“Of One Mind and One Heart” (Acts 4:22)

Ecumenical Growth toward Unity in Faith

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Based on the 2006 Sophia Lecture delivered at Washington Theological Union, a scholar of ecumenism and ecclesiology engaged in international ecumenical dialogue reflects on two recent achievements to demonstrate how steps toward unity are drawing Christians closer together.

The modern ecumenical movement, which began in Edinburgh at the World Missionary Conference of 1910, will soon celebrate its one hundredth anniversary. Have Christians come any closer to being of one mind and one heart in their faith over the past century? In this year’s “Holy Wisdom Lecture” I would like to argue that they have and to explore two of ecumenism’s significant advances toward unity in faith.

St. Irenaeus, in his opus magnum written against the various heresies of his day, has a lovely passage about unity in faith (Adversus haereses 1.10.2). After alluding to the words of Acts 4:22 used in the title of this article, he continues:

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For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But as the sun . . . is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shines everywhere and enlightens all who are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth. (Irenaeus, 331)

Augustine, a few centuries later, argued that the view of the Donatists was only held by Christians in North Africa, and, since the wider church was opposed to it, it must be mistaken. One of his more celebrated principles for arguing this way—securus indicat orbis terrarium (that one can be sure about a belief or judgment when it reflects the faith of the entire Christian community)—led John Henry Newman to become a Catholic, because he came to believe that only the Catholic Church maintained this concern to conserve the whole faith as professed by the whole Christian community through time and space (Newman, 109–11).

We can admit that the patristic witnesses about unity in faith are at times a bit optimistic. After all, if unanimity were so prevalent, why did Irenaeus need to write a work Against the Heresies or Augustine his books against the errors of the Donatists? But the insight that the church needs to be one in faith is quite sound. It is not the claim of only one community but a perennial conviction of most Christians, so that the most tragic cause of division—because it is the most difficult to heal—occurs when two groups come to the conclusion that they no longer share the same faith. In such a situation, what can they do but divide?

Unity of Faith and Ecumenism

At Edinburgh in 1910, the World Missionary Conference gathered Christian leaders, mainly from Protestant and Anglican communities of the North Atlantic, to address the problem of credibility caused when Christians preach the one Gospel of Jesus Christ in opposition to one another. It is particularly telling that one of the ground rules adopted for the Edinburgh conference was the rule that doctrinal differences were not to be discussed (Latourette, 360–61, and Tatlow, 406)! It was felt that talking about the faith would lead immediately to insuperable problems and sabotage the conference from the start.

Two comments about this decision should be made. First of all, notwithstanding this ground rule, the Edinburgh delegates did feel that they shared a fundamental unity in faith. It was this conviction that led to the very dramatic moment that arguably could be called the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. On the final day of the conference, after a long and impassioned debate, a vote...
was put as to whether a continuation committee should be established to plan for further missionary conferences and to continue the work of pursuing greater Christian unity. The response to the call for those in favor was a thunderous “aye”; the response to the call for those opposed was absolute silence. And then, spontaneously and almost as one person, the entire assembly rose to its feet and began to sing the hymn known by some as the “Old Hundredth” and by others as the doxology—“Praise God from whom all blessings flow” (see Latourette, 362). This was surely an expression of unity in faith.

Second, already at Edinburgh some felt that the bracketing off of doctrinal questions could only be a temporary provision. Ultimately, divided Christian communities had to address the contradictory convictions that were the cause of their divisions in the first place. The express aim of the Faith and Order movement, founded at Lausanne in 1927, was to address these issues. The Faith and Order movement has produced some very significant advances potentially of great importance for Christian unity. The famous Montreal statement on Scripture and tradition of 1963 is a milestone that still has the potential to draw closer together, on the one hand, those who recognize a special authority in tradition as the necessary transmitter of the Word of God and, on the other, those who assign to Scripture an authority that places it above or even in opposition to tradition. D. Baptist, Eucharist and Ministry of 1982—the most translated, most widely distributed, and most responded to ecumenical text ever written—registered a remarkable degree of agreement, especially about baptism and Eucharist, and seems to have had a formative effect upon many communities. Church and World of 1990 explored how the unity of the church should be of service to renewal in the world, making for a more just society and for more equitable relations between men and women, both within and outside the church. The following year, Confessing the One Faith provided a commentary on the Creed, which could serve as a common resource for handing on the faith today, implicitly showing that we are, for the most part, already one in faith concerning articles of the Creed. A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Towards an Ecumenical Hermeneutics (1998) builds upon the insights about the unity of Scripture and tradition in the Montreal statement. Occasioned by the many responses in which various churches evaluated Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry in light of their own readings of Scripture and
tradition, *Earthen Vessels* offers reflections about contextuality and legitimate diversity in interpreting the Word of God and about ecclesial structures needed for distinguishing between interpretations that express the genuine catholicity of the church and those that contradict its oneness in faith. Finally, the center of attention of Faith and Order has shifted in the last fifteen years to the area of ecclesiology, leading to the publication less than one year ago of a document entitled *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.

