

**August, 2018**

**David Lochhead, *The Dialogical Imperative: A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.**

David Lochhead and I were colleagues on the faculty of Vancouver School of Theology from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. We met in the early 1970s in the Student Christian Movement. It was a long and stimulating friendship. The wisdom in this particular book remains seminal in my *praxis* of church learning and leadership. Brentwood participates in the coming of the Commonwealth of God in the midst of Canada's most secular urban centre. In working out the best ways we can imagine, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to witness to the message of God's reconciliation of the world to God's original intention for creation in Jesus Christ, Lochhead's vision of true dialogue in communicating the Gospel still shapes our conversations. Here's my take on that vision, 30 years after the publication of the book.

David outlines four different perspectives that have characterized the history of our encounter with other religions and worldviews. First, there is simply isolation, when we thought we were the only people who mattered. This was largely the result of geographic separation. When we discovered that others, who were different from us, shared this earth, we adopted a stance of hostility. We either sought to defeat them or defend ourselves against them. An alternative to direct hostility was competition by trying to persuade others that full truth was found only in our way of understanding the world. A later approach, especially among the larger Protestant denominations, was partnership. It takes various forms, but usually seeks to find common ground upon which to build cooperation. But the partnership was often unequal, with the most powerful partner dominating what was thought and done.

None of these stances, David argues, is really adequate in designing Christian witness in a pluralistic/fragmented culture. Instead, we would be more faithful to the biblical witness to God's reconciling grace in Jesus Christ if we became more dialogical in our evangelism and mission. He draws on the inspiration of two very different thinkers in crafting this approach to encountering those different from us. One is Karl Barth (1886-1968). He was the most influential thinker in twentieth-century Western Protestantism. He emphasized the unique truth that God communicated to human beings in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, a truth that became convincing and transformative through the work of the Holy Spirit. Lochhead emphasizes that Barth does not buy into the popular evangelical belief that we are saved by our acceptance of Christ. This is a form of Christian triumphalism that ignores God's initiative in reconciling the world to God's original intent of being blessed and blessing place. Martin Buber (1878-1965) turned to the Hasidic stream of Judaism to articulate a Jewish humanism grounded in the everyday relationship between God and human beings. For both Barth and Buber, human flourishing arose from a constant dialogue between God and human beings, and among human beings, in which each participant in the dialogue was respected and each participant was open to learning from the Other/other. There was a foundational humility in their understandings of human capabilities and tendencies that called for prayerful cultivation and careful conversations.

In dialogue with Barth, Lochhead thinks those of us who identify as Christian should give as clear and compelling a witness to the hope that is in us as we can. Genuine dialogue does not require watering down our understanding of God's revelation in Christ. But we do acknowledge, as do the New Testament writers, that God has more to teach us. And that more may come from surprising sources.

As Lochhead works out his illuminating approach to interfaith dialogue (and we might add 'interworldview' dialogue), he insists that God's Holy Spirit is constantly at work in the conversations to inspire new insights on how to live together in God's commonwealth with justice and kindness. A God-given humility makes us a learning people. This humility does not lead to lack of conviction that God has saved the world in Jesus Christ and is enlisting us to contribute to that work through the work of the Holy Spirit. It does lead to what John Calvin called 'a teachable spirit' when it comes to how well we understand and engage in that salvation.

Thirty years ago, when Lochhead wrote this book, the fragmented and confusing cacophony of voices claiming to know the truth was not as easily spread around in the human community. We have reverted to a dominant dynamic of worldview hostility and competition out of which he hoped we were growing. In my view, Lochhead's vision of reconciliation built on respectful relationships is even more urgent than it was in the late 1980s. Digesting the wisdom in this book will give you a much richer understanding of this urgency than I can offer in a short book note.