

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

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

⁴ Cf. Goran Janzon, *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).

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

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

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

⁸ 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.

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

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

¹¹ R. D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1970, pp. 148 ff.

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

¹³ *Dialogue avec Tryphon*, 80.

¹⁴ 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).

¹⁵ 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 onicity) 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

the image of the body. These remarks will support the content of the whole passage.

First, the body is the prime example of *unity within diversity* or of *diversity within unity*. Paul emphasizes it to the Corinthians in his remarks on spiritual gifts (I Corinthians 12). Second, the notion of "body" entails that of *visibility* — a body can be seen. If our unity is that of a single body, it will not be able to remain invisible. Finally, the church is a body, the body of Christ — and specifically in the sense of a bride, just as the woman is the body of her husband.

Paul uses the image of this thought, as can be seen in the next chapter of the epistle to the Ephesians (5:25 and following); and, as a Dutch Benedictine monk, Dom Paul Andriessen, has demonstrated throughout all the epistles, the church is not the body of Christ as if she were the extension or prolongation of the Christ in a sort of mystical fusion, but rather in the clear relationship of *alliance*. The church is the body of Christ as the community of those who believe in him, who obey him, who love him because he first loved them, and who purify themselves in the hope of his return. If such is the union of the body of the church to her Head, then the union of Christians in the unity of the body, which is dependent upon it, will manifest similar characteristics: faith, obedience, hope, and love.

The model of alliance is not the only one which helps us to understand the nature of Christian unity. By its trinitarian construction, Paul's condensed formula, "only one Spirit, only one Lord, only one God and Father," invites us to consider a yet higher model — that of the Divine Being himself: only one God, but in an eternal differentiation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The high priestly prayer clearly expresses this. Jesus asks: "That they be one as we are one." Notice the adverb "as"! There is an analogy to the trinitarian unity and — more specifically in John 17 — to the unity of the Father and the Son.

In what way are the Father and the Son one? Saint Augustine demonstrated that the Father and the Son are eternally one in the Spirit. He called it the knot of love of the Father and the love of the Son. This thought has a sound biblical foundation. The Holy Spirit is both the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son. He, the third Person, bears a name that designates the Trinity as a whole. God is Spirit. The final vision in Revelation symbolically represents it as a river of living water running out from the throne of God the Father and of the Lamb; this underscores their unity. It is the very same Spirit that unites us, thus reflecting through the work of grace the union of the Father and the Son.

The union of the Father and the Son in the Spirit does not alter their distinctiveness. They are not merged: being one, they remain several. This is the second point that must be emphasized and which man's natural thinking has no small difficulty in understanding! Indeed, in creation itself, the more one ascends the ladder of beings, the more one finds unity and distinctiveness. A horse, for example, is characterized by more unity than a mass of rock, and, *at the same time*, has a far richer internal differentiation or diversity. This is an invitation to conceive of the highest unity as also the most differential.

But natural human thinking remains deaf to this message. Man's thinking introduces an opposition between unity on the one hand and diversity on the other — and thus makes them incompatible. One can see this in many religions and philosophies of the East and the West. Whence does this fatal tendency arise? The natural thinking of man — of fallen man — does not listen to the Word of the living God, of God the Creator of the world. Man's thinking begins with the world; and, in order to make its gods, it absolutizes elements or aspects of the world. However, *in the world*, even if unity and diversity increase together on the ladder of beings, they can never be found to the absolute degree — thus absolutely linked. Unity and diversity are often disassociated in the world. The kind of unity that meets the eye (poor unity) excludes diversity. Natural thinking, which absolutizes these aspects of the world, fatally turns unity and diversity into two opposed principles. Biblical thinking alone — liberated by the living God from the bondage of "world elements" — invites us to conceive of a unity which comprises in itself the richest diversity.

The question is not of interest to philosophers and speculative theologians alone. The choice of the model of unity influences the whole of cultural life! As for myself, I understood the scope of application of the trinitarian model about fifteen years ago after reading an article in a military publication on Islamic society. Torn between unity and diversity, natural man appears to be condemned to vacillate incessantly between individualistic monarchism and oppressive dictatorship, between monolithic totalitarianism and disintegration.

The modernist theologians of our day preach doctrinal *pluralism* and contend that they find it in the New Testament. Their idea is that diversity destroys unity. In their view, James contradicts Paul, John contradicts Mark. This is the total disintegration of biblical witness. We affirm, on the contrary, a diversity within unity, differences of approach of viewpoints of language, of procedure — but without conflict. Compare Paul and the author of Hebrews: their example is to the point. They speak of the Old Testament in significantly different but perfectly complementary ways. So the unity that we must maintain is of the same kind as the internal unity of the New Testament, which seeks to let the same truth spread, taking in the diversity of our temperament, of our gifts, and of our situations.

The trinitarian model enables us to notice another complementary fundamental. The exposition will deal with it in its conclusion. In the diversity of trinitarian roles, the *objective* work was the *Son's*: revelation and redemption, the teaching of truth, the expiation in our place. The *subjective* work is the mission of the *Spirit*: regeneration and sanctification, opening of the heart to the truth of the Son, and transformation unto likeness. The emphasis of the Reformation was on the *objectivity of grace*; and this emphasis remains in larger churches that came out of the Reformation to the degree in which they did not forsake their heritage. On the other hand, the *subjective* work has been of more interest to the pietistic, revivalistic, and — dare I add — "charismatic" tradition. A unilateral and exclusive emphasis, as we know, leads to heresy. We can now see that it upsets the equilibrium of the "trinitarian model," and we understand perhaps how this model can

help if we keep it constantly before us.

2. Only one baptism

Perhaps it is because the question of baptism is related to the great duality of the evangelical heritage that it was so frequently mentioned in your remarks. I must therefore deal with this question, although I am about to walk on eggs. The Lord, I hope, will enable me to do so — he who allowed Peter to walk on water!

I made clear that "only one baptism" signified here "the baptism of water." Many of you wrote to me suggesting rather the baptism of the Holy Spirit! Unfortunately, I cannot agree with this. I have consulted all the knowledgeable commentaries on the epistle to the Ephesians in the library of our department — and not one chose that interpretation. I do not believe that the fact is to be explained only on the basis of the poverty of our library. Indeed, I do not bow down before the specialists as before an infallible arbiter! But there is a fundamental reason for their choice in this case, and it seems to me to be decisive. It is only the *verb* "to baptize" that is used at times in a metaphorical sense for the effusion of the Spirit; the *noun* "baptism," is never used in this way. It designates baptism by water. Even Dr. James Dunn, who exceeds all others in including "in the Holy Spirit," recognizes this when finding the verb "to baptize."

Others of you said: "There is but one baptism, both of water and of Spirit." Without using a demonstration that others use very well, I will say that it is a strong conviction on my part that Scripture distinguishes and teaches us to distinguish. Even if we argue that the clear separation in the case of Cornelius is an exception, Scripture proves at least *two* realities: the ritual of water given by men, and the work of the Lord who pours out the Spirit. These two do not constitute a pure and simple identity. On this, I believe we can all agree. The real problem is the relationship *between the two*. I do not wish to upset my Lutheran brethren or those who think as they. I do not wish to convey the feeling that I am capitalizing on my privilege as a speaker to engage in baptistic propaganda. I will leave for some other time the exposition of concepts I hold as true. Luther would give assent to a proposition which satisfies me and which will express the common core of our baptismal doctrines: the work of salvation and the communication of the Spirit — within or without baptism — is only operated through the agency of the Word of God accepted in faith.

I must comment a little more on the place of the baptism of water, "only one baptism" in the epistle to the Ephesians. The Apostle Paul, who said, "It is not to baptize that the Christ sent me" (I Cor. 1:17), certainly did not make the ritual of water in and of itself a fundamental principle of Christian unity. The commentators are themselves at times perplexed. I do not deny that "only one faith" and "only one baptism" can be taken to apply to the subjective aspect of salvation. After having mentioned the "one Lord," Paul could refer to the adhesion to the Lord in *only one faith*, the common trust that ties us to him; *only one baptism*, the confession and the committal of this faith. In this case, the word "baptism" would refer to the spiritual reality that the ritual signifies — such as it does in a most clear fashion in the first letter of Peter (3:21).

