

Unity in Christ: Baptism, Faith, and the Eucharistic Koinonia

Introduction

Our Internal Memorandum from 2004 (Bari) says “there is no doubt that Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church act out of different conceptions of the Church.” The purpose of this paper is to test that claim 1) by identifying the broad agreement that has emerged in the course of our thirty-year dialogue with regard to the topic for this session – “Unity in Christ: Baptism, Faith, and the Eucharistic Koinonia” – and 2) by presenting key tenants of Disciples ecclesiology that bear directly on this topic. My hope for the paper and subsequent discussion is that, with God’s help, they will clarify our similarities and differences, moving us toward “actions that will make [the relationship between our churches] more intense and more profound.”¹

Every church has an ecclesiology, however explicit or implicit, that addresses the relationship between the church as human community and as the divinely-instituted body of Christ, between the individual and the communal, between the local congregation and the universal church, and between the church of history and the promised gathering of all things in Christ. It is certainly true, as the Bari memorandum suggests, that the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church have

¹ “Apostolicity and Catholicity,” The agreed statement of the Disciples of Christ-Roman Catholic Church international dialogue (1977-82), par. 57.

weighted these tensions differently. What I want to explore is the extent to which our positions can be seen as mutually edifying rather than mutually exclusive.

My own thinking about these matters has been sharpened by reflection on various ecclesiological essays of Pope Benedict XVI. His understanding of church is, in many ways, a welcome corrective to characteristic Disciples distortions, including undue emphasis on the individual and the local community of faith. Disciples, however, will have real difficulty with some of Pope Benedict's distinctive emphases; my own reading of his work has set several of my Disciples-shaped convictions in sharp relief. In the paper that follows, I have preserved something of this mental conversation by including a brief section on the Pope's ecclesiology. In order to distinguish these writings from the papal office, I will refer to their author as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

I begin, however, not with differences but with areas of shared affirmation.

Emerging Consensus Regarding Unity in Christ

The 2004 Internal Memorandum says that both the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church affirm the gift of Christ's presence

“experienced in the church;” but, in fact, this formulation is too weak. Far better is the title of the second agreed statement, “The Church as Communion in Christ.” Disciples will likely be hesitant to say that the presence of Christ is restricted to the church (see Ephesians 1: 22-23, Colossians 1: 15-20); but both churches, along with our partners in the ecumenical movement, acknowledge that the presence of Christ is the ground of ecclesial identity. To put it another way, communion with Christ (or participation in Christ) is the foundation of the church’s existence and its essential nature.

Further, our churches together affirm, in the language of the World Council of Church’s Faith and Order Commission, that “the Spirit incorporates human beings into the body of Christ through faith and baptism, enlivens and strengthens them as the body of Christ nourished and sustained at the Lord’s Supper, and leads them to the full accomplishment of their vocation.”² The authors of our first agreed statement, “Apostolicity and Catholicity,” were not sufficiently precise when they wrote that “Baptism is ... the fundamental source of our oneness in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection;”³ The source of our oneness is the triune God. But baptism and profession of the gospel are the means, the signs, through which the Spirit acts to incorporate persons into the church. “To [the] one Church belong all those who are

² The Nature and Purpose of the Church, Faith and Order Paper No. 181, par. 11.

³ “Apostolicity and Catholicity,” par. 22.

baptized in water and the Spirit with the authentic confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God.”⁴

We also agree that “the oneness achieved by grace in baptism should find manifestation and completion in the anamnesis of the sacrifice of Christ for all humanity at the table of the one Lord.”⁵ Participation in the communion of the church begins through baptism and confession of faith and is sustained through continuing eucharistic fellowship.⁶ In the eucharist, we have said with one another, “the Spirit makes Christ present to the members of the community” and, thus, “... renews, makes real and deepens visible fellowship with God.”⁷

In the sacraments and confession of faith, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians not only have communion with Christ but also with one another. Our agreed statements have repeatedly and explicitly expressed this theological insight:

- “By its very nature, baptism impels Christians toward oneness. In baptism, a person is incorporated into Christ Jesus and into his body, the Church. The fundamental unity which God

⁴ Ibid., par. 56. See The Nature and Purpose of the Church, par. 20.

⁵ Ibid., par. 32.

⁶ See “The Church as Communion in Christ,” The agreed statement of the Disciples of Christ – Roman Catholic Church international dialogue (1983-92), par. 49. See The Nature and Purpose of the Church, par. 78.

