AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL FOR PURSUING PEACE AND PURITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST: A PLEA FOR REFORMED CATHOLICITY[1]

BY RICH LUSK
ASSISTANT PASTOR
AUBURN AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MONROE, LA

Reformed Suspicions

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 New Testament (Heb. 12:14; Eph. 4:1-6; Phil. 2:1-4; John 17:21; Rom. 12:17-21). Biblically, we are obligated to strive for an orthodox 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. 2:11ff; Rom. 14:4)? The oneness of God demands that he have one people, one church (John 10:16; Eph. 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 New Testament never mentions "Christianity," as if biblical religion were an abstraction, or a mere ideology, or an "-ism" of some sort.[2] 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

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[1] Thanks to John Frame and N. T. Wright, whose own writings on church unity inspired large portions of this essay. I have focused primarily on the need for denominational or institutional unity, but hopefully readers will also grasp how the spirit of this article applies to our treatment of those *within* our denominations who may have differing perspectives from ourselves on controversial issues. Inter-, as well as intra-denominational relations need to be reformed according to Scripture.

[2] See Peter Leithart's fine essay "Against 'Christianity'; For the Church" at http://capo.org/premise/97/june/p970604.html.

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. A Christian can no more grow apart from the church than a branch severed from its vine or a limb cut from its body. 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 inter-Trinitarian relations.[3] The Trinity is not just an abstraction; it is a living revelation of God's own way of being. We have been drawn into this fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit, and are to now live according to the "family rules" of truth, unity, and self-giving love.

But the church's catholicity is to do more than image the Trinity; we are to embody the truth of justification by faith alone as well. 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, as N. T. Wright has pointed out, 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.[4] The doctrine of justification relativizes our membership in other ethnic and familial groups, and puts our membership in God's kingdom and family squarely in the center of our lives. Justification by faith means all Christians, whatever their other differences, belong at the same communion table (Gal. 2:11ff).

Just as importantly, one's ability to understand and articulate the doctrine of

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[3] The best study to date on God's humble, loving inter-Trinitarian relationships is Royce Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A Thematic Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986). Gruenler assumes the way the Father and Son relate to one another in the economy of redemption reveals God's ontological nature. He gestures towards a kind of social Trinitarianism in which each person of the divine family puts himself at the others' disposal. Father, Son, and Spirit each offer service to one another and seek one another's glory. The applications for human relationships are as abundant as they are obvious.
[4] See Tom Wright, *Bringing the Church to the World* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992) chapter 14, and more recently, the article "Community and Koinonia" available at http://www.latimer.org.nz/comment/articles/Communion%20and%20Koinonia.shtml. Many of the thoughts in this section spring forth from Wright's work.

justification must not become a new form of doctrinal legalism, as it has in some quarters.[5] 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 *person* of Christ saves, not *propositions* about him, however necessary those propositions are. 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 faith in Jesus, sealed by baptism. Obviously, justified believers are required to live in accordance with certain biblically prescribed norms and patterns, lest they fall under the chastening hand of the Lord and the disciplinary process of the church. But these theological and behavioral obligations grow out of the church's fundamental boundary marker of Christ-directed faith, manifested in baptism.

All this suggests that Reformed suspicions about ecumenism are themselves suspect. The core truths of our faith cry out for a unified, catholic church, visibly manifested in the world. Christian ethics requires us to pursue peace and like-mindedness in a humble and comprehensive fashion. The gospel promises to create just such a community, as Adam's sin is undone and the nations are drawn together into the kingdom of Christ's gracious love. The Trinity, unless it is to be no more than a bald theoretical abstraction, demands that our diversity be bound together by a unity of unbreakable love, fellowship, and mutual giving.

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[5] See, e.g, John Gerstner *Primer on Justification* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 2: "[T]he word justification is so strange to the ears of modern Christians. This would be less tragic if one's eternal life did not depend on a correct understanding and sincere belief in justification by faith alone." Gerstner has unwittingly made correct understanding of a doctrine rather than trust in Christ the necessary condition of salvation.