This interpretation does not seem to me to be the best in this case. The comments of the Apostle himself in verses 13 and following show that he is thinking of faith in the objective sense — faith transmitted once and for all, faith as the structure of truth and model of doctrine. In its subjective sense, faith often varies; and even if one does not take one's weaknesses into account, how many differences can be seen both synchronically and diachronically! It is more straightforward to say "only one faith" when referring to the faith: those-things-which-we-believe.

"Only one baptism" must then likewise refer to the objective side of Christian unity. I suggest that we see in this a stylistic phrase which is not contrived or far-fetched; a stylistic phrase which designates a part for the whole. Paul says "only one baptism," but he is thinking of the whole of the *ecclesiastical order* of which baptism is the first institution. If a political leader, in order to promote national unity, proclaims, "Only one head, only one justice, only one school, only one sword," it can be readily understood that "sword" represents the whole of the national defense, both as symbol and as element. Likewise, "school" means more than a school; "school" here encompasses all forms of education and of cultural molding. The function of the word "baptism" in Paul's language is analogous to that of the word "school" or "sword" in the political oration. The reign of the one and only Lord upon his church is carried out through the existence of an order, of rules and rituals for our life in common, of disciplines and official ministries. That this is, in fact, the Apostle's thought is confirmed to us through his comments, since he deals with ministries in the church — distributed in the harmonious measure of Christ's gifts and purposed to allow the orderly growth of the whole body.

If this order, represented by baptism, is of such importance to Paul, what are we to say of our divergencies, in view of what he says? Or in view of such-and-such a paragraph of the Confession of Faith? "Only one baptism" — is it not painfully ironic in the situation that made my previous remarks necessary? Must I deny any unity between my Lutheran brethren and myself if I hold that their baptism is not that of Scripture? Must they do the same? The problem of baptism could synecdochically be to us the totality of that which separates us as Lutherans, Anglicans, Reformed, Baptists, Mennonites, Pentecostals, Plymouth Brethren, Quakers.

3. The rule of proportion

The answer that I recommend begins by the refusal of all-or-nothing type solutions. Indeed, our differences concerning baptism, for example, are not "*nothing*." These differences reduce the possibilities that we have to express our Christian unity. But they do not destroy *everything*. They do not oblige me to treat my brothers of another persuasion as if they were antichrists or as if they were false teachers not to be greeted. The rule of proportion must be observed.

To justify this rule — and especially to apply it — is no easy task. Our present situation is no longer that of the early church, where most divergencies required an all-or-nothing discussion.

Indeed, we still experience and know all too well the kind of divisions found in the church at Corinth, engendered by carnal motives —

born of pride and jealousy, of fear and foolishness — often aggravated by misunderstandings.

In these cases, the division is sin; repentance must restore the whole communion. Of course, it is still true nowadays that certain scandalous sins demand, on the contrary, a rigorous separation — as the separation from the incestuous (I Cor. 5:11). But I speak not of such examples of division: they are clear, too clear! One has to simply obey.

Our delicate problem is that of divergencies of a doctrinal or ecclesiastical order between true brothers. Two sincere Christians, who have a mutual esteem, come to incompatible convictions as a result of reading the Bible. Such a situation was rarely found in New Testament times, yet such a situation is the central problem in the existence of several Christian confessions or denominations. The diversity of administrative structures, the variety of labels, is not that which bothers me; even carnal motives, which historically played a role, can be placed before God in repentance. But the lack of agreement in matters of faith and obedience is another matter. It is because of my conscience that I cannot be a Lutheran and that a Lutheran brother can not be a Baptist; and the New Testament does not give me any very explicit instructions as to what has to be done.

