

Chapter Sixteen

The Holy Spirit and the Unity of the Body

1. Ecumenism and Christian Unity

Christian Unity and Ecumenism

By Christian unity we mean the unity of all Christians and the unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, there is no distinction between the two. The Church is one body with many members. The members are one because by the Holy Spirit they are formed into one body. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12: 12 - 13). We cannot rightly separate the unity of Christians from the unity of the Churches.

Many Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians are opposed to or at least suspicious of the ecumenical movement. They can see the ecumenical movement as a human effort trying to unite man-made denominations, and they can contrast that to the spiritual unity produced by the Holy Spirit that they have experienced as born-again believers. This separation and contrast is problematic for several reasons. First, a study of the history of the ecumenical movement shows clearly that the pioneers were courageous believers deeply impacted by the prayer of Jesus: "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou has sent me" (John 17: 21). Secondly, many Evangelical Christians were deeply involved in the origins of the ecumenical movement (e.g. John Mott and J. H. Oldham) and the disenchantment of Evangelicals with the ecumenical movement dates mostly from the 1960s. Thirdly, the view that authentic unity is spiritual and (largely) invisible does not correspond with the full teaching of the New Testament. As the Catechism teaches: "The desire to recover the unity of all Christians is a gift of Christ and a call of the Holy Spirit." (para. 820).

The unity of the one Church is an organic unity, because the Church is a body. The unity of the Church is in no way a uniformity. This follows from the diversity of members. God's salvation is opened up for all peoples by the death and resurrection of his only Son, Israel's Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. So the vision in the book of Revelation: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev. 7: 9). The unity of the Church brings many into one: many members into one body, many peoples and cultures into one family, many gifts to build up one body. On the relationship of the one and the many, see Rom. 12: 4 - 8; 1 Cor. 12: 4 - 11; Eph. 4: 4 - 7.

The One Church and Many Churches

Very important for Christian Unity is the new awareness - since Vatican Two in the Catholic Church but always strong in the Eastern Churches (Orthodox and Catholic) - that in the New Testament the word "church" sometimes means the one universal Church and sometimes means local churches of particular cities or areas.

One universal Church: see Eph. 1: 22; 3: 10, 21; 5: 29, 32; Col. 1: 24; Matt. 16: 18; 1 Tim. 3: 15.

"The church in ...": "the church in Jerusalem" (Acts 8: 1, 3); "To the church of God who is at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1: 2; 2 Cor. 1: 1); "the churches of Christ in Judea" (Gal. 1: 22). This

usage may/should be understood as “the one universal church as present in”, which provides the biblical basis for the Vatican Two teaching cited below.

Local churches (so many references so only a sample is given): “the church at Antioch” (Acts 13: 1); “he [Paul] went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches” (Acts 15: 41); “the churches of the Gentiles” (Rom. 16: 4); “the church in their house” (Rom. 16: 5; 1 Cor. 16: 19; see also Philemon 2); “the churches of Asia” (1 Cor. 16: 19); “All the Churches of Christ greet you” (Rom. 16: 16); “the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1: 2); “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess. 1: 1; 2 Thess. 1: 1); the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 1: 4; 2 - 3).

In the Vatican Two decree on Bishops, it is taught: “A diocese is a section of the People of God entrusted to a bishop to be guided by him with the assistance of his clergy so that loyal to its pastor and formed by him into one community in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist, it constitutes one particular church in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active.” (*Christus Dominus*, para. 11). It is very important that the local church is not just a branch or an administrative area of the universal Church. That would be seeing the Church as a human institution. The Church is a mystery and it is a mystery of divine love. The parallel of the relationship of the universal churches and the particular (local) churches is more to the relationships within the Trinity, which are the expressions of total self-giving in love, where in the Holy Spirit the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. So the universal Church is present in each local church, and each local church is present in the universal Church.

It was this deeper understanding of the Church and the churches that enabled the Catholic Church at Vatican Two to recognize for example that the Orthodox churches are authentic local churches, and that the Holy Spirit is at work within the other Christian churches and confessions/denominations (ecclesial communities). Official Catholic documents refer to the Protestant churches as ecclesial communities, because the word “church” is only used of those bodies that are recognized to have the apostolic succession of bishops and thus a recognized ordained ministry and eucharist. It is wrong to understand this usage as insulting, as the most basic issue is that the Protestant church bodies are recognized as Christian bodies, living with the divine life proclaimed in the Gospel and poured out by the Holy Spirit and ministering the grace of God to their members. They are Christian, not just as composed of genuine Christians, but are Christian communions. They are called “ecclesial communities” because they possess important elements of Church, and the goal of ecumenical work is to bring all Churches and Christian communions into full communion and mutual recognition.

