

## CONFLICTING VISIONS OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

The present situation of the movement toward Christian unity seems to me to be not unlike the middle of a Brahms symphony. It began at the start of the century with the enunciation of a single theme. Little by little other themes were introduced and began to interweave over the years. There have been crescendoes and diminuendos, and, little by little, complicated currents of rhythm entered into creative struggle with each other. The moment at which we have arrived then is one of immense complexity, and it is very difficult to get a balanced and accurate view of precisely where the lines of movement are leading. Yet it is worth a try because the movement toward unity is not just something we passively listen to but something in which we are actively involved. All of us together are both composers and musicians and we need to understand as best we can this complex movement in which we participate if we are to play our parts intelligently and effectively.

Efforts to identify conflicting approaches to the question of Christian unity often oversimplify by describing two opposing syndromes: the "good guys," who are liberal, ecumenical, oriented to social change and open to the whole world; and the "bad guys," who are non-ecumenical, conservative, oriented toward personal salvation and focused on the internal life of their church community. However, this picture seems to me to be drawn with too facile a hand. Indeed, I prefer, for the purposes of this paper, to speak of Christian unity rather than ecumenism, because the vision of unity is not confined to those who choose to call themselves ecumenical. Those who are suspicious of ecumenism are not without interest in Christian unity. They simply have their own vision of what Christian unity means.

What I propose to do then is to describe and comment on four pairs of conflicting visions of Christian unity which seem to me to be operative today. Different individuals and groups share different combinations of these visions, so no one of the eight is intended to completely or exclusively identify any individual or group. The first conflicting pair is, on the one hand, the approach to unity which works through existing institutions, usually bodies which have been on the

scene for some time; and on the other, the approach which relies more on new, spontaneous, not-yet-institutionalized efforts toward unity. The second pair is similar to the first, but, as we shall see, is not quite the same: work for unity through higher levels of Church life as over against work for unity on the local level. The vision of unity which emphasizes the personal, private, and spiritual contrasts with one which stresses the public, social and secular. That is the third pair. And the final pair is a vision of unity which centers on the Church in contrast to one which centers on the larger reality of the kingdom of God. I propose to examine each of these pairs more closely, and then conclude by trying to put together a picture of the Church and her mission which can incorporate the best of all of them. What the paper amounts to, then, is an effort to lay out a dialogue between conflicting visions of unity, with the hope that out of it will emerge some kind of unity of these conflicting visions of unity.

The institutional approach to unity includes above all the World Council of Churches and the Vatican Unity Secretariat, but also includes national and local councils of churches, national and local ecumenical commissions or agencies of churches, official union negotiations, joint working groups, and bilateral conversations both national and world-wide. The contribution which the institutional approach has made toward unity cannot be underestimated. It is hard to imagine, for instance, the degree to which the attitudes of Christians the world over have been transformed since the beginning of the century by the steady influence of the World Council of Churches and the organisms which preceded it. And what an immensely different climate there would be today between Catholics and Protestants without the Second Vatican Council and the Unity Secretariat which became the ecumenical instrument of the Vatican II Church. Furthermore, John Deschner, in his report to the WCC Central Committee in August of last year,<sup>1</sup> has shown that not all the achievements of the institutional approach to unity are in the distant past. He reports on thirty-six union negotiations over the previous two years, for instance, and shows that twenty-two of them have yielded positive results and only a dozen, a third of them, show signs of

<sup>1</sup>"Developments in the Field of Church Unity," *Ecumenical Review* 24, No. 4 (October, 1972), 447-58.

malaise. He points to the twenty-seven bilaterals of the past ten years<sup>2</sup> and to the astounding results they have achieved particularly with regard to the Eucharist and mutual recognition of ministries.<sup>3</sup> He concludes by noting the growing insistence in the WCC on the theme of a coming universal council which can speak for all Christians and show the way into the future.

At the same time he recognizes that the institutional approach to unity is under attack from both the right and the left. From the left comes strong criticism of the whole apparatus of union negotiations and bilaterals which distract from the pressing need to face the truly divisive social, racial, political and other problems of our day. Criticism from the right charges the institutional approach to unity with deadly compromises which are the first step to loss of Christian truth and betrayal of the gospel. Eugene Burke suggests that the difficulty American Protestants have in accepting a centralizing institutional approach may be attributable in part to the deep psychic and even unconscious roots which remain from a long history of anti-papalism, roots which a relatively few years of general ecumenical dialogue have far from excised.<sup>4</sup>

Jan Grootaers, a Dutch layman, sees the institutional approach to unity as having reached a crisis.<sup>5</sup> If it is to become effective, it must get in touch again with the living sources out of which it grew, and become clericalized and much more flexible. But the real hope for unity he sees in what he calls the post-ecumenical movement, which leads us to the second of our first pair of conflicting visions of unity, the vision of unity through independent, spontaneous, non-institutional efforts. First of all, it should be recognized that practically every approach to unity

<sup>2</sup>Nils Ehrenstrom and Gunther Gassmann, *Confessions in Dialogue* (Geneva: WCC, 1972).

<sup>3</sup>For an excellent summary and evaluation of the bilaterals between the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and other Christian communions, see Appendix A of the *Proceeding of the Twenty-Seventh Annual Convention of the CSTA*, Los Angeles, California, 1972, pp. 179-232.

<sup>4</sup>In an unpublished paper read at the last meeting of the Roman Catholic/Presbyterian-Reformed bilateral.

<sup>5</sup>"Crise et avenir de l'Oecumenisme," *Irenikon* 44 (1971), 159-90.

which we now see institutionalized began as something spontaneous and non-institutional. We must recognize that we will never reach the point of not needing the charismatic and prophetic element, what Rahner calls the dynamic element in the Church. It may well be that only through the emergence and growth of new vital forces moving us toward unity can the rigidity and fatigue which so easily overtakes the institutional approach be overcome. These dynamic forces can be of many kinds: a pentecostal community in which Catholics and Protestants share a life of prayer and worship and mutual support almost unaware of confessional differences; a Catholic and Protestant task force to win justice for oppressed farm workers, which prays and celebrates the Eucharist together; an interfaith marriage in which all elements of both confessions are completely shared. One striking instance of new energies emerging is the Taizé Council of Youth. Back in February of 1969 Roger Schutz was so impressed with the number of young people from all over the world visiting Taizé and searching for a way of reconciliation between Christians that the idea of a Council of Youth occurred to him. In 1970, 2,500 young people celebrated Easter at Taizé; in 1971 there were 6,500. This Easter, with a crowd of 18,000 young people, Schutz announced that the Council of Youth would begin on August 30, 1974 at Taizé and successively convene in Africa, Latin America, Asia and North America. Their goals are to become conscious of oppression, committing their energies to breaking with situations where man is victim of man, rejecting privileges, refusing the hunt for success, fostering communion between men, finding liberation for themselves and others, becoming released themselves so as to effectively secure the release of others both near and far.<sup>6</sup> Here is a vigorous movement outside the present institutions for unity. Perhaps one day it will become part of the institutional approach, just as present institutions grew out of Christian student movements many years ago.

These dynamic forces which spring up in non-institutionalized ways are essential to the movement toward Christian unity, but they are not without danger. If, either because of the intransigence of institutions, or the angry self-righteousness of the new prophetic group

<sup>6</sup>*The Tablet* May 5, 1973, p. 424.

(or perhaps through a bit of both) the two become alienated from each other, the net result is not progress toward unity, but new division. In a word, the institutional approach to unity and the spontaneous prophetic approach are complementary. They both need each other.

Of the second pair of conflicting approaches to Christian unity, one directs its energies to higher-level dialogue, negotiation, and sharing, while the other concentrates on unity at the local level. Let us take a closer look at both of these, trying to see what positive values each has, and what dangers each entails.

Dialogue and negotiation at higher levels can have a liberating effect by removing many of the official restrictions which keep Christians divided. It can create the climate and establish policy by which Christians are encouraged to move toward greater unity in belief, in worship, and even in administrative structure. It can make individual Christians and individual churches aware of being part of a larger, indeed a world-wide community, and remind the local churches of a responsibility which reaches beyond the narrow limits of their own congregation. It is not surprising that the drive to prepare the way for a universal Christian council shows up in the WCC and not in some local congregation.<sup>7</sup>

But too exclusive attention to this higher level can cause problems. Those who spend their time at this level can easily forget that the principal reason for the existence of higher level structures is to provide support for what happens at the local level. The Council of Florence is the classic example of a division which was thought to be overcome at the top level, only to discover that the supposed reunion was repudiated at the local level. The frequently expressed fear of a superchurch, and the evangelical suspicion of unity by merger grow out of a sound instinct: unity is not achieved simply by rearrangements at higher levels in the churches. This fear undoubtedly played its part in the rejection of COCU's plan for a unified structure for a new American Church.

So it is not surprising that as COCU backs away, for the present, from specific plans for national structures of a united Church, it turns

<sup>7</sup>Gunars J. Ansons, "Ein universales Konzil," *Oekumenische Rundschau* 22, No. 1 (January, 1973), 13.



its attention to the Church at the local level. Indeed, there are signs that the decisive importance of unity at this level is becoming more and more widely realized in many quarters. Jan Grootaers points out that one of the reasons for the present crisis of institutional ecumenism is that the WCC never succeeded in bringing the movement toward unity down to the level of the ordinary parish of the member churches.<sup>8</sup> The National Council of Churches' Department for Councils of Churches has become the Commission on Regional and Local Ecumenism. The Anglican-Roman Catholic bilateral in this country has begun to direct its attention to projects for growing together at the local level; as has also the Roman Catholic-Presbyterian-Reformed bilateral.

This is a development which has great promise. Let us examine some of the reasons why. First of all, if Christian unity is not a grand abstraction, it must be experienced primarily in relation to those particular human beings whose lives touch ours directly in the place where we live and work. This is especially true of the movement toward Christian unity in our own country. When one speaks of Sweden or Spain, or of the unity of Christians of the West with those of the East, it is primarily a matter of acceptance of a Christian community in a different part of the world. But here in America Christians are all thrown together in the same place. This gives a special importance to local unity. It is much more important to overcome disunity and division at the local level, because there it is much more destructive of the Christianity of individuals, being experienced directly and daily.

One of the temptations of Catholics has been to think of the Church, and of Church unity, in rather impersonal, abstract, universal and legalistic terms. One becomes a Catholic by being incorporated through the legal act of baptism into a world-wide organism. Individual churches are impersonal sacramental supermarkets in which one revivifies or develops one's connection with this rather abstract impersonal entity, the Catholic Church, by infusions of supernatural grace. One is vertically in touch with God without very much attention to one's relationship to other Christians, Catholic or otherwise. More serious attention to local churches is a corrective for this kind of Catholic distortion. If we take the local church seriously, we begin to

<sup>8</sup>"Crise et avenir de l'Oecumenisme," p. 172.

pay more attention to the concrete experimental dimensions of the Church, and of the life of grace. This recovery of the experience of the Church as a sharing together in the power of the Spirit through a tangible set of relations with concrete human beings brings us close to the Church of the New Testament and the Church of the Fathers and is a source of both renewal and unity, which always go together.

If unity is to be real, real people must grow together; they cannot grow together unless their lives intermingle; and their lives cannot intermingle unless they come together in the same place. The preliminary condition for overcoming estrangement and reaching deeper unity is an ongoing set of contacts and exchanges, which can only happen if people are together in the same place. This appears to be so elementary and obvious that it seems unnecessary to belabor the point, and yet in practice it is often overlooked. The movement toward unity remains a professor's speculation or a bureaucratic game unless Christians are drawn together at the local level for human sharing, for worship, for learning, and for mission to the world in both the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

The most basic obstacle to the unity of Christians is not theological disagreement, but the refusal to accept the other person and his community. The division of the heart is both the fact to be overcome and the main obstacle which prevents it from being overcome. Mutual rejection can only be overcome by mutual acceptance. Indeed, one might even say that there is no way to mutual acceptance—mutual acceptance *is the way*. Or at least if there is any other way, it consists only in creating the conditions for such an acceptance, and those conditions are primarily all that goes with living and growing together at the local level. We often hear, and I am sure that it is true, that one of the greatest obstacles to Christian unity is widespread inertia. Now inertia cannot be overcome by high-level mergers or joint official statements from boards or commissions or even from churches themselves, but only by bringing Christians together in ongoing personal relationships at the local level.

Incidentally, we should not overlook the fact that polarization of opposing groups is taking place not only between different churches, but within single congregations, both Catholic and Protestant. To disregard the importance of overcoming these internal divisions and

restoring unity within such single congregations is to take too narrow a view of the movement toward unity. Christian unity means not only Catholics united with Protestants, but Catholics with Catholics as well, and Protestants of a particular tradition with their Protestant brothers and sisters of the same tradition. If liberal Catholics and conservative Catholics excommunicate each other, this division must be given no less serious attention than that between Catholics and Protestants if we take seriously the project of Christian unity. The point I want to make here is that this unity too, between Catholic and Catholic, between Protestant and Protestant, can only be achieved by closer attention to the concrete life of the local congregation.

I suspect too that it will not be possible to deal adequately with these problems at the local level unless there are much smaller units of sharing and worship than the large impersonal congregations which are the normal pattern at present. Such small units do exist, and are of many kinds. Perhaps the two most significant kinds are those which meet together for sharing in prayer and worship: home Eucharists, pentecostal prayer groups and the like; and those who join together to accomplish some goal connected with peace or justice. One of the many advantages of such small "local churches" is that they highlight the fact that the reality of the Church is not buildings, altars, elaborate furnishings, nor even the bread and wine of the Eucharist, but rather the community of human persons gathered together through the Spirit in a web of interaction, interrelation and joint mission.

In the transitional period of bewilderingly rapid change through which we are living, we are experiencing the disintegration of the religious patterns, symbols and structures which were shaped by the culture which is now passing away. How can we cope with this situation and shape new forms which are viable? Everyone must do his part at his own level, the theologian, the hierarch, the professional liturgist and all the rest. But the key to it all is what happens with local groups, small groups at the local level of church life. If ways are to be found for Christians to stay alive, and not merely to barely stay alive, but to develop a style of Christianity which can flourish, small groups of Christians must listen together to God's Word, experience the Lord's presence in each other, and commit themselves to one another and to the service of the world around them. The structures and patterns and



symbols which supported Christians through past ages were formed out of such primal Christian experience. Now that those forms are no longer viable, new ones can only be created through renewed experience of the basic Christian realities in contemporary context by small groups at the local level. This is not to say that such intensely vigorous small communities need be or will be the only form of Church life. But a network of them will be the hope of the Church of tomorrow.<sup>9</sup>

In speaking of the approach to unity on the local level, we have concentrated largely on the problem of renewal and revitalization of the Church and have not said much directly about the overcoming of division. This approach grows out of the conviction that genuine Christian renewal is the essential foundation of unity.<sup>10</sup> But it is presumed that, as far as possible, such local communities of renewal should do everything possible to share together across confessional lines in all aspects of their life: human sharing, worship, learning and mission. Not that emphasis on such local communities as the instruments of unity is without its dangers. There is always the peril of cozy introversion. Such groups can lose the vision of the catholicity of the Church and the responsibility that each community has for all others. But if such a group is to reach beyond itself in love and concern and solidarity, this is more likely to grow out of their rich experience together of Christ and his Spirit than from instructions issued from some central church agency encouraging them to go beyond themselves.

Of the third pair of conflicting visions of unity, one emphasizes the personal and spiritual dimension of Christianity and the other places more stress on the secular and social. Martin Marty calls these two approaches as they are found in American Protestantism "private" Protestantism and "public" Protestantism. "Private" (or "evangelical")

<sup>9</sup>See Karl Rahner, "The Teaching of Vatican II on the Church and the Future Reality of Christian Life," in *The Christian of the Future. Quaestiones Disputatae*, No. 18 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), pp. 78-81; also "The Present Situation of Christians: A Theological Interpretation of the Position of Christians in the Modern World," in *The Christian Commitment* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), pp. 3-37.

<sup>10</sup>"Decree on Ecumenism," *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966), pp. 350-51.

Protestantism emphasizes individual salvation out of the world, a personal moral life in accordance with this ideal, and fulfillment in the rewards of a life to come. "Public" (or "social") Protestantism is concerned with the social order and man's social destinies. It tries to transform the world, and is less concerned with revival and personal conversion than with building the kingdom of heaven on earth.<sup>11</sup>

The concern for personal salvation is found today not only among evangelical and pentecostal Christians, but, in different ways (ways, incidentally, for which many evangelicals and pentecostals have little sympathy) in the counter-cultural involvement in Eastern religions and types of meditation, in encounter and awareness groups of different kinds. The common denominator is personal fulfillment. There is no denying that authentic Christianity is impossible without personal conversion and serious attention to prayer and personal moral vision and personal commitment to it. It seems to me that any effort to denigrate this kind of Christianity because of its concern for a deep personal Christianity is misguided. All true Christian unity is in the bond of the Spirit and in personal union with the Lord Jesus.

That is not to say that such an approach to Christianity is without its dangers. It carries with it a tendency to think of the unity of Christians as a purely spiritual invisible reality which can be brought about and maintained without any kind of structural association. Michael Harper, writing from personal experience,<sup>12</sup> sees the dangers of the pentecostal form of this personal spirituality in three weaknesses: (1) the denigration of thought and of the human mind, (2) a pietism which neglects man's environmental and social needs, and (3) elitism which is tempted to look down on the "outsider." He does not think that the pentecostal Christian need yield to these temptations, and even points out ways in which they are resisting them, but the tendencies are there.

Marty's "public Protestantism" has its roots in the Social Gospel, and has shown itself, especially during the sixties, in the policies and

<sup>11</sup>Martin Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), p. 179.

<sup>12</sup>"Charismatic Renewal—A New Ecumenism?" *One in Christ* 9, No. 1 (1973), 61-65.

declarations of institutional ecumenical bodies such as the WCC and the NCC as well as of national denominational boards of some of the mainline churches. The 1966 WCC Conference on the Church and Society is a classic example of this approach. It seems that at present these bodies are under fire from their local constituencies because such policies do not meet their approval. It would appear that the mass of American Protestants are of the "private" variety.

What about Roman Catholics? Despite the pioneer work of men and women like those associated with the Catholic Worker movement and Friendship Houses, it remains true, as David O'Brien writes, that "From Leo XIII to Pius XII the social action of the [Roman Catholic] Church was derivative and secondary to the larger mission of saving men's souls."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, a concern for the social mission of the Church has been given more explicit official expression in recent years in the Roman Catholic Church. The trend picked up momentum with Pope John XXIII and Vatican II, and became even more a part of the Catholic scene with Pope Paul's *Populorum progressio*, the Medellin Conference of the Latin American Bishops, and the concrete actions of men like Groppi, Chavez and the Berrigans. Perhaps the most explicit official commitment of the Roman Catholic Church to this kind of Christianity is the statement of the Roman Synod of Bishops in 1971: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."<sup>14</sup> Yet it seems safe to say that this kind of "public Catholicism" is no more generally accepted by the average Catholic pastor and layman in the United States than "public Protestantism" is accepted by most Protestants.

Still, it is a charge put upon us if we take seriously the biblical message, especially Matthew 25. As Moltmann puts it: "According to

<sup>13</sup>*The Renewal of American Catholicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 276.

<sup>14</sup>In "Introduction" to *Justice in the World*, document of the Second General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 1971 (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1972), p. 34.

the New Testament, the brotherhood of Christ is twofold: on the one hand, it is his brotherhood with the faithful and their brotherhood with one another; and on the other hand, it is his brotherhood with the humblest, the starving, the oppressed, the alienated, the hopeless and the forsaken."<sup>15</sup> But no one can be serious about significant help for the poor and the needy in the kind of world we live in today unless he works toward a transformation of those social, political and economic structures which keep them in their poverty and need.

