

THE PROFESSOR, THE PREFECT, AND THE POPE

Joseph Ratzinger: A Reformed Appreciation

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Reformed churches, like their Lutheran and Anglican counterparts, have roots in the anti-Catholic polemic of the sixteenth century. In our time, however, both formal condemnations and habitual prejudices have been replaced, for the most part, by openness and appreciation. Recently, Presbyterian and Reformed churches in North America have taken official actions to affirm that anti-Catholic language in their Reformation era confessions of faith do not apply to the contemporary Catholic Church. Yet, unlike Lutherans, Anglicans, and their descendants, nearly all Reformed churches have remained unalterably opposed to episcopal ordering of the church. Sixteenth century rhetoric, reinforced by events in Scotland and the Netherlands, and solidified by the minority experience of Reformed communities in Europe and Latin America, have produced continuing suspicion of bishops generally, Catholic episcopacy specifically, and popes most pointedly.

From time to time, anti-episcopal instincts intensify doctrinal differences, bringing to the surface residual Reformed resistance to Catholic thought and life. This was evident in an incident surrounding celebrations of the Holy Year 2000. The Vatican invited the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to be part of an ecumenical committee on the Jubilee, and WARC accepted, appointing as its representative a minister of the Waldensian Church. When it was learned that Pope John Paul II would grant indulgences to Holy Year pilgrims, WARC withdrew from the ecumenical committee and, alone among the world communions, refused to participate in the ceremonial opening of the Holy Door which marked the commencement of the Jubilee Year.

Reformed wariness about episcopal authority and the power of the papacy grew deeper when Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI. Long in the public eye, as a theologian at Tübingen and Regensburg, as bishop in Munich, and, most notably, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger began his pontificate as a “known commodity.” Unlike most popes before him, Benedict XVI was familiar in Protestant as well as Catholic circles before his elevation. His reputation preceded him, and even now, he remains “Ratzinger” to many. Assessment of this known commodity was mixed at best. Sometimes denigrated as “God’s Rottweiler,” critics conceded that although Joseph Ratzinger was evidently brilliant, he was seen as using his finely honed theological mind in the service of conservative, authoritarian, even repressive Vatican policies. In some circles, the pontificate of Benedict XVI was greeted with apprehension.

Lacking the public charm and charisma of John Paul II, the more distant Benedict XVI was characterized by some as a cold, determined proponent of centralized Vatican hegemony. The Reformed were not alone in ruing Cardinal Ratzinger's inquiry of Hans Küng, Leonardo Boff, Charles Curran and other prominent Catholic theologians. Protestant progressives bemoaned his opposition to liberation theologies, theologies of religious pluralism, feminism, and other liberal movements. Additionally, as the recognized author of the infamous *Dominus Iesus*, the new pope was assumed to represent a withdrawal from the ecumenical generosity of *Ut Unum Sint*. All of this seemed to confirm innate Reformed distrust of Catholic faith and order.

Yet "all of this" is little more than a political cartoon, a caricature in service of simplified, often uninformed opinion. Benedict XVI began his pontificate as the author of a large body of theological writing that does not lend itself to easy classification, and certainly not to hasty dismissal. Reformed Christians can benefit from careful attention to the Ratzinger corpus, for theological issues that are at the core of his concern are issues that have always been central to the Reformed tradition. Many of the questions that engaged Joseph Ratzinger as professor and as prefect are questions that occupied John Calvin and continue to concern Calvin's heirs. Ratzinger's answers are not always congenial to Reformed faith and life, but even his different conclusions may sharpen Reformed questions and enrich Reformed resolutions.

Scholars who are thoroughly familiar with the thought of Joseph Ratzinger observe that he has been remarkably consistent in his views, at least since the supposed "conservative turn" in the late 1960's. Nevertheless, it is risky to trace straight lines from professor to prefect to pope. Professors, even professors of Catholic theology, speak and write from a far more personal social location than heads of Vatican congregations and commissions. The constraints on prefects are different from the momentous responsibilities of popes. The professor who wrote *Introduction to Christianity*, the prefect who was responsible for *Dominus Iesus* and "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Certain Aspects of the Church as Communion," and the pope who delivered *Deus Caritas Est* are the same man, yet one whose intellectual work has taken place in different settings and has had different purposes. A professor's books and a prefect's clarifications do not predetermine a pope's encyclicals. Even so, the concerns of a lifetime have not undergone wide swings; consistent themes have been both deepened and focused through immersion in a remarkable ecclesial life.

Truth and the Church

Controversy

Controversy is a common thread woven throughout the career of Professor Ratzinger, the vocation of the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the pontificate of Benedict XVI. His prominence throughout the Protestant as well as the Catholic world has often taken the form of notoriety, as his statements and writings have elicited disagreement and even outrage. This has not escaped his attention, of course. He is well aware that some look upon him as "the inquisitor" or "the enforcer." With more than a touch of annoyance, Cardinal Ratzinger noted in 2002 that,

“ . . . it seems nowadays to have become a veritable duty, for theologians who have any self-confidence, to deliver a negative judgment upon documents issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.”¹ Controversy has resulted from genuine theological differences, of course, but it is also a consequence of the enduring spirit of the professor in the words of the bishop, cardinal, and prefect. “Professor Ratzinger” is a man of evident erudition, but one whose thinking typically reflects an inclination toward academic disputation and sharp debate that virtually invites continuing argument. A scholarly turn of mind that seems always to have opponents in view produces writing that is inherently polemical.

For decades, Joseph Ratzinger has contended with others over the correct interpretation of Vatican II. Thus, the controversy surrounding him has been due, in part, to his position with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which afforded him heightened capacity to make his interpretation of the Council prevail. But, additionally, he has attracted antagonism and opposition because of his characteristically piercing critique of those with whom he disagrees. The rhetoric of Cardinal Ratzinger is often cutting and dismissive:

That all-too-guileless progressivism of the first postconciliar years, which happily proclaimed its solidarity with everything modern, with everything that promised progress, and strove with the self-consciousness zeal of a model schoolboy to prove the compatibility of what is Christian with all that is modern, to demonstrate the loyalty of Christians to the trends of contemporary life – that progressivism has today come under suspicion of being merely the apotheosis of the late capitalistic bourgeoisie, on which, instead of attacking it critically, it sheds a kind of religious glow.²

It is understandable that those on the receiving end of such withering derision would level their own return fire. It is also understandable that those who agree with the Cardinal’s thought would relish his tone. Thus the controversy moves beyond intellectual disagreement into wider, more public ecclesial arenas.

Ecclesial Truth

The contentious tone of Cardinal Ratzinger’s writing is not simply the consequence of an academician’s penchant for debate, however. It also reflects a churchman’s deep passion for the truth of the gospel and its vital importance for the life of the faithful. In a wide-ranging 1984 interview with Vittorio Messori, Cardinal Ratzinger made clear the connection between truth and the well-being of believers: “One should not forget that for the Church faith is a ‘common good,’ a wealth that belongs to everybody, beginning with the poor who are least protected from distortions. Consequently, the Church sees in the defense of right belief also a social work for the benefit of all believers.”³ Truth matters to the faith and faithfulness of ordinary Christians – to their prayers, their service, and the shape of their lives. The Cardinal’s commitment to truth is not only the conceptual dedication of a scholar, but also the passionate responsibility of a pastor.

