

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE CHURCH TO BE ONE?

My the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.

For the last several weeks we have been worshipping together with Grace Lutheran Church, and exploring our new relationship as part of one united family. Anglicans have explored Church union several times over the years – with the United Church and, of course, with the Roman Catholic Church in a process resulting from the 1968 Lambeth Conference. Up until recently those explorations yielded little fruit. Now, however, we have moved forward, and this process of familiarization with our new brothers and sisters in Christ has led some of you to ask searching questions about just what does it mean to be the Church?

Every Sunday during Mass we confess our belief in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church – the so-called “Four Notes of the Church” – when we recite the Nicene Creed. But just what do we mean when we say those words? We all know that “catholic” means universal, not Roman, and we expect the church to be holy, but who exactly are we one with, and what does it mean to be apostolic? Since the season of Advent is a time of reflection as well as one of joyful anticipation of the coming of our Lord, it is an appropriate time to reflect on these “Four Notes” while the experience with Grace is still fresh in our minds. Today I want to speak about the Unity of the Church. Next week I will address “holiness”, followed by “catholicity” and “apostolicity” on subsequent Sundays.

Christianity is a remarkable phenomenon on the world scene. Even with all of the stories about the decline of the Church it is still the largest of the great world religions. The Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook (1996), shows 1,928 million Christians of a world population of 5,716 million. The next largest is Islam with 1,099 million believers. Of these almost two billion Christians, 968 million are Roman Catholic, 396 million Protestant, 218 million Orthodox, 71 million Anglican, and 276 million were classified as “other”, presumably Pentecostal. In fact, the world is confronted not by one great Church but by an immense and

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE CHURCH TO BE ONE?

bewildering mass of denominations. To make matters more confusing, most of the major denominations, to say nothing of the splinter groups, are out of communion with each other. How then are we “one” church.

Traditionally, our theology tells us that the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church is that community that has existed as one people since the day of the apostles; that hammered out a shared canonical heritage; that designated bishops sworn to uphold its treasures across the generations and that gathers week in and week out to celebrate the resurrection through its Eucharist.

Defined in that manner, a lot of people who believe themselves to be Christian are left out of the “one” church. The United Church and the Presbyterians, for example, do not celebrate the eucharist on a weekly basis; nor, for that matter, did most Anglicans up until about twenty years ago. In our particular case, there is a big question, from a Roman Catholic perspective, about whether or not we have maintained a valid apostolic succession in our holy orders. The Orthodox Church maintains that they, not the Church of Rome, are the true bearers of continuity with the church of the first millennium. In their view, the West broke the collegiality of the church by going its own way; especially in the disastrous addition of the *filioque* clause to the creed. However, there were also significant differences in the first century church. The Jerusalem Church, for example was quite different from the Gentile Church established by the Apostle Paul.

In an ecumenical approach, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, believes that the four marks of the church should be understood with ecumenical breadth, and not with confessional narrowness. To illustrate what they mean, in a report titled, “One God, One Lord, One Spirit”, they state that the creed refers to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as a creation of the Spirit. The church as an institution, they maintain, has no life of its own; but rather, participates in the worldwide creative movement of the Spirit. By their definition, there is but one church in the diversity of local churches. All the baptized are incorporated into a single body called to witness to their one and only saviour. The unity of all Christians shows itself visibly in the fundamental;

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE CHURCH TO BE ONE?

faith and sacramental life. They go on to say that this unity does not imply uniformity, but an organic bond between all the local churches in their valid diversities; such that all the baptized, confessing the same faith, are able to share together in the same sacraments - in particular, the same Eucharist.

This position reflects the fact that the church, as the body of Christ, underscores the intimate organic relationship between the living Lord and all those receiving their hope from him; together with the integral unity of the community of believers constituted in and by him. The church, as a *koiononia* of saints, unites the faithful of every age and all places in a fellowship of prayer, praise and sharing of suffering and joy. As Christ's living body, the church is regarded as being both local and universal, particular and inclusive. The royal priesthood of all the faithful and the diverse ordained ministries, serving God in the body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, reflect the presence of the Trinity in the world.

In essence, the oneness of the Church is the oneness of those who confess Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, and accept the historic creeds. Two points, however, need to be made: First, no denominational church can itself stand as the referent body identified as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Second, we cannot dechristianize communities created by the Holy Spirit in the wake of the division between East and West, the Protestant Reformation, or the extraordinary growth of Pentecostalism. We must reckon with the genuine working of the Holy Spirit wherever we find it; understanding that such working involves not just individual conversions, but also the creation of radically diverse communities.

