

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. 24 Father, 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*” (1 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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