

Sermon notes – “Unity” (Ps. 133; Jn. 17)

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I cannot take time to recount all the influences on the sermon, as this is a topic I have had a peculiar interest in for quite some time. Some years ago, John Armstrong's *Reformation and Revival* journal published an article of mine on Christian unity: <http://trinity-pres.net/essays/immodest-proposal-reformed-catholicity-RRJ-revised.pdf>. That paper has a more detailed account of my vision for catholicity. I strongly recommend treatments of the topic by John Frame, Leslie Newbigin, Philip Schaff, John Williamson Nevin, Craig Higgins, Darrell Johnson, and Andrew Sandlin, among others.

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It seems to me that if our ultimate loyalty is where it should be -- to the church catholic -- then our loyalty to a particular denomination will always be limited and relativized. Indeed, if I pledge my allegiance to the catholic church -- as I do every time I say the Nicene Creed -- then, ultimately, I MUST hope that my denomination will eventually die out. And if I ultimately want my denomination to die out so that something catholic can take its place, it seems foolish to invest a great deal in it. Now it may be that investing myself in a particular denomination is a way of investing in the catholic church. But as Frame points out, denominations tend to dissipate effort by duplicating one another's programs. Denominations tend to breed inefficiency. And there's always the danger of serving the denomination in a way that actually might be counter-productive for Christendom as a whole.

I very quickly grow sick of denominational cheerleading. "My denomination is bigger than yours." "My denomination is older than yours." Etc. Who cares, really? The fact is, denominationalism solves nothing because, alas, we all remain connected to one another anyway through one faith, one Lord, one baptism. I know that when we see others in the church doing things we regard as foolish, it is very tempting to be ashamed and to want to distance ourselves from them. And nothing says we have to approve of the sin or stupidity of other Christians. But we do have to avoid any kind of factionalism, as much as it depends upon us. And we have to give our brothers the benefit of the doubt, trying to see things from their perspective, even if they have a different Christian nameplate.

Obviously, denominations aren't going away tomorrow or the next day and so we have to make use of them. But I tend to think we'd all be much better off if we invested ourselves far more heavily in unity and shared ministry at the parish and city levels, rather than thinking exclusively in terms of denominational connections.

Picking a denomination is basically a matter of [a] which brethren do I feel most comfortable promising subjection to?; [b] given my views, where can I best serve to maximize fruitfulness and minimize wasted time over theological spats?; and [c] where has God providentially granted me an opportunity?

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One way to build catholicity is to read from various traditions and to interact with Christians with in other denominations. As the slogan goes, "All of the church belongs to all of the church." We should be willing to learn from Christians in other branches of the church and incorporate their insights into our worldview (even as we share our insights with them).

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One point of controversy is how Protestants should regard the Church of Rome. Obviously, Rome varies as much as Protestantism, and so making a blanket judgment is next to impossible. There are many Roman Catholics who are obviously nominal, and in many places in the world, Catholicism is heavily syncretistic.

However, on the whole, we should render a favorable judgment of Rome. Rome is part of the visible church. Luther, Calvin, Hodge, etc. all agreed. An excellent, balanced treatment is found in Hodge's article on the topic:  
<http://www.hornes.org/theologia/charles-hodge/is-the-church-of-rome-a-part-of-the-visible-church>.

Here are some excerpts (check especially my underlined sections):

"Since the church of Rome," says Turretin, "may be viewed under a twofold aspect, either in reference to the profession of Christianity and of the evangelical truths which she retains, or in reference to her subjection to the pope, and to her corruptions both in matters of faith and morals, we can speak of her in two different ways. under one aspect, we do not deny

she retains some truth; under the other we deny that she is Christian and apostolical, and affirm her to be anti-christian and apostate. In one sense, we admit she may be still called a CHRISTIAN CHURCH. 1st. In reference to the people of God, or the elect, who are called to come out of her even at the time of her destruction, Rev. xviii. 4. 2d. In reference to external form, or certain elements of a dispersed church, the vestiges of which are still conspicuous, as well as regards the word of God and the preaching thereof, which she still retains, although corrupted, as the administration of the sacraments, especially baptism, which as to its substance is there retained in its integrity. 3d. In reference to the evangelical truths, as concerning the Trinity, Christ the mediator, God and man, by which she is distinguished from a congregation of pagans or infidels. But we deny that she can be properly and simply (i.e., without qualification) be called a true church, much less the only and the catholic church, as they would wish to have her called."

In the next paragraph but one, he explains what he means by verity as affirmed of a church, when we say she is vera ecclesia. It includes "verity in faith," or freedom from heresy; purity, or freedom from all superstition and idolatry; liberty in government, freedom from servitude and tyranny; sanctity of morals, as opposed to corruption of manners; and certainty and consolation, or freedom from doubt or diffidence.

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The only point really open to debate is, whether the Romish church as a society professes the true religion. In reference to this point we would remark, 1st. That by true religion in this connection, has ever been understood, and from the nature of the case must be understood, the essential doctrines of the gospel. Men may enlarge or contract their list of such doctrines; but it involves a contradiction to say, that those who hold the essentials of the gospel, do not hold the gospel. This would be saying that the essence of a thing is not the thing itself, but something else. By the essential doctrines of the gospel we mean, and Protestants have been accustomed to mean, those doctrines which, in the language of Hooker, "are necessarily required in every particular Christian man." The question, therefore, as correctly stated by Professor Thornwell, really is, Whether Rome as a society still teaches enough to save the soul? 2. Our second preliminary remark is, that in determining what are the essential doctrines of the gospel, we cannot consent to bow to any other authority than the word of God. We cannot with Romanists and Anglicans, on the one hand, consent to make the judgment of the church the criterion of decision on this subject; nor on the other, can we submit to the judgment of

individuals or sects, some of which would close not the church only, but heaven itself, against all Presbyterians, others against all Calvinists, others against all Arminians, others against all who sing hymns. 3d. A third remark is, that we must distinguish between what is essential to the gospel, and what is essential for a particular individual to believe. The former is fixed, the other is a variable quantity. The gospel in its essential principles is now what it always was and always must be. But what is essential for a man to believe depends upon that man's opportunities of knowledge. A poor Hottentot may get to Heaven though he knows nothing about, or should unintelligently reject many doctrines which it would argue an unsanctified heart in a man nurtured in the bosom of a pure church, even to question. 4. We must interpret language according to the usus loquendi of those who use it, and not according to our own usage. If a man defines justification so as to include sanctification, and says that justification is by works as well as faith, we must understand him accordingly. We may say a man is sanctified by love, hope, and other Christian graces and works; meaning that all these tend to promote his conformity to God; when we could not say, that he is justified, in our sense of the term, by these things.

It is then impossible to give any list of essential doctrines of the gospel, if so doing were to imply that all doctrines not included in such list might be safely rejected by men, no matter what their opportunities for knowledge might be. By essential doctrines we mean, as already stated, those which no man can be saved without believing. We shall not undertake the delicate task of giving a list of such doctrines, but content ourselves with remarking that the Scriptures adopt a twofold mode of statement on the subject. First, they give certain doctrines which, they declare, if any man believes he shall be saved. And secondly, they state certain doctrines which, if a man rejects, he shall be lost. These two modes of statement must be consistent, i.e., they cannot lead logically to contradictory conclusions, even though the Bible arranges under the one head some doctrines which it does not place in the other. One reason why more particulars are found under the latter head than the former, no doubt is, that the rejection of a doctrine implies a knowledge of it. And the rejection of a doctrine when known may be fatal, when the knowledge of it, as a distinct proposition, may not be essential to salvation. These essential doctrines therefore may be learned both from the affirmative and negative statements of the Bible. For example, it is said, whosoever believes in Christ shall be saved; whosoever believes that Jesus is the Son of God is born of God; whosoever believes and confesses that Christ is Lord, does it

by the Holy Ghost; on the other hand, it is fatal to deny God, for he that cometh unto God must believe that he is the rewarder of those that diligently seek him. He who denies the Son, the same hath not the Father; he who denies sin, or that he is a sinner, the truth is not in him; he who rejects the sacrifice of Christ, has only a fearful looking for of judgment; he who seeks justification from the law has fallen from grace, and Christ shall profit him nothing; he who denies the resurrection of Christ, makes our preaching and our faith vain; he who denies holiness, and the obligation of holiness, has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel; so he who says that the resurrection is past already, has made shipwreck of the faith. The denial of these doctrines is said to forfeit salvation; but it does not follow that they must all be clearly known and intelligently received in order to salvation. It is a historical fact, as far as such a fact can be historically known, that men have been saved who knew nothing of the gospel but that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. The Scriptures do not warrant us in fixing the minimum of divine truth by which the Spirit may save the soul. We do know, however, that if any man believes that Jesus is the Son of God, he is born of God; that no true worshipper of Christ ever perishes. Paul sends his Christian salutations to all in every place, theirs and ours, who shall call upon the name of the Lord Jesus, their Lord and ours.

That Romanists as a society profess the true religion, meaning thereby the essential doctrines of the gospel, those doctrines which if truly believed will save the soul, is, as we think, plain. 1. Because they believe the Scriptures to be the word of God. 2. They direct that the Scriptures should be understood and received as they were understood by the Christian Fathers. 3. They receive the three general creeds of the church, the Apostle's, the Nicene, and the Athanasian, or as these are summed up in the creed of Pius V. 4. They believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. In one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried. And the third day rose again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end. And they believe in one catholic apostolic church. They acknowledge one baptism

for the remission of sins, and look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

If this creed were submitted to any intelligent Christian without his knowing whence it came, could he hesitate to say that it was the creed of a Christian church? Could he deny that these are the very terms in which for ages the general faith of Christendom has been expressed? Could he, without renouncing the Bible, say that the sincere belief of these doctrines would not secure eternal life? Can any man take it upon himself in the sight of God, to assert there is not truth enough in the above summary to save the soul? If not, then a society professing that creed professes the true religion in the sense stated above. 5. We argue from the acknowledged fact that God has always had, still has, and is to have a people in that church until its final destruction; just as he had in the midst of corrupt and apostate Israel. We admit that Rome has grievously apostatized from the faith, the order and the worship of the church; that she has introduced a multitude of false doctrines, a corrupt and superstitious and even idolatrous worship, and a most oppressive and cruel government; but since as a society she still retains the profession of saving doctrines, and as in point of fact, by those doctrines men are born unto God and nurtured for heaven, we dare not deny that she is still a part of the visible church. We consider such a denial a direct contradiction of the Bible, and of the facts of God's providence. It was within the limits of the church the great anti-christian power was to arise; it was in the church the man of sin was to exalt himself; and it was over the church he was to exercise his baneful and cruel power.

Hodge also addressed whether or not Roman clergy are ministers of the gospel: [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/charles\\_hodge/do\\_rc\\_clergy\\_count\\_as\\_gospel\\_ministers.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/charles_hodge/do_rc_clergy_count_as_gospel_ministers.htm)

Some excerpts (again, note my underlining):

Do, then, the Romish priests come within this wide definition of ordained ministers? Are they appointed by public authority to teach the Christian religion, and to administer its ordinances? The question is not whether they are good men, or whether they do not assume sacerdotal and other powers to which they have no claim, or whether they are correct in doctrine; but simply whether, in a body professing to hold saving doctrine, they are appointed and recognised as presbyters. If so, then they are ministers within the sense of the received Protestant definition of the

term. [This is the ground on which the Reformed churches defended the validity of the orders received from the Church of Rome. "Talis autem est," says Turretin, "episcoporum et presbyterorum vocatio in ecclesia Romana, quae quoad institutionem Dei bona fuit, sed quoad abusum hominum mala facta est. Unde resecatio errorum et corruptelarum ab hominibus invectarum, non potuit esse vocationis abrogatio, sed correctio et restitutio." --Vol. iii. p. 265.]

We maintain that as the Romish priests are appointed and recognized as presbyters in a community professing to believe the scriptures, the early creeds, and the decisions of the first four general councils, they are ordained ministers in the sense above stated; and consequently baptism administered by them is valid. It has accordingly been received as valid by all Protestant churches from the Reformation to the present day.

Calvin, in his Institutes, (Book IV, chs 15, 16), after saying that baptism does not owe its value to the character of the administrator, adds: "By this consideration, the error of the Donatists is effectually refuted, who made the force and value of the sacrament commensurate with the worth of the minister. Such are our modern Katabaptists, who strenuously deny that we were properly baptized, because we received the rite from impious idolators in the papacy; and they are therefore ferocious for re-baptism. We shall, however, be sufficiently guarded against their nonsense, if we remember we were baptized not in the name of any man, but in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and therefore baptism is not of man, but of God, no matter by whom it was administered."

John Calvin gives a very nuanced assessment of Rome, but here is his bottom line (*Institutes*, 4.2.12): "When we categorically deny papists the title of the church, we do not for this reason impugn the existence of churches among them."

Even after Rome wrongfully excommunicated Luther, he still admitted Rome existed objectively as a true church:

Although the city of Rome is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, nevertheless there remain in it Baptism, the Sacrament, the voice and text of the Gospel, the Sacred Scriptures, the ministries, the name of Christ, and the name of God. Whoever has these, has them; whoever does not have them has no excuse, for the treasure is still there. Therefore the Church of Rome is holy, because it has the holy name of God, the Gospel, Baptism, etc.

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Joel Garver has some interesting things to about catholicity, including Protestant/Roman relations. See his essay on “Catholicity and Authority” here: <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/theo/catholicity.htm>. See his “On the Catholic Question” here: <http://www.joelgarver.com/writ/theo/question.htm>. Joel has an interchange with Roman Catholic theologian David Armstrong here: <http://socrates58.blogspot.com/2004/06/s-joel-garvers-on-catholic-question.html>.

Joel, myself, and some other Presbyterian theologians put together a document entitled “Presbyterians and Presbyterians Together” a few years ago: <http://www.joelgarver.com/ppt/home.html>. I think this document is a good summation of the kind of brotherly charity we ought to extend to one another – though, sadly, such charity often remains lacking in the conservative Presbyterian world.

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John Frame chronicles the sad history of division in the modern Presbyterian and Reformed world in his provocative essay, “Machen’s Warrior Children”: [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/2003Machen.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2003Machen.htm). Frame’s book *Evangelical Reunion* is far and away the best treatment of the problems attending our denominational system. I highly recommend it. Frame’s own ministry as a seminary professor and churchman has been a sterling example of Reformed catholicity at its finest.

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A forthcoming publication, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity* by my friend Brad Littlejohn is a good example of Reformed catholicity. The Mercersburg men (Nevin and Schaff) sought to develop a “Reformed and catholic” project in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America, though it was short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful.

The forward to Littlejohn’s book is written by Peter Leithart and gives a nice summary of why true Protestants are and must be catholics:

For an increasing number of Protestants, the dismemberment of Protestantism is a scandal, an oozing wound in the body of Christ, leaving behind a twisted Christ as painful to behold as the Isenheim altarpiece.

But what is a Protestant to do? The Reformation was itself a rent in the vesture of Christ, so how can Protestants object to the tin-pot Luthers and Machens that faithfully keep up the Reformation tradition of fissure and fragmentation? The problem is sharper for Protestants convinced, as I am, that the Reformation assault on liturgical and soteriological idolatry was necessary in the sixteenth century and remains thoroughly relevant in the twenty-first. Can Protestants be Protestants, and yet also be committed to the unity of the church? Is there such a thing as a catholic Protestantism, a Protestant catholicism?

I teach my theology students to be “because of” theologians rather than “in spite of” theologians. God is immanent not *in spite of* His transcendence, but *because of* His transcendence. The Son became man not *in spite of* His sovereign Lordship, but *because* He is Lord, as the most dramatic expression of His absolute sovereignty. Creation does not contradict God’s nature, but expresses it.

So too with Protestant catholicism: Protestants must learn to be catholic *because* they are Protestants, and vice versa.

To say this is, in part, to make a historical claim. In its origins and at its core, Protestantism is, as Philip Schaff saw and many recent students of the Reformation have confirmed, a thoroughly catholic enterprise. David Yeago sums it up nicely: Luther’s aim was to address idolatry, and he ultimately addressed it in a way that “anchored [him] more deeply than ever before in the traditions of catholic dogma, catholic sacramentalism, and catholic mysticism.”