⁷ Ibid., pars. 28 and 29.

has given us is rooted in the sacrament and cannot be destroyed.”⁸

- “The faith which commits a person to Christ commits that person to the Church which is his Body; because faith is given by the one Spirit of Christ, it is the one basic faith that binds Roman Catholics, Disciples and other Christians in one fellowship in that Spirit.”⁹
- “God in Christ invites to the Eucharist, and through the Holy Spirit binds together into one body all who break the one loaf and share the one cup. At the Lord’s table the unity of the Church is accomplished, for believers are joined to Christ and to one another.”¹⁰

To put it simply, the fundamental bonds of communion with Christ – faith, baptism, and the eucharist – are also the fundamental bonds of communion with one another. Thus we can say that they are constitutive of the church, have theological priority in the life of the

⁸ “Apostolicity and Catholicity,” par. 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, par. 38.

¹⁰ “The Church as Communion,” par. 32. This dialogue has also affirmed that the eucharist is foundational for the church’s mission, that from sharing Christ’s body at the table we are sent as Christ’s body to care for the world” (par. 31)

church, because “...they are events in which we have the promise of the presence of the communion-creating Christ.”¹¹

Having said all that, I will add that Protestants, if we were writing these documents by ourselves, would likely add the Word of God as a constitutive mark of the church. The phrase “Word of God” by which is meant “God’s revelation and self-giving in Christ,” present in the life and proclamation of the church —¹² suggests that God “encounters” humans, that revelation is more like an event than the disclosure of supernatural truth. Calvin insisted that the Word of God is not simply information about God but is the instrument of the Spirit through which faith is called forth, union with Christ is effected, and grace imparted. Right proclamation of the Word (which is fully attested to in scripture but is not reducible to scripture) is the effective means, wrote Calvin, by which fellowship with Christ, and thus with one another, is brought about. The Word of God here assumes the function that medieval theology in the West ascribed to the sacraments.¹³

Our dialogue, consistent with other parts of the modern ecumenical movement, has affirmed “the necessary link between [proclamation of]

¹¹ This formulation comes from a study paper on “Baptism and the Unity of the Church,” written by the Institute for Ecumenical Research (Strasbourg). See Michael Root and Risto Saarinen, eds., Baptism and the Unity of the Church (Eerdmans, 1998), p.21.

¹² This definition is taken from the report of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order (Montreal, 1963).

¹³ A fine summary of Calvin’s understanding of the Word of God is found in B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Fortress, 1993), pp. 76-86.

the Word and the sacraments.” The Word, we have acknowledged, has its own efficacy, but “its saving power is experienced most fully when the Word is received with the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.”¹⁴

According to the Faith and Order text, The Nature and Purpose of the Church, the church “is the creation of God’s Word and Holy Spirit Incarnate in Jesus Christ, [the Word] is testified to by the Church and proclaimed in preaching, in sacraments, and in service.”¹⁵ I suspect we would concur.

In summary, our stated topic for this session of the dialogue – “Unity in Christ: Baptism, Faith, and the Eucharistic Koinonia” – points toward a substantial ecclesiological convergence. Disciples and Roman Catholic conceptions of the church indeed differ in significant ways, but even these differences, to which we now turn (by way of conversation with Cardinal Ratzinger), rest on a considerable base of shared affirmation.

Ecclesiology in the Writings of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

There is much in the ecclesiology of Cardinal Ratzinger that I find very appealing, especially his emphasis on the intrinsically communal character of human life. A human being, he writes in his Introduction to

¹⁴ “Receiving and Handing on the Faith: The Mission and Responsibility of the Church,” the agreed statement of the Disciples of Christ – Roman Catholic Church international dialogue (1993-2002), par. 2.5.

¹⁵ The Nature and Purpose of the Church, pars. 9 and 10.

Christian Theology, “ is more himself the more he is with ‘the other.’... Only through ‘the other’ and through ‘being’ with ‘the other’ does he come to himself.” And this being with entails being for others – not as individual acts of compassion but as expressions of our essential humanity. This, it seems to me, is a most important corrective to the “ontological individualism” that infects modern culture to its core.

It follows that the content and outward expression of Christian faith are, likewise, focused on the union of those who, through sin, are estranged. In line with Henri de Lubac, Cardinal Ratzinger asserts that “Christianity is, by its very nature, a mystery of union.... The essence of redemption is the mending of the shattered image of God, the union of the human race through and in the One who stands for all and in whom, as Paul says (Galatians 3:28), all are one: Jesus Christ.” Communion with Christ is the content of grace, and its consequence is human life with and for one another.

