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The Lordship of Christ and the Unity of the Church

Jeffrey Kloha

The last stanza of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (*Lutheran Service Book* 357) expresses longing for the unity which only the coming of Christ can bring:

O come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of Peace.

Advent is the time when the church is most aware that it is incomplete; that Christ was present in the flesh at his first advent, and will be in the flesh at his second advent, but his second advent has not yet come. We now live in both aeons: in this world, incomplete, with longing; but also in the eternal kingdom, perfect, with joy. We are, as the apostle writes, those “upon whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11), even if that age has not yet come in fullness. Among the myriad prayers of the church in this present age is the prayer for unity. It is our prayer because it is the prayer of our Lord Jesus. His High Priestly Prayer offered up petitions for us, the church of this day: “also for those who will believe in me through their word” (Jn 17:20). That prayer is “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you” (17:21). Jesus’s prayer for the church and all individuals gathered into it is that we have the same unity as that which exists between the Father and the Son. This relationship is indivisible and one of complete accord. The Father and the Son do the same work (Jn 5:17–19; 10:25), speak the same things (6:45; 8:28), render the same judgment (8:16), are “in” each other (14:10); they are, simply, “one” (10:30; 17:11). This oneness of the Father and the Son is the same oneness that is to exist, in a mysterious yet real way, among those whom he has called. Such intimate oneness among those in Christ is for two purposes. First, Jesus continues, “that they may be in us” (17:21). That is to say, in order for people to be in relationship with the Father and the Son, they must at the same time be in perfect relationship with others. Second, this unity between Father, Son, and church is necessary for faithful witness to the world: “so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (17:21–23). Unity among the members of the body of Christ, the members of the church, is not a small matter. According to this passage, without perfect unity with one another, we can neither be in unity with the Father, nor can we give faithful testimony to the gospel.

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But, as the Advent hymn reminds us, we have “sad divisions” in the body, and so we pray, constantly, that the divisions “cease.” We pray that Jesus would come again, and at his coming he would be “King of Peace” over all people, over all Christians. Even this prayer, however, is too small; it is a post-denomination, post-Reformation prayer. The translation we now use was produced in the mid-nineteenth century. The recognition of “sad divisions” did not exist in the version of the hymn that circulated in the middle ages, which concluded with this stanza, one no longer in our usage:

Veni, Veni, Rex gentium,	O come, O come, Ruler of the nations
Veni, Redemptor omnium,	Come, redeemer of all people
Ut salvas tuos famulos	To save your servants
Peccati sibi conscios.	Who know their sin.

There is no mention of “sad divisions” in the older version, nor is the coming Lord hailed as the “desire of nations.” Rather, the coming Emmanuel is “Ruler of the nations” and “redeemer of all people.” In other words, the hymn confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord (1 Cor 12:3) and acknowledges that we—even we in the church—are still in sin, but we long to be made whole.

This medieval hymn understands, perhaps better than is evident in the recent history of the church, the relationship between the lordship of Christ over all creation and the unity of the church. That is to say, from a biblical perspective, the oneness of the church and its role in the world is inseparable from the fact that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ. “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church” (Col 1:17–18). But we in our day perhaps too easily assume *dis*unity because the church has lived with it for so many centuries. The Nicene Creed’s confession of “one, holy, universal (catholic) and apostolic church” may have become mere lip service, a Platonic ideal that has no significance in the lives of the baptized. New Testament ecclesiology, however, is centered in a relentless drive toward unity (ἑνότης) in one Lord, Jesus Christ (Eph 4:3, 13). There is no aspect of the church’s thinking, teaching, behavior, or relationships that is not grounded in its unity in Christ. All the baptized are united because they are God’s single eschatological people, formed in him by the gospel and waiting for the last day, when all creation is united in Christ. Any discussion of church that does not assume that the goal is the “unity of all” under Christ ignores the fundamental confession of Christ as Lord and the proclamation of his gospel.

