

Peter Schmiechen, *Christ the Reconciler: A Theology for Opposites, Differences, and Enemies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.

This is a book every Canadian Presbyterian concerned about the integrity of the theological witness of church should read. I suspect very few have. The author, at the time of writing, was President of Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and a minister of the United Church of Christ in the USA. He retired in 2002, but continues to ponder the future of the church in its mission as a corps of ambassadors for God's reconciling love for the world in Jesus Christ.

That focus is one good reason for Canadian Presbyterians to consider this book. In our most recent statement of Christian belief, *Living Faith*, we agree that the great affirmation of the Christian faith is that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not holding our sins against us and making us ambassadors of this message. (2 Corinthians 5:19-20) The Greek word for 'ambassador' is a derivative of *presbuteros*, from which the name Presbyterian comes. Perhaps the best way of describing our tradition's theological perspective, then, would be Reconciling Orthodoxy. And Schmiechen provides much that is worth pondering as we consider why that perspective is important for our church today.

There is a wealth of detail in the book that I will not try to summarize. As is so often the case with these book notes, I'll focus on a couple of dimensions of the book that strike me as instructive for the church as it seeks to become an ever more faithful corps of ambassadors for the justice, kindness, and humility that form the core of the Gospel's message and in which our triune God delights.

Schmiechen is clear and uncompromising in his analysis of how many churches in North America have become captive to the dominant culture of individualistic piety and consumer religion. He explores a wide range of topics in detailing the impact of these cultural assumptions that distort our understanding of the mission of Jesus – individualism, the church as a voluntary association of like-minded individuals, consumerism based on our preferences, functionalism based on what works, angry polarization, and violent reactivity. (7-30) In the face of these attitudes and behaviours, Schmiechen argues, persuasively I find, that we need to rebuild the church around a crisis/reconciliation interpretation of the atonement that God worked out on and through the cross. He focuses on Paul's imaginings of what God was up to in the Corinthian correspondence. The church, in this framework, is a divinely created community through the actions of God on the cross and in the resurrection. The crises generated by humanity's rebellion against God's vision of goodness are forgiven and the world is reconciled to its original relationship with God.

To live in the world in this new communal way involves six things:

1. it involves acknowledging and gradually living into reconciliation as a gift from God to be confessed and practiced publicly;
2. it involves a grateful response that is best expressed in worshipping – repenting, proclaiming, and praising in this new community;
3. it involves growing together in our *praxis* of reconciliation with all of creation so that we can become ever more faithfully the blessings we were created to be;
4. it involves sharing the good news that God loves the world, forgiving those who have denied this reality, resisting the powers of evil that persist in that rebellion, and being agents/ambassadors of that reconciliation in all our circles of influence;
5. it involves praying and hoping for the ultimate reconciliation of all people and things according to the divine will; and

6. it involves being representations of the integrity of faith, hope, and love in the face of pretense, divisions, anger, and despair. (154-55)

Schmiechen offers an intriguing image of the church to ponder and practice. It emerges from his take on Paul's pastoral letter to the Ephesians. He encourages us to see ourselves as the participating in the household of God (Ephesians 2:19), a community of fellow residents in one home. For Schmiechen, exploring this image in thought and practice inspires healing and wholesome ways of reforming the being and doing that is church. He suggests eight to get us started:

1. there are many rooms in this house, enough for everyone in spite of their differences to live in peace;
2. people are known by name;
3. sharing food is the means of sustenance, unity, and fellowship;
4. care for the children and honour for the older members of the household are practiced;
5. members suffer and must deal with death in community with each other;
6. there is diversity, disagreement, and conflict within the framework of the unity of the household;
7. there is refuge and safety in the house, where one can always find entrance; and
8. there is always music to celebrate life's joys and sorrows and, above all, our praise to God. (166)

To read this book is to participate in a conversation with a seasoned and sage soul who knows the household of God well, in all of its haplessness and hopefulness. You will come away from that conversation nourished to flourish as an active contributor to the formation and reformation of its witness and witness.