

## THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL UNITY

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If faith is on the decline in the world today, if unbelief is spreading it is because of the divisions in Christendom! Who in the twentieth century has not heard this refrain? But, to many people the evangelization of the world appears as the other side of the ecumenical undertaking; they are not far from believing that the coming together of once separated churches is nowadays the privileged form of testimony.

This way of considering things should be received with much reserve. The rejection of the Gospel by the world has many other roots than rivalry between "Christian labels." In the places where ecclesiastical fusions have occurred, within the past twenty or thirty years, evangelism does not seem to have profited much from it! One can wonder, according to Professor Carl Wisloff's delightful illustration, whether the big Atlantic liners are really so superior to small boats when the purpose is to go out fishing!<sup>2</sup>

Watch out, however, because when we set excess and deformation aside, we can also lose a true idea. The Bible also establishes a link between the unity of the church and its growth through the addition of new members. The first summing up of the book of Acts suggests a relation between the outstanding unity among the first believers and the adding by the Lord to their community of all those who came to salvation (Acts 2:44-47). (The same distinctive expression comes back, in the original, at the beginning and at the end of this passage, and it evokes unity.) Several of the following passages emit the same sound: Acts 4:32-33; 5:12, 14; 9:31. In the prayer usually quoted about Christian unity, Jesus asks his disciples to be one so that the world may believe that the Father sent him (John 17:21, 23). In the powerful synthesis brought to us by the epistle to the Ephesians on the same subject, the unity of the tightly bound body is accomplished through a constant edification, inseparable from evangelism (Eph. 4:1-16).

If we are truly concerned about evangelizing the world, we must understand the nature of the conditions and the consequences of Christian unity according to the New Testament. This is what we want to do, defining principles in order to apply them better to the contemporary situation. To prevent an arbitrary choice in the matter of texts, we shall let ourselves be guided by the Apostle Paul's so wonderfully complete and condensed passage previously pointed out (Eph. 4:3-6), without, however, being compelled to undertake a detailed exegesis of it, or depriving ourselves of the help of other passages.

### *One Spirit*

Very roughly outlined, caricature-like, today's two main conceptions of Christian unity are in opposition to each other, and are likely to attract our attention.

As for the first, unity is *lost*, and it must be found or built again. It will take the shape of a *visible* unity, institutionalized, administrative. We are revealing no secrets whatsoever. Those who seem indwelt by the keenest "ecumenical" passion have often deplored the wish in the high-priestly prayer (of Jesus) is not being fulfilled among us. The loss of unity seemed to be obvious to them when they saw for themselves the confessional separations, the doctrinal condemnations, and the refusal to acknowledge the validity of the sacraments and ministries of other churches. They greeted as steps toward unity the unions that gathered varied communities into the same organization. Of course, the official documents of Amsterdam (1948), Evanston (1954), etc., are careful to assert the unity given "in Christ." Some use a dialectical language: unity is lost as concerns us, but subsists within Christ. The division is at the same time a shameful reality and an "ontological impossibility." The formula would normally mean that it cannot be.<sup>3</sup> According to common opinion, however, the dominant feeling is that absence of unity is sought for. Likewise, in order to avoid producing the specter of the super-church, specter or scarecrow, others do not insist so much on the administrative unity but leave the image of the desired unity more fuzzy. As a general fact, however, the emphasis remains on the unity of the visible institutions as a goal proposed for our efforts.

Most evangelical Christians are turning toward a very different vision. They believe unity is given, and they stress it; it is *invisible* and "spiritual." No one can destroy the link which joins all the true believers, the answer to Jesus' request, a request the Father could do nothing but fulfill, because he always grants his Son's requests. The existence of varied denominations has nothing to do with this certain unity, definitely obtained in the "Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

### *"Spiritual" Unity*

The scriptural presentation very strongly shows that we are one in the Spirit. Christian unity is seen as the gift of God rather than the fruit of our works. It also shows that it is essentially different from the administration centralization brought about in the economic and political realms. Paul is not afraid of repetition to emphasize it (Eph. 4:3, 4): the unification of all believers belongs to the real mission of the Holy Spirit. "One body" first depends on "one Spirit." The prayer of Jesus (John 17) goes in the same direction. It crowns the revelation of the Upper Room which above all announces the coming of the Comforter (or Advocate) when the mission of the Son will be fulfilled (John 14-16). This order of events invites us to understand that the unification which will follow the fulfillment of the work of Christ and the coming of the Spirit are one single event. Paul proclaims to the Corinthians, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." Earlier he showed them, in the enveloping of the Israelites by the cloud when they left Egypt, the type of their baptism in the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 10:2). As the cloud, a symbol of the mysterious (spiritual) presence of God, separated the children of Israel from the Egyptians and sealed their unity as people of God, so too does the Spirit work out the unity of the New Covenant people. At Pentecost, to which these verses refer, the sign of the speaking in tongues showed that God wanted, in

his grace, to recreate that which had been destroyed at Babel, to gather together the dispersed members of a torn humanity. I will add to this point that in the development of the theme in Ephesians, Paul sees the parts of the body serving the unity, in the ministries which he elsewhere calls the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:11ff.; I Cor. 12:4, 5). Unity is most certainly, of the Spirit. And Christian experience echoes in witness. We know our unity when we feel the presence in the other believer of the same Spirit that lives in us. We thrill to the words of the Chinese martyr, Shu Yi, who named the "secret organization" tying all Christians together, "The Holy Spirit."<sup>8</sup>

#### *The Trinitarian Pattern*

It is in the Spirit that the Father and the Son from all eternity are one. Jesus explicitly considers the unity of the believers as the reflection, the analogy, of the trinitarian unity (John 17:11, 21, 22). Paul supports, in speaking of unity, one of the strongest trinitarian affirmations of the New Testament (Eph. 4:4-6).

It is possible to draw some consequences. If the pattern is trinitarian, the unity is not obtained to the detriment of the diversity, as though there were a tension between the two. The two themes closely intertwine without difficulty in the text, and even the repetition seven times (Eph. 4:4-6) of the word "one" can have a symbolic sense: a unity "harmoniously differentiated." The divine trinity is not only a pattern, but a foundation of that marriage of unity and diversity which holds under suspicion all enterprise of bureaucratic uniformity. Only the Trinity makes it possible to keep the One and the Multiple from struggling as two opposite principles. Many Christian thinkers have understood this point, from Tatian, apologist of the Syrian School of the second century, to Cornelius Van Til (of the Reformed School of Philadelphia). It establishes this paradoxical law which we observe in creation: the higher the position of a being in the existing hierarchy (from dust to man), the more its internal unity grows, as well as its differentiation.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Yes, but...*

The fact of unity in the Spirit, according to the pattern of and based on the trinitarian foundation, seems to favor the second conception of Christian unity. Should we adopt this concept without discussion? Let us not forget what it leaves somewhat in darkness: that the gift of God is to be kept, that is, cultivated (Eph. 4:3), that the invisible unity must be expressed in a visible way. Alas, a very evident contradiction can show up: some believers who are one, and will always be so, betray in their conduct that spiritual reality which sustains them. God is faithful, but the unfaithfulness of the Christians hinders "the effect of the fact," the action of the grace of God.

When Paul warns against the danger of divisions, he not only asks for a soft and patient attitude, he also brings up the official ministries in the church (Eph. 4:11) and the completeness of the doctrinal agree-

ment (Eph. 4:13-14). "Evangelicals," haven't we fallen into an easy self-satisfaction when we have acclaimed our spiritual unity? The subtle temptation of any vast evangelical gathering is to conceal the sharp edges of the difficulties which have not been smoothed out, these elements of disunity which persist — and the problem of expression comes up again in a different way. How can we recognize the unique Spirit which should unite us? We have to try the spirits, and we must, by all means, avoid falling into confusion under the cover of unity; it would be like falling again into Babel under the cover of Pentecost! It could also be dangerous for a man to have confidence in his spontaneous feeling about this. The risk of a tragically false refusal exists. We all feel badly about Luther at Marburg when he judged that other remarkable man of God, the reformer Zwingli, as being prompted by another spirit.

#### *One Hope*

The association of the Spirit to Hope, leads us to the same thoughts (Eph. 4:4). It is constant in the New Testament. The gift of the Spirit was the promise for the "last days" (Acts 2:17). The Spirit is a Spirit of adoption, which makes us co-heirs with Christ, the seal upon us for the Day of Redemption, the down-payment or the first fruits of the inheritance to come (Romans 8:15ff, 23; II Cor. 1:22, 5:5; Eph. 1:13ff., 4:30, etc.) The miracles he accomplishes are "powers of the world to come" (Heb. 6:5), signs of redemption, yet to come, of the body.

This association delivers us from the temptation of a satisfied passivity. Our unity also is "in hope," the unity of walking together, the unity of the pilgrim people moving toward a unity at last perfectly expressed and which would take in everything. We are united to struggle and pray so that "the total unity will some day be restored." We know the biblical expression the "shalom" of the Kingdom! The earth will be filled with the knowledge of God like the bottom of the sea by the waters, and the gathering together of all things under the same Lord, Jesus Christ, when he is gloriously revealed.

But this association of the Spirit to our active hope of the end also brings us to the crucial question. "One hope" excludes all other hopes, solely human, that is, the various secularized messianisms, the despairs more or less made known, the courage of the absurdity, the mystical escape, or the anarchist fury. Should we not beware that some monstrous mixtures will arise under the cover of a language taken from the Scriptures? The rapidity with which the "theology of hope," preached so brilliantly by the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, was transformed into a "theology of the revolution" (favorable to Marxism) should be a warning to us. On the other hand, what may be said of the differences of evangelicals on eschatological questions (on the doctrine of the Last Days)? Do not they break the unity of hope?

The crucial question concerns in fact the hope in its ties to *faith*. It concerns the Spirit in its fundamental relation to Christ and to his Word (I John 4:1-6). We can hope to answer it by considering the second part of Paul's summary, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

*One Lord*

The Spirit leads to Jesus Christ. He does not speak about himself, but glorifies the Son (John 16:13, 14). The second divine mission is dependent upon the first: the Spirit has only to apply the effects of the work of Christ. He unites us to the Head so that all his grace flows over the members of the body. His instrument, his "sword," is the Word; the intelligible discourse of Jesus and of his witnesses. (The Holy Spirit works *by* and *with* the Word, as Lutherans and Presbyterians, respectively, like to point out.) Thus the subjective experience of salvation is always founded, anchored, in objective truth. There is an idea abroad today which must be received with the utmost reserve. It holds that the Holy Spirit represents the alogical or paralogical aspect or pole of spiritual reality. This idea has its place in the theology of Emil Brunner, for example who, after having been attracted by the irrational thinking of Bergson, hooked his wagon to a moderate existentialism<sup>7</sup>. But such an idea does not appear in the biblical revelation concerning the Spirit, who is perfectly one with the Logos. The Apostle Paul contrasts the Holy Spirit's mode of action with that of the spirits of paganism, to the paralogical dynamic which carried the Corinthians away, out of control and without reflection, toward *dumb idols* (I Cor. 12:2). The Spirit is the Spirit of the Lord, he manifests himself by the sober, clear, intelligent confession: "Jesus is Lord."

Paul designates with equal sobriety the two great pillars of objectivity: "One faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5).

*One faith*

Most commentators understand clearly that Paul speaks of faith in the objective sense (that which one must believe: as according to the recent French ecumenical translation of the Bible). "One faith" evokes the great structure of truth which the apostles, evangelists, pastors, and doctors must communicate in order to assure unity in the teaching as against doctrinal instability (Eph. 4:11-14). It is "the model of doctrine" to which the believers had been committed (Rom. 6:17, literal translation), "the form of sound words" to be held faithfully (II Tim. 1:13) "the faith which was once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), the truth which should "sanctify" the believers, setting them apart so that they may be one according to Jesus' prayer (John 17:17-19)<sup>8</sup>. No experience of unity, no matter how dynamic or exciting, can replace the unity of the faith. For the New Testament, all communion in the Spirit which lacks the dimension of beliefs (I have used this unpopular word on purpose!) absolutely must be examined with great care. It could turn out to be an illusion or false, perhaps even the work of other "spirits." With these biblical principles thus laid, without ambiguity, we face the most burning questions.

From the leaders of most of the churches, an almost unanimous chorus glorifies *doctrinal pluralism*. "It is the only one adapted to a pluralistic culture," we are told. Many claim a New Testament basis for this. They are following E. Kasemann and find irreconcilable traditions on every page. Pastor Louis Simon expressed it in typical fashion. "The diversity of convictions, of Christologies, of ecclesiologies, is in the very make-up of the Word of God<sup>9</sup>." When he says "diversity,"

the context shows that he means *opposition* and he exalts this opposition as the condition of life and liberty. At the same time, it is suggested that to demand a clear-cut statement of faith is almost pharisaical blasphemy: *blasphemy* because the mystery of God cannot be expressed in man's language; *pharisaical* because the orthodox judges the others from a dominating position and makes salvation dependent on an intellectual "accomplishment." One more step and chaos itself is in turn invited to sing the hymn to the liberty of God. Of God? More accurately of man!

To the pluralist discourse, we can only answer in the manner of Luther: we cannot, *non possumus*.

*Diversity without conflict*

All of this is contraband goods which they want to hide by flying the New Testament flag. Only a criticism subject to an apostate *a priori* finds contradictions in the apostolic testimony. It creates these contradictions by refusing to approach the text with a sympathetic outlook, and completely overlooks the obedience of faith. We certainly do recognize the diversity of the New Testament, and with joy! The language, the point of view, the key concepts change from one sacred author to another. But the striking thing to us is an unartificial harmony of teachings given so diversely. Its miraculous character leads us to confess: this is not the work of man. Thus, for example, we recognize the same truth when the synoptic Gospels speak about participation in the coming Kingdom, the Johannine writings about the new birth and receiving eternal life, and Paul about the resurrection with Christ and the new creation. This multiplicity of presentations helps us to a higher appreciation of the unique, same message.

To describe the concern for a clear-cut statement of faith as pharisaical shows both the lack of understanding of the pharisees' error and the lack of joy of being freed from the darkness of error, of being freely enlightened by the truth of the Word of God. The clear statement of faith is not a human accomplishment, but rather the effect of sanctification by truth, a work of God. Invoking the sublime mystery of God in order to refuse orthodoxy is to pronounce words filled with the authority of wisdom and godliness, but used, in fact, only to satisfy theological carnality (Col. 2:23). It is a pagan dualism between God and the language he created. But we proclaim that God has the power to reveal himself in the language of the man he created in his image. It is so easy to blame the incapacity of language. But, be careful, the Bible denounces lying as the basis of deformation. Thinking that liberty is real only in incoherence is to hold an entirely anti-Christian notion of liberty. This is going back to the old belief of pagan mythologies: out of chaos comes newness of life.

*Facing error*

If the biblical authors agree on one point, it is on their warnings against false teachers. Micah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel fought false prophets. Paul, Peter, and John are agreed on this. Paul complains that believers too easily receive another gospel, another Jesus, an-

other spirit (Gal. 1:6; II Cor. 11:4). He demands that the faithful separate themselves from those who leave the teaching they have received (Rom. 16:17). Peter is no more indulgent (II Peter 2). John seems the most severe on this matter: you must not even greet those who deny the doctrine of Christ (II John 9-11; I John; Rev. 2-3). No unity is possible outside the one faith. Jesus himself said, "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad."

But he also said, "He that is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40). What do you say when two brothers who serve the same Lord in the same spirit, differ in doctrinal questions which at least one qualifies as a matter of faith?

Paul makes a clear difference between the fundamental agreement necessary for two brothers to walk together, and the divergencies, even among adult Christians, which should not restrain the expression of Christian unity (Phil. 3:15). But this is not a complete solution. Was Paul thinking of insignificant subjects, small details, or more important points?

The famous and well-balanced saying of Rupertus Meldenus, "On the necessary points, unity; on the questionable points, liberty; in everything, love"<sup>10</sup>, leaves no answer to the difficult question: what is included in the first category and what is included in the second? Among those who quote the saying, we find the entire spread from strict separatism to total laxity.

Our situation is not that of the early church. That is where the difficulty arises. The New Testament does not provide many indications corresponding to our present problem. The physical presence of the apostles, who were able to give a fully authoritative answer on the doctrinal and practical questions which came up, left little room between obedient faith and open rebellion. The errors have also become more and more subtle. In some situations even true Christians are easily turned aside by erroneous words.

We should not disregard the work of the sixteenth and seventeenth century theologians. Luther had already classified his article at Smalkalden (1537-38) in three categories, and Calvin speaks of two classes (*Institutes* IV 1, 12).

The Lutherans have defined the fundamental articles of faith. These are classified as primary and secondary (these may be ignored, but cannot be denied without overturning faith). They also defined less important articles, such as the anti-Christ.<sup>11</sup> The modern evangelicals, however, often feel that the famous "theological fervor," typical of those times, made them less tolerant than the Apostle Paul.

We will formulate some guidelines as a suggestion:

*The possibilities of expressing Christian unity are proportional to the doctrinal agreement reached.* The fellowship and cooperation which express unity have various stages and forms. They can be institutional, permanent, frequent, occasional, exceptional; in worship, evangelism, teaching, social work. Two ministers can feed the same flock, or join on the same platform to protest against pornography. I suggest that we draw several concentric circles on a paper. The inside circle could be the one where Paul met the Philippians (Phil. 3:15); others would cor-

respond to a less complete agreement that would permit only looser associations.

We do not, therefore, follow those who only see the subject of unity as *everything* or *nothing*. We propose a "little by little" relationship, the strategy of the "flexible defense" rather than the massive retaliation-like atomic reprisals.

And we stand on the exhortation of Paul to the Thessalonians (II Thess. 3:14, 15). Without making differences between moral questions and dogmatic questions, the apostle prescribes discipline for any brother who disobeys the teaching while still considering him a brother. The decisive point is this: a brotherly attitude softens the blow of separation. In this way we define a situation of intermediary discipline, at some point between the judaisers on whom Paul pronounces a curse, and that of the Philippians with whom Paul walks in the same spirit. Paul measures the hardness of the separation to match the importance of the differences.

The revealed truth (always singular in the Bible) unfolds like an organism. Jesus himself teaches us this by stating the "heart" of the Old Testament, the two interdependent commandments on which stand all of the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:40) and also by vigorously emphasizing the differences in accusing the Pharisees (Matt. 23:23f). The way Paul reasons and discusses shows there are articles of faith with differing degrees of importance. Surely, since the truth is organically one, if it is denied on even a small point, it is by implication, denied. But since it is organically diversified, it is not permissible to emphasize to the extreme this logic of implication in order to separate from the brothers. Since it is the secondary nature of the differences that permit cooperation, and since this secondary nature is flexible, our rule of proportion stands.

*Five criteria make it possible to evaluate the relative importance of a doctrinal question under discussion.* Each person gives instinctively a factor of importance to the various doctrines he professes. But other factors, like the tendencies of personalities or the circumstances of education, are likely to deflect toward error such a spontaneous evaluation. It is necessary to utilize principles which are independent from the individual or denominational tendencies.

a. *The biblical criteria.* The place given to a subject in the Bible, especially in the New Testament, is an indication of the importance Jesus and the apostles attributed to it. Naturally, the importance of a doctrine cannot be measured by the number of verses which present it, but even that factor can be of help. The doctrine of the atonement is found throughout the Scriptures, as the blood is in the body — according to Vinet's image. It surely is of an altogether different importance than the prescription of a veil for the women, whatever interpretation is given to it since it is found only in one passage (I Cor. 11).

b. *The theological criteria.* The clearer the consequences, and the more they relate to the very center of evangelical truth, the more this point is of importance. There are strategic doctrines. If you touch one of them, everything falls. Others are on the periphery and one difference will leave the rest of the building standing. The factor of theologi-

cal analysis was the favorite factor of orthodox theologians of the seventeenth century. It is that factor that Paul was using at the time of the Galatian crisis. Whosoever demands more than faith in order to be accepted by God, makes the death of Jesus Christ logically unnecessary (Gal. 2:21). The doctrine of circumcision was strategic. But on the other hand, it should be noted that Reformed people like Hodge and Baptists like Spurgeon had, basically, the same theology, except for the doctrine of the visible church and infant baptism<sup>12</sup>. This doctrine is thus less central.

c. *The practical criteria.* It is also necessary to analyze the consequences on a practical as well as a theological basis. What are the implications for the organization of the church, spiritual life, the methods, and the message of evangelism? Some practical differences seem tied to a doctrinal point, while, in reality, other hidden factors (sociological, personal, etc.) produce them. The matter of infant baptism, which is not central from the theological standpoint, has important practical consequences. On the other hand, the Monothelite controversy, which puts Christology in the balance, may not create a lot of upsets in the practical life of a church.

d. *The historical criteria.* In order to deliver us from the narrowness of our personal horizons, there are no better and more precious helpers than our brothers and fathers in the faith. They have not been infallible, but we must respect and appreciate the wisdom God gave them and profit from it. We always run the risk of using the irony of Paul: "What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?" (I Cor. 14:36). Thus we can discover that throughout the history of the church, until the nineteenth century, Christians have decided against division in connection with the millennium. The oldest pre-millennialist declaration, after the apostolic period, is the one of Justin Martyr around A.D. 150. It underlines the fact that many Christians, having a pure and pious faith, had another opinion.<sup>13</sup> Would it be wise to be more intolerant than he was? He has been followed in his brotherly attitude by most of the Christian generations. It is quite different with the doctrine of Holy Communion, about which division arose. Rightly or wrongly, the question carried much weight.

e. *The contemporary criteria.* God has given such clarity to his Word that the essentials of the message cannot be hidden to the respectful and wise reader. Where men of God, scientifically capable and professing to be obedient to the Scriptures, find themselves heavily numbered on both sides of a discussion, we can conclude that the object of the discussion does not belong to the vital heart of Christianity. For example, the view of the intermediary state we see as biblical is opposed by some evangelical theologians. We judge by this that it is of a secondary nature.

With the help of these criteria, we could trace a big circle, of first importance, corresponding to the dogma of the divinity of Christ and the incarnation. There would be no fellowship with those who would be outside, with those who break down the doctrine of Christ. Another very important circle, inside the first, would be the authority of the Scriptures, the written Word of God, without fault or contradiction.

This doctrine is strategic. With those true brethren who do deny this position of Christian orthodoxy we can only envisage an occasional or exceptional cooperation. Total ecclesiastic fellowship, an even smaller circle, requires a minimum of agreement in ecclesiology. Two other examples may be given. The great discussion of Calvinism and of Arminianism does not stir up an unimportant question. Its importance may in fact justify a few regroupings. On the contrary, differences in eschatological matters, among those who firmly believe in the personal return of the Lord "to judge the quick and dead," should not hinder a full expression of Christian unity.

*Christians ought to consider as abnormal their differences in matters of faith, even secondary ones.* The weight of history often makes us fall from sheer discouragement. We then comfort ourselves with a "spiritual" notion of unity which is a far cry from the New Testament pattern. With a high degree of determination and the help of all ministries we must move with all our energies toward unity of faith and of knowledge, to the maturity of the full stature of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:13).

*Let us not confuse customs, language, or style of presentation with faith.* The Bible sometimes demands separation, more or less severe, for doctrinal reasons. It forbids it for any other. But we too often let these other reasons deprive us of the expression of unity. We all tend to give to the expression of faith the value of faith itself. The Bible is very little concerned — so little we are amazed to realize it — with the external form of prayer, to the atmosphere and to the emotional flavor of Christian experience. It does not seem interested in the rigidity or the freedom of liturgical order (even though it condemns disorder) (I Cor. 14) or of the number of "oh's" and "ah's." The preferences in this realm are not illegitimate. Our sensitivity is us. It is only "natural" that they play a rôle in the liberty of expressions of Christian unity. But true unity will be supernatural! It is evident that we all need to learn the price of diversity.

However, the liberty we enjoy as to the forms does not mean that all external signs are left to our little individual or collective ideas. The Christianity of the New Testament is built upon a second pillar of objectivity: the unity of order, after the one of truth. To use Paul's expression, after "one faith, one baptism."

### *One Baptism*

Without doubt, the apostle is referring here to the Christian water baptism, a public witness joined to a confession of faith (Rom. 10:9, 10). "In Jesus' name" is an expression with a commercial touch, implying that the baptized is brought to the Lord's accounting, as one of his personal properties (cf. I Peter 3:21). We can stand in wonder at the fact that baptism appears in the list of the seven realities through or in which Christians are one. Doesn't this lead us to exalt it beyond what is just? Isn't Paul giving a warning against such an exaltation when he points out the fact that Christ did not send him to baptize but to preach the Gospel, which message alone God used for the salvation of believers (I Cor. 1:17). As for me — and I am Baptist — the application of the very five factors cited above leads to the following conclusion, regarding

the differences of opinion evangelicals have about the method, the subject, and the meaning of the baptism of water. We are to give medium importance to this complicated problem, neither fundamental nor marginal; second without being secondary. How can we explain the place of baptism in Ephesians 4:5?

Would water baptism establish Christian unity? Many, through the influence of the great Catholic tradition, would like to relate the unity of "all the baptized" (an expression not found in the New Testament!) with the causative efficacy of the rite, which is supposed to confer the Spirit, at least when it finds faith. This interpretation, for me, is excluded: it confuses water baptism with baptism of the Spirit. We shall leave to one side the theological arguments that Reformed theologians like Auguste Lecerf masterfully developed<sup>14</sup>. It will be enough to notice that the confusion of both baptisms neglects the clear distinction of both in the story of Cornelius (Acts 10, 11). It is the Lord who baptizes in the Spirit. His disciples baptize in water. No confusion is permitted between the two; there is no dependence of the first on the second<sup>15</sup>.

When Paul outlines "one baptism," he is using, we believe, a figure of speech close to synecdoche: baptism is *the part for the whole*. The doorway to the visible church, the first institution of Jesus Christ for his community, baptism represents the whole of the ecclesiastical order.

In the economy of grace, "faith" is not the only objective structure; our subjective experience of the Spirit is linked to the life of a definite "society," a society with its rules and rites, its discipline and leaders, in charge of exercising discipline. "One baptism" means that the true, entire expression of our unity cannot leave aside the ecclesiastical order — no matter how painful this reminder might be for us.

Paul's epistles and the rest of the New Testament forbid the neglect of this part of Christianity. The main official ministries are presented to the Ephesians (4:11). They play the role of the joints of the body (verse 16). The little tableau in the book of Acts describing the life of the primitive church, often mentions the activity of the apostles and of their assistants in this realm (Acts 2, 6, 15, etc.) As long as the evangelical Christians do not reach a common comprehension about the ministries, something will be lacking in the expression of their unity. And the same must be said of baptism, this time considered for itself, and about the Lord's Supper. Without speaking about inter-communion in the manner of certain people, we cannot deny that brothers who are not able to sit down openly at the same table, are not living the fullness of their brotherhood. As evangelical Christians, we do not have these problems of orders, the great divisions that have torn Christendom apart, but we do not have the right to feel satisfied with mere partial agreement, "forgetting" the various elements the New Testament wants us to experience together!

Among the ministries, there are some in which more than one local community is interested. In addition to the apostles, without successors, one can quote the case of Apollos. It reminds us that the unity of all churches, according to the biblical concept, should also become strong — by a public witness, appearing in an *ordered* manner. The Scripture

imposes no form to this presence, but we do see Paul very concerned about obtaining the hand of fellowship from the apostles of Jerusalem so that his "course" as an evangelist might not be in vain (Gal. 2), and his collection for the poor in Jerusalem (II Cor. 8, 9) might be a demonstration of solidarity for all members of the body of Christ. In the interests of world evangelism, which involves all of us *together*, should we be thinking of other ordered expressions of our unity beyond this very meeting in Lausanne? Some permanent expression?

#### *One God and Father*

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians did not conclude his summary with the two expressions that so strongly push us into progress toward unity: "One faith, one baptism." And we should do well to follow him. Here, as elsewhere, (I Cor. 3:23, 11:3) his theocentric emphasis is: "One God and Father" (Eph. 4:6). Unpleasant as it could be to some modern theologians who hate the "metaphysical" which contrasts with the eclipse of the Father in today's thinking, the New Testament is theocentric.

It protects us from a subtle temptation, that of re-establishing *man* in the center under the pretext of Christo-centrism or Spirito-centrism, that of falling back again in anthropo-centrism while we pretend to be concerned with spiritual experience, healthy doctrine, or correct order. In the unity of God, all unity gets its roots. From the sovereign grace of God proceed all the positives of salvation, objective and subjective. For the glory of God, the Spirit's working operates in us, as the Lord Christ's work avails for us.

In Eph. 4:6, the clause that concerns the Father is of trinitarian structure: "*above all*" corresponds to the Father; "*among all*" to the Son, who lives with us until the end of the world; "*in all*" to the Spirit who makes us temples of God by living in us. Here the Trinity is summed up from the standpoint of the Father who sends the Son and the Spirit. This way we more clearly see the unity and plurality without tension in the divinity. So we see how the two main lines of objectivity and of subjectivity must stay distinct and wholly joined — under the predominant thought of the Trinity and to the praise of the Fatherly purpose of grace.

The consequence is eminently practical. Most of us are heirs of the Reformation, which found again the objective economy of the revelation and of the redemption, and heirs of the pietist and revivalist traditions, which emphasized the subjective work of the Spirit. If we are ready to complement each other and to correct each other, it is while fighting for a total trinitarian Christianity that we will learn to express better our unity in the Spirit of Christ, to draw closer to each other on all questions of faith and ecclesiastical order, to walk more freely together to propagate the Gospel. To the glory alone of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Vernon Mortenson of Wheaton (1966), "Missions and Evangelical Unity," *The Mission of the Church in the World*, (Harold Lindsell, ed.; French translation, 1968), pp. 189 ff; Rene de Visme Williamson, "Negative thoughts about Ecumenism," *Christianity Today* XX (August 30, 1968) p. 1131.