It is also a theological claim. Protest ought not be aimed at permanently dividing the church. Luther, Calvin, and the rest insisted that the disarray of the late medieval church came from fundamental corruptions of worship and doctrine. Their work divided the church, and that was necessary, but the goal of that division was always reunion in truth and love. Genuine Protestantism seeks to unite the church in Christ alone, as He offers Himself to His people in the Spirit through Word and Sacrament. To be Protestant is to aspire to a purified catholicity.

Especially in American Protestantism, this Protestant body is unrecognizable beneath the cancers of revivalism, rationalism, pietism, individualism and subjectivism. A churchly Protestantism is as alien to American soil as high tea. This historical amnesia is nothing new in American Protestantism, and is evident even in the best of American Protestant theologians.....Charles Hodge, truly a giant of American Presbyterianism, defined the material principle of the Reformation as “our continued protest against the error of a mediating church or priesthood.”

This is, to put it mildly, hard to square with Luther's emphasis on the sacraments, or with Calvin's insistence, following Cyprian, that we "cannot have God as our Father unless we have the church as our mother." Hodge, for all his erudition, could not shake himself loose from his American context and as a result missed a central feature of the Reformation. In this respect, the Mercersburg theologians breathed more of the spirit of the Reformers than their opponents who styled themselves as defenders of the Protestant tradition. Schaff knew that the Reformation was continuous with many trends of medieval Christianity, and Nevin grasped the heart of Calvin's Spiritual sacramental theology.

We need an American Reformation that recovers the original catholic vision of Protestantism, and in pursuing this, American Protestants do well to take a page from early twentieth-century Catholics and embark on a program of *ressourcement*....

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Some helpful thoughts from Augustine:

We entreat you, brothers, as earnestly as we are able, to have charity, not only for one another, but also for those who are outside the Church. Of these some are still pagans, who have not yet made an act of faith in Christ. Others are separated, insofar as they are joined with us in professing faith in Christ, our head, but are yet divided from the unity of his body. My friends, we must grieve over these as over our brothers. Whether they like it or not, they are our brothers; and they will only cease to be so when they no longer say *our Father*.

The prophet refers to some men saying: *When they say to you: You are not our brothers, you are to tell them: You are our brothers*. Consider whom he intended by these words. Were they the pagans? Hardly; for nowhere either in Scripture or in our traditional manner of speaking do we find them called our brothers. Nor could it refer to the Jews, who did not believe in Christ. Read Saint Paul and you will see that when he speaks of "brothers," without any qualification, he refers always to Christians. For example, he says: *Why do you judge your brother or why do you despise your brother?* And again: *You perform iniquity and commit fraud, and this against your brothers*.

Those then who tell us: *You are not our brothers*, are saying that we are

pagans. That is why they want to baptize us again, claiming that we do not have what they can give. Hence their error of denying that we are their brothers. Why then did the prophet tell us: *Say to them: You are our brothers?* It is because we acknowledge in them that which we do not repeat. By not recognizing our baptism, they deny that we are their brothers; on the other hand, when we do not repeat their baptism but acknowledge it to be our own, we are saying to them: *You are our brothers.*

I they say, "Why do you seek us? What do you want of us?" we should reply: *You are our brothers.* They may say, "Leave us alone. We have nothing to do with you." But we have everything to do with you, for we are one in our belief in Christ; and so we should be in one body, under one head.

And so, dear brothers, we entreat you on their behalf, in the name of the very source of our love, by whose milk we are nourished, and whose bread is our strength, in the name of Christ our Lord and his gentle love. For it is time now for us to show them great love and abundant compassion by praying to God for them. May he one day give them a clear mind to repent and to realize that they have nothing whatever to say against the truth; they have nothing now but the sickness of their hatred, and the stronger they think they are, the weaker they become. We entreat you then to pray for them, for they are weak, given to the wisdom of the flesh, to fleshly and carnal things, but yet they are our brothers. They celebrate the same sacraments as we, not indeed with us, but still the same. They respond with the same Amen, not with us, but still the same. And so pour out your hearts for them in prayer to God.

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TPC is in the CREC, a communion of Reformed and evangelical churches. While the CREC has its quirks, like every denomination, a catholic spirit predominates for the most part. The front page of the CREC website includes these words from the moderator:

Our desire is to further the work of God's Kingdom throughout the earth and to see the gospel ministry prosper so that the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ (Rev. 11:15). We work toward the day that every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10, 11).

As the CREC continues to grow, we are humbled by the Lord's kindness and patience with us. By God's grace, we shall continue laboring together with a generous and patient spirit. Our gathering of churches is not intended as a separation from other orthodox believers who confess the name of Christ, but rather as a gathering within that broader church, that we might work together effectively for the reformation of the church and the redemption of the world.

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There is nothing less catholic than taking pride in one's denomination (even a denomination's supposed catholicity). There's a lot of denominational cheerleading that goes on in our various Presbyterian groups.

In our zeal for Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, or ?????, we can easily end up obscuring the catholicity God has given us. To say "I am of \_\_\_\_\_" is to show a party spirit that violates 1 Cor. 1:10ff. We should be "mere Christians." But because the house of Christianity has built up denominational walls (Lewis uses this illustration in *Mere Christianity*) and because we can't just sleep in the hallway, we have to choose a room. So we're in the Presbyterian room. But we still insist it's all one house -- we're living under the same roof in the same household.

I don't think catholicity has much of anything to do with denominational membership per se, though some denominations are certainly more sectarian and others more catholic. I think denominations are more or less invisible to God. Or, to the extent that he sees them, they are temporary, necessary evils in his providence. You cannot judge catholicity merely by denominational affiliation. You have to be *somewhere* -- and so we have a denominational home. But that denominational connection does not give us our primary identity as a church. I cannot see how being in the CREC in itself is any less catholic than being in any other denomination (e.g., one of the Anglican splinter groups). A denomination, by definition, is anti-catholic in its very existence. Or, to put it another way, there is no one denomination that can be identified with the catholic church we confess to acknowledge in the creed. In a denominational era of history, as we live in, one must strive to be catholic *in spite of his* denomination -- though some denominations make catholicity more of a possibility than others.

Catholicity also has nothing to do with the age of the denomination. All of us have the right to trace our faith right to the apostles, indeed back to the old covenant saints. Those who refuse us this right are the most sectarian of all! I kind of chuckle when Anglicans look down on PCA or CREC people because their church goes back to the 1500s. How is that any better, in the grand scheme of things, that going back to the 1970s or 1990s?

So what does it mean to be catholic?

Mostly it's an attitude. It's how you view the church and how you love your fellow Christian. Catholicity is just the new command of John 13 in action. It's all about how we treat one another in our local churches and on other congregations.

But we can still define catholicity a little more objectively.

To be catholic means to recognize all the baptized (minus open apostates) as fellow members of the family God. That's to be contrasted with sectarians, who refuse fellowship to others whom they *should* recognize as Christians.

So: Are there sectarians within the Roman Catholic Church? Yes. But there are also some catholics.

Are there sectarians within the PCA? You bet. I've had dealings with quite a few. But there are many catholic Christians and churches in the PCA as well.

There are no doubt sectarians and catholics within most denominations, including Anglicanism and the CREC.

What makes up catholic? I could make a long list here, but here are a few things:

1. Confessional breadth, meaning an appreciation for the truth as it is confessed in various branches of the church. (See TPC's Book of Confessions in our constitution.)
2. A willingness to embrace into our community and commune with all other baptized Christians. We would recognize and respect the disciplinary and governmental actions of other church bodies, including their baptisms and excommunications.

3. An appreciation for what other traditions within Christendom do well, past and present.
4. A willingness to work with other churches in mission and ministry (as opposed to focusing narrowly on denominational projects).
5. A worship service that represents the mainstream Christian tradition for the last 2000 years, and uses forms and music that come from a wide range of Christian traditions.
6. To be catholic is define yourself positively by the gospel, and not merely against other Christian groups. The “enemy” is the world, not Christians in other denominations.
7. We have the willingness to be self-critical of our own tradition. Many Reformed people simply don't want to be provoked to think and reconsider. They don't want to be challenged by anything in the Bible or in the Reformed tradition that might be different from what they are accustomed to. But this is just domesticating and taming the Bible. We must be willing to test received truths in every generation.
8. Being catholic means refusing to build a church upon distinctive lifestyle choices, such as homeschooling or patriarchal family arrangements. A catholic church will be much more accommodating and flexible (within certain parameters, of course).
9. In my opinion, the ultimate form of catholicity is paedocommunion. I really wonder if paedocommunion might do more than just about any other single thing (other than weekly absolution and communion) to change and mature the culture of a church. If you're willing to commune with such small children, it really opens the door to fellowship with a wide variety of child-like (and even childish) grown-ups. I often think the marginalized (the poor, the intellectually weak, children, the elderly) do not do very well in Reformed churches. If we truly practice catholicity, we should find our churches growing with more diverse peoples.

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Yes, its' true: There are more rednecks than conservative Presbyterians (even though the two groups overlap, at least slightly!). My quip that all of the members of conservative Reformed denominations could fit into Talledega Motor Speedway may be an exaggeration, but not by much. It's important to keep in view how small the Reformed world is compared to the rest of the Christian church. We simply must have an appreciation for what God is doing in other parts of the church in other parts of the world.

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I botched this a bit in the sermon, so here is the full quote from Obama that I cited in the sermon:

And even if we did have only Christians in our midst, if we expelled every non-Christian from the United States of America, whose Christianity would we teach in the schools? Would we go with James Dobson's, or Al Sharpton's? Which passages of Scripture should guide our public policy? Should we go with Leviticus, which suggests slavery is ok and that eating shellfish is abomination? How about Deuteronomy, which suggests stoning your child if he strays from the faith? Or should we just stick to the Sermon on the Mount - a passage that is so radical that it's doubtful that our own Defense Department would survive its application? So before we get carried away, let's read our bibles. Folks haven't been reading their bibles

Our disunity makes it impossible for Christians to have an impact on the culture. We do not speak with a united voice, so the world only hears a cacophony. Even if the world wanted to know, 'What does the church have to say about \_\_\_\_\_?' we could not give an answer. Who speaks for the church? How can the church make her voice heard? Apart from greater institutional and governmental unity, it's impossible.

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Why we can be so mean to each other and yet it feel so right? Blaise Pascal explains: "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." Christians attack and even persecute other Christians with zeal because they believe they are doing the will of God, "taking a stand for the gospel," etc. Time and again in church history, the fiercest opposition

Christians have faced has come from other Christians. We best be careful before we attack another Christian – it is easy to be self-deceived!

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I mentioned in the sermon rejoicing when other churches grow. I really mean that. Let's face it: in our day, far more churches are shrinking and dying rather than growing. We should celebrate the growth of churches that are succeeding in reaching our culture – and we should look very carefully at what they are doing.

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Phillip Schaff, after describing the factious and rivalrous nature of Protestantism:

To the man who has any right idea of the Church, as the communion of saints, this state of affairs must be a source of deep distress. The loss of all his earthly possessions, the death of his dearest friend, however severely felt, would be as nothing to him, compared with the grief he feels for such divisions...of the Church of God, the body of Jesus Christ.

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More on John 17, shaped by Darrel Johnson:

As I said, the key to this passage is understanding the position of the church between and within the Father and Son. Just where we'd expect the Holy Spirit to be, Jesus places the disciples. We are the Father's gift to the Son (17:2, 6, 7, 9) and the Son's returning gift to the Father.

The Son's ultimate aim is the glory of the Father, but that glory is going to be manifested precisely in the unity of his people. Jesus prays we would share in the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son, that we would be one in their oneness. The Father and Son live in, through, around, and toward one another; we are to do the same. They share glory, honor, and love – a common life; we are to do the same. The unity of Father and Son is not just a model or paradigm for oneness; our oneness is an actual sharing in their oneness. We do not just imitate God; we participate in God. The Father and Son live inside one another, each containing and being contained by the other, as the Father gives himself to the Son, and the Son in turn pours himself into the Father. We now share in the

interrelationships, standing between the Father and Son. We are to envelope and be enveloped by one another even as they are.

In John 17:3, Jesus describes eternal life as knowing the Father and the Son as the one he has sent (or knowing the Father BY the Son he has sent). Eternal life is not just unending life. It is God's life – the life God has, the life God is. To know God in the deep biblical sense is to participate in the shared life of Father and Son. This is what eternal life really means.

Jesus wants us to share in God's glory. Glory refers to weightiness, to luminescence, to manifested majesty. It refers to God's essence (e.g., Moses' request in Ex. 34, "show me your glory," is a request for God to reveal himself as he is, in his essential being). Jesus is praying we would come to dwell in God so deeply, and come to know him so fully, that we would share in this glory. But this glory is going to be experienced and revealed only as we live in unity together. Thus, God's glory and the church's unity are two perspectives on the same reality, the highest good in the universe. We are to be united so that God will be glorified; but glory is also a means to our unity (cf. 17:22).

Again, this shows us that the highest Trinitarian theology has the most basic implications; the most mysterious truth is also the most practical.

In 17:21, we see that there is a further end in view. Sharing in the oneness of Father and Son is glorious and a means to glory, but it is also a means to another end. We need to pay attention to the "so that" in this passage. We are to live at one with one another within the oneness of God SO THAT the world may believe the Father sent the Son (cf. 17:23 also). In other words, just as glory and unity are inseparable, so unity and mission are inseparable.

It is very interesting that Jesus brings the world into his prayer at this point. Back in 17:9, Jesus excluded the world from his prayer – a puzzling, even troubling, move in light of texts like John 3:16, where God's love for the world is expressed. Why doesn't Jesus pray for the world? We have to understand that 'world' in John's gospel is a technical term for humanity/human society (especially Israel) organizing itself without God and against God. It's Psalm 2:1-2. It's the Tower of Babel. Jesus cannot pray for the oneness of the world as it presently exists because that would lead to another Babel. Instead, he prays for the world indirectly, by praying for the success of the church's mission to the world.

Thus, his prayer for his disciples is really a prayer for the world too, in the ultimate sense because Jesus plans to reach the world through his disciples, specifically through his disciples as they are united together in the life of the Father and Son.

If we are out of synch with one another, fighting against one another, dividing from one another, we are obscuring the very thing we are supposed to reveal to the world, namely, the love and life and joy and glory of the Father and Son. Their life and love are to be reproduced in our relationships, in our inter-Christian community. Our relationships within the church and between churches are supposed to reproduce (and therefore manifest) the Father/Son relationship, as we give ourselves to one another in holy love and joy. As we live as the united people of God, standing between the Father and Son, the world comes to know that the Father sent the Son and that the Father loves us with the same love he has for his Son....and when that happens, the world ceases to be "world" and becomes "church" and the mission of Jesus and the disciples is fulfilled.

The unity of Jesus' disciples reveals the glory and love and unity of the Triune God....which means our disunity reveals lies about the God whose name we bear. We are called to show the world something that is NOT world, something different, a different way of living and loving and relating. When we live as God lives, sharing in his life, the world has to sit up and take notice. The world is forced to conclude that our word is true: the Father really did send his Son to be the Savior of the world. But our disunity botches all this up. The world cannot conclude much of anything from a disunited church. If we do not dwell in one another, the world will not come to believe that we dwell in the Son and that the Son dwells in the Father.

In John 17, as in John 13, Jesus essentially gives the world the right to judge Him on the basis of his disciples. This is both scary and astonishing. Jesus says the world is meant to look at us and see us loving one another in an inexplicable and "otherworldly" way. As they witness our unity, they will be drawn out of the world into that unity found in the church. As they witness us "doing life" together, sharing love and honor as we live in their midst (remember, Jesus says in Jn. 17 he is NOT taking us out of the world but sending us into the world!), we point the world to gospel and the mission of the Son as the one sent by the Father.

All said, then, our unity is the key to revealing Jesus' identity and mission to the world. He has staked his reputation and the success of his mission to our ability

to love another and get along together. Our unity is the key to changing the world. We stand within the Trinity, outside the world; the love of God is our lever; in this way we can move the world where we wish it to go.

For more, see also Peter Leithart's article "Making Room," available here: <http://www.credenda.org/pdf/20-3.pdf>.

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R. J. Rushdoony on catholicity:

When we are Christians, to the extent to any degree we are faithful to the gospel, we are bigger than ourselves. And that is why whether they are Arminian, Roman Catholic, or Calvinist, people who are truly serving the Lord are bigger than their own thinking, bigger than their own faith. We transcend ourselves. And that is the glory of the gospel. It enables us to do more than we can do. It is the grace of God working through us. It is not that we teach different gospels; we are trying to teach the same gospel even though at times our emphasis will be a warped one, a limited one, a partial one. All the same, God can use it.