For Joseph Ratzinger, truth is knowable and error is real. Truth and error are not academic categories, but vital distinctions that affect the lives of persons, the life of the Christian community, and the life of entire societies. That is precisely why the theological rights of the Church community trump the rights of the individual theologian. In the Messori interview, Cardinal Ratzinger went on to say, “Broad circles in theology seem to have forgotten that the subject who pursues theology is not the individual scholar but the Catholic community as a whole, the entire Church.”⁴ Because theological work is an ecclesial service before it is private inquiry, the personal work of the individual theologian must always proceed from the Church and be directed to the Church. Theology, then, “turns to something we ourselves have not devised. . . . The path of theology is indicated by the saying, ‘Credo ut intelligam’: I accept what is given in advance, in order to find, starting from this and in this, the path to the right way of living, to the right way of understanding myself.”⁵

The question of truth goes deeper than the vocation of the theologian; truth is the vocation of the Church. This Church vocation must be lived fully, for “If the question of truth is no longer being considered, then what religion essentially is, is no longer distinguishable from what it is not; faith is no longer differentiated from superstition, experience from illusion.”⁶ The necessity of a community of truth is most apparent – and most vital – in baptism and its necessary complement, the catechumenate. Baptism and the catechumenate are dramatic confirmation of the fact that persons do not and cannot confer faith upon themselves. The decision of faith “is not an isolated and autonomous decision of the subject, but is essentially a reception: a sharing in the already existing decision of the believing community. . . . One is incorporated, as it were, into the already existing decision of the Church. One’s own decision is an accepting of and a letting oneself be accepted into the decision that has already been made.”⁷ Christian truth is not an elusive phantom to be sought by isolated individuals, but an antecedent reality that is given to individuals by the believing community that has itself received truth as gift from the Lord.

Emphasis upon truth, and upon the ecclesial character of truth, is incompatible with Western culture’s strange ambivalence about truth. On the one hand contemporary culture takes it for granted that there are indisputable truths, knowable by use of the scientific method. Yet our culture also supposes that there are things about which there is no truth. Most dramatically, the culture assumes that there is no true social or moral order – or that there are many different but equally true social and moral orders. Whatever “truths” exist, appear to be little more than relative, personal points of view. No one perspective is true while others are false, and so virtually every perspective must be tolerated. All are true in their own way, and so all must be accorded equal space in the marketplace of ideas. Cardinal Ratzinger has understood that in this cultural context, “insisting that there is a universal, binding, and valid truth in history, which became flesh in Jesus Christ and is handed on through the faith of the Church, is regarded as a kind of fundamentalism, as an attack upon the modern spirit, and as a threat to tolerance and freedom.”⁸

Can the truth about God be known? Can truth claims about God be tolerated in pluralistic societies? As professor and prefect, and now as pope, Joseph Ratzinger has contended against the diminution of confidence in the revealed truth of Christian faith, and the correlative “belief” that renouncing claims to truth in the Christian faith is a condition for the end of religious violence and the advent of universal peace. His well-known concern for the future of Europe grows from his recognition that “Atheism is beginning to be the fundamental public dogma and faith is tolerated as a private opinion, which means that ultimately its essence is not tolerated.”⁹ In the face of a pervasive belief that Christian truth claims are a social problem, Ratzinger makes the audacious assertion that only the public acknowledgment of God provides a foundation for ethics and law that can overcome the real social dangers: resurgent nationalism and world revolution!

Truth for Cardinal Ratzinger is never a socially disembodied conception. Rather, truth is integral to the actual life of the Church. His understanding of truth’s deeply ecclesial character, embedded in the lived experience of faith, accounts for his persistent focus on baptism and the catechumenate. Truth is not simply a matter of doctrine set forth in abstraction from the believing community; truth resides at the heart of faith – both the faith of the individual and the faith of the church. Moreover, the truth of faith is not static, but reaches out to the world. This conviction is most often set forth in the context of Christian faith’s missional essence, grounded in the intrinsically evangelistic character of the believing community. Consistently, Ratzinger emphasizes the *missional* necessity of truth.

Truth’s missional character is grounded in the recognition that Christian faith has always been intended as proclamation. Ratzinger points to the foundational text, “God is our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). The Church’s proclamation of God’s intention declares God’s love and seeks to draw men and women into love’s communion with God and with others. Proclamation of the love of God is more than a generalized assurance of divine favor, however; it is the announcement of love in the form of the cross. “If God so loves us,” says Ratzinger, “then we are loved in truth. Then love is truth, and truth is love. Then life is worth living. This is *evangelium*.”¹⁰ The reality of God’s love for humankind is known only when faith’s love does not disregard faith’s truth: “The faith that reaches out to the other reaches out of necessity to his questioning as well, to his need for truth; it enters into this need, shares in it, for it is only by sharing in the question that word becomes answer.”¹¹

Conversion to the truth of the gospel does not normally begin with a person’s agreement with doctrine or commitment to a program, but with an attraction to the character of the Christian community’s life, directly fostered by personal relationships with Christians. Coming to faith, then, proceeds through the Church and is realized in “sharing in faith with the Church as the new and greater ‘I.’ The ‘I’ of ‘I believe’ is not my old ‘I’ shut in on itself; it is the ‘I’ of the *anima ecclesiastica*, that means the ‘I’ of the human being in whom the entire community of the Church expresses itself, with which he lives, which lives in him and which he lives.”¹² Faith overcomes solitude as it confers

community, an enduring community that encompasses time as well as space. The individual believer is not alone, but is welcomed into a concrete local community. This community of faith is not limited to the local church, however. The believer is also welcomed into a broader and deeper community “because he knows, too, that he has behind him the great community of those who, in every age, have traveled the way he is traveling and have become his brothers and sisters.”¹³ The communion of saints proceeds to and from the local church, spanning time as well as space.

For all of this, conversion to faith is not simply incorporation into the Christian community, even the communion of saints, for it also involves “a purposeful turning to the truth that the community has received and that is its distinctive characteristic.”¹⁴ The Christian community is a communion in truth. Just as faith itself is a gift of the community of faith, so, too, the content of faith is a gift of the Church. Throughout his writings, Joseph Ratzinger has stressed that Christian faith is not something we create for ourselves, but rather something we receive as a reality that is antecedent to us. As early as *Introduction to Christianity* he stated the theme that has endured over the decades: to believe as a Christian “means affirming that the meaning we do not make but can only receive is already granted to us . . . Christian belief is the option for the view that the receiving precedes the making.”¹⁵

We receive the faith of the Church through the classic *symbola* of the ecumenical Creeds. The baptismal *symbolum*, present to us in the Apostles’ Creed, both reflects and preserves “an independent linguistic subject that is united by the common basic experience of faith and is thus possessed of a common understanding.”¹⁶ Because the baptismal *symbolum* presupposes the catechumenate, it is less an objectification of doctrine than “the expression of a personal decision (made by a whole community) for a way that is attainable only by means of such a decision.”¹⁷ While the language of the Apostles’ Creed is both informative and performative, the emphasis is on its performative function. It is the expression of a process of decision that is both the climax and commencement of the way of the catechumenate.