All of this is grounded in the communal nature of God, which itself is the ground of the church and the key to its essential nature. Cardinal Ratzinger would surely agree with the following statement from Faith and Order: “The church is not the sum of individual believers in communion with God. It is not primarily a communion of believers with each other. It is their common partaking in God’s own life whose innermost being is

communion.” Some Protestants have reacted with surprise to the strong endorsement of ecumenical dialogue (“...disposed to do all in [my] power to promote the fundamental cause of ecumenism.”) given by Pope Benedict immediately after his election; but that simply betrays a lack of familiarity with his theology. Unitatis redintegratio is the central theme in his writings.

There are, however, three aspects of Cardinal Ratzinger’s ecclesiology that, while containing much insight, will not maintain a proper balance in the eyes of most Disciples.

1) Cardinal Ratzinger’s ecclesiology begins with the complete identification of Christ with the church. For him a more adequate formulation of our overall theme would be “The Presence of Christ as the Church.” Miroslav Volf summarizes by saying that, for Cardinal Ratzinger, “the church is a single subject with Christ When the church acts, Christ is acting; where Christ acts, the church is acting.” It follows that since the church is one subject with Christ, it alone has the authority to interpret Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Indeed, Christ speaks only through the voice of the church.

2) The anthropological center of Cardinal Ratzinger’s ecclesiology is summed up in this sentence from Principles of Catholic Theology:

“Baptism means, then, that we lose ourselves as a separate, independent ‘I’ and find ourselves again in a new ‘I’ [i.e., the ‘I’ of Christ which is the church].” To be baptized is to cease to exist as an individual by entering into the corporate personality of Christ; to believe is to be taken up into the church’s decision of faith by becoming a single existence with Christ. It is no longer I who confess but the church that confesses in me.

Again, Cardinal Ratzinger grounds this theology of human person in his understanding of the triune God. The “persons” of the trinity, he argues, are constituted by their actions and relationships; the Son is nothing other than the one who is sent by the Father. So also with humans. Through baptism, there is no longer an “I” behind the relationships one has with Christ and, through him, with the others who together are his body. As Volf, observes, “... by understanding persons as pure relationships, one never gets to the notion of the rights of persons. Since the person nowhere stands on its own,’ as pure relation it cannot have any rights over against the others.” Thus, Cardinal Ratzinger’s relational theology ends up reinforcing the power of those who express the voice of the church.

3) Cardinal Ratzinger’s ecclesiology, as far as I can tell, has always been eucharistically centered, which allows him, in some places, to ascribe full churchliness to the local congregation instead of seeing it as a “lower”

unit of an institution. Every local assembly in which the eucharist is celebrated is “an immediate an actual realization of the church itself” since it has the full presence of Christ.

Such a view, however, stands in real tension with other of his theological writings which suggest that the local churches are parts of the universal church. Since Christ, present in the eucharist, is always undivided, one cannot have Christ in local celebration if not in communion with other congregations celebrating the eucharist. In Cardinal Ratzinger’s theology, “just as a human being cannot make himself into a Christian, but rather must receive Christian existence from the church, so also a congregation cannot make itself into a church, but rather must receive its being as church from the whole church.” Theological priority, here clearly shifts to the universal body of Christ.

Elements of a Disciples Ecclesiology

Our topic, and the conversation with Cardinal Ratzinger, raised the correct questions. Disciples have answered those questions, often more implicitly than explicitly, by trying to hold elements of the church in proper balance.

1. Christ and the Church.

I am sure there have been times when Disciples overemphasized the church as human organizations; but these are distortions of our basic ecclesiological claim that the church is constituted by the presence of Christ in it. In the language of Faith and Order, it is a creature of the Word through the power of the Holy Spirit.

From the Disciples perspective, however, it is also possible to overemphasize the church as divinely constituted to the point that “the church is the presence of Christ.” As Protestants see it, when this happens, the Church loses the primary criterion of its own renewal. The historical church, as human organization, repeatedly obscures Christ’s presence and must be called back to its own basic nature. Over identification of Christ with the church can mean that chastisement of the church is viewed as attack on Christ himself – thus curtailing the impulse for reformation.

In this regard, a key scriptural passage for Protestants is Ephesians 5: 25-33 in which Christ love for the church is compared to the marriage bond between a husband and wife. The two become one flesh yet remain distinct, which the author of the epistle can only call “a great mystery” (Ephesians 5: 32).

Friedrich Schleiermacher clearly had this issue in mind when he penned his famous distinction between Protestantism and Catholicism: the former “makes the individual’s relation to the church dependent on his relation to Christ” while the latter “makes the individual’s relation to Christ dependent on his relation to the church.” Ecumenical dialogue has led, however, to the recognition that this formulation, while broadly useful, is too simplistic. In the complex reality of all churches, the relation of individuals to the church depends on their relation to Christ, just as their relation to Christ depends on, and is shaped by, their relation to the church.

