

The way, the truth, and the life

Colleagues,

As a teenager, I grew deeply troubled by a theological question which has surely been troubling to many pensive Christians, young and old, across time and space: namely, if belief in Jesus is the only path to salvation, then what is to become of my friends and loved ones who die without believing the gospel? Today we offer response to that question, in the form of a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin, a fellow member of the editorial team. (You may recall some of Steve's earlier work in this space—including, most recently, the homily of [ThTheol #722](#).) In this case, he's preaching on John 14:1-13, and his powerful and straightforward preaching voice rings out clearly, even in print. Would his response feel sufficient to someone deeply troubled by the "What about my friends" question? I'll leave that for you to decide as you read, and I pray that you'll find his words a clarifying aid to your own thinking and preaching.

Peace and Joy,

Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"WHAT ABOUT UNCLE CHARLIE?"

John 14:1-14

Easter 5A

May 22, 2011

Christ Church

The Lutheran Church of Zionsville

Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin

Helen had to see me right away. She came and sat in my office sobbing and grieving. Her beloved Uncle Charlie had just died. She would be leaving the next day for the funeral. Her Uncle Charlie and his late wife, Agness, had virtually raised her. Now, with the death of Uncle Charlie, questions plagued her. Doubt haunted her.

Helen had dearly loved Uncle Charlie, but Uncle Charlie never went to church. He didn't believe in Jesus and at times wasn't sure if there even was a god. But Uncle Charlie was a good man. He had always treated her with kindness. She recited numerous examples of his gentleness and compassion. However, now she wondered about his fate. Would Uncle Charlie go to heaven or would he be condemned to spend eternity in hell because he never believed in Jesus? Surely, his goodness must count for something. Surely, God would not be so unfair and consign such a good person to eternal damnation. She wanted words of assurance from her pastor.

Helen quoted words from today's Gospel. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (v. 6). She found them troubling and scary when she thought about the fate of her beloved Uncle Charlie. Uncle Charlie did not believe in Jesus.

It is clear. Jesus is the only way to God, life, and salvation. The claim is exclusive and absolute. However, at the same time, we have seen the claim that Jesus is "the only way" used by some to judge, threaten and demand that others "accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior" or else. This kind of arrogant Christianity rubs us the wrong way. Jesus' claim to be the only way to the Father ought not to be the equivalent of beating someone over the head until they give up and give in. We know that Jesus' invitation to faith is much more about love than

threat.

Nevertheless, we cannot sweep Helen's question under the table. What about Uncle Charlie, and all the other Uncle Charlies of the world? What about those who never had a chance to hear about Jesus? What about good people like Mahatma Gandhi or Buddha or the aborigine from the outback of Australia or those whose place of birth, cultural background, or time in history never gave them the opportunity to hear about Jesus and the God whom he calls "Father"? Or what about the child who died in the neonatal intensive care unit of Riley Hospital after only twenty hours of life and never had the chance to hear about Jesus? Have his parents been derelict because they did not get their child baptized in time?

Is God going to just write off all these Uncle Charlies and send them packing when they show up at the pearly gates because they did not believe in Jesus? This kind of God seems horribly unfair, more like a monster than a beloved Father.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we sympathize with Helen's concern for Uncle Charlie. All of us deep down harbor the hope that God will be fair. Of course, God's idea of fairness must agree with our idea of fairness. We often complain that if God and life were only fair, then all would be well. Of course, it is only fair that God count all the good things we do. If they count for us, they surely must count for the Uncle Charlies of this world, so that finally, in the end, at the last day, in eternity, they too will be saved.

However, is that the good news that we think it is? Do we in the end want God to be utterly fair with us? The problem is that if God were to be utterly fair with us, we would be in big trouble. We cut corners. We rationalize. We conveniently ignore all those times we have dropped the ball. We pretend to be better than we

are. We desperately try to keep prying eyes away from the secrets hidden our closets. We, like all the Uncle Charlies of this world, cling to our goodness and get nervous when someone starts poking around in our garbage. In short, we want to be in charge, call the shots, decide what is fair and what is not—and play God.

The problem is that sooner or later reality sets in. We get exposed. We are not God. We are not in charge. We don't get to call the shots. We don't get to decide what is fair and what is not. Remember, that is exactly what the serpent promised Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve could be in charge, call the shots, and decide what is fair, good and evil, right and wrong, and ultimately be God, if they would only eat of the forbidden fruit. They believed the serpent, tried to play God, and suffered the consequences.

That was Helen's problem. She thought she knew what God ought to do. She came to her pastor so that I would assure her that her understanding of God was right. She disagreed with Jesus when he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He was too narrow, too intolerant, and too restrictive. Was not Uncle Charlie good enough? Did he, did she, do we really need Jesus that much?

Before we even know it, look what we have done. We have put ourselves on the throne and told Jesus to move over. Jesus may have said "I am the way, the truth, and the life," but we know better. We will try our hand at being God. We will decide what is fair.

Talk about playing with fire and inviting disaster. Talk about waiting to be knocked off our pedestal and reminded who is in charge. God will not be mocked. God is in charge. God does not ask for our opinion. God sends stuff that does not fit our

template. We are not in charge.

In today's Gospel, Thomas, Philip, and the disciples were deeply troubled, anxious, worried. They thought they had things figured out. They thought that their investment in Jesus was finally going to pay off. They thought their sense of fairness was about to be vindicated as Jesus would soon begin his kingdom in all of its glory. They would have their places of privilege. Then, Jesus throws them a curve. He says that he is about to leave them—and die. This did not fit their template. This did not compute.

They, like we, arrogantly presume to be able to write a job description for God and define what it takes for God to be worthy of being God. They, like we, complain about God's definition of fairness. They, like we, deserve to be expelled like Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden forever. That is what we deserve. But instead, Jesus continues to love us relentlessly all the way to the cross and beyond. God will not give up on us. God sends Jesus to bear our arrogance and stupidity all the way to the cross. In exchange for sufferings that are unexplained, hurts that are undeserved, and questions that are unanswered, God gives us the peace that the world will never understand. God will not let us go. God loves us no matter what. Even death on a cross and a rock-sealed tomb cannot stop the love of God.

That changes everything—for Helen, for us, and for all who foolishly think they can play God. We at last can LET GO, and LET GOD. We can trust God and live with the unsolved mysteries, unexplained sufferings, and unanswered questions.

What about the Uncle Charlies of this world? What about all of those who never had the chance to learn of God's gracious love in Jesus or, when they did, still found it too fantastic to believe? Instead of thinking that we can be God better than God

can be God and that we can explain it all, we can let God be God. What to do with the Uncle Charlies of this world is God's problem, not ours. We turn their fate over to God, and fervently pray in the name of Jesus that God have mercy on them. When we start to play God and think that we need to decide who gets in and who does not, we go down a road that will only further trouble our hearts and trouble the world.

God's love for the world is absolutely clear and certain. It is only by telling the story of Jesus that we can be sure that God is our father and we are his children. Therefore, Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life." When Jesus says, "no one comes to the Father except through me," he is reminding us that there is no other place in the world, no other god, no other philosophy or self-help system, no other way of life that can offer us a gift like this.

There is much in life that remains messy, confusing, and chaotic. What about Uncle Charlie? We don't know what God ultimately will do with the Uncle Charlies of this world. That is God's problem, not ours. That is the difference between being God and not being God. Since we are not God, there will always be questions unanswered and mysteries unsolved. However, we do know this. It is clear and certain: Because of Jesus Christ, God loves us no matter what. Because of Christ, we do have a God we can trust and a future we can embrace. We can assure the world unequivocally and unambiguously: God IN CHRIST loves all—even the Uncle Charlies who never got it but who we hope in eternity will.

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John's Gospel and Christian Unity, Conclusion

Colleagues,

Today you get the final installment of the essay by Steven Kuhl that we've been feeding you for the past three weeks. Steve has been discussing St. John's contribution to the development of Christian theology in the first century. Now he turns to the implications of this for unity among Christians today. It's a short reflection. I, for one, wish it were longer. I haven't asked Steve about this, but even so I'll hazard the guess that, mindful of time constraints at the meeting he first presented this work to, he stopped sooner than he would have liked. Knowing how thorough Steve is, that's the best explanation I can think of for the question or two that still hangs in the air when he cuts things off. For example, what might John have to say about unity among Christian groups when one of them does *not* conceive of the Eucharist as something more than a memorial meal? Does that ipso facto relegate this group to the ranks of the pseudo-Christian (see below, with reference to [ThTheol 738](#))? Would John say that? Would Steve? And so on.

I would also love to know how Steve's paper was received by the people he read it to last November. As co-editor Carol Braun pointed out in her introduction to the first installment of this Thursday Theology edition, that initial audience was a group of

ecumenical leaders gathered under the auspices of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. So what happened? Did their ears perk up? Did they comment on things they hadn't thought about before? Was there anything approaching an "Aha!" moment for any of them? Is there any chance that the rest of us might get responses like these if we trotted Steve's insights past our own sets of ecumenical conversation partners? Perhaps we can get Steve to reflect briefly along these lines in a future posting.

All this notwithstanding, be sure to relish what you're getting here. If you were busy with other things when the prior installments popped in, take a half hour to go back and read them. What Steve, channeling the late great Raymond Brown, has laid out for us here is tremendously refreshing. If nothing else it will leave you seeing all kinds of things in the Gospel according to St. John that you hadn't noticed before. For anyone charged with using the Church's scriptures to deliver God's living Word to communities-in-Christ of the 21st century, that by itself is a gift indeed.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Being One as the Father and Son are One John's Answer to the Question, "What is the Nature of the Unity We Seek?"

By Steven C. Kuhl

[Part Four: Conclusion]

John's Vision of Christian Unity

Given the substantial Christological and ecclesiological differences between the Johannine and Apostolic Churches, what's amazing is that John still saw himself as part of the one

sheepfold of Christ *together with* the Apostolic Churches! Why? What kind of vision of unity does he have? The answer, we said, coincides with the image John presents of Christ and his disciples in the upper room. In the upper room the unity of the disciples is not defined by a common understanding of what Jesus is doing or a common mode of behavior they are to follow, but by a common reception of the ministry of Jesus. Ultimately, what they hold in common (and that defines their unity) is *faith* in the work of God (Jn 6:28) through Jesus, who is self-confessed to be the Son of God, sent by the Father, attested to by the Holy Spirit, to save them by making them children of God and, thus, sharers in the divine life, “eternal life.” John’s shorthand for describing this unity is the enigmatic phrase, “being one as the Father and the Son are one.”

Ultimately, what is most characteristic about this view of unity, at least from the side of the disciple, is how risky it is. Faith by definition involves risk. And that risk in this case is not simply located in the object of faith, Jesus Christ, although trusting Christ is risky business. Questions like “Is he really sent from God?” and “Is the way of the cross really the way to eternal life?” will not be fully verified “by sight” until the resurrection. But there is also another risk: the risk of being in full communion with other disciples who are themselves very deficient in many ways. Jesus insists that true faith in him also means loving his other disciples. In the upper room scene, what *ultimately* characterizes the Beloved Disciple is not that he had a superior understanding of Jesus and a more faithful, public allegiance to Christ crucified than all the rest—both of which are true, however! Rather, what distinguishes him, ironically, is his willingness not to be distinguished from others, but to be one with them, equal with them, as one who is loved and served by Christ. That, in John’s view, is true Christian unity. Peter stands out in the upper room as the one

who, at least at first, did not want to take that risk of being regarded as equal with the rest. At least, that's how I interpret his refusal, at first, to be washed like the rest, and his insistence that he will be a standout hero of the faith unlike the rest. Jesus' words to him were clear! You need to be washed like the rest and you are no more courageous than the rest. Not to recognize the other disciples under the care of Jesus as equally his disciples, in spite of their deficiencies, is to deny Jesus and to sever oneself from the unity of the Church. So the great admonition of John is this: Be wary of whom you break fellowship with. It has eternal consequences. We should be more willing to risk unity with others, if there is doubt about them, than to risk division. For the unity of the church is not created by the understanding or the behavior of the disciples, but by their willingness to be under the ministry of Jesus. John would therefore counsel us to be just as wary of separating from others for the wrong reasons as of uniting with them for the wrong reasons.

Does John envision sure and certain "signs" of this fellowship on earth? I think he does. But they are in no way dogmatic or juridical or legalist or institutional in nature, as we conventionally understand those terms. Rather, the signs are what some Christians might call "sacramental" and what John calls "spiritual." Spiritual here does not mean non-material, but rather those things that are signs of the work of the Spirit in our midst, signs that are gateways to participation in the glory of the Father and the Son through the power of the Spirit. And there are three, it seems to me. The first is "preaching" or what John calls the church's "speaking of what we know and testifying to what we have seen" (Jn 3:11). The second is "baptism," which for John is not simply an initiation rite into an organization, but "new birth" into the family of God, the household of faith (Jn 3:5). The third is the Eucharist,

understood not simply as a memorial meal, but the giving of himself as real food, the eating of which is a real, life-giving participation in the divine life through Christ the gate (Jn 6:54). Brown notes that John isn't interested in how these signs were "founded" by Jesus, as were the synoptic Gospels or Paul. While taking that for granted, he is concerned by the Apostolic churches' overemphasis on construction imagery for understanding the relationship of Christology to ecclesiology, finding that it tends to reduce the significance of these signs into mere rites to be performed. To the contrary, they are to be seen as the "gate" or the "voice" leading into a living encounter with the crucified and living Christ through the power of the Spirit. When you see these things taking place, you know the upper-room ministry of Jesus is still happening, happening to make his disciples one as the Father and the Son are one, though there may be deficiencies in these disciples' understanding and behavior.

