

PRAYING FOR THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

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Later Ellen experienced a religious conversion. She became disaffected when the Southern and Northern Presbyterians, estranged since the Civil War, reunited after over a hundred years. It was not the reunion she objected to, but the liberal theology of the Northern Presbyterians, who, according to her, were more interested in African revolutionaries than the divinity of Christ. She and others pulled out and formed the independent Northlake Presbyterian Church.

Then she became an Episcopalian.

Then suddenly she joined a Pentecostal sect. . . .

I do not know what to make of this.

- *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Walker Percy¹

Praying for the unity of the church should be the most obvious task of the ecumenical movement, if not of the whole church. After all, Jesus' "high priestly" prayer for his disciples – his prayer for us – is all about oneness: the oneness of the Father and the Son, the oneness of the gospel, the oneness of the community of faith, and the oneness of the world (John 17). Yet, even within the ecumenical movement, prayer for the unity of the church takes a back seat to institutional striving for agreements that look like treaties and arrangements that resemble loose alliances. The fullness of a unity that is observable to all who have eyes to see seems remote at best. Perhaps full visible unity is thought to be so remote that praying for it appears to be more romantic than efficacious.

That they may be one?

It is common in ecumenical circles to repeat, like a mantra, Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one," sometimes citing the next clause of the Lord's petition, "so that the world may believe." While this grounds our labors in John 17, we still abbreviate the biblical reference, short-circuiting the rich movement of our Lord's prayer and reducing a powerful proclamation of the gospel to a slogan. Our prayer for the unity of the church might be deepened if it embodied a fuller measure of Jesus' prayer for us.

Jesus prayed "when the hour had come," timing that underlines the urgency of his petitions. The words of the prayer echo themes that are prominent throughout John's Gospel. In the beginning the evangelist proclaimed, "the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (Jn. 1:14, RSV). At the end, Jesus prayed, "Father . . . glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you." (Jn. 17:1) In the beginning the evangelist proclaimed, "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (Jn. 1:18, RSV). At the end, Jesus prayed, "that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn. 17:1-3). The intimate oneness of the Father and the Son, stressed throughout the Gospel, has been made manifest to those

who know and believe the truth – not as abstract, conceptual truth, but as the truth of the gospel, the truth of lived communion with God. The unity of God’s people is thus grounded in the very nature of the One to whom they are bound; Jesus prays, “that they may be one, as we are one.” As the Father and Son are one, *so* those who know the only true God and Jesus whom he has sent *are to be* one.

But those who are to be one have not been one and are not one. If the unity of the people of God were as inherent as the unity of the Father and the Son, there would have been no need for Jesus to pray for our oneness. Yet Jesus did pray for our unity, and does pray for our unity. Why, then, is our praying as he prayed so sporadic? Why is our concentrated prayer for Christian unity too often confined to a mere midwinter week?

The reason for our lethargy may be found within Jesus’ prayer itself. He pleads, “Holy Father, protect them . . . so that they may be one.” Our Lord prayed for our protection because he knew that our unity was imperiled at the outset, and that even our limited, partial unities within the shattered church are in constant danger of further fragmentation. The church was endangered by all that sought to divide it, and remains imperiled by all that seeks to increase its breakup. Jesus prays for our protection from the forces of disunity, for only then can our unity cohere with the oneness of the Father and the Son. From the outset, Christian unity has been at risk, dependent on our protection from the danger posed by “the world” and by “the evil one.” Yet even though we pray daily, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we remain insufficiently aware that among our temptations is easy acquiescence to the evil of our division.

The congregation in which my wife and I worship always includes Lord’s Day prayers for our three covenant partners in the community – a Catholic parish, an Episcopal church, and a Baptist congregation. We also pray, by name, for another church in our area, a congregation in our presbytery, and a member church of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. These prayers are more than a pro forma exercise; they shape our consciousness of a church that is broader and deeper than our congregation or our denomination, and help to encourage patterns of mutuality.

Yet our intercessions tacitly assume the continuing separation of the churches for which we pray. Our prayers do not lament our multiple levels of separation or yearn for the day when full Eucharistic communion among parishes will be the reality in Louisville, in the United States, throughout the world. Instead, we casually accept the continuing division of the church as a characteristic of “the way things are.” It may take something as striking as Ephraim Radner’s rhetoric to awake us to the devitalized condition of our “ecumenical” denominations and their congregations . . . not to mention those churches that take pride in their separation:

Consider that the debilitation of the Body of Christ, the encroaching paralysis of its senses, is hardly a reality its members greet with comprehension . . . Indeed, the most manifest mark of the divided church appears to be its own insensitivity to the symptoms of its condition. No stench reaches its nostrils; no shame cracks its heart.²

Invisible Church? Diverse Gifts?