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Craig Higgins has a fine article on "Reformed catholicity" in this collection: <http://touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=13-01-021-o>

This is one of the more amazing paragraphs in Higgins work:

One last comment: In *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II has invited all the churches to discuss how the Petrine office should function in a reunited Church, and Reformed churchmen should welcome this conversation. Our idea of concentric circles of conciliar accountability would lead us to teach that, if the Church were visibly united around the world, there would need to be an ecumenical council, meeting as necessary to govern and guide the Church. The above argument for a (reformed) episcopacy would also lead us to teach that such a council would need a "presiding bishop," serving as *primus inter pares* among his brothers, and historically such a position of honor has fallen to the bishop of Rome. How would we envision a Reformed(!) Petrine office? 23 First, as argued above, any such primacy would need to be exercised in a conciliar fashion; the universal

episcopate must be seen first as a pastoral, rather than a juridical, office. The idea that the pope has an authority that exceeds even that of an ecumenical council must be rejected. Second, we must humbly but firmly insist that the dogma of papal infallibility is not only foreign to the holy Scriptures but also is not a *catholic* doctrine at all, but a sectarian one. The dogma of papal infallibility is a serious obstacle to true ecumenism, and another example of where the unity we seek awaits further reformation.

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Scott Sherman tells the story of trying to plant a church in Greenwich Village:

When I was church planting in Greenwich Village, in conversation after conversation with non-Christians I encountered lists of reasons why they rejected or struggled with Christianity. At or near the top of most of those lists was the scandal of divided Christians. At first, I defended us with Bible verses about truth and detailed discussions of Church history. That never worked, even once. At some point during that time I began reading Newbigin, and re-reading my New Testament in light of what he was saying. Instead of defending, I started repenting and admitting to my non-Christian friends that they were right about us. This is scandalous and we are hypocritical. But I pointed out that it was the gospel that enables Christians to face the failure of our love for one another. When my love fails, there is still a love that never fails. People began to listen and were attracted (and surprised) by the humility. Apologetics by apology! I began to realize something then about the mess: it never helps to deny that it is there, or make excuses for it. But when we humble ourselves and acknowledge our failure, we come back to our most fundamental calling as the Church: to confess that we are sinners in need of the Savior, which is the mystery the world longs to see revealed.

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One way to think of unity is with a series of concentric circles. The centermost circle contains the non-negotiables of the Christian faith – Apostles and Nicene Creed type stuff. The next circle contains our Reformed/Presbyterian confessional convictions. The outermost circle is where we put other matters which quite often belong in the realm of “opinion” rather than “conviction” (e.g., various “Christian lifestyle” matters). In the centermost circle agreement is required; in the outermost circle we can afford to be very flexible.

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Newbigin's *Household of God* deserves special mention as vital work of ecclesiology. Written in the early 1950s, it is still timely and helpful. Newbigin especially stresses the importance of the unity as it relates to mission and salvation throughout the book. It is must-reading for anyone wondering how the church can ever be united and what role we could possibly play in that reunion.

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C.S. Lewis, from Introduction to Athanasius' *On The Incarnation*:

We are all rightly distressed, and ashamed also, at the divisions of Christendom. But those who have always lived within the Christian fold may be too easily dispirited by them. They are bad, but such people do not know what it looks like from without. Seen from there, what is left intact despite all divisions, still appears (as it truly is) an immensely formidable unity. I know, for I saw it; and well our enemies know it. That unity any of us can find by going out of his own age. It is not enough, but it is more than you had thought till then. Once you are well soaked in it, if you then venture to speak, you will have an amusing experience. You will be thought a Papist when you are actually reproducing Bunyan, a Pantheist when you are quoting Aquinas, and so forth. For you have now got on to the great level viaduct which crosses the ages and which looks so high from the valleys, so low from the mountains, so narrow compared with the swamps, and so broad compared with the sheep-tracks.

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John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, i, 14:

They exclaim that it is impossible to tolerate the vice which everywhere stalks abroad like a pestilence. What if the apostle's sentiment applies here also? Among the Corinthians it was not a few that erred, but almost the whole body had become tainted; there was not one species of sin merely, but a multitude, and those not trivial errors, but some of them execrable crimes. There was not only corruption in manners, but also in doctrine. What course was taken by the holy apostle, in other words, by the organ

of the heavenly Spirit, by whose testimony the Church stands and falls? Does he seek separation from them? Does he discard them from the kingdom of Christ? Does he strike them with the thunder of a final anathema? He not only does none of these things, but he acknowledges and heralds them as a Church of Christ, and a society of saints. If the Church remains among the Corinthians, where envyings, divisions, and contentions rage; where quarrels, lawsuits, and avarice prevail; where a crime, which even the Gentiles would execrate, is openly approved; where the name of Paul, whom they ought to have honoured as a father, is petulantly assailed; where some hold the resurrection of the dead in derision, though with it the whole gospel must fall; where the gifts of God are made subservient to ambition, not to charity; where many things are done neither decently nor in order: If there the Church still remains, simply because the ministration of word and sacrament is not rejected, who will presume to deny the title of church to those to whom a tenth part of these crimes cannot be imputed? How, I ask, would those who act so morosely against present churches have acted to the Galatians, who had done all but abandon the gospel (Gal. 1:6), and yet among them the same apostle found churches?

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John Frame has written a very fine article on Reformed catholicity, in response to Jeremy Jones' presentation at PCA's denominational renewal conference ([http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/2008Jones.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2008Jones.htm)):

1. We need to give more attention to the biblical doctrine of the unity of the church, both spiritual and governmental. In the interest of Reformed Catholicism, we need to see the present denominational differences in the church as an aberration, an anomaly. New Testament church government makes no provision for denominations. When factional spirit begins to emerge in the early church, the New Testament identifies it as sin and describes it as worldly wisdom (1 Cor. 1:10-31, 3:1-4). The birth of new denominations is always the result of sin, either by those who leave, or those who stay, or (more likely) both. So why do we glorify our separateness from other Christians? We should be mourning it instead and seeking to reverse it.

But this will mean that we will have to look at other traditions far more positively, acknowledging and celebrating what is good in them, rather

than always trying to tear them down. We must reject the pride that seeks always to make our own group look better than the others.

2. We need a clearer understanding of what theology is. Many, I think, regard theology as discovering something within the Bible, sometimes called a “system.” On this view, the challenge of theology is to see who can reproduce this system in the fullest detail. In our circles, many assume that Calvin and the Westminster Standards did it best; they got the system right. So our theology must be a reproduction of theirs. This concept of theology encourages, I think, the “golden age” view of things and the necessity of holding rigidly and in detail to past models.

Let me suggest instead that the work of theology is the work of *application*. It takes the Scriptures and *uses* them to answer our present questions and to meet present needs. This is Paul’s concept of *doctrine*: teaching that is *sound* (health-giving) (1 Tim. 1:10, 6:3, 2 Tim. 4:3, Tit. 1:9, 2:1). Thus, as Jones says, its focus is upon the present and future, not only the past. And so theology is bound to the mission of the church.

3. The PCA is a “confessional church,” as we are often told. We should, however, forthrightly ask the question whether this is a good thing. If it is, what role should a 350 year old confession have in a contemporary church? Is it plausible to suggest that we should treat the confession in effect as an infallible presentation of biblical doctrine? How then can we do justice to the immense amount of quality biblical scholarship and theological reflection that has taken place since that time? Does confessionalism itself lead to sectarianism? If not, how can a confessional church guard against sectarians who appeal to the confession as a “golden age” document? On these matters I am, for now, content to ask questions, rather than presuming to provide answers.

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I wonder if we are entering in an era in which we should describe ourselves as being “post-reformed.” What it means to be Reformed has become so clouded by our divisions and disunity that it may be time to move beyond the Reformation. This is not to say the Reformation project is over (as some have said); indeed, there is still plenty to protest and reform. But it is to say that churches in the Reformation stream have veered so far off course, it is time for serious change and renewal.

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Andrew Walls:

The Ephesian metaphors of the temple and of the body show each of the culture-specific segments as necessary to the body but as incomplete in itself. Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ's completion as we have seen, comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the lifeways of all the world's cultures and subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.

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Hans Urs von Balthasar quoting Karl Barth

(<http://www.ratzingerfanclub.com/Balthasar/vonbunity.html>):

The plurality of churches...should not be interpreted as something willed by God, as a normal unfolding of the wealth of grace given to mankind in Jesus Christ [nor as] a necessary trait of the visible, empirical Church, in contrast to the invisible, ideal, essential Church. Such a distinction is entirely foreign to the New Testament because, in this regard also, the Church of Jesus Christ is one. She is invisible in terms of the grace of the Word of God and of the Holy Spirit,...but visible in signs in the multitude of those who profess their adherence to her; she is visible as a community and in her community ministry, visible in her service of the word and sacrament.... It is impossible to escape from the visible Church to the invisible.

If ecumenical endeavor is pursued along the lines of such a distinction, however fine the words may sound, it is philosophy of history and philosophy of society - it is not theology. People who do this are producing their own ideas in order to get rid of the question of the Church's unity, instead of facing the question posed by Christ.... If we listen to Christ, we do not exist above the differences that divide the Church: we exist in them.... In fact, we should not attempt to explain the plurality of churches at all. We should treat it as we treat our sins and those of others.... We should understand the plurality as a mark of our guilt. (K. Barth, *Die Kirche und die Kirchen*. Theol., 9-10).

For more about Balthasar, see Garver's helpful pages.

Samuel Craig, founder of Presbyterian and Reformed publishing, wrote in 1930:

...there will be the full recognition of the fact that what they [that is, Calvinists] hold in common with other evangelical Christians is much more important than what they hold in distinction from them. In fact while they will be as unflinchingly opposed to Rome as were their fathers they will not be blind to the fact that as the lines are drawn today - theism over against atheism; Christ the God-man over against the man Jesus; the cross as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice over against the cross as a symbol of self sacrifice; salvation as a divine gift over against salvation as a human achievement; the Bible as the revealed Word of God over against the Bible as a purely human product; the moral law as a divinely imposed rule of life over against the moral law as an everchanging resultant of human insight and experience - Rome, at the points at which the battle rages most fiercely today, is our ally rather than our opponent.

John Williamson Nevin, giving a mid-19th century critique the "sect system" of American Christianity, in which church groups split off from one another endlessly, ostensibly for "the glory of God":

Altogether we have some ten or twelve bodies in this country, (possibly more,) conscience split for the glory of God, who stand unitedly, while severally excluding one another... Can there be any meaning or reason in such a phenomenon? Has historical theology any real interest whatever in questions that lie between Old Covenanters, New Covenanters, Associate Seceders, Associate Reformed Seceders, and Reformed Associate Reformed Seceders, clear out to the tip end of orthodoxy in the last wee Presbytery of Pennsylvania? To ask the question, is to provoke a smile. Who understands this field of Church History? Who cares to thrust himself into its briery waste? Do these sects understand themselves? Is there, in truth, anything in them to be understood; or that is likely to weigh a feather hereafter, under any separate view, in the mind of God's universal Church? Alas, for the unreason of our reigning sect system!

A.T.B. McGowan:

Although the Reformation took place in the sixteenth century, it is important to understand that this was the beginning of something and not

the end. The Reformed churches affirmed the need to be *semper reformanda* (always reforming). Unfortunately, this commitment to continuing reformation has not been faithfully and consistently maintained over the centuries. At the one end of the theological spectrum, some have invoked *semper reformanda* in order to justify abandoning the core of Reformation theology and departing from received orthodoxy. At the other end of the spectrum, some have forgotten about *semper reformanda* in their progress toward a rigid confessionalism, giving the impression that the final codification of truth has already taken place and that there is no need for further reformation. Between these two extremes, there is a vital task to be performed by the church in every generation namely to subject its beliefs and practices to renewed scrutiny of Holy Scripture. In doing so, the church must restate the truth of Scripture in ways that faithfully communicate the gospel, advance the mission of the church and address the issues that men, women and children are facing day by day as they seek to follow Christ and witness to him.

N. T. Wright on the spread of the early church:

Christianity did not spread by magic. It is sometimes suggested that the world was, so to speak, ready for Christianity: Stoicism was too lofty and dry, popular paganism metaphysically incredible and morally bankrupt, mystery-religions dark and forbidding, Judaism law-bound and introverted, and Christianity burst on the scene as the great answer to the questions everyone was asking. There is a grain of truth in this picture, but it hardly does justice to historical reality. Christianity summoned proud pagans to face torture and death out of loyalty to a Jewish villager who had been executed by Rome. Christianity advocated a love which cut across racial boundaries. It sternly forbade sexual immorality, the exposure of children, and a great many other things which the pagan world took for granted. Choosing to become a Christian was not an easy or natural thing for the average pagan. A Jew who converted might well be regarded as a national traitor. Even slaves, who might be supposed to have less to lose than others, and hence to appreciate an elevation of status through conversion, might face a cost: as we saw, Pliny thought it normal to interrogate, with torture, slave-girls who happened to be part of the early Christian movement. We have no reason to suppose that interrogation under torture was any easier for a young woman in the second century than it is in the twentieth.

Why then did early Christianity spread? Because early Christians believed that what they had found to be true was true for the whole world. The impetus to mission sprang from the very heart of early Christian conviction. If we know anything about early Christian praxis, at a non- or sub-literary level, it is that the early Christians engaged in mission, both to Jews and Gentiles....This missionary activity was not an addendum to a faith that was basically 'about' something else (e.g. a new existential self-awareness). Christianity was never more *itself* than in the launching of the world mission.

John H. Armstrong:

Presbyterian and Reformed people often seem bent on using their marvelous insights into Scripture and Christian tradition in ways that do not provoke others to love, but rather to controversy. Some of this is, sadly, necessary. We are told to 'earnestly contend for the faith' as ministers of the Word of God. But the mission of Christ, in this increasingly dark time in Western history, can ill afford the continued border wars that keep promoting new schisms about boundary issues that should not be allowed to divide us further.

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T. Plantinga, providing a Dutch Reformed perspective on what it means to be "ecumenical"/"catholic"

(<http://www.spindleworks.com/library/schilder/ecumine.htm>):

As you know, the speech I am about to deliver is entitled "Your Ecumenical Task." In this title you have a strange word - ecumenical. Don't blame me if you think it is too learned: the topic has been given to your servant in those very words.

However, you should not let the word "ecumenical" frighten you. All of you speak "ecumenical language" every Sunday, when you confess with the church of all places: I believe a holy, catholic, Christian church. And "catholic" has the same meaning as "ecumenical." The "ecumene" means "the entire inhabited world"; therefore "ecumenical" means "pertaining to the entire cultural world" or "concerning the entire human race." In your Book of Praise you can find an ecumenical heirloom, the Nicene Creed, which dates back to the so-called First Ecumenical Council of 325. There the Arians were condemned, and also the Cathari (or Novatians), who, so

it says, could not join the ecumenical church if they did not agree with the dogmas - that's what it says - of the universal and catholic church.

Stipulations were also made concerning the so-called baptism of heretics. All of this sounds rather strict, and dogmatic, and precise. Well, it is indeed strict, and dogmatic, and precise, because it is the church that is speaking here, and she is standing on guard for the benefit of the whole world. For exactly that orthodox Church has the oldest papers of the ecumenical movement; she is like a lioness as she fights her attackers on the ecumenical hunting ground.

The church that is strict and orthodox and takes a firm stand against heresy has never been a sect. She has understood from the beginning that God's truth has been set as the norm for the whole world; and that therefore everyone who wants to render a service to the "ecumene, the wide, wide world, must preach the truth only according to the command of Christ; and that the first service, the first ecumenical security service that can be rendered to the world is to fight against heresies such as the one propounded by Arius, and to call them by their name. Using an image from Isaiah: if the church dogs, i.e. the watchdogs of the Good Ecumenical Shepherd Jesus Christ, bark loudly against the wolves, they are performing their ecumenical service, fulfilling their ecumenical task. Whoever readmits or flirts with a heresy that has been condemned by the ecumenical church at any one time removes himself from the first and oldest ecumenical movement, willed by God.

