

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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