Protestant ecclesiology has hardened its heart against the shame of the divided church. Two odd theological arguments are put forward to provide rationalization for obvious fragmentation. The first, common in more conservative circles, is a pop version of “invisible church.” It asserts that since Christ cannot be divided, the unity of the Body of Christ must be real even though it is not at all apparent. Therefore, all Christians are said to be one in a spiritual unity that transcends institutional differentiation. The second, common in more liberal circles, is a pop version of “celebrating diversity.” It asserts that since uniformity is a dreaded condition to be avoided, differences among churches should be seen as a welcome variety of mutually enriching gifts. Therefore, even divisive differences are said to be evidence of the abundant multiplicity of God’s grace. These two routine justifications for the divided reality of the churches use peculiar variations on themes as validations for the continuing division of the church.

The invisible-visible church distinction, at least as old as Augustine, is a way of thinking about the relationship between the communion of saints and the earthly church, not a means to assert the church’s spiritual unity in the face of evident disunity among the churches. To the limited extent that invisible-visible is a useful category for the earthly church, it may be one way to make a modest, common-sense distinction between the faithful and those who merely associate themselves with a church. It does not provide justification for church division. Together with other sixteenth century reformers, John Calvin acknowledges a two-fold use of “church” in Scripture itself – all the faithful of every time and place, and those who merely profess devotion to God. But he is clear that scriptural ambiguity about the character of the church we can see does not give us the capacity to discern who is in and who is out, much less to excuse division within the visible church. “Just as we must believe, therefore, that the former church, invisible to us, is visible to the eyes of God alone,” says Calvin, “so we are commanded to revere and keep communion with the latter, which is called ‘church’ in respect to men.”³

If the so-called invisible church were, indeed, the real church, while the multitude of churches we see were simply human institutions that do not contradict the spiritual unity of the church, why did Jesus pray for the unity of the Christian community? By definition, “invisible unity” is assumed, needing no prayer of ours and none of our Lord’s. Jesus’ prayer is not superfluous, however. He did and does pray that we may all be one precisely because we are not one, and because our real and present danger is increasing, all too visible disunity.

The “celebration of diversity” rationale for the divided church attempts to make a virtue of necessity. Since ecclesial uniformity is not even a remote danger among us, and since even the most ardent ecumenists do not envision a united church characterized by difference-denying homogeneity, diversity that separates churches from each other is not a value that must be protected. As often as not, “diversity” is simply a polite term for the chaos of church multiplication. Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4 all assume that the unified Christian community is endowed with a rich array of diverse

gifts. These charisms are not autonomous blessings, however. They are given “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7), “for building up the body of Christ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 12-13), and thus for showing that we are “one body in Christ, and individually members of one another” (Romans 12:5).

In light of the scriptural assumption that the variety of charisms is a God-given feature of unified communities of faith, the meaning of “gift” language in contemporary ecumenism is puzzling. Each church is said to possess particular gifts, features of its own life that may be absent or only partially present in the lives of other churches. On the one hand, this use of “gift” seems intended to avoid the impression that there is fundamental failing in the other church, or that the other must receive the gift in order to rectify a deficiency in its life. On the other hand, some gifts are apparently considered so indispensable that the possessor cannot give them up or tolerate their absence in other churches, even for the sake of unity. In both cases, the gifts are assumed to be the possessions of churches, now theirs to give! The confusion is too often resolved by reducing the discussion of gifts to gracious acknowledgement that one church might possibly be enriched by certain attractive characteristics in the life of another church, or that all churches are enriched by the sheer existence of their diversity.

The ecumenical danger is not that a united church would impose standardization that failed to make room for a range of liturgical, spiritual, social, and missional expressions. The perilous reality is that divided churches continue to shelter their particular “gifts” as corporate assets that must be protected and that should be acquired by other churches. Absent reception of one’s charism by the other, the cherished “gift” becomes sufficient grounds to justify continued separation. Deep distress over what the churches may lack is thereby avoided, and grief over their continuing estrangement is thereby suppressed.

Self-sufficient Churches?

Not long ago, mainline churches regularly asserted their theological or ecclesial superiority over one another. Today, denominational triumphalism has been replaced by an unprecedented openness, characterized by cordial relationships at every level of church life. But generous acknowledgement has not led to urgent engagements that might create genuine visible unity. Instead, mutuality leads Protestant churches to grant others, as well as themselves, essential ecclesial self-sufficiency. Since each church is said to embody the one holy catholic and apostolic church, each already has everything needed to be Christ’s faithful church.