This movement has, in fact, been underway since the moment God spoke to His first created people as His covenant partners: go, dwell on the earth, as My "watchers" over this My ecumenical heritage, and cultivate her to My honor. When Adam put the first spade into the ground, he performed an ecumenical service. When he, as head of the family and as "church father," gave his "woman" the divine covenant law as the fundamental law for all times and places, that was the first "ecumenical message." When Eve bore her first son, that was the first move of the "ecumenical movement." When they sinned, that was the first "ecumenical misdeed." When God gave the mother promise, that was the first "ecumenical restoration."

When Cain killed his brother, in the first church persecution, that was the first thrust toward a contra-ecumenical organization, the first sectarian deed, the principal deviation from ecumenical paths. Cain was the first sectarian, and exactly as a sectarian, he eventually gathered the most votes and had the largest number of followers. Then that great fool thought he was ecumenically minded and worked ecumenically (he was as dumb as

sin can make a man); he thought that in order to be able to work ecumenically, you had to have the greatest number. But God said no: to be active ecumenically in the ecumenical apostolate means to fulfill the mission mandate, the mandate which makes you take the Word of God, received in a certain place, out to the whole world, saying: "I have now passed on to you what I have received from the Lord."

In his conversion, Adam remained faithful to that oldest and legitimate ecumenical movement, and Abel and Seth followed him in this respect - but Cain chose the sect. He separated himself. As forerunner of the antichrist, he wanted to win the entire world for his revolution against the truth "received" from God. And he thought that numbers will determine who wins the battle. But God says: the ecumenical movement started from Me, and it will also be brought to a proper end by Me. Therefore, the question "Who is serving the ecumenical apostolate?" can only be answered well if it is preceded by the question "Who keeps the 'received' Word of God unchanged and goes out to the wide world with it?" The oldest, the original, the "genuine" ecumenical movement is not winning the world numbers for your deviating message, but winning as many people as possible for God's judgment-laden, directive message. Heresy is always a denial of the ecumenical apostolate. To become an ally of hers is to disturb the original ecumenical movement, thrust forth from the old paradise. The flood was an ecumenical judgment, albeit to preserve the ecumenical church, and the ecumenical apostolate. The sectarians as well as the isolationists were drowned, but the church was preserved. The way of the ecumenical movement of the apostolate invariably goes through the ark. And if therefore our form for baptism - in the prayer - speaks about that flood, then I dare say: your baptism, which found its prototype in the flood, meant that your foot was placed on the ecumenical path. Therefore, whoever says: "Baptize all who are brought into the baptismal house, even if they take their stand over against the ecumenical divine message," may win large numbers (for a while, at least ... ), but he only opposes the ecumenical apostolate. He opposes the church, which has wanted to be ecumenical all through her life, and supports the sect, the schism.

Sin always produces the separation of Cain; the separatists are usually in the majority, while those who stand for the right ecumenism are usually in the minority. Your own confession says as much when it states: this Holy Church, i.e. the ecumenical community, sometimes appears very

small for a while, and in the eyes of men to be reduced to nothing. And then it points to Ahab's "wicked era." Ahab was king of Israel; therefore his task was to preserve the church in its purity. He was supposed to see to it that Israel's course was not altered, so that the pure water of God's word of grace and of the messianic blessing could, one day, at Pentecost, flow into the "ecumene," that wide world life.

If Ahab had preserved Israel's life purely, he would have worked with Elijah, that great ecumenical figure. Preservation of the Church is the first social deed, the primary ecumenical act. But Ahab married a Tyrenian princess, Jezebel, who was up to her neck in synthesis, and in world trade and world politics, and in the ecumenical largest-common-denominator-religion, that message of-and-to-and-for-oneself. So Jezebel played the role of ecumenical figure in apostolic robes and cap, upon which, in the Esperanto of those days, were embroidered the initials S.o.N. (Shepherdess of Nations).

But Elijah knew that the S.o.N. the Shepherd of Nations, the Pastor Ecumenicus, was Christ, the Messiah according to the promise. Therefore, he turned Mt. Carmel into an Ecumenical Union Square. Carmel. became the Place de la Concorde of his Reformation: he banned the syncretists. That's why the Revelation of John mentions both Jezebel and Elijah. There Jezebel is banned by the Shepherd of Nations, and the power, the authority of Elijah is given to the two witnesses in Chapter 11. They are prophesying on the Place de la Concorde of the Revolution: the wide streets of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt and which is built where Christ's cross once stood. So she is also called Jerusalem, but then the Jerusalem, relieved of the ecumenical mandate since Pentecost, forsaken of God. On this Place de la Concorde, the witnesses read the Formula of the True Concord - the Biblical testimony. Unadulterated. And they have made their witness in the orthodox way (Revelation 11:7 states: they have "finished" their testimony). Over against that forsaken Jerusalem, on the last page of Scripture stands the accepted, the fulfilled, the Eternal Ecumenical Jerusalem - the City of the Great King, built square, with its gates are open to all sides.

Of course, you understand that much more can be said about this subject. But this small amount is enough to remind you that our Pentecost is the Ecumenical Feast of the church - and thus the obligatory Ecumenical Feast of the World. Whoever does not let himself be gathered to the true church at Pentecost, which, according to Acts 2, can be quite easily distinguished from the false church, and who thus takes something away from the Gospel- according-to-the- Scriptures as it is inseparable from Christ as

God's Son and our Guarantor, has forfeited the right to speak of and for the ecumenical apostolate. Even if he shouts until he is hoarse for the Ecumenical Message and for the Ecumenical Movement and for the Ecumenical Apostolate, it won't make any difference. The "messages" must be true to the Message; and if they are not, the ecumenical dawn will not appear. The ecumenical feasts of God are the feasts of His "extremists" and thus of His "extremists." There are other extremists too. But whoever finds "extremists" an abusive term suited only for sectarians has thereby sent the ecumenical apostolate down a dead end street. That dead end is exactly where the devil wants us: he wants the Place de la Concorde reserved for the heralds of the revolution, not for the heralds of God's Reformation in Revelation 11.

No wonder the Bible is full of the ecumenical proclamation of the Great Ecumenical Drama. "Ecumenical" is not a new term but a very old one. The Jews had already transcribed the Greek word "oikoumene" into Hebrew letters in the rabbinical scriptures and left it untranslated. Luke starts the Christmas message with the ecumene: Caesar Augustus wants the ecumene registered for the Roman Empire (the Beast of Daniel, and of Revelation). But from a stable in Bethlehem, the Great Son of David began at that very moment to "register" the ecumene for Himself, and for the God of David.

Ecumene is then the inhabited world, viewed as the operative area of world politics. The Beast grasps at the latter - but the Spirit has been ahead of him for centuries, when He had David anointed as king of the birthplace of theocracy, i.e. as king of Israel's ecumenically directed community, keeping the ecumenical seas of the world pure. Jesse's living room, where David was anointed, and the stable of Bethlehem, the starting point for the world rule of the Son of David, are the stages of God's Ecumenical Movement, a movement as old as the world ruled by God's Covenant. Emperor Nero, who in the Revelation of John is an image of the ecumenical anti-christ, is called Ecumenical Daemon in Greek emperor's titles, just as Emperor Claudius is called Ecumenical Benefactor, or Savior.

"Ecumenical" has here become a matter of world politics and world culture. Therefore Scripture commands that there be ecumenical preaching (Matthew 24:14). Over against the Satanic temptation of ecumenical world power, Christ places the "It is written" He wants to become the Ecumenical Savior-Judge only through obedience (Luke 4:5). Christ predicts an ecumenical temptation in the last days (Revelation 3:10), and also catastrophe (Luke 21:26); and thus the prophet Agabus

predicts an ecumenical famine (Acts 11:28). In this regard he is an ally of John on Patmos who, at the opening of the third seal, sees the black horse of famine dash across the world (Revelation 8:5-6). All this is the beginning of the ecumenical judgment (Acts 17:31).

In short, the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, speaks continually about the one great ecumenical Drama. On the one side is the ecumenical preaching (Romans 10:18; see also Psalm 19:4); on the other side is the ecumenical error, the ecumenical temptation under the leadership of the Antichrist, God's great adversary, with his "catholic," i.e. universal, propaganda service, with his ecumenical contra-speech against the Speech of God and against all His Sayings.

Today, many people want to argue away the "antithesis." With their principial denial of a principial antithesis, they try to force a "breakthrough" between the existing parties. [\(1\)](#) Several years ago Adolf Hitler with his "paranymphs" did just that. Rosenberg was his prophet. Many proselytes will always be found for this breakthrough theory, in whatever form it appears. But when the separate-from-the-antithesis movement, with the help of this theory, has gathered the crowds of dissidents against the antithesis-positing- gospel, then the Antichrist will take up the antithesis-preaching again. He will refer back to Genesis 3:15, but only to set over against it his word, his "contra- gospel." The text is old: I shall put enmity between the serpent and the seed of the Church-woman. But the explanation is new. For the serpent, even in the days of early Christianity, was the symbol of paganism, e.g. in Pergamus, with its Asclepius-worship. Asclepius was the god of Light and Life. The Christians, however, had their God of Light and Life. That was the God of whom John speaks in the first chapter of his Gospel, when he says: in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. In that Word was Life, and the life was the Light of men. And that Word has now become flesh. It has come to bruise the head of the old serpent.

But this Bible language is cast aside as worthless by the antichristians. So when united heathendom goes so far as to proclaim the serpent, the Asclepius- symbol of an "autonomous" light and "autonomous" life, as the ecumenical symbol, then the antichrist will affirm: I will put enmity between this my serpent and you, O woman of the Church; between your seed and her seed. That seed of the serpent will bruise your head, and you will not even get the chance to bruise the heel of that other seed. Then the ecumenical antithesis will have been proclaimed again. God's Word is always right in the end.

That's why the first task of the church will always be the proclamation of that centuries-old antithesis. She does not tolerate a breakthrough on the basis of false slogans proclaiming unity. What she desires is a breakthrough with the sharp weapon of that Biblical antithesis - over against all groups and all movements that have denied and ridiculed the Biblical idea of the antithesis and have cursed it as the greatest folly and a fragmenting force, including, therefore, the ecumenical church movement which has no confession, and also the youth movement that has allowed itself to become part of this "ecumenism."

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Hans Urs von Balthasar:

Even if a unity of faith is not possible, a unity of love is.

John Frame:

For many years I have felt that Presbyterians have wasted valuable time debating one another, time that could better be spent in worship, evangelism, and nurture. Pure doctrine is important, but total unanimity on every disputable issue is impossible, and that is not required by Scripture. So we need to be more careful about our priorities. We also need to take much greater care to be fair and gracious to one another when debates do arise. The principles expressed by the Presbyterians Together document give us biblical guidance in this area.

Samuel T. Logan:

Jonathan Edwards believed that censoriousness among Christians was one of the reasons why the Great Awakening lost its revival power. I believe he was right! And I believe that censoriousness is having the same kind of negative effect in our conservative Presbyterian circles today.

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Schaff on charity amidst disagreement:

The internal quarrels among Christian brethren, which are found more or less in all denominations and ages, are the most humiliating and heart-sickening chapters in Church history, but they are overruled by Providence for the fuller development of theology, a wider spread of Christianity, and a deeper divine harmony, which will ultimately, in God's own good time, spring out of human discord.

The two great families of Protestantism are united in all essential articles of faith, and their members may and ought to cultivate intimate Christian fellowship without sacrifice of principle or loyalty to their communion. Yet they are distinct ecclesiastical individualities, and Providence has assigned them peculiar fields of labor. Their differences in theology, government, worship, and mode of piety are rooted in diversities of nationality, psychological constitution, education, external circumstances, and gifts of the Spirit.

1. The Lutheran Church arose in monarchical Germany, and bears the impress of the German race, of which Luther was the purest and strongest type. The Reformed Church began, almost simultaneously, in republican Switzerland, and spread in France, Holland, England, and Scotland. The former extended, indeed, to kindred Scandinavia, and, by emigration, to more distant countries. But outside of Germany it is stunted in its normal growth, or undergoes, with the change of language and nationality, an ecclesiastical transformation. The Reformed Church, on the other hand, while it originated in the German cantons of Switzerland, and found a home in several important parts of Germany, as the Palatinate, the Lower Rhine, and (through the influence of the House of Hohenzollern since the Elector Sigismund, 1614) in Brandenburg and other provinces of Prussia was yet far more fully and vigorously developed among the maritime and freer nations, especially the Anglo-Saxon race, and follows its onward march to the West and the missionary fields of the East. The modern Protestant movements among the Latin races in the South of Europe likewise mostly assume the Reformed, some even a strictly Calvinistic type. Converts from the excessive ritualism of Rome are apt to swing to the opposite extreme of Puritan simplicity.

Germany occupies the front rank in sacred learning and scientific theology, but the future of evangelical Protestantism is mainly intrusted to the Anglo-American churches, which far surpass all others in wealth,

energy, liberality, philanthropy, and a firm hold upon the heart of the two great nations they represent.

2. The Lutheran Church, as its name indicates, was rounded and shaped by the mighty genius of Luther, who gave to the Germans a truly vernacular Bible, Catechism, and hymn-book, and who thus meets them at every step in their public and private devotions. We should, indeed, not forget the gentle, conciliatory, and peaceful genius of Melanchthon, which never died out in the Lutheran Confession, and forms the connecting link between it and the Reformed. He represents the very spirit of evangelical union, and practiced it in his intimate friendship with the stern and uncompromising Calvin, who in turn touchingly alludes to the memory of his friend. But the influence of the 'Praeceptor Germaniae' was more scholastic and theological than practical and popular. Luther was the originating, commanding reformer, 'born,' as he himself says, 'to tear up the stumps and dead roots, to cut away the thorns, and to act as a rough forester and pioneer;' while 'Melanchthon moved gently and calmly along, with his rich gifts from God's own hand, building and planting, sowing and watering.' Luther was, as Melanchthon called him, the Protestant Elijah. He spoke almost with the inspiration and authority of a prophet and apostle, and his word shook the Church and the Empire to the base. He can be to no nation what he is to the German, as little as Washington can be to any nation what he is to the American. And yet, strange to say, with all the overpowering influence of Luther, his personal views on the canon and on predestination were never accepted by his followers; and if we judge him by the standard of the Form of Concord, he is a heretic in his own communion as much as St. Augustine, on account of his doctrines of sin and grace, is a heretic in the Roman Church, revered though he is as the greatest among the Fathers.

The Reformed Church had a large number of leaders, as Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Bullinger, Calvin, Beza, Cranmer, Knox, but not one of them, not even Calvin, could impress his name or his theological system upon her. She is independent of men, and allows full freedom for national and sectional modifications and adaptations of the principles of the Reformation.

3. The Lutheran Confession starts from the wants of sinful man and the personal experience of justification by faith alone, and finds, in this 'article of the standing and falling Church,' comfort and peace of conscience, and

the strongest stimulus to a godly life. The Reformed Churches (especially the Calvinistic sections) start from the absolute sovereignty of God and the supreme authority of his holy Word, and endeavor to reconstruct the whole Church on this basis. The one proceeds from anthropology to theology; the other, from theology to anthropology. The one puts the subjective or material principle of the Reformation first, the objective or formal next; the other reverses the order; yet both maintain, in inseparable unity, the subjective and objective principles of the Reformation.

The Augsburg Confession, which is the first and the most important Lutheran symbol, does not mention the Bible principle at all, although it is based upon it throughout; the Articles of Smalcald mention it incidentally; and the Form of Concord more formally. But the Reformed Confessions have a separate article de Scriptura Sacra, as the only rule of faith and discipline, and put it at the head, sometimes with a full list of the canonical books.

4. The Lutheran Church has an idealistic and contemplative, the Reformed Church a realistic and practical, spirit and tendency. The former aims to harmonize Church and State, theology and philosophy, worship and art; the latter draws a sharper line of distinction between the Word of God and the traditions of men, the Church and the world, the Church of communicants and the congregation of hearers, the regenerate and the unregenerate, the divine and the human. The one is exposed to the danger of pantheism, which shuts God up within the world; the other to the opposite extreme of deism, which abstractly separates him from the world. Hence the leaning of the Lutheran Christology to Eutychianism, the leaning of the Reformed to Nestorianism.