The ecumenical movement has enabled Christians from all traditions to be more conscious of what they have in common. Today, we are more aware of the inevitability and positive value of plurality, and accept creative disagreement within the one body of Christ. We understand that diversity need not prevent us from working and praying together. Indeed, given that the variety of belief and practice within any one denomination is often as great as that between

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE CHURCH TO BE ONE?

denominations we see the possibility of discerning and accepting a fundamental unity in diversity.

This is not to say that all who worship God are automatically enrolled in the “one church”. The ecumenical movement cannot officially endorse such admirable groups as the Unitarians and the Quakers who explicitly reject central doctrines of the Creed; let alone extreme heterodox movements like the Jehovah’s witnesses or the Mormons.

The unity of the church is not just a visionary ideal, it has ethical and political implications. All Christians are called to embrace the races and classes of the first, second and third worlds in the communion of the worldwide people of God. The question is, whether the Christianity of the Creeds, despite plurality, can still foster and sustain a unified vision of the world and world history.

In our contemporary society, religion is being marginalized by science and technology. Many, if not most, social institutions – education, health, charities – are run on secular lines. And we are becoming accustomed to the idea of ‘morality without religion’. Christianity has ceased to provide a common framework of meaning for all citizens. The decline of “Christendom” has been hastened by the presence of large minorities from other faith traditions – Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish and Buddhist paramount among them.

The loss of a pervasive, all-embracing common framework of shared values and obligations has led to a much more serious breakdown of the sense of right and wrong among large sections of the population. The forms of interpersonal relation, communal life and culture are neither captured, nor explained by the natural, or even the social sciences. In such circumstances it has not proved to be easy to socialize both the under-privileged and the privileged to respect and observe even the basic necessary conditions of social life. It is too easy for individuals to pursue their own ends ruthlessly, without regard for others. This nihilistic trend is evidenced by: increased crime, drug abuse, vandalism, aggressive behaviour, lack of guilt or conscience in those apprehended and casual attitudes to abortion, sex, family commitments, and the care of the mentally sick.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE CHURCH TO BE ONE?

The prevailing liberal consensus of our society inclines towards managerial rather than ethical attitudes towards problems such as deployment of resources in health care and how to deal with misfits, the marginalized and the helpless. In fact, we are faced with a pretty shaky liberal system of values, lacking the means to commend itself through education and socialization to new generations; even with regard to the basic conditions of life together in community. Where ideals of life and private value systems are concerned there is no common language and no rational means of settling moral disputes. In the context of a weakened overall value system in public life, irreconcilable preferences and life-styles in private life, and strong nihilistic tendencies at many points – society is driven back to religion as the possible source of meaning and value for all aspects of our life together.

There is no doubt that the religions, despite the abuses that loom so large in secular consciousness, have provided countless millions with consolation, a sense of meaning and purpose, hope for the future, and spiritual resources to bring good out of evil and new life out of despair. Despite the view in the media there is a great deal of religion, ranging from bizarre to profound, in even the most secularized western nations. Of all religions, the Christian faith is well placed to take modern cosmology and evolutionary theory in its stride. The core doctrines of the Christian creeds speak of ultimate origins, divine revelation, true human nature, the meaning of life and of the whole world process, the spiritual resources for transforming what is wrong with humanity and the final destination of creation and of us all that the sciences cannot even begin to answer

While Christianity may have ceased to provide a common framework of meaning for all citizens, there is still much serious Christian commitment to be found in our society. Practicing Christians may be a minority but serious Christian faith and practice was probably always a 'minority business' even in the so-called 'ages of faith' when Christianity did provide the framework of ideas within which social life was lived.

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The future well-being of our society lies in a fresh Pentecost in the life of the children of God. Christians do have sufficient strength to be heard, and to influence the reformation of a commonly held value system in public life, through ecumenical unity, the communion of the many in their diversity within the one body of Christ; the live communion of all the baptized, representing the visible unity of the churches - the priesthood of all believers.

We are empowered to be salt of the earth, a letter from Christ, the vineyard of the Lord, the bride of Christ, exiles in a foreign land, the Israel of God, the holy temple in which the living God dwells, a remnant, chosen by grace, the slaves of Christ, a light to the world, a royal priesthood, the holy city, the branches of the true vine and the very body of Christ. If the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is the fruit of the working of the Holy Spirit it is in the working of the Holy Spirit that we must orient ourselves today for the collective good of our society.

To start, we just need to act what we profess to believe – that we are one church, one holy and apostolic people, set aside for God's work in the world.

Amen

A Bibliography of Sources and Further Reading

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