Although my own church’s constitution often uses the word “church” ambiguously, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s *Book of Order* opens with a claim that most Presbyterians would take as referring to our own church, but would also be willing to grant to other churches: “Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, and for its service to God.”⁴ If the churches each have “all that is necessary,” there is no awareness of the fundamental

incompleteness of separated existence, no urgent need for deep ecclesiological conversations that might lead to significant change, and no compelling need for visible church unity.

Even so-called “full communion” agreements between or among churches are notable for their eagerness to preserve the individual integrity of the churches in their continued separation. While full communion agreements establish what used to be called “pulpit and altar fellowship” (no small thing), recognition and/or reconciliation of ministries, and various patterns of theological, missional, and institutional relationships, these agreements maintain the separate, independent identity of each church. Maintenance of autonomy may even be key to their approval. Churches “in full communion” continue to frame theological statements, take moral positions, order ministries, and amend polities without consultation, let alone the concurrence of their sister churches. Mutual responsibility and accountability, so fundamental to communion, falls away as churches continue to order their faith and life apart from one another.⁵

Various forms of reconciled diversity and (less than) full communion are preferable to the estranged antagonisms of the past, but they carry with them the illusion of significant unity. Far too often, they describe comfortable arrangements of mutual forbearance that permit churches to remain self-contained while feeling better about their continuing separation. The conviction of ecclesial self-sufficiency carries with it practices of institutional self-sufficiency that are masked by a narrow range of cooperative programs. The illusion of unity inhibits the churches’ capacity to recognize the reality of their continued division, and dulls them to the pain of division within the body of Christ.

What Does the World See?

The actual unity of the real church is not merely a matter of ecclesiastical diplomacy, or even of intra-ecclesial communion. It is a feature of the integrity of the gospel. Jesus prayed,

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you,
may they also be in us
so that the world may believe that you have sent me.
The glory that you have given me I have given them,
so that they may be one as we are one.
I in them and you in me,
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.*

The desperate need for the visible 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 that God has sent the Beloved into the world and who do not know that the Father loves them as he loves the Son. Jesus’ prayer grows from his understanding that

the oneness of his community is a reflection of the oneness of the Father and the Son, and thus a visible proclamation that God's new Way in the world is known in Jesus Christ. God's Way is the Way of divine love for the world and human love within the world. Jesus' prayer makes an explicit link between the unity of the church, the world's knowledge that the Father has sent the Son, and the world's assurance that the Father's love for the world is grounded in the mutual love of the Father and the Son.

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 prominent denominations such as the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Southern Baptist Convention internally split by public disputes, while other denominations are characterized by the internal proliferation of competing affinity groups.

What the world sees in North America is an array of churches that look and act like marketplace commodities. Denominations regularly advertise themselves in national media campaigns, differentiating themselves from other churches by targeting niche markets. Congregations engage in local promotions, peddling a full range of religious goods and services. At all levels, churches put themselves forward as the best option for meeting the real and imagined needs of the shrinking number of religion's consumers. These efforts are often called "evangelism," but they have less to do with the good news of salvation in Christ than with the marketing of full service religious institutions. The churches turn mission away from the world and inward upon themselves, existing mainly to serve the collective needs of their new and old members while competing with one another for market share in a declining demographic. Far from proclaiming the gospel, the churches proclaim themselves, without a hint of discomfort or embarrassment.

Churchly competition, so thoroughly American, simply confirms the world's lurking suspicion that churches care less about seeking and saving the lost than about increased market share, less about love of God and neighbors than about seeking additional adherents, all in order to enhance institutional prominence and finance future expansion. Yet, beneath the world's conviction that churches, like other institutions in American society, are in the sales business, beneath the world's suspicion of churches' motives, lies a deeper, more troubling consequence of the church's division. It is but a short leap from the commodification of the church to the commodification of God. Choosing a church, choosing a religion, choosing a god, leads straight to "I determine what God is."⁶ The divided church supports generic American religiosity in its predisposition to shop for a god that meets its needs.

What the world does not see in the all-too-visible disunity of the churches is a sign of the unity of the Father and the Son. Jesus prayed that we might be one *so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*. We are not one, of course, which obscures the gospel, rendering 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, 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.”⁷

Simply put, the disunity of the church calls into question the trustworthiness of the gospel. Thus, Jesus prayed that we may be one so that those outside of the church can know and believe that God loves them, and that God’s love for them is actual in the sending of Jesus Christ to the world. The visible manifestation of this good news is the character of a Christian community that is united in its belief in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and in love for one another (1 Jn. 3:23). Perhaps the most basic task of a “missional” church is to pray with Jesus for the visible unity of the Christian community, so that the world may see, and know, and believe the gospel.

