



Witnesses of These Things: Ecumenical Engagement in a New Era

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Studies 2010: Christian Understanding of Unity in an Age of Radical Diversity

“One Mind for the Faith of the Gospel”

Philippians 1:27¹

Introduction

At the heart of the ecumenical movement is a dilemma that has troubled thinkers through the ages: what is the relationship between the one and the many, between the unity of a community and the diversity of individuals and sub-groups? From the outset, ecumenical leaders have affirmed that unity and diversity must be held in dialectical tension in any faithful understanding of the church. The First World Conference on Faith and Order (1927) envisioned a “unity in multiplicity.”² A decade later a second such conference declared that “what we desire is the unity of a living organism, with the diversity characteristic of the members of a healthy body.”³

The early statements of the Faith and Order stream of the ecumenical movement recognized that an emphasis on unity can become bland and authoritarian if it does not value the human diversities of race, gender, culture and theological perspectives on the one faith. Similarly, an emphasis on diversity without concern for the common good can become fragmented and provincial. Unity is meaningful only if it includes those who are not alike; diversity is significant only when it is seen in relationship to the other distinctive members of the whole body.

In the early decades of the ecumenical movement the balance often tipped in the direction of unity, however, as if diversity were a problem to be resolved. It was argued that confessional identities needed to die as part of the price for church union. Particular racial and ethnic groups needed to be ‘included’ in the majority. Theological differences needed to be eliminated through dialogues aimed at reaching wide-ranging agreement. Not surprisingly, when the ecumenical movement spoke of unity many heard it as the subordination of diversity in favor of the preferences of those in power.

Over the past two generations the balance has shifted in large parts of the ecumenical movement, leading to major changes in the perceived goal of dialogue. Models of ‘organic union’ have given way to proposals for ‘reconciled diversity’ in which churches preserve their historic identities and methods of decision-making while sharing in sacraments ministry and mission.

It is not the purpose of this study to argue for or against various models of Christian unity, but rather to suggest that overemphasis on diversity, like overemphasis on unity, can have destructive consequences. Churches settle for tolerant cooperation rather than struggling to overcome church dividing issues that prevent eucharistic sharing and the reconciliation of ministries. Instead of valuing diverse individuals as essential to genuine community, the church succumbs to individualistic self-sufficiency that denies the interdependence of Christian women and men. Affirmation of particular identity is too often seen as an end in itself rather than a call to share the Spirit’s gifts in order that Christ’s body may be ‘built up in love’ (Eph 4:16).

This study contends that the ecumenical movement must find new ways of holding unity and diversity in appropriate and creative relationship. The goal of the ecumenical movement is not to unite those who are diverse – that is the goal of political parties and governments. The goal is to celebrate the wondrous diversity of our God-given oneness as God’s people, Christ’s body, the Spirit’s temple. Abstract slogans about unity and diversity are no longer compelling. The church must turn again to scripture and tradition in order to hear what the Spirit is saying to us.

Embedded in the New Testament are ways of understanding the community of faith that values both the church’s unity and its diversity, while acknowledging the indispensable relationship between them. These ways of understanding the *one* church discern both the promise and the peril of its *diversity*.

The Body of Christ

The ‘body of Christ’ texts – 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 1, Ephesians 4 and Colossians 1 – provide insight into the life of the contemporary church. Each text, in ways familiar to most Christians, presents the church as the body of Christ. Our very acquaintance with the New Testament’s ‘body of Christ’ language, however, may diminish our capacity to hear what it says to us. ‘Body of Christ’, the Bible’s shocking metaphor, has become a cliché.

‘Human organizations are like the human body’ is a modern truism. The comparison is embedded in everyday references to ‘the body politic’, ‘a body of troops’ and ‘legislative bodies’, not to mention less obvious allusions to ‘corporate life’. Unfortunately, such conventional uses of the organization-body figure of speech shape the way New Testament ‘body of Christ’ texts are understood in the church, obscuring their meaning. The church-body analogy has scant capacity to inform us, let alone to alter the way we live.