And the truth of justification by faith alone requires articulation in our common acceptance of one another, particularly at the Lord's table. All this and more is jeopardized when we splinter and fragment from one another and when we bicker and fight with one another. Our divisions distort and cloud our theological vision and hinder our mission to call unbelievers into God's kingdom. Catholicity without compromise is the need of the hour, not only for the sake of the church, but also for the sake of the world.

From Reformed Catholicity to Reformed Denominationalism

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 seen irreversible. As C. S. Lewis pointed out, we can't even agree about the relative importance of our disagreements! 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 guiltiest 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 John Calvin himself, who was known to say "I would not begrudge traversing ten seas" if it would reunite the church.[6] Men such as Calvin and John Knox took the charge of schism seriously and, rightly or wrongly, sought to demonstrate they were the true "catholics." Even the feisty Luther made his last, dying wish the preservation of the unity of the church.[7] The Reformers claimed they were not leaving the church; rather the church had

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[6] Quoted in John T. McNeil, "Calvin as Ecumenical Churchman," *Church History* 32 (1963), 379. Calvin's sentiment is all the more impressive when we remember he was a fairly timid homebody and sea travel in his day was rather perilous!
[7] According to Philip Schaff,

> Luther exhibited the doctrine of justification as precisely the true ground of Christian union, and fought with all the strength of his gigantic spirit against the fanatical and factious tendencies of his time. His last wish, as that of Melancthon also, wrestled for the unity of the church. His most depressing fear was still: "After our death, there will rise many harsh and terrible sects. God help us!"

Phillip Schaff and John Nevin, *Principle of Protestantism* (Chambersburg, PA: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1845), 120.

left them, by departing from fidelity to the Scriptures.[8] They carefully distinguished essentials from non-essentials in matters of faith and practice.[9] Yet

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[8] Calvin compared the situation of the Reformers vis-à-vis Rome to the apostles, who were cast out of the synagogues:

> This [charge of schism] is indeed a very grave accusation but one that needs no long and labored defense. . . Now let them go and shout that we who have withdrawn from their church are heretics, since the sole cause of our separation is that they could in no way bear the pure profession of truth. I forbear to mention that they have expelled us with anathemas and curses – more than sufficient reason to absolve us, unless they wish to condemn the apostles also as schismatics, whose case was like our own . . . For it is enough for me that it behooved us to withdraw from them that we might come to Christ (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV.ii.5-6).

All references to *Institutes* are taken from the edition edited by John T. McNeil and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).
[9] See *Institutes* IV.i.12:

> What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith . . . Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over nonessential matters should in nowise be the basis of schism among Christians? First and foremost, we should agree on all points. But since men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss salvation . . . In the meantime, if we try to correct what displeases us, we do so out of duty . . . From this it is clear that every member of the church is charged with the responsibility of public edification according to the measure of his grace, provided he perform it decently and in order. That is, we are neither to renounce the communion of the church nor, remaining in it, to disturb its peace and duly ordered discipline.

Calvin's rule is a helpful one: whatever doctrinal shortcomings will not cause loss of salvation are to be borne with in the catholic community, though we ought to lovingly correct as much error as we can. In IV.i.13-15, he deals with moral imperfections in the same wise, pastoral fashion. He counsels that even in

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 that we ought always to 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. They are indignant at vices which they deem intolerable, when they cannot be corrected: and, thus, under pretext of zeal, they separate themselves and seek to form for themselves a new world in which there is to be a perfect church . . . As then these are inflamed with a zeal so rigid that they depart from God himself and violate the unity of the church . . . Many err in this 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.[10]

Calvin sternly warned those tempted to spurn the society of faithful, but sinful, believers for "something better." He called schism the "worst and most harmful evil in the Church of God." He argued, "The only way we can serve God is by

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cases of severe disciplinary breakdown, individuals should not be quick to claim the right of separation:

> And indeed, if churches are well ordered, they will not bear the wicked in their bosom . . . But because pastors are not always zealously on the watch, and are also sometimes more lenient than they should be, or are hindered from being able to exercise the severity they would like, the result is that even the openly wicked are not always removed from the company of the saints. This I admit to be a fault and I do not intend to excuse it, since Paul sharply rebukes it in the Corinthians. But even if the church be slack in its duty, still each and every individual has not the right at once to take upon himself the decision to separate. Indeed, I do not deny that it is the godly man's duty to abstain from all familiarity with the wicked, and not to enmesh himself with them in any voluntary relationship. But it is one thing to flee the boon companionship of the wicked; another, in hating them, to renounce the communion of the church.

Obviously, Calvin does not have in view leaving one local church for another since his comments predate the rise of competing denominations in a given locale. Still, his points are very relevant to our contemporary situation.

[10] Cited in Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 230-1.

being people who love peace, and are eager to have it."[11] But rarely in contemporary expositions of "Calvinism" are these sentiments drawn out and emphasized.[12]

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 (to the original pilgrims who voyaged to America) should serve as a stern warning to us:

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[11] Ibid, 229.

[12] Calvin not only modeled catholicity at the institutional level, he also did so at the interpersonal level. At one point, Martin Luther directed one of his typical, but unfortunate, outbursts of rage towards the Swiss reformers. Heinrich Bullinger, in particular, was hit hard. Bullinger sought Calvin's advice. Calvin's wise, balanced reply demonstrated tremendous love and mercy:

> I hear that Luther has at length broken forth in fierce invective, not so much against you as against as against the whole of us. On the present occasion, I dare scarce venture to ask you to keep silence, because it is neither just that innocent persons should thus be harassed, nor that they should be denied the opportunity of clearing themselves; neither, on the other hand, is it easy to determine whether it would be prudent for them to do so. But of this I do earnestly desire to put you in mind, in the first place, that you would consider how eminent a man Luther is, and the excellent endowments wherewith he is gifted, with what strength of mind and resolute constancy, with how great skill, with efficiency and power of doctrinal statement, he hath hitherto devoted his whole energy to overthrow the reign of Antichrist, and at the same time to diffuse far and near the doctrine of salvation. *Often I have been wont to declare, that even although he were to call me a devil, I should still not the less hold him in such honor that I must acknowledge him to be an illustrious servant of God*" (Translated by David Constable, *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters,* edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, vol. 4 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983], 432-3, emphasis mine).

Without whitewashing Luther's sin, Calvin does his utmost to preserve unity at all costs among fellow members of the body of Christ. Without overlooking Luther's flaws, he emphasizes his positive traits and accomplishments. Without becoming full of self-pity or spite, Calvin puts the cause of Christ and the well-being of his church above his own reputation and standing. I have read and listened to numerous expositions of Calvinism; unfortunately, I have never heard these ecumenical qualities included as part of the presentation. In light of today's mess in the Reformed world, we are more than justified in asking, "Where are the true Calvinists? Who are Calvin's real heirs?" Sadly, they are few and far between.

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.[13]

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. We so easily forget that our systems of theology are *merely* human; Scripture alone is divine. In all of this, we must also remember that the catholicity of the church is *not* a secondary doctrine. The reformation of the church is a delicate process, and must be done with care lest we make things worse rather than better. And while continuing reformation is necessary, zeal for theological and liturgical reform must never exceed love for our Christian brothers and sisters. Love and truth must always walk hand in hand. If we are always putting "truth before friendship," we are extreme ideologues, not faithful Christians.

Christian Americans or American Christians?

The fragmenting of the church in America is filled with ironies that reveal our misplaced priorities. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it best, with classic understatement: "It has been granted to the Americans less than any other nation of the earth to realize the visible unity of the Church of God."[14] American Christians have torn the church apart with disastrous, though often unrecognized, consequences.

