

Unity in the Body

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In one of his sermons, the revivalist preacher Leonard Ravenhill mentions an incident in which an elderly lady was asked by someone which church she went to. She, perhaps reading the issue of denomination in the question, and not certain of the right terminology, answered abruptly, “Oh no, I go to a different abomination!”

While the modern era has been able to pull down many of the denominational walls, there are still some lessons that must not be forgotten. We have learnt that many differences are not really essential, which means that unity can become essential. Yet, while we consider newer ways to bridge relationships, we must be cautious not to burn important bridges down.

Questions of Authority

The first instance of schismatic feelings in the Church is recorded in Acts 6, and it was, not very surprisingly, an issue of food and tables, a catering issue to be precise. The Hellenist Christians were the first protestants against the Hebrew Christians. The apostles solved it by appointing Spirit-filled deacons, democratically nominated to expressly serve tables. That is the only instance, by the way, where the KJV mentions the word “business” in the Book of Acts. The second instance of possible schism erupted in Acts 15, this time over a doctrinal issue. Some teachers, later known as Judaizers, were teaching that one could not be saved unless one was circumcised according to the Law of Moses. The apostles and elders at Jerusalem solved it by calling a Council at Jerusalem and commissioning Paul, Barnabas, Judas (Barsabbas), and Silas to inform Gentile Christians of the Jerusalem decision, namely that the Gentiles should not consider themselves forced to obey the Mosaic Law except abstaining from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. The schism, however, could not be prevented; for the Judaizers had their own reasons to differ from the Apostles, and the schismatic group came to be known as “false brethren” (pseudadelphos, 2Cor. 11:26; Gal. 2:4).[1] While the issue of tables could be administratively solved, the issue of doctrines inevitably ended in division. Gnostics, Docetists, Nicolaitans, and other schismatic groups followed later. The appointed deacons could serve tables; the commissioned apostles could only sever tables. From then on, all possibility of a dialogue between the parties was ruled out by the apostolic commission.

Of course, an attempt was also not made, as the church at Antioch only wanted to know if the apostles at Jerusalem endorsed the new teaching. One couldn’t expect the need for the apostles to consult or dialogue with the Judaizers to form a consensus. The report declared “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us...” (Acts 15:28). There was a theocratic framework to the

theological framework of the Early Acts of Apostles Church. Later, apostolic authorship and authority played an important role in recognizing the Canon of the New Testament. Pseudographs claiming apostolic authorship abound, though discredited by the Church as uncanonical later on. Several other disputes, later in the history of the Church, could only be settled by reference to interpretations of the Canon. However, it was not until the Reformation that the concept of Sola Scriptura gained full acceptance. Yet, divisions and schisms continued to take place over questions of authority and doctrinal acceptance.

The Post-Enlightenment period saw a new surge of scholarship that questioned the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. Much of the pronouncements that followed gave rise to a culture in which, according to the German philosopher Nietzsche, God was dead and the churches were nothing but “tombs and sepulchers of God.”[2] Perhaps, the epigram “Seminaries are cemeteries” has its origins here. Despite its scholastic attractiveness and popularity, however, liberalism was as diversified as its term indicated, faithful to its Enlightenment zeitgeist, a spirit as catchy as a running nose and as elusive as a running goose. The American Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen said about it: “the movement is so various in its manifestations that one may almost despair of finding any common name which will apply to all its forms.”[3] Its opposition, however, decided to hit the rock. They became known as the Fundamentalists after the publication of a set of 12 books called *The Fundamentals* between 1910 and 1915. The five indisputable fundamentals of Christianity were identified as belief in the infallibility of the Bible, in the virgin birth and the divinity of Jesus Christ, in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross as atonement for the sins of all people, in the physical resurrection and second coming of Christ, and in the bodily resurrection of believers. The proceedings of both the Jerusalem Council of the 1st century and the conferences of the 20th century that gave rise to *The Fundamentals*[4] agree in the fact that they were both aimed at defending the unique identity of Christianity – the former, from the authority of Judaism, and the latter, from the authority of vague modernist liberalism.

