

Proposal: When Jesus says: “That they may all be one,” he’s NOT talking about ecumenism.

Colleagues,

Here’s what prompted the heretical claim in the proposal above.

It was this throw-away line from a big-name speaker last month at St. Louis University: “Remember, Jesus spoke Aramaic.” [His point was that the Greek New Testament, our closest contact to Jesus’s own words, is a translation. Jesus spoke Aramaic, the “pigeon”-Hebrew in the culture of his day.]

The event was an ecumenical workshop. We’d recited the ecumenical mantra many times: “That they may all be one,” Jesus’ mandate to us to get on with ecumenism and to do better, much better, than we’ve been doing. Though it’s supposed to be Good News, it comes as accusation, an occasion for self-flagellation. And the oneness never happens.

And then it hit me. Jesus spoke Aramaic. So the word he used for “one” when he said ““That they may all be one” was “echad.” When Jewish folks—then and now—hear “echad,” they pole-vault back to the great Hebrew declaration of faith in Deuteronomy 5: 4-5. They call it “The Shema.” Shema is the first Hebrew word in the confession, an imperative. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one [echad]. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

So what does “echad” mean in the original Shema? I’d recently

read an essay on that very question. Its title: ON THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD IN THE SHEMA (DEUTERONOMY VI 4-5) by J. Gerald Janzen, O.T. prof at the Christian Theological Seminary (Disciples of Christ) in Indianapolis, Indiana. It was published in the numero uno journal of O.T. studies, with the Latin name Vetus Testamentum. Vol. 37, no 3 (July 1987), p. 280-300.

The upshot of Janzen's comprehensive probing is that "echad" in the Shema is not about numbers at all. It's not arithmetic. It is NOT saying that there is only "one" God, Israel's God, "Yahweh" by name [regularly rendered in English translation as the LORD (all-caps)], and there are no others. Even though such one-god-only monotheism is basic in O.T. theology, that is not what the Shema is proclaiming. It is not a confession against polytheism.

Instead the Shema is saying that Yahweh is single-hearted, single-minded. Echad means integrity, not duplicity. No double-speak from this deity. No double-talk, double-dealing. No double cross. No talking out of both sides of his mouth. No forked tongue. A straight-shooter, who sticks to what he says. Keeps his word. Keeps his promises. And THEREFORE trustworthy. So since Yahweh is trustworthy, therefore "you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

In Janzen words: "The upshot of my analysis [is] that the claim upon Israel to love Yahweh its God with all its heart and soul and strength follows upon an affirmation to Israel that Yahweh is 'echad,' 'one.' The purpose of this affirmation is to identify in God the dependable ground upon which an exhortation to wholehearted loyalty may appropriately be made."

It was this "oneness," God's "fidelity to his promises made to the ancestors," that was challenged—even worse,

contradicted—"under the vicissitudes of Israel's history." In crisis after crisis (military defeat, apostasy, captivity, famine, even locusts) "the alternatives become worship of other gods, or re-affirmation of Yahweh's fidelity and integrity." The Shema of Deut 5 is "one such re-affirmation . . . 'Yahweh [is] echad'" and will not "forget [his] divine oath and promise."

Janzen makes a compelling case. He's got me convinced. And if that is the center of God's oneness in the Shema, what is it in John 17?

First of all let's recite the Johannine text and put "faithfulness" in where the Greek says "one." Starting at v. 11: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be FAITHFUL, as we are FAITHFUL (v.20) I ask . . . that they may all be FAITHFUL. 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 FAITHFUL, as we are FAITHFUL. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely [Greek: "all the way to the end"] FAITHFUL, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

The anticipated consequence (twice repeated) of the disciples "being faithful" is that the "world may BELIEVE . . . that the world may KNOW" what God is up to in Jesus.

If the "one" in John 17 should mean ecumenical unity, that they all hang together and don't squabble and separate, that's not insignificant. Jesus does not recommend squabbling. But why would non-squabbling urge anyone to believe that "no one comes to the Father, but by me?" Or "whoever believes the Son has eternal life?" Or "I am the way, the truth and the life." Or Jesus' response to Pilate "everyone who belongs to the truth

listens to my voice?" The fundamental scandal about Jesus is Jesus—whether his disciples are squabbling or are at peace with each other.

