

# Luther and the unity of the churches: an interview with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

The interconnection between church and theology is the issue: wherever this unity comes to an end, any other kind of unity will necessarily lose its roots.

**Question:** Where does Luther scholarship stand today? Have there been any attempts to research Luther's theology, beyond existing historical investigations?

**Cardinal Ratzinger:** Nobody can answer this question in a few sentences. Besides, it would require a special kind of knowledge which I do not possess. It might be helpful, however, briefly to mention a few names which represent the various stages and trends of Catholic Luther scholarship. At the beginning of the century we have the decidedly polemical work by the Dominican H. Denifle. He was responsible for placing Luther in the context of the Scholastic tradition, which Denifle knew better than anybody else because of his intimate knowledge of the manuscript materials. He is followed by the much more conciliatory Jesuit, Grisar, who, to be sure, encountered various criticisms because of the psychological patterns in which he sought to explain the problem of Luther. J. Lortz from Luxembourg became the father of modern Catholic Luther scholarship. He is still considered the turning-point in the struggle for an historically truthful and theologically adequate image of Luther. Against the background of the theological movement between the two world wars, Lortz could develop new ways of questioning which, subsequently, would lead to a new assessment of

Luther. Meanwhile, the liturgical, biblical, and ecumenical movements on both sides have changed a lot of things. The Protestant side engaged in a renewed search for sacrament and church, that is for the Catholic Luther (K. A. Meissinger). Catholics strove for a new and more direct relationship with Scripture and, simultaneously, sought a piety which was shaped against the background of traditional liturgy. Much criticism was directed at many a religious form which had developed during the second millenium, especially during the nineteenth century. Such criticism discovered its kinship with Luther. It sought to emphasize the "Evangelical" in the Catholic. It was against this background that Lortz could describe the great religious impulses which stimulated the reformer and which generated theological understanding of Luther's own criticism that had its roots in the late medieval crises of church and theology. With this in mind, Lortz proposed the famous thesis for the period of the great change in the thinking of the reformer: "within himself Luther wrestled and overthrew a Catholicism that was not Catholic."<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, he could have based his thesis on Denifle who demonstrated that Luther's revolutionary interpretation of Romans 1:17, which Luther himself later interpreted as the actual turning-point of the Reformation, in reality corresponded to the line of arguments presented by the medieval exegetical tradition. Even concerning the period around 1525 during which, following Luther's excommunication and his polemics which were aimed at the center of Catholic doctrine, the contours of a new evangelical church organization became apparent, Lortz thought he could safely say that Luther was "not yet aware of the fact that he was outside the Church."<sup>2</sup> Though Lortz did not minimize the deep rift which really began to take shape in the controversies of the Reformation, it seemed simple enough, following his work and by simplifying his statements, to develop the thesis that the separation of the churches was, really, the result of a misunderstanding and that it could have been prevented had the church been more vigilant.

The generation following Lortz stressed various aspects: scholars such as E. Iserloh, P. Manns, and R. Bäumer illustrate how, in departure from Lortz, rather varied directions and positions could be assumed and developed. Younger theologians, such as O. H. Pesch or J. Brosseder, were pupils of H. Fries and remained essentially within the perimeter of J. Lortz. I

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, trans. Ronald Walls (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1968), I, p. 200.

<sup>2</sup>Lortz, p. 487.

would like to mention two outsiders who stand apart from theology as it is taught in the classroom because of the way in which they approach the phenomenon of Luther: first of all the Indologist Paul Hacker, a convert, in his book on Luther entitled *Das Ich im Glauben* (Faith and the Ego)<sup>3</sup> where he perhaps also documents his own spiritual voyage. He concerned himself with the structure of Luther's act of faith. He saw the actual turning-point of the Reformation in the change in the basic structure of the act of faith. Subsequently, he vehemently opposed the theory of a misunderstanding as well as all ideas advocating convergence and a complementary nature. Theobald Beer, a pastor in Leipzig, has been tenaciously devoting his life to the reading of Luther as well as the late medieval theology prior to Luther. He has studied not only the changes in theological thought in the difference between Luther and Scholasticism, but also between Luther and St. Augustine. In doing so, he has verified important shifts in the design of a Christology which, postulating the idea of "sacred bargaining," is completely bound up with anthropology and the teachings on grace. This new construct, that is, the changed basic configuration of a sacred bargaining (which Beer insists is found continuously from the early to the late Luther) expresses, in Beer's opinion, the reformer's completely different and new attitude toward faith which permits no harmonization.<sup>4</sup>