The conciliar *symbolum*, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, serves as a clarification for the whole Church, “a regulation of the proper understanding of the baptismal decision – explanations that are indispensable for proclaiming it but not of themselves a necessary content of such proclamation.”¹⁸ Because it was formulated on the episcopal level, in council, Nicea is an instrument of unity for the whole Church. The conciliar *symbolum* is not itself a baptismal creed, but it remains grounded in the faith inaugurated in baptism, and leads baptismal faith further on the way of reflection, providing “basic reference points” for a deepened understanding of the faith.

So, in Christian belief, “the receiving precedes the making,” but “the making” is not irrelevant to “the receiving.” A proper understanding of the baptismal decision, together with the necessary proclamation of that decision, accounts for Ratzinger’s emphasis on the catechumenate as a necessary element of the church’s missional life. The turning from (renunciations and exorcism) and the turning toward (*regula*) that is at Baptism’s core must be preceded or followed by sustained attention to the truth of faith –

catechesis. The way of the catechumenate is not merely a process of intellectual instruction, of course, but rather a process of conversion in which the whole person is incorporated into the body of Christ. “Faith is located in the act of conversion,” says Ratzinger. “It is not a recitation of doctrines, an acceptance of theories about things which in themselves one knows nothing and therefore asserts something all the louder; it is an all-encompassing movement of human existence.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, the way of catechesis is the way of the gospel’s truth that leads to new life: “One becomes oneself by becoming a confession of faith, an open Yes, when one is received into the community of the faithful, when one is incorporated into the community of the faithful, when one is immersed in and allows oneself to be immersed in it.”²⁰

Challenges to Reformed Faith and Life

Contemporary Reformed Christians are likely to recoil at Cardinal Ratzinger’s assertion that the Church possesses the truth of the gospel into which persons are received. Yet John Calvin, forebear of the Reformed tradition, famously followed Cyprian in understanding the church – the visible, actual church – as mother: “There is no way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance . . . Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives.”²¹ Calvin’s use of this rich image was more than a nod in the direction of a church Father. While he did not hold that God’s power is bound to the use of the outward means of the church, he was convinced that normally, God uses the ordinary means of the church’s proclamation and teaching to make the shape of the gospel known. For Calvin, the consequences of disregarding the church’s teaching of Christian faith are dire, leading directly to infidelity to the gospel:

Many are led either by pride, dislike, or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous. But, since they do their utmost to sever or break the sacred bond of unity, no one escapes the just penalty of this unholy separation without bewitching himself with pestilent errors and foulest delusions.²²

Like Cardinal Ratzinger, Calvin did not imagine that the church’s teaching authority derives from its own insight or wisdom. He would have approved of Ratzinger’s ready acknowledgment that “the Church knows and confesses, in the act of receiving [the faith], that she does not act in her own right as a separate and independent subject but in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; that her act of receiving is, in its turn, contained in the act by which she, too, is received and lets herself be received.”²³ Calvin would also agree with Ratzinger’s conviction that the unity of the Church comes from communion with the apostles, that is, with “persistent remaining in the teaching of the apostles. Unity thus has a content that is expressed in teaching.”²⁴ Yet neither Ratzinger nor Calvin finds contemporary Reformed approval for their conviction that the faith of the church is prior to the faith of the individual and shapes individual fidelity to the gospel, and that the unity of the church is unity in the apostolic faith.

Calvin attempted a difficult balancing act. In his view, the church of God exists “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution.”²⁵ This church is “the faithful keeper of God’s truth”, and so “no one is permitted to spurn its authority, flout its warnings, resist its counsels, or make light of its chastisements – much less to desert it and break unity.”²⁶ But where is this church of pure proclamation and faithful sacramental practice? Calvin himself followed his bold definition with numerous qualifications that were intended to recognize the reality of fault in the church’s life while preserving its authority in matters of faith. On the one hand, Calvin takes the Creed to profess that we “believe the church” (not *in* the church), and so the church is understood not as faith’s object, but rather faith’s preserver and transmitter. Christian faith is sharing in the faith of the whole church. And yet, on the other hand, the faith of the whole church is subject to evaluation and can be found wanting. Whose evaluation? What criteria?

The Protestant answer to those questions has always been “the word of God.” The motto of the Reformed tradition – *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, “the church reformed always to be reformed according to the word of God” – expresses the enduring belief that God judges and reforms the church, and that Scripture is the criterion of reformation. Yet Protestants have easily transmuted *sola scriptura* into “scripture in isolation,” especially from the “control” of the church. In the Messori interview, Cardinal Ratzinger commented tellingly on the separation of church and Scripture, saying that “the Bible without the Church is no longer the powerfully effective Word of God, but an assemblage of various historical sources, a collection of heterogeneous books from which one tries to draw, from the perspective of the present moment, whatever one considers useful.” To this uncomfortably accurate description of the way too many Protestants use the Bible, the Cardinal adds a vivid coda: “An exegesis in which the Bible no longer lives and is understood within the living organism of the Church becomes archaeology: the dead bury their dead.”²⁷

As exclusive reliance on the “historical-critical” method wanes, Protestant scholarship and Protestant churches must re-think the relationship between church and Scripture. The church cannot live without Scripture; Scripture cannot live without the church. If Scripture only breathes within the church, how is Scripture’s critical voice heard above “the noise of solemn assemblies”? At least part of the answer lies in the exercise of the church’s teaching office. It is the teaching office of the church that bears responsibility for the preservation and transmission of faith’s truth. Although this is differently understood by Catholic and Reformed, their insights can be complementary, enriching both.

Calvin placed great weight on the role of the church’s pastors, not because he had confidence in their personal capacity for fidelity, but because he believed them to be the God-given bond of unity: “one is appointed pastor to teach the rest, and those bidden to be pupils receive the common teaching from one mouth. For if anyone were sufficient to himself and needed no one else’s help (such is the pride of human nature) each man would despise the rest and be despised by them.”²⁸ But what happens – as it does too

often today – when pastors are the ones who feel self-sufficient, and do not think they are bidden to be pupils who receive teaching from the mouth of the church? When biblical and confessional authority erodes, Reformed church structures are no longer able to receive, preserve, and pass on the truth of the church’s faith.

In an uncharacteristically personal aside at the conclusion of a subtle treatment of tradition and apostolic succession, Cardinal Ratzinger voiced a lament that many Protestants could echo:

Today, many Christians, myself included, experience a quiet uneasiness about attending divine services in a strange church; they are appalled at the thought of the half-understood theories, the amazing and tasteless personal opinions of this or that priest they will have to endure during the homily – to say nothing of the personal liturgical inventions to which they will be subjected. No one goes to church to hear someone else’s personal opinions. I am simply not interested in what fantasies this or that individual priest may have spun for himself regarding questions of Christian faith. . . . When I go to church, it is not to find there my own or anyone else’s innovations but what we have all received as the faith of the Church – the faith than spans the centuries and can support us all.²⁹

The difficulty is not confined to any one ecclesial tradition. What is true, to one degree or another, in all churches is certainly true within churches of the Reformed tradition: fidelity to the gospel is in continual danger of succumbing to forms of “I Determine What God Is,”³⁰ coupled with individualistic (idiosyncratic?) readings of the Bible, selective attention (inattention?) to the confessions, benign neglect (willful disregard?) of the church’s polity, and isolation (alienation?) from colleagues in ministry. In North America, all of this occurs within the pervasive reality of the church’s cultural disestablishment, minimizing its capacity to speak convincingly to an uninterested public.

The all-too-common reality of idiosyncratic proclamation points to the necessity of a vital teaching office within the church. Reformed churches have always conceived the teaching office functioning within conciliar structures. The church’s councils – local sessions/consistories, regional presbyteries/classes, national general assemblies/general synods – are composed of pastors (teaching elders) and ruling (canon) elders. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) charges these councils with responsibility to “frame symbols of faith, bear testimony against error in doctrine and immorality in life, resolve questions of doctrine and of discipline, give counsel in matters of conscience, and decide issues properly brought before them.”³¹ Yet it must be acknowledged that organizational and legislative functions have combined with pervasive diversity in faith and life to overwhelm the capacity of councils to articulate and transmit “the doctrine of the faith.”

There is no ready solution to the problems of the Reformed (and other Protestant) “teaching office.” It may be at this point that the theological work of Professor/Cardinal Ratzinger can most helpfully shape the pontificate of Benedict XVI. Popes are called to be teachers of the faith. In the Catholic view, the Roman primacy is a function of the acknowledgment of Rome as the criterion of right apostolic faith. Benedict’s lifelong

passion for the truth of the faith presents the possibility of a de facto papal teaching office for the *whole* church. Protestants generally, and the Reformed in particular, have often focused their gaze on the failings of popes and continuing doctrinal disputes. Yet we may acknowledge, along with Cardinal Ratzinger, that “with the same realism with which we declare today the sins of the popes . . . we must also acknowledge that Peter has repeatedly stood as the rock against ideologies, against the dissolution of the word into the plausibilities of a given time, against subjection to the powers of this world.”³²

Teachers are not supreme authorities, whose dicta are to be received passively. The papal teaching office is not accorded unquestioned acceptance even in the Catholic Church. Yet it is a fact that Christians from all ecclesial traditions pay attention to popes when they speak and write. Reformed Christians tacitly acknowledge a measure of papal authority, even when we disagree with aspects of papal theological and moral teaching. (As a friend of mine said to me upon her return to the Catholic Church, “At least there’s something there to disagree with.”) Benedict’s evident faith and keen theological mind present the possibility of genuine engagement, throughout the churches, with the questions of faith’s truth that have occupied him for decades.

Cardinal Ratzinger once expressed a hope for the papal ministry that Benedict XVI has the possibility of fulfilling:

Even when the claims of his office are disputed the pope remains a point of personal reference in the world’s sight for the responsibility he bears and expresses for the word of faith, and thus a challenge perceived by everyone and affecting everyone to seek greater loyalty to this word, as well as a challenge to struggle for unity and to be responsible for the lack of unity. In this sense even in division the papacy has a function of establishing unity, and ultimately no-one can imagine the historical drama of Christendom without this function.”³³

The churches today, especially the churches of the West, experience a certain crisis of confidence in the universal truth of the gospel. The challenges of religious pluralism, social secularization, and the “postmodern” impulse combine to place churches in a defensive posture that relies on communication technique, market-driven programming, and the downplaying of Christian distinctives in order to achieve institutional success. Benedict’s work has prepared him to engage all Christian churches in a deep exploration of faith’s truth, and the means of proclaiming that truth to the world as well as embedding that truth in the life of the Christian community.

The Church as Communion

Ecclesiology and Reformation

What do we mean when we speak the word “church”? Because the nature of the church is a central issue in the reception, preservation, and transmission of Christian truth, ecclesiology has been a point of friction between Reformed and Catholic from the beginning. While Reformation judgment was leveled against church abuses, current

critique focuses on church structure. Underlying both is a deep difference in understanding the essential nature and meaning of the church. Cardinal Ratzinger has readily acknowledged that “the difference in the ways in which Church is understood . . . has proved to be an insuperable barrier.”³⁴

Calvin’s concern was reform of the church, not its division. His remarkable reply to Cardinal Sadolet makes it clear that his primary objection was to perceived theological, liturgical, and ecclesial departures from the faith and order of the ancient church. In response to Sadolet’s accusation of schism, Calvin asserted that the state of the Catholic Church at the opening of the sixteenth century was the impetus to its reformation, not its division: “the light of divine truth had been extinguished, the Word of God buried, the virtue of Christ left in profound oblivion, and the pastoral office subverted. . . . Do those who contend against such evils declare war against the Church? Do they not rather assist her in extreme distress?”³⁵ But the intention of Calvin, Luther, and other early reformers was not fulfilled. Schism was the result, setting off a process of ecclesial fragmentation and proliferation.

Nearly five centuries have passed, and thoughtful observers agree that while theological, liturgical, and ecclesiastical deficiencies and abuses may have characterized the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church of the twenty-first century cannot be accused of egregious departures from foundational Christian truth. Clear differences between Catholic and Protestant remain, of course, especially on matters of ecclesiology. The past five centuries have seen the widening of the ecclesiological gulf between Catholic and Reformed, so that talk about the nature of the church is conducted now in two different languages, neither of which is easily translated into the other.

Ecclesiology is at the heart of Joseph Ratzinger’s theology, not because he has an unnatural attraction to institutions or a penchant for power, but because he is ceaselessly concerned with the truth of Christian faith. Faith’s truth is not doctrine distant from life, not even, in the first instance, “the doctrine of the faith,” but rather the living truth of the Church’s faith lived out in the lives of believers. Thus, “In both her sacramental life and in her proclamation of the Word, the Church constitutes a distinctive subject whose memory preserves the seemingly past word and action of Jesus as a present reality.”³⁶ Pilate’s infamous question – what is truth? – finds its answer in Jesus Christ, who is himself the way, the truth, and the life for the world. But it is the church that is the means by which Christ makes himself present, and so Ratzinger can even say, “The Church is not an idea but a body, and the scandal of the incarnation, over which so many of Jesus’ contemporaries came to grief, is continued in the infuriating aspects of the Church.”³⁷

The Body of Christ

The ground of Cardinal Ratzinger’s ecclesiology is christological and trinitarian. “Ecclesiology appears as dependent upon Christology, as belonging to it,” he says. “Yet because no one can talk correctly about Christ, the Son, without also straightaway talking about the Father, and because no one can talk about the Father and the Son without

listening to the Holy Spirit, then the christological aspect of ecclesiology is necessarily extended into a Trinitarian ecclesiology.”³⁸ The christological and trinitarian core of his understanding of the church is not simply a theological assertion, but one that focuses, in the first instance, on the presence of Christ in the lives of believers. Christ does not live in the recesses of the church’s memory, nor does he preside over the church in remote splendor. Christ’s presence is living and active. The living Lord of the church is not confined to history, for he is always a dynamic actuality in the present and the future. The implications are twofold: the church has no existence apart from the presence of Christ, and Christ’s presence is not dependent upon the church. Because the church is nothing less than Christ’s body, Christ continuously originates the church and sustains the church. “The Church is the presence of Christ,” says Ratzinger, “the fact that we are contemporaneous with him, that he is contemporaneous with us.” The presence of Christ in the church is not, primarily, presence in the institution, however, but in the lives of believers. Ratzinger repeatedly makes the point that “The source of [the Church’s] life is the fact that Christ is present in people’s hearts: it is from there that he shapes the Church, and not the other way round.”³⁹

Because Christ is the center of the church, the church’s life is characterized by two dynamic elements. First, separated people are drawn together by moving toward God. Second, the dynamic of the unification between God and people, and the unification among people, finds its point of convergence in Jesus Christ. The dual reality of people drawn together, in Christ, is *visible* in the Eucharist. Throughout his extensive writing on Eucharist, Cardinal Ratzinger stresses that, “Eucharist, seen as the permanent origin and center of the Church, joins all of the ‘many,’ who are now made a people, to the one Lord and to his one and only Body.”⁴⁰ The Church-forming nature of Eucharist is far more than a pale reflection of conceptual unity, as in the annual “World Communion Sunday” celebrated in many Reformed churches. Ratzinger insists that Eucharist really does make the Church, not by virtue of the Church’s initiative, but by the real presence of Christ who continues to call and gather a people. “The content of the Eucharist, what happens in it, is the uniting of Christians,” says Ratzinger, “bringing them from their state of separation into the unity of the one Bread and the one Body. Eucharist is thus understood entirely in a dynamic ecclesiological perspective. It is the living process through which, time and again, the Church’s activity of becoming the Church takes place.”⁴¹

Among Reformed Christians, Calvin’s rich theology of the Lord’s Supper must always contend with Zwingli’s mere memorialism. Even within Reformed churches that incorporate Calvin’s rather than Zwingli’s sacramental theology, the notion that the Eucharist “makes” the church seems odd. It also seems presumptuous when coupled with claims that true Eucharist is linked to a particular understanding of apostolic succession and thus confined to the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Tragically, Eucharist remains the most visible instance of the church’s disunity, not only between Catholic and Protestant churches, but also among Protestant churches. Overcoming this great divide is unlikely as long as “ministry” is seen as the problem to be solved. Yet, if these matters can be bracketed, the church-forming character of Eucharist might be recovered in Reformed circles. The Pontificate of Benedict XVI can enhance the life of all “ecclesial

communities” if it reflects Cardinal Ratzinger’s rich understanding of the inherent relationship of the church as body of Christ and the Eucharist as body of Christ. “You are the body of Christ” is more than a Pauline trope, “This is my body” is more than a memorable simile, and the connection between the two is more than linguistic.

Cardinal Ratzinger has accentuated an understanding of the church as Eucharistic communion. This emphasis has clear ecclesiastical as well as ecclesiological implications, of course, but divisive institutional realities are not foundational. Benedict XVI can provide a profound ecumenical service through the compelling teaching of Cardinal Ratzinger – now addressed to the whole Christian community – that “The content of the Eucharist, what happens in it, is the uniting of Christians, bringing them from their state of separation into the unity of the one Bread and the one Body.” The Cardinal’s conclusion is that “the Church is not just a people: out of the many peoples of which she consists there is arising *one* people, through the *one* table that the Lord has spread for us all. The Church is, so to speak, a network of Eucharistic fellowships, and she is united, ever and again, through the *one* Body we all receive.”⁴² In Ratzinger’s view, these words are descriptive of the Catholic Church, but, as such, they are normative for “ecclesial communities” as well. Papal teaching that is invitational – not as a call to return to the Catholic Church, but rather as an encouragement to explore the fullness of Eucharistic ecclesiology – can benefit all, with especially salutary implications for Reformed churches.

Reformed churches are notorious for their tendency toward schism. Of the great ecclesial movements emerging from the sixteenth century Reformation and its aftermath – Catholic, Lutheran, Anabaptist, Anglican, Methodist, and Reformed – it is the Reformed family of churches that has multiplied by a continual process of division born of disagreement, controversy, and separation. Division and schism are not unknown in other ecclesial families, of course, but the scale is smaller and the pace slower. For Reformed Christians, schism is not the last resort, but often the first instinct. A question posed by Catholic eucharistic ecclesiology, then, and particularly by Benedict’s eucharistic emphases, is whether Reformed sacramental minimalism, especially neglect of the Eucharist, is a significant, largely unrecognized element in the endemic splintering of Reformed churches.

In spite of Calvin’s identification of faithful churches by the dual marks of Word and Sacraments, Reformed churches tend to be churches of the Word alone. The Reformed tradition exalts preaching and takes pride in theological precision, but even with the recent increase from quarterly to monthly Communion, it remains a tradition that marginalizes sacramental life. The consequence is that churches of the Word alone too easily become churches of words alone . . . and words are what we fight about and fight with. Reformed unity is often restricted to doctrinal accord, thus paving the way for doctrinal disagreements to produce ecclesial disunity.

Recovery of the church’s sacramental heart does not mean abandonment of “the pure ministry of the Word,” but rather renewed appropriation of the inseparable connection between the Word made flesh and the body of Christ. If Word and Sacrament

are the heart of the church's true and faithful life, neglect of one leads inexorably to deformation of the other, for when either Word or Sacraments exists alone, it soon becomes a parody of itself. Reformed Christians have always been quick to point out that sacraments can become prey to superstitious excess in churches where preaching and teaching are minimalized. But Reformed Christians are less aware of how easily preaching and teaching can deteriorate into institutional marketing or human potential promotion in churches that magnify the word while marginalizing Baptism and Eucharist.

Calvin placed Word and Sacrament together at the core of the church's true life because he took it as "a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace."⁴³ Sixteenth century Reformation disputes – between reformers and the Catholic Church and among the reformers – centered on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The categories in which these debates occurred no longer name the real issue before us all: the real, bodily presence of the risen Christ in Eucharist and in the church formed by Eucharist. Benedict XVI's potential contribution to this matter can be sensed in a 1978 essay, "The Presence of the Lord in the Sacrament." The essay is, on the one hand, a clear and moving account of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist as "a power that catches us up and works to draw us within itself," transforming us into the very body of Christ. The essay is also an intra-Catholic argument about the proprieties of liturgical reform and innovation. Reformed Christians will be uninterested in the latter, but could be enriched by clear teaching of the former.