Concluding Remarks

At the start of this paper I suggested that we think of Christian unity as a concept that is able to handle three kinds of differences:

1. differences that are by nature church-dividing and need to be overcome by agreement for the sake of the gospel;
2. differences that are by nature part of a legitimate diversity and need to remain for the sake of the gospel; and
3. differences that are by nature in need of being overcome but which can be overcome only in the future (eschatological), and, then, only "in unity," that is, only through the gospel.

I suggest that John has presented us a vision of unity that addresses all three of these kinds of differences. The first

difference corresponds to John's dealings with the non-believers and the pseudo-Christians. They manifest differences from the Johannine community that quite clearly rejected the preaching and sacramental signs of the gospel. They have no interest in participating in the upper-room ministry of Jesus.

The second kind of difference is exemplified in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. John's parenthetical comment, that Jews share nothing in common (culturally) with Samaritans (Jn 4:9), holds the key. What emerges as the difference between Jews and Samaritans is that Jews have an attachment to the temple in Jerusalem and Samaritans to the temple on Mount Gerizim. Jesus' response is to relativize that difference as non-substantial. What matters is not *where* you worship, but *whom* you worship, that you "worship the Father in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). True worship coincides with believing that the Father has sent the Son as savior, and it happens wherever that testimony is given. Temples and buildings are relativized (cf. 2:19-22), testimony to Christ is absolutized.

The third difference, so it seems to me, corresponds to the situation that existed between the Johannine Community and the so-called Apostolic Churches. They had substantial disagreements on Christology and ecclesiology, and yet John presents them as part of a unified church in spite of their substantial differences. Why? Because unity is primarily spiritual in nature: it is a unity of faith, a unity that is a participation in the glory that exists between the Father and the Son, a glory that is seen in the ministry of Jesus performed on his disciples who may be far from stellar in their understanding and their behavior. The ministry of Jesus, in other words, is both a sign of a unity that already exists (the oneness of the Father and the Son) and an instrument whereby that unity (faith in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is created, maintained and brought

to perfection.

In short, John sees God's purpose for his community's fellowship with the Apostolic Churches as spiritual in nature. The Johannine community is to remain in fellowship with the Apostolic Churches trusting that the Holy Spirit, Advocate and Teacher, will use them both to confirm the faith of the church (affirmation) and to radicalize the faith of the church (admonition), doing both from a standpoint of love. John's telling of the gospel demonstrates how this happened among the Twelve. Thomas, for example, was brought forth by the power of the Spirit to a more perfect confession of Jesus as being not only "my Lord" but also, unambiguously, "my God" (Jn 20:28). Peter, for example, was led to a more perfect understanding of leadership in the church by eventually losing his life for the sake of the sheep (Jn 21:18-19). Ecclesiology is not rooted in an authority structure but rather in an authoritative witness to the crucified and risen messiah. John hopes that what happened to the Twelve will happen to the churches they left behind.

As Brown notes, in a sense it did: John's view did prevail, at least with regard to Christology. After a long struggle of 250 years, the Church at Nicea affirmed John's testimony: the Son is "from above," he is "homoousios" with the Father. We might also add that, drawing on the synoptic traditions, after a 150-year struggle, the church also affirmed the incarnation as meaning more than what John literally says: that the Son became not merely "flesh," but "human." Of course, there are other aspects of John's theology (or perhaps Matthew's or Paul's) that still need clarifying, nuancing, or amplifying as new situations emerge and questions are asked. My point is that this is precisely what the ecumenical movement should be about: diverse traditions in dialogue addressing the faith issues of their day through a lively exchange of affirmation and admonition. My point is that, drawing on John's idea of Christian unity as

“being one as the Father and the Son are one,” there are sound theological reasons why we should work on our differences from a standpoint of unity and not division. Indeed, many of the full-communion agreements in vogue today do just that.

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John's Gospel and Christian Unity, Part Three

Colleagues,

This week we bring you the third installment of Steve Kuhl's paper on John's Gospel and Christian unity, which was first published in the March 2012 issue of *Ecumenical Trends*. (Parts One and Two were [ThTheol #737](#) and [#738](#).)

As you'll recall, last week Steve discussed John's portrayal of non-believing communities, drawing largely on the work of the Johannine scholar Raymond Brown. This week Steve continues to draw on Brown's work, focusing now on John's portrayals of the Apostolic Churches—that is, the churches founded by those whom John's Gospel insists on calling not “the Apostles” but “the Twelve.”

We hope you'll appreciate the light that Steve casts on John's Gospel, and we look forward to next week, when we'll bring you the conclusion of Steve's essay. In that conclusion, he'll sum up John's vision of Christian unity and what it means for the modern ecumenical movement.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Being One as the Father and Son are One John's Answer to the Question, "What is the Nature of the Unity We Seek?" By Steven C. Kuhl

[Part Three: John and the Apostolic Churches]

The Johannine Community among the Apostolic Communities

In his close reading of the Gospel of John, Brown convincingly argues that there are two kinds of authentic Christian communities represented therein. There is the Johannine community, represented by the Beloved Disciple, and then there are the Apostolic Churches, represented by "the Twelve," as John calls them, with Peter often being the primary spokesperson. The reason for this conclusion, says Brown, is rooted in five passages (Jn 13:23-26; 18:15-16; 20:2-10; 21:7; 21:20-23) where Peter and the Beloved Disciple are consistently and deliberately contrasted with one another (Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 82-83), and then a sixth passage where the Beloved Disciple is at the foot of the cross with Mary (Jn 19:26) while Peter is among those who scattered (Jn 16:32). What is important here, however, is the attitude John has towards these historic Apostolic Churches.

In general, as Brown notes, John has a favorable impression of

the Twelve which corresponds to a favorable impression of the Apostolic Churches they left behind. They are regarded as genuine Christians who are clearly distinct from the pseudo-Christians. This is explicitly evidenced in the "bread of life" discourse (Jn 6) where, in the face of Jesus' "hard teaching," the Twelve publicly declare their intentions to continue to follow Jesus, while the pseudo-Christians, by contrast, publicly declare their intentions to leave (See Jn 6:60-69.) Even more indicative of John's favorable attitude toward the Twelve (and the churches they left behind) is the fact that they are all present at the Last Supper (Jn 13:6; 14:5, 8, 20) and clearly part of the one flock of the one shepherd (Jn 10:16). The two communities have their differences (more on that later), they are not united on everything, but they are united where it counts: they truly believe in him whom the Father has sent (Jn 17:8). Jesus is certain of this, even if they are not always aware of that faith in one another. The upper-room narrative is for John an image of the church united in Jesus. More accurately, it is an image of the church as a *koinonia* (a fellowship or partnership) of churches that are one "as the Father and the Son are one." By closely observing the ethos of the upper room, we can see what constitutes for John church unity.

The Upper Room as the Image of Church Unity

In the upper room, Jesus is the calm, other-oriented, active agent ministering to his disciples in order to prepare them to receive and abide in what is to come: his messy work of salvation. The disciples by contrast are a basket case. Thomas (Jn 14:5), Philip (Jn 14:8), and Peter (Jn 13:9, 36-38) each in their own way demonstrate this in the narrative. Significantly, neither perfect understanding nor heroic exploits constitute Church unity. What constitutes unity is that all are *equally* ministered to by Jesus. There is no distinction

between them. They are all equally in need of cleansing. [Note: For Brown's discussion of the Johannine egalitarianism, see Brown, *The Churches the Disciples Left Behind*, 94.] The ritual of the foot washing makes this abundantly clear, and Peter is the foil for demonstrating it (Jn 13:1-11). Peter is portrayed as wanting to distinguish himself from the rest of the disciples. In no way does he want to be seen as equal with the rest. And so, he declines to be washed by Jesus as the others were washed. When Jesus explains to Peter that unless he is washed, he can have no part in him, Peter persists in wanting to be distinguished from the other disciples. Only now he demands a whole-body wash. But Jesus insists that there is no distinction between disciples. He does one and the same ministry for all. In the upper room, it becomes clear that church unity is marked by the saving service of Jesus equally received by all present. The Church is a *koinonia* of salvation.

[Note: This last phrase comes from Randall Lee and Jeffrey Gros, eds., *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, X (US Conference of Catholic Bishops: January 2005).]

Of course, the fact that Christian unity is grounded in the saving service of Jesus does not mean that the disciples, in turn, do not engage in service to one another. They do. Indeed, they are saved for service. Service of each other is a distinctive mark of the Christian community, as Jesus makes clear with his new commandment: "love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12). The *koinonia* of salvation is by nature a *koinonia* of love. But the disciples' service or love for one another does not constitute their unity. Rather, it is the consequence of their union in Christ, just as fruit is the consequence of a branch that abides in the vine (Jn 15:5). Moreover, just as there is no distinction in how Jesus serves his disciples, he cleanses them all equally, so there is no

distinction in how disciples serve each other either. Regardless of the outward form that their service takes, no distinction is made between one disciple's service and another's. Disciples simply "love one another as Jesus has loved them," without distinction and without compulsion. The great example of this is seen at the end of the gospel when Peter is told by Jesus that his service will entail death. Peter asks about the Beloved Disciple, "What about him?" (Jn 21:21). Jesus basically says to Peter, "That's none of your business." What ultimately concerns Jesus is not the outward form a disciple's service takes, though it will undoubtedly both take some outward form and be met with some kind of outward consequence. Nevertheless, with regard to the outward form Christian service takes, freedom reigns. Therefore, according to Jesus' teaching in the upper room, what characterizes Christian service is the inward source from which it springs: his very own love for them. In a sense, the Augustinian maxim fits nicely with John's outlook: "love, and do what you will" [Homily 7 on the First Epistle of John, available from *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170207.htm> (accessed 26 October, 2011)].

Church Unity amidst Substantial Differences?

We have been following Brown's basic assumption that John is retelling the familiar story of Jesus, not as a journalist, but as a pastor/shepherd who seeks to locate in that story answers to questions that are specific to his ecclesiastical situation in Asia Minor in ca. 95 AD. Chief among his concerns was how to relate to the churches left behind by the Twelve, what Brown calls the Apostolic Churches. John has issues with them. And most basically the issue is the image they use for understanding the relationship of Christ to the Church. Brown presents this issue succinctly on pp. 86-87 of his work *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*. The apostolic tradition, he maintains,

typically used “construction imagery” to relate Christ to the church, identifying Jesus as the founder or builder or cornerstone (i.e., Mt 16:18; Eph. 2:20) of the church. While that imagery communicates important insights, especially with regard to the “unicity” of Jesus (Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, 86-87), nevertheless, if taken too literally or exclusively, it relegates the church to a mere (organizational) edifice and Jesus as merely the past founder of it. The image holds up Jesus as a fond memory, but it does not give just due to his ongoing presence in the community, by the power of the Spirit, as risen and reigning Lord. At least, that seems to be John’s concern about these churches. In essence, they are stifling essential features of the gospel by their construction imagery.

John, by contrast, says Brown, prefers to think of Jesus as the constant “animating principle” of the church, in which soteriology, Christology and ecclesiology are intimately interconnected (Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, 87). Salvation is about a qualitatively different life, “eternal life,” conceived of as a genuine participation in the divine life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Jn 3:16) that coincides with faith. Christology is about Jesus, the Son of God incarnate, as the point of the spear of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) entering into this world to be the gate, the door, the vine through which believers are drawn by the Spirit into the divine life as children of God. Ecclesiology is about the church being a living relationship between Christ and the believers, the divine life manifesting itself now, already among believers, though with much more to come. The Church is therefore like branches on a vine or sheep with their shepherd. The idea of Church as an enduring, lively relationship between God and humanity is the central thing. The church is like branches that “abide in” and receive life support from the vine

of Christ in every moment; only as that life-giving connection (call it faith) endures does the Church bear the fruit of love (Jn 15:1-11). All this points to what John's Jesus means when he prays that the disciples (the churches) be one as the Father and the Son are one. Their unity is a participation in the divine life of God.

But what does participation in the divine life mean practically? What does "being one as the Father and Son are one" look like now? In short, it looks like the upper room. It looks like a community being served by Christ through the Spirit to the glory of the Father. That upper-room community was a basket case, when looked at from a human point of view—except, of course, for the Beloved Disciple, who is presented as the only one who is really in sync with Jesus' death-and-resurrection mission. Thomas and Philip didn't have an ounce of understanding as to what Jesus was talking about, and Peter's determination to be the hero among the disciples is dashed by his denial. Even so, the Beloved Disciple was in union with them, not because they were on par with one another theologically or behaviorally, but because he like them was under the care of the one Shepherd of the flock: Jesus Christ. What is distinctive about John's concept of unity, then, is not that the disciples or the churches they left behind are equally perfect in understanding or conduct but that they recognize and trust the ministry of Jesus in their midst. In one of his confrontations with the Jews, Jesus is asked, "What must we do to perform the work of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (Jn 6:28-29).

According to Brown, the Johannine community thought that the churches the apostles left behind were defective on two fronts: Christology and ecclesiology. And yet, the Johannine community remains in communion with them. Why? We can answer that only as we understand what John thought their deficiencies were and how

the unity of the church is not necessarily nullified by those deficiencies. As we proceed, it will become apparent that, for John, church unity includes within it not only the "mutual affirmation" of the churches, but also "mutual admonition." Indeed, there are cases when the only way that substantial differences between Christians can be overcome is from the standpoint of unity, and not division—that is, from the standpoint of being mutually under the ministry of Jesus. This is what it means to be one as the Father and Son are one: it means sharing in the glory of the cross, that unique glory that exists between the Father and the Son; a sharing that is made visible and tangible through the Spirit in preaching (Jn 17:20), baptism (Jn 3:5) and Eucharist (Jn 6:35).