Thus it should be clear that there cannot be any Luther scholarship which does not at the same time involve research into his theology. One cannot simply approach Luther with the distant eye of the historian. To be sure, his theology must be analyzed and interpreted from an historical point of view, but, for the Christian historian, it emerges inevitably from the past, affecting him in the present. As far as the directions of this research are concerned, I believe that today one can discern two basic tenets with respect to which Harnack already saw the basic alternatives: with his catechism, his songs and his liturgical directives Luther created a tradition of ecclesiastical life in the light of which we can both refer to him as the "father" of such an ecclesiastical life and interpret his work with evangelical churchliness in mind. On the other hand, Luther also created a theological and polemical opus of revolutionary radicality which he by no means retracted in his political dealings with the princes and in his stand against the leftists within the Reformation. Thus one can also comprehend Luther on the basis of his revolutionary break with tradition—and one will, on such a reading, then arrive at quite a different overall view. It would be desirable to keep in mind Luther's piety when reading his polemical works

and the revolutionary background when dealing with issues concerning the Church.

**Question:** Would it be realistic for the Catholic Church to lift Luther's excommunication on the basis of the results of more recent scholarship?

**Cardinal Ratzinger:** In order to do full justice to this question one must differentiate between excommunication as a judicial measure on the part of the legal community of the Church against a certain person, and the factual reasons which led to such a step. Since the Church's jurisdiction naturally only extends to the living, the excommunication of a person ends with his death. Consequently, any questions dealing with the lifting of Luther's excommunication become moot: Luther's excommunication terminated with his death because judgment after death is reserved to God alone. Luther's excommunication does not have to be lifted; it has long since ceased to exist.

However, it is an entirely different matter when we ask if Luther's proposed teachings still separate the churches and thus preclude joint communion. Our ecumenical discussions center on this question. The inter-faith commission instituted following the Pope's visit to Germany will specifically direct its attention to the problem of the exclusions in the sixteenth century and their continued validity, that is, the possibility of moving beyond them. To be sure, one must keep in mind that there exist not only Catholic anathemas against Luther's teachings but also Luther's own definitive rejections of Catholic articles of faith which culminate in Luther's verdict that we will remain eternally separate. It is not necessary to borrow Luther's angry response to the Council of Trent in order to prove the definiteness of his rejection of anything Catholic: ". . . we should take him—the pope, the cardinals, and whatever riffraff belongs to His Idolatrous and Papal Holiness—and (as blasphemers) tear out their tongues from the back, and nail them on the gallows . . . . Then one could allow them to hold a council, or as many as they wanted, on the gallows, or in hell among all the devils."<sup>5</sup> After his final break with the Church, Luther not

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<sup>3</sup>Paul Hacker, *Das Ich im Glauben* (Graz, 1966).

<sup>4</sup>Theobald Beer, *Der fröhliche Wechsel und Streit: Grundzüge der Theologie Martin Luthers* (1st ed., Leipzig, 1974. Second ed., enlarged, Einsiedeln, 1980).

<sup>5</sup>*Wider das Papsttum in Rom, vom Teufel gestiftet*, quoted by Cardinal Ratzinger from A. Läpple, *Martin Luther: Leben, Bilder, Dokumente* (Munich/Zurich, 1982), pp. 252f. (The above translation is from *Luther's Works*, vol. 41 [Church and Ministry III], Helmut T. Lehmann, general ed. [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966], p. 308.)

only categorically rejected the papacy but he also deemed the Catholic teachings about the eucharist (mass) as idolatry because he interpreted the mass as a relapse into the Law and, thus, a denial of the Gospel. To explain all these contradictions as misunderstandings seems to me like a form of rationalistic arrogance which cannot do any justice to the impassioned struggle of those men as well as the importance of the realities in question. The real issue can only lie in how far we are today able to go beyond the positions of those days and how we can arrive at insights which will overcome the past. To put it differently: unity demands new steps. It cannot be achieved by means of interpretative tricks. If separation occurred as a result of contrary religious insights which could locate no space within the traditional teachings of the Church, it will not be possible to create a unity by means of doctrine and discussion alone, but only with the help of religious strength. Indifference appears only on the surface to be a unifying link.

