

Reclaiming Catholicity: Cosmic Catholicity

By Rich Lusk

At the heart of any quest for restored catholicity is the canon of Vincent of Lerins: “Now in the Catholic Church itself we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all.” That’s not to say his canon is easy to apply, or even fully adequate after twenty centuries of doctrinal development and dispute. Even in Vincent’s day, it required nuances, caveats, and qualifications. But Vincent does remind us that we should always focus most intently on those things that all Christians hold together: the basic doctrines articulated in the early ecumenical creeds concerning the Triune nature of the Creator God, the Incarnation of the eternal Son in Jesus Christ, and redemption through the death and resurrection of the God-man. In our teaching, our liturgies, and our prayer, it would do wonders for Christian unity if we kept coming back to these basic touchstones of Christian orthodoxy, what C. S. Lewis, following Richard Baxter, called “mere Christianity.” This is not to say we cannot move beyond these fundamentals into particulars, but for too long we have majored on minors and overemphasized denominational distinctives, at the expense of unity. Our confessions have become polemical documents, used more to distinguish different flavors of Christian faith from one another than to demarcate the faithful from the unfaithful. The time is ripe for reconsidering the close family resemblances we bear to one another

rather than staring only at our distinguishing features. Just as there are greater and lesser commandments in Scripture, so not every doctrine carries equal weight. Some doctrinal areas are non-negotiable, while other areas can make allowance for variety of expression and even error, without threatening the health of the church.

The issue of church unity forces us to ask some hard questions. In fact, these may be the most pressing questions facing us at the present moment. 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)? What can we learn from one another if we take the time to seriously listen? Why is it often taboo to read authors from other branches of the church? Does our present doctrinal diversity itself point to some greater theological synthesis to be brought about in the future? Divisions in the body of Christ call for serious self-examination and repentance (cf. 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 then set out to deal with their differences under one roof, 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.

In the end, only God can unify his fragmented people, but there is reason to think he will – not only because of the glorious picture painted by the prophets (e.g., Ezek. 36-37), but also because Jesus prays for our unity (Jn. 17). How will it come about? Will there be massive repentance amongst Christians, leading to an evangelical reunion? Will God raise up an *uber*-theologian who provides a theological system so complete and so compelling, it draws various traditions together? Will it take a widespread persecution, allowing Christians to work out their differences in jail cells and prison camps? Perhaps God will raise up a benevolent dictator, who forces the issue by insisting that a united church is in the best interests of the empire. I do not know. But I do know that we need to do what we can, where we are, with the resources we have, to bring about the visible, tangible unity of the church. There is most certainly a unity we have in Christ that remains, even when we divide from one another. But instead of obscuring that unity, we have a duty to build upon, manifest it, reveal it, and cultivate it. Without attempting a comprehensive plan of reform, let me make a few suggestions. Certainly, we must learn that “catholic” is not a bad word. In fact, it captures the essence of New Covenant faith. It is a thoroughly eschatological category. The term, first used by patristic great Ignatius of Antioch and then incorporated in the Nicene Creed, simply means “universal.” In its earliest usage, it distinguished the faithful and orthodox from the heretical and schismatic. But it also

reminds us two further important truths about the nature of the kingdom Christ inaugurated.

First, the kingdom is for all races, tribes, languages, families, ethnic groups, or whatever other way we want to classify the diversity of the human race. The church offers salvation to all. Her ministries are for all. Her gospel is for all. Unlike the Old Covenant, in which the true religion was entrusted to one nation, now all the families of the earth are invited to partake of the Abrahamic blessing (Gal. 3:8).

“Catholicity,” in other words, is a summons to global mission. It is both indicative and imperative. Because the church *is* catholic, she must *become* catholic. Catholicity reminds the church she must be always reaching out, always pouring forth love and grace, always incarnating God’s love to the world (cf. Jn. 20:21). “Catholicity” is the answer to postmodern multiculturalism as well as the lingering racism of modernism. In the church, fragmented humanity is put back together. Augustine pictured the fall of Adam as a china doll hitting the ground and shattering into countless chipped and cracked pieces which now fill the world. In the church, the pieces are put back together in a beautiful new mosaic. Never again can the church be identified primarily with one nation or people group as in the Old Covenant. “Catholicity” reminds us that our ultimate citizenship is in Christ’s kingdom, a kingdom which is called to disciple every nation of the earth (Matt. 28:18-20).

But catholicity not only grounds the church’s mission to humanity; it is also prophetic and hopeful. “Catholicity” means that God desires to include the nations of the earth in his kingdom. His salvation is not a tiny reclamation project for a few ‘lucky’ souls; it is a massive,

cosmos-embracing work of renewal and re-creation. "Catholicity" captures the essence of the apostolic proclamation, namely, that Jesus has been crowned Lord of all and so now all things are to be gathered up under his headship (cf. Eph. 1:10). Jesus did not come to condemn the world or snatch a tiny handful of elect individuals out of the world before casting the rest of creation into the dustbin. Rather, he came to save *the world* (cf. Jn. 3:16-17). His saving work is universal -- catholic -- in that sense. By confessing faith in the "catholic" church, we are claiming God's promise to give the kingdoms of the earth to the King he enthroned in heaven at his right hand (Ps. 2). We are asking God to make the kingdoms of this world the Kingdom of Jesus Christ (cf. Rev. 11:15). We are petitioning God to fulfill his eschatological design for the cosmos (Rom. 8:17ff).