First, concerning Christology. According to Brown, when compared to the Johannine community, the Apostolic Churches tended to be "traditional" or "conservative." From the perspective of the first century, this means that they both 1) took great care to preserve the literal language and thought-world in which Jesus lived and 2) used that language to communicate the gospel to new members and in new environs. To be sure, there is great value in keeping the memory of Jesus alive in this way. After all, the person of Jesus is not like a wax nose that can be shaped into just any kind of profile. His history matters. Yet, in John's judgment, as Christianity moved into the Gentile world, the language and thought-world of Judaism was not able to do justice to the historic picture of Jesus as he was actually (personally) experienced and as he actually (in his person) *still* is. In short, John thought that the divinity (person) of Christ was being inadequately confessed and the salvation (work) he accomplished correspondingly diminished. In John's language, the "joy" of salvation was "incomplete" (Jn 15:11). As ironic as this may sound to us, for John the language of Messiah (Jn 1:41), the fulfiller of the law (Jn 1:45), the Holy one of God

(Jn 1:49), Lord (Jn 21:7), and the Son of God (Jn 6:69) did not say clearly enough that Jesus is *God*, as the prologue emphatically asserts (Jn 1:1-5). As a result, John introduces the idea of Jesus' preexistence* and his status as being "from above" to dispel any hints of a lingering Ebionism that might be attributed to the tradition of the gospel. The crowning jewel of this theological accent comes from the mouth of doubting Thomas himself. When Thomas confronts the resurrected Christ, who can be experienced only through the power of the Spirit, he confesses him as "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28). John is saying here that the old language of "Jesus is Lord" no longer says enough. It's time to remove any ambiguity about that traditional confession and add to it "my God!" Urging the churches the apostles left behind to use this hermeneutical key in their reading and transmission of the gospel tradition that they have received from the Twelve is one of his major admonitions to them.

*[Note: The most bold expression of this preexistence is Jesus' line to the Jews, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (Jn 8:58).]

The second major concern for John is the ecclesiology of the Churches the apostles left behind. Directly related to their "low" Christology is a correspondingly "low" ecclesiology. Characteristic of the ecclesiology of the Apostolic Churches, according to Brown, is an overemphasis on the importance of institution and office (human operations) to the neglect of what John sees as the "real" authority in the Church: the ongoing leadership of the Good Shepherd through the sending of the Holy Spirit, the true Teacher/Paraclete/Advocate. How this institutionalization happened is easy enough to understand. According to Brown, with the death of the Apostles, the churches they left behind quite instinctively invoked their names to fill the teaching gap that occurred by stressing that the "official" successors of the Apostles should teach what they taught without

change (Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, 87). As a result, a kind of conservatism emerged that is prone to legalism and that accentuates institution and office as the defining characteristics of Church. John saw this development as contradicting the spirit of Jesus—not in the sense that he opposes church order categorically, but that he opposes a view of church order that 1) dismisses the priority of the Holy Spirit as the real Teacher of the community and 2) diminishes the fundamental equality of all disciples as potential vessels of the Spirit.

[Note: Of course the great example of the everyday disciple as vessel of the Spirit is the nameless Beloved Disciple himself. Also, as Brown notes, women are especially highlighted as disciples through whom the Spirit exercises leadership, leadership being the work of advocacy for Jesus, in whatever form it takes. Examples include the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:29) and Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:18).]

John knew that while the work of Jesus was finished (Jn 19:30), the work of teaching and comforting and advocating for that work was not (Jn 14:26). Indeed, John testifies that Jesus, in the upper room, specifically tells his disciples this. So what is Jesus' teaching on the continuity of leadership in the church? According to John, Jesus does not establish an elite class of disciples, called "Apostles," to lead the church, but promises the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in his name *to teach them everything, including reminding them of all that Jesus himself has said to them* (14:26). Indeed, the most conspicuous feature in John's Gospel is the absence of the title or designation of any disciples as "Apostle." Brown says there is a reason for this. In John's view there are only "disciples" (Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, 91-95) There is no official elite class of disciples called Apostles. That idea is either a misconception by the Apostolic Churches or a

misguided teaching by those who called themselves Apostles. To be sure, John is very aware of the tradition that calls the Twelve by the title "Apostles," but he refuses to call them that. Why? Because as the church has evolved, the meaning of their ministry has been distorted to replace the role of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is, for John, the primary Teacher/Paraclete/Advocate in the church, the one who is the guarantee of the church's continuity.* Whatever form the organizational leadership may take in the churches left behind by the Apostles, it dare not usurp the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit and the fundamental equality of all believers. That is John's admonition on ecclesiology.

*[Note: Of the early church fathers, Irenaeus of Lyons (ca 200 AD) emerges as a central figure to reassert this Johannine accent on the connection between pneumatology and ecclesiology when he wrote, "*For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church*" (*Against Heresies* III, 24). Recall that one hundred years earlier Ignatius of Antioch asserted the connection between Christology and ecclesiology when he wrote, "wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church" (Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 8).]

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John's Gospel and Christian Unity, Part Two

Colleagues,

This week we are excited to bring you part two of Steve Kuhl's paper on John's Gospel and the goal of Christian unity, first published in the March 2012 issue of *Ecumenical Trends*. Last week, in his introduction (ThTheol #737), Steve laid out his thesis—that although the modern ecumenical movement has stalled on the question of what kind of unity we ought to seek, we can find answers that question in John's Gospel and, in particular, in that Gospel's vision of the disciples being one “as the Father and Son are one.”

Last week Steve emphasized that the differences dividing Christians from each other fall into three distinct categories: the differences which are Church-dividing and need to be overcome for the sake of the gospel; the differences which are part of a legitimate diversity and need to remain for the sake of the gospel; and, finally, the differences which need to be overcome but can only be overcome in the eschatological future, “in unity,” through the gospel.

In the rest of his paper, Steve delves deeper into John's views on Christian unity, focusing this week on the Gospel's portrayal of non-believing communities and next week on its portrayal of the communities of believers represented by the apostles. In both parts, Steve draws on the work of the Johannine scholar Raymond Brown, illuminating Brown's arguments and building on them in support of his own thesis.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Being One as the Father and Son are One John's Answer to the Question, "What is the Nature of the Unity We Seek?"

By Steven C. Kuhl

[Part Two: John and the Non-believing Communities]

Church Unity and the Situation-in-Life of the Johannine Community

Reinhold Niebuhr once noted that there is nothing more inappropriate than an answer to an unasked question. The sentiment applies here to John's notion of Christian unity. What question prompts the Johannine Jesus to pray that his disciples be one "as the Father and Son are one"? It is not simply that they are divided. Worse, there are competing visions of unity being advanced within the Christian Community during the time of John—visions, in John's view, that are not adequately rooted in the gospel of salvation as summarized in John 3, namely, the "glory" that marks Christian unity, the glory of the cross. But what are they? Because the original receivers of the gospel knew basically what those alternative visions were by virtue of their situation-in-life (i.e., their being-there) John does not need to explain them in detail. But we are not there in their life's situation. Does that mean John's meaning is lost to us? Not necessarily, not if we can sleuth a reconstruction of the life situation from the hints that are sprinkled throughout the text.

Reconstructing the situation-in-life to which John's Gospel is addressed is the purpose of modern source, form, and redaction critical methods. Fortunately, Raymond Brown has given us such a

reconstruction for the Johannine community in his work, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*.^{*} What follows is a summary of Brown's reconstruction of the situation-in-life of the Johannine community—not in exhaustive detail, but insofar as it illuminates the competing visions of Christian unity that existed in John's day. In response to those alternative visions of Christian unity, John offers his Christological definition of unity as being one "as the Father and Son are one." After reconstructing this situation-in-life, we can move on to how the Johannine vision of Christian unity defines the three kinds of differences or, stated positively, the three characteristics of unity (what is essential, what is open, and what is to be endured) that we identified above.

^{*}[Note: Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). See also, Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984) and Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Volumes I and II in *The Anchor Bible Commentary Series* (Garden city, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970).]

The Johannine Community vis-à-vis Six Other Kinds of Community

It is important to note that Brown's process of reconstructing the situation-in-life of the Johannine community presupposes a pastoral-theological purpose as John's motive for writing. John is not simply functioning as a disinterested journalist. He is a shepherd-theologian (cf. John 10) who is retelling the familiar story of Jesus to his flock in a way that addresses their particular situation-in-life: that is, the threats to the gospel that undermine the integrity of Christian community in his day. As such, the work is apologetic, written to define and defend the three kinds of differences we noted above.

In general, Brown identifies six distinct "communities" that can

be grouped into three distinct categories to which the Johannine community relates: the “non-believers,” the “pseudo-Christians” (my term, not Brown’s), and the “Apostolic churches.” This classification is based on what Brown argues to be John’s literary strategy of taking known figures and events in the historic ministry of Jesus and “redacting” them to represent known communities and attitudes with which his community is contending in ca. AD 95 (Brown, 23, 59). John’s purpose is to answer the soteriological, Christological, eschatological, and ecclesiological challenges that the Johannine community faces. Of course, as Brown in his modest way notes, the reconstruction is based on assumptions that are not absolutely certain. His proposal is an educated guess (Brown, 7). But, in my judgment, it is an argument that is thoroughly grounded in the data of the Gospel and sufficiently correlated with the historiographical data of the place and time in which John wrote to provide a context for interpreting John’s idiosyncratic definition of Christian unity as “being one as the Father and the Son are one.”

The Johannine Community among the “Non-believers”

According to Brown, three distinct kinds of “non-believers” are identifiable in John’s Gospel. They are described as “the world,” “the Jews,” and “the followers of John the Baptist” (Brown, 62-71). The first two, the world and the Jews, represent the fact that by ca. 95 AD the Johannine community had come to realize that the gentile world (the dominant culture) was no more predisposed to accepting Jesus as the messiah than were the Jews, the dominant religious tradition out of which Christianity arose (Jn 4:22). Indeed, John’s community was experiencing as much harassment from the local Roman officials and populace as they had earlier from the Jews.

[Note: The historical evidence corroborates this point. By ca. 85 AD the Council at Jamnia had officially expelled from the

synagogues any who confessed Jesus as messiah (Brown, 22), and by ca. 117 AD (as known from the correspondence between Emperor Trajan and Pliny, a procurator in Asia Minor) there were sporadic outbreaks of Christian persecution that had grown commonplace among local populations in Asia Minor.]

By contrast, the followers of John the Baptist (hereafter, JBapt) represent a special problem of “unbelief” for John’s community. According to Brown, it is likely that the first members of the Johannine community were former followers of JBapt (cf. Jn 1:35-42), John himself, aka, the Beloved Disciple, included (Brown, 32, 69). But not all of JBapt’s followers ended up following Jesus. Some still insisted that JBapt was the Christ. For that reason, John is adamant in his depiction of JBapt as 1) clearly identifying Jesus, not himself, as the messiah (Jn 3:28) and 2) explicitly exhorting his disciples to follow Jesus and not himself (Jn 1:36-37). As Brown shows, John’s reference to the fact that some of the followers of JBapt did not believe in Jesus (i.e., Jn 3:22-26) clearly suggests that in ca. 95 AD there still existed a community dedicated to the confession that JBapt was the messiah. Their continuing presence was a concern that needed addressing, if for no other reason than that John still hoped to draw them into becoming followers of Jesus as messiah (Brown, 71).

In general, John uses these non-believing communities as the theological foil for identifying the theological essence of the church and church unity: namely, faith in Jesus as the messiah, understood as the unique (monogenes) Son of the Father (Jn. 1:14), the one whom God sent into the world to save the world (cf. Jn 17:3). Central to John’s rhetorical strategy is the fact that at first glance the world, the Jews, and the followers of JBapt regard each other as polar opposites. Indeed, they have no love for one another. Yet, in spite of their stark differences, John presents them as having one thing in common. They are

united in their *unbelief* concerning Jesus. That commonality underwrites their basic unity as a unity against the Son and, hence, against the Father who sends him and the Spirit who attests to him (Jn 15:26-27). Such unity, in other words, is a unity against God. In a sense, John and Goethe are in agreement: the only theme in history that really matters is the conflict between belief and unbelief. [See Werner Elert, *The Christian Faith: An Outline of Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. Martin H. Bertram and Walter R. Bouman, 5th ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 242.] "Those who believe in him are not condemned; those who do not believe are condemned already" (Jn 3:18, cf. 3:36).

Of course, John is aware that there exists a significant diversity of unbelief between the world, the Jews, and the disciples of JBapt. They are not all unbelievers in the same way. For example, "the world," as John describes it, is a wider concept than "the Jews" (Brown, 63). The world is in complete darkness concerning sin (its opposition to God) and God's condemnation (wrath) upon it (Jn 3:17-21, 16:8-11). "The Jews," by contrast, have a great advantage over "the world" on two counts. First, they have Moses (Jn 5:45-47) and, hence, a long history with the God whom Jesus now claims as his Father. Second, they have the Scriptures, a long prophetic tradition in which God has been indicating his intentions for the people of Israel (Jn 5:39) to send a messiah. Yet, in spite of this historical advantage, John asserts, they do not believe. Both those witnesses, Moses and Scripture, says John's Jesus, point to Jesus himself as the one hope for all, a Jew and gentile alike, and yet they, "the Jews," refuse to believe in him. The irony is that Moses and Scriptures, given for the advantage of "the Jews," now become their accusers. Finally, the disciples of JBapt also disbelieve that Jesus is messiah but do so, says John, for their own distinct, contradictory reasons. Unlike "the

Jews," they believe God's messiah has come in the person of JBapt. Their belief is contradicted, says John, by JBapt himself, who not only denied of himself such an ascription (Jn 3:28) but actually ascribed it to Jesus (Jn 1:36-37).

