

## The Lack of Unity Among Christians

"The witness to Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants."

-Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 10 November 1994, Saint Pope John Paul II

### A) The Church of Thousands of Faiths:

Hence the universal Church is seen to be "a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit"

-Catechism of the Catholic Church #810

The massive number of divisions of Christian churches is a big barrier to the credibility of the Christian religion. The accusations of heresy some denominations make concerning other Christians are often unwarranted and have far-reaching and damaging consequences. They make non-Christians wonder why one should join a religion of "love" when its existing members seem to hate each other so much.

There is much debate over how many Protestant denominations actually exist, and with good reason. The single biggest problem is how to define what a denomination is. A certain amount of variation will exist between different congregations that still abide by the same doctrine and teachings of a common order, but how much variation can exist before a separate order is formed? At least one survey decided that if a church, with its own unique dogma, had parishes in multiple countries, then each country had its own denomination of the church. This is totally meaningless. Whoever thought this was a good idea only succeeded in showing how ignorant he is about religion. Sadly, many people have bought into this pathetic definition.

As a Catholic, I take offense to suggesting there are over 200 denominations of the Catholic Church. We are one church as the word "Catholic" (meaning "universal") indicates. I can go to any Catholic Church in the world and know that I am getting the same communal experience that I would have had in my hometown, even if I don't understand the language. It has been my observation that when fellow Catholics go on pilgrimages, they always include at least one notable church to visit for mass. When they return, they typically spend more time talking about how beautiful the foreign mass was than about any other aspect of the trip. I am not alone in this observation. Matthew Kelley questioned Catholics worldwide and published the results in his book *Why I Love Being Catholic*. This culture-crossing unity all Catholics share at mass was the most common response.

In contrast, there are over 140 regional and national Lutheran churches in the world, with 138 participating in the Lutheran World Federation at the time of this writing. While traveling Lutherans would most likely go to a sister Lutheran church rather than a non-Lutheran church, they still are conscious of the differences between one form of Lutheranism and another. They hope to find a parish of their own teachings or, failing that, at least one close enough for their comfort. These separate churches are freely admitted by Lutherans as being separate

denominations.

Most other Protestant churches, however, are somewhere in between these two extremes. It is not always easy to tell when a parish has a local flavor but is still part of a bigger church, or if it is a new denomination that has split off. I have found that attempts to clarify this are not always welcome. There are also movements of Christian thought that greatly influence established churches and yet may or may not have churches of their own. The Evangelical movement, for example, not only influenced the teachings of many established churches, but has inspired many denominations in their own right (such as Pentecostals), as well as the majority of non-denominational churches. Does a parish whose preacher embraces the Evangelical movement form his own denomination or does he remain part of his parent church? Should the non-denominationals who embrace Evangelical teachings really be called non-denominationals after all, or should they all be classified as Evangelical?

Finally, there are churches where either Jesus has to share the spotlight with other figures, and/or essential aspects of His teachings (such as claiming to be God) are denied. Should they really be called Christian at all?

According to the Religious Congregations and Membership Study of 2010, there are over 35,000 independent or non-denominational Protestant churches in the U.S. alone. I suspect that this number will be larger still when the 2020 survey is completed and reported publicly. My research into non-independents seem to suggest between 500 to 2000 denominations of Christianity in the U.S., depending on who did the research and how they defined what a denomination was. I do believe it is fair to say that one has a choice of about 36,000 schools of thought when it comes to Christianity in the U.S.

**B) The Problem of Division:** Many educated people, including Mark Twain and my favorite apologist C.S. Lewis, have lauded the variety of Christian brands as a good thing. To them, one can therefore find the perfect fit to one's own needs as a Christian to maximize one's faith. Much like a fine lady shopping for the perfect shoes to match the dress she is going to wear at a big social event.

While I agree that this sounds good in theory, anyone who knows anything about human nature should be a bit suspicious. Apparently, skeptics think so, too. The most obvious question that comes up is: how can 36,000 churches, each professing to tell "the truth," all be right? While a great deal of commonality exists throughout nearly all Christian denominations, there is a danger of watering down teachings so as to not offend one of another denomination. For that matter, there is also the danger of churches bending the teachings to conform to the wants of the congregation rather than to what Christian teachings really say. This is an especially important question when clergy are elected instead of being appointed. Is a church willing to accept, as Jesus did, that maybe only 12 people from about 5000 *men* (John 6:10, 66-67 the word "men" suggests an even greater number as family members certainly attended, as shown in Matthew 14:21) will remain when the teachings start "hitting close to home?"

But perhaps the most damning evidence against this division is Matthew 16:18: "And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my *church*, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against *it*." (italics mine) Note the singular form of "church" and the pronoun "it." Also

note that Jesus only promises safety for those within this one church.

The problem is not exclusively one of appearance. It is inevitable that, with so much variety out there, that much ignorance exists concerning other denominations. Ignorance breeds contempt, and pride can quickly transform this contempt to a false sense of superiority. This superior attitude can certainly cause one to look at other denominations as being lesser at best and, on occasion, has led to hatred and even bloodshed.

### **C) Does Division Discredit Christianity?:**

"[Martyrs are] a heritage which speaks more powerfully than all the causes of division."

-Homily for the Ecumenical Commemoration of Witnesses to the Faith in the Twentieth Century, 7 May 2000, Saint Pope John Paul II

One cannot deny that the lack of unity in the Christian community is real: the evidence is both obvious and overwhelming. But I do not believe this discredits Christianity as a whole. Christianity is not about how *right* humans are, but rather how God loves us despite how *wrong* we get it. Indeed, it is the only major religion I am aware of whose focus is on the sinful (i.e., corruptible) nature of man. If the goal of the scientific method is to have a theory predict an outcome given certain knowns, then the divisions within Christianity sadly meets this goal. In the backwards logic that seems to be common in the Bible, a lack of division would suggest that our faith was wrong about the sinful nature of man. Division does not discredit the teachings of Christianity, perfect unity would. It is not that this justifies those who, through pride or ill intent, mislead others in faith; only that such behavior is predictable and expected based on its own teachings.

### **D) The Biblical Answer to Division - Diversity:**

"Welcome anyone who is weak in faith, but not for disputes over opinions. One person believes that one may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. The one who eats must not despise the one who abstains, and the one who abstains must not pass judgment on the one who eats; for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on someone else's servant? Before his own master he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. [For] one person considers one day more important than another, while another person considers all days alike. Let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind. Whoever observes the day, observes it for the Lord. Also whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while whoever abstains, abstains for the Lord and gives thanks to God."

-Romans 14:1-6

First of all, please note that I took great pains to use the word "division" instead of "diversity" when speaking of the credibility problem. Diversity is very welcome in the Christian

faith. As we can see in the passage above from St. Paul to the Romans, cultures can be different and still be part of the same faith. This was written specifically because of cultural differences between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. St. Paul, however, clearly intends to show that as long as any behavior is in keeping with love of God and neighbor, it is good.

This leads us to the next point: what behavior is in keeping with the love of God? For this, I would like to refer to John 3:36: "Whoever *believes* in the Son has eternal life, but whoever *disobeys* the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him." (italics mine) Note how *belief* is life, but *disobedience* is death. By the very words of Jesus, belief is the opposite of disobedience. To believe (or to have faith) in God means to obey God. The whole of the Bible teaches us what obeying means. There are many different ways to obey.

In 1 Corinthians 12:14, 18-19, St. Paul says "Now the body is not a single part, but many. But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body *as he intended*. If they were all one part, where would the body be? But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body." (italics mine) I suggest the gentle reader should read this whole chapter, as it shows so well how diversity is part of God's plan. We obey God when we perform the part He calls us to do. But God is very generous, and gives us more gifts and talents than we can ever use in this lifetime. If a high school student is good in both science and music, he may be considering a career as either a doctor or a musician. Either choice is fine, as God made him suitable for either part. It will be more important how he acts within the career than the career itself.

This leads me to my final question for this topic: what is the difference between diversity and division? Going back to 1 Corinthians 12:18, we see that we are called to be part of the body "as He intended." By not being the part God intended, we still retain our uniqueness, but we no longer have a place. We are now separated, or divided, from the body. Using another example of a high school student, a student with no scientific talent who goes on to be a doctor would be such a case. Even if he does so with the noble idea of taking good care of people, it is still wrong because God gave him talents to take care of people in *other* ways. Whatever reasons one would tell oneself to justify such a choice, they can all be summarized in a single word: pride. This is why so many people with good intentions ultimately take the evil route. Doing good becomes a form of idolatry when one's own idea of "doing good" is more important than the idea of "doing good" as *He* intended one to do.

While Christians bring discredit to themselves when they engage in division, Christianity itself is not discredited because of its diversity.

### **E) Christians have an Advocate in Unity Through Jesus:**

"Furthermore, many elements of sanctification and of truth" are found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church: "the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements." Christ's Spirit uses these [Non-Catholic] Churches and ecclesial communities as means of salvation, whose power derives from the fullness of grace and truth that Christ has entrusted to the Catholic Church. All these blessings come from Christ and lead to him, and are in themselves calls to "Catholic

unity."

-Catechism of the Catholic Church #819

As mentioned in **Topic A.2**, Jesus called for a single church in Matthew 16:18. In John Chapter 17, Jesus gives the longest single prayer recorded in the Bible. It is just before His arrest, so these are essentially a dying man's final petition to the Father. Verses 11-12 are: "And now I will no longer be in the world, but they are in the world, while I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, *so that they may be one just as we are*. When I was with them I protected them in your name that you gave me, and I guarded them, and *none of them was lost except the son of destruction*, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled." (italics mine, the "they" being the eleven remaining disciples)

He followed that up by a reminder of how He labored to ensure it was that way during His lifetime. A few verses later (20-23), Jesus extends this prayer of solidarity to all those who come after the disciples: "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that *they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you*, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that *they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one*, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me." (italics mine)

Jesus used the word "one" four times and refers to unity at least three other times in only four verses! Also note that Jesus Himself acknowledges how unity is essential to the credibility of the Church He created. Christian division is the ultimate oxymoron. Regardless of what denomination we Christians belong to, or how such divisions occurred in the first place, we should all strive for unity, and such unity can only happen through accepting diversity. This is a simple effort that we can all do and will it bring more credibility to our faith than any Papal edict or evangelistic sermon ever could.

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