As we draw near to the one hundredth anniversary of the World Missionary Conference, one may ask, “Where has all of this led? Have we made any progress toward unity in faith? Are the divided Christian communities any closer today than they were one hundred years ago?”

### Two Recent Achievements

I would like to turn briefly to two recent achievements of ecumenical dialogue in order to argue not only that unity in faith is possible but also that important steps toward it have already been taken. The first is the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ),” signed in 1999 by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and of the Roman Catholic Church. It is a relatively short text drawing together the fruits of a number of individual Lutheran-Catholic dialogues, one of the more significant ones being held here in the United States. Members of both communities were convinced that these dialogues were uncovering the same fundamental consensus on justification by faith, one of the principal causes of the division of the Western church (see JDDJ, nos. 13 and 40–45).

What is so heartening about the declaration is that it illustrates how two communities can come to a new awareness about the degree of their unity in faith when they examine a once-divisive doctrine within a broad context of study and dialogue. The declaration states:

> By appropriating insights of recent biblical studies and drawing on modern investigations of the history of theology and dogma, the post Vatican II ecumenical dialogue has led to a notable convergence concerning justification, with the result that this joint declaration is able to formulate a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification. In light of this consensus, the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century do not apply to today’s partner. (JDDJ, no. 13)

The agreement provides a short statement of consensus in the basic truths relative to the doctrine of justification, whose heart is expressed in the following words: “Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy
Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works” (no. 15). Seven related topics are then briefly explored, in each of which traditional Lutheran and Catholic teaching had been formulated in contrasting ways. Now these different formulations are explained as simply different and compatible explications of the fundamental consensus on justification.

For example, on the question of the good works, both communities agree that “good works—a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love—follow justification and are its fruits” (no. 37). In the past, Catholics and Lutherans seemed opposed about whether such good works could be called “meritorious.” The declaration now presents these former oppositions in a new light:

When Catholics affirm the “meritorious” character of good works, they wish to say that, according to the biblical witness, a reward in heaven is promised to these works. Their intention is to emphasize the responsibility of persons for their actions, not to contest the character of those works as gifts or far less to deny that justification remains the unmerited gift of grace. . . . When [Lutherans] view the good works of Christians as the fruits and signs of justification and not as one’s own “merits,” [they] nevertheless also understand eternal life in accord with the New Testament as unmerited “reward” in the sense of the fulfillment of God’s promise to the believer. (nos. 38–39)

The point is that different sensibilities concerning the word merit have led to quite different affirmations about it. Upon closer examination, however, these affirmations turn out not to be contradictory. Catholics speaking about merit in no way intend to deny the utterly gratuitous nature of justification in Jesus Christ; Lutherans denying that good deeds are meritorious in no way intend to reject what the New Testament teaches about God’s reward and about the responsibility of believers to produce fruits worthy of salvation. Pope John Paul II in paragraph 38 of Ut Unum Sint wrote that one of the benefits of dialogue is the discovery that formulations once considered in opposition are sometimes instead merely “the result of two different ways of looking at the same reality.” When the Catholic Church officially approved the joint declaration on justification, it was stating that such a discovery has been made concerning this particular doctrine.

The joint declaration is a fine example of two principles that gained new clarity at Vatican II: the principle of the hierarchy of truths and the principle that a plurality of formulations is possible in expressing revealed truth. First of all, it nicely illustrates the hierarchy of truths by going to the very heart of the doctrine of justification, as expressed in the short statement quoted above, and then addressing subsidiary questions like those concerning “merit” in light of that more central doctrine. Not only this, the declaration also seeks to situate the doctrine of justification in relation to the whole range of biblical teachings about salvation in Christ. When the doctrine of the hierarchy of truths first appeared
in Vatican II’s decree on ecumenism in 1964, many thought it might allow for doctrinal unity based upon a reduced number of truths. What one sees in the “Joint Declaration,” instead, is a promising and unexpected use of this principle in a way that denies no doctrine but allows for a more accurate reading of positions that once seemed contradictory but now can be acknowledged as compatible.