Correlation between an organization and the human body is not only a modern platitude. It was already a cliché in the first century. The human organization as body was a well-known Hellenistic figure of speech, used to describe the *polis*, the family, and other institutions and associations.⁴ If Paul had been doing nothing more than noting that diverse persons in the church can and should function together as a unified whole, the readers of his letters might have

dismissed his body language as a truism. Comparing any organization, even the church, to the human body was little more than first century conventional wisdom. But Paul was not being trite. He had something to say that was – and is – surprising.

The Body is Christ's

When we look closely at the ‘body of Christ’ passages in 1 Corinthians, Romans and Colossians, we quickly move beyond conventional understandings. The texts do far more than compare the human organization, the church, to the one-yet-differentiated human organism, the body. Neither 1 Corinthians nor Romans nor Ephesians nor Colossians says simply that the church is *like* the body. Instead, they make the startling claim that the church *is* the body of *Christ*. It is as the body of *Christ* that the church is one, and it is as the body of *Christ* that the church's diversity is experienced.

- 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...* Now you are the body of *Christ*, and individually members of it. (1 Cor 12:12, 27)
- For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body *in Christ*, and individually we are members one of another. (Rom 12:4-5)
- [God] has put all things under [Christ's] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is *his body*, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:22-23)
- There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ... We must grow up in every way into *him who is the head*, into *Christ*, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Eph 4:4-6, 15-16)
- [Christ] himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. *He is the head of the body*, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. . . . I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of *his body*, that is, the church. (Col 1:17-18, 24)

The jarring element in these texts is not “the church can be likened to the body,” but rather, “the church-body is the body of *Christ*, the body *in Christ*, the body whose *head is Christ*.” The church-body is not its own body, but *Christ's* body! And yet Christ's body is no longer exclusively identified with Christ, for the body of Christ is *the church*! Clearly, Paul's language is not mere simile: “the church is like a body.” Rather, Paul creates a rich metaphor in

which two disparate terms – church-body and Christ-body – are brought together in a way that discloses an altogether new reality. Church-body and Christ-body are each intelligible separately, but *church-body-of-Christ* goes far beyond ordinary usage, stretching language to the breaking point in order to create a new apprehension of truth.

To put it simply, the church is not its own. The church is not self-generated or self-directed. The church is not its own, for the church belongs to another, to Christ, precisely as Christ's body. The church is not master of its own life, able to determine its own nature or purpose, for the church belongs to Christ alone. Even so, the bond of *church* and *body of Christ* is not a natural one, as if the church were the continuing form of Christ's earthly presence, or as if the church dwells in Christ's heavenly presence. Rather, as the body of Christ, the church exists as a visible collection of ordinary people that is nothing less than the locus of the real presence of Christ.

It is not coincidental that the other striking New Testament use of 'body of Christ' also discloses Christ's presence. "This [bread] is my body", says Jesus (Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19). Bread is Christ's body and the church is Christ's body; both bread and church are the locus of Christ's presence. Christ's real presence in Eucharistic bread and wine nourishes the body of Christ, constituting and manifesting the real presence of Christ in the church.

The Body is Wounded

As if this were not enough – *we are the body of Christ, we are one body in Christ, we are the body whose head is Christ* – the texts suggest that we are Christ's *wounded* body, even Christ's *crucified* body. The suffering, executed, dead and buried Jesus has been raised to new life, of course, but resurrection does not eradicate crucifixion. It is the crucified one who is raised, and the resurrected one is none other than the crucified. As the *body of Christ* the church is not a glorified body. The church is the body of the crucified-risen Christ, and so the church lives with nail marks in its hands and a gash in its side (Jn 20:24-29), as a slaughtered lamb (Rev 5:6), and as the body whose hands and feet remain pierced (Lk 24:36-49).