2. Individual and community.

I have already acknowledged that Disciples are always in danger of confessing and acting individualistically; but individualism is a distortion of our claim that Christian faith involves both the formative role of the community and the free response of the individual believer. A believer’s Baptist tradition such as the Disciples certainly emphasizes the personal appropriation of God’s grace and its expression in Discipleship; but this is set within a eucharistically-centered sense of community. At our best, we affirm that no one comes to faith alone. We don’t invent the faith, we receive it through proclamation, witness, and nurture of the church.

From our perspective, however, it is also possible to overemphasize the communal. The outcome of the communities nurture is, we pray, a person's own act of surrender to Christ, something that the church cannot do or give. Paul, it seems to me, is a major informant for this typical Protestant understanding of the relationship between individual and community. The apostle suggests that we are incorporated into Christ without loss of individuality or identity, becoming like the interdependent but distinct and diverse members of a body. "The faith that you have, "he writes to Christians in Rome," have as your own conviction before God" (Romans 14: 22). Even though we are commonly "in Christ," we remain subjects-in relationship – formed by our relations but not determined by them.

Our different "weighting" of this tension is expressed, of course, in different approaches to authority. For example, when the Roman Catholic Archbishop in St. Louis instructs priest to withhold the eucharist from Catholic politicians who publicly disagree with the church's teaching on such matters as abortion and stem cell research, it strikes most Disciples as overly coercive and hierarchical, giving too much weight to the tradition of corporate teachings and not enough to the dictates of conscience. On the other hand, many Disciples now realize that our reluctance/inability to teach with authority can leave the church spiritually innervated and socially compromised.

At the time that the Disciples in North America “restructured” in the 1960’s, leaders in our communion looked for an ecclesiological foundation that promotes accountability without coercion and found it in the Reformed understanding of covenant. Every serious church covenant emphasizes the authority of Christ which strongly tempers personal freedom with communal responsibility. Members of the covenant community, we have said, are mutually accountable to one another because they are commonly accountable to Jesus Christ who is Lord and head of the church. The Reformed tradition doesn’t speak of covenant as subordination to a human authority or power but as ordination to communal Discipleship by Christ who is the source of authority. This is, needless to say, a very difficult way of being church! – but one that Disciples think is coherent and theologically defensible.

3. Local and universal.

I know there are times when Disciples overemphasize the church as local faith community, even referring to local congregations as “autonomous;” but, again, this is a distortion of our more thoughtful and official claims. In North America, the restructure of the 1960’s was precisely intended to remove language of autonomy from the church’s self-understanding. The church, we said, exist in various “manifestations” that are interdependent – the character of their relationship being that of

covenant. We are baptized in a particular congregation into the one church of Jesus Christ, and thereby united with all who profess faith in him.

From our perspective, however, it is also possible to overemphasize the church universal, turning local eucharistic communities into branch offices of the church. Our Reformed heritage affirms that each gathered community of baptized believers, in which the gospel is preached and the sacrament celebrated is truly church; it has the whole Christ along with the means of salvation. To put it another way, each local congregation in which Christ dwells by faith is the catholic church, not simply the sub-unit of it. The church is universal because it participates through the spirit in the person and work of Christ who is universal.

A key biblical text for such reflection is Matthew 18: 20 which speaks of Christ presence among those (even two or three) who gather in a particular place in his name. Paul seems to operate out of this assumption when he addresses his epistles “To the church of God that is in Corinth ... together with all those who in everyplace call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Corinthians 1: 2). There is no church above the local assembly only in and with it.

By way of summary, the following statement from the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches captures what Disciples leaders, if I'm not mistaken, with regard as a proper balance:

The local church is truly church. It has everything it needs to be church in its own situation.... The local church is not an administrative or juridical sub-section or part of the universal Church.... [But] the local church is not a free-standing, stealth-sufficient reality. As part of a network of communion, the local church maintains its reality as church by relating to other churches.

Our different weighting of this tension is expressed, it seems to me, in different understandings of Catholicity. Reformed and Free churches generally affirm that the church shows its catholicity less through trans-contextual consensus than through its appropriate adaptability to diverse local settings and, thus, through its identification with the mission needs of particular places. This accounts for the willingness of Disciples to participate in local (i.e., National or Regional) church union efforts. Our great temptation is to over-identify with a particular context, which only underscores the importance for us participating in the global ecumenical movement.