We are immersed in a long-standing situation where the church, the body of Christ, is divided. It seems to us normal and acceptable. There seems to be little or no teaching or exhortation toward the unity of the church in any of its manifestations, be it individual, local, or denominational. We have become comfortable with disunity. The gospel goes out, the sacraments are administered, faithful saints live their lives in service to Christ and one another and then rest with all the saints until the last day, and we take it as a given that it is God-pleasing that the church lives in disunity. We seek to justify the divisions that already exist, or to sharpen the lines of who is “in” or “out” of our particular church home, be it tradition, synod, or congregation. The New

Testament, however, does not address our situation at all. For it presumes unity, based on the lordship of Christ and baptism into him.

But it will not always be so. The “now” of the present evil age will become the “not yet” of the day when every tongue confesses Jesus Christ as Lord (Phil 2:11). On that day, the Spirit’s work of building “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:20–21) will be complete. The apostle speaks in the present tense concerning the present-day, ongoing work of the Spirit: “in [Christ] you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph 2:22).¹ But on that day, the Spirit’s work will be complete; there will be one God and one people. The Lord who will reign on the last day is the same Lord who reigns today, and the one church that he will gather on that day is the same church that lives in him today. Our unity is in Christ.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Unity of the Church

“Jesus Christ is Lord” (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11). In this confession, spoken at baptism and repeated in countless daily encounters with the world and its ways, the church begins, is sustained, and carries out its work. The church cannot be understood without or apart from this confession, for it declares that all other lords are now defeated and destroyed. Under one Lord, all other identities and allegiances—nation, family, race, language, social status—are dissolved and a new people, God’s own creation, are brought forth. So there is “one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:4–5).

The only means of entrance into the church is to have been gathered into Christ. This happens by the power of the word in baptism, where the church’s confession of Jesus Christ as Lord becomes the confession of the individual. There is no other means of entrance. The chronic obstacle to this teaching during the time of the NT was circumcision. With strong biblical warrant (Gn 19), some in the church *required* that all men, including Gentiles, be circumcised in order to become part of God’s chosen people, teaching that Jesus could not be confessed as Lord unless one was circumcised. The book of Acts narrates the struggles that the church had in sorting through this issue, especially in chapters 10–15. First, in a vision, the Spirit teaches Peter that the purity laws are no longer the mark of God’s people. In Christ, all foods are clean (12:9–16) and, because “[Jesus Christ] is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead,” now “everyone who *believes in him* receives the forgiveness of sins through his name” (12:42–43). As Peter was preaching this to the household of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit poured out on the “God-fearing” Gentiles, and they were “baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” Not without reason, Luke reports also that after the baptisms, “they asked him [Peter] to remain for some days” (12:48). As soon as the household of Cornelius was gathered into the body of Christ, they shared hospitality with and learned from Peter. That is to say, the newly baptized immediately participated in fellowship with others who were also in Christ. There was unity, because of the word which led to faith and confession of Christ.

The Letter to the Galatians brings the question of the means of unity to the fore: who could be included in the church, and, importantly for our purposes, on what basis? That is, what unites someone to the church? Paul's gospel, that Christ alone was sufficient to bring one into the people of God, to make one an heir of the covenant, a child of Abraham, led him to proclaim the message about Christ even to the Gentiles—and they became part of the ἐκκλησία without undergoing the key mark of the covenant, circumcision. Subsequent teachers followed Paul's departure with the teaching that the Gentiles could only become part of Israel if they were circumcised. According to them, faith in Christ merely made it possible for them to do what God had always required of his people—to undergo circumcision. So faith was not sufficient; indeed, Christ's work was not sufficient (Gal 2:20). Something else was required. Paul calls this teaching “not gospel” (Gal 1:6–9). The first part of Paul's strongly worded counter-argument concludes with what is perhaps an allusion to the words spoken over the Galatians at their baptism:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For whoever of you has been baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male and female, for you are all one [people] in Christ Jesus. So if you belong to Christ, then you are seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:26–29)²

The point of Galatians 3 and this section in particular is that now the Gentiles are part of the single people of God (λαός; cf. 2 Cor 6:16; Ti 2:14) and as such, heirs of the promise. The use of εἰς to express unity is reflected also in Ephesians, where again the issue of the misuse of the law to divide Gentile from Jew has been abolished, “so that he might create in himself one new man (ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον, all masculine singular) in place of the two, so making peace” (Eph 2:15). Consistently in the NT, unity in Christ is assumed, and any human teaching that would threaten that unity is rebuked.