Thus, in spite of all their differences—indeed, their hatred of one another—the world, the Jews, and the followers of JBapt are united in that one theme in all history that really matters. They are unbelievers in Jesus as the Christ. As Brown notes, this poignant, cutting description of the unbelieving community is not meant to foster either a vindictive attitude towards the world or an anti-Semitic attitude toward the Jews (see Brown pp. 66, 69, and 71). Indeed, the Johannine community continues to exist for the one purpose of testifying (cf. Jn 3:11) to the love of God in Christ for all people, Jew and gentile, in conformity with the rule of faith attributed to Jesus and attested to in John 3:16. The point is that the Johannine community senses a deep responsibility to articulate the reason for its exclusively focused faith in Jesus as the universal hope for all. That essential focus dare not be obscured or muted. This, then, brings us to John's critique of the two other groups that appear in his theological treatise, the pseudo-Christians and the Apostolic Churches. First, the pseudo-Christians, then [in Part 3] the Apostolic Churches.

The Johannine Community among the Pseudo-Christians

The world, the Jews, and the followers of JBapt clearly reject Jesus as the messiah. But, as Brown observes, the Gospel of John speaks of Jews and individuals who claim to believe in Jesus as messiah but who clearly do not share Jesus' self-understanding of what that means, and who are therefore rejected by Jesus himself (Brown, 71). Following Brown's categorization, these pseudo-Christians are of two types: "Crypto-Christians," who are "Christian Jews" still within the synagogue (Brown, 71-73), and "Jewish Christians," who have an inadequate faith as revealed in

their confession of faith (Brown, 73-81). Understanding why these Christians are not part of the one sheepfold of Christ (of which the Johannine community is a part) is essential for understanding the meaning of John's description of Christian identity and unity as "being one as the Father and Son are one."

The Crypto-Christians are Jews who are afraid to publically confess their faith in Jesus for fear they will be expelled from the synagogue. John 12:42-47 and the story in John 9 about the man born blind are the clearest examples of this category of "Christians" in the environs of the Johannine Church. John's candid assessment of them is that "they love human glory more than the glory that comes from God" (Jn 12:43). Theologically, they think it is sufficient to be known as "disciples of Moses" rather than as disciples of "that fellow" (Jn 9:28-29). Brown notes that it is difficult to reconstruct the details of either their Christology or their ecclesiology (Brown, 72). What we do know is that they were content to interpret Jesus as a good Jew who attended the synagogue and whose message conformed fundamentally to the understandings of the law and Moses taught in the synagogue. According to Brown, these Christians had no time for the Johannine polemics against the synagogue, Moses, the temple, and the law. On the contrary, these Crypto-Christians saw their silence concerning Jesus not as cowardice (or apostasy) but as prudence. Their goal, says Brown, was to work cryptically within the Jewish synagogue with the hope of bringing anti-Christian synagogue leaders back to an attitude of tolerance towards Christians that existed decades before ca. 85 AD before the Council of Jamnia officially outlawed the name of Christ from being spoken in the synagogue (Brown, 22, 66).

[Note: Examples of this group are indicated, in my judgment, by Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a "secret follower of Jesus for fear of the Jews," and by Nicodemus, "who had first come to Jesus by night." Interestingly, both are also portrayed as

having left that group to become public confessors by asking for the body of the crucified Jesus after he was dead. See Jn 19:38-39.]

The second category of pseudo-Christians, according to Brown, consists of Jewish Christians who were “publically” known as Christians, who formed their own churches after either leaving or being expelled from the synagogue, but who, in the evangelist’s judgment, have an “inadequate faith” (Brown, 73-74). They are variously represented in the Gospel of John by those “disciples” who are rebuffed by Jesus when they demand proof of his divine authority or take offense at some of his specific teachings (cf. Jn 6:60-64). In ca. 95 AD they are known to the Johannine community as those who identify with the “name” of Jesus but then misrepresent him and his teaching. The first example of this kind of pseudo-Christianity is those who want a “bread king” and miracle worker but are offended when, instead, Jesus offers himself as the true object of faith (6:28-29) and “his flesh” as the real food that sustains unto eternal life (Jn 6:25-71).

A second example of pseudo-Christians in proximity to the Johannine Community, according to Brown, is represented in John’s portrayal of Jesus’ immediate biological family. His own mother is rebuffed for interfering with his timing (Jn 2:4), as are his brothers for demanding miracles and public displays of power (Jn 7:3-6). The meaning is that Christian identity is not linked to physical lineage or mere historical continuity to Jesus (let alone to the apostles); rather, it comes by faith alone in him as the only Son of God. This is reinforced when, at the cross, Mary and John the Beloved Disciple are declared by Jesus as family (Jn 19:26), as church, as being one the “way the Father and Son are one,” being one by virtue of their faith in Christ crucified. The rejection of the idea of physical lineage and historical descent as defining marks of Christian identity

is illustrated also through those Jews who claim "Abraham is our father" (Jn 8:31-38). To them Jesus says "before Abraham was, I AM" (Jn 8:58), an assertion of what might be called John's "high Christology." Even those who try to one-up Jesus in this debate, those who say that they have "God himself" as father (Jn 8:41), Jesus in essence says, "Impossible! If that were so you would believe in his only begotten Son, whom the Father has sent, which 'I AM'. But you don't." The church is a fellowship of faith in Christ, the Son of God. Its unity is not in fleshly things but divine things. The church is one as the Father and the Son are one.

A third example of pseudo-Christians in proximity to the Johannine Community, according to Brown, is depicted in John 10, the familiar Good Shepherd narrative. (Although Brown is conspicuously brief, if not vague, on this point, I think it very significant and worthy of expanded clarification.) The issue is leadership, and apparently the leaders of pseudo-Christian communities are trying to infiltrate the Johannine community or, perhaps, snatch its members away (cf. Jn 10:1-10). Nevertheless, the issue is "what constitutes authentic Christian leadership?" Or, to use John's language, what distinguishes a "hireling" from a "shepherd"? It is important to note here that John is not uninterested in Church leadership, as some have suggested. On the contrary, authentic leadership is a mark of the authentic community. But what is it? Key to defining authentic Christian leadership is the concept of the "voice" of the Good Shepherd, that is, the vox Christi. Authentic Christian leadership has to do with disciples being the mouthpiece of the one Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. "My sheep hear my voice," he says. "I know them and they follow me" (Jn 10:27). The authentic Christian leader is not necessarily one who exists in an "official" line of descent or in historically privileged proximity to Jesus, but in the one who speaks the word of the

Good Shepherd among the sheep by the power of the Spirit. Significantly, there is a specific element of content for identifying a speaker as being the voice-piece of the Good Shepherd. It is the cross and resurrection of Christ: that deed in which the Father and the Son are mutually glorified (Jn 17:1-5) and that deed for which the Spirit Advocate has been sent to vocalize/testify through the likes of his Church and its leaders (cf. Jn 15:26-27). The Good Shepherd is identified as the one who lays down his life for the sheep. As the end of John's Gospel notes, it is possible that the human mouthpieces of the Good Shepherd may also be called to lay down their life for the sheep. Peter is specifically singled out in this regard (Jn 21:19). But note that it is not essential that the church's leaders be themselves literally martyred. In response to Peter's inquiry about the Beloved Disciple, whether martyrdom is in his future, Jesus simply says, "Peter, it's none of your business." True martyrdom, authentic witness, authentic Christian leadership, does not necessarily consist in the literal losing of one's life, but in being a faithful witness, regardless of consequences, to Christ crucified and raised.

In summary, just as John used the non-believing groups as a foil to identify what is distinctive about the nature, identity, and unity of the Christian community, so he does also with the pseudo-Christians. The critique he makes of them is instructive, giving specific content to what Jesus means when he prays that his disciples be one as the Father and the Son are one. First, the Christian community is not secret about its identity as followers of Jesus. It publically confesses Jesus as the messiah and is publically known by that confession.

Second, for John, the confession of Jesus as messiah presupposes both a high Christology (i.e., the Son is God) and a high sacramentology (i.e., his flesh is real food) that are patently offensive to these pseudo-Christians. The volatile reaction of

the pseudo-Christians is strategic to John's theology of unity because it makes visible those who are truly "one" with the Father and the Son in the confession of Jesus and those who are not. Moreover, the confession of Jesus as messiah is not, for John, an achievement of human reason. Rather, it is a gift of the Spirit as interpreter of the Christ Event and bestower of faith. The Christian confession of Jesus as messiah is inescapably offensive and dumbfounding to those who are still "of the flesh," while it is inherently mystifying, though joy-inducing, to those who are "born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:3-10). Why some "get it" and some don't is a deep mystery that is beyond human (redeemed or unredeemed) comprehension precisely because it is not under human control (i.e., Jn 1:12-13). It is under the control of the Spirit, which "blows where it chooses" (Jn 3:8). To be sure, the work of the Spirit and the testimony of the church are inseparably linked in the realization of this mystery (Jn 3:11; 15:26-27). But it is the Spirit that makes effective the church's testimony, not vice versa (Jn 3:1-16). Therefore, the church should be careful not to constrain its Christology or sacramentology in rationalistic arguments. Too often both the "high" and the "low" traditions of Christology and sacramentology (especially in the Western Churches) are equally guilty of rationalization. John's Jesus simply refuses to entertain rationalism when it comes to the domain of the Spirit.

Third, John approaches the question of church leadership in a decisively spiritual, as opposed to legal, way. Although we will get into this more in the next section, we note for now that authentic leadership in the church is not measured by lines of physical descent or historical proximity to the earthly Jesus (as argued variously by the pseudo-Christian communities) but rather in how faithfully the leadership gives voice to the call of the Good Shepherd in the church and the world. Whatever else

John's Jesus means when he prays that his disciples be one as the Father and the Son are one, the teaching that John presents relative to these pseudo-Christian communities certainly rules out any narrowly institutional or organizational definition to that oneness. But it is in the Johannine Community's dispute with the "Apostolic Churches," as Brown calls them, that the question of what constitutes the "legitimacy" of a Christian community becomes even more focused.

[Part 3 will address that dispute with the Apostolic Churches.]

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Mr. Pelagius Goes to Washington. A Book Review

Colleagues,

We're pleased this week to send along a gift from a new contributor, Pastor Matt Metevelis of Las Vegas. The Lord granted me the privilege of serving as Matt's pastor for a time, and I've watched his progression through high school, college, and Luther Seminary, where he learned from the likes of my old schoolmates, Gary Simpson and Pat Keifert. Matt reads

voraciously. He thinks astutely. Last week he commented on Facebook about a book he had read and appreciated. It sounded like something that's right up our alley, so I asked him for a review. He graciously said yes. Here it is. Timely stuff, as you'll see. Enjoy.

May I say again that we welcome contributions? Think about it!

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Mr. Pelagius goes to Washington: A Book Review

Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics by Ross Douthat
New York: Free Press, 2012

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat's latest book cuts through the morass of polemic and paranoia about religion and society to provide a profound and readable account of the American religious situation. Douthat is skeptical of those who fear the influence of Christianity and those who champion it. In the introduction he makes the following argument:

"... America's problem isn't too much religion, or too little of it. It's bad religion: the slow-motion collapse of traditional Christianity and the rise of a variety of destructive pseudo-Christianities in its place."

Douthat, applying arguments from Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Barth, and others, shows how religious energy does not dissipate under the collapsing behemoth of mainline churches but instead becomes transformed. Churches may dwindle but religion remains. And what religion becomes in the rubble of mainline Christianity is a phantasmagoric horror of cheap spiritualism, disastrous individualism, political hucksterism, and consumer trash with

corrosive consequences for our republic.

Douthat's work is really two books. It presents both the decline of institutional churches and a critique of the "heresies" that took their place. The stage is set in the postwar era. Tracing the careers of Fulton Sheen, Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King Jr., Douthat shows the emerging outline of a Christianity that is dynamic, engaging, and genuinely traditional. The four men in Douthat's ecumenical cast of characters differ drastically from one another, but they also share a few traits in common. All four are public figures with wide-ranging cultural influence, and all were respected and admired by society at large. But, unlike their contemporary counterparts, each remained deeply steeped in his own religious traditions and maintained an intense Biblical and dogmatic core. They represent a postwar society which took Christianity seriously as evidenced by high church attendance, political influence, academic investigation, and even several popular films. This was a society where churches, united together, were seen as an integral part of national health and could work together on great causes like the Civil Rights movement. For Douthat this remains a paradise lost, where Christianity was not dominant but influential, healthy, faithful and intellectually respectable. Christ and culture, church and society had found a harmonious and salutary balance beneficial to both parties.

In the years afterward that balance fell apart, and with it fell the stature and influence of the mainline Christian churches and the stabilizing power of Christian orthodoxy. Douthat chronicles the change in the religious landscape with great attention if not detail. He presents the factors that emptied out the churches in the decades following the 1950s as largely sociological realities and not the work of devious apostates. Douthat offers several hypotheses to explain the institutional storm and stress that drained the power and influence of the

churches. The great changes of these decades left in their wake churches with dwindling members and coffers, growing out of touch and struggling in vain either to keep up with cultural trends or to resist them.

After his thorough autopsy of mainline churches, Douthat turns his considerable rhetorical firepower on what he considers to be the rise of four major heresies in American Christianity and the contributions each has made to our current problems. The Dan Brown-inspired "lost gospels" movement, prosperity theology, the "God Within" movement, and messianic nationalism are all singled out for criticism in the second part of the book. Douthat traces each movement in its historical development, demonstrates the reasons for their popular appeal, and then explains how each distorts the Christian witness. He singles out Dan Brown, Joel Osteen, Elizabeth Gilbert (the author of the spiritual travel memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*), and Glenn Beck as the exponent of each, and he subjects them to fair yet biting criticism.