4. Already and not yet.

My "mental conversation" with Cardinal Ratzinger made less direct mention of this tension but it has been implicit throughout the preceding discussion. Historically, Protestants have argued that the one catholic

church is “invisible,” consisting of “all the elect who have been, are, or shall be gathered into one.” This is not to deny the importance of the visible, historical church (the church must have material, institutional form), but rather to provide a theological principle for criticizing it. This principle, as Calvin stressed, guards against the claim that “we” alone are the church or know its true boundaries. The problem, of course, is that this teaching (when visible and invisible are not held in adequate relationship) has contributed to the division of the church with groups splitting from the other parts of the visible body in the name of an invisible catholicity.

Partly for this reason, contemporary Protestant ecclesiology speaks little of visible – invisible, preferring to emphasize a different, though related, dialectic: already-not yet. The church of history, is, at best, a provisional representation of the Reign of God; it expresses the full character of Christ only ambiguously – which means that the truly Catholic church is always reforming by seeking to be formed more fully to Christ.

It is certainly possible to undervalue the visible, institutional, historical church, seeing it as something less than that community in which Christ dwells by faith; but, from our perspective, it is also possible to overvalue it, identifying the church too closely with God’s promised Reign.

Disciples haven't written much about this, but I think it is consistent with our heritage to say that the already and the not yet (as well as the visible and the invisible) connect precisely in the celebration of the sacraments and the confession of faith.

Conclusion

Earlier agreed statements have named the goal of our dialogue as "no less than visible unity." I affirm this ultimate goal and pray that the Holy Spirit will accomplish it "as Christ wishes and by means he desires." I also see, however, two more immediate objectives.

1) Speaking now to of the Disciples of Christ, I would like to see the interim results of the dialogue studied more widely in the church in order that they might, with God's help, contribute to its renewal. For example, I appreciate the Disciples emphasis on the churchliness of each local congregation in which the Word is preached and the sacraments administered – in which Christ dwells by faith. But the church is impoverished if local and universal are not held in proper tension. This dialogue can help Disciples teach a more catholic understanding of church. I obviously appreciate the Disciples emphasis on the freedom of each believer in Christ; but I also obviously believe that the church is impoverished if individual and communal are not held in proper tension.

This dialogue can help Disciples teach that ours is a responsible freedom, that through baptism we become persons-in-community who are bound inextricably to one another because of our communally-mediated communion with Christ.

A great deal is at stake. Disciples are prone to see the church as a human organization, to see faith as a matter between me and God, and to regard the congregation as the determiner of its own confession and worship. This dialogue with Roman Catholics can call us back to our own best ecclesiological instincts and, thus, merits wide discussion.

2) Our first agreed statement, “Apostolicity and Catholicity, spoke of seeing our churches “as having a communion in via.” As the Decree on Ecumenism points out, through baptism and faith in Jesus Christ we are brothers and sisters in him; and, while we may not yet recognize one another as churches, there is a “real, though imperfect, communion” between us. Our task, said the agreed statement is to give external expression to this communion on the way. “Communion expressed through practices is an important element of the emerging koinonia among churches This has implications now for Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics in each place.”

With this in mind, I hope that we will call on our congregations/parishes to enter now into closer relations with one another in local settings:

- praying for neighboring congregations/parishes by name,
- joining for prayer during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and other special occasions,
- inviting one another to social events in the congregation/parish,
- looking for opportunities to make regular public witness to their shared faith in Jesus Christ,
- engaging in pulpit exchange at least annually,
- organizing joint educational programs for youth and adults,
- teaching about the other community and this dialogue in their own educational classes,
- sharing facilities and resources when the other is in need,

- participating in one another's baptisms as a sign of our shared conviction that through baptism, with water and in the name of the triune God, we are incorporated into Christ.

These steps it seems to me, should be unobjectionable. Can we, however, go one step further? The agreed statement referred to above says that "we affirm the mutual recognition of baptism administered by Roman Catholics and Disciples...." Isn't it time, after thirty years of dialogue, that we ask our churches to celebrate the theological convergence achieved in this dialogue and, through public acts, engage in a mutual recognition of baptism? Such a recognition could make clear our continuing differences with regard to faith, ministry, and authority while giving thanks to God for our communion in via.

Not long before his death, Father Jean Tillard asked what I regard as a most troubling question: "Why after so many years of effort, so many meetings and documents, so many lives consumed by this work, is there so meager a harvest ...?" This is also the question students ask in my courses on ecumenism, often expressing real cynicism in the face of unchanged relationships. My double hope is that we will face our real differences in a spirit of honest exploration and that we will give thanks for our real convergences in a spirit of humility and praise.

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