

Reformed Catholic Miscellanies
Rich Lusk

“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.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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!’

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

“Christ did not die for propositions but for persons.”

Thomas Goowin, 1600-1680

Westminster Divine and Congregational Pastor

John Calvin can best be described as a Reformed catholic.

Calvin wrote to Bullinger in 1538:

Oh, if a pure and sincere accommodation could be agreed upon at length among us! What, then, would hinder the assembling of some public Synod, where individuals might propose whatever they may conceive to be most for the benefit of the churches? A way might be found out of going to work by common deliberation, and if need be, that the cities and princes also should assist in this undertaking by mutual exhortation and counsel, and also confirm by their authority; but in so great perplexity, the Lord is rather to be inquired of that himself may open up a way.

Calvin wrote to the ministers of Zurich in 1549, reminding them to exercise a “hermeneutic of love”:

I may at least on good grounds wish to obtain this of you, viz., that you will not allow yourself to become entangled in baseless suspicions. For I observe that, owing to this cause, you are perplexed in regard to many points which present difficulty, simply because you put upon the majority of my statements a different construction from what you have any ground for doing. A preconceived opinion regarding me leads you to imagine and attribute to me what never occurred to my mind.

Calvin’s desire for ecclesiastical unity is seen in a letter to the Roman Catholic Cardinal Sadoletto. Note that he refers to the Romanists as a “party” within the wider church:

Always, both by word and deed, have I protested how eager I was for unity . . . My conscience told me how strong the zeal was with which I burned for the unity of the Church . . . The Lord grant, Sadolet, that you and all your party may at length perceive, that the only true bond of Ecclesiastical unity would exist if Christ the Lord, who hath reconciled us to God the Father, were to gather us out of our present dispersion into the fellowship of his body, that so, through his one Word and Spirit, we might join together with one heart and one soul.

His desire for unity shines through in a 1552 letter to Cranmer:

Yet the Lord, as he has done even from the beginning of the world, will preserve in a miraculous manner, and in a way unknown to us, the unity of a pure faith from being destroyed by the dissensions of men. And, those whom he has placed on his watchtower he wishes least of all to be inactive, seeing that he has appointed them to be his ministers, through whose labors he may preserve from all corruptions sound doctrine in the Church, and transmit it safe to posterity. Especially, most illustrious Archbishop, is it necessary for you, in proportion to the distinguished position you occupy, to turn your attention as you are doing towards this object. . . .

This other thing also is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time, viz., that the Churches are so divided, that human fellowship is scarcely now in any repute amongst us, far less that Christian intercourse which all make a profession of, but few sincerely practice.

If men of learning conduct themselves with more reserve than is seemly, the very heaviest blame attaches to the leaders themselves, who, either engrossed in their own sinful pursuits, are indifferent to the safety and entire piety of the Church, or who, individually satisfied with their own private peace, have no regard for others.

He wrote to Bullinger in 1540, emphasizing the importance of unity among pastors:

We see how much it concerns not our church alone, but all Christianity, that all to whom the Lord has entrusted any charge in his church should agree in true concord . . . We must therefore purposefully and carefully cherish association and friendship with all ministers of Christ . . . in order that the churches to which we minister the Word of God may faithfully agree together . . . As for me, as far as in me lies, I shall always labor to this end.

In 1560, he expressed his desire for an ecumenical council to restore the fallen unity of Christendom:

[We must] put an end to the divisions which exist in Christendom . . . Now, it would not be enough to hold a council, unless it were to be universal; that is to say, if the object of it were not to appease all the troubles of Christendom. . . .

Wherefore, it is indispensably necessary that those who demand a reformation, should accept the council which will be held, in order that all Christendom may be united, or that those who shall be unwilling to range themselves under the banners of unity and concord be declared and held for schismatics."

My personal favorite is a 1552 letter to Cranmer on his willingness to do *anything* for the sake of unity among the churches:

Now, seeing that a serious and properly adjusted agreement between men of learning upon the rule of Scripture is still a desideratum, by means of which Churches, though divided on other questions, might be made to unite, I think it right for me, at whatever cost of toil and trouble, to seek to obtain this object . . . So much does this [disunity in the wake of the Reformation] concern me that could I be of any service I would not begrudge traversing ten seas for this purpose.

The fact that the visible body of Christ is presently divided into thousands of groups and sects must not push us to deny the clear purpose of God in Christ that there be one flock even as there is one shepherd. Though there are many members in the body, the body is one not many. Clearly our Savior's intention was not merely to have evangelical churches, or even evangelical Reformed churches, but one holy, catholic Church organized and patterned after the Biblical rule and following His commandments.

Where do denominations fit in to this pattern for the Church? It is a question none of us like to ask and sometimes do not even think to ask simply because we have never known anything else, but the obvious answer is, they don't. We must recognize that denominations are an expedient necessitated by sin.

Plainly, there is a unity that exists in Christ's Church which cannot be destroyed by denominations. But it is also true to say that there is a unity which cannot exist as long as there are denominations.

Steve Wilkins
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"A man may hold an error and yet not be an heritque"
Edmund Calamy, 1600-1666
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