

## Churches show unity best by servitude (Fr. John Parker)

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**From the beginning, it has not been so. A group of churches - among them Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and others - organize a sunrise Easter service to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. At Thanksgiving, a group of churches prays together annually. On Saturday evenings, a Roman Catholic Church offers Mass in a Lutheran church's sanctuary. An Episcopal priest serves as the pastor of a Presbyterian church.**

At a certain level, these are unbelievable signs of generosity and Christian love - like a situation where two church groups pray together, the second of which exists historically and theologically in reaction against the first. These are all attempts to

bring unity to the churches, waving the banner of John 17:11, Jesus' prayer to his father, «that they may be one, even as we are one.»

But do these services and activities foster unity? Or are they outward and visible efforts, however sincere, that lack interior substance? Can «ecumenical» activity – as highlighted and encouraged, for example, by the World Council of Churches' «Week of Prayer for Christian Unity,» marked this year Jan. 18-25 – «work» today?

Christians always have had both an essential call to, and existence in, unity. Since the earliest days following Jesus Christ's death, resurrection and ascension, this unity has been outward in form and inward in essence. Christians believed and dogmatized «that which is from the beginning.» In the book of Acts, we read of Christians living and dying together, even holding all their possessions in common. We find in the letters and writings of those who learned personally from the disciples of Jesus – saints such as Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus and others – unity of faith and belief.

For these Christians, like their spiritual progeny especially found in the Orthodox Church, when some facet of faith and belief was questioned, councils were convened to determine what had been believed from the beginning. Throughout history, there have been many such councils, though seven have been called «ecumenical,» meaning «from the whole Christian world.» The first and last were convened in Nicaea in 325 A.D. and 787 A.D., respectively. Each of these councils dealt specifically with theologically pressing issues such as: Was Jesus both God and man? Or how does the incarnation of God affect our view of material things?

By 1054 A.D., the Christian East and West parted ways over a number of issues, the most important of which was authority: Who decides what and how? To this day, the Orthodox Church maintains that doctrine, biblical interpretation and other matters of the church are determined in council together (as described above), with reference always to «that which is from the beginning.» Five hundred years later, more fractioning of the Christian West ensued with the Protestant Reformation, and such splintering continues to occur even to this day. I recently heard the most petty of such examples, where a congregationally run church actually divided over a disputed phone bill. Yes, truly.

Especially since the 16th century, schisms have run rampant in the Christian West, mostly over matters of authority. In almost all of these cases, splits occurred as a result of one group's insistence on its interpretation of Holy Scripture over the other's. Should babies be baptized or only adults? Is the Lord's Supper a memorial or a reality? Do the bread and wine change into the body and blood of Christ or not? Is the church hierarchical or local? The Bible speaks to all of these concerns.

The trouble is, one can read just about anything he wants into the Scriptures. So who decides who is right? A question of authority.

Enter the contemporary ecumenical movement. At some point in the past century or so (the details of which are not within the scope of this writing), Christians of a variety of «flavors» have come to realize that their separation is not good. This is a noble insight. Not only is it not «biblical,» but it also serves as a poor witness to non-Christians, who are not likely to be convinced of the truth of Christianity as a result of the squabbles and schisms of some of its adherents. And so there have been organizations founded, such as the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, as well as scores of local organizations and initiatives, each of which has made efforts at re-establishing «unity» among the churches.

But is the church disunited? From the Orthodox Christian perspective, the answer is plainly «no.» The church is one – still one – and professes to be so actually and truly when we recite the Nicene Creed (formalized nearly 1,700 years ago): «We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.» The gates of hell, according to the Scriptures, cannot prevail against the church; neither is the body of Christ severed from the head. Nor are there many «bodies» of Christ. What makes the church one is that it believes, teaches and practices that which is from the beginning. And those who believe such show the same by their profession of faith and receive Communion together as a sign of that faith, demonstrating the essential oneness of the church. Anything else is bickering over personal interpretations of things.

From the earliest days, Christians have taught and recognized that a Christian cannot pick and choose what he or she believes. «As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ» (Galatians 3:27). As a servant (or «slave» to be more accurate) of Christ, we voluntarily lay down our will for his.

The question Jesus asked St. Peter we also are asked: «Who do you say that I am?» And there is an answer. Since those days, Orthodox Christians have continued to believe and proclaim the earliest answer to that question. Consider the opening words of the First Epistle of St. John: «That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ... that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.» Or the words of St. Paul: «For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.» (1 Corinthians 11:23). We believe what was passed along was what was received from the

beginning.

Prayer services and «Weeks of Prayer for Christian Unity» will prove empty and lacking until every separated Christian and ecclesiastical group asks the hard question: «Who do you say that I am?» Or more specifically, «What have Christians always believed about Jesus?» Once answered, individuals and groups then must act on that finding.

In reality, as «nice» as joint sunrise Easter services seem, as pleasant as it may be to share an annual, generic Thanksgiving service and as amazing as it is that Roman Catholics serve Mass in a Lutheran church's sanctuary, these all share one fatal flaw: no unity of faith. After the sunrise, the groups all go to their churches to celebrate in their own way. At Thanksgiving, the Great Thanksgiving – the Eucharist of our Lord – cannot be celebrated together. A Lutheran may attend the Roman Catholic service in her own church building, but may not receive Communion. Because the groups do not believe together that which is from the beginning, their unity is and can only be external and temporary, a mask covering their persistent, fundamental divisions.

The church is one. It is the holy body of Christ, living and breathing from Pentecost to this day. Every person's task is twofold. First, one must find out for himself what he believes but shouldn't, or what he doesn't believe but should, about Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Second, he must unite himself to the church, wherein we find the beginning of our salvation while we breathe on this Earth, remembering that Jesus Christ left us a holy body, not a book.

There is, in truth, hope, and we need not despair. This is a narrow way; in fact, it is «the» narrow way. And yet, in the midst of the struggle, God is with us. If there is one «ecumenical» activity that can always and immediately bear fruit, it is serving those to whom Jesus referred to as «the least of these.» All self-professing Christians need to serve the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the needy and the imprisoned together. In the end, our judgment on the last day will depend on it (John 5:28ff). Lord have mercy.

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