**Question:** Can we claim that the present-day pluralism in the theologies of both the Catholic and the Protestant churches will ease the way toward an approximation among the churches or merely an approximation among Catholic and Protestant theologians?

**Cardinal Ratzinger:** Here, as always, we will first have to explain the term pluralism. Also, we will have to discuss the relationship between theology and Church. It is an indisputable phenomenon that Catholic and Lutheran exegetes have come closer as a result of the advances of the historico-critical method and the more recent methods of literary scholarship, so much so that the church affiliation of the individual exegete is hardly relevant any longer as far as the results are concerned: under certain circumstances, a Lutheran exegete may think more along "Catholic" lines and be more in tune with tradition than his Catholic counterpart. Thus the latest biblical reference works feature both Catholic and Lutheran exegetes, depending on their specialization. The only distinction that remains appears only to be their respective area of research. The jointly published Lutheran-Catholic commentary illustrates these points. It is here interesting to note that Lutheran exegetes have a more pronounced tendency to rely more heavily on their "fathers" (Luther, Calvin) and to include them as actual discussants in their endeavors to grasp the meaning of Scripture than their Catholic counterparts who appear largely to agree that Augustine, Chrysostom, Bonaventure and Thomas have nothing to contribute to modern exegesis.

Of course, one could ask what kind of a community

such an agreement among exegetes would create. While Harnack thought that there was no more of a solid foundation than a commonly shared historical method, Karl Barth treated this attempt to establish unity with irony, calling it sheer illusion. Indeed, a common method will create unity; however, it also is capable of continually generating contradictions. Particularly, scholarly agreement on findings designates a different level of unity from, say, an agreement on ultimate convictions and decisions with which we concern ourselves when we deal with questions of church unity. The unity of scholarly results is essentially revisable at any time. Faith is a constant. The history of reformed Christianity very clearly illustrates the limitations of exegetic unity: Luther had largely abandoned the line separating the teachings of the church from theology. Doctrine which runs counter to exegetic evidence is not a doctrine to him. That is why, throughout his life, his doctorate in theology represented to him a decisive authority in his opposition to the teachings of Rome. The evidence of the interpreter supplants the power of the magisterium. The learned academic (Doctor) now embodies the magisterium, nobody else. The fact that the teachings of the Church became thus tied to the evidence of interpretation has become a constant question mark in church unity itself, ever since the beginnings of the Reformation. For it is this revisable evidence which became an inevitably explosive charge against a unity understood from within. Yet unity without content remains empty and will wither away. The unifying effect of theological pluralism is thus only temporary and sectional. There is inherent in pluralism the inability ultimately to become a basis for unity.

**N**evertheless, it is true that agreement among exegetes is capable of surmounting antiquated contradictions and of revealing their secondary character. It can create new avenues of dialogue for all the great themes of intra-Christian controversy: Scripture, tradition, magisterium, the papacy, the eucharist, and so on. It is in this sense that there is, indeed, hope even for a church which undergoes the afore-mentioned turmoil. However, the actual solutions which aim for deeper assurance and unity than merely that of scholarly hypotheses cannot proceed from there alone. On the contrary, wherever there develops a total dissociation of Church and exegesis, both

become endangered: exegesis turns into mere literary analysis and the church loses her spiritual underpinnings. That is why the interconnection between church and theology is the issue: wherever this unity comes to an end, any other kind of unity will necessarily lose its roots.

**Question:** Are there still any serious differences between the Catholic Church and the Reformed Churches and, if so, what are they?

**Cardinal Ratzinger:** The fact that now as ever there are serious differences is illustrated by the existence of papers of agreement which have been published in great numbers in recent years. This is particularly evident in the most progressive dialogues: in the Anglican-Catholic and the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. To be sure, the Anglican-Catholic documents, made public in 1981, claim to have come up with a basic pattern with which to solve the controversial issues, but they do not insist, by any means, to have arrived at any final solutions. Not only the official reply of the Congregation of Faith but also diverse other publications have amply emphasized the grave problems inherent to these documents. Similarly, the Catholic-Lutheran document concerning the Lord's Supper does not conceal in the old controversies, in spite of the many important convergences, the fact that many unsolved issues remain.<sup>6</sup> The skillful approach leading to unity as suggested by H. Fries and K. Rahner in their theses, remains an artificial exploit of theological acrobatics which, unfortunately, does not live up to reality.<sup>7</sup> It is impossible to direct denominations toward each other as in a military exercise and then to pronounce: the importance lies in the marching together; individual thought is of lesser importance. Church unity feeds on the unity of fundamental decisions and convictions. The operative unity of Christians is something different. It does, thank God, already exist in parts and it could be much stronger and more comprehensive, even without solving the actual questions of unity.

To get back to the original question about what separates the Churches, entire libraries have been written on the subject. To answer it succinctly and concisely is rather difficult. Of course, one can readily focus on a number of questions where controversies exist: Scripture and tradition, that is, especially, Scripture and magisterium. Also, in conjunction with this, the question of the spiritual magisterium per se, apostolic succession as a sacramental form of tradition and its epitome in the papal office, the sacrificial character of the eucharist and the issue of transsubstantiation and, thus, of eucharistic adoration and prayer outside the mass (while there is fundamental agree-

ment on the presence of Christ), the sacrament of penance, varying views in the area of Christian morality whereby, of course, again the magisterium figures very prominently, and so on. Yet such an enumeration of controversial matters of doctrine will trigger the question concerning the fundamental decision: does all this rest on a fundamental difference, and, if so, can it be pinpointed? When, during the festivities surrounding the anniversary of the *Confessio Augustana* in 1980, Cardinal Willebrands noted that the roots had remained despite the separations during the sixteenth century Cardinal Volk, afterwards, asked both humorously and seriously: Now I would like to know if the contraption of which we speak here is, for instance, a potato or an apple-tree? Or, to put it differently: is everything, with the exception of the roots, merely leaves, or is it the tree which grew from the roots that is important? How deep does the difference really go?

Luther himself was convinced that the separation of the teachings from the customs of the papal Church—to which separation he felt obligated—struck at the very foundation of the act of faith. The act of faith as described by Catholic tradition appeared to Luther as centered and encapsulated in the Law while it should have been an expression of the acceptance of the Gospel. In Luther's opinion, the act of faith was turned into the very opposite of what it was; for faith, to Luther, is tantamount to liberation from the Law, but its Catholic version appeared to him as a subjugation under the Law. Thus Luther was convinced that he now had to carry on St. Paul's fight against the so-called Judaizers in the Epistle to the Galatians and turn it into a fight against Rome and Catholic tradition per se. The identification of the positions of his time with those of St. Paul (we may see in it a certain identification of himself and his mission with St. Paul) are fundamental aspects of his life. It has become fashionable to insist that there are no longer any controversies concerning the teachings on justification. The fact is that Luther's questioning is no longer valid: neither Luther's consciousness of his sinfulness and his fear of hell, nor the terror he felt vis-à-vis divine Majesty and his cry for mercy. His views on the freedom of the will which had already roused the opposition of Erasmus of Rotterdam are also hard to understand now. Conversely, the justification

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<sup>6</sup>Joint Roman Catholic/Evangelical Lutheran Commission, *The Lord's Supper* (Paderborn and Frankfurt, 1979).

<sup>7</sup>H. Fries and K. Rahner, *Einigung der Kirchen—reale Möglichkeit* (Freiburg, 1983). First critical remarks on this are found in the review by H.-J. Lauter in *Pastoralblatt* 9 (1983): 286f.

decree of Trent had already emphasized the pre-eminence of grace so strongly that Harnack believed that, if its text had been available, the Reformation would have had to take a different course. However, after Luther's lifelong insistence on the central differences in the teachings on justification, it seems justifiable to assume that it is here that we will, most likely, discover the fundamental difference. I am unable to elaborate on all this within the context of an interview. Thus, I will try briefly, though in necessarily biased and fragmentary fashion, to comment and, in doing so, attempt at least a perspective on the issues at hand.

**I**t seems to me that the decisive cause of the breach cannot be found solely in changes in the constellation of ideas and in the concomitant shifts in theological theory, no matter how important these elements are. For there is no denying the truth that a new religious movement can be generated only by a new religious experience which is, perhaps, aided by the total configuration of an epoch and which incorporates its resources but is itself not consumed by them. It seems to me that the basic feature is the fear of God by which Luther's very existence was struck down, torn between God's calling and the realization of his own sinfulness, so much so that God appears to him *sub contrario*, as the opposite of Himself, i.e., as the Devil who wants to destroy man. To break free of this fear of God becomes the real issue of redemption. Redemption is realized the moment faith appears as the rescue from the demands of self-justification, that is, as a personal certainty of salvation. This "axis" of the concept of faith is explained very clearly in Luther's *Little Catechism*: "I believe that God created me. . . . I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord who saved me . . . in order that I may be His . . . and serve Him forever in justice and innocence forever." Faith assures, above all, the certainty of one's own salvation. The personal certainty of redemption becomes the center of Luther's ideas. Without it, there would be no salvation. Thus, the importance of the three divine virtues, faith, hope, and love, to a Christian formula of existence undergoes a significant change: the certainties of hope and faith, though hitherto essentially different, become identical. To the Catholic, the certainty of faith refers to that which *God* worked and which the church witnesses. The certainty of hope refers to the salvation of individuals and, among them, of one self. Yet, to Luther, the latter represented the crux without which nothing else really mat-

tered. That is why love, which lies at the center of the Catholic faith, is dropped from the concept of faith, all the way to the polemic formulations of the large commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians: *maledicta sit caritas*, down with love! Luther's insistence on "by faith alone" clearly and exactly excludes love from the question of salvation. Love belongs to the realm of "works" and, thus, becomes "profane."

If one wishes, one may call this a radical personalization of the act of faith which consists in an exciting and, in some sense, exclusive "eye for an eye" relationship between God and man. At the same time, man has to depend time and again on the forgiving God against a demanding and judgmental God, that is, Christ, who appears *sub contrario* (as Devil). This dialectic view of God corresponds to a dialectic of existence which Luther himself once formulated as follows: ". . . it is necessary for a Christian to know that these are his own sins, whatever they are, and that they have been borne by Christ, by whom we have been redeemed and saved."<sup>8</sup> This "personalism" and this "dialectic," together to a lesser or greater degree with an anthropology, have also altered the remaining structure of his teachings. For this basic assessment signifies that, according to Luther, faith is no longer, as to the Catholic, essentially the communal belief of the entire church. In any case, according to Luther, the church can neither assume the certain guarantee for personal salvation nor decide definitely and compellingly on matters (that is, the content) of faith. On the other hand, to the Catholic, the church is central to the act of faith itself: only by communal belief do I partake of the certainty on which I can base my life. This corresponds to the Catholic view that church and Scripture are inseparable while, in Luther, Scripture becomes an independent measure of church and tradition. This in turn raises the question of the canonicity and the unity of Scripture.

In some respects this incorporates the point of departure for the entire movement; for it was exactly the unity of Scripture—the Old and the New Testament, the gospels, the epistles of St. Paul, and the Catholic letters—on the basis of which Luther felt confronted with a Devil-God whom he felt compelled to resist and whom he resisted with the assistance of the divine God which he discovered in St. Paul. The unity of Scripture which had hitherto been interpreted as a unity of steps toward salvation, as a unity of analogy, is now replaced with the

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<sup>8</sup>Luther's Works, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 17 (Lectures on Isaiah, Chapters 40-66) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 223.

dialectic of Law and Gospel. This dialectic is particularly sharpened by the two complementary concepts of the New Testament—that of the “gospels” and that of the epistles of St. Paul—of which only the latter were adopted and even radicalized by the earlier-described “by faith alone.” I would say that the dialectic of Law and Gospel expresses most poignantly Luther’s new experience and that it illustrates most concisely the contradiction with the Catholic concepts of faith, salvation, Scripture, and church.

To sum up, Luther did indeed realize what he meant when he saw the actual point of separation in the teachings on justification which, to him, were identical with the “gospel” in contra-distinction to the “law.” To be sure, one has to view justification as radical and as deep as he did, that is, as a reduction of the entire anthropology—and thus also of all other matters of doctrine—to the dialectic of Law and Gospel. Since then there have been many revelations based on all his individual pronouncements so that one should hope to have arrived at the point where the basic decision can be thought over and integrated into a more expansive vision. However, this has, unfortunately, not yet happened. To follow Fries’ and Rahner’s suggestions, and thus apparently to skip over with a few political maneuvers the quest for truth, when it presents itself in terms of clear alternatives would be entirely irresponsible. All the more reason to hope that the commission which was established following the Pope’s visit to Germany and the purpose of which it is to shed light on the central issues and the accompanying mutual exclusions will draw us closer to the goal, even though that commission will presumably remain unable to achieve the goal with its own accord.

**Question:** Considering the relationship of the Catholic Church to the churches of the Reformation, would it be possible to borrow St. Paul’s formula and speak of the “Church of Corinth,” “the Church of Rome,” and “the Church of Wittenberg”?

**Cardinal Ratzinger:** The answer is a clear “no.” This already applies in a church-sociological sense in the case of the “Church of Wittenberg,” as there is no such church. Luther had no designs to establish a Lutheran Church. To him, the concept of the church centered in the congregation. Anything that went beyond that was organized and patterned after the existing political structure, i.e., the princes, considering the logic of contemporary thought and development. Thus regional churches were established at the same time that the political structure also replaced the non-existent individual structure of the church. Much has changed since 1918, although the

Lutheran Church has retained its regional structures which, in turn, form church associations. It is obvious that the application of the term "church" to churches which took shape as a result of historical accidents will assume a different signification when compared to the intentions of the term "Catholic Church." Regional churches are not the "church" in a theological sense but are, rather, ways in which Christian congregations organize themselves; they are empirically useful, indeed necessary, but they are also interchangeable under different circumstances. Luther was able to transfer the church structure to the principalities only because he did not consider them integral to the concept of the church. On the other hand, to the Catholic, the Catholic Church, i.e., the community of bishops among themselves and together with the Pope, was instituted as such by the Lord. It cannot be interchanged or replaced. It is exactly this visible sacramental nature which is central to the concept of the Catholic Church that at the same time elevates the visible to a symbol of something greater. The transtemporal unity is as much a feature of this function as it is a symbol of the transcendence of the various political and cultural realms in the communion with the *Body* of Christ—which turns out to be the communion of his body in the very reality of the community of bishops everywhere and at all times. Thus it becomes clear that the plurality of local churches which together form the Catholic Church signifies something quite different from the pluralism of the denominational churches which are not integrated in a concrete single church and behind which are found hidden diverse institutional forms of Christian existence as well as different theological ideas about the spiritual reality of the church.

**Question:** Is an ecumenism of the *Basis* (infrastructure) a way toward ecumenism?

**Cardinal Ratzinger:** In my opinion, the term *Basis* cannot be applied to the concept "church" in this fashion. Sociological and philosophical notions underlie talk about the *Basis* according to which society is characterized by an "above" opposite a "below," whereby "above" signifies the established and exploitative power, while "below," the *Basis*, means the actual sustaining powers, the economic forces, which alone can bring about progress when they are exercised or actuated. Whenever there is talk of *Basis ecumenism*, we can sense the emotions associated with such ideologies. The fact is that it is generally a matter of modifying the idea of community which only considers the congregation as church in the actual sense. The larger, major churches appear as the organizational umbrella which can be fashioned any way one desires. To be sure, the local congrega-

tions are naturally the concrete units that make up the life of faith in the church and, thus, also become sources of inspiration for their way. The Second Vatican Council stated in regard to the development of faith in the church:

There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about . . . through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts (cf. Luke 2:19 and 51). It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience. And it comes from the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth.<sup>9</sup>

Thus there are three principal factors to be considered in the determination of progress in the church: reflection on and study of the holy words (Holy Scripture), insight based on experience in spiritual matters, and the teachings by the bishops. Hence the frequently criticized monopoly of the episcopal office in matters of teaching and life does not exist in the tradition of the Church. "Insight resulting from experience in spiritual matters" incorporates the entire contribution of the Christian life and thus also the special contribution by the "base," i.e., the community of believers as a so-called "theological locus." On the other hand, it becomes clear that the three factors belong together: experience without reflection is bound to remain blind, study without experience becomes empty, and proclamations by a bishop lack effectiveness without roots in the former two. All three jointly shape the life of the church, whereby one or the other element may, at times, manifest itself more strongly, but none must be absent entirely. All in all, even sociologists would deem as phantasy the notion that granting autonomy to the congregations would engender a united church. The opposite is the case: such an autonomy is bound to lead to atomization. Experience has shown that a unification of hitherto separate groups will, at the same time, lead to further separations. Much less will it automatically grow into a united church.

**Question:** Does St. John's concept of unified Christianity also signify unity among the churches?

**Cardinal Ratzinger:** First of all, we will have to be careful to avoid simply superimposing our situation and our questions onto St. John. To begin with, it is important to understand the passages in question with their own perspective in mind. Only then can we venture to understand how to stretch the lines leading to us. Now it is exactly the proper interpretation of St. John's request for unity which is hotly disputed—though of course there do exist several common basic elements within the variety of the interpretations. First, unity among the faithful

is, according to St. John, nothing which could be accomplished by human effort: it remains a request expressed through prayer which itself also implies a commandment directed at Christianity. It is expressed through prayer because the unity of Christianity comes from "above," from the unity of the Father with the Son. It constitutes a participation in the divine unity. I believe that Käsemann is essentially correct when he states that

for John, unity is a mark and a quality of the heavenly realm in the same way in which truth, light and life are the quality and mark of the heavenly reality. . . . Unity in our Gospel exists only as heavenly reality and therefore in antithesis to the earthly, which bears the mark of isolations, differences and antagonisms. If unity exists on earth, then it can only exist as a projection from heaven, that is, as the mark and object of revelation.<sup>10</sup>

However, the completely theological form of unity does not indicate a pressing of the question of unity into the Beyond or a postponement into the future: it is precisely the special characteristic of the church that heavenly affairs extend into the temporal realm. The church is the event of incorporation of human history into the realm of the divine. That is why things happen in the world which cannot come from this world: e.g., unity. That is exactly why unity—as a characteristic which is typical only of heavenly affairs—is also the sign of the divine origin of the church. If we narrow it to the "Word," then one can also come to an agreement with one of Käsemann's formulations:

The accepted Word of God produces an extension of heavenly reality on earth, for the Word participates in the communion of Father and Son. This unity between Father and Son is the quality and mark of the heavenly world. It projects itself to the earth in the Word in order to create the community there which, through rebirth from above, becomes integrated into the unity of Father and Son.<sup>11</sup>

It becomes immediately clear that all this cannot be purely spiritual, but indeed that it envisions a concrete unity of the church. Otherwise, the significance of the sign which is the object of John 17:20 would be rendered entirely meaningless. Schnackenburg assembled a number of ideas which illustrate the universal orientation ("catholic") of the church in the fourth gospel: the passages concerning the acceptance of the Samaritans and Greeks into the Christian community, the word

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<sup>9</sup>Constitution on Revelation II, 8.

<sup>10</sup>Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17*, trans. Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 68.

<sup>11</sup>Käsemann, p. 69-70.

about the gathering of the dispersed children of God (11:52), the word about a shepherd and his flock (10:16), and the acceptance of the tradition of St. Peter, the narrative about the 153 large fish (John 21).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Käsemann called attention to certain analogies between the Gospel according to St. John and the unitarian vision in the Epistle to the Ephesians which he characterizes as follows:

In Ephesians 4:5, a formative orthodoxy asserts itself which considers itself to be constitutively bound to heaven and in this respect to be the institution of salvation and not merely the instrument of grace. The unity of this orthodoxy now becomes identical with the truth of the right doctrine which it must administer as the mystery of divine revelation. Earthly reality may show its nature as dispersion and division. The heavenly reality is of necessity one and indivisible.<sup>13</sup>

Even though one cannot help but notice the epigrammatic, almost caricature-like formulation, an important message remains. Käsemann describes the position of the Gospel according to St. John vis-à-vis early Catholicism in somewhat ambiguous fashion: on the one hand, he speaks of the "closeness to the rising early Catholicism,"<sup>14</sup> and, on the other, he states that John

is at least spatially "remote from the beginnings of early Catholicism and theologically he does not share its trends even though he shares a number of its premises."<sup>15</sup>

One thing remains clear: St. John wrote his gospel for the universal church, and the notion of a unity of Christians in separate churches is totally alien to him.

**Question:** Will there be a unity of all Christians in the future, in the sense implied by your last statement? Also, concerning the churches, will they have to wait until the Day of Judgment?

**Cardinal Ratzinger:** I should think that the answer is quite clear in view of what was said above: the unity of the church is the unity of all Christians. The separation or even juxtaposition of both types of unity is a modern fiction whose content is rather vague. Even though St. John appears to show little interest in the individual institutional aspects of the church, his gospel nevertheless presupposes quite obviously the concrete connection between the story of salvation and the people of God through which God's act of redemption occurs. For example, the parable of the vine (John 15:1-10) reiterates the image of the vine of Israel attested to by Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as the psalms. "Vine" is also a traditional way of referring to the "people of God" to whom is given here, in the person of Jesus Christ, a new center. The simultaneous sounding of the refer-

ence to the eucharist in the parable of the vine adds a very realistic ecclesial framework to this seemingly entirely "mystical" way of thinking.<sup>16</sup>

It is quite a different question, however, to ask to which concrete goals the ecumenical movement can aspire. This problem ought to be discussed anew now that it has been twenty years since the Council. It might be profitable to remember on this occasion how the Second Vatican Council formulated it, how it was not determined by the notion that all existing "churchdoms" were only pieces of a true church that existed nowhere and which one would have to try to create by assembling these pieces: such an idea would render the church purely into a work of man. Also, the Second Vatican Council specifically stated that the only church of Christ is realized (*subsistit*) "in the Catholic Church which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him."<sup>17</sup> As we know, this "realized through" replaces the earlier "is" (the only church "is" the Catholic Church) because there are also many true Christians and many truly Christian ideas outside the Church. However, the latter insight and recognition which lies at the very foundation of Catholic ecumenism does not mean that, from now on, one would have to view the "true church" only as a Utopian idea which may ensue in the end of days: the true church is reality, existing reality, even now, without having to deny others their Christian existence or to dispute the ecclesial character of their communities.

Let us return now to the question of concrete ecumenical goals. The actual goal of all ecumenical endeavors must naturally be to convert the plurality of the separate denominational churches into the plurality of local churches which, in reality, form one church despite their many and varied characteristics. However, it seems to me that in a given situation it will be necessary to establish realistic intermediate goals; for, otherwise, ecumenical enthusiasm could turn to resignation or, worse, revert to a new embitterment which would place the blame for the breakdown of the great goal on the others. Thus the final days would be worse than the first. These intermediate goals will be different depending on how far individual

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<sup>12</sup>R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium III* (Freiburg, 1975), pp. 241-245.

<sup>13</sup>Käsemann, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup>Käsemann, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup>Käsemann, pp. 66-67.

<sup>16</sup>Schnackenburg, pp. 118-123.

<sup>17</sup>*Constitution on the Church*, I, 8.

dialogues will have progressed. The testimony of love (charitable, social works) always ought to be given together, or at least in tune with each other whenever separate organizations appear to be more effective for technical reasons. One should equally try to witness together to the great moral questions of our time. And, finally, a joint fundamental testimony of faith ought to be given before a world which is torn by doubts and shaken by fears. The broader the testimony the better. However, if this can only be done on a relatively small scale, one ought to state the possible jointly. All this would have to lead to a point where the common features of Christian living are recognized and loved despite the separations, where separation serves no longer as a reason for contradiction, but rather as a challenge to an inner understanding and an acceptance of the other which will amount to more than mere tolerance: a belonging together in the loyalty and faithfulness we show for Jesus Christ. Perhaps it will be possible for such an attitude to develop which does not lose sight of final things but, meanwhile, does the closest thing by undergoing a deeper maturity toward total unity, rather than making a frantic scramble for unity which will remain superficial and at times rather fictitious.

**I** am convinced that the question of the final union of all Christians remains, indeed, unanswerable. One must not forget that this question also includes the question of the union between Israel and the church. At any rate, to me the notion that one could achieve unity through a "really general (ecumenical) council" is a hybrid idea. That would be tantamount to building another tower of Babel which would necessarily result in even greater confusion. Complete union of all Christians will hardly be possible in our time. However, that unity of the church which already exists indestructibly is a guarantee for us that this greater unity will happen in the future. The more one strives for this unity with all one's might the more Christian one will be.—  
*Translated by Albert K. Wimmer* □