For example, many American Christians now look to the state more than to the church to preserve and transform of culture. The divided condition of the

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[13] I have seen this quotation appear in various sources and forms. See, e. g., http://www.mlp.org/sermon.html, http://www.sail1620.org/history/articles/heritage.html, or http://www.cowtown.net/users/nct-cpoa/articles/Chapter_10.htm.

[14] I do not have the exact reference for this quotation, but it comes from Bonhoeffer's *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures, and Notes, 1928-1936.*

American church leaves us vulnerable to statist tyranny because a divided church is impotent.[15] Meanwhile, few, if any, professed Christian statesmen[16] think in terms of the catholic church when developing foreign policy views. Economic, military, and other concerns trump protecting fellow brothers and sisters in Christ across the globe. Despite claims to have a "humanitarian" foreign policy, we continually fail to use our international leverage to aid the plight of suffering Christians. Support of the church's worship and work at home and abroad are out of the question for both conservatives and liberals in the American political landscape.[17] Meanwhile, we have taught our school children to pledge allegiance to an "indivisible" nation, even as we have not hesitated to chop the church up into thousands of pieces. Political secession is the unpardonable sin and must be avoided at any cost; meanwhile, ecclesiastical secession is apparently no big deal. But if the church is truly the body of Christ, to divide the church is to divide Christ himself. We have drawn and quartered him time and time again, thinking such ripping and tearing has no real world consequences. But we must not hide behind quasi-Gnostic notions of the church's "invisibility" or the supposed "private" nature of religious belief. We have been far more complicit in the destructive secularization of our culture than we realize. A divided church has produced a chaotic cultural situation.

In large measure, the loss of the church's preserving and transforming influence on society has been due to her internal fragmentation. The hard-hitting words of Irenaeus may not be popular with American Christians (who tend to be far more American than Christian, anyway), but they ring just as true now as they did centuries ago:

> [God] shall also judge those who give rise to schisms, who are destitute of the love of God, and who look to their own special advantage rather than to the unity of the church; and who, for trifling reasons . . . cut in pieces and divide the great and glorious body of Christ, and so far as lies in them, destroy it – men who prate peace while they give rise to war, and do in truth strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.[18]

The oneness of the church by contrast is a beautiful reality. Consider another

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[15] Conversely, a unified and faithful church is the best antidote to statism. Jean Jacques Rousseau viewed intercommunion among Christian churches as the gravest threat to the unity and power of the modern state sinc it offered Christian citizens membership in a trans-national kingdom. See William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002), 50.

[16] I suppose I am using the term "statesman" rather loosely here.

[17] This support is called for in traditional confessional documents, e.g., Westminster Larger Catechism 198 speaks of "the church . . . being countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate."

[18] From *Against Heresies*, 4.33.7, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:508.

early church theologian, Cyprian:

> The church is one, which is spread abroad far and wide into a multitude by an increase no fruitfulness. As there are many rays of the sun but one light, and many branches of a tree but one strong trunk grounded in its tenacious root, and since from one spring flow many streams, although a goodly number seem outpoured from their bounty and superabundance, still, at the source, unity abides. . . So also the church, bathed in the light of the Lord, extends over the whole earth: yet there is one light diffused everywhere.[19]

Denominationalism is ugly and suicidal. Not only does each denomination become an unbalanced, disfigured caricature of what the church should be, but we end up wasting all kinds of valuable time, energy, and money promoting denominational causes rather than the cause of the catholic church. Denominational zeal overtakes zeal for the kingdom at large. As John Nevin said, "A church without unity can neither conquer the world nor sustain itself."[20] Unfortunately, Christians insist on being their own worst enemy. If only Nevin's spirit would grip us:

> All Christians, then, in their various denominational capacities, are required, as they love the church and seek the salvation of the world, to encourage with all their might a closer visible connection between the different parts of Christ's body. . . [It is] a high and glorious privilege to take part, even to the smallest extent, in the work of restoring these divisions.[21]

Nevin saw clearly the evil of schism within Protestantism:

> 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 . . . Our various sects, as they actually exist, are an immense evil in the Church. Whatever may be said of the possibility of their standing in friendly correspondence and only stimulating the whole body to a more vigorous life, it is certain that they mar the unity of this body in fact, and deprive it of its proper beauty and strength . . . Our sects, as they actually stand at this time, are a vast reproach to the Christian cause. By no possibility could they be countenanced and approved as good, by the Lord Jesus Christ, if he should appear again as in the world as the visible head of his

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[19] Quoted in *Institutes*, IV.ii.6.
[20] Schaff and Nevin, *Principle of Protestantism*, 206.
[21] Ibid, 209.

people. This all must feel.[22]
Nevin said of his own ecumenical labors,

> If I might be instrumental with the humblest agency in helping
> only to pull down a single one of all those walls of partition, that
> now mock the idea of catholic unity in the visible church, I should
> feel that I had not lived in vain, nor labored without the most
> ample and enduring reward.[23]

If only pastors today shared Nevin's heart for catholicity! If only we saw the importance of the church's visible unity! Instead, many of our church leaders are far more concerned with building their own ecclesiastical empires than with promoting the cause of the church catholic. Good Christians are good churchmen – *high* churchmen, we might even suggest. It's been said, "High Churchman are those who think highly of the Church and lowly of themselves, while Low Churchmen are those who think lowly of the Church and highly of themselves."[24] Historically, American denominationalism has been decidedly low church and so, not surprisingly, we have become a nation of extreme individualists in which all other interests must be subordinated to each person's quest for self-fulfillment and self-actualization. The church is only relevant or useful insofar as it helps *me* in my private spirituality. In this setting, it is easy to see how denominationalism fits snug within our consumerist, "me-first" culture. It is time to reverse the decline of American churchmanship, and this must include a renewed emphasis on catholicity.

Nevin gave his most devastating critique of American Christianity's "sect system" in his work *Antichrist*. In fact, Nevin identifies the sectarian spirit itself as the spirit of the Antichrist! A false understanding of Christ's person (cf. 1 John 4:2-3) works itself out in a false conception of Christ's body, the church. Nevin

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[22] Ibid, 204.

[23] Ibid, 209. Puritan great John Owen shared the same attitude a couple centuries earlier:

> I confess I would rather, much rather, spend all my time and days
> in making up and healing the breaches and schisms that are
> amongst Christians than one hour justifying our divisions, even
> wherein, on the one side, they are capable of a fair defence . . . . In
> the meantime, a reconciliation amongst all Protestants is our *duty*,
> and *practicable* . . . . When men have laboured as much in the
> improvement of the principle of forebearance as they have done to
> subdue other men to their opinions, religion will have another
> appearance in the world."

I have misplaced the citation information, but I believe the quotation comes from volume 13 of the Banner of Truth edition of Owen's *Works.*

[24] Geddes MacGregor *Corpus Christi* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 1. See also Daryl Hart's fine essay, "Rediscovering Mother Kirk: Is High-Church Presbyterianism an Oxymoron?" *Touchstone* Vol. 10, No. 13 (December 2000).

argues that our peculiar brand of dualistic Protestantism fosters a low view of Christ's real humanity, stemming from an overspiritualization of the faith. Things earthy and physical are viewed as impediments to genuine "heart religion" rather than as means of grace through which God manifests his saving presence. The ministry, liturgy, and sacraments are all downgraded as "common" and "external." American Christianity tends to view salvation as a bolt from the clear blue yonder, a "me-and-Jesus" experience, rather than a gracious relationship mediated through Word, sacrament, and pastor. There is contempt for history, authority, and tradition. Too much trust is placed in the individual's private judgment. The result is