Breaking Unity

The people of God are united by the Spirit-given confession of Jesus as Lord (1 Cor 12:3), incorporated into the body of Christ in baptism (Gal 3:26), and gathered by the Spirit into that body for the common good (1 Cor 12). Within this body, differences of opinion inevitably occurred. This nascent group of newly baptized did not have generations of traditional teaching to build upon. Every day brought questions about how living in Christ while also living in the world should look. A host of examples are provided in 1 Corinthians: Should the body align around popular speakers, as did the crowds in the public square (1 Cor 1–4)? Should the body tolerate destructive sexual relationships, perhaps driven by inheritance and economic concerns, in the name of “Christian freedom” (1 Cor 5)? Should brothers in Christ bring their grievances against one another to be judged by someone who does not confess Jesus as Lord (1 Cor 6)? Should the married refrain from sexual activity? Should they separate from a non-baptized spouse? Should they remarry, or should they stay single (1 Cor 7)? Should they eat in a temple dining room, or buy meat from the local market that may have been sacri-

ficed to an idol, or eat in a non-Christian's home (1 Cor 8–10)? Should wives wear head covering to worship? Should their banquets look like any other Greco-Roman banquet (1 Cor 11)? What is this bizarre thing called “resurrection,” and what difference does it make in the present (1 Cor 15)? Moving outside 1 Corinthians, should Christians eat meat or only vegetables (Rom 14)? In some places the question was whether or not the Gentiles should be allowed into the church (Galatians); in other places, they asked if the Jews should be allowed in (Romans). Should they observe festivals and Sabbaths (Rom 14; Gal 4)? The list is virtually endless; to ears that are accustomed to gospel-focused preaching, it is surprising and perhaps uncomfortable how often of the NT does not focus on “the gospel” (narrowly defined) but on “living in Christ.” The confession of Christ as Lord led to a new way of living in the world.

These encounters with the world, inevitably, caused divisions. “I hear that there are divisions among you when you come together as church” (1 Cor 11:18). “Who are you, who judges the servant of another person . . . One person thinks one day is more important than another, another person thinks all days are the same” (Rom 14:4–5). “I follow Paul! I follow Apollos! I follow Cephas! I follow Christ! Is Christ divided?” (1 Cor 1:13–14). And similar sad divisions continue today. The question that is most pressing in our day is this: What to do about divisions? When is the matter under dispute simply a matter of opinion, of Christian freedom? When does someone's life and teaching need correction by the church? And what is the point at which fellowship has been broken?

The NT writings are very clear in that any teaching which diminishes Christ and his work is “not gospel.” This follows, of course, from the fact that unity is created only because an individual has been baptized into the name of the one Lord. If one confesses a different lord, then that person is no longer a part of his body. Furthermore, those who teach “a different gospel” are to be driven from the gathering of those who are in Christ lest “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (Gal 5:9).

Stated in NT terms, it is not different teaching *per se* that receives condemnation; it is the confession of a different lord, by word or deed, that is condemned. Such teaching cannot by definition be gospel, because the gospel is that Jesus has been sent by the Father, killed and raised from the dead for sinners, and exalted to the right hand of the Father as Lord of all creation. So the teaching that only Jesus's death and resurrection makes it *possible* for the Gentiles to be received as part of the people of God—so long as they get circumcised (Gal 5:2, 11; 6:13)—as was being taught by false teachers in Galatia, is by definition “not gospel” (Gal 1:7). Similarly, in 2 Corinthians the “pseudo-apostles, deceitful workers” are those who “proclaim another Jesus than the one we proclaimed,” offer “a different spirit from the one you received” and “a different gospel from the one you accepted” (2 Cor 11:4). These teachers are linked to Satan, “who disguises himself as an angel of light,” and, for these teachers, “their end will correspond to their deeds” (2 Cor 11:14–15).