This teaching is also important for showing that the historic Church understanding is not just an **institutional** view. The goal of the ecumenical movement is not to amalgamate church institutions, as many critics have argued. It is to bring separate communions into full organic and visible communion, whatever that may mean for the institutional aspects of these bodies. The Church is necessarily both charismatic and institutional.¹ It has an institutional dimension because it is a structuring of human beings within a visible body. But the foundational institutional elements that have to be brought together for the fullness of the one body are the liturgical and ministerial structures (baptism and eucharist, bishops united around the Pope) not the bureaucratic apparatus that might disappear tomorrow. What “bringing together” might mean in practice is something for the Holy Spirit to reveal at the appropriate time. Here there is diversity in unity and unity

¹ On this twofold aspect, see address of John Paul II to new ecclesial movements at Pentecost 1998.

in diversity: one Eucharist, but many rites and expressions; one baptism, but not necessarily just one baptismal rite; one united and recognized ministry, but not always organized the same way.

The Unity of Christians

But the unity of the Church cannot just be the correlation and right relating of the structures. Most profoundly, it is the unity of all believers. The ministerial and liturgical structures exist to serve the unity of all believers. So Paul writes to the Ephesians: be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (Eph. 4: 3 - 6). Be eager to maintain the unity” is addressed to “the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1: 1) and so is a word spoken to all believers not just to the leaders.

Unity means love. We are not truly united to others when we do not love them, if they make the same profession of faith. In the history of the ecumenical movement, many key developments have developed out of personal friendships.² Bridges cannot be built without the building of personal relationships. A glaring example of the futility of trying to heal divisions without love is found in the short-lived reconciliations between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church that was effected officially in Lyon (1274) and at the Council of Florence (1439). These reunions took place as a result of the desperate political situation of Constantinople, but they failed because the people did not respect each other and did not want to be reconciled. The Greek anger over Catholic atrocities during the Crusades, especially the sack of Constantinople in 1204, was still alive and unhealed.³

Unity in faith has a connection with the past, with the present and with the future:

Ecumenism and the Past. Ecumenism is concerned with “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude v. 3). Christian faith celebrates “the mighty deeds of God” in the past (see Ps. 9: 2, 71: 15; 96: 3; 106: 2; 136, *passim.*; 145: 4; 150: 2). This dimension has to include the mighty works of God for the Israelites, and not just begin with the New Testament. Ecumenism is concerned with the unity of the Gospel message, the unity of the new covenant in the blood of Jesus, the unity created by faith in the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Ecumenism requires that all Christians profess the same works of God in Old and New Testaments. It focuses attention on such questions as: What is the content of the faith delivered to the saints? What is the content of the Gospel? How do we understand the redemptive work of Jesus on the Cross and in his Resurrection - Ascension?

Ecumenism and the Present. Ecumenism today has the task of building upon the unity that we inherit from the past, of repenting for the sins that have produced our present

² A striking example is the long-term friendship of the French Catholic priest, the Abbé Fernand Portal, and the Anglican layman, Lord Halifax, who met on the island of Madeira in 1890, a friendship which led thirty years later to the Catholic - Anglican conversations in Malines, Belgium, an important forerunner of later ecumenical relations, though this was not widely recognized at the time.

³ So when Pope John Paul II visited Athens in the year 2000, the Orthodox Archbishop of Athens immediately asked the Pope after his arrival when the Catholic Church was going to apologize for the atrocities of 1204. To his credit, the Pope simply acknowledged this and confessed that these acts were a serious sin against unity.

divisions, of going deeper into all the causes of those divisions. It means identifying what we already share with other Christians and to make that the basis of our relationship and of our honouring of them. It means affirming now that what unites is more fundamental than what divides, and to ask what this means for the way we relate to other Christians and the way we speak of them.

Ecumenism and the Future. The future dimension has been the weakest element in the ecumenical movement. Ecumenism requires that all Christians proclaim that there is only one hope (Eph. 4: 4), there is only one coming King (1 Thess. 3: 13; 5: 23; 1 Tim. 6: 14), and there is only one coming Kingdom (Matt. 6: 10). The future eschatological dimension provides the fullest and deepest motivation to work for unity. Yes, greater unity will reduce the scandal of a divided Christian witness to the world, but the deepest reason is that all Christians have to prepare now to be fully loving and accepting of each other in the coming Kingdom. The Lord is coming back for one Bride, gorgeously dressed and so perfectly prepared (see Eph. 5: 25 - 27; Rev. 19: 8); he is not coming back for a harem.

Points for Discussion

1. Why is it important that the unity of the Church is a visible and organic unity?
2. Describe how you see your contribution as a believer to the restoration of full church unity.
3. Why is the hope of the second coming of Jesus very important for Christian unity.