Praying for the Unity of the Church

From the Groupe des Dombes, to the Princeton Proposal, to *Ut Unum Sint*, to “Called to Be the One Church,” deep repentance – confession, turning, conversion – has been seen as the necessary starting point for renewal of the gospel imperative to strive for the visible unity of Christ’s church.

- “Our confessions have to ‘make confession,’” says the Groupe des Dombes, “to move forward to admitting their limitations and inadequacies, even sins.”⁸
- The Princeton Proposal declares that, “we must examine our collective consciences and repent of actions, habits, and sentiments that glory in division.”⁹
- John Paul II notes explicitly that “there is an increased sense of the need for repentance: an awareness of certain exclusions which seriously harm fraternal charity, for certain refusals to forgive, of a certain pride, of an unevangelical insistence on condemning ‘the other side,’ of a disdain born of an unhealthy presumption.”¹⁰
- The Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches recognizes that “Each church must become aware of all that is provisional in its life and have the courage to acknowledge this to other churches.”¹¹

Absent the repentance in which churches acknowledge that they are not whole, that each is fundamentally incomplete without the other, and that continuing division is disobedience, broad and deep ecumenical engagement remains only an option that may or may not be exercised.

The basic form of prayer for the unity of the church is prayer of confession. Before we pray “that we may be one” we must acknowledge that we are all complicit in our disunity. The PCUSA’s *Book of Common Worship* (1991) built upon and enriched the liturgical gains of the earlier *Worshipbook* (1971). The *Book of Common Worship* incorporates many of the best features of *The Worshipbook*, and is even more attentive to ecumenical liturgical life than its predecessor, yet, inexplicably, it omits two prayers that are essential to the church’s ecumenical calling. The first is a prayer of confession in *The*

Worshipbook's section on "Christian Unity," the second is the opening section of a "Litany for the Unity of Christ's Church

:

Great God: your Son called disciples, and prayed for their unity. Forgive divisions. Help us to confess our lack of charity toward people whose customs are different, or whose creeds conflict with what we believe. Forgive arrogance that claims God's truth; that will not learn new ways. Heal broken fellowship in your mercy, and draw the church together in one faith, loyal to one Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.¹²

LEADER: O God: you have welcomed us by baptism into one holy church, and joined us by faith to Christian men in every place. May your church on earth be a sign of the communion you promise, where we will all be one with Christ, and joyful in your kingdom.

PEOPLE: Amen.

LEADER: From a clinging to power that prevents church union; from thinking forms of government perfect, or courts of the church infallible;

PEOPLE: Good Lord, deliver us.

LEADER: From mistaken zeal that will not compromise; from worshiping neat doctrines rather than you;

PEOPLE: Good Lord, deliver us.

LEADER: From religious pride that belittles the faith of others, or claims true wisdom, but will not love;

PEOPLE: Good Lord, deliver us.

LEADER: From a worldly mind that drums up party spirit; from divisiveness; from protecting systems that have seen their day;

PEOPLE: Good Lord, deliver us.¹³

These prayers are not ideals for the repentance of the church, but they point to the need for congregations, judicatories, national church gatherings, and ecumenical forum to confess the sin of their complicity in church division and repent of their complaisant self-sufficiency. Prayers for the visible unity of Christ's church begin with confession and repentance. Only then can we join with our Lord in prayer; only then can we pray with honesty that we may be one so that the world may believe the gospel.

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¹ Walker Percy, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987) p. 353.

² Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) p. 277.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster,

1960) 4.1.8., p. 1022.

⁴ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order*, G-1.0100b.

⁵ see Joseph D. Small, "What is Communion and When is it Full?" *Ecclesiology* 2.1 (2005).

⁶ Ingolf Dalferth, "I Determine What God Is!" *Theology Today*, 57.1, April 2000.

⁷ Bruce Marshall, "The Disunity of the Church and the Credibility of the Gospel," *Theology Today*, vol. L, no. 1, April 1993. p. 82.

⁸ Groupe des Dombes, *For the Conversion of the Churches*. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993) p. 28.

⁹ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 57f.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, Publication 5-050) ¶ 15, p. 20.

¹¹ World Council of Churches, "Called to be the One Church" (Geneva: WCC) ¶ 7.

¹² *The Worshipbook: Services* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) p. 159.

¹³ *The Worshipbook*, p. 119.