The most characteristic exponent of this difference between the two confessions is found in their antagonistic doctrines of the Lord's Supper; and hence their controversies clustered around this article, as the Nicene and post-Nicene controversies clustered around the person of Christ. Luther teaches the real presence of Christ's body and blood in, with, and under the elements, the oral manducation by unworthy as well as worthy communicants, and the ubiquity of Christ's body; while Zwingli and Calvin, carefully distinguishing the sacramental sign from the sacramental grace, teach the one only a symbolical, the other a spiritual real, presence and fruition for believers alone. The Romish doctrine of transubstantiation is equally characteristic of the magical supernaturalism

and asceticism of Romanism, which realizes the divine only by a miraculous annihilation of the natural elements. Lutheranism sees the supernatural in the natural, Calvinism above the natural, Romanism without the natural.

5. Viewed in their relations to the mediaeval Church, Lutheranism is more conservative and historical, the Reformed Church more progressive and radical, and departs much further from the traditionalism, sacerdotalism, and ceremonialism of Rome. The former proceeded on the principle to retain what was not forbidden by the Bible; the latter, on the principle to abolish what was not commanded.

The Anglican Church, however, though moderately Calvinistic in her Thirty-nine Articles, especially in the doctrine on the Scriptures and the Sacraments, makes an exception from the other Reformed communions, since it retained the body of the episcopal hierarchy and the Catholic worship, though purged of popery. Hence Lutherans like to call it a 'Lutheranizing Church;' but the conservatism of the Church of England was of native growth, and owing to the controlling influence of the English monarches and bishops in the Reformation period.

6. The Lutheran Confession, moreover, attacked mainly the Judaism of Rome, the Reformed Church its heathenism. 'Away with legal bondage and work righteousness!' was the war-cry of Luther; 'Away with idolatry and moral corruption!' was the motto of Zwingli, Farel, Calvin, and Knox.

7. Luther and Melanchthon were chiefly bent upon the purification of doctrine, and established State churches controlled by princes, theologians, and pastors. Calvin and Knox carried the reform into the sphere of government, discipline, and worship, and labored to found a pure and free church of believers. Lutheran congregations in the old world are almost passive, and most of them enjoy not even the right of electing their pastor; while well-organized Reformed congregations have elders and deacons chosen from the people, and a much larger amount of lay agency, especially in the Sunday-school work. Luther first proclaimed the principle of the general priesthood, but in practice it was confined to the civil rulers, and carried out in a wrong way by making them the supreme bishops of the Church, and reducing the Church to a degrading dependence on the State.

8. Luther and his followers carefully abstained from politics, and intrusted the secular princes friendly to the Reformation with the episcopal rights; Calvin and Knox upheld the sole headship of Christ, and endeavored to renovate the civil state on a theocratic basis. This led to serious conflicts and wars, but they resulted in a great advance of civil and religious liberty in Holland, England, and the United States. The essence of Calvinism is the sense of the absolute sovereignty of God and the absolute dependence of man; and this is the best school of moral self-government, which is true freedom. Those who feel most their dependence on God are most independent of men.

9. The strength and beauty of the Lutheran Church lies in its profound theology, rich hymnology, simple, childlike, trustful piety; the strength and beauty of the Reformed Churches, in aggressive energy and enterprise, power of self-government, strict discipline, missionary zeal, liberal sacrifice, and faithful devotion, even to martyrdom, for the same divine Lord. From the former have proceeded Pietism and Moravianism, a minutely developed scholastic orthodoxy, speculative systems and critical researches in all departments of sacred learning, but also antinomian tendencies, and various forms of mysticism, rationalism, and hypercriticism. The latter has produced Puritanism, Congregationalism, Methodism, Evangelicalism (in the Church of England), the largest Bible, tract, and missionary societies, has built most churches and benevolent institutions, but is ever in danger of multiplying sectarian divisions, overruling the principle of authority by private judgment, and disregarding the lessons of history.

10. Both churches have accomplished, and are still accomplishing, a great and noble work. Let them wish each other God's speed, and stimulate each other to greater zeal. A noble rivalry is far better than sectarian envy and jealousy. There have been in both churches, at all times, men of love and peace as well as men of war, with corresponding efforts to unite Lutheran and Reformed Christians, from the days of Melancthon and Bucer, Calixtus and Baxter, down to the Prussian Evangelical Union, the German Churchn Diet, and the Evangelical Alliance. Even the exclusive Church of England has entered into a sort of alliance with the Evangelical Church of Prussia, in jointly founding and maintaining the Bishopric of St. James in Jerusalem.

The time for ecclesiastical amalgamation, or organic union, has not yet come, but Christian recognition and union in essentials is quite consistent with denominational distinctions in non-essentials, and should be cultivated by all who love our common Lord and Saviour, and desire the triumph of his kingdom.

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From Nevin's famous "Catholic Unity" sermon:

Eph. IV. 4-6.—There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. This is the image of the CHURCH, as delineated by the hand of the inspired Apostle. In the whole world, we find nothing so resplendently beautiful and glorious, under any other form. The picture is intended to enforce the great duty of charity and peace, among those who bear the Christian name. In the preceding part of the epistle, Christ is exhibited as the end of all separations and strife to them that believe, and the author of a new spiritual creation, in which all former distinctions were to be regarded as swallowed up and abolished forever. Reference is had in this representation primarily to the old division of Jew and Gentile; but in its true spirit and sense, it is plainly as comprehensive as humanity itself, and looks therefore directly to every other distinction of the same sort, that ever has been or ever shall be known in the world. Christianity is the universal solvent, in with all opposites are required to give up their previous affinities, no matter how old and stubborn, and flow together in a new combination, pervaded with harmony only and light at every point. "In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, not uncircumcision, but a new creature." "Those who were far off, are made nigh by his blood." "He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; making in himself of twain one new man." In him, all spiritual antagonism among men is subverted. The human world is reconciled first with God, and then with itself, by entering with living consciousness into the ground of its own life as revealed in his person. Such is the idea of the Church, which is "the body of Christ, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all." And now at length, passing from doctrine to practice, the Apostle calls upon those to whom he wrote to surrender themselves fully to the claims of this exalted constitution. "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord beseech you, that ye

walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called. With all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Such a temper, and such a life, are necessarily included in the very conception of the Church, as here described. "There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." He does not say, *Let* there be one body and one Spirit, as simply urging Christians to seek such agreement among themselves as might justify this view of their state; but the fact is assumed as already in existence, and is made the ground accordingly of the exhortation that goes before. There is one body and Spirit in the bond of peace. The unity of the Church is not something which results first from the thought and purpose of her vast membership, of which it is composed; but on the contrary, it is the ground out of which this membership itself springs, and in which perpetually it stands, and from which it must derive evermore all its harmony, and stability, and activity, and strength.

From the beginning, this great truth has dwelt deep in the consciousness of the Christian world. Through all ages, and in all lands, that consciousness has been uttering itself as with one mouth, in the article of the creed, *I believe in the Holy Catholic Church*. The Church is one and universal. Her unity is essential to her existence. Particular Christians, and particular congregations, and particular religious denominations, can be true to themselves only as they stand in the full, free sense of this thought, and make it the object of their calling to fulfil its requisitions. The manifold is required to feel itself one. All particularism here must be false, that seeks to maintain itself as such, in proportion exactly as it is found in conflict with the general and universal, as embraced in the true idea of the body of Christ.

I propose to consider, in the further prosecution of the subject at this time, *first*, the Nature and Constitution of the Holy Catholic Church, in the view now stated; and *secondly*, the Duty of Christians as it regards the unity, by which it is declared to be thus Catholic, and holy, and true.

Read the rest: <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/john-nevin/catholic-unity>.

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Jonathan Edwards on charity towards the brethren:

Truly gracious affections differ from those that are false and delusive in that they naturally beget and promote such a spirit of love, meekness, quietness, forgiveness, and mercy, as appeared in Christ....

But here some may be ready to say, Is there no such thing as Christian fortitude, and boldness for Christ, being good soldiers in the Christian warfare, and coming out bold against the enemies of Christ and his people?

To which I answer, there doubtless is such a thing. The whole Christian life is fitly compared to a warfare. The most eminent Christians are the best soldiers, endued with the greatest degrees of Christian fortitude. And it is the duty of God's people to be steadfast and vigorous in their opposition to the designs and ways of such as are endeavoring to overthrow the Kingdom of Christ, and the interests of religion.

But yet many persons seem to be quite mistaken concerning the nature of Christian fortitude. It is an exceeding diverse thing from a brutal fierceness, or the boldness of beasts of prey. True Christian fortitude consists in strength of mind, through grace, exerted in two things: 1) in ruling and suppressing the passions and affections of the mind; and 2) in steadfastly and freely exerting and following affections and dispositions, without being hindered by sinful fear, or the opposition of enemies.

.....[K]ept under in the exercise of this Christian strength and fortitude, are those very passions that are vigorously and violently in a false boldness for Christ. And those affections which are vigorously exerted in true fortitude, are those Christian holy affections, that are directly contrary to the others.

Though Christian fortitude appears in withstanding and counteracting enemies without us; yet it much more appears in resisting and suppressing the enemies that are within us; because they are our worst and strongest enemies, and have the greatest advantage against us.

The strength of the good soldier of Jesus Christ appears in nothing more, than in steadfastly maintaining the holy, calm meekness, sweetness, and benevolence of his mind, amidst all the storms, injuries, strange behaviour, and surprising acts and events, of this evil and unreasonable world....

There is a pretended boldness for Christ that arises from no better principle than pride.

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Richard Baxter on the folly of many of our quarrels:

I did not sufficiently discern then how much in most of our controversies is verbal and upon mutual mistakes. And withal I knew not how impatient divines were of being contradicted, nor how it would stir up all their powers to defend what they have once said, and to rise up against the truth which is thus thrust upon them as the mortal enemy of their honour. And I knew not how hardly men's minds are changed from their former apprehensions, be the evidence never so plain. And I have perceived that nothing so much hindereth the reception of the truth as urging it on men with too harsh importunity, and falling too heavily on their errors. For hereby you engage their honour in the business and they defend their errors as themselves, and stir up all their wit and ability to oppose you. We mistake men's diseases when we think there needeth nothing to cure their errors but only to bring them the evidence of truth. Alas! There are many distempers of mind to be removed before men are apt to receive that evidence.

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More Nevin, on sects and unity:

Sects have no true theology, they are prone always to undervalue it in any form, as having a secret consciousness that for *them* it is in fact nothing. And in such shape as they have it, we find it to be always a system of mechanical abstractions, as barren for the understanding as it is cold and jejune for the heart. All runs out into a scheme of invincible dualism; man here, God there; two worlds, set over against each other, in the way of everlasting abstract opposition; all communication between them magical only and fantastic, not historically real; the incarnation a divine *avatar* simply, in human shape; the Church, an idea; its sacraments, signs, the Bible, an aerolite, shot from the skies; the whole process of salvation, a sort of divine legerdemain, wrought in the soul by the help of invisible powers; all resolving itself at last, some outward supernatural apparatus

only excepted, into marvelous coincidence, at almost every point, with the grossly subjective, neological theology of the mere Socinian or Deist, from which the idea of the supernatural is banished altogether.

Christianity is the universal solvent, in which all opposites are required to give up their previous affinities, no matter how old and stubborn, and flow together in a new combination, pervaded with harmony only and light at every point.

The Church is one and universal. Her unity is essential to her existence. Particular Christians, and particular congregations, and particular religious denominations, can be true to themselves, only as they stand in the full, free sense of this thought, and make it the object of their calling to fulfil [sic.] its requisitions.

Unity does not exclude the idea of difference and multiplicity. Indeed, it is only by means of these, that it can ever appear under an actual concrete form.

It is the duty of all then, to consider and lay to heart the evil that is comprehended in the actual disunion and division, which now prevail in the Catholic Church, I say *Catholic* Church; because the one Spirit of Christ is supposed to pervade the whole body, notwithstanding this vast defect, binding it together through all parts of the world with the force of a common life.

The church ought to be visibly one and catholic, as she is one and catholic in her inward life; and the want of such unity, as it appears in the present state of the protestant world, with its rampant sectarianism and individualism, 'is a lamentation, and shall be for a lamentation,' until of God's mercy the sore reproach be rolled away.

The union of the Church in any case, is not to be established by stratagem or force. To be valid, it must be free, the spontaneous product of Christian knowledge and Christian love.

Then it is the duty of the church... to observe and improve all opportunities, by which it is made possible in any measure from time to time, to advance in a visible way the interest of catholic unity.

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More from Phillip Schaff:

Catholicism is the strength of Romanism, Romanism is the weakness of Catholicism. Catholicism produced Jansenism, Popery condemned it. Popery never forgets and never learns anything, and can allow no change in doctrine (except by way of addition), without sacrificing its fundamental principle of infallibility, and thus committing suicide. But Catholicism may ultimately burst the chains of Popery which have so long kept it confined, and may assume new life and vigor.

Such a personage as Augustine, still holding a mediating place between the two great divisions of Christendom, revered alike by both, and of equal influence with both, is furthermore a welcome pledge of the elevating prospect of a future reconciliation of Catholicism and Protestantism in a higher unity, conserving all the truths, losing all the errors, forgiving all the sins, forgetting all the enmities of both. After all, the contradiction between authority and freedom, the objective and the subjective, the churchly and the personal, the organic and the individual, the sacramental and the experimental in religion, is not absolute, but relative and temporary, and arises not so much from the nature of things, as from the deficiencies of man's knowledge and piety in this world.

These elements admit of an ultimate harmony in the perfect state of the church, corresponding to the union of the divine and human natures, which transcends the limits of finite thought and logical comprehension, and is yet completely realized in the person of Christ. They are in fact united in the theological system of St. Paul, who had the highest view of the church, as the mystical "body of Christ," and "the pillar and ground of the truth," and who was at the same time the great champion of evangelical freedom, individual responsibility, and personal union of the believer with his Saviour. We believe in and hope for one holy catholic apostolic church, one communion of saints, one fold, and one Shepherd. The more the different churches become truly Christian, or draw nearer to Christ, and the more they give real effect to His kingdom, the nearer will they come to one another. For Christ is the common head and vital centre of all believers, and the divine harmony of all discordant human sects and creeds. In Christ, says Pascal, one of the greatest and noblest disciples of Augustine, In Christ all contradictions are solved.

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TPC elder David Smolin has written a helpful paper entitled “Reformed Catholicity v. Reformed Eccentricity”:

In very simple terms, I perceive “Reformed Catholicity” as anchored simultaneously in two parts:

(1) “Reformed;” Our theological distinctives are anchored in Reformation theology (in the broader sense which includes Anglican and Lutheran as well as the narrower sense of Presbyterian).

(2) “Catholicity” We recognize that we are joined in Christ to a broader catholic “universal” church which is defined theologically by Trinitarian Orthodoxy, and thus includes the wider evangelical church, Wesleyans, charismatics, moderate neo-Orthodox Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, etc. This relationship has both contemporary and historical elements: it means that in Christ we are a part of one universal church existing in the world today, and also part of the one catholic and apostolic church in history.

By contrast, I perceive “Reformed Eccentricity” as simplistically anchored in a “Remnant Theology” perspective. Remnant theology is an OT perspective which derives from the OT chronology in which most of Israel would, over time, fail the various tests of faith. Indeed, in one sense Jesus turns out to be the one true covenant keeper of Israel, who recapitulates the history of Israel but is faithful at all points to the covenant. Reformed Eccentricity misapplies this OT paradigm to both the history of the church and relations within the contemporary church, and hence tends to produce an endless series of divisions, each based on the view that their particular movement represent the true “remnant” of the church. Thus, as contrasted to the two points of Reformed Catholicity named above, we could characterize Reformed Eccentricity as follows:

(1) “Reformed” A set of theological distinctives interpreted narrowly to largely exclude other Reformation-derived churches (i.e., Anglicans and Lutherans), and which leads to a constant narrowing, as each division and movement within Presbyterian claims a theological warrant to see itself as the true “remnant of the remnant of the remnant.”

(2) “Catholicity” Under remnant theology the attitude toward other churches tends to be largely negative, as large parts of the church are

written off as equivalent to the old apostate “Northern Kingdom of Israel.” Hence, there is no felt obligation to maintain any kind of unity, in Christ, with those outside of the “remnant” church. The emphasis instead is on maintaining fidelity to the distinctives—generally in theological doctrine-- that define one as the true remnant church.

