so-called consensus quinquesaecularis. ⁽⁷⁾ This theological quest for peace was reinforced by pious souls who recommended a departure from external strife by moving inward. Here Johann Arndt featured prominently with his immensely popular devotional literature, in particular his Four Books of True Christianity, which recommended peace and spirituality instead of strife and debate. ⁽⁸⁾

And it is a disciple of Arndt and a possible champion of Calixtus who raised his voice in the mid-1620 with a Latin book whose Latin title translates as "A Prayerful Admonition for Peace to the Theologians of the Augsburg Confession." ⁽⁹⁾ It is in this book that we find for the first time the saying also championed by the Restoration Movement, even if some of its intellectual roots reach back even farther into western religious and intellectual history.

Peter Meiderlin's argument for peace in the church starts out with a story about a dream he had. In it he encounters a devout Christian theologian in a white robe sitting at a table & reading the Scriptures. All of a sudden Christ appears to him and warns him of an impending danger and admonishes him to be very vigilant. Then Christ vanishes and the Devil appears in the form of a blinding light and claims to have been sent on a mission from God. The devil alleges that God has authorized him to found a new order of these doctrinally pure elect.

Our theologian thinks about what he has just heard and decides to bring it in prayer before God, upon which the devil immediately vanishes and Christ reappears. Christ tenderly raises the trembling Christian up, comforts him kindly & before he departs admonishes him to remain loyal only to the Word of God in simplicity and humility of heart.

The book falls into two parts, a "pathological" part, in which he then accuses the theological heretic detectors of his day of being inhabited by three demons, already alluded to in the New Testament: vainglory, avarice, and rivalry. In this section Meiderlin focuses upon the very attitudes that produce ecclesiastical strife and states: "Every proud theologian is a heretic, if not in act, at least in ultimate influence."

Having exposed the heretic hunters, he turns to the therapeutic part and contrasts the three theological vices with three virtues: humility, contentedness, and love of peace and unity. While in the words of Meldenius "concord strengthens weak things and discord demolishes great things," he finds that the Scriptures urge humankind to practice charity in all of their endeavors. Does that mean that there is no need for doctrines? Certainly not. But only those doctrinal statements are necessary that center on salvation, follow unmistakably Scripture, have been formulated in universal confessional statements, and are considered true by the great majority of believing theologians. The insistence of belief in theological minutiae or non-essentials is in the mind of the author only designed to destroy Christianity itself. Here he invokes also a famous saying from the Stoic philosopher Seneca in vogue again since the Renaissance, in which he warned of cramming the mind with unimportant things. "We are ignorant," Seneca writes, "of essentials because we deal in non-essentials." Meiderlin tries to avoid both extremes, that of a disintegrating sectarianism and of a levelling orthodoxy, by taking a middle position that affirms salvific essentials while maintaining at the same time responsible theological freedom. The regulative principle by which a church can maintain both and keep the peace is love, Paul's most excellent way. Thus, Meiderlin's dictum: "We would be in the best shape if we kept in essentials, Unity; in non-essentials, Liberty; and in both Charity."

Meiderlin's book had, however, only a very limited influence among seventeenth-century Lutherans. What gave the saying its longevity was its near universal applicability to any situation of church strife.

It is thus not surprising we encounter it next in another ecclesiastical conflict situation, the English Restoration Period, where a theologian and writer in particular adopted it as his own motto and translated it and by so doing spread it throughout the entire English-speaking world. That person was the Puritan divine and writer Richard Baxter.