The second principle was enunciated by John XXIII at the opening of the council and reiterated by *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 6, and *Ut Unum Sint*, nos. 18 and 38. It distinguishes between the content of a doctrine and its time-conditioned formulation. Of course, there is a lasting truth expressed in any solemn teaching of the church and a perennial normativity to the formulation in which it is expressed. At the same time, the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and many other Scholastic theologians that the *actus credentis terminatur non ad enuntiabile sed ad rem*—that the act of the believer is not directed the proposition but to the reality—confirms that Pope John was not proposing a new principle *ex nihilo*. Indeed, one of the first texts produced by the International Theological Commission was *Unity in Faith and Theological Pluralism*. Its very first thesis states that the ultimate cause of plurality in the expression of the faith is to be found in the mystery of Jesus Christ himself, who is the one and only Savior of all peoples. Since no human expression is exhaustively adequate to the mystery of salvation in Christ, a variety of formulations and approaches is not only possible but may be desirable. The joint declaration seems to reflect quite directly this insight.

**A Second Achievement**

The second text I would like to discuss briefly is *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, distributed to the participants at the ninth general assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in February 2006. The importance of this text can be appreciated when one recalls that in 1950, only two years after its foundation, the WCC felt it necessary to issue the famous Toronto Statement that basically distanced the council from any particular ecclesiology or conception of the nature and mission of the church (see West, 1137–39). This was necessary so as to respond to the concern that joining the council might require a community to jettison its own understanding of the church. The Toronto Statement affirms that WCC membership did not imply the acceptance of a particular ecclesiology. Instead, one of the principal aims of the council would be precisely to provide a forum within which a common vision of church could emerge.

In light of Toronto, this new work on ecclesiology is a genuine milestone. It not only seeks to integrate earlier WCC statements about unity—especially the classic statements from the general assemblies of New Delhi, Nairobi, and Canberra—but also to harvest the ecclesiological insights from other Faith and Order work,
especially those woven into the responses to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Of the many aspects of this text that give reason for hope, I will comment here upon two.

First of all, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* attempts to address what might be called a contrasting outlook that has had a tremendously divisive effect upon the way Christians from different traditions view the church. One way of trying to capture this difference is in terms of the holiness or sinfulness of the church. Traditional Orthodox, Catholic, and, to a large extent, Anglican ecclesiology has refrained from calling the church a “sinner,” thinking that such would be an inappropriate description of the bride of Christ, purified by him with a bath of purification (see Eph 5:26-27) and professed in the Creed to be holy. This approach is characterized generally by a positive regard for the church as a people chosen and graced by God, with structures of divine origin that must be preserved and defended. The Reformation, as reflected in its very name, was very attentive to the failures of the members of the church, both individually and collectively. Its many different communities soon developed a range of convictions about the extent to which specific offices or structures were permanent or could be changed, with the accent being more on the latter. It also insisted on the continual reform of the community under the judgment of the Word of God.

Hopefully, in a way analogous to that of the “Joint Declaration on Justification,” this new WCC text on the church can be an occasion to reveal that, at a fundamental level, the contrast between Christians in their basic estimation of the church is not so sharp. Clearly, when Catholics express a high regard for the church as the bride of Christ, they do not wish to be blind to the shortcomings evidenced among its members or lukewarm in their commitment to change what can and should be changed. Similarly, the Protestant insistence upon reform does not lead them to deny the divine origin of the church in the plan of God and its sublime role in serving as an instrument to continue Christ’s saving mission to all humankind. My hope would be that the opening chapters of this new ecclesiological text could move all Christians toward unmasking this centuries-old opposition as a *false* opposition.