At the risk of repetition, I would summarize the attributes of Reformed Catholicity and Reformed Eccentricity as applied in various areas:

#### I. Reformed Catholicity v. Reformed Eccentricity and Our Relationships to Other Churches

Reformed Catholicity tends to be optimistic, not only eschatologically (i.e., post-millennial or positive a-millennial), but also in its approach and relationships to other churches and traditions and the world at large. Confident in Christ’s victory and in the perseverance of the church, Reformed Catholicity perceives reformed congregations as joined in Christ to a larger church well beyond the bounds of Presbyterianism. Reformed Catholicity is encouraged by the progress of the broader church, even when it is not specifically in our theological “camp.” Thus, reformed catholicity, while unafraid to note its differences theologically with some of the teachings of other traditions, nonetheless has the theological optimism to believe that Christ is building his church and doing great things for the kingdom, even through parts of Christ’s church that do not embrace the particularities of Calvinist or reformed doctrine. Further, reformed catholicity finds encouragement in the movement of other traditions toward certain Reformation doctrines and emphases, such as reading the scriptures in the language of the people or teaching about justification, even when those churches fail to fully embrace reformed doctrinal formulations.

Reformed Eccentricity may be eschatologically optimistic (i.e., post-millennial or positive a-millennial), but despite this doctrinal optimism it operates according to the OT paradigm of “remnant theology.” Broad and significant parts of the church are totally written off (i.e., Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Lutherans, Charismatics, Wesleyans, etc.) Then, living in the cramped and limited confines of the totally

reformed (the first remnant), reformed eccentricity is ever looking for a doctrinal basis to condemn significant parts of the conservative Presbyterian world. Hence, one is always in the mode of becoming the remnant of the remnant of the remnant, and the acceptable church shrinks to the vanishing point. Reformed Eccentricity often has its fiercest theological combats within the relatively small world of conservative Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, but these doctrinal battles are of little interest or relevance to the wider church. Yet the doctrinal warfare within conservative Presbyterianism is taken extremely seriously by the combatants, because the implicit remnant perspective suggests that whoever is left standing is Christ's only true and faithful church on the earth. Thus, the world of reformed eccentricity is like life in the Soviet Union under Stalin, where insiders are periodically "purged."

## II. Reformed Catholicity v. Reformed Eccentricity in Relationship to the Church in History

Reformed Catholicity embraces the entire history of the church, East and West, as truly being "church history." Therefore, it finds wisdom and guidance in the Church Fathers, Eastern and Western, the Medieval Church, etc. This means a willingness to read and learn from those outside of the specifically "reformed" tradition of Western Christianity. This does not mean that everything the church has done or taught throughout its history is correct, but it means that as reformed Christians we are a part of one holy catholic and apostolic church that has existed in various places and cultures over the past two millennia.

Reformed Eccentricity tends to read and refer to a very limited subset of historical Christianity. Other than Trinitarian Orthodoxy and Augustine, the Church Fathers are ignored (and large parts of Augustine are also ignored, because of his high sacramental theology and embrace of the Roman Church of his day). The middle ages are seen as a time of spiritual darkness. It is as though the history of Christianity leap-frogged from the Book of Acts to selected portions of Augustine, and then jumped over a millennia of history to Luther. Even Luther turns out to be little more than a stepping-stone, because his sacramental theology is either ignored or detested. The Reformation is seen principally through the lens of Puritanism, or perhaps Southern Presbyterianism, as Calvin (like Augustine) is himself reduced to a small subset of his actual teachings. The import of this historical method is of course profoundly pessimistic,

because it in essence writes off 90% of the history of the church. This attitude toward church history is another manifestation of the implicit remnant theology of reformed eccentricity.. (Thus, when the East and West, the East is implicitly written off as an apostate church and the West contains the Remnant; then within the Western Church Puritan Calvinism is the remnant amidst the apostate ruin of Catholicism and the failure of organized Lutheranism to fully reform. Once again, reformed eccentricity sees church history through a lens in which it is the remnant of the remnant of the remnant.)

### III. Reformed Catholicity versus Reformed Eccentricity: the Battle for the Heart of Liturgical Presbyterianism

The average low-church Protestant who comes to worship at Trinity Presbyterian Church will immediately notice that our worship service is “high church,” and similar in many ways to Anglican, Lutheran, and even Roman Catholic services. This raises an immediate set of questions which can be answered in either a “reformed catholicity” or “reformed eccentricity” manner.

The reformed catholicity approach embraces the implicit connections of liturgical worship: connections to the wider liturgical parts of Christ’s Church (including Anglicans, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox), and historically back to the long history of the church, which has been primarily liturgical in its worship. The liturgy becomes a part of our “catholicity.”

Reformed eccentricity, however, perceives liturgical Presbyterian worship as sharply disconnected from the other liturgical churches, as a part of maintaining the view that those traditions are apostate or at least egregiously in error. From this perspective, liturgical Presbyterianism attempts to virtually re-invent liturgical worship as though Anglican and Lutheran forms of worship (for example) were irrelevant or totally different. Liturgical worship thus becomes primarily another way, within the combative and divided world of the totally reformed, to distinguish a “remnant;” liturgical Presbyterians view themselves as the “true remnant” among the reformed, even as other movements within conservative Presbyterianism (such as full subscription or Southern Presbyterianism)

view liturgical Presbyterianism as apostate and themselves as the true remnant. Thus, from a “reformed eccentricity” point of view liturgical Presbyterianism is profoundly sectarian, rather than “catholic.”

#### IV. Reformed Catholicity v. Reformed Eccentricity: Remnant Politics v. Majoring in the Majors

As a matter of personal observation from many years in the Reformed world, I would note that one difference between Reformed Catholicity and Reformed Eccentricity occurs in secondary areas. Churches driven by reformed eccentricity seem to attract a significant number of people with eccentric or unusual political views. Thus, churches driven by Reformed Eccentricity seem to attract a disproportionate number of people with extreme anti-government views. These political views sometimes become a part of the theology and culture of the churches, to the degree that being a part of the “remnant” is seen as intertwined with sharing a certain set of anti-government political views.

By contrast, it should be a goal of “Reformed Catholicity” churches to “major in the majors,” rather than being known for a set of intertwined theological and political beliefs that appear eccentric to most Christians. This does not mean that political topics should not be discussed—for as a Christian law professor I certainly see the relevance of Christianity to law and government! Rather, it means that the church as an institution clearly differentiates between the clear teachings of Christianity to which the church must always adhere, and the often controversial applications of Christianity to the myriad political and legal issues of the day. We cannot give the impression that we have the same confidence about the meaning of 9/11, the correct level of governmental taxation, or who should be the next President, as we have about the identity of our Lord and Savior—for when we make mistakes abohe day (as we most certainly will do), we cannot allow those errors to undercut the witness of the church to the fundamental truths of the gospel.

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Here are some scans church of old documents by me on church unity – please forgive the scanning errors:

**PURSUING PEACE AND PURITY  
IN THE BODY OF CHRIST:  
A PLEA FOR REFORMED CATHOLICITY**

**DY RICH LUSK  
Itecbcd 129/01**

Reformed Christians are usually suspicious of any talk of unity among Christians of differing doctrinal convictions, yet the pursuit of peace and unity among believers is a high priority in the NT (Heb. 12:14; Eph. 4:1-6; Phil. 2:1-4; Jn. 17:21; Rom. 12:17-21). It seems we are obligated to strive for a biblical ecumenism that will recognize all professing believers as brothers in the Lord, while excluding all known unbelievers (even if they call themselves "Christians" yet are not--cf Rev. 2:9, 3:9). In other words, the boundaries of our fellowship must be as wide as the kingdom itself, but no wider. We ought to be as ecumenical as God himself is, for who are we to reject someone the Lord has accepted (Gal. 2:1 1ff; Rom 14:4)? The oneness of God demands that he have one people, one church (Jn. 10:16; Epli. 2:14ff; Gal. 3:15ff). This pursuit of unity must take place at all levels -- individual, familial, institutional/denominational, even international. Christians in different positions of leadership in the church will have different responsibilities in reuniting the church and restoring peace, but it is a task that all who name the name of Christ are called to undertake.

Genuine love, peace, unity, and fellowship are central to biblical Christianity. The gospel not only forgives sins; it creates a new community, a renewed human race. God's goal is not just a bunch of redeemed individuals, but a redeemed community, worshipping, living, and growing together. Interestingly, the NT never mentions "Christianity," as if biblical religion were an abstraction, or a mere ideology, or an "-ism" of some sort. The Bible's continual focus is on the concrete community of saints, united with Christ. The biblical images of the church are always corporate (e.g., flock, city, stones in God's temple, members of Christ's body, new creation, Israel of God, kingdom of priests, etc.) With false ecumenical movements on the left and raw individualism on the right, never has the need been greater for a well articulated, well thought out plan for building Christian unity. There is no such thing as a Christian church that has lost the basic truth of God's Word (for such an entity would no longer be a true church), but neither is there any such thing as a "lone ranger" Christian, isolated from all

other believers. Biblical religion, at its very core, is *social* in nature. God himself is a social being, existing as a holy family of Father, Son, and Spirit, and God has created (and now redeemed) humanity to reflect his sociality. The church should model human life as God intended, showing forth the very love, fellowship, humility, and peace that mark God's own interTrinitarian relations.

Our approach to Christian unity is really a litmus test for how well we understand the doctrine of justification by faith and how willing we are to apply it biblically. The doctrine of justification by faith alone should compel us to pursue the ecumenical task. In fact, justification by faith is *the* ecumenical doctrine, the doctrine that denies Christians the right to fragment into subgroups or sects based on secondary and often culture-based distinctives. Justification by faith means all Christians, whatever their other differences, belong at the same communion table (Gal. 2). Just as importantly, one's ability to understand and articulate the doctrine of justification must not become a new form of doctrinal legalism, as it has in some quarters. As Richard Hooker pointed out in times of ecclesiastical upheaval not completely different from our own, one can be justified by faith without knowing exactly what "justification" is. Salvation does not depend on the purity of our doctrine any more than the purity of our works. In other words, we are not justified by believing in the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith but by believing in Jesus Christ and him crucified. The apostle Paul's doctrine of justification declares that all who trust in Christ for salvation are saved, irrespective of other moral and doctrinal shortcomings. If the Reformed tradition has a superior grasp of this teaching (which it does), it should be the most patient towards Christians who are less mature in their understanding of biblical soteriology (which it often isn't). Unfortunately, the doctrine of justification is often used as a battering ram to beat down believers from other traditions or as a barrier to keep them out of our fellowships, rather than serving as the doctrinal basis of the ecumenical task. The doctrine of justification ultimately points away from itself to Jesus Christ; all those who trust in Him as Lord and Messiah are fellow members of God's family and must be treated as such. None of this is to say the doctrine of justification itself is unimportant. In fact, it is critical -- perhaps more critical than many Reformed theologians imagined. I am arguing it is not only of great importance to our soteriology (a point most in the heritage of the Reformation have grasped), but also to our ecclesiology (a point that has been frequently missed). Justification by faith strikes against any attempt to define the boundaries of the church by anything other than faith in Jesus, sealed by baptism.

Any call for church reunion is superficial without giving serious attention to the

historical aspect of denominationalism. Many of our unjustified schisms have had several centuries to harden and now seem irreversible. Certainly there are schisms that predate the Reformation that must be healed, but the great majority of unjustified denominational splits have Protestants to blame. Those in the Reformed tradition are perhaps the most guilty of all. The Reformed are notorious for creating fault lines within the church even over small details of doctrine or practice. Why are we so willing to sacrifice the doctrine of the church's catholicity for the sake of everything else? Why is catholicity so expendable? Why are we blind to the fact that unity is a function of purity — that a divided church *cannot* be pure? Why are we so quick to attack other denominations and defend our own? On this point of unity, we seem to have departed from many of the great early Reformers, including Calvin himself, who was known to say "I would gladly cross seven seas if it would reunite the church." Men such as Calvin and Knox took the charge of schism seriously and, rightly or wrongly, sought to demonstrate they were the true "catholics." They were not leaving the church; rather the church had left them. Calvin refused to offer shelter to schismatics behind some kind of "liberty of conscience" doctrine. He detested those who were perfectionists about the church, refusing to stay in a communion that was not "holy" enough for them:

But we are thus reminded to always beware of the intrigues of Satan when they appear under the cover of truth. When, therefore, our minds are disposed to piety Satan is ever to be feared lest he should stealthily suggest to us what may turn us aside from our duty, for we see some that leave the church because they require in it the highest perfection. Many err in this

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way grievously, imagining when they see the evil mingled with the good that they will be infected with pollution unless they immediately withdraw themselves from the whole congregation.. .But there have always been persons who, imbued with notions of absolute holiness as if they had already become ethereal spirits, spurn the society of all in whom they see something human [i. e., fallen] still remains.

Moreover, many Reformed seem to act as if there were nothing left for our branch of the church to learn, as if God had no new light to break forth from his Word, as if the church's theological climax was reached in 1647. The words of John Robinson (one of the original pilgrims who voyaged to America) should serve as a stern warning to us:

We have not yet arrived at the goal. There are still treasures in the Scriptures, the knowledge of which have remained hidden to us. All the misery of the Presbyterian churches is owing to their striving to

consider the Reformation as completed, and to allow no further development of what has been begun by the labor of the Reformers. The Lutherans stop at Luther, many Calvinists at Calvin. This is not right. Certainly, these men in their time were burning and shining lights; nevertheless, they did not possess an insight into the whole of God's truth and if able to arise from their graves, they would be the first to accept gratefully all new light. It is absurd to believe that during the brief period of the Reformation all error has been banished, just as it is absurd to believe that Christian understanding has completed its task

Thus, the sixteenth century Reformation must serve as new starting point for us, not an endpoint. We have more work to do; the Reformed church must be ever reforming, if she is to be faithful to her heritage. If we have no more questions to ask, we no longer understand the answers we are giving. The provisional nature of our theology should make us humble, open to correction, and ready to accept the insights of other traditions. In all of this, we must remember that the catholicity of the church is *not* a secondary doctrine.

The issue of church unity forces us to ask some hard questions. Why are we institutionally separated from other Christians anyway? What are we trying to preserve in our denomination? How can we justify our denomination's existence? Why aren't we united with other true churches of Christ in our geographic region? How can we "contend for the gospel as one man" when we are not united "in one spirit" (Phil. 1:27)? Divisions in the body of Christ call for serious self-examination (1 Cor. 11:17-34). My analysis of the biblical data leads me to believe our current situation is a great evil in God's sight.

Denominationalism is unjustified ecclesiastical divorce--we are separated from brethren with whom we should be united. Just as a couple that has been divorced unbiblically should be remarried and *there* set out to deal with their differences, so our immediate duty is to reunite with estranged Christians and Christian churches. Obviously there are many complications involved and I'm not sure anyone knows exactly how we ought to proceed in mapping out a course of repentance and reunion, but we must begin to at least think about these issues and prayerfully work towards solutions. The goal of this paper is to serve as a call to confession of sin in this area and briefly set forth the scriptural case for catholicity. The following list of statements is intended to provide a starting point -- but certainly not an endpoint -- for healing the unjustified schisms that

have fractured the one church of God. While this short paper may leave us with more questions than answers, hopefully it will set us in the right direction, so

that once again Christ's whole army may fight for him under a single banner.

1. There is "one, holy, catholic, apostolic church" as the Nicene Creed confesses. Any divisions among genuine believers over theological, liturgical, or ethical issues are ultimately due to sin on one or both sides. To perpetuate this fragmentation of Christ's flock is to invite judgment from the Lord; in fact, our present scattered condition is itself a form of God's curse upon us (Lam. 4:16; Eze. 36:19). When we repent, God promises to grant us unity (Isa. 40:11; Eze. 36:24ff, 37:15ff~). The Scripture views this unity to be one of the greatest blessings of salvation (Ps. 133). Indeed, the gospel is good news not only because it restores us to fellowship with God but also one another. We must ask: Have our denominational separations from other true Christians really made the church any purer? Any stronger? Any more influential culturally? Any more able to disciple the nations? There is great power in unity (Gen. 11:6; Phil. 1:27-28), a power the church currently lacks. Besides, if there truly is one church, separating from other Christians over some issue, even an important one, does not really solve the problem. Rather it compounds the problem because *their* church is still part of *our* church, the one church of Jesus Christ. They may be a part of the body that is sick, but it is still part of our body and we must be concerned for its healing. We must learn to think covenantally and corporately about the church.