Past the modern era one enters the postmodern era to find the Church involved in another battle: the battle with ecumenism. The philosophical zeitgeist had undergone a little change, a critical change. The issue was no longer very much doctrine or authority: it was unity, tolerance, and cooperation. The United Christian Conference on Life and Work at Stockholm (1925) ran the slogan “service unites but doctrine divides” (quite true with reference to Acts 6 and Acts 15). With the missionary movement spreading across the nations, ecumenical concerns became inevitable, and ecumenism finally took momentum from the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh (1910). The World Wars also played some role in building bridges of unity between Christians from various denominations.[5] The World Council of Churches (WCC) came into existence at Amsterdam in 1948. Even the Roman Catholic Church could not keep itself fully distanced from the movement. In 1961, Pope John XXIII permitted Roman Catholic observers officially to attend the third assembly of the WCC. But, as late as 2005, some observed that the ecumenical vision was not so seriously pursued by all, and research showed that there was more felt “a desire to preserve and enhance the identity of the confessional body rather than risk their own identity; of competition between confessional and ecumenical bodies.”[6]

In response to the mainline ecumenical movement, the era saw the resurgence of the Evangelical Movement,[7] the formation of the World Evangelical Fellowship (1951) and wide propagation of evangelicalism through the media of radio, television, and Christian literature. Evangelicalism, in essence, opposed the syncretistic tendencies of the ecumenical movement as represented by the WCC and called forth for emphasis on Biblical faith and world evangelization. In quite many ways, however, the era did see great attempts towards unity among the various groups; the Communion of Churches in India, the Pentecostal Charismatic Peace Fellowship, Churches Uniting in Christ, Christian Churches Together, and the Pentecostal World Fellowship may be quoted as few examples. Some of these stood with the WCC while others detached themselves from it. The WCC mourned the fact that the Roman Catholics, the Evangelicals, and the Pentecostals weren't in the fold. Hawkey quotes the General Secretary of Christian World Communions: "The tent isn't big enough. Until we find some way that Roman Catholics and Pentecostals belong, it is nonsense to talk of ecumenism." [8] Yet, the era also saw the rise of several trans-denominational or inter-denominational mission movements and a fruitful time of great exchange of ideas and spiritual fellowship through literature, music, television, etc between Christians, regardless of the denominations. Of course, "doctrines divide" still.

In 1994, leading Evangelical and Roman Catholic scholars in the United States signed a document called "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" (ECT).[9] The significance of this document, subtitled "The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium", consists in the recognition of the need of unity despite several key differences in doctrine and practice, and in the agreement on points of affirmation, hope, enquiry, contention, and witness. "The difficulties must not be permitted to overshadow the truths on which we are, by the grace of God, in firm agreement," it said and expressed the hope that "our efforts to evangelize will not jeopardize but will reinforce our devotion to the common tasks to which we have pledged ourselves in this statement." Of course, there were a few more ECT meetings and statements to follow, being met by much criticism as well; however, it was also understood that the statements did not speak officially for any of the two communities.[10] The apostles[11] are no more, of course, and the Bible is out in the hand of even the boy who drives the plow,[12] amidst beliefs and cultures of various kinds.

Yet, despite the diversity, and the absence of any visible central authority (like the apostolic authority of the 1st century Church),[13] there must be a recognizable essence of Christianity that identifies it as such, or else "Christianity" is up for grabs – it would evade definition. Many Introduction to Philosophy classes begin with the statement, "The question of what philosophy is, is itself a philosophical problem." Perhaps, that is also applicable to our subject: "The question of what Christianity is, is itself a Christian problem!" One usually hears the analogical argument, "Just because a child is born in a garage, doesn't make him a mechanic; similarly, just because one is born in a Christian home doesn't make one a Christian." We hear terms like "nominal Christians" and, of course, also of "anonymous Christians". So, the question boils into "Who should define Christianity or the Church?" or "What does absolutely define Christianity or the Church?" The search is not for a consensus but for the ultimate determinant.

