

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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