2. While we must pursue unity with other Christians and other Christian churches, at the same time we must beware of a false unity based on compromise with sin and error. The cliché "Doctrine divides, experience unites" is a sham and does not create the kind of peace and unity God calls us to pursue. Nor may the church tolerate persistent behavior that excludes one from the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-11, Gal. 5:19-21). While we are to live at peace with all men, including unbelievers, we can only have *true* peace, unity, and fellowship with other believers. This peace within the church includes maintaining fellowship in interpersonal relationships (Mt. 5:23-24; 1 Cor. 11:17ff) as well as striving for unity in faith and knowledge (Eph. 4:11 if). The only unity worth having is unity rooted in the truth and obedience. Liberal ecumenical movements have been guilty of crying "Peace! Peace!" when there is no peace. Such movements are plainly at war with God's Word (cf Jer. 6:14) and therefore we must be at war with them as well.

3. We must identify denominationalism for what it is: sin. We must not confuse denominations with the church. While denominations, as organized, confessing groups of churches, are within the one, true church, they are by no means identical to the church because no denomination includes all true churches of

Christ. No denomination can claim to be the one, true church, although some denominations may act as if this were the case. We must recognize the consequences of our unbiblical splintering. No denomination as such can claim Christ's promise of invincibility (Mt. 16:18). No denomination as such can claim God's promise to be given a full complement of Spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12). No denomination as such has all the resources necessary to do all the church is called to do (Mt. 28:18ff). This means that ultimately our man-made denominational barriers must be torn down. Our ultimate loyalties are never to a denomination, but to the true church, wherever it is found. This is not to say we should

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immediately abandon our denominations; to become independent would be to become a denomination of one church, which only aggravates the problem. Denominations have their place in our present situation, but we must work ultimately to disband them, rather than to preserve them. We must also avoid viewing the para-church as a substitute for church unity. While God has greatly used para-church ministries, they ultimately stand in the way of church reunion. The para-church model usurps the calling God has given to the church, steals away valuable Spiritual gifts and resources that rightfully belong to the church, and distorts the Christian life by separating the key features of the church's ministry (preaching, sacraments, and discipline).

4. Our repentance in this area must begin with mourning over our divisions. *Individually* we must not treat our churches as theology clubs. We must not treat fellow believers who hold different convictions as second class citizens of the kingdom, *even they are wrong and we are right*. We must recognize that many doctrinal errors we discover in others are only obvious to us because we once held the same false positions! Many doctrinal errors among Christians are due to ignorance as much as anything else. Moreover, many Christians who are in error are actually motivated by a desire to protect a legitimate teaching of Scripture, but are not yet able to see that truth in its broader biblical context. We must be patient and loving towards our erring brothers and sisters, hoping they will show us the same forbearance. *Institutionally*, we must see our denominationalism as unjustified ecclesiastical divorce. Our duty is to be reconciled and *then* work out our differences. We cannot make full agreement a prerequisite to fellowship or church reunion. In the meantime, we must recognize baptisms and disciplinary actions performed by other churches. Recognizing ordinations by other churches is a more complex matter because of the higher qualifications for officers in the church, but this is a problem God will help us resolve as we seek to be obedient to Scripture in the areas that are more

clear. The final goal must be nothing short of governmental, institutional, creedal, and liturgical unity with all other true churches of Christ.

5. The basis of our pursuit of peace and unity must be rooted in the *fact* of our oneness in the Father, Son, and Spirit. The unity of the church is an indicative before it is an imperative. At the same time, unity in practice is commanded precisely *because* unity is a constant Spiritual reality. Unjustified separation from other believers is heinous sin because the Father has united us in the work of Christ and the Spirit. We are sinning against this oneness when we splinter the church in any way. Ultimately, there should never be any such thing as a *church* split--we should only break off from unbelievers and false churches. Therefore, we cannot be content merely with the unity we presently have in Christ and the Spirit; our unity must come to concrete, visible, institutional expression as well. This unity manifests the love that is to mark us out as God's people (Jn. 13:34-35). As we strive for unity, we can be confident God will bless our efforts and restore his church because Christ has prayed that his people would be one and his prayers are always effectual (In. 17).

6. Pursuing peace and unity includes striving for like-mindedness. This means that we can never agree to disagree with fellow believers. Rather we must agree to carry on the discussion until God grants us oneness of mind and heart. In the meantime, Scripture

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calls us to patient tolerance without doctrinal indifference: This will be hard and messy and requires more maturity than most of us in the church presently have. It means we must speak the truth, but must do so in love (Eph. 4:15). Contemporary Reformed Christians and churches are particularly guilty of being divisive and treating love and unity as secondary to doctrinal purity. But instead of this kind of Reformed sectarianism, we must strive to be Reformed Catholics -- staunchly Reformed in doctrine, yet having a catholicity of spirit that embraces all true believers. Reformed snobbery and chauvinism must become a thing of the past. We must be willing to be corrected and we must be willing to learn from other ecclesiastical traditions (Just as, hopefully, they will be willing to learn from us!). The early church in particular is helpful here, because it took both liturgical and doctrinal unity so seriously. Above all, we must remember that we are called to *actively* pursue unity and fellowship with one another; we cannot be passively indifferent. Nor can we ever be forced to choose between doctrinal purity and ecclesiastical unity -- we must pursue both because, ultimately, one is not possible without the other.

7. We must define the boundary markers of the true church so that we know with whom we must pursue this kind of peace and unity. Who should be recognized as a fellow Christian? What churches should be considered true churches? Should we stick with the earliest of Christian creeds, "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Rom. 10:9)? Should we use the ecumenical creeds of the early church (particularly the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds)? Should we define the church sacramentally (all those baptized into the name of the Trinity and not excommunicated are to be recognized as Christians)? Should we follow the three marks of the Reformers (the pure preaching of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and the faithful execution of discipline)? Should we focus on justification by faith alone as the article by which the church stands or falls, and if so, how do we evaluate the pre-Reformation church? Should we use a church's judicial proceedings as the test, considering it to be a true church until it censures an individual teaching the truth (see Calvin's *Institutes* 4.2.10; Jn. 9:1311)? Are the five membership vows from the PCA BCO sufficient? Should we judge denominations as a whole or should we judge each local church on its own? How do we deal with true believers in false churches, if such a thing is possible? We also have to ask if the bar of orthodoxy (the minimum confession a person can make and be accepted into the church) can change through history as the church progresses in her understanding of Scripture. Similarly, we must ask if the bar can be lowered during times of weakness in the church. Complicating matters even more is the fact that Scripture seems to give us a dual standard -- one for membership in the church, another for leadership in the church. It may be possible that we would recognize the pastor of a certain church to be a true believer, yet we would consider him to be unqualified to serve as a minister. What should we do in such cases? These are all difficult questions, but let us not forget that it is our fault that they have even arisen. Sin always makes a mess. We need to beg God for the grace to clean it up. Let us start by building unity with Christians and denominations that are already quite like-minded and move out from there. I am confident that as we do, God will show us from his Word where to draw the line.

8. Reformed churches have a special responsibility to pursue unity with other churches because God has given us a more biblical understanding of justification by faith alone.

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Justification should be the great ecumenical doctrine of the church. It plainly teaches that all who have faith in the Jesus of Scripture have an equally righteous standing before God

--no matter how flawed their life and doctrine may be in other ways. A corollary

of justification by faith is that we must have table fellowship (i.e., communion, or eucharistic fellowship) with all others who name the name of Christ (Gal. 2). To not fully accept anyone as a brother who has faith in Jesus is, in principle, to deny *solajIde*. The church's only boundary marker, ultimately, is faith in Christ, sealed in baptism. To add anything to this is to repudiate in practice the doctrine we hold so dear. This means others must be received as brothers in Christ even if they cannot articulate justification in a precise, biblical manner. We cannot be satisfied with such ignorance, but we must remember we are justified by faith, not by our ability to explain justification. It is easy to turn our doctrine of justification into new theological legalism, where only those who understand justification as well as the Reformers are considered Christians. This is an unbiblical rigorism. While we must not become indifferent to doctrinal error, we must also not make being a theologian a prerequisite for being a Christian.

9. Biblical ecumenism has tremendous implications for how we view the children of believers. Children baptized into the name of the Trinity should be considered members of the church, with all the rights and privileges that come with being in the body of Christ. In baptism, they are graciously received into the family of God. The Father adopts them as his children, unites them to his Son covenantally, and ordains them into the royal priesthood of the church. Even in Reformed circles, despite our insistence on infant baptism, we often treat our children as though they were outside the pale of the faith until they have "proven" themselves by passing an elders' examination, going through a communicant's class, or memorizing a catechism. None of these practices have biblical warrant and yet they are common place. Children of the covenant share covenant membership with their parents; upon baptism, they have the same covenantal status as everyone else in the church (cf. 1 Cor. 10; 12:13). We must resist "two-tier" Christianity that would make our young ones second class citizens of the kingdom until they reach physical maturity. After all, Jesus did not tell the little children to become like us in order to enter the kingdom, but told us to become like them (Lk. 18:15ff). By keeping the youngest members of our churches from the Lord's table, we are doing precisely what Paul warns against in 1 Cor. 11, namely, dividing the body of Christ. This calls for serious self-examination.

10. Finally, we must keep in mind that the church's unity in history can never be absolutely perfect. While God promises to cause his church to grow in unity and maturity through history (Gal. 4:1-11; Eph. 4:7-16), the church will not be fully glorified until Christ returns. God has promised to grant unity to his church in the Messianic age (Isa. 11:1ff; Ezek. 37:15ff; etc.) so we know our

divisions will not continue indefinitely. But we also must remember that we cannot be perfectionists about church unity because perfect unity will not be achieved until the final resurrection. Only then will we completely and eternally be at peace with one another. In the meantime, we must rejoice in the fact that we get a foretaste of this final unity we will someday enjoy every Lord's Day when the *one* church, by faith, ascends in *one* Spirit into the *one* heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 10:19ff, 12:15ff; Jn. 4:24; Mt. 18:20), to worship the *one* living and true God, celebrating *one* feast as *one* body, giving praise to *one* Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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The purpose of these ten theses is not to lead us to despair. True, we should be full of godly sorrow that will bear the fruit of repentance (2 Cor..7:8-12). But ultimately we should be full of hope and encouragement as well. The kind of unity Scripture calls us to is not something we can produce in our strength. Like-mindedness is God's gift (Rom. 15:5-6). But it is a gift God delights to give to his church, and promises to give through the course of history. As Thomas M'Crie describes it,

A happy reunion of the divided Church is promised in the Word of God. It is implied in those promises which secure to the Church the enjoyment of a high degree of prosperity in the latter days — in which God engages to arise and have mercy on Zion, to be favorable to his people, pardon their iniquity and hear their prayers, cause their reproach to cease, and make them a praise, a glory, and a rejoicing, in all the earth; in a word, in which he promises to pour out his Holy Spirit and revive his work. God cannot be duly glorified, religion cannot triumph in the world, the Church cannot be prosperous and happy, until her internal dissensions are abated, and her children come to act in greater unison and concert. But when her God vouchsafes to make the light of his countenance to shine upon her, and sheds down the enlightening, reviving, restorative, and sanctifying influences of his Spirit, the long delayed, long wished-for, day will not be far distant. It will have already dawned.

The prayer of Jesus (Jn. 17) will be answered! God will make us all one, even as he is one. This is our hope: By the grace of God, someday we will all be Reformed catholics!



The Church, Salvation and Apostasy  
Quotes compiled by Rich Lusk

Therefore *lie who would find Christ must first of all find the church*. How would one know where Christ and his faith were, if one did not know where his believers are? And he who would know something of Christ, must not trust himself, or build his own bridges into heaven through his own reason, but he must go to the church, visit and asic of the same..for *outside the church there is no truth, no G'hrist, no salvation*.

-Cah'in

When, according to Christian belief; lost souls are saved, the saved ones become united in the Christian Church.. .true Christians must everywhere be united in the brotherhood of the Christian Church.

-J. Gresham Machen

A man without a country (a citizen of no nation) would be considered an anachronism in civil society. A professing Christian who is not a member of any Christian body should be just as much a rarity. There are three institutions and three only -- family, church, and state -- that can rightfully claim the allegiance of every living person. He who refuses, or evades, enrollment in the church of Christ is a traitor to Christ as surely as lie who refuses or evades duty to the land in which he lives is considered to be an enemy or a rebel. "He that is not with me," said Jesus, "is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad" (Mt. 12:30).

-Roderick Campbell

And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

-Acts 2:47

He cannot have God for his father who does not have the church for his mother.

-Augustine

Apart from the church, salvation is impossible.

-Luther

Because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title "mother" how useful, indeed necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, puffing off mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Matt. 22:30). Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation *God's fatherly favor and the especial witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church.*

The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a *traitor and apostate* from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments.

-Calvin

[God] mercifully chooses to speak to us through the Church. The Church is therefore, according to Calvin, a divinely ordained institution, whose purpose is to accomplish among us the work of the risen and exalted Christ, who, having, instituted certain ordinances, wills that we recognize in them His divine presence. Those who disdain the fare the Church provides when the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments rightly administered deserve to 'perish from terrible hunger.' In keeping with his patristic and medieval heritage, Calvin treats such people as children who despise their own mother's milk.

-MacGregor

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made

manifest, that none of them were of us.

-I John 2:19

It is clear that in the days of the apostles it was universal practice to receive believers into the visible church.

What could be more logical? He who believes in Christ is united with Christ. Faith binds him to Christ. He is a member of Christ's body, the invisible church. But the visible church is but the outward manifestation of that body. Every member of the invisible church should as a matter of course be a member of the visible church...

*The Scriptural rule is that, while membership in the church is not a prerequisite of salvation, it is a necessary consequence of salvation. Outside the visible church "there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (WCF XXV.2).*

-Kuiper

First, all safety resides in Christ alone; and then we cannot be separated from Christ without falling away from all hope of safety; but Christ will not and cannot be torn from his church with which he is joined by an indissoluble knot, as the head of the body. Hence, unless we cultivate unity with the faithful, we see that we are cut off from Christ.

-Calvin

It is worthy of observation that none but the citizens of the church enjoy this privilege [of having their sins forgiven]; for, apart from the body of Christ and the fellowship of the godly, there can be no hope of reconciliation with God. Hence, in the creed we profess to believe in *the Catholic Church and the forgiveness of sins*; for God does not include among the objects of his love any but those whom he reckons among the members of his begotten Son, and, in like manner, does not extend to any who do not belong to his body the free imputation of righteousness. Hence it follows that strangers who separate themselves from the church have nothing left for them but to rot amid their curse. Hence, also, an open departure from the church is an open renouncement of eternal salvation.

-Calvin

The spouse of Christ cannot be adulterous; she is uncorrupted and pure. She knows one home; she guards with chaste modesty the sanctity of one couch. She keeps us for God. She appoints the sons whom she has born for the kingdom. Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If anyone could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside the Church. The Lord warns, saying, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who gathereth not with me scattereth" (Matt. 12:30). He who breaks the peace and the concord of Christ, does so in opposition to Christ; he who gathereth elsewhere than in the Church, scatters the Church of Christ... .He who does not hold this unity does not hold God's law, does not hold the faith of the Father and the Son, does not hold life and salvation.

-St. Cyprian

We receive our faith from the Church and keep it safe; and it is as it were a precious deposit stored in a fine vessel, ever renewing its vitality through the Spirit of God, and causing the renewal of the vessel in which it is stored. For this gift of God has been entrusted to the Church, as the breath of life to created man, to the end that all members by receiving it should be made alive. And herein has been bestowed upon us our means of communion with Christ, namely the Holy Spirit, the pledge of immortality, the strengthening of our faith, the ladder by which we ascend to God. For the Apostle says, "God has set up in the Church Apostles, prophets, teachers" (I Cor. 12:28) and all the other means of the Spirit's working. *But they have no share in the Spirit who do not join in the activity of the Church....For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every kind of grace. The Spirit is truth.* Therefore those who have no share in the Spirit are not nourished and given life at their mother's breast; nor do they enjoy the sparkling fountain that issues from the body of Christ.

-St. Irenaeus

[The Church] is an institution founded by Christ, proceeding from his loins and

animated by His spirit, for the glory of God and the salvation of man, through which alone, as its necessary organ, the revelation of God in Christ becomes effective in the history of the world. Hence, out of the Church, as there is no Christianity, there can be no salvation.