Questions of Approach

With the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the Catholic Church made an irrevocable commitment towards ecumenism. A key development was the recognition of Christians outside the visible structure of the Catholic Church. In the words of Cardinal Kasper:

The decisive element of the Second Vatican Council's ecumenical approach is the fact that the Council no longer identifies the Church of Jesus Christ simply with the Roman Catholic Church, as had Pope Pius XII as lately as in the Encyclical "Mystici corporis" (1943). The Council replaced "est" (the Catholic Church "is" Jesus Christ's Church) with "subsisti": the Church of Jesus Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, which means that the Church of Jesus Christ is made concretely real in the Catholic Church; in her she is historically and concretely present and can be met. This does not exclude that also outside the visible structure of the Catholic Church there are not only individual Christians but also elements of the Church, and with them an "ecclesial reality". "It is not that beyond the boundaries of the Catholic community there is an ecclesial vacuum".

The Council speaks of "elementa ecclesiae" outside the Catholic Church, which, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling towards Catholic unity. The concept "elementa" or "vestigia" comes from Calvin. Obviously, the Council – unlike Calvin – understands the elementa not as sad remains but as dynamic reality, and it says expressly that the Spirit of God uses these elementa as means of salvation for non-Catholic Christians. Consequently, there is no idea of an arrogant claim to a monopoly on salvation. On the contrary, both the Council and the ecumenical Encyclical acknowledge explicitly that the Holy Spirit is at work in the other Churches in which they even discover examples of holiness up to martyrdom.[14]

Of course, there are differences, and the Catholic Church commits to respect "the other Churches in the otherness which they claim for themselves." Also, in the ecumenical effort, the goal is not a conversion of people to the Catholic fold (though mutual conversions must be respected with respect to freedom of conscience), but "the conversion of all to Jesus Christ". The idea is that "as we move nearer to Jesus Christ, in him we move nearer to one another." In this sense, the approach is not towards "union" or "compromises" of any kind – for differences undeniably exist – but towards greater "reciprocal spiritual exchange and a mutual enrichment."

In its efforts to embrace the Orthodox brethren, the Church faced two offences: the Filioque and Roman primacy. The issue of Filioque concerns the inclusion of the statement that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (implying a double procession) in the Nicene Creed. It served as the main bone of contention that led to the East-West Schism of 1054. The doctrine was rejected by the Eastern Church who believed that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone. Following the 62nd meeting of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation (June 2002), the Consultation issued an agreed statement, *The Filioque: A Church-Dividing Issue?* in which it recommended refraining from labeling each other as heretical on this issue and not treat the doctrine as have already reached full and final ecumenical resolution. The Catholic Church also declared that the condemnation made at the Second Council of Lyons (1274) of those "who presume to deny that the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son" is no longer applicable.[15] The Filioque doesn't seem to be a major issue now; however, the issue of Roman primacy does. While many Eastern Orthodox Christians are willing to have the

same respect for the Pope that they have for their own Patriarch, they desist according to the Roman Bishop the status of supremacy over all Christians. The doctrine of Papal primacy serves as the greatest obstacle in the Catholic efforts towards ecumenism.

A Joint Working Group (JWG) between the World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church was set up in 1965 with the object of exploring means of cooperation between the two communities. After a period of some 40 years into the dialogues, the JWG reported in 2005 that there were deep differences even in the conception of ecumenism. There were “different understandings” and “different ways of doing” ecumenism.[16] Also, the Roman Catholic Church didn’t seem to drop the concept of “return” to the “fullness” of truth and unity that subsists in the Roman Catholic Church. It continued to remind about the “incomplete” communion existing with other churches, though significantly having considered other churches as “churches and ecclesial communities.”[17] Also seeing that there are differences of ecumenical perception within the WCC itself, and the fact that while the WCC is a fellowship of churches the RC is a church, an incompatibility was observed in the decision-making and implementation process – “Since the WCC has no authority over its member churches, the decisions are conveyed simply as recommendations.”

Other approaches are being tried. The Global Christian Forum (GCF) is one example through which it has been possible to also involve the Evangelicals and the Pentecostals in the ecumenical quest. It was founded in 1998 following the proposal of the then General Secretary of the WCC, Rev. Konrad Raiser, that a new, independent space should be created where participants could meet on an equal basis to foster mutual respect and to explore and address together common concerns.[18] A conference was held at Limuru, Kenya from November 6-9, 2007 which brought in some 250 church leaders from more than 70 countries with dozens of churches and organizations ranging from “African Instituted Churches and Pentecostals all the way through Protestant and Anglican to Roman Catholic and various groups of Orthodox.”[19] Some 40% were reportedly from Evangelical and Pentecostal groups, many from the global south. Despite the fact that the WCC funded and supported it, the Forum was autonomous and independent of the WCC.