John's Jesus does hustle a sort of ecumenism, but it's not really the sort we've come to associate with the term.. Example: John 10. The Good Shepherd has other sheep that are not of this fold. Jesus "leads" them too, but the point is not that he leads them back into one big sheepfold. It seems that they could stay where they are and still be "one" in this shepherd's sheepfold. Oneness means that those sheep too be "faithful" as the "one" shepherd is "faithful" to them. The fundamental game is like ping-pong between shepherd and sheep. The common denominator of the sheep, a.k.a. their unity, is that they pong in response to the Shepherd's ping. This is the ping-pong of oneness in Jesus' Aramaic echad.

The fundamental danger—for Israel in the OT and for Jesus's followers in John's Gospel—is for the folks to run away from the ping-pong table. To desert Yahweh (back then) and THE Good Shepherd (now), to stop trusting the promissory voice of both Father and Son. The oneness—one thing needful for faithfulness—is to "keep hearing my voice and following (trusting) me." The flock "scatters," not when they get denominational brand names, but when they get out of earshot of the One (=faithful) Shepherd. No longer even hearing the ping, they cannot possibly pong.

Ecumenical unity under some world-wide umbrella is not what Jesus prays for in John 17. The nemeses to the faith are not differences in horizontal relations among his disciples. They are fractures in the (call it vertical?) God-trusting, Shepherd-listening department.

How does this impact the "world believing, the world knowing

what God is offering in Jesus"? Can it be so simple as this? Faithful following of Jesus is what presents to the world the same Good Shepherd that he himself offered in that first generation, and that his sub-shepherds offer in subsequent generations, that someone somewhere offered—and keeps on offering—to us.

Were all Christians in the world to be “nice” to each other—granted that’s a super-minimal ecumenism—that would hardly have the clout to convince the world in its hard unbelief to trust the Good Shepherd, would it? What made him hard to believe then persists now as well. For John the offense is articulated by Thomas right after Easter: “How could a crucified Messiah be anybody’s God and Lord?” If he can’t save himself, how can he save others? And even if “they say” that he’s alive again, even if I grant that, how is that Good News for me? Hurray for Jesus, he made it! Where’s any spinoff from that for me? So it took a second visit. Jesus swapping his death-marks with Thomas—“touch here, touch there—for I did it all for you. Death-marks conquered. It’s for you. Your death-marks conquered too.” It doesn’t always work that way, but in Thomas’ case it did “You are my Lord and my God.”

The world does not come to “believe, to know” in any other way than that “they believe on Jesus through the disciples’ word.” That means “faithful” reportage of God’s faithfulness in Christ. Call it Gospel both in its indicative mood and imperative mood. “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. Therefore be reconciled to God.”. Put into the language of echad: God is faithful. You be faith-full.

That’s not far from the one line on church unity in the Augsburg Confession. “For the true unity of the church it is enough that the Gospel be preached purely [=unencumbered by legalist add-ons] and the sacraments administered in congruence to this

Gospel.” That’s what unites [one-ifies] folks to Christ, and hooked to him, they are ipso facto one-ified to each other. No add-ons needed.

Church unity is finally all about faith—on both sides of the ping-pong table. And I don’t say this merely because tomorrow is Reformation Day. It’s ping-pong faith. nThe ping is the singular faithfulness of God and the Son at “one” with their promises. The pong is the faith of Christ-trusters, at “one” with that promissory offer.

When the disciples are themselves echad (=faithful), then the world will know that Jesus is echad just as the Father is echad. Better, not “just as” the Father is echad, but that Jesus IS the Father being faithful. The courtroom drama in John’s entire Gospel is focused here: IS Jesus the ONENESS of Yahweh, (God keeping his promise) down here on the ground, or is he not? The only way the world will know what the verdict was in that trial—after Jesus goes to the Father—is the faithful witness of his disciples to Jesus’ reliability. As they (stealing from the Shema) “love THIS Lord their God with all their heart, soul and might? and let the world know what they are doing and why.

Isn’t that John’s proposal for ecumenism? Is there any better one?

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder