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The Catholicity of the Church: Reconciling the call for Exclusive Doctrine and Inclusive Community

Jonathan Cole

I Introduction

Ecclesiology presents theologians with some of their most challenging theological problems. There are several tensions inherent in the historical and sociological reality of the church that are difficult to resolve theologically: divine presence and human community, order and charism and the one and the many. None is more intractable and arguably more urgent than the issue of disunity which is a product of the tension over the one and the many.

The New Testament places an emphasis on Christian unity. Paul wrote to the church at Rome: 'May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom 15:5).[1] Yet there are today, by some estimates, as many as 34,000 distinct Christian denominations, worshipping the one God in a cacophony of competing voices.[2] The church's disunity today demands theological explanation and solution.

A central challenge for any discussion of the church in a multi-denominational context is that almost anything one says of the church understood in its universal sense will be true of some, but inevitably be false with respect to others. Therefore, in order to investigate what lies at the heart of the tension between the one and the many in the church, I propose to briefly survey four different traditions with their distinctive approaches to the issue of

[1] NRSV accessed through Mantis Bible Study iPhone App.

[2] It is impossible to know with any certainty just how many denominations are in existence. A lot also depends on how one defines denomination or on one's ecclesiological typology. This figure is taken from Paul D. L. Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole?* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 7.

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catholicity: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Reformed and Pentecostal, and make observations arising from the survey. This ought to provide a robust enough basis upon which to draw some conclusions about the tension of the one and the many that might hold for all churches.

1. Roman Catholic

Roman Catholic ecclesiology is built on the understanding that Jesus Christ founded the church in his lifetime.[3] Jesus willed that his apostles' successors, in the form of bishops, 'be shepherds in His Church' until 'the consummation of the world'.[4] Each bishop serves as 'the visible principle of unity and foundation of unity in their particular church'.[5] Together, in the college of bishops, they express the 'variety and universality of the People of God'.[6] Furthermore, Jesus instituted a 'permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and communion' by placing Peter, and by extension his successors in the form of the bishops of Rome (Popes), at the head of the college of bishops.[7] The pope, as the Vicar of Christ, exercises 'full, supreme and universal power over the Church'.[8]

In Roman Catholic ecclesiology, catholicity is a gift of the Holy Spirit. But it is a gift 'distorted by the presence of sin…in the members of the church individually and collectively'.[9] As a consequence, the catholicity of the church must be understood eschatologically, as both an 'affirmation of fact and an invitation to hope'.[10] Avery Dulles describes the catholicity of the church as 'a present, though imperfect, reality'.[11] This imperfection arises by virtue of the fact that many Christian communities and churches are not currently in communion with Rome. While Roman Catholicism acknowledges the existence of 'elements of sanctification' and 'truth' outside its visible structures,[12] the 'fullness' of catholicity can only be realised in communion with Rome.[13]

2. Eastern Orthodox

The Eastern Orthodox Church also understands Jesus to be the founder of the Church.[14] It also shares the Roman Catholic view that the episcopate forms the centre of a Christ-ordained order and principle source of unity within the body of Christ.[15] However, it repudiates

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3 Michael A. Fahey, 'Church', in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives Volume II,* ed. Francis Shussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 16.

4 'Dogmatic Constitution of the Church—Lumen Gentium', The Holy See, 21 November 1964, accessed 7 October 2013, *http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, LG III, 18.*

5 *LG III, 23.*

6 *LG III, 22.*

7 *LG III, 18.*

8 *LG III, 22.*

9 Fahey, 'Church', 43.

10 Fahey, 'Church', 43.

11 Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 168.

12 *LG III, 8.*

13 Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church,* 21.

14 Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 245.

15 John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 8.

the idea that the bishop of Rome has been endowed with a divinely-ordained special office of unity and authority over other bishops.[16] In its stead, it emphasises a conciliar model of authority and unity, which is understood as the ideal reflection of the Trinity.[17] While the Eastern Orthodox Church rejects the infallibility of the Pope, it subscribes to the view that the church as a whole, particularly through its ecumenical councils, is infallible.[18]

This difference in part stems from the Eastern Orthodox Church's emphasis on the Trinity as the model for understanding the relationship between the one and the many in the church, in contrast to Roman Catholicism's greater emphasis on the Christological foundation of the church, with an episcopal successor leading the church in Christ's place.[19] Kallistos Ware argues that 'just as each man is made according to the image of the Trinitarian God, so the Church as a whole is an icon of God the Trinity, reproducing on earth the mystery of unity in diversity'.[20] John Zizioulas argues that a truly Trinitarian view of the church consists of both 'communion' and 'otherness', just as it does in the triune God.[21]

Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology maintains that the church exists in the form of both visible and invisible congregations—those worshipping on earth here and now and the saints and angels in heaven.[22] The visible and invisible congregations make up a single, undivided and 'continuous reality'.[23] This concept rests on the idea that the 'unity of the Church follows of necessity from the unity of God'.[24] Thus, while the church may appear divided to the human mind, it is in reality united from God's perspective.[25] The united church—both visible and invisible—consists of churches in communion with the Eastern Patriarchates (and those past who were similarly in communion).[26]

This marks an important departure from Roman Catholicism. While claiming to represent the fullest embodiment of the one holy, apostolic and catholic church, Roman Catholicism accepts that the catholicity of this church is in some way broken and imperfect because of schisms and splits. This allows it to recognise an imperfect and less than full working of God's grace in Christian communities not in communion with Rome. For example, it is able to recognise in the Eastern Orthodox Church 'true sacraments'.[27]

The Eastern Orthodox Church, on

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16 Ware, *The Orthodox Church,* 243.