> a spirit of endless division . . . A spiritualistic, subjective Christianity may be said to carry the idea of schism in its very constitution . . . Sectarianism goes throughout on the assumption, that there is no holy catholic Church in this world, one and universal, by its very conception, as the person of the Savior himself; but that the Church is simply what men may choose to make it, for their own accommodation . . . Men have a right, it is pretended, if they are not satisfied with the Church as they find it, to secede and form a new organization more to their own taste, or the Church may rend itself into two bodies, with more or less violence, and each continue to be as much a Church as before. The principle in this way becomes one of unlimited division; if it be proper to have fifty Sects, we may as easily allow five hundred or five thousand; it follows, at last, that any congregation, or fragment of a congregation, is competent at any time to erect a separate standard in the name of the Church . . . Sects profess to honor the universal Church, but it is perfectly plain that they honor themselves a great deal more.[25]

Reclaiming Catholicity

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. 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

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[25] John Nevin, *Antichrist; or the Spirit of Sect and Schism* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1848), 50-52.

cannot move beyond these fundamentals into particulars, but for too long we have majored on minors and overemphasized denominational distinctives. 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.

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.[26] 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.[27] 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.

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 into 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

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[26] In 1845, Schaff argued that "Every period of the Church and of Theology has its particular problem to solve . . . The main question of *our* time, is concerning the nature of the Church itself, in its relation to the world and to single Christians" (Schaff and Nevin, *Principle of Protestantism*, 177). Needless to say, the "Church question" still hasn't been answered with any consensus over a century and a half later. If anything, further divisions have only intensified and exacerbated the question.

[27] Frame's *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) makes use of this metaphor.

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 modernity. 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.[28] 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).

Towards a Reformed Catholicity: 10 Theses

The goal of this article is to serve as a call to confession of sin in this area of church unity 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

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[28] See William Cavanaugh, "The City: Beyond Secular Parodies," in *Radical Orthodoxy*, edited by John Millbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 184.

church of God. While this essay 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. The gospel is irreducibly *social* – not in the sense of nineteenth century liberalism, which substituted salvation from poverty through statist welfare for salvation from sin through the blood of Christ -- but in the sense that the NT describes, coming to expression in a community of believers. The church itself – the corporate community of the redeemed -- is the outcome of Christ's saving work, the firstfruits of the Spirit's new creation. The contemporary Reformed tendency to pry apart the institutional church from salvation has had disastrous consequences. Generic low-church American Calvinism and Revivalism have simply proven inadequate to deal with the challenges that face us. 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 (Matt. 5:23-24; 1 Cor. 11:17ff) as well as striving for unity in faith and knowledge (Eph. 4:11ff). 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. False unity is no better than disunity.

3. We must identify denominational*ism* for what it is: sin. We must not confuse denominations with the church. Following C. S. Lewis, it may be clever to identify various denominations as doors into rooms off of the main hall of "mere Christianity."[29] But then we have to ask: Has the master designer and builder of the house (cf. Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:11ff) authorized the construction of these dividing walls? Did he not come to tear down all such barriers? 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 single denomination includes all true churches of Christ. No denomination can claim to be the one, true church, although some denominations may arrogantly 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 (Matt. 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 (Matt. 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 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,[30] but we must work ultimately to disband them, rather than to preserve them.[31] We must also avoid viewing the para-church as a substitute for church unity. While God has greatly used para-church ministries, and they too can serve a temporary purpose in our present situation, ultimately they may 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).[32]

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[29] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1943), 12.
[30] Schaff lays out the temporary value "sects" or denominations may serve in the providence of God in Schaff and Nevin, *Principle of Protestantism*, 134-5. See also Nevin, *Antichrist*, 55.
[31] Discerning how we should structure our loyalties to the catholic church vis-à-vis our various denominations in our current situation is a difficult question. However, at the very least, our commitment to catholicity should relativize and qualify our denominational attachments. Frame's *Evangelical Reunion* has many helpful thoughts on this issue scattered throughout. I suggest starting with a local, geographically based strategy, since this seems to be how the apostolic church was organized.
[32] By "para-church" ministries, I have in view those organizations that operate independently and apart from the supervision of any ecclesiastical body. In other words, Promise Keepers rallies and Campus Crusade Bible studies (however profitable and used of God they may be) do not fulfill the ecumenical mandate.

4. Our repentance in this area must begin with mourning over our divisions. We must view our present, Babel-like condition as a form of God's judgment. We must ask the Spirit of Pentecost to reunite what our pride and arrogance have divided. We must plot practical paths to restored unity. We must constantly measure our progress against the ideal standard of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church which we faithfully profess in the Nicene Creed. *Individually,* we must not treat our churches as theology clubs. We must not treat fellow believers who hold different convictions as second-class citizens in the kingdom, *even if 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. We must allow Christian individuals and families to move their membership across denominational lines without heaping scorn on them for having abandoned the "true church." 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 clearer. The final goal must be nothing short of governmental, institutional, creedal, and liturgical unity with all other true churches of Christ.[33]

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. Our common faith bonds us together; only apostasy gives full grounds for separation. Therefore, we cannot be content merely with the hidden unity we presently have in Christ and the Spirit; our unity must come to concrete, visible, institutional expression as well, lest we be guilty of Gnosticizing the faith. This unity manifests the love that is to mark us out as God's people (John 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

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[33] Of course, this does not negate legitimate forms of diversity. But there should be an obvious and intentional unity in the church.

prayers are always effectual (John 17). Such unity is critical if the church is to have success in her mission to the nations. Why should a skeptical world believe the gospel really reconciles sinners with God when it cannot even unite the OPC and the PCA?

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 calls us to patient tolerance without doctrinal indifference. This will be hard and messy and requires more maturity and patience than many 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 (and ever reforming!) in doctrine, yet having a catholicity of spirit that embraces all true believers. Reformed snobbery and chauvinism must become things of the past. Our ideologically-driven approach to the faith must become more well-rounded, holistic, and incarnational. To make a pun off of Peter Leithart's fine work, for too long, we have been *for Christianity* (e.g., ideology) and *against the church* (e.g., truth embodied in community).[34] We must once again learn to prize the church and her ministries. 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. Truth and love always go together.

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. This is always the most difficult aspect of ecumenical endeavor. Who should be recognized as a fellow Christian? What churches should be considered true churches?[35] Should

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[34] See Peter Leithart's essay "Against 'Christianity'; For the Church" at http://capo.org/premise/97/june/p970604.html.

[35] Of course, for Protestants, questions about the status of the Roman Catholic Church loom large in any discussion of ecumenism. Discussion of Rome's validity as part of the body of Christ would require a separate article at least as long as this one. On the whole, the best Reformed theologians have judged Rome to be a true, though corrupt, church of Christ. Consider Calvin:

> Of old, certain peculiar prerogatives of the church remained among the Jews. In like manner, today, we do not deprive the papists of those traces of the church, which the Lord willed should among

we adhere to 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)? If so, how do we measure these marks? 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* IV.ii.10; John. 9:13ff)? Are basic church membership vows 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

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them survive the destruction. God had once for all made his covenant with the Jews, but it was not they who preserved the covenant; rather, leaning upon its own strength, it kept itself alive by struggling against their impiety. Therefore such was the certainty and the constancy of God's goodness—the Lord's covenant abode there. Their treachery could not obliterate his faithfulness, and circumcision could not be so profaned by their unclean hands as to cease to be the true sign and sacrament of his covenant. Whence the Lord called the children born to them his children [Ezek.16:20-21], when these belonged to him only by a special blessing. So it was in France, Italy, Germany, Spain and England after the Lord established his covenant there. When those countries were oppressed by the tyranny of the Antichrist, the Lord used two means to keep his covenant inviolable. First, he maintained baptism there, a witness to this covenant; consecrated by his own mouth, it retains its force despite the impiety of men. Secondly, by his own providence he caused other vestiges to remain, that the church might not utterly die . . . To sum up, I call them churches to the extent that the Lord wonderfully preserves in them a remnant of his people, however woefully dispersed and scattered, and to the extent that some marks of the church remain—especially those marks whose effectiveness neither the devil's wiles nor human depravity can destroy (*Institutes* IV.ii.11-12).