The GCF brought in two advantages: historical freshness and postmodern approach. In its historical freshness, it differed in its autonomous nature and separation from the older ecumenism that had historically accrued suspicion among many groups. It did succeed in carving a new space. In its postmodern approach, it forwarded a transformed ecumenism that emphasized mutual cooperation and fellowship rather than structural unity and doctrinal agreement. The emphasis is on narratives (Christian life) and networking (Christian fellowship). The second global gathering of the Global Christian Forum is scheduled to be held on 4-7 October 2011 in Manado, Indonesia under the theme Life Together in Jesus Christ, Empowered by the Holy Spirit. It aims to assemble about 300 leaders and representatives of churches and organizations of all the main Christian traditions from all parts of the world.[20] The issue of Pentecostalism and Charismatic spiritual experience is obviously going to play an important role in this conference.

With respect to the identity of Christian, the GCF has a minimal definition: the confession of “the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in his divinity and humanity,” the focus, evidently, being above denominations on the fellowship with the Triune God and Jesus Christ. The next

gathering in October will decide the nature of GCF's future, as well as much of global ecumenical endeavor.[21]

Questions of Authenticity

After the Nairobi Conference of the GCF, David Parker had commented: "The danger of GCF is that it will become simply another talkfest, but its advocates are determined to avoid that. The crucial test is whether it can lead to changes at the local level in the life and mission of the church, and provide a process that will assist in the ongoing resolutions of difficulties." The challenge is to help reflect the sense of unity in diversity at the grassroots level, or else the conferences are mere wastage of time and funds. The kids at school usually hang a note on their classroom walls, "Talk Less, Work More!" Work, ultimately, must be more expressive of intent than mere talk.

Reconciliatory efforts by the Vatican have become expressly clear from not just efforts towards ecumenism, but also public grief and prayer for forgiveness over crimes during the Inquisition, Crusades, and throughout Catholic history. History is not open to oblivion; but, histories can be healed – and Christians have a ground for that in the Cross of Jesus Christ. This era has trans-denominationally picked up several liberation themes, and the struggle for equality has played important role across nations, whether it be the Feminists, the Blacks, the Minjung, or the Dalits. Mutual acceptance has to become culturally embedded into the Christian life, or else mere resolutions and regulations only enforce hypocrisy. Discrimination is a serious issue. However, mutual acceptance cannot be an excuse for loss of spiritual identity. While it is true in a way that global secularization has in a great way helped to erect a platform in which freedom of conscience could be possible,[22] it has brought with it a danger that the Church becomes open to secularization instead of recognizing its identity difference from the secular. One example is when the problem of discrimination is wrongly stretched from sex-discrimination to sexuality-discrimination. Just because the world legalizes homosexuality doesn't mean that the Church should follow pattern. If she does so, she violates not only the meaning of sexuality but also the essence of Biblical spirituality. In such event, her acts cannot be considered reconciliatory at all; they may be modern, but ultimately schismatic[23] – has she considered her relationship with the entire Christian community while making such controversial decisions? Is she being ecumenical only at conference tables and not when out in the world?

Conclusion

The prayer and effort towards unity is in agreement with the High-Priestly Prayer of our Lord in John 17:11, "That they may be one as We are." The Bible specifies reasons why one must separate from some, and why one must not separate from some. Christ brought down all walls of separation between male and female, Jew and Greek, rich and poor, slave and free, Roman and barbarian, masters and servants (Gal.3:28; Col.3:1). All enmities get cancelled on the Cross and those who were once historically enemies, no matter what the historical reasons are, are now united in His Body through the Cross (Eph.2:16). However, the Church also possesses a distinctive role as the light of God in the world. She is called to holiness and separation from immorality (1Thess.4:7; Col.1:22). She is expected to expose the works of darkness (Eph.5:11), making a distinction but saving others with fear, "pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh" (Jude 22,23). Doctrinal integrity is integral, but the goal is that each, "speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ –

from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:15-16). The 21st century has seen a rich growth in inter-denominational ministry and the rise of many platforms through which Christians could globally and mutually benefit through study, sharing, witness, and worship from each other. The prospects are no longer bleak, for we have come a long way. However, as the sphere grows larger, our responsibility also grows to the larger. But, we believe that “as we move nearer to Jesus Christ, in him we move nearer to one another.”

Notes

[1] The term “Judaizer” is never used in the New Testament; the verb ioudaizo used in Galatians 2:14 is translated as “to live as do the Jews” in the KJV.

[2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882, 1887) para. 125; Walter Kaufmann ed. (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp.181-82

[3] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), <http://www.biblebelievers.com/machen>

[4] The term “fundamentalist” was first used by a Baptist journalist in 1920 as a badge of honor for those Christians who championed the cause of the Fundamentals. In later times, of course, it has received much negative connotations with the rise of militant fundamentalism.

[5] Card. Walter Kasper, “Current Problems in Ecumenical Theology”, www.vatican.va

[6] Jill Hawkey, *Mapping the Oikoumene* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005). [Wcc-coe.org](http://www.wcc-coe.org)

[7] Modern Evangelicalism is generally considered to be a wider movement of which Fundamentalism was a subset. Many Evangelicals are moderate and are also found within the mainstream ecumenical denominations, though holding fast to the Protestant conservative faith (cf. “Evangelicalism”, Encarta, Microsoft Corporation, 2008).

[8] *Mapping... (2005)*

[9] See full text at: <http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9405/articles/mission.html>, Accessed July 27, 2011. The names of the signatories included people like Bill Bright (Campus Crusade), Charles Colson (Prison Fellowship), Kent Hill (Eastern Nazarene College), John White (Geneva College), Robert Destro (Catholic University of America), J.I. Packer (Regent College) Francis George (OMI Diocese of Yakima), George Weigel (Ethics and Public Policy Center), Fr. Avery Dulles (Fordham University), Fr. Richard Neuhaus (Institute on Religion and Public Life), Brian O’Connell (World Evangelical Fellowship), and Pat Robertson (Regent University).

[10] The Introduction of the 1994 statement mentions “This statement cannot speak officially for our communities.”

[11] Meaning the Founding Apostles. Many Pentecostal and Charismatic groups believe that the office of the apostle is still continuing.

[12] William Tyndale (c.1492-1536) is said to have remarked to a “learned” but “blasphemous” clergyman, “I defy the Pope, and all his laws; and if God spares my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!”

[13] Namely, among the Protestants; the Roman Catholic Church embraces the doctrine of apostolic succession and papal infallibility.

[14] Card. Walter Kasper, “Current Problems in Ecumenical Theology”, www.vatican.va

[15] “Filioque”, Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org, Accessed on July 29, 2011.

[16] “From Reflection to Reception: Challenges facing the Roman Catholic Church-WCC collaboration”, Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia, Presentation at the event marking the 40th anniversary of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC. Document date: 18.11.2005. <http://www.oikoumene.org>

[17] Ibid

[18] <http://www.globalchristianforum.org/aboutus/> & www.oikoumene.org/en/events-sections/global-christian-forum.html

[19] David Parker, “Transforming Ecumenism? The Global Christian Forum”, Christianity Today Australia, 26 Nov. 2007. au.christiantoday.com

[20] Manado 2011, globalchristianforum.org

[21] “It [the GCF] is for the moment the only instrument that provides space where all the main Christian traditions can assemble in mutual trust for this purpose.” Op. cit.

[22] Harvey Cox had argued as early as 1975 that secularization was Biblically inevitable. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, rev. edn. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975).

[23] Cp. “The decision by the U.S. Episcopal Church to ordain Gene Robinson, an openly gay, non-celibate priest who advocates same-sex blessings, as bishop led the Russian Orthodox Church to suspend its cooperation with the Episcopal Church. Likewise, when the Church of Sweden decided to bless same-sex marriages, the Russian Patriarchate severed all relations with the Church, noting that “Approving the shameful practice of same-sex marriages is a serious blow to the entire system of European spiritual and moral values influenced by Christianity.”” – “Ecumenism”, Wikipedia, Accessed on July 29, 2011.