Douthat depicts these "heresies" as simplifications which eschew the complicated and at times paradoxical ideas that have emerged over time to explain the vague witness to Jesus presented in scripture. Prosperity theology displaces the paradox of a God who provides for his creation and yet warns about the danger of wealth, choosing instead a simplistic picture of God as a cosmic CEO who just wants to bless your right attitudes with success. "God Within" theology takes a God presented as both transcendent and intimate and replaces him with a God who, according to Gilbert, "dwells inside you as you," or comfortably hugs you from inside your own ego. And Glenn Beck's brand of religious nationalism replaces the God who chooses Israel and yet declares himself God of all nations with an American tribal deity that revealed himself most fully in 1776 and awaits the right public policy program to emerge again. The common error in all of these distortions is that they are all in some way simplistic

distortions which detract from the full spectrum of Christian theology. Orthodox theology for Douthat exists tenuously as a careful balance of seemingly contradictory ideas from the historic councils and doctors of the church. For example, Jesus is both fully God and man, and heresy arises by emphasizing one nature at the expense of the other. Good theology is a balancing act. For this analysis Douthat cites Chesterton and draws heavily from his own professed Catholicism which sees proper theology as an Aristotelian exercise in locating a golden mean and trusting a proper magisterium to maintain it through subsequent ages.

But heresy does not come simply from a failure to keep a proper theological equilibrium. Indeed heresy is not ultimately a uniquely theological and intellectual shortcoming. Douthat assumes that his cast of heretical villains could be rehabilitated simply by reading the Bible with a wider lens. He misses that these heresies rise from the source of all heresies, the failure to distinguish between the law and the gospel. Heresy is not just a bad reading of some ancient texts; it is the fruit of a more fundamental human temptation to treat the law as the gospel. Each of the heresies Douthat singles out presents the law to its hearers as the purer form of the gospel, or the way that God is made your ally by your own act and on your own terms. This can happen explicitly, as in Joel Osteen's preaching that God has to bless you if you do good things and think good thoughts; or as in Glenn Beck's grotesque dressing up of human laws and traditions like the constitution in attempt to pass them off as divine gifts, promises, and blessings. It also happens implicitly in Gilbert's "God Within" who won't judge you externally but condemns you with a never-ending and fruitless internal quest to know yourself and find your own meaning. When churches decide not to preach the gospel because of either willful ignorance or institutional decay, the law will always

creep in to make the false promise of salvation with all its deadly demands. What is absent from all these heresies is not just good theological understanding but the cross of Jesus Christ itself.

For all its understandable failure to dig to the root of the problem, Douthat's work is useful to read. Douthat is conversant with major and minor figures in Christian thought and popular culture, and his book is a wonderful and opinionated tour through contemporary Christianity. He knows how to analyze society like a good journalist and delivers great one-liners with the succinct punch of a great columnist. The book gives a great sense of perspective to the challenges facing the church and the problems crippling our society, even if its prescriptions for the future are not fully developed. The only prescription I do agree with is Douthat's recommendation that Christian churches and theologians strive to be both ecumenical and confessional. (Most of my colleagues falsely find these terms mutually exclusive.) But whether you agree with each argument or not, the work is still worth a read. Douthat will give you a great sense of where we've been, a healthy sense of disgust and chagrin for where we are, and a small glimmer of hope for where we might be despite the challenges and impostors that surround us.

Pastor Matt Metevelis

Chaplain for Nathan Adelson Hospice

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Nevada

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request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

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John's Gospel and Christian Unity, Part One

Colleagues,

This week we're excited to bring you the first part of an exceptionally insightful paper on John's Gospel by the Rev. Dr. Steven Kuhl. Steve is well known to Crossings readers as a frequent writer of text studies, a leader of workshops, and the current President of Crossings Community, Inc. He's also an assistant professor of historical theology at Cardinal Stritch University and—as we think you'll see over the next few weeks—he's a gifted practitioner in that field.

Steve first presented this paper in November 2011 at a retreat for ecumenical leaders, held at Green Lake, Wisconsin, by the Wisconsin Council of Churches. The paper was then published, with minor edits, in the March 2012 issue of *Ecumenical Trends*. *ET* has graciously granted us permission to republish it here, which we do with a few more small edits.

This week's installment is the introduction, in which Steve lays out his thesis on how the Gospel of John answers the core ecumenical question, "What is the nature of the unity that we Christians seek?" Taken as a whole, Steve's paper made us see John's Gospel from an excitingly enriched perspective that's

grounded (as it must be) in Christ's cross and resurrection. We have a hunch his paper will have the same effect on you that it did on us.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Being One as the Father and Son are One John's Answer to the Question, "What is the Nature of the Unity We Seek?" By Steven C. Kuhl

[Part One: Introduction]

The Question of Church Unity Today

Today there is tremendous consensus among many of the divided churches that "the way of ecumenism is the way of the church." [John Paul II, "Ecumenism as the Pastoral Priority of This Pontificate," *Origins CNS Documentary Service* 34, no. 28 (December 23, 2004): 441.] That phrase, coined by John Paul II, means that no one can be seriously dedicated to the church of Jesus Christ without also being dedicated to the unity of that church. And yet, there is profound confusion and outright disagreement—indeed, division-reinforcing disagreement—between the churches over the kind of unity we seek. Is it institutional, confessional, spiritual? Is it a version of historical continuity or missional solidarity? Is it some of these? Is it all of these? Is it none of these? Do we even know what we mean by these? Are these even the categories we should be thinking in? Right now ecumenical dialogue seems to be in a cul-de-sac with regard to the question of the nature of the unity we seek, seeing no way through

While I have no neat answer to this problem, I do have a modest

suggestion. Why not go to the one “institutional authority” that has unanimous ecumenical support and universal ecclesiastical use: the canon of the New Testament?* More specifically, why not go to the one text in the New Testament that has served to underscore the consensus expressed in the above quotation by John Paul II—the text after which his encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint* (“That They May Be One”), was named; the one that is also known to us as Jesus’ high-priestly prayer; the one which John the Beloved Disciple presents as *paraclesis*, a spirit-supplied application of the teaching of Jesus, in the seventeenth chapter of his account of the gospel? Moreover, let’s do so without any theories of divine inspiration or predetermined interpretations. Let us do so simply by letting John speak to us through his Gospel, which he believed to be a specific instance of the promised, ongoing teaching function of the Paraclete for the church in his time and place (Jn 14:17, 25-26; 15:26; 16:13-14).

*[Note: Of course, the unanimous consent of the church itself does not thereby make the New Testament authoritative. Nevertheless, the very fact that the New Testament is presently authoritative by unanimous consent may be a sign of what John the Beloved Disciple sees as the working of the Paraclete among us as the teacher of the church. Hence, unanimous consent does not mean that the church is over Scripture. On the contrary, it means that the church is constantly dependent upon Scripture. The New Testament is therefore a *norma normata* (a normed norm), a work that is believed to be genuinely normed by the gospel and that needs to be read through the lens of that norm. The gospel then is the actual event or good news of Jesus Christ and is the *norma normans* (the norming norm) that norms and defines Christian teaching and testimony. The *norma normans* is the Word, Jesus Christ himself, crucified and raised for salvation of those who believe (cf. Jn 3:16), as attested to, interpreted, applied by the Spirit.]

Of course, we need to realize that when John wrote his Gospel he was not speaking literally to us. Nor was he aware of the roller-coaster ride the church would take over the centuries in its attempts to clarify the gospel in contexts of confusion, distortion, or rejection. He knew nothing of an Imperial Church, the Arian controversy, or the Chalcedonian settlement. He knew nothing of a schism between East and West, or a rift between so-called Protestants and Catholics in the West, or the challenge of modernity. To think that he was addressing exactly the setting we find ourselves in would be naïve. Even worse, it would ignore John's vision of a Church being guided through history by the Paraclete; it would reify the confession of the gospel in time and overlook the pastorally focused and historically specific ministry that John was performing for the church of his day. But at the same time, let us not think that John is not speaking to us. That would mean his message was simply time-bound and relativistic. None of the ecumenically minded churches, to the best of my knowledge, believes that either. Let us therefore read John's account from the perspective of "a second naïveté," as Paul Ricoeur called it: that is, in a way that is fully and critically aware of the historical contingency of the text, and yet fully and critically aware that a historically contingent text can still speak to us today. [Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 351-53.]

Indeed, the intended relevance of John's Gospel for us today is already boldly stated in the text itself. John explicitly presents Jesus as praying not only for present company but also for "those who will believe in [him] through their word" (Jn 17:20). We do well to quote the most often quoted part of that prayer, John 17:20-24:

20 'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21that they

may all be one. 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. 22The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23I 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. 24Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (NRSV, <http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=John+17>)

The Significance of John 17 for the Modern Ecumenical Movement

A quick glance at the text reveals numerous themes that are immediately linked to Jesus' concern for Christian unity or, as he puts it, "that [the disciples] may all be one" (Jn 17:20), "completely one" (Jn 17:23). One theme that particularly grabbed the attention of the early founders of the ecumenical movement is the close connection between the mission of the church and the unity of the church. The experience of global missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries revealed that the disunity of the church obscured, confused, and even undermined their efforts to make Christ known to the world in accordance with the missional imperative of Jesus' prayer (Jn 17:21). Through its linking of mission and unity, Jesus' prayer contained an important truth that anticipated and incriminated the situation of a church content with denominationalism, competition, and division.

Taking John 3:16 as a guiding Johannine "rule of faith,"* I would interpret the reasoning of the missionaries as follows: if the crucified and risen Christ is God-in-person loving the world, the world that is *de facto* at enmity with God the creator and under the righteous condemnation of this God (Jn 3:17-18), and if by that cruciform love Jesus is saving, out of the world,

those who believe in him (for salvation is not by fiat but by faith), then how can those who claim to be his disciples not love one another as he has loved them (Jn 13:34 and 15:12)? According to Johannine logic, the disunity of the church undermines the mission of the church because it undermines the soteriological center of the Christian message. Disciples as sinners drawn out of the world to be united as one reconciled people of God in Christ—this, for John, is *the* fundamental characteristic of salvation in Jesus and *the* defining, distinctive feature of the church. Whatever else the church might be, at its root it is a community defined by its faith in Christ as savior from the judgment of God upon sinful humanity.

*[Note: The concept of a “rule of faith” or a “rule of truth” comes out of the third century and was used by Irenaeus and Tertullian against the Gnostics, for example, to designate an essential doctrinal point that needed to be recalled in order to guide the interpretation of the Christian message or story. It is, in other words, a theological hermeneutical concept. As the biblical writers bear witness to the gospel of Christ, they frequently employ such rules of faith. It must be remembered, however, that it is the theological content of the rule of faith, not the linguistic formulation of that rule, which is normative.]

What resulted from this scandalous experience in the mission field was a gathering in 1910 of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. That meeting in turn marked the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, which eventually spawned the World Council of Churches in 1948. By 1965 the movement had gathered around itself a broad spectrum of churches (including the Roman Catholic Church, various ethnic Orthodox churches, classical Reformation churches, and numerous post-Reformation Protestant churches), sparking a blaze of inter-Christian dialogue in which no issue or concern would be left off the table for discussion.

For reasons too complex to state here, the momentum of that dialogue reached its climax with the publication of the WCC document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982, and it has now stalled around the question, "What is the nature of the unity we seek?"

[Note: The exception is the development of the so-called "full communion" relations as represented by the Porvoo Agreement in Europe and the various agreements fashioned in the United States by the ELCA, ECUSA, PCUSA, UMC, etc. Whether these should be seen as a "fulfillment" of the Johannine understanding of church unity is open to question.]

Christian Unity as Already and Not Yet

While there have been some great insights into the differences that exist between the churches, it is my judgment that the present stagnation has to do with an inability to distinguish between three kinds of differences:

1. differences that are by nature Church-dividing and that need to be overcome by agreement for the sake of the gospel;
2. differences that are by nature part of a legitimate diversity and that need to remain for the sake of the gospel; and
3. differences that are by nature in need of being overcome but which can be overcome only in the future (eschatologically), and, then, only "in unity," that is, only through the gospel.

Not all differences are alike, and it is my contention that John's concept of "being one as the Father and Son are one" provides a vision of Christian unity that can account for these three kinds of differences. Or, stated in more positive terms, John provides a vision of unity that fits the oft-quoted saying, "In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas"

("Agreement in necessary things, freedom in indifferent things, and love in all things). [John Paul II, "Ecumensim," 443.]

[Note: The actual origin of this phrase is unknown, as is the precise form of the phrase, especially concerning the last part. If the phrase ends with "in utrisque caritas," then it means "love in both things" (i.e., necessary and non-necessary things); if, however, the phrase is "in omnibus caritas" then it means "love in all things," and that can imply that there are things in addition to necessary and non-necessary things that might nevertheless be mixed up in church life—namely, controversial things. I am using the phrase as if that is what it means. Therefore, it does not necessarily contradict the nature of church unity that there be within it necessary things, non-necessary things, and controversial things.]

The unique eschatological quality of Christian unity, as John envisions it, entails not only agreement in essential things (i.e., things that exist *ius divinum* and therefore constitute the church) and freedom in adiaphoral or indifferent things (i.e., things that exist *ius humanum* and which therefore, in a historically conditioned way, serve that constitution), but also love in all things, which includes controversial things—including wrong things—things not included in essential and indifferent things. At least that is how I am here interpreting "omnibus," "all things."

[Note: I do so under such evangelical dicta as "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18) and "Love covers a *multitude of sins*" (I Peter 4:8), and in light of Paul's complex discussion of the weak and strong (Rom 14). One must note the paradoxical element that this third difference brings to the discussion of unity.]

Significantly, then, Christian unity is not a unity that we, the

members of the church, create, but one that we receive (Jn 1:12-13) or enter into like entering into a sheepfold (Jn 10:7-10). The unity of the church and the reality of the church are inseparable, as the Nicene Creed says: "We believe in one...church." For that to be the case, Christian unity must itself necessarily be the creation of the triune God, as the Father "glorifies" the Son in his saving work (Jn 17:1-5) and "sends" the Holy Spirit to advocate for that glory when and where it wills (Jn 3:8) in accompaniment with the gospel proclaimed (Jn 15:26-27). From the human side, then, Christian unity is variously understood as a unity of faith (Jn 20:31), a participation in the Spirit (3:5-8; 6:63), the fold of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:14), a fellowship of love (Jn 13:34-35), an abiding in Christ (Jn 15:1-11). This makes Christian unity distinct from any other kind of expression of human unity in the world—whether political, social, sexual, or even religious, where religion is defined as a category of the law of God/Moses (cf. Jn 1:16-18). The distinguishing feature of this unity is that it is noncoercive and can never be imposed. This is what John means when he says, "The law indeed came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17). The nature and unity of the church is constituted not by God's lawful engagement with the world but by God's Christological engagement with the world. "The glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14), the glory that exists between the Father and the Son from all eternity, the glory of the cross whereby the Father and the Son together are visibly, tangibly, historically united for the purposes of the salvation of the world (Jn 17:1-5)—this is what constitutes the church and its unity.

This unity both excludes and includes differences that exist between those who enter into it, and I am suggesting that there are three kinds of differences. Wrestling with the content of

these three kinds of differences, and especially the third kind of difference, is the ecumenical challenge today. Does Christian unity mean human agreement or organizational continuity here and now on all possible aspects of ecclesial existence? Or is it fundamentally divine and eschatological in nature, a paradoxical unity that is already and not yet; a unity that is possessed as a promise, by faith, even as certain present differences continue to exist between Christians, differences that *really* matter? I think the kind of unity that John envisions, which he claims is Jesus' own vision of unity, is the latter. It is a unity that can handle certain substantial differences among Christians, because unity is not simply the *result* of differences already overcome between Christians but is rather the divinely established *means* or *context* for overcoming those differences eschatologically. Indeed, it is only in the context of people coexisting with this third kind of difference that true Christian unity becomes distinguishable from all other kinds of unity.

[Note: Although New Testament examples are rare, a good example of this unity in disagreement is Paul's teaching on the weak (the conservatives) and the strong (the liberals) in Romans 14. Here Paul urges Christian unity not on the basis of agreement on the issue but rather on the basis of suspending judgment on the other, the one with whom you disagree. Why? Because, ultimately, God is to be the judge.]

We will next turn to how John articulates this view of Christian unity in his immediate context.

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Play-by-Play Liturgy, Part Two

Colleagues,

This week, as promised, we bring you the final half of Pr. Todd Murken's play-by-play liturgy. The first half came two weeks ago, in [ThTheol #734](#). If you saw [ThTheol #735](#), you'll know that we devoted last week's entry to remembrances of Todd, who suffered a fatal cycling accident very soon after we published Part One of his liturgy. Since then our inboxes have seen a steady stream of your prayers and notes of remembrance. Thank you for these. We will pass them all along to Todd's widow, Julie.

I didn't know Todd, but in rereading his liturgy tonight I was struck with the clarity of his voice as he preached the vital good news of the gospel—the core idea that, while we on our own can produce only poor and bitter grapes, Christ fills us up with his own sweet and saving wine.

As you'll remember from Part One, Todd's liturgy features a running commentary by fictionalized versions of the American football commentators John Madden and Al Michaels. The conceit may be artificial, but it's grounded in Todd's insight (for which he credits his former professor, George Hoyer) that the worship service can be understood as a series of "plays"—the Catch, the Give, the Share, and, finally, the Live. We left off last time at the end of the gospel reading. Today's entry begins

with the sermon, whose texts are Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isaiah 5.1-7) and Jesus' closely related parable of the wicked tenants (as told in Matthew 21). During the sermon, Madden and Michaels fade temporarily into the background. The law and gospel take center stage, and Todd's own preaching voice comes through. Thanks be to God for that voice, and for the good words that it spoke.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

PLAY BY PLAY LITURGY

What would John Madden and Al Michaels Say at Lutheran Worship?

[Part 2]

Pr. This morning's readings are so clear as to need little explanation, except of how they speak to us.

They are both about God insisting on his rights: insisting that we return to him what we owe him, and showing how he destroys people who don't. Isaiah says that the Lord is going to remove his protection from Judah so that it will be looted and ruined by its military enemies. I suppose Isaiah realized that the people of Judah would never believe the Lord would do such a thing. So Isaiah uses this clever parable to get the people to pronounce judgment on themselves. The Lord did everything for his vineyard, but it did not yield back to him what he wanted and deserved.

Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants does the same thing: he gets his hearers to pronounce the sentence of "a miserable death" on the tenants. But the tenants in the parable represent

those who have just challenged Jesus, the very ones who will kill the Son: the "chief priests" and "elders of the people." Leaders bear a special responsibility to be sure God gets his due from the people. Jesus' warning today goes especially to us pastors and bishops, and also to parents, governors, and presidents of companies.

So, has the house of Israel, has the human race yielded to God the good grapes he deserves? There is both a No and a Yes to this. I must tell you the No, first, so we appreciate the Yes. No, we have not given God his due. Not Green Bay, not the USA, not Grace Lutheran, nor the whole race. We do not worship him as we ought with overflowing hearts. We do not endure suffering patiently with unworried confidence in God's care. We do not gladly serve him in all things. We take for granted, neglect, and even abuse his blessings: our families, our jobs, the earth, our abilities, our bodies. We do not keep the commandments as we owe him to do. We yield too many wild, bitter grapes.

But there is also a Yes answer. At least one of us, one human, one Israelite, namely Jesus the Christ, did yield to God the good grapes God deserves. He yielded God perfect obedience unto death, even death on a cross. He yielded God perfect trust that he would raise him from death. Sweet, good grapes!

We might say, "Good for him, but what does that get us?" Plenty. We get his reward. Yes. God will treat us as well as he treated Jesus: resurrection to life, glory and seats at the heavenly banquet. Because we, fellow believers, are in Christ. By our believing in him and being baptized into him, what is his is ours. We get full credit for his production of righteousness and obedience. We get to share, just as if we had yielded grapes as sweet as his are.

And it gets even better. We are even starting to yield sweeter

grapes ourselves. Yes! For we take Jesus into us, in the Lord's Supper, and he sweetens us. As we receive Jesus' forgiving blood, the wine made of his good grapes, God is no longer an impatient landlord but becomes instead our Father. So now we can focus not on obeying God out of fear, to keep up with the rent, but rather on yielding him good works, good grapes, for love of his Son who paid all our rent, in advance, by his suffering and blood. We produce these good grapes with the confidence of kindergartners making Mother's Day gifts: such kindergartners do not trust in the quality of their work for their gifts to be accepted, but they trust in their mothers' love. And it is exactly that, our trust in Christ, that makes our worship and service sweet to God, a pleasure to him, as no overdue rent could ever be. That's how drinking Jesus' wine makes us yield sweeter grapes.

God demands his due, the good grapes of obedience. He gets them, not from us, but from the vine of Jesus' cross. Because we belong to Christ by our faith and baptism, we get full credit for what he has done. And as we drink the wine from the cross, trusting Jesus' blood, our bitterness is changed to his sweetness, and how good we taste to God. Amen.

JM Wow, that's what I like about worship, it brings you right into the face of God.

AM Which is not necessarily good news. The face of God's impatience with those who are behind in their obedience was made very clear. Just because that is so biblically true, it is hard to listen to.

JM Yeah, but it is just that that makes the Gospel so precious!

See, preaching is for faith. Sermons are not to make people good, but to make them believers (and then the goodness will come, too). There is a Lutheran game plan for preaching faith

into people. It's kind of a reverse. First you preach God's Law, not only what we should do, but also how the Law condemns us for not doing it. We are not talking about mini-sins that only need a mini-Jesus. The real Law of God puts us to death! And then you preach the Gospel, how Christ died for our trespasses to save us from this condemnation. You preach how his death is good for more than mini-sins, it's strong enough to cover all! We have been reconciled to God by the death of his Son, the same Son who rose to give us eternal life. This is how you preach for FAITH. This is how you preach to make people believers, not merely to make them good. In fact, without faith, we can't really be good.

AM But now the people are standing to sing again.

JM Yeah, I love this part. See the people have just made a Catch, right? The Word in all its glory has been Passed to them, by God through the minister, and they Catch it. Next thing, though, now THEY say it. THEY sing it to God, or to each other. They are repeating, or confessing, what they have just received.

Cong. sings Hymn of the Day, "Salvation unto Us Has Come"

Apostles' Creed

AM What would you say, John, is the creed a Pass or a Give?

JM It is definitely a Give. I mean, the folks are giving their faith to the Holy Trinity, putting their trust in him, pledging their allegiance to him. They Catch the Word from him and so Give their faith to him.

Like the rest of the liturgy, the Creed is mostly phrases from the Scriptures. By the way, did you know that the Creed is one of the most recent additions to the Christian liturgy?

AM No, how long has it been included?

JM. Less than a thousand years.

Pr. Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and all people according to their...

PRAYERS

Pr. The peace of the Lord be with you always.

Cong. And also with you.

The peace is shared.

AM That must be one of those Share plays you were talking about.

JM Right! The SHARE is where the people are giving to each other. But they are not just saying "Good Morning out there!" What they Share in the Liturgy is always something divine. It is the LORD'S peace they are sharing here.

AM And what a privilege it is! No wonder they have such a good time.

JM You know, now we are in the part of the liturgy that the church did not inherit from the synagogue. What the first Christians did was add the Lord's Supper to the synagogue service. And the Lord's Supper begins with the "kiss of peace," that the disciples received from the Lord on Easter, and that Paul mentions in his letters.

OFFERING is assembled.

AM The offering: another Give play, obviously.

JM Yes, but also Share. When the Church began, the offering was bringing bread and wine for the meal, and the leftovers were given to the poor and needy.

But you are right, now it is a Give play. It is an offering, a sacrifice, given to God. It is not a sacrifice to win God's

favor: Christ did that for us so totally-how could we add to that! This is a sacrifice of thanksgiving, a gift of pure love from us to God.

AM That's why the believers are so generous: for pure joy. What are we going to see next?

JM As the offering-bread and wine and money-is presented, a joyful song is sung, part of Psalm 51 or, this morning, Psalm 116.

AM But isn't there also an important prayer?

JM Sure, and in the offertory prayer these people are going to offer not just things but themselves to Christ and his kingdom. That is a major Give. That is huge.

AM Speaking of big, then comes the prayer called the Great Thanksgiving.

JM Yeah. "Lift up your hearts" has been part of Christian liturgy for 1850 years and may go right back to the apostles! Then comes the Holy, Holy, Holy, which is from Isaiah but includes the shouts of the Palm Sunday crowd: Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

AM But the Holy, Holy is prefaced by something the minister says or sings that includes themes from the season like Advent or Easter. What is that preface called?

JM It's called The Preface. Then comes the Eucharistic Prayer. I need to explain this. See, Jesus took bread, thanked God, broke and shared the bread, and then said "Do this." So the Church does it. We bless God the way Jesus and all Jews did that night: they blessed him for creation and life, for choosing Abraham and Israel and for their whole history, and they asked the Lord to come and save them. Of course with that ancient Jewish

thanksgiving the Church includes thanks for Jesus Christ's death and resurrection! Then we break the bread and share it, just like he said to.

AM So this is a Give play, Giving thanks to God.

JM Yeah, but you know, I almost want to say that at least by the time the Communion comes it is just everything. See, the Communion is the fellowship: the believers, the Father, the Son, the Spirit, they are all together having a great time. You've got Jesus there giving his body and blood and forgiveness and everything. You've got the people there Catching it, but even their act of Catching in faith Gives him praise. And, of course, they are Sharing with each other. I mean, it's great.

AM Any special music coming up?

JM Yeah, they sing "Lamb of God."

That's what John the Baptist (I like that guy) said about Jesus. Starting about 700 A.D. the pope had it sung at the breaking of the bread.

AM Looks like they're coming with the offering.

Offertory is sung.

Offertory prayer is prayed.

Great Thanksgiving

Lord's Prayer

Lamb of God

Communion

Post-communion blessing

(As the table is being cleared)

AM Looks like it's all over, John.

JM Not really. See, liturgy or worship is not just about what

happens here. There is one more important play I have to talk about. It is the Live play. That starts now. Now we all go out and believe what we've been told, and live like we believe it. That's a struggle, but that is why the liturgy has so much Passin' and Givin' and Sharin': to get us ready to live out the whole week as God's people.

You know, a great Lutheran, Soren Kierkegaard, said that when he leaves worship he doesn't ask "How was it?" but "How did I do?" That's really what it's about. The Passing, the Giving, the Sharing: it's not just words, it actually happens, it is what we do. That's what makes this a great liturgy.

AM Indeed it has been. And we will all be back again, next week, right here, for another great liturgy between the Holy Trinity and his people at Calvary Lutheran Church. Until then, for John Madden, I'm Al Michaels; have a great Live play this week.

Post-Communion Prayer

Benediction

Sending Hymn

Dismissal

Pastor Todd B. Murken, Ph.D.

Grace Lutheran Church

Green Bay, Wisconsin

October 26, 1999

In Blessed Remembrance

Colleagues,

"Time like an ever-rolling stream / soon bears us all away. / We fly forgotten as a dream / dies at the opening day."

Is there anywhere in English hymnody a line more doleful? Is there in hymnody of any kind a sharper reminder of why we need Christ?

It strikes me again this week that horrid Death gets more press than it deserves. Sure, as an instance of the "Accuso!" that God's Law hurls at sinners, it's doubtless the loudest. But it isn't the last. Nor is it the worst. A few weeks ago I watched a three-year-old striving as three-year-olds will to command the attention of every other living being in the room, to that end pitting her will against the parent who had summoned her to the dinner table where everyone else was waiting to dig in. At first the ploy worked, all present attending to the drama as mother and father took turns pleading with her to quit her misbehaving. But at a certain point the adults simply turned away, focused on each other, and began the meal as if the child were not there. In less than twenty seconds she was perched at the table where she belonged. Out of the bones of babes, to tweak a famous phrase.