Second, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* offers for the first time in a Faith and Order text some initial consideration of the ministry of primacy within a future community in which unity has been reestablished. It does so in explicit response to John Paul II’s call for dialogue about this ministry. *Nature and Mission* states:

> In recent years . . . both ecumenical rapprochement and globalization have created a new climate in which a universal primacy can be seen as a gift rather than a threat to other churches and the distinctive features of their witness. . . . Despite continuing areas of disagreement, there seems to be an increasing openness to discuss a universal ministry in support of the mission and unity of the
church and agreement that any such personal ministry would need to be exercised in communal and collegial ways. Given the ecumenical sensitivity of this issue it is important to distinguish between the essence of the primacy and any particular ways in which it has been or is currently exercised. (nos. 103–104)

These modest affirmations all echo official Catholic statements on the ministry of the successor to Peter, both those in *Ut Unum Sint* and those of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s “Reflections on the Ministry of the Successor to Peter” (1998).

**Looking toward the Future**

These reflections have considered unity in faith mostly in reference to ecumenical dialogues and two of the agreements they have produced. But can texts really bring divided Christian communities closer together? I almost hesitate to report the following quotation because its author is a noted theologian—thus no enemy to theological texts—and is president of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. In an ecumenical gathering in St. Alban’s cathedral on May 17, 2003, Walter Kasper stated:

> It may be useful to bear in mind that the ecumenical documents of only the last decades at the international level . . . now comprise two thick volumes. Who can read all this stuff, and, indeed, who wants to? Most of this documentation is not really received in the churches, neither at the hierarchical nor at the grassroots level. Often it is destined only for the bookshelves, and I can well understand lay people who disappointedly ask: What and where are the concrete results, and what is the visible outcome of your illuminated discussions and documents? (Kasper 2003, 22)

The truth, of course, is that ecumenical documents are merely tools—and not the only tools or perhaps not even the most important ones—for arriving at unity in faith. The reception of documentation by the churches at the hierarchical and grassroots levels, which Cardinal Kasper calls for, is really aimed at the churches’ mutual reception of one another. One of the essential elements of this mutual reception is the recognition that we share the same faith.

If we want to uncover how the church remains united in the same faith, the New Testament and the community of the early centuries can offer some guidance. These sources show that unity in faith is not established once and for all by a text. It is the possession of a living community of persons—each intelligent, free, and graced in varying ways. The church’s unity in faith embraces diversity, as evidenced in the four Gospels or in the diverse treatment of a single theme, such as
that of “the body of Christ” in 1 Corinthians and Colossians. But diversity also appears sometimes as a threat to the unity of the community. It can be the diversity of false doctrine, about which Paul warns the leaders of the Ephesian community in his tearful departure recounted in Acts 20 and against which Timothy and Titus are to guard, according to the Pastoral Letters.

Perhaps the only NT text that uses the precise expression “unity in faith” is Ephesians 4:13, which reads as follows: “. . . until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (NIV). Clearly here unity in faith is something into which the community continues to grow, maturing into unity in faith. This entails a process that does not end. The basic elements that make this process work are the revealed Word of God, expressed in Scripture and transmitted through the tradition, the gifts and charisms of the Spirit related to prophecy and teaching, dialogue, the development of statements of faith such as creeds and official teachings, and the guidance of ministerial leaders (see Henn, 195–228).

Unity in faith needs to be seen as a process that gives due weight to the existential encounter of believers with Christ as their Lord and Savior and, at the same time, leads to sincere common conviction about revealed truth. Currently, divided Christian communities will be able to become “of one mind and of one heart” (Eph 4:22) only as they come to accept together the essential elements that allow this process to take place: the normative authority of Scripture as transmitted by the tradition; the charisms relative to the handing on of the faith; the practice of dialogue involving all members of the community; and the leadership of the bishops who have been graced with the Spirit’s help to exercise the ministry of episkopē. Ecumenical conversations can and already have helped this to occur, in varying degrees, between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities. The last ten years have seen the production of important new convergences about justification and church, perhaps the two principal causes of division in faith. Of course, the miracle of unity in faith can only be worked by the Holy Spirit. In the meantime, ecumenical dialogue, formation, and spirituality must continue to prepare the ground for this miracle. But there is cause for great hope here.

Soon the Christian world will celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the First World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh. Those present were amazed at the unanimity they felt in launching the ecumenical movement. One can hope that
this anniversary can occasion renewed preparation for the gift of unity in faith. Two years ago, Cardinal Walter Kasper made a comparison between the Lutheran-Catholic agreement on justification and the improbable falling of the Berlin wall, adding: “It is my firm conviction that one day too we will rub our eyes in amazement that God’s Spirit has broken through the seemingly insurmountable walls that divide us and given us new ways through to each other and a new communion” (Kasper 2004, 160). May that day come sooner than we dare to think!

References