The church does not live in triumphant glory. There are times when the church pretends to itself and others that it is a powerful force in the world, but this pretense is difficult to maintain in the current era of the church's cultural disestablishment – even though nostalgia and wishful thinking are ever present. The New Testament 'body of Christ' texts draw us back to the cross as they proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor 11:26). The church is made Christ's body through baptism into Christ's death, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13). The church has been united with Christ in a death like his, and the fullness of resurrection is not yet its possession (Rom 6:5). Thus, the church's bodily existence as *ecclesia crucis* is not an unfortunate necessity, but the God-given shape of its life as the body of Christ.

In letters to Corinth, Rome, Ephesus and Colossae the church is known as the wounded body of Christ. Paul's 'body of Christ' passages neither celebrate the church's unity nor applaud the church's diversity. He employs the metaphor in contexts of discord and division, not peace and harmony. "Is Christ divided?" Paul asks the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:13, RSV). His question is more than rhetorical, and the answer remains uncertain. From first century Corinth through Christian communities spanning twenty centuries, the grotesque reality is that the suffering body

of Christ is lacerated and torn by the very disciples of Christ. John Calvin's letter to Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer voices the agony of the church: "This other thing also is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time, viz., that the Churches are so divided, that human fellowship is scarcely now in any repute among us... Thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding."⁵

Paul draws upon 'body of Christ' when disagreement in the church breeds antagonism that leads to separation. Because Christ's body should not be marked by disagreement, antagonism and separation, Paul urges unity. The opening of 1 Corinthians is typical: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor 1:10). Yet the unity Paul urges is a unity *of* diverse members, not a unity imposed *over* diverse members: "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (Rom 12:4-6).

'Body of Christ' is used throughout at points of conflict and division. First Corinthians is laced with recognition of dissensions, quarreling, factionalism and strife. The conflict within the community demonstrates dramatically that members of the body of Christ have a common need for diverse gifts. Recognition of this reality leads to "care for one another" in the "more excellent way" that "does not insist on its own way" (1 Cor 12:31; 13:5). The split between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in Rome leads Paul to use 'body of Christ' again, bracketed by admonitions that no one should "think of himself more highly than he ought to think" and exhortations to "love one another with brotherly affection" and to "live peaceably with all" (Rom 13:3; 12:10; 12:18). Even the more lofty letter to the Ephesians acknowledges the continuing division of Jews and Gentiles, coupling "one body" with the plea to live "forbearing one another in love...maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). In Colossians the link between Christ's suffering and the church's suffering is explicit: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24).

To call the church "*body of Christ*" is to set forth the God-given, Christ-shaped, Spirit-empowered unity of the church. The human body is not a voluntary alliance of independent eyes, ears, hands, feet, hearts and lungs; the parts of the body have no viability apart from their bodily unity. As Christ's body, the church is not merely a humanly diverse collection of self-sufficient communities with the brand name "Christian". Christ is so present in this body that the church is not its own, but Christ's. Yet anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear knows that this body is divided. Is Christ, then, divided?

Life Worthy of the Gospel of Christ

The New Testament does not call the church to be diverse; diversity is an evident, God-given reality. Yet it is also evident that diversity can become difference that leads to division. The New Testament is replete with exhortations to unity precisely because there are "quarrels among us" that lead to "divisions among us;" we are not "in agreement," and we are not "united

in the same mind and the same purpose” (1 Cor 1:10-11).

What is the character of the unity that Scripture urges? Scripture exhorts us to “live life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” and to be of “one mind for the faith of the gospel” (Phil 1:27). We are urged to unity in faith and unity in the character of our living – faith and life, theology and morality, doctrine and ethics, evangelism and justice. Of course, these are precisely what divide the body of Christ, separating churches from one another and creating factions within churches. Moreover, these are precisely the matters that receive superficial attention in too many ecumenical proposals and too many attempts to resolve intra-church conflicts. Ecumenical and denominational discussions are often constrained by anxiety that attempts at theological precision will uncover divergences, and that attention to moral issues will expose oppositions.