Reformed scholastics such as Francis Turretin and Charles Hodge came to similar positive, yet nuanced, conclusions about Rome. The Reformation was, as Jaroslav Pelikan put it, a "tragic necessity" – necessary because the late medieval church had grown wildly corrupt, yet tragic because it inevitably destroyed the unified Christian culture that made Christendom possible. For an interesting discussion of Rome, see Joel Garver's essay "On the 'Catholic Question'" available at http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/ACE.html.

as the church progresses in her understanding of Scripture. Similarly, we must ask if the bar can be lowered during times of weakness and declension 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. 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, no matter what their ethnic or family background may be. 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. 2:11ff). The doctrine of justification requires a form of "open communion." The table belongs not to a particular denomination but to the Lord and to his people as a whole. To not fully accept someone as a brother who has faith in Jesus is, in principle, to deny *sola fide.* As N. T. Wright has said, we must turn "justification by faith" into "fellowship by faith." 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. *Believing,* not *understanding* or *articulating*, is the key, though, of course, we expect understanding and articulation to mature over time. It is easy to turn our doctrine of justification into a new kind of theological legalism, in which 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. The church, as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Rom. 4; Gal. 3-4) and the new Israel (cf. Rom. 11) must include children even as the old Israel did (cf. Matt. 18:ff; 19:13-14). A truly catholic body will include people of all kinds, including all ages.[36] Children baptized into the name of the

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[36] Obviously, here I am choosing sides in the paedobaptist debate, though, in the spirit of this essay, I count Baptists as my brothers in Christ. My hope is that

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 baptized 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 *as conditions of eucharistic fellowship* and yet they are commonplace. 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 (Luke 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. It is a denial of genuine catholicity. (Of course, it should go without saying that those who understand this position, often referred to as "paedocommunion," should be gracious and forbearing towards those Christians who disagree. Paedocommunionists, paedobaptists, and baptists must all learn to get along despite their deep and important sacramental differences.)

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. 11:11ff; 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 be completely and eternally 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, 12:18ff; John 4:24; Matt. 18:20), to worship the *one* living and true God, celebrating *one* feast as *one* body (1 Cor. 10:14-17), giving praise to our *one* Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:1-11).

Conclusion

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). We

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they will treat their children as heirs of the covenant and members of Christ's body as much as conscience will allow (e.g., teaching them to pray "Our Father").

should earnestly long for and work towards what John Frame has called "evangelical reunion." Philip Schaff's battle cry must become our own:

> Away with human denominations, down with religious sects! Let our watchword be: One spirit and one body! One Shepherd and one flock! All conventicles and chapels must perish, that from their ashes may rise the One Church of God, phenix like and resplendent with glory, as a bride adorned for her bridegroom.[37]

True, the short term prospects for such a project look fairly futile. But ultimately we should be full of hope and encouragement. The kind of unity to which Scripture calls us is not something we can produce in our own strength or wisdom. 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. We have the comfort of knowing the church is *God's church* and he will care for it in every way. 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.[38]

The prayer of Jesus (John 17:20ff) 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![39]

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[37] Schaff and Nevin, *Principle of Protestantism*, 121.

[38] Quoted in Frame, *Evangelical Reunion*, 68.

[39] Note that the form and content of this article match and reinforce one another. In making the case for unity, I have cited theologians from Anglicanism (Hooker, Lewis, Wright), Roman Catholicism (Chesterton), the early church both east and west (Cyprian, Vincent), American Presbyterianism (Hodge, Frame, Leithart), Scottish Presbyterianism (Knox, M'Crie), early continental Reformed (Calvin, Bullinger), Reformed scholasticism (Turretin), German Reformed (Nevin, Schaff), Lutheranism (Luther, Bonhoeffer), Puritan Congregationalism (Owen, Robinson), Eastern Orthodox (Pelikan), and so forth. Hopefully, I have made a fully *catholic* case for catholicity!