RICHARD BAXTER

In the wake of the Puritan defeat and the enormous religious tensions in Restoration England between Presbyterians, Independents, and Anglicans, Baxter sought in numerous writings to reconcile warring factions and find a common ground among them.⁽¹²⁾ And here it was Peter Meiderlin and his motto that he recommended to those living in strife and discord. He recommends to rulers in the introduction to his book The Saint's Everlasting Rest to encourage those separated by religious convictions "to agree upon a way of union & accommodation and not to cease until they have brought it to this Issue." He then in English translation quotes our famous dictum & identifies Meldenius, whom he calls a "Pacifactor," as its author.⁽¹³⁾ He also bemoans the previous excesses of the Puritans as well as the reaction to them and acknowledges the "Reconcilers that were ruled by prudent Charity always called out to both Parties, that the Churches must be united upon the Terms of primitive Simplicity, and that we must have Unity in things necessary, and Liberty in things unnecessary, and Charity in all." Baxter felt that "the tolerating ... of tolerable Differences, is the way to Peace."⁽¹⁶⁾ **He was not tolerant enough himself, however, to extend this principle to the Anabaptists.** But, again, we see during the Restoration period the introduction of a minimal consensus of essential beliefs suggested originally by Meiderlin as the solution to English religious discord.

The idea of a minimal consensus, it should be mentioned, was not Meiderlin's invention. It had been prepared as well in the earlier continental discussions about adiaphora, those doctrinal points capable of compromise, among Lutherans and Calvinists.

RESTORATION MOVEMENT

A few words need to be said now about the significance of the Peace Saying in the Restoration Movement. Despite its nearly universal awareness among church members today, there is, to my knowledge, no study of the saying's reception and spread in the Restoration Movement. A few probes will have to suffice. To start with Barton W. Stone and the Christians, there is no evidence of any significant use of the saying among Stoneite churches that I am aware of, although there would have been opportunities to become aware of it. The only passing reference to the saying within the wider Stone environment can be found in Rice Haggard's influential 1804 An Address to the Different Religious Societies, on the Sacred Import of the Christian Name[1804], in which he writes with reference to previous creedal and confessional standards: "One thing I know, that wherever non essentials are made terms of communion, it will never fail to have a tendency to disunite and scatter the church of Christ. It is certainly **making the door of the church narrower than the gate of Heaven,** and casting away those whom Jesus received." ⁽²²⁾ A minimal doctrinal consensus is, however, not entertained as legitimate for ecclesiastical unity in view of Rice's anti-creedalism & sola scriptura prescriptions for unity.

Stone is even less receptive to the notion of essential doctrines as basis for union, although he read theologians that cherished the motto. We know that Stone during his early theological studies was required to read the Dutch Reformed theologian Witsius, one of the foremost champions of the dictum. Because of Stone's thorough-going non-creedalism and rejection of any doctrinal standards not explicitly found in Scripture, we would suspect him to have had great difficulty in accepting even a minimal doctrinal consensus as a basis for unity. And that was indeed the case. Stone actively opposed any solution to church unity based on a consensus of doctrinal "essentials." In his 1841 lectures on the "Union of Christians," held in Jacksonville, Illinois, Stone writes:

Some who are opposed to a large creed-book as a plan of union, yet plead for the necessity of a few ESSENTIAL doctrines to be embodied, as a bond of union. But who shall determine what these essential doctrines are?

Suppose it possible that every member of the Church on earth were together, and all agreed upon three or four doctrines as only ESSENTIAL & that these only shall be tests of Christian union, would they all honestly agree, that should increasing light convince them that the doctrines received were wrong, they would still retain and defend them?

Would they, or could they bind their posterity to believe and receive them? But these things are impossible. No formulary of doctrines can unite the Christian world. If it can unite a party, that union is only partial, and of short duration; it is a union of disunion, for unless we give up the right of thinking & implicitly believe as the Catholics do, such creeds are vain. ⁽²⁵⁾

For Stone, creeds are no secure basis for union whereas the Bible is. He thinks a reduction of faith to essentials will short-change biblical faith, inject too much human selectivity & possibly ossify communal beliefs. He does not seem to be troubled by the subjectivity of the interpreter. In the same lectures he states: "The BIBLE ALONE [caps in the original], is the only religion in which Christians can unite. Not on the opinions formed by man of the truths and facts stated in the Bible, but upon the facts themselves." ⁽²⁶⁾ Thus, as far as Barton Stone is concerned, he and his immediate circle do not seem to have been a fertile breeding ground for the Meiderlin motto.

