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]

<u>Church Unity and the Situation-in-Life of the Johannine
Community</u>

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 know 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.]