Scripture does not urge uniformity in faith and morals, however. Ephesians 4:1-16, a favorite ecumenical text, presents us with a marvelously modulated insight into unity/diversity, moving from *one* to *all* to *each* to *some* and then back to the *unity* of the *whole* that requires the working of *each*. The *one* body is to lead a life worthy of its calling in *one* faith and *one* hope because there is *one* Spirit, *one* Lord, *one* God and Father of *all*. Yet *each* was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift so that *some* have one calling and some others have different yet complementary callings. The purpose for *all* is building up the *body of Christ*. It is as *each* part is working properly that the body is whole. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit are evidenced in a diversity of gifts that are to be exercised for the health and maturity of the whole body.

The whole church is called to stand firm in one spirit with one mind for the faith of the gospel. And yet, within the whole church, diverse persons, groups and denominations are not called to march in lock-step, but rather to strive “side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel” (Phil 1:27).⁶ Striving *side by side with one mind* is suggestive, for it implies a commonality of purpose and yet a multiplicity of effort. *All* are to strive for the *one* faith of the gospel as *each* fulfills the mission in collaboration with *each*. Unity in the faith of the gospel is lived out side by side, together with, synergistically.

All of this suggests that the unity of the church is not found in human homogeneity, ecclesiastical diplomacy, integrated institutions or inter-church accords. The unity of the church resides in the faith of the gospel that is lived out by persons, groups and denominations ‘side by side’ in a manner worthy of the gospel. The unity of the diverse church is a feature of the integrity of the gospel of Christ, God’s new Way in the world, the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit.

The task of the churches, then, is to give complementary and therefore unified witness to the faith of the gospel of Christ. Unified witness to the faith of the gospel goes far beyond cooperative ventures, especially those motivated by concern for efficiency and economy. The churches are called to give unified witness to the *faith* and *faithfulness* of the *gospel*. The witness of the churches is not and should not be monolithic, but neither should the witness be obscured by the churches’ independent assertions of their historical and sociological diversity. The witness of the churches should be characterized by what Karl Barth called “integrated multiplicity”.⁷ The churches are multiple, but their witness must be integrated in fidelity to the gospel of Christ.

The desperate need for the oneness of the Christian community is not for the sake of the church. Christian unity is for the sake of the world; for the sake of those who do not know “what

was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, ...and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 Jn 1:1). The oneness of the Christian community is to reflect the oneness of the Father and the Son, and thus be a visible proclamation that God’s new Way in the world is known in Jesus Christ, the Way of divine love for the world and human love within the world.

But the world does not see a unified Christian community. The world sees ‘Christianity’ in a fractured, dizzying kaleidoscope image of differentiated church institutions: Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal – each separated from the other, and the latter two endlessly subdivided into competing and often hostile church bodies. The world sees churches split by public disputes, the internal proliferation of competing affinity groups and the scandal of personal-political maneuvers. Moreover, a world that is increasingly indifferent to embodied communities of faith, also sees the churches promote themselves as specialty boutiques in the religion wing of America’s shopping mall, competing with each other for a share of the declining demand for what they offer.

What the world does not see in the all-too-visible disunity of the churches is a sign that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” What the disunity of the churches obscures is God’s glory, “glory as of the only Son from the Father” (Jn 1:14, RSV). Division and competition among the churches renders less accessible to the world the good news that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters” (Gal 4:4, RSV alt.). Bruce Marshall puts the matter starkly: “The credibility of the gospel – of the message that the triune God gives his own eternal life to the world in the missions of the Son and Spirit – depends upon the unity of the church by which that life is exhibited to the world. ... The unity of the church is a necessary condition for holding the gospel true”.⁸ John Howard Yoder was even more blunt: ‘Where the church is not united, the gospel is not true in that place’.⁹

Division Among and Within the Churches

Many lament the onset of an ‘ecumenical winter’ in which the commitment of the churches to the unity of Christ’s Church has been put on ice. Ecumenical councils contract as denominational engagement and funding decline. Thin ecumenical agreements preserve the essential self-sufficiency of the churches. Congregations in one denomination engage in cooperative mission with neighboring congregations from other denominations (and other faiths) and call it ecumenism. They wonder what all the institutional and academic fuss over unity is about, even as they continue to believe and worship in mutual isolation.