Those who have been baptized but reject the faith are therefore cut off, for they are no longer confessing Jesus as Lord and therefore, by definition, are no longer members of his body. This happens either by worshipping as Lord something other than Christ, or by living a life that is not consistent with life in Christ. Examples of the

former are Hymenaeus and Alexander who have “made shipwreck of their faith” by blaspheming, and so are handed over to Satan (1 Tm 1:19–20). The strong warnings against eating in idol temples in 1 Corinthians 10 are prefaced in 1 Corinthians 8 by the confession that there is only “one God” and “one Lord.” So the apostle warns the Corinthians not to “be idolators” (10:7) and to “flee from idolatry” (10:14), for participating in pagan rituals makes them *κοινωνοί* of demons, and not of Christ.

But one can also be cut off from Christ by not living the Spirit-filled life of the baptized. For there are only two categories of people: the righteous and the unrighteous. The unrighteous “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9), and their unrighteous status is demonstrated by their unrighteous behavior: 1 Corinthians 6 lists the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, men who practice homosexuality, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers. The righteous, however are different. They “used to be these things” (*καὶ ταῦτά τινες ἦτε*), but in what may be the purest gospel statement in the New Testament Paul continues, “you were washed, you were made holy, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” Note the reference, consistently, to Jesus Christ as Lord. He reigns, and in his reign the unrighteous are made righteous by baptism into him. However, those who turn aside from the Spirit and reject the righteousness given to them by living unrighteous lives, separate themselves from Christ and his body, the church. An example is seen in 1 Corinthians 5, where there is “sexual immorality *among you* . . . a man has his father’s wife.” Such a man is to be removed from the church: “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.” Again, “Lord” is used twice, emphasizing that Christ is reigning in this people. Anyone who claims to be of him and yet lives in this way must be removed, for it is manifest that they are not “of Christ.” Yet, even in this situation the goal is, as in Matthew 18, the restoration of the sinner; so that, after repentance and forgiveness, “he may be saved on the last day.” Paul next lays out the theological rationale for separation from the body of Christ. The baptized live “in the world,” and must associate with those who are of the world. But the baptized are not to live as the unbaptized live. “I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one” (1 Cor 5:11). Two kinds of people are “judged”: The “outsiders” are judged, not by the church, but by God. The church’s job is to judge those “inside the church.” His stunning, heartbreaking conclusion: “Purge the evil person from among you.” Troublingly, many in the church today do the opposite: vocal opposition to certain evils present in society, yet silence regarding sin inside the body, such as remarriage, same-sex behavior, abortion, greed, enmity, anger, and on and on. Many today, sadly, claim to confess Christ as Lord but refuse to live out that confession in their bodies (1 Cor 6:19–20). In summary, unrighteous individuals are cut off from the body because they have been cut off from Christ. Some because they have rejected him and his gifts of forgiveness and life; some because they have rejected the life given by the Spirit, which is made sadly evident by their unrighteous living. In these cases, the

church is only acknowledging the reality that such a person is no longer in Christ.

As we struggle to live as one body under one Lord in the present age, we continue to ponder the question: What is the basis of unity in the church? The answers are many. Some find it in human-created structures, whether bureaucratic or episcopal. Others find it in social relationships and cultural homogeneity. Others find it in shared language and forms, even worship forms. But the Scriptures find it in Christ, under his Lordship, living in his gospel, and each of us is called to renounce all that we would add or detract from his glory as Lord. The sad divisions may persist until the last day, but each of us, as the old hymn reminds us, knows our sin and longs for the Ruler of the nations and the Redeemer of all people to come and save us, all of us, who have been gathered into his body. The gospel has created unity; may it never be that we break the unity that the Spirit has created by that great confession: Jesus is Lord.

Endnotes

¹ Luther's Small Catechism summarizes the ongoing work of the Spirit: "Even as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

² Some in the church use this passage wrongly to argue that this passage urges "equality" of social status or power. However, the masculine singular adjective εἷς cannot mean "equal" (the Greek word should then have been ἰσότης, not εἷς).