However, social-action Christianity, like all the other approaches we have dealt with, has its hazards, too. A frenetic activism can starve the spirit. Recognizing that we cannot fail to concern ourselves for remedying material poverty, it remains true that man does not live by bread alone. If the Church can give no more than material resources, it leaves the deepest hunger of man unfed. Thomas Merton put it well in the last talk he gave before his untimely death: "You can't just immerse yourself in the world and get carried away by it. That is no salvation. If you want to pull a drowning man out of the water, you have to have some support yourself. . . . There is nothing to be gained by simply jumping into the water and drowning with him."<sup>16</sup> Hugh Kerr makes a similar point in reflecting on Dean Kelley's recent and provocative *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*:<sup>17</sup>

If there is to be a new phase for the mainline denominations, the ecumenically and socially-oriented churches, then there must be a new articulation of basic essentials, such as respect for Scripture as norm and content of faith, the perversity of human nature, salvation and joy in Jesus Christ, and the life of the Spirit within fellowship. If there is to be a new era for the ecumenical movement and for some sort of social gospel, it will have to emerge *directly out of* such an articulation of the simplicities of the Christian tradition.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>"Fellowship in a Divided World," *Ecumenical Review* 24, No. 4 (October, 1972), 440.

<sup>16</sup>Father Louis, O.C.S.O. (Thomas Merton), "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," in *A New Charter for Monasticism*, ed. by John Moffitt (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 80.

<sup>17</sup>(New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

<sup>18</sup>"A Failure of Perception," *Theology Today* 30, No. 1 (April, 1973), 51.

One of the most painful problems which must be faced by "public Christianity" has to do with the uses of violence in the pursuit of justice. Robert Brown puts it well in a forthcoming book: "The answer is not easy, for those who simplistically opt for violence must be reminded that they may be jeopardizing the vision of peace, whereas those who simplistically opt for non-violence must be reminded that they may be ignoring the cry for justice wrung from the heart of the oppressed"<sup>19</sup> and he cites the words of Don Helder Camana who calls for a people and a Church who will be "fit instruments to perform the miracle of combining the violence of the prophets, the truth of Christ, the revolutionary spirit of the Gospel—but without destroying love."<sup>20</sup>

Once again we find in this third conflicting pair of approaches that neither alone is fully adequate. Without the kind of concern for the neighbor in need which takes seriously the challenge to transform a world of injustice and war, private Christianity fails to be fully faithful to the gospel. Without personal spiritual transformation and rootage in a life of prayer and personal integrity, public Christianity sells the gospel short.

The last of our four pairs of conflicting approaches to Christian unity is similar to the third pair, yet different enough to deserve separate treatment: one is a vision of church-centered unity, the other of unity centered on the kingdom.

The historian R. R. Palmer notes that in the nineteenth century the Catholic Church adopted a church-centered approach in its efforts to preserve unity and to resist the threatening forces of disintegration. He even believes that the defensive church-centered strategy of Pius IX, withdrawing into a strong religious fortress, was a wiser course than the way of open adaptation to the surrounding world adopted by liberal Protestantism.<sup>21</sup> Dean Kelley's recent book, *Why Conservative*

<sup>19</sup>Robert M. Brown, *Frontiers for the Church Today*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press, New York.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, quoting from *Church and Colonialism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969), p. 111.

<sup>21</sup>*A History of the Modern World* (2nd ed.; New York, 1960), p. 603, cited in David J. O'Brien, *The Renewal of American Catholicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 81.



*Churches are Growing*<sup>22</sup> seems to suggest that the strongly church-centered conservative churches in our time have qualities of vitality which give greater promise of survival than the liberal and ecumenical churches, and he includes in the latter category not only mainline Protestant churches, but, since Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church as well. The church-centered approach gives a very clear sense of identity. It puts a heavy emphasis on the vertical relationship to God. It tends to have all the qualities we have associated with "private Christianity." It strongly cultivates the inner life of the congregation and instills a deep sense of primary loyalty to the Church. The life of the Christian who makes this approach his own is strongly supported by fixed religious practices, very explicit formulas of belief, set patterns of worship, and unambiguous authority figures. For him the Church is an ark of safety surrounded by the chaotic floodwaters of the world. Such Christians are not usually supporters of the ecumenical movement, but it would be false and unfair to say that they have no vision of Christian unity. For them, Christians *are* united, in the true Church (whether that Church be Southern Baptist, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox) and working for unity means saving men out of the flood and bringing them into the ark, the one true Church of Christ.

Dean Kelley maintains that it is because such churches answer man's deep need for meaning, and demand serious commitment, that they are alive and growing today. He lists four "Minimal Maxims of Seriousness" for those who wish to learn from these "church-centered" churches: (1) Those who are serious about their faith do not confuse it with other beliefs, loyalties or practices, or mingle them together indiscriminately, or pretend they are alike, of equal merit, or mutually compatible if they are not. (2) Those who are serious about their faith make high demands of those admitted to the organization that bears the faith, and they do not include or allow to continue in it those who are not fully committed to it. (3) Those who are serious about their faith do not consent to, encourage, or indulge any violations of its standards of belief or behavior by its professed adherents. (4) Those who are serious about their faith do not keep silent about it, apologize for it, or let it be treated as though it made no difference, or should

<sup>22</sup>(New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

make no difference, in their behavior or their relationships with others.

Looking back into history, Kelley discovered that the effectiveness of Anabaptists and Wesleyans came from very specific ways of putting such seriousness into effect: (a) Be in no haste to admit members. (b) Test the readiness and preparation of would-be members. (c) Require continuing faithfulness. (d) Bear one another up in small groups. (e) Do not yield control to outsiders, nor seek to accommodate their expectations.<sup>23</sup>

Rosabeth Kanter has written a thought-provoking sociological study of nineteenth-century American communes which compares those which survived and those which did not. The key to survival is commitment, and she finds that those groups which survived spelled out that commitment to the community in very specific and concrete ways. The external expressions of commitment which made the difference between survival and collapse for those communities are unusually like what we find in church-centered communities.<sup>24</sup>

All this should not be shrugged off too easily with the charge that it is simply explained by an immature need for security. If the contours of belief and ritual and practice in the Church become so fuzzy and fluid that the Christian loses his hold on meaning and purpose, he will make no significant contribution to any kind of unity, either in Church or world. There is, in short, something valuable in the church-centered approach to unity, and we neglect it to our peril.

That having been said, the fact remains that the church-centered approach to unity carries with it serious dangers and is, taken by itself, quite inadequate as a Christian vision of unity. What are some of those dangers? Twenty years ago Reinhold Niebuhr put his finger on the principal danger in writing of the Catholic Church. "I think," he wrote, "that the Catholic Church tends to identify the historic church with the Kingdom of God."<sup>25</sup> The church-centered approach tends to restrict

<sup>23</sup>Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, p. 176.

<sup>24</sup>*Community and Commitment. Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

<sup>25</sup>"Religion and Politics," in Peter H. Odegard, ed., *Religion and Politics* (New Brunswick, 1960), pp. 107-108, cited in O'Brien, *The Renewal of American Catholicism*, p. 202.

the presence and activity of God to the Church, often to a single church, and easily forgets or even denies that the whole world with everyone in it is the theater of God's action. Even an ecumenism which would see the Church as the community of *all* faithful Christians could become too narrowly church-centered and think of unity exclusively in terms of belonging to the Church.

This approach leads to a possessive control and fear of change especially on the part of those who bear administrative responsibility for the institution. If the Church is all, it cannot recognize radical goodness elsewhere, and those outside the Church can be seen only as objects of pity or prospects for conversion. If the Church is all, then there is no value in working to build the universal community of man, but only in drawing men into the Church. If the Church is large and powerful, she will try to control the world around her and consider it her right to do so. If she is small and weak, she will huddle in a self-righteous ghetto. These are some of the perils to which the church-centered approach is exposed.

If, on the other hand, one accepts the Copernican revolution in ecclesiology which is the theme of Richard McBrien's *Do We Need the Church?*,<sup>26</sup> then the Christian shifts the center of his attention from the Church to the kingdom of God. This sheds a different light on the quest for unity. The whole world and all mankind become the locus of unity, and they are not merely raw material to be built into the unity of the *Church*, but the place where the unity of the *kingdom* is being built. The Church is the sign and sacrament of the unity of all men with God and with one another.<sup>27</sup> This unity is being built not only by Christians, but also by Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Moslems, indeed even by those who in the discreet phraseology of Vatican II, "without blame on their part, have not arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to lead a good life, thanks to his grace."<sup>28</sup> This kingdom-centered approach lays the foundation for a much larger

<sup>26</sup>(New York: Harper and Row, 1969)—with indebtedness to Vatican II, and to Rahner, Metz, Moltmann, Schillebeeckx and others.

<sup>27</sup>"Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966), p. 15.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 35.

ecumenism, one which returns to the root meaning of the word: the whole inhabited earth.

Furthermore, once the Church is seen as the servant of the kingdom, and not as an end in itself, it is possible to be far more flexible in adapting its structures. Indeed, this shift in attitude may have contributed as much as the historical and biblical studies of recent years to the recognition that forms of ministry need be far less fixed and rigid than we once thought they were.

But not everyone feels comfortable with this approach. It carries with it hazards similar to those mentioned above in describing "public Christianity": obscuring of the clear identity of the Church, shift of loyalty away from the inside to the outside, and debilitating adaptation to the surrounding culture. Dean Kelley's study<sup>29</sup> makes one ask whether too much openness to the world at large may not be sapping the strength and vitality of the ecumenical churches. Thomas O'Shea has suggested that the nineteenth century liberal Protestant effort to adapt to the modern world failed through an erosion of Christian substance, but he looks hopefully (or did, at least, in 1968) on the present efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to come to terms with modernity.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most difficult challenges the Church faces in this task is achieving the right balance between the church-centered and the kingdom-centered approach to unity. They are not easy to combine in an integrated unity. To put it rather crudely, this challenge raises the question whether it is necessary to be narrow-minded in order to be deeply religious. L. Stafford Betty puts the question this way: "Is it possible, then, for a Christian—or a man of any other religion—to have a living, a significant faith in his creed if at the same time he realizes that it is not uniquely true, not uniquely revelatory, not uniquely faithful to the real, the objective order of things?"<sup>31</sup> Sociologists have discovered that the large majority of church members in America, the "extrinsically religious," are closed in their attitude toward "outsiders."

<sup>29</sup>Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*.

<sup>30</sup>*The Catholic Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 248-52.

<sup>31</sup>"The Radical Pluralism of Arnold Toynbee—Its Implications for Religion," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9, No. 4 (Fall, 1972), 836.

They have an overbalance of "church-centeredness." But there is a minority among them who are "intrinsically religious," and they are open toward "outsiders." They succeed in combining commitment to the Church with commitment to the kingdom. Or perhaps it would be even better to say that they see their commitment to the Church as a concrete form of commitment to the kingdom. For unless a Christian can see an integral connection between his faithfulness to his Church and his dedication to the furthering of God's kingdom in the whole world, he will probably give up one for the other. To repeat the remarks of Hugh Kerr cited earlier: "If there is to be a new era for the ecumenical movement and for some sort of social gospel, it will have to emerge *directly out of* such an articulation of the simplicities of the Christian tradition."<sup>32</sup>

It all comes back to an understanding of the nature and mission of the Christian Church. Is the Church an institutional reality, working through stable structures which come to us out of the past? Is the Church an ongoing event, depending on fresh and spontaneous prophetic voices and deeds? Is the Church a protective umbrella of higher-level servants and services? Is the Church the local congregation of believers in a particular place? Is the Church the place where the individual meets the Lord Jesus among the brethren, is converted, and is nurtured day by day in the inner life of the Spirit? Is the Church the community of those who reach out in love to transform the world into a place where all men can live in peace and justice and decency? Is the Church a community of believers deeply committed to each other and to the special unity they share as Christians? Is the Church charged in a special way with the task of deepening the unity of the whole human family, whether or not they belong to the Church?

The Church is all of these things, and if we are to move ahead toward the ideal of unity, none of them can be neglected. The movement toward unity is just that, a movement, a constantly developing thing which, on the one hand, will never be perfect if achieved this side of the Eschaton, yet on the other hand, is brought closer by every act in which two or more people come closer together. Unity is not something to be reserved for some future moment of achievement, but every small step moves us to deeper unity; that should encourage us. Yet there is always a fuller and more complete unity to



be achieved; that should challenge us.

Finally, let us not complain that the death of so much in the Church today makes it impossible to hope for the future. For we have betrayed the core of our Christian faith if we deny that death is the most authentic way to life.

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