What's worse than Death? Death's consequence, that's what. The pebble plops in the stream, the ripples vanish, the conversation of the living rolls on without you and pays you no heed. One hundred years from now it will be with me as if I had never been born. One thousand years from now the digital traces I'm busy piling up these days (as are we all) will have long since been scrambled beyond all recognition. In that day it will be with me as with Bishop Berkeley's falling tree. With none on hand to perceive that I was, I will not have happened. "Dust you are. To dust you shall you return." He-Who-Said-That wasn't kidding. His Son once spoke of outer darkness, the very thing that three-year-old I mentioned had intimations of. In the lighted hall the

living feast, as much on talk and laughter as on food and drink. At the heart of the former is shared memory. Such sounds as leak through the walls into the cold and bitter night contain no mention at all of those the night has swallowed. No wonder the darkness rattles with the noise of gnashing teeth.

Enter Christ whose immediate gifts for those who have died are, first, the capacity to remember them, each and every one, and second-far better still-his fierce, unyielding determination to do just that. Did he not die himself to save us from oblivion?

You'll know why I'm thinking along these lines if you read the note we sent you on Sunday evening. To repeat, in case you didn't: last week's contributor, Pr. Todd Murken, was fatally injured in a bicycle accident this past Friday. A day earlier you had gotten Part One of his "Play-By-Play Liturgy." Part Two was due this week. You won't find it here, at least not yet. Better, it seems to me, that we should pause to thank the Lord Christ for a faithful, gifted servant, and after that to praise him for keeping Todd in his own most blessed remembrance as yet another of God's cherished saints to whom the Promise forever applies.

I didn't know Todd well. Nor did most of you, I suspect. One member of our editorial team didn't know him at all. The likes of us would leave him forgotten within a day or two of next week's post. Shame on us, but life rolls on; or so we'll want to mumble in our standard, useless effort to excuse our shame. Confessing that, let Christ be thanked as well, and from the bottom of every heart, for remembering on our behalf, as we cannot, and granting us the credit for it. There's a reason, by the way, why Christ's death was an explicitly shameful death. How else would he silence Shame's whining "Accuso," the one we can't shrug off? This too is how we find ourselves, with Todd, among those who are being saved.

I mentioned last week that Todd did his doctoral work on Eucharistic theology. I wonder what he made of that final line in the Words of Institution, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Here’s my own present take on it: we remember Christ precisely because he remembers us all. Comes the wonder: in remembering him alone, we can’t help but remember each other, including the countless each-others that he alone knows. Blessed remembrance indeed! Something to think about, perhaps, the next time you go to the Table.

Meanwhile, in lieu of Part Two of Todd’s piece—as intimated, we’ve pushed that off till next week—we send along tributes from three colleagues who did know him well. Like everything else we may say about each other, these tributes are fragile and fleeting, read today, swept quickly away in tomorrow’s flood of information. Read and ponder anyway. Todd’s Christ will be pleased. Then he’ll stash what you read in the one mind, God’s, where all good words abide forever, above all the ones that Christ himself keeps saying about us all. In light of that, a prayer:

“O God our help in ages past, / our hope for years to come: / be
Thou our guard while troubles last / and our eternal home.”
—*Isaac Watts*

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Encomia: The Rev Dr. Todd B. Murken, 1955-2012

*From the Rev. Dr. Kathryn A. Kleinhans, Professor of Religion,
Wartburg College—*

Todd and I were good friends for over 30 years. We first met in

fall 1981, when we began our M.Div. studies at Christ Seminary – Seminex in St. Louis. Starting with internship, we became lifelong theological correspondents, exchanging long letters and processing our experiences through Law/Gospel lenses. We disagreed about some important issues in the life of the church, but such disagreements were neither rancorous nor final. Todd had a powerful drive to understand where others were coming from. In recent years the long letters were replaced by equally long e-mails, full of questions and of nuanced argument. Some people play chess by mail. Todd and I did theology by mail.

Todd was a faithful godfather to our firstborn, whom he typically addressed not as Christopher but as *cristoferos*, always reminding him that his baptism made him a “bearer of Christ.”

Todd found great joy in his marriage to Julie, and as a guest in their home, I was able to witness the grace that they reflected to each other. I received news of Todd’s death while attending an ecumenical seminar in Strasbourg, France. Only five weeks earlier, Todd and Julie and I had gathered around an atlas in their kitchen, discussing the conference and mapping out my trip.

In seminary, I learned of Todd’s Advent discipline. He listened every day during Advent to Handel’s “Messiah”—but only through the Passion narrative. He would not listen to the full oratorio until Christmas Day. Such personal discipline was characteristic of Todd, who believed that patience and preparation laid the foundation for an even fuller joy. “May they rest in peace,” we often say of the blessed dead. I imagine, though, that Todd is not resting. Surely he is among those gathered around the throne of God, singing an unending “Hallelujah Chorus.”

+ + +

From Cathy Lessmann, Office and Business Manager, the Crossings

Community—

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to work with Todd when he served as editor of our Crossings newsletter. Not only did I learn to appreciate his intelligence and his unique ability to articulate the Gospel in easy-to-understand language, but I found him to be a most gentle and kind “boss” to work with. Todd loved the outdoors, he loved to bike, kayak, backpack, sail—you name it, he loved it. Back in 2002 we (my husband Gary and I) went sailing with him and Giselle in the Virgin Islands, and I remember how he absolutely relished the experience. I remember how considerate he was when we scuba dived and I was still fearful. I remember having long, intriguing theological conversations with him and how he always tried to converse at my level. Most of all, I remember that Todd believed in Jesus and that it was evident by the way he lived and interacted with all of us.

+ + +

From the Rev. Dr. Steven C. Kuhl, President of the Crossings Community—

Next week’s Thursday Theology will come to us with both joy and sadness. The joy, of course, will arise from the fresh engagement with the gospel that it will give in continuation with what we read last week. The sadness is that Todd Murken, the suffering servant of the Suffering Servant who will give it to us is with us no more—at least not in a way that he can preach the gospel to us with his distinctively winsome prose. Having died so unexpectedly, we commend him to the Lord. Who would have guessed that this would be the last drop of refreshment God would squeeze out of Todd for us to enjoy? *Soli Deo Gloria.*

Todd was a cherished member and active participant in the Crossings Community. Having studied under Bertram and Schroeder

at Seminex and achieving his doctorate in Systematic Theology under Bob Bertram, he was a remarkable teacher and practitioner of law-gospel theology and the Crossings Six-Step Method for elucidating it. To the blessing of many, he brought that commitment to his work both in the parishes he served and in the East Central Synod of Wisconsin, ELCA where he oversaw and taught in its Lay School of Theology.

Todd has served the Crossings Community primarily through his gift of writing. In a time of great transition, he masterfully took over and edited the Crossings Newsletter, writing major articles on how the gospel crosses into the lives of real Christians. Todd also contributed by way of his probing intellect. When his brow was furled you could be sure that he was analyzing what was being said with evangelical seriousness. I had not known that Todd had published a book (his dissertation adapted) until I read about it in Jerry Burce's introduction of him in last week's Thursday Theology: *Take and Eat, and Take the Consequences*. I plan to get it.

On behalf of the Crossings Community, I extend our deepest sympathy to all who knew Todd in this life and who now mourn his loss, especially, his wife, Julie, his two children, Nathaniel and Anastasia, and his family, friends, and parishioners. We take comfort in those words of Paul when he says "whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's." Todd is the Lord's. The promise of resurrection is his and our heritage.

Play-By-Play Liturgy, Part One

Colleagues,

This week's guest writer is Pastor Todd Murken of Holden Lutheran Parish in Wautoma, Wisconsin. If you've followed Crossings for a while you'll recognize the name. Todd edited our quarterly newsletter from 1999 to 2004, having been summoned to the task by prior editor Bob Bertram, who was his PhD advisor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. It's been a while since we've heard from Todd. We're delighted indeed that he responded to a recent nudge from Cathy Lessmann in the Crossings office and sent us the item we pass along today.

Google's search engine helped us learn that Todd studied dramatic arts at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. You'll see that background reflected in this present piece, which he wrote for Sunday-morning use in a worshiping congregation. Combining whimsy and seriousness in a nice ear-catching mix, it aims to alert the saints to the evangelical substance in the unfolding action of the liturgy. The assumption is that Christ gets busy when two, three, or more come together in his name. So much the better if the gathered ones notice what he's doing. We'll leave it to you to decide if Todd succeeds in opening eyes. Saying that, we urge you to hold your conclusions until next week when we send you Part Two.

A quick word of explanation for readers outside the U.S.: John Madden and Al Michaels have been top-tier sportscasters in this country for the past few decades, with NFL football as a particular specialty.

I should mention, by the way, that Todd turned his PhD dissertation on Eucharistic theology into a book entitled *Take and Eat, and Take the Consequences*. It was published in 2002 by

the Peter Lang Publishing Group as Volume 220 of their American University Studies, Series 7, Theology and Religion. A quick look at the publisher's [synopsis](#) reveals an obvious connection to the work he presents here. Intrigued? You can get a copy at Amazon.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

PLAY BY PLAY LITURGY

What would John Madden and Al Michaels Say at Lutheran Worship?

Introductory notes:

1. First, I give credit to my worship prof, George Hoyer, for saying there are four actions in worship: Catch (from God), Give (to God), Share (with each other), and go Live in the world. The conceit of changing "Give" to "Pass" was the suggestion of my friend, Packer-fan Pastor George Krempin.
2. At least some adaptation will be necessary, for example if your first reading is not Isaiah 5. Also if your choir anthem, or Musical Offering, comes at some other place.
3. This will not work well without the Lord's Supper—but neither does worship.
4. If I remember correctly, the sermon included in [Part 2 of] the script is about six to seven minutes. Without a children's sermon or the second lesson, and singing hymns that are not longer, this service is no longer than usual, around 65 minutes.
5. Have fun.

PLAY-BY-PLAY LITURGY

What would John Madden and Al Michaels say at Lutheran Worship? (Well before worship begins, say ten minutes, JM and AM take their places—clearly visible to all, yet at the side. They will need to strike a balance between being just obtrusive enough that worshipers will realize that something is up, and yet not so disruptive as to make it impossible for worshipers to concentrate and pray.

At the appointed time for worship to begin, AM introduces them.)

AM This is Al Michaels here with John Madden to bring you this week's worship of Almighty God by the people of Calvary Lutheran Church, Green Bay, Wisconsin. It should be a great worship service, don't you think, John?

JM Should be. I was talking earlier to a couple of the worshipers: one at the acolyte position and two playing usher, and they said they were ready to give it their very best. After all, this is for God.

AM The preacher, too, is excited. He said that he has some really good Gospel for the folks, some Good News. He said that Christ's giving us not just things, even wonderful things like family and health, but giving *Himself* helps us to pray always and not lose heart.

JM I was talking to a couple of other worshipers, a woman whose position is fourth pew and a man playing deep back. They are eager for worship, too. She wants to praise God all she can for what he has done for her. And that man in the back is playing hurt today. It's harder to worship when you're down, but his head is in the game and his heart, too. He says his spirit needs to hear again the great love of Christ, how Christ was willing to die for his salvation.

AM And here we go. The pastor is coming out to begin the

service.

Pr. In the name of the Father and of...

Cong. Amen.

JM See, that right there is called a "Pass" play. God is here actually Passing something to his people through the minister, and the worshipers need to Catch it.

AM It's not just words.

JM No! See, this opening drive of the liturgy is based on the baptism play they have all done. God is here Passing to the people a renewal of all his baptismal promises to them. But here's the thing, see: it is up to the people to Catch it. They have to Catch what God Passes at them. That's why they say Amen. I even noticed a few using that old "sign of the cross" move as a way to Catch what God is Passing. You know, Christians have used the sign of the cross for over 1800 years.

AM The Pass is so important a play that we see it in the liturgy over and over.

Pr. If we say we have no sin...

AM That's another Pass, isn't it John? Through the minister God is throwing the people the promise of forgiveness of their sins.

JM Yeah, and it is probably the most important Catch the people can make. The text he just read is from 1 John, one of my favorite epistles.

AM But John, there is no "Amen," here. How do people Catch this one?

JM By faith. They Catch it by believing what he said: that God will cleanse them from unrighteousness for Jesus' sake.

Pr. Most merciful God,
Cong. We confess that we are in bondage to...
Pr. Almighty God, in his mercy, has given...

AM Another Pass play! Wow, God sure is generous in this liturgy. God just threw them forgiveness. Some of them used the Amen or the cross-sign to signal their Catch. But, John, did they in fact catch it?

JM You know, it's always hard to tell. I mean, sure, they say Amen, but do they mean it? Do they believe? Remember that Catching is believing. Do they believe that God has, right now, for Christ's sake, forgiven them all the sins they have confessed?

AM On the replay you can see some nodding or smiling: they have just made an important grab and they know it!

JM Yeah, but others may be humbly glad—or just plain relieved—and not show it. The Catch happens in the heart.

Opening hymn, “All People that on Earth do Dwell,” is sung.

AM We've seen a lot of Passes but clearly that song was not a Pass play.

JM You're right. That was the second basic play in the liturgy. It is a Give. Giving glory to God. See, the liturgy is a two-way meeting and this time the action goes the other way: the worshipers give to God. The words of that hymn, by the way, are Psalm 100.

AM Now it looks like another Pass coming up. What will the folks need to do to Catch it?

JM Believe! Believe that God's grace, love, and communion are given to them by these words (which, by the way are from 2

Corinthians).

Pr. The grace of our Lord Jesus...

Cong. And also with you.

The Kyrie is prayed.

AM I don't think that could be called a Pass play, John. The worshipers didn't Catch anything. They are pleading with God for help, for badly needed help.