Before the Lord, a certain separation appears to me both as an evil reality and as an inevitable obligation. I am unable to comfort myself hastily in saying, "I am in the Spirit with my Lutheran brethren," for this unity is only expressed in a mutilated form — for it is not quite "an only faith" and "an only baptism." I cannot say, "Let's forget all this; what is important are our actions, our lives — not theology." For we are sanctified through truth (Jesus said "truth" before saying "life"), and Paul calls us to the unity of full knowledge (*epignosis*) and not that of ignorance (verse 13)! I may not claim that the questions which divide us are unimportant, but neither may I treat my brother as a pagan or a publican: he is my brother!

Each of us must witness to and live the truth of Scripture as he or she sees it; and yet we cannot be infinitely divided!

Paul comes to help in two passages. He shows clearly to the Philippians that secondary divergencies must not keep us from walking together. We must continue to fight and to pray for a better understanding. But division is not necessary; and, hence, is not permissible. But what when the questions — although not primary ones — are neither secondary ones? The second epistle to the Thessalonians lays down the principles of a *moderate and mitigated* separation. This deviation from the apostolic tradition is sanctified, but brotherhood must not be forgotten.

This principle is our rule of proportion. It applies, of course, in many different ways according to the instance. The greatest discussion will bear on the *scale* we are to use. Who is to decide if a question is an essential one, a secondary one, or a major or minor one? Who will assess its degree of importance?

I have proposed five criteria and would like to make two fundamental remarks on their use. First, they are not a recipe which automatically gives the answer to the problem; nothing replaces loyalty, humility, and prayer. How are these criteria to help us? The object is less to *determine* the importance of a point than to *discipline* our groping research. The

criteria are there mainly to protect us against the snares of subjectivity; to keep us from taking our personal inclinations and intuitions for the voice of the Holy Spirit — and that we might escape the narrowness of our tradition, of the culture of our age.

It is through the combination of criteria that we will approach exactitude with a margin of possible error. Implicit in the proposition I am making, particularly in the first and in the last two criteria, there is the conviction in the *clarity* of Scripture, which is amply manifest and which will keep us not too far from the truth.

It is perhaps not a bad thing that time fails me to comment on each criterion and on the results at which it enables one to arrive. Our common work must begin in the construction of a common scale, through careful thought of our agreements and differences.

Conclusion

The suggestion I wished to make in developing the question of my exposition — over a possible lengthening of this Congress — has been integrated into a project that we will all discuss, which is now submitted for your consideration. This also applies to the outline of a bold and wise proclamation.

Together, we could also define a code of good manners — a framework of obligation for evangelical collaboration. There should be some simple rules that all would respect and automatically conform to. This could help us to avoid irritations and would soothe many wounds.

I hope I have conformed to such a framework in the way in which I have spoken to you. Otherwise, please forgive me.

In the practical application of biblical principles of unity, the emphasis should also be upon biblical teaching and theology. In this respect, I should like to recommend the manifesto of a group of international students from Trinity Theological Seminary, near Chicago. One must also encourage such movements as the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, who are pioneers in biblical unity in evangelization.

Let us remember that the essential thing, which is the most effective in the long run, is the *changing of mentality*. First we must be deeply convinced of the truth of these verses in Ephesians. God desires us to express more perfectly the unity already given to us by the Son in the Spirit without in any way lessening our love of the truth. We must will as he wills, in spite of our differences — and, at the same time, specifically acknowledge these differences. This is an urgent matter.

Too often, as evangelical Christians, we have majored on minor differences — at the same time confusing the truly essential with the secondary. Others, however, in order to be involved with the world, have abandoned our one and only foundation.

Today our witness must be one of discernment, immovably grounded on the basic affirmations of the faith — in a wise and sober appreciation of other questions, together with brotherly assistance, with respect and esteem one of the other, and with a sincere desire to make progress. May the Lord help us to do this. Then our task will not appear as sectarian proselytization; our working together will not run the risk of falling into modern confusion. But the unity of our witness will be for the spread of the Gospel throughout the world.