-Schaff

As we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, so we firmly believe that from the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be, one Kirk, that is to say, one company and multitude of men chosen by God, who rightly worship and embrace him by true faith in Christ Jesus, who is the only Head of the Kirk, even as it is the body and spouse of Christ Jesus. This Kirk is catholic, that is, universal, because it contains the chosen of all ages, of all realms, nations, and tongues, be they of the Jews or be they of the Gentiles, who have communion and society with God the Father, and with his Son, Christ Jesus, through the sanctification of his Holy Spirit. It is therefore called the communion, not of profane persons, but of saints, who, as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, have the fruit of inestimable benefits, one God, one Lord Jesus, one faith, and one baptism. *Out of this Kirk there is neither kfe nor eternal felicity. Therefore we utterly abhor the blasphemy of those who hold that men who live according to equity and justice shall be saved, no matter what religion they profess.* For since there is neither life nor salvation without Christ Jesus; so shall none have part therein but those whom the Father has given unto his Son Christ Jesus, and those who in time come to him, avow his doctrine, and believe in him. (We include the children with the believing parents.) This Kirk is invisible, known only to God, who alone knows whom he has chosen, and includes both the chosen who are departed, the Kirk triumphant, those who yet live and fight against sin and Satan, and those who shall live hereafter.

-Scots Confession

There is therefore great need today for laying fresh emphasis upon the doctrine of the Church.... We must correct the widespread notion that Christianity is merely an affair of the individual soul.... We must therefore teach men afresh that the blessings of the Gospel cannot be enjoyed by the single individual in his singleness, but only in his incorporation into Christ's Mystical Body, the Holy Catholic Church.

-John Baillie

The visible Church, which is also catholic and universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, *out of which there is no ordina,j' possibility of salvation.*

-WCF XXV. 2

No man is a schismatic for removing from one congregation to another, but he that shall separate himself from all church communion, and shall rend himself from the catholic church, he is schismatic, lie is an apostate.

- Samuel Hudson

So closely does Calvin identify incorporation in Christ with incorporation in the church that he regards the activity of the church towards its individual members as being identical with the action of Christ towards the individual. The response of the individual to the ministiy of the church is thus identical with his response towards Christ. Under certain conditions the authority of the church is nothing less than the authority of Christ himself, and obedience to Christ involves obedience to the church.

-R. S. Wallace

They who wish to become partakers of so great a benefit must be a part of israel, that is, of the church, out of which there can be neither salvation nor truth.

-Calvin

But we esteem fellowship with the true Church of Christ so highly that we deny that those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true Church of God, but separate themselves from it. For as there was no salvation outside Noah's ark when the world perished in the flood; so we believe that there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church; and hence we teach that those who wish to live ought not

to be separated from the true Church of Christ.

-Second Helvetic Confession

Lawful excommunication...is the cutting off from the body of Jesus Christ, from participation of His holy Sacraments, and from public prayers with His Church, by public and solemn sentence, all obstinate and impenitent persons, after due admonitions, which sentence, lawfully pronounced on earth, is ratified in heaven, by binding of the same sins that they bind on earth. The danger is greater than man can suddenly catch hold of: for seeing that without the body of Jesus Christ there abideth nothing but death and damnation to mankind, in what estate shall we judge them to stand that justly are cut off from the same?

-Scottish Form of Excommunication

The Cyprianic formula, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, is vital to the Reformed tradition...The Church [is] the one Body of Christ on earth and the unique instrument of Christ's redemptive process...Only in the Church can we be ingrafted into Christ and fed by him so that we become organically united to Him and to one another. As there is but one Christ, so there is but one Church. There is no other place whither we may go to find the life that He alone can and does impart.

-MacGregor

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, *not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together*, as in the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

-Hebrews 10: 24-27

Such as forsake the church.. .wholly alienate themselves from Christ.

-Calvin

The Lord has not promised his mercy, save in the communion of the saints.

-Calvin

There can be no greater privilege than to be regarded as belonging to the flock and people of God, who will always prove the best of fathers to his own, and the faithful guardian of their welfare.

-Calvin

It is obvious that for Calvin the sanctification of the individual, and the growth, nurture, and discipline of his Christian life take place within the life of the church, and the attitude and loyalty of the individual towards the church is an extremely important factor in this matter.. Our salvation within the church is constantly furthered by the mutual care which the members, gathered together in one body under the same head, have for each other.. Our sanctification flows from our election and incorporation into the membership of the church...Sanctification is therefore a work which God accomplishes in his providential dealings with the church, and in this respect also we participate in sanctification not as isolated individuals but especially within the fellowship of the church and as members of the church, for it is in such fellowship that our lives can be made outwardly conformable to the death and resurrection of Christ...Calvin identifies departing from the church with 'falling away from the living Gôd'....He says, 'They cannot be God's disciples who refuse to be taught in the church.'...Calvin, of course, would warn us that as individuals we must not rest our confidence of salvation in the mere fact of belonging to the church. It is vain to belong to the church if we have of ourselves no living connection with Christ through faith and prayer."

-R. S. Wallace

Whosoever tears asunder the church of God, disunites himself from Christ who is head and who would have all his members united together...We thus understand that God ought to be sought in order to be rightly worshipped by us; and also that he ought to be thus sought, not that each may have his own peculiar religion, but that we may be united together, and that everyone who

sees his brethren going before, excelling in gifts may be able to follow them, and to seek benefit from their labors. It is indeed true that we ought to disregard the whole world, and to embrace only the truth of God; for it is a hundred times better to renounce the society of all mortals, and union with them, than to withdraw ourselves from God; but when God shows himself our leader, the prophet teaches us that we ought mutually to stretch forth our hand, and unitedly to follow him.

-Calvin

Better to belong to the worst possible congregation than to no church at all.

-Torrey

It is a dangerous temptation to think there is no church where perfect purity is lacking...Anyone who is obsessed with that idea, must cut himself off from everybody else and appear to himself to be the only saint in the world -- or he must set up a sect of his own along with other hypocrites.

-Calvin

Some notes on church unity and reunion from a 2001 email discussion when I was on staff at Redeemer Presbyterian (PCA) in Austin, TX:

1. Frame's book seems like a no-brainer to me. Isn't it obvious from the Bible that God wants a church that is visibly unified as much as possible? But many of our finest theologians and church leaders don't seem to see this (as Frame's book sadly demonstrates). Ecumenism of any sort is treated with calloused suspicion by many Reformed folk. Ecumenism itself has, ironically, become a source of further division: we can't even agree if we should be united! (Someone has made the point that conservatives treat 'unity' with the same contempt liberals have for 'heresy') So long as this is the case, simply stating the fact that we should desire unity is a good starting point. Once we all see the need for it, I think hammering out practical solutions will get a lot easier. (You know that many PCA and OPC presbyters just don't think visible catholicity is all that big of a deal since attempts at any kind of merger were short lived.) If the OPC and PCA came together, we'd learn a lot as we worked out our differences, and that wisdom could be used in taking on more difficult ecumenical projects with churches that seem further from us.

2. In a way, what forced me to think about these issues was the realization that I disagreed with so many things even in a very good church like RPC. I've learned the value of 'godly toleration' (I hope) from my own experience. Basically, in thinking through your previous question, I was just applying the same principles I've applied at RPC to a larger situation. I have also found that hashing differences out with people in the local church can be the fastest way to grow spiritually: you begin to learn to articulate your own convictions in a peaceful way, and learn that other points of view have often captured some aspect of the truth you overlooked. If this is true in a body as homogenous as RPC, it seems it would be even more true in a broader ecclesiastical setting. Perhaps taking on the ecumenical project is the key to attaining maturity (cf. Eph. 4).

3. Along these same lines, reading broadly has opened my eyes to quite a bit. I have found there are godly, thoughtful theologians in Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Methodism, Lutheranism, Anglicanism, etc. Even the Baptists produce a decent theologian from time to time. :-) A lot of Reformed people think this kind of reading is dangerous. Certainly one must use discernment, but I'd actually say never leaving the Reformed ghetto is what is dangerous. Just because other traditions don't express everything in the same categories as we do doesn't make them necessarily heretical. I think the Reformed branch of the church is uniquely advantaged in that it seems more able

to incorporate the best insights from other traditions (whereas, say the Lutherans, to take one example, have a much harder time incorporating our insights into their theology).

4. I think a knowledge of church history is also helpful. I have found Luther and Calvin to be far more like the Medievals who preceded them than the moderns who came after them (especially modern Americans). Daryl Hart, of Westminster seminary, had a fine article where he pointed out that if Calvin were to walk into many of our liturgically low presbyterian churches today, he'd be tempted to look to Canterbury or Wittenburg. Another theologian said, tongue in cheek, if the Reformers were around today, they'd say just the opposite of what they said in the 16th century! The point is that even those of us who call ourselves Reformed have really moved a long way from our heritage (sometimes for the better, but usually for the worse).

5. I think the sad thing about our situation is not so much that we drive past a lot of churches to get to the one we like (however troublesome this may be), but that the churches we drive by generally have no real sense of connection or fellowship with one another. Even if I'm going to drive past Grace Covenant and CrossPointe and EvFree to get to RPC, it would be great (at the very least) if we felt, experienced, and put into practice some kind of catholicity. Joint diaconal ministry projects, worship services, mutual prayer and pastoral oversight, and so forth might be one way to build up a sense of unity. Another possibility is replacing denominationalism with metropolitanism, or at least an overlapping of the two. If cities are becoming more and more important, as the sociologists tell us, we might find ourselves more concerned with what the other churches in our city are doing than what other PCA churches in Mississippi or wherever are doing. Pan-denominational city-wide church associations are already forming in some cities in America. This may be one way forward (though I'll admit it would be a lot of work).

6. Denominations may be dying out anyway. Ever since the rise of liberalism, the differences between true believers in various communions have been greatly relativized. What I want to know now is not so much if you are a Lutheran or a Methodist, but do you actually believe the Nicene Creed? Maybe this is why God rased up liberalism: to drive true believers back together. Of course, if that is the case, it's hard to tell at this point!

7. I can think of several scenarios God might bring about in order to reunify his church (though not all of them are pleasant). I'm not a prophet, so these are

thought experiments, not predictions.

-- God lets the church in America basically die out (perhaps as punishment for our ecclesiastical sectarianism). He begins to work in other places in the world, such as Africa or Asia, that are not as individualistically oriented and may value church unity more than we have. (Plus, they learn from the failure of the American church that sectarianism is a bad thing that should never be tried again). These churches could then re-evangelize America, someday, I guess. (The problem is we have already exported our particular brand of sectarian Christianity to so many parts of the world, especially through para-church missions organizations).

-- God brings about a fierce persecution of the church. While in jail, or while walking to the stake, members of different denominations realize what they have in common is greater than what separates them (a common enemy unites!). Members of different denominations work together to protect each other, etc., and soon find they're really functioning as one church anyway.

-- This one may seem unlikely given our political situation, but historically there is precedent: A godly civil magistrate is raised up by God. He wants the church to be unified for the sake of the public good (cf. Rom. 13:4). He calls a nation wide church council (per WCF 23.3, original edition, and 31.2). He firmly, but lovingly, insists Christians settle their differences there. A kind of 'national church consensus' emerges. Sure, there are dissenters, but civil and ecclesiastical pressure keeps their numbers minimal.

I really don't believe any kind of broad scale church reunion can come about on its own. We're simply too sinful for that. We're too comfortable in our sectarianism to REALLY do anything about it. Thus, I think it is likely God will force church union from the outside. In short, we just don't know what the future holds; our situation is really unprecedented as far as church history goes. So God will have to do some 'new thing' --he'll have to shake things up quite a bit -- to bring about Frame's hoped for reunion.

What do we do in the meantime? I guess we try our best to put into practice the Melachthonian creed (I've also seen it attributed to Baxter) as best we can: In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity. We can join Jesus in praying for the church's unity and we can treat other Christians -- even those from different denominations -- with love and respect as we strive for like-mindedness.

Perhaps these thoughts are enough to keep us from the brink of despair...

## **Life in the Father's House: Why Should I Join a Church?**

By Rich Lusk

By and large, the church today is in a real mess. Because so many churches are unfaithful and unfruitful, it is somewhat easy for us to assume the church is not essential to the Christian life. We end up with a love-hate relationship with the church, involving ourselves only when it seems to be to our convenience or benefit. But is this view, however prevalent, biblical? Does God require his people to attach themselves to a local church? Is it really all that important to take formal membership vows?

The biblical answer is clear. However, in order to see it, we must not allow ourselves to be blinded by modern assumptions. Admittedly, there is no verse that says, "Thou shalt join a church." But that is because the early Christians took it for granted that church membership was not an option. In Acts 2:47, we are told of the results of the apostles' ministry following Pentecost: "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." To be saved was inseparable from being added to the church. Church membership is certainly not a prerequisite of salvation, but it is a necessary consequence of it. No where does the New Testament sanction the idea that a person could trust in Christ for redemption but then refuse to join the church. If we are united to the head, Christ, how can we not be united to his body, the church? When God calls a person to himself, he also calls that person into the community of the saints. Those who refuse to join the church must be viewed as unbelievers because they are treating themselves as unbelievers (Matthew 18:15-20).

God commands us to submit to the authority of his ordained representatives, namely the elders of a local church. Hebrews 13:17 instructs us to, "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account." But how can we obey our elders if we have not formally committed ourselves to a particular local church? The only way to obey this command is to be part of a church. Moreover, how can elders keep watch over the souls of their flock if they do not know who is in the flock? How can they give an account to God of those under their care if they are not clearly identified by church membership?

The church is pictured throughout the Old and New Testaments as the place of salvation. The Westminster Confession of Faith declares, "The visible

church...consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (25.2). Martin Luther, the great Reformer of the sixteenth century, stated that, "Apart from the church, salvation is impossible." Fellow Reformer John Calvin also saw the necessity of the church. Calvin, along with Luther., was simply following the teaching of earlier church fathers, who followed the apostle Paul in affectionately viewing the church as our spiritual mother (Galatians 4:26). Calvin stated: "Because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn from the simple title 'mother' how useful, indeed necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off the flesh, we become like the angels. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been her pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom, one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation. ..God's fatherly father and the special witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church. The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of the Word and sacraments."

Why is the church central to Christianity? The church certainly has no intrinsic power to save sinners in herself. But the church is God's means of gathering and perfecting his people. The church is God's temple, built not with stones and mortar as the Old Testament temple had been, but built out of flesh and blood. Christians are the living stones that make up God's temple, God's unique dwelling place (1 Peter 2:4-8). The church is the covenant community, the true heir of all God's promises (I Peter 2:9-10). The church is the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God that Old Testament saints longed to see (Hebrews 11:10, 12:18-24). When the church is faithful in preaching the gospel to the nations and administering the sacraments, not even the gates of hell can withstand her (Matthew 16:19).

With this background, it is understandable that we would be urged t<sup>o</sup>not forsake "the assembling of ourselves together" (Hebrews 10:25). But this duty is not a burden. The psalmist longed to be in the presence of God and his people: "I will declare your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly will praise you" (Psalm 22:22; see also Psalm 35:18, 122:1, 133:1-3). It is true that the church will never be perfect in history. But we are called to bear one another's sins and

burdens, pursuing peace and unity in the bond of the Spirit. The church is the bride of Christ; he died for her and continues to cleanse her until that day when she is perfect (Ephesians 5:25-32). In the mean time, we must not let the remaining impurities in the church keep us from her fellowship. In a sense, we could say the church is like Noah's ark — she may smell on the inside, but it sure beats drowning in the wrath of God on the outside.

Thus we see the church is God's instrument of salvation. To her have been entrusted the Word and sacraments; through these means of grace, God grants His people eternal life. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the church is the catalyst of Christian growth. But there is a flip side to this truth. Not everyone in the church is saved. The Bible speaks of hypocrites (those who merely pretend to be Christians, but really aren't) and apostates (those who once pretended to be Christians, but have now shown their true colors). John spoke of those who abandoned the church, thus proving they had never been saved (1 John 2:19). We may not presume we are eternally secure just because we belong to a local church.

The church may be far from perfect. Indeed, Redeemer Presbyterian is certainly far from perfect. But our hope is the grace of God, which formed the church, sanctifies the church, and will someday glorify the church. The church is the glorious body and beautiful bride of Christ. The church is God's temple, God's army, God's household. Thank God for the church, and thank God for bringing you into his church.