JM Yeah, that's a good point. "Lord, have mercy" is an old plea from the Bible, like the ten lepers or the blind man at Jericho asking Jesus for help. But here's how you know that this play, like all prayers, is a Give play. To both the lepers and the blind man Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well." Get it? To pray the Lord's help is to put trust in him. That's the Giving: the worshipers, by praying, are Giving their faith to God—provided that they actually DO trust God to answer their prayer for help.

Pr. Glory to God in the highest, and peace...

Cong. ...in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

AM The words from "Glory to God" are also biblical: the angels in Luke 2 sing the Christ-child's birth. And this is another Give, right?

JM Sure. But again, it's not just by singing the words. The players need to concentrate on what they are doing, direct their thoughts to God and praise him. Otherwise they aren't doin' the Givin'.

You know, there's a funny history to this. The "Glory to God" and the Kyrie didn't always begin the liturgy; it used to kick off right with the Bible readings. But around 600 A.D. in Rome, it took the bishop so long to put on his elaborate uniform, that

he added the Kyrie and Hymn of Praise for the people to sing while they were waiting.

Pr. The Lord be with you.

Cong. And also with you.

JM That's a third kind of play, a Share. But I'll talk about that later.

Pr. Let us pray...

Cong. Amen.

The congregation sits.

AM You can kind of feel a transition here, can't you John?

JM Yeah, the opening drive is over. There has been a lot of Passin' and Catchin' and Givin'. It's a good setup. It gets the momentum going between and God and the worshipers so they are up for the two main pieces of the liturgy: the Word and the Sacrament.

AM Here comes the lector onto the field. John, Bible reading has always been part of the liturgy, hasn't it?

JM Oh, sure, since way before Jesus, even. See, the synagogue service, like at Jesus' time, had three portions from Scripture: a reading from the first five books of the Bible, called "the Law" or even "Moses," then a psalm was sung, then a reading from one of the prophets. Then there was a sermon interpreting the readings, then prayers. As you can tell, the first Christians, who were Jews, kept the same order of service they were used to, and it is still used today.

First reading: *Isaiah 5:1-7*

JM Whoa! What a blitz! I bet Isaiah's hearers never saw it coming! He sets them up with this complaint about the well-

tended vineyard that produced nasty grapes, then BAM!, he says, YOU are the vineyard!

AM But in the liturgy today, how can the worshipers read such a devastating blitz from God?

JM See, there is a kind of a stunt Christians do to enable them to face a divine blitz like this: they just let it come. We can't defend against God's accusations: he's got us dead to rights. But we believe that his blitz is not his last play: we believe God's last throw to us is forgiveness in Jesus Christ's death. So when the blitz of divine accusation comes, Christians don't scramble away from it, or use excuses to block it, they just let it come and sack them-all the while trusting Christ Jesus to pick them up again. In a way, Christians welcome the blitz: not that it feels good to have our sin pointed out, but it reminds us again to rely on Christ alone, not ourselves, and that is good.

AM Of course it is the preacher's job to help us read a blitz like this.

JM Hey, is that musicians getting ready? This is way too early for the half-time entertainment.

AM No, that is not half-time but part of the liturgy. The musicians are not entertaining the worshipers, the music is to encourage their faith.

JM Oh, I thought it was maybe just entertainment. But it's not.

Musical offering

Cong. (stands) Alleluia! Lord, to whom...

Pr. The holy Gospel according to...

Cong. Glory to you, O Lord.

AM What a tremendous show of respect for this reading!

JM Isn't it great? I mean, they are on their feet! They're cheerin'! These are some of the best fans Christ has! Wow!

AM It sounds like they are talking right TO Jesus.

JM Sure, because he's gonna talk right to them! See, for Christians, hearing Jesus' words isn't like hearing Aristotle or Shakespeare or one of those dead guys. Jesus is alive, so HE is the one talking to them. It's like he himself has just walked in to give them his word for the week. So they stand and sing to him the same words Peter once said to him; from John, my favorite Gospel.

AM So they listen, because they are listening to Jesus Christ through the minister. This of course is another Pass play. So the people have to concentrate to Catch the words in their hearts.

JM Sure, and that standing and singin': that is a Give play.

Pr. reads the Gospel.

Pr. The Gospel of the Lord.

Cong. Praise to you, O Christ.

Cong sits.

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

You can support the ministry of the Crossings Community with a tax-deductable donation via PayPal (click icon below).

So you thought you knew “deacon”?

Colleagues,

This week we send you a second treat from Pr. Richard Gahl, a friend and informal colleague of mine in Cleveland, Ohio. You got the first in January (ThTheol #709). See the introduction there for a brush up on who Dick is and why he’s a person to listen to. Here I merely add that Dick is one of those blessed folks who refused to flip off the brain-switch when he got home from his retirement party. He spends lots of time these days poring through books in his study and following threads of thought that intrigue him. Christian ministry is one of his particular interests. Entrenched positions on that topic in his LCMS branch of the Lutheran venture are one of his banes.

A while ago Dick told me that he’d stumbled across some fresh thinking about ministry in the New Testament, with respect to the diaconate in particular. I asked if he’d write it up so we could share it. He agreed. Here it is. If, like me, you’re well beyond 50 and haven’t thought much about deacons since you wrote that paper on Acts 6 back in seminary, you’ll be surprised. Pleasantly, I trust. I think there’s something strangely delicious in having preconceptions dashed. Read on.

As you do, a bit of explanation for those of you who haven’t studied New Testament Greek. Dick uses standard shorthand references for a couple of the essential tools of the trade. One is “Kittel.” That refers to a monumental ten-big-fat-volume work called Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, a

translation of the German Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament, edited by, yes, Gerhard Kittel. The work consists of long, minutely detailed articles about particular words and their meanings as these evolved over time. The articles were written by a wide assortment of top-notch scholars of the past century.

The other bits of shorthand are “BAGD” and “BDAG.” That’s Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker, followed by Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich. They refer respectively to Editions 2 and 3 of A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament Greek, originally compiled in German by Walter Bauer, then translated and augmented in three successive English editions by American scholars F. Wilbur Gingrich, William F. Arndt, and Frederick W. Danker. Fred Danker was the sole editor and reviser of Edition 3. Hence his advancement in the line-up of initials.

By the way, I just checked. Amazon’s current price for a new copy of Edition 3 is a mere \$145.20; for which, among so much else, you’ll get the latest scoop on what the words diakonos (deacon) and diakonia (what deacons do) really mean. Then again you could just read Dick.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

New Testament scholarship has, for the most part, taken diakonia in its noun and verb forms down the wrong path since the nineteenth century. This is the judgment of John Collins, an Australian professor who has studied at The Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and earned his doctoral thesis at King’s College, London in 1976. His 1990 *DIAKONIA, Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* [1] led to a complete rewriting of the diakon-entries in the 3rd edition of the standard Greek-English

lexicon, published in 2000. A later work, *Deacons and the Church*, 2002 [2], describes the directions of New Testament studies around the diakon- words after 1990. This article will attempt to trace the development of Collins's work and identify some of the significant interpretations his work makes possible.

Translations in recent years have been all over the place with the diakon- words. Deacon, deaconess (for a clearly masculine noun), ministry, waiting on tables, serving: all are frequently used with little evident rhyme or reason. Gordon Lathrop's recent *Four Gospels on Sunday* [3] gives the word-family a clear social ministry flavor, with an emphasis on helping the poor and needy. *God's Word to the Nations* has been the only translation to admit difficulty in bringing "deacon" into understandable English with its six identical footnotes that read, "English equivalent difficult" [4].

Collins traces the wrong path back to the influence of the Lutheran Deaconess movement in the mid-nineteenth century. He credits Wilhelm Loehe with making diakonia "service to the poor" [5]. This track was continued in the 1930's PhD thesis of Wilhelm Brandt who was influenced by the Kaiserwerth community of deaconesses. It became standard thinking through H. W. Beyers' article in Kittel [6]. Collins concludes that "the titles 'deacon' and 'deaconess' were adopted in the nineteenth century on the mistaken understanding that the apostolic diaconate was essentially for works of mercy" [7].

To reinterpret the ancient sources Collins studied some 370 instances of the use of the diakon- family of words from some 90 authors over an 800-year time frame, from 500 BCE to 300 CE. He also identified 20 inscriptions and 30 papyri that made use of the word-family [8]. The results are readily seen in a comparison of the major headings for the verb form of diakon- in the second and third editions of *A Greek-English Lexicon* of the

New Testament.

BAGD – 1979

1. Wait on someone at table
2. Serve – services of any kind
3. Care for, take care of
4. Help, support someone
5. Ecclesiastical office, serve as deacon

BDAG – 2000

1. Function as an intermediary, act as a go-between, agent
2. Perform obligations – include meals
3. Meet an immediate need
4. Carry out official duties, minister in a cultic context
5. Acts 6:2 poses a special problem: care for, take care of with dative of thing.

Collins begins his 2002 book with a thorough examination of Mark 10: 45, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (NRSV). He notes that it is customary to treat the text as a simple contrast between “to be served” and “to serve.” The diakonia word is in both parts of the verse. This leads somewhat naturally to understanding this with table service as the setting. However, Collins insists that the phrase “to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” is epexegetical, that is, the second phrase explains the first. The point then is that Jesus is carrying out his assignment from the Father.

The diakonia of Jesus, as dramatically contextualized by Mark in chapter 10, at the end of the Galilean mission and on the road to Jerusalem, was to serve the One whose voice called to him at his baptism, and the Son of Man would perform this service by carrying out the mission to which the voice had

consecrated him. [9]

In the letters of Paul ten individuals are identified with the term diakonos: Apollos, Ephaphras, Phoebe, Stephanus, Timothy, Tychicus, Mark, Fortunatus, Erastus and Paul himself. In addition, in 2 Corinthians 11 reference is made to servants of Satan. 1 Corinthians 3:5 identifies both Apollos and Paul in the role of diakonos. Divisions within the house churches of that community had led some to place Apollos in a leading role while others did the same with Paul. The diakonos word by its use in Greek culture would suggest “that Paul and Apollos belonged to a god, that they had been entrusted with the god’s message, that they have the duty to pass it on and the right to be heard and believed, and that their rights and duties are equal.” Diakonos thus signals delegation or assignment. Each of the remaining eight deacons should be seen in the same light. It is of interest that Phoebe then is not to be called deaconess, as she is so termed by Beyer. [11] Instead she is the delegate from Cenchraea, their representative to the house churches in Rome. In an introductory note to Deacons, Collins states that while his study does not specifically address gender issues in the book, “the ancient language of ministry, namely diakonia is inclusive. Accordingly, every implication for ministry today that arises from the considerations presented in the following pages is equally applicable to men and women” [12].

Collins characterizes the diakonoi of Satan in 2 Corinthians 11:15 as a parallel that “arises from the notion of delivering a message from an unworldly realm and requires us to read the latter term as a designation of spokesmen” [13].

The cultic use of the diakon- words in Greek literature from the period of study is far from a characterization of menial service. Collins notes the religious character of the usage in

accounts of banquets and festivals [14]. Slaves were never servers at banquets with religious character, rather “young sons of free men would pour the wine” [15]. This customary Greek language use can readily be seen to provide a role for deacons in Eucharistic services in the second and third centuries CE.

Acts and the appointing of seven deacons has traditionally been seen as growing out of the human care needs of the Hellenistic widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. What has long been puzzling is why both Stephen and Philip left behind their assigned food ministry for preaching the gospel. Collins’s solution is to trace the use of diakonia in Acts beginning with 1:17. Here Peter raises the need to fill Judas’ share in this ministry (diakonia). In 1:25 “this diakonia” is a parallel for apostles, i.e. “apostleship.” In 20:24 Paul describes himself as carrying out the diakonia he received from the Lord and reports to James in 21:19 on how he carried out this diakonia to the nations. Collins concludes that the word diakonia is a code word for the special apostolic mission to take the Word of God abroad [16]. Because Acts 6:4 also references diakonia in connection with the word of God, Collins goes on to state:

What does this make of the Seven? It makes of the Seven a new group of preachers, directed at first to the needs of the Hellenists—note how happily the story ends at 6:7: the word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem. [17]

The Greek-speaking widows were overlooked in the daily preaching of the word. Daily the word was proclaimed in the temple in the language of the Jews. But being Greek-speaking they were not able to understand the proclamation. They needed preachers who could teach them in their own language. So the Seven are

selected to preach the word. This was their diakonia, their mission.

Finally, in doing some preparation for preaching on a Sunday when 2 Corinthians 6 was one of the texts for the day, the subject of coworkers drew this writer's attention. See verse 1: "Since we are God's coworkers...." Digging back into chapter 5 one finds Paul writing that "Whoever is a believer in Christ is a new creation.... A new way of living has come into existence. God has done all this. He has restored our relationship with him through Christ, and has given us this ministry of restoring relationships. (vv. 17-18, GWT; emphasis added). By now a reader will likely surmise that the word "ministry" is diakonia . This makes restoring relationships the assignment, or mission, of the people of God.

Endnotes

1. John N. Collins, *Diakonia Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1990.
2. John N. Collins, *Deacons and the Church, Making Connections between Old and New*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, 2002.
3. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Four Gospels on Sunday, The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2012. See pages 46 and 73.
4. *God's Word*, World Publishing, Grand Rapids, 1995. This footnote occurs Romans 16, Ephesians 6, Philippians 1, Colossians 1 & 4, 1 Timothy 3.
5. Collins, 1990. p. 10
6. Collins, 1990. p. 7
7. Collins, 1990. p. 255
8. Collins, 1990. p. 74
9. Collins, 2002. p. 33
10. Collins, 1990. p. 196

11. Herman Beyer, TDNT vol. 2, 1964. p. 93
12. Collins, 2002. Note following p. viii
13. Collins, 1990. p. 202
14. Collins, 1990. p. 156
15. Collins, 1990. p 158
16. Collins, 2002. p. 52
17. Collins, 2002. p. 58

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