Reformed churches – so committed to engaging social realities in order to "transform culture" – can also be enriched by the insight that Eucharist is a primary source of the Church's mission. The Cardinal has emphasized that the Church's apostolicity is experienced as the Church receives the source of its life through the apostolic tradition, which, in turn, sends the church out to and for the world. It is Eucharist that shapes the Church's mission by drawing it back to Christ. In his characteristically acerbic style, Ratzinger says that, "In order for mission to be more than propaganda for certain ideas or trying to win people over for a given community – in order for it to come from God and lead to God, it must spring from a more profound source than that which gives rise to resource planning and operational strategies. It must spring from a source both deeper and higher than advertising and persuasion."⁴⁴ Eucharist is "the deeper source" that grounds the Church's mission in Christ, and thus draws the church's actions into the *missio dei*.

Cardinal Ratzinger is clear that as the church is drawn into the Eucharist, becoming a Eucharist, it is freed from the moralism of its activity, and freed for witness to Christ and service in Christ. Eucharist does not form the Church for its own sake, then, but for the sake of God's mission, by which he draws all people to himself and unites them in the very body of Christ. The question of the origin and shape of the church's mission is one that confronts all churches, especially in Europe and North America. The danger confronting the churches is that recognition of the end of the Constantinian era, the disestablishment of the church, and the advent of "post-Christian" Europe (and North America?) will simply lead to a set of organizational initiatives and

institutional programs designed to create a “missional” church. A church that is the subject of its own constructive activities inevitably becomes self-promoting, and thus an offense to the gospel. The church cannot be allowed to imagine that its mission is shaped by its own actions. Ratzinger reminds all Christians that,

The Church is there so that God, the living God, may be made known – so that man may learn to live with God, live in his sight and in fellowship with him. The Church is there to prevent the advance of hell upon earth and to make the earth fit to live in through the light of God. On the basis of God’s presence, and only through him, it is humanized.⁴⁵

Benedict XVI’s pastoral service to all the churches of the West will be significant if he achieves an appropriate balance between identifying causes of “the advance of hell upon earth,” and the shape of “making the earth fit to live in through the light of God.” Cultural critique is necessary in a time when Western Christians simply assume the givenness, and even the goodness, of “the way things are.” It is not surprising that Cardinal Ratzinger has declared consistently that, “Among the most urgent tasks facing Christians is that of regaining the capacity of nonconformism, i.e., the capacity to oppose many developments of the surrounding culture.”⁴⁶ But preoccupation with the culture’s ills can be perceived as little more than conservative nostalgia, a call for return to the past, and thus unrelated to hopes for the future and faithfulness in the present. The more important issue is “making the earth fit to live though the light of God.” This is a matter of thinking as well as doing. Pope Benedict can lead all churches in the effort “to revive the argument about the rationality of belief or unbelief,” for he understands that “The struggle for the new presence of the rationality of faith is . . . an urgent task for the Church in our century.”⁴⁷ The task is not that of the Catholic Church alone, for alone, the Catholic Church cannot accomplish it. All Christian churches have common cause in bearing rational witness to the presence of God in the midst of human history. It is the experiential knowledge of God’s presence rather than fixation on the advance of hell that makes “nonconformism” possible,

Universal Church and Local Church

The question remains: what is this “church” that Cardinal Ratzinger writes about so perceptively. Vatican II opened a rich conversation, within the Catholic Church and beyond it, on the nature, purpose, and mission of the church. As professor, cardinal, and prefect, Joseph Ratzinger has been a central participant in the discussion. Tracing all lines of the ecclesiological dialogue occasioned by *Lumen Gentium* is too complex a task for this essay, but the heart of the matter may be seen in the distinction between local church and universal Church, and in the shape of the relationship between the two.

Eucharist makes the church; the church is Eucharist. Cardinal Ratzinger repeatedly makes the point that the church came into being when Jesus gave bread and wine, body and blood, and said, “Do this in remembrance of me,” for the church is the response to this commission. Because Eucharist is the act of a real community of believers, the Eucharistic nature of the church points first of all to the local gathering:

“Eucharist is celebrated in a concrete place together with the men who live in it. It is here that the event of gathering begins.”⁴⁸ Thus, the church’s origin and basis in Eucharist is the source of its nature as *communio* – communion with the one triune God through communion with Christ, and communion among those who share in the body of Christ, becoming the body of Christ.

Although the church as *communio*, made concrete in Eucharist, points first to the local Eucharistic community in Ratzinger’s view, it is not confined to the local church. The multitude of Eucharistic celebrations “cannot stand side by side as autonomous, mutually independent entities” and the so “the Church “cannot become a static juxtaposition of essentially self-sufficient local Churches.”⁴⁹ There is *one* Christ and so there is *one* body of Christ and so there is *one* holy catholic apostolic church. The church’s unity and catholicity are guaranteed in the communion of local churches with their bishop, the communion among bishops, and the communion of bishops with the pope. Thus, *church* signifies “not only the cultic gathering but also the local community, the Church in a larger geographical area and, finally, the one Church of Jesus Christ herself. There is a continuous transition from one meaning to another, because all of them hang on the christological center that is made concrete in the gathering of believers for the Lord’s Supper.”⁵⁰

It would be possible to conceive of this communion as building the one church from the bottom up. Cardinal Ratzinger has contended vigorously against this view, in both its Orthodox and Protestant forms, through communications from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as well as in numerous essays and addresses. He has emphasized repeatedly that communion among local churches derives from their communion with the one body of Christ, the universal Church. The order – universal Church, local Church – is made clear in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion.” “Aspects of the Church” attempts to draw together Vatican II’s multivalent uses of the term “universal Church” by stressing one aspect of the Council’s teaching: “the universal Church cannot be conceived as the sum of particular Churches, or as a federation of particular Churches, but, in its essential mystery, it is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular Church.”⁵¹ In a vivid image, “Aspects of the Church” states that the universal church is the mother of local churches, not their product.

“Aspects of the Church,” offered as an authoritative exposition of the Second Vatican Council’s teaching, bears the marks of the Cardinal Prefect’s effort to advance the view that the Council’s communion, collegiality, and people of God references are to be understood in relation to unity, hierarchy, and body of Christ. The ontological priority of the universal Church is at the center of an ongoing discussion that did not end with “Aspects of the Church.” Most notably, the discussion was heard in a public exchange of articles between Cardinals Kasper and Ratzinger, prompting the Prefect to write, “This ontological precedence of the Church as a whole, of the one Church and the one body, of the one bride, over the empirical and concrete realizations in the various individual parts

of the Church seems to me so obvious that I find it difficult to understand the objections raised against it.”⁵²

The Reformed tradition, together with other Protestant traditions, contains a particular version of this issue in the invisible-visible church distinction. Although the priority of the invisible church is implicit, the notion of invisible church generally serves as a way of distinguishing the flawed church we can see from the one holy catholic and apostolic church that is spiritual and hidden in the purposes of God. In its popularized versions, the invisible church is the true church while the visible church is the flawed church, true church only to the extent that it conforms its faith and life to the invisible church. The result is a denigration of all institutional embodiments of the visible church, together with a view of their dispensability, that often results in justification for the multiplication of separated local churches.