In this preliminary probing, I shall have to skip over the Campbells, but from the literary evidence I have surveyed, creeds as well as "opinions" and "speculations" are as much rejected by the Disciples. Both the Campbells and Stone seem to distinguish matters of Faith and of Opinion or Speculation. While Opinions and Speculations have almost the same function as Non-essentials in Meiderlin and Baxter, they are a shade more negative in this doctrinally suspicious unity movement and hardly worthy of our love.

The Meiderlin motto takes on some significance not in the first generation of the movement but during a period of internal strife, during the gradual process of the **separation between the Churches of Christ and the Disciples**. In fact, the first time it really comes into prominence with Isaac Errett's controversial statement of belief published as Our Position. While Meiderlin is not quoted as such, the issue of a minimal doctrinal consensus as well as that of essentials and opinions surfaces.

Faith is reduced into a belief of salvific essentials of Jesus' life, death and resurrection while "matters of opinion--that is, matters touching which the Bible is either silent or so obscure in its revelations as not to admit of definite conclusions--we allow the largest liberty, so long as none judges his brother, or insists on forcing his own opinion on others, or on making them an occasion of strife." It is perhaps in this climate that the version of the saying becomes popular with which many of us are familiar: "In faith, unity; in opinions, liberty; in all things charity." ⁽²⁷⁾

In the outgoing nineteenth century the motto now entered also the broad consciousness of the Disciples by its prominent display in the masthead of J.H. Garrison's and B.W. Johnson's amalgamated journal The Christian-Evangelist. It ran from 1889 until 1918 but in a curious wider phrasing characteristic of an ecclesiastical administrator: "In faith, Unity; in opinions & methods, Liberty; in all things, Charity." ⁽²⁸⁾

One other area where some of the issues of the saying come into relief is during dispute with pre-millennialism. Essentials and non-essentials are being introduced into the discussion by amillennialists in order to relativize the exegetical results of R.H. Boll & his followers as salvific non-essentials of our faith, whereas Boll and the Pre-millennialists defend the Bible as being in all parts essential in order to safeguard not only their eschatological doctrines but also the literalist-historical exegesis by which they are quarried. Such a posture has theological consequences in that it insists upon an even narrower fundamentalism in biblical matters than the amillennialists. The issue surfaces again in particular in the editorial correspondence of the Gospel Advocate and in the debate between Neal and Wallace. ⁽²⁹⁾

CONCLUSION

One can summarize briefly the results of our brief history of Meiderlin's Peace Saying as follows. It was invoked most commonly as a solution for intra-ecclesiastical conflict.

Its relevance proved itself repeatedly throughout modern religious history: a divided Lutheranism, a disunited English Protestantism, similar situations among the Dutch Reformed, but also as a protective measure invoked by marginalized and persecuted religious groups such as the Moravians & Quakers. The early Restoration Movement, and Stone in particular, while capable of sharing the irenic spirit of the saying, had problems with the dictum's minimal doctrinal consensus because of its wholesale rejection of all creedal and doctrinal norms. The closest one comes to non-essentials in the early Restoration Movement are what was termed opinions and speculations, none of which had any normative status in our sola scriptura religion and thus did not need to be reconciled theologically. Only in a situation of strife and at a time when there emerged among the Disciples a budding creedal self-definition are biblical essentials and theological opinions formally regulated within a latitudinarian framework. The other situation in which essentials and non-essentials became an issue was in the debate between premillennialists and their amillennial opponents. Here the distinction was forced upon the pre-millennialists by the amillennial mainstream in an attempt to relativize or discredit the apocalyptic teachings that were so central to the premillennial identity.

Pre-millennialists reacted in turn by doing what Lutheran orthodoxy had done several hundred years earlier. They declared that in matters of faith, there are no non-essentials. Now we have come full swing, from the 20th century back to the confessional age of German Lutheranism where we began.