<sup>2</sup> Amsterdam Congress (1971). See the official volume, *Evangelism Alert*, 1972, p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> This is Barthian. Cf. K. Barth, *Dogmatics IV*, IXXX, pp. 36-38.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Goran Janson, *Les Evangeliques anglais devant le Conseil (Ecumenique des Eglises: Essai d'analyse des attitudes et des arguments)*. (thesis presented at the Independent, Evangelical Seminary, Vaux sur Seine, France, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Y. Congar, "Unite, Diversite et Divisions," *Sainte Eglise*, 1963, p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> Ff. H. de Lubac, *Catholicisme, les aspects sociaux du dogme*, 1947, p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> Brunner ties the Spirit to the "paralogical" in *Das Missverständnis der Kirche*, 1951, pp. 47 ff; cf. p. 165; with force in his *Dogmatique*, vol. III, 1967, pp. 29 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Klass Runia, *Reformation Today*, 1968, pp. 56 ff., shows clearly that the question here is doctrinal truth as well as personal truth. His entire book treats thoroughly the subject of this expose. Its reading is strongly recommended.

<sup>9</sup> "Le scandale de l'Unité" in *Parole et Dogmatique, hommage à Jean Bosc*, 1971, p. 230.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. VII, 1910; reprinted 1965, pp. 650 ff, and Y. Congar op. cit. p. 118.

<sup>11</sup> R. D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutherianism*, 1970, pp. 148 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Heinrich Heppe, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche*, 1935, pp. 34-36.

<sup>13</sup> *Dialogue avec Tryphon*, 80.

<sup>14</sup> A. Lecerf, "Le Soli Deo Gloria et L'efficacite des sacrement," *Bulletin de la Societe Calviniste* No. 44 (December 1940); "Des moyens de la Grace, Notes dogmatiques II," *Revue Reformee*, No. 22 (1955/2).

<sup>15</sup> When Paul says "one baptism," of course he does not exclude this distinction. For the Spirit, the New Testament does not use the substantive "baptism" but only the verb "to baptize," and this is from a stylistic point of view, a metaphor. Against a causative conception of baptism, we refer to two powerful demonstrations, Karl Barth's *Testament, Dogmatique IV/4*, 1961, and to this exegetic masterpiece: J.D.G. Dunn's thesis *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 1970.

## THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL UNITY

Henri Blocher

Your criticisms were valuable beyond even my anticipations! Never before have I had such an experience; I have found it enriching — and, in several instances, quite moving. Many thanks in the Lord! And now, I feel perturbed, for I am about to disappoint you who have encouraged me. Time permits me to touch only on a small number of the points which you raised.

I will not attempt to deliver to you a shortened version of this exposition, for it already needs to be condensed. I would simply remind you, that its theme is *biblical foundations* rather than the *means of application*, and that its correct title is: "Our Christian unity according to the Bible." Without neglecting the central issues of this Congress, the exposition deals with the theme of *Christian unity as expounded in the New Testament*. This is but one stone in the edifice of this Congress. I believe that it is preferable to place one stone carefully rather than to try to construct a whole wall too quickly.

In fact, I believe that we must come to grips with the difficulties of the subject and with elements that might generate discussion amongst us. It is for this that the exposition does not develop the theme of love, which is the cement of our unity, nor the clause "one Lord." As to the principle in these cases, I am sure that we all agree. It is in coming to the practical aspects that we all confess our insufficiency.

### 1. *Ephesians 4 and the trinitarian model*

The Apostle Paul's passage on Christian unity, in the fourth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, enables one to consider the difficulties from a viewpoint that is in itself biblical. This text, which is more structured, more concise, and at times more precise than the high priestly prayer of Jesus, is less often a subject of meditation. I have thus proposed that we examine it. I must, however, make one confession: I hesitated in my choice because of the formula "only one baptism," since I foresaw the possibility of a controversy as a result of its commentary. But I was convicted: I was not to be any more cautious than Paul, any more cautious than the Holy Spirit!

Too often, as evangelical Christians, we cover the shame of our differences with Noah's coat. We sing, "We are one in the Spirit" — and it's sincere, it's true, and it's necessary. But we forget the equally necessary biblical emphasis on the *expression* of unity and on agreement in thought and deed. We prudently leave a number of tabooed questions to the side; such prudence is not of the Holy Spirit!

We will return to the question of baptism, but first I would like to comment on the first of the seven affirmations of unity (or unicity) in Paul's summary: "only one body," the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4). My exposition does not treat it in any particular paragraph; for essentially the exposition is, in its entirety, but a development of the clause "only one body." These words signify Christian unity; and the following six affirmations remind one of its bases and aspects. I will, however, add three remarks on the choice of these words and of