Cardinal Ratzinger’s understanding of universal Church and local church emphasizes their coherence, not their distinction. His emphasis is on the *visibility* of the ontologically prior universal Church in the life of the local church. “The Church of Christ is not hidden behind the multitude of human constructions, intangible and unattainable; she exists in reality as a corporal Church that shows her identity in the Creed, in the sacraments, and in the apostolic succession.”⁵³ This visibility of the one and catholic church is captured in *Lumen Gentium*’s well known formulation: the one holy catholic apostolic church “*substitutit in Ecclesia catholica.*” Ratzinger accentuates the way in which the *substitutit* formulation counters all “ecclesiological relativism” by proclaiming that there is a Church of Jesus Christ in the world. “The Council is trying to tell us that the Church of Jesus Christ may be encountered in this world as a concrete agent in the Catholic Church.”⁵⁴

Reformed churches, together with virtually all Protestant churches, reject the position of Vatican II and its vigorous championing by Joseph Ratzinger. Reformed churches have reacted with aggrieved anger whenever they are relegated to the status of “ecclesial communities,” particularly when this lesser status is coupled with assertions that the one holy catholic apostolic church subsists in the Catholic Church alone. Thus, *Dominus Iesus* was greeted with dismay when it declared that “the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not Churches in the proper sense.”⁵⁵ The recent deliverance from the Congregation, “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church,” occasioned a heated rejoinder from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches when it reiterated the Catholic position that the universal Church subsists in it alone and that the ecclesial communities born out of the sixteenth century Reformation are not Churches in the proper sense. Both documents’ acknowledgment that “elements of sanctification and truth” are present in ecclesial communities has not been sufficient to overcome Reformed dismay at Catholic Church claims that in it alone are found all the elements of church that Christ instituted.

Reformed ecclesiology embodies an understanding of the church as communion that bears a certain conceptual resemblance to the Catholic view, but that places the

dynamics of communion in councils rather than the episcopacy. In the Reformed view, the church is the body of Christ, in communion with Christ who alone is head of the church. A local church (congregation) is gathered in communion by Word and Sacraments, served and led by the pastor and elders together in council (session, consistory). Congregations are in communion with one another as pastors and representative elders gather in regional councils (presbyteries, classes). Regional councils are in communion with one another in national councils (general assembly, general synod). Reformed churches are quick to assert the advantages of conciliar over episcopal systems, but less aware of their inherent dangers. Among the dangers of Reformed communion ecclesiology is the obvious tendency for communion to be confined within political boundaries. The absence of a global structure of communion is due, in part, to the “invisibility” of the “universal” church, and thus to the natural limitations of “bottom up” fellowship. An ancillary danger results from the tendency of trans-congregational communion to be reduced to practical legislative relationships, effectively confining communion in Word and Sacraments to congregational life.

Reformed churches will not abandon conciliarity, of course, but could benefit from considering Cardinal Ratzinger’s caution, hearing in it a challenge to the Reformed tendency to conceive the church as the object of our action.

[N]obody can turn himself or herself into the Church. A group cannot simply come together, read the New Testament, and say: “We are now the Church, because the Lord is present wherever two or three are gathered in his name.” An essential element of the Church is that of receiving, just as faith comes from hearing and is not the product of one’s own decisions or reflections. For faith is the encounter with what I cannot think up myself or bring about by my own efforts but must come to encounter me. . . . The Church is not something that one can make but only something one can receive, and indeed receive it from where it already is and where it really is: from the sacramental community of his body that progresses through history.⁵⁶

The Ecumenical Situation

Apprehension about the pontificate of Benedict XVI intensifies when the matter at hand is the current ecumenical situation and the future path of ecumenism. Among Reformed Christians there is a sense that the openness of *Ut Unum Sint* is only grudgingly acknowledged. It has not gone unnoticed that the widespread appreciation of the Lutheran-Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* was accompanied by observations from Cardinal Ratzinger that seemed almost churlish. After remarking that the problem with *JDDJ* is that “hardly anyone knows anything about the issue with which it is concerned,” Ratzinger went on to criticize ecumenical engagements that concentrate on the issue of Eucharistic fellowship. If ecumenical agreement “appears to reduce our entire consciousness of the faith to the celebration of communion. Then we must be fearful also that the Eucharist itself . . . has atrophied into a kind of communal act of socialization . . . What counts is simply the ritual representation of unity.”⁵⁷

The language is biting, and the sentiment may lack a measure of generosity, but Reformed churches may be able to appreciate Ratzinger's point as a useful caution against ecumenical engagement that elides issues of truth in order to achieve a certain level of "agreement." He has noted that "the experiences of so-called consensus ecumenism have shown how difficult it is to do justice to the demands of truth. . . . So it is that people are often inclined to invert the relationship between consensus and truth."⁵⁸ He is equally critical of ecumenism that gives action primacy over truth. Once again it is abiding concern for the truth of the faith that leads him to cut against the grain. Much intra-Protestant ecumenism may focus too narrowly on Eucharistic sharing, settle too readily on consensus in theological commonplace, and assume too quickly that common mission activity represents genuine unity. Exercise of the papal teaching office in a manner that helps to refocus the ecumenical movement on the truth of the gospel can reinvigorate it by clarifying and refining its aims.

Critique of Ratzinger's ecumenical "hard line," noticeable in earlier writing and in the recently approved "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church," should take note of a recent statement adopted by the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches. "Called to Be the One Church" is a statement on ecclesiology that bears significance for the future of ecumenism. It concedes that, "churches have not always acknowledged their *mutual responsibility* to one another, and have not always recognized the need to give account to one another of their faith, life, and witness, as well as to articulate the factors that keep them apart." The statement calls for the churches "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. Each church is asked to articulate the judgments that shape, and even qualify, its relationship to the others. The 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."⁵⁹ The World Council of Churches and Benedict XVI seem to share the conviction that the ecumenical task of the churches is better served by candour than by courteous avoidance of deep difference. Ecumenical honesty is sometimes painful, but it is only through open acknowledgment of deeply held convictions that genuine dialogue can occur. Premature pressure for thin agreement leads, at best, to peaceful coexistence, not to unity. It may be that Benedict's open statements and the WCC's new position provide grounds for a different kind of ecumenical engagement.