Subdued dedication to the unity of the church is no longer solely an ecumenical concern. What was an ecumenical issue *among* the churches is now a denominational issue *within* the churches as well. Because internal theological and moral diversities are sometimes irreconcilable, many American churches are now coping with the reality of discord, departure, splits, schisms and breaks in communion. Even within particular churches, commitment to ecclesiastical unity wanes as both majorities and minorities assert diverse theological, moral and ecclesial convictions, requiring agreement as their condition for concord.

Discourse about ecclesial unity and diversity has become attached to conflicts within the churches in odd ways. Denominational establishments, which used to be celebrants of diversity, now invoke unity as a means of suppressing diversities that challenge the ecclesiastical institution. Dissidents within the churches, which used to call for unity in faith and practice, now invoke diversity as justification for departure to alternate church bodies. While diversity *among* denominations can generally be accommodated by expressions of mutual appreciation, diversity *within* churches may harden into the reality of mutual exclusion.

In the midst of it all diminished ecclesial concern for unity is accompanied by a blossoming appreciation for diversity among the churches as well as within churches. Reception of diversity now embraces far more than the gospel-created inclusion of race, gender, class and ethnicity, extending to variety in all aspects of Christian faith and life. As we struggle with the gospel's call for Christian unity in the current reality of radical diversity we are charged to live out our Lord's prayer "that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn 17:23). The call for Christian unity is not for the sake of the churches, but for the sake of the world.

Recommendations

1. That the NCC recognize and fulfill its potential as a privileged instrument by which churches may listen to one another and speak to one another, engaging issues that challenge the churches and imperil humankind.
2. That the NCC incorporate into its life the spirit of the WCC Porto Alegre statement, "Called to Be the One Church," by facilitate *deep conversations* among various churches, inviting them to engage in the hard task of giving a candid account of the relation of their own faith and order to the faith and order of other churches.
3. That the NCC provide the forum in which each church can articulate the judgments that shape, and even qualify, its relationship to the others so that honest sharing of commonalities, divergences and differences will help all churches to pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life.

ENDNOTES

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1. Unless otherwise noted, scripture references are taken from Bruce Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); also cited as NRSV. When noted, scripture passages are taken from Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Revised Standard Version Containing the Old and New Testaments*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); also cited as RSV.
 2. See H. N. Bate, ed., *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference, Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1928²), p. 331.
 3. See Leonard Hodgson, ed., *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh, August 3-18, 1937*, (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1938), p. 252.
 4. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 1038-1039. See also J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body*, Studies in Biblical Theology No. 5 (London: SCM, 1952), pp. 59-60.
 5. John Calvin, "Letter to Cranmer" (1552) in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, vol. 5, edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 355.
 6. NRSV: "striving side by side (*suvathlountes*) with one mind (*miq psuchēi*)." See also Philippians 4:3, "[Euodia and Syntyche] have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers" (*sunergōn*).
 7. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.3.2, translated by G. W. Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), p. 856.
 8. Bruce Marshall, "The Disunity of the Church and the Credibility of the Gospel," *Theology Today* I:1 (April 1993), p. 82.
 9. This quotation is an edited paraphrase of Yoder. His original words are: "If it is not the case that there are in a given place people of various characters and origins who have been brought together in Jesus Christ, then there is not in that place the new humanity and in that place the gospel is not true." in John Howard Yoder, "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation" in *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, edited by J. L. Garrett Jr. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969), p. 259.