17 Ware, *The Orthodox Church,* 245.

18 Ware, *The Orthodox Church,* 252.

19 This is at least how things look to Eastern Orthodox theologians. See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Great Britain: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 123.

20 Ware, *The Orthodox Church,* 244.

21 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness,* 4-5.

22 Ware, *The Orthodox Church,* 247.

23 Ware, *The Orthodox Church,* 247.

24 Alexei Khomiakov, *The Church is One,* Orthodox Christian Information Center, accessed 7 October 2013, http://orthodoxinfo.com/general/khomiakov_church.aspx.

25 Khomiakov, *The Church is One.*

26 Khomiakov, *The Church is One.*

27 'Decree on Ecumenism—Unitatis Redintegratio', The Holy See, accessed 8 October 2013, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html, *UR III, 15.*

the other hand, maintains that it alone is the embodiment of the 'ideal Church' as a visible, concrete reality on Earth.[28] Consequently, it finds it more difficult to make the same concession made by Roman Catholicism at Vatican II. Kallistos Ware serves to illustrate this difficulty. He argues in *The Orthodox Church* that it is possible for individuals not visibly part of the church to be saved, but they 'must *in some sense* be a member of the Church' (original emphasis).[29] In what sense, Ware says, 'we cannot always say'.[30]

3. Reformed (Calvin)

Jean Calvin shares the Eastern Orthodox distinction of a visible and invisible church, albeit with some important differences that lead him to very different conclusions about the issue of Christian unity. Calvin believes the visible and invisible churches are not in fact united. He believes the invisible church consists of the true saints, past and present, and that this church represents the one holy, catholic and apostolic church.[31] However, unlike Eastern Orthodoxy, Calvin believes this church is known only to God.[32] Thus, while it is a concrete reality, it is not visible or knowable. The visible church, according to Calvin, consists of the earthly community of all who profess faith—saints and hypocrites alike.[33] Calvin describes the position of the invisible church within the visible church as 'a small and despised number, concealed in an immense crowd, like a few grains of wheat buried among a heap of chaff'.[34]

Calvin further argues that believers are obliged to 'cultivate…communion' with the visible church.[35] He believed cultivating communion with the visible church necessitated tolerating members who might not ultimately enjoy membership of the invisible church:

> For it may happen in practice that those whom we deem not altogether worthy of the fellowship of believers, we yet ought to treat as brethren, and regard as believers, on account of the common consent of the Church in tolerating and bearing with them in the body of Christ. Such persons we do not approve by our suffrage as members of the Church, but we leave them the place which they hold among the people of God, until they are legitimately deprived of it…Thus we both maintain the Church universal in its unity, which malignant minds have always been eager to dissever…[36]

Calvin believed that God placed a higher value on Christian unity than on purity of membership. He deemed those who turned their backs on the visible church (i.e. the radical reformers of his day) 'deserters of religion'.'[37]

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28 Ware, *The Orthodox Church,* 248-249.

29 Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 251-252.

30 Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 252.

31 Calvin doesn't use the language of 'one holy, catholic, apostolic Church', but this is the implication of his argument about the 'invisible' Church. Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* accessed on iBooks, *Book IV, 1:2.*

32 Calvin, *Institutes,* IV, 1:2.

33 Calvin, *Institutes, IV, 1:2.*

34 Calvin, *Institutes, IV, 1:2.*

35 Calvin, *Institutes*., IV, 1:7.

36 Calvin, *Institutes*., IV, 1:9.

37 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, 1:10.

4. Pentecostal

Trying to say anything definitive about Pentecostal ecclesiology is difficult for two reasons: the 'bewildering pluralism'[38] within the movement and its lack of articulated ecclesiology.[39] For the purposes of rounding off our comparative survey, we will investigate the perspective of just one prominent part of the Pentecostal movement: the Assemblies of God.

For the Assemblies of God, the church can be understood only when placed within the larger and more important context of the 'kingdom of God'. Interestingly, the official website of the Assemblies of God USA offers no statement that might be considered a doctrine of the church or an ecclesiology. It does, however, offer a 'position paper' on the kingdom of God adopted by the General Presbytery in 2010.[40] This is already an important departure from the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Reformed (Calvin) ecclesiologies with their emphasis on the church—visible, invisible or otherwise. The paper does not specifically address the issue of catholicity. But the implications of the views articulated therein about the kingdom of God and the church have important bearing on the issue.

The Assemblies of God defines the 'kingdom of God' as 'the sphere of God's rule', against which fallen humans participate in a universal rebellion.[41] By faith, obedience and regeneration through the Holy Spirit humans can 'become a part of the kingdom and its operation'. Crucially, the kingdom is present 'whether or not people recognise and accept it'.[42] The kingdom is both 'a present realm' and 'a future apocalyptic order into which the righteous will enter at the end of the age'.[43] Thus, 'the reality of the ultimate Kingdom is qualified'—to be fulfilled only at the eschaton.[44] The current age, located as it is between the 'first and second advents of Christ' is understood as consisting of a 'forceful spiritual confrontation between the power of the Kingdom and the powers that dominate the world in this present age'.[45] The latter refers to satanic powers.

Jesus Christ is nowhere described as the founder of a 'church'. Rather, the kingdom is described as being 'present…in the person and acts of Jesus during the time of His Incarnation'.[46] As such, Jesus might be thought of as the 'inaugurator' of the kingdom rather than the founder of the church.

In contrast to the magisterial reformers' dictum that the church is present where the word is preached and the sacraments duly administered,

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38 Walter J. Hollenweger, 'An Introduction to Pentecostalisms', *Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education* 25 (2004): 130.
39 Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 13.
40 'The Kingdom of God', Assemblies of God USA, 9-11 August 2010, accessed 8 October 2013, http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Position_Papers/pp_downloads/PP_The_Kingdom_of_God.pdf.

41 'Kingdom of God', Assemblies of God, 1.
42 'Kingdom of God', Assemblies of God, 1.
43 'Kingdom of God', Assemblies of God, 2.
44 'Kingdom of God', Assemblies of God, 2 (the paper is inconsistent with respect to the capitalisation of 'kingdom').
45 'Kingdom of God', Assemblies of God, 2.
46 'Kingdom of God', Assemblies of God, 2.

the Assemblies of God believes that: 'where His Spirit is, the Kingdom is present'.[47] The paper makes an important ontological distinction between the kingdom and the church:

> The age of the Spirit is the age of the Church, which being Spirit-created is also the community of the Spirit. Working primarily through the Church but without being confined to the Church, the Spirit continues the Kingdom ministry of Jesus himself.'[48]

Thus the purpose of the church is to serve the kingdom, which existed before the Church and will continue to do so after the Church has finished its 'work'.[49]

II Observations

This survey has briefly explored four very different views on Christian unity. These can be summarised as follows:

a) Roman Catholicism's imperfect or partial catholicity where churches in communion with Rome enjoy the fullness of catholicity and those that are not have the potential to enjoy some of the fruits of grace;

b) Eastern Orthodoxy's perfect catholicity whereby its invisible component is united with the visible component manifested as a concrete reality in the form of bishops in communion with the Eastern Patriarchates;

c) Calvin's reformed view of an invisible communion of saints

known only to God in communion with the visible Church where the wheat and chaff are mixed together; and the

d) Pentecostal (Assemblies of God) view of the church entailing spirit-filled membership of the kingdom of God, furthering the work of the kingdom against the forces of Satan.

While this survey is far from exhaustive—in either its depth or breadth—it does provide a basis for several important observations about the tension of the one and the many in the church, particularly as it relates to the plurality of denominations or traditions.

1. The origin of the church

Firstly, one's understanding of the origin of the church is an important determinant of how one will probably approach the issue of Christian unity. Two views in this regard are evident amongst the traditions surveyed above: Christ as founder of the church (Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy) and church as the 'outcome' of Jesus' ministry (Reformed and Pentecostal).[50] The belief that Jesus founded the church naturally leads to belief in a divinely-given church order. This in turn opens the door to the belief that the church, if founded and ordered by Jesus, must be understood as being perfect in some way. It is then very difficult to accept any church that doesn't

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47 'Kingdom of God', Assemblies of God, 2.

48 'Kingdom of God', Assemblies of God, 3.

49 'Kingdom of God', Assemblies of God, 4.

50 For 'outcome' see Walter J Hollenweger, who says the 'church can…be considered as being the outcome of the work of Jesus, but *not of his foundation*… (original emphasis)—'The Pentecostals', trans. R. W. Wilson (London: SCM, 1972), 428.

acknowledge the authority of this order, for they can only have fallen into error or worse.

On the other hand, if the church is an outcome of Jesus' ministry, then order is not divinely ordained, or at least not in the institutional sense, and the yardstick for measuring the validity of order will more likely be its efficacy in furthering the church's mission, the 'outcome' of Jesus' ministry. Thus Calvin could focus on the Word and the sacraments and reform Catholic Church order. Similarly, the Assemblies of God can focus on the presence of the Spirit as the mark of the kingdom of God and appropriate secular language for its order—general superintendent, non-resident executive presbytery, by-laws, for example—without any embarrassment.

In short, if Jesus is the founder of the church, church order necessarily becomes central to the question of catholicity. If he is not understood as the founder of the church, then order is not central, but the church's mission is. As a consequence, both sides have found it difficult to compromise as order and mission are constitutive of their respective churches.

As an aside, the fact that the two oldest traditions which both accept Christ as the church's founder can still be in schism today over exactly what Christ instituted amply demonstrates that this view is no guaranteed path to unity. Similarly