In the view of Cardinal Ratzinger, ecumenism begins with the acknowledgment that God has revealed himself and his purpose for humankind: "God has spoken – if we think we know better, then we get lost in the darkness of our own opinion; we lose unity instead of moving toward it."⁶⁰ Therefore, truth must remain constitutive, but since revelation is not perfectly appropriated, the assertion of its priority is not the end of the matter. If truth is the heart of the matter, ecumenical dialogue can be genuine. Ratzinger has set forth marks of a more "relaxed" ecumenical search that must accompany the necessary search for complete unity that continues to investigate obstacles to unity and develop models of unity. "This kind of [relaxed] unity," he says, "for whose continuing growth we can and must exert ourselves without putting ourselves under the all too

human pressure of having to succeed by reaching our goal, has a variety of approaches and therefore demands a variety of effort.”⁶¹

This more relaxed ecumenism begins with discovering, discerning, and acknowledging evidence of the kinds of unity that already exists, such as joint reading of the Bible as the word of God, confession of the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, Trinity, christology, baptism and the forgiveness of sins, prayer, the essential ethical instruction of the Decalogue as well as areas of common ethical action. This catalogue of existing unity is significant, and so should be “put to work,” deepening and broadening it at all levels (ministers, theologians, lay people) and embodying it in joint action.

A second aspect of ecumenical engagement that does not press toward premature agreement is “not to want to force anything on the other that still threatens him or her in his or her Christian identity.”⁶² This means, for example, that Catholics should not try to pressure Protestants on recognition of the papacy and a certain understanding of apostolic succession. Protestants, in turn, should not press the issue of intercommunion on the basis of their understanding of the Lord’s Supper. “This kind of respect for what constitutes for both sides the ‘must’ of the division does not delay unity,” the Cardinal writes, “it is a fundamental pre-condition for it.”⁶³

Ratzinger ends his essay, “The Progress of Ecumenism,” with the suspicion that not everyone will be pleased with his concept. The Reformed family of churches should be pleased, however. Commitment to the truth of the faith, honest acknowledgment of divergences, generous recognition of the real instances of unity in faith and life among us, and respect for the Christian integrity of the other have been hallmarks of the Reformed tradition from Calvin to the present. Furthermore, neither Reformed churches nor Cardinal Ratzinger confuses more “relaxed” ecumenical engagement with dilatory ecumenical endeavor. The effort is real because the reality of division is an offense to the gospel. At their best, contemporary Reformed Christians echo John Calvin’s words in a letter to Archbishop Cranmer: “This other thing 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, far less that Christian intercourse which all make profession of, but few sincerely practice. . . . Thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding.”⁶⁴

At his best, Joseph Ratzinger has combined unstinting passion for the truth of the faith with openness to the presence of faith’s truths in other Churches and ecclesial communities. The contribution of Benedict XVI to deeper appropriation of Christian truth throughout the worldwide Christian community, and to fuller expressions of Christian unity, will depend on the way this balance is maintained and expressed. The churches need Truth more than bourgeois toleration, and the Bishop of Rome is uniquely placed to engender deep ecumenical engagement in “the doctrine of the faith.”

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- ¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005) p. 133.
- ² Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987) p. 56.
- ³ Ratzinger, with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985) p. 25.
- ⁴ *The Ratzinger Report*, p. 71.
- ⁵ Ratzinger, “What in Fact Is Theology?” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005) p. 31.
- ⁶ Ratzinger, “Presentation of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*.” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, p. 213.
- ⁷ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 37.
- ⁸ “Presentation of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*,” p. 211.
- ⁹ Ratzinger, “Europe: A heritage with obligations for Christians” in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), p. 234.
- ¹⁰ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 81.
- ¹¹ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 337.
- ¹² Ratzinger, “Luther and the unity of the Churches” in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, p. 127.
- ¹³ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 83.
- ¹⁴ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 128.
- ¹⁵ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1969) p. 73.
- ¹⁶ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 125.
- ¹⁷ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 124.
- ¹⁸ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 126.
- ¹⁹ *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 88.
- ²⁰ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 111.
- ²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 4.1.4., p. 1016.
- ²² *Institutes*, 4.1.5., p. 1018.
- ²³ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 111f.
- ²⁴ Ratzinger, “Communion” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, p. 64.
- ²⁵ *Institutes*, 4.1.9., p. 1023.
- ²⁶ *Institutes*, 4.1.10., p. 1024.
- ²⁷ *The Ratzinger Report*, p. 75.
- ²⁸ *Institutes*, 4.3.1., p. 1054.
- ²⁹ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 283.
- ³⁰ Ingolf Dalferth, “I Determine What God Is!” *Theology Today*, 57.1, April 2000.
- ³¹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2005) G-9.0101b.
- ³² Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996) p. 73f.
- ³³ Ratzinger, “The papal primacy and the unity of the people of God” in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, p. 44f.
- ³⁴ *The Ratzinger Report*, p. 160.
- ³⁵ John Calvin, “Reply to Sadolet” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J.K.S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) p. 241.
- ³⁶ *Called to Communion*, p. 19.
- ³⁷ Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council” in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, p. 6.

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- ³⁸ Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, p. 140.
- ³⁹ “The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council”, p. 4.
- ⁴⁰ *Called to Communion*, p. 29.
- ⁴¹ Ratzinger, *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, The Heart of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003) p. 114f.
- ⁴² Ratzinger, “We Who Are Many Are One Body, One Bread” in *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003) p. 114f.
- ⁴³ *Institutes*, 4.14.17, p. 1292.
- ⁴⁴ Ratzinger, “Eucharist and Mission” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, p. 121.
- ⁴⁵ Ratzinger, “The Church on the Threshold of the Third Millennium” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, p. 286.
- ⁴⁶ *The Ratzinger Report*, p. 115.
- ⁴⁷ “The Church on the Threshold of the New Millennium,” p. 291.
- ⁴⁸ *Called to Communion*, p. 77.
- ⁴⁹ *Called to Communion*, pp. 29 & 85.
- ⁵⁰ *Called to Communion*, p. 32.
- ⁵¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion,” ¶ 9.
- ⁵² “Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*,” p. 134f.
- ⁵³ “Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*,” p. 146f.
- ⁵⁴ “Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*,” p. 149.
- ⁵⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, ¶ 17.
- ⁵⁶ “The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council,” p. 10.
- ⁵⁷ Ratzinger, “The Augsburg Concord on Justification: How Far Does It Take Us?” in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 2.1; 2000.
- ⁵⁸ Ratzinger, “On the Ecumenical Situation” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith*, p. 260.
- ⁵⁹ World Council of Churches, Ninth Assembly (2006), “Called to Be the One Church.” Document PRC 01.1, paragraphs V.12 & V.13.
- ⁶⁰ “On the Ecumenical Situation,” p. 264.
- ⁶¹ Ratzinger, “The Progress of Ecumenism” in *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, p. 140.
- ⁶² “The Progress of Ecumenism,” p. 141.
- ⁶³ “The Progress of Ecumenism.” p. 141.
- ⁶⁴ Calvin, “letter to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer” in *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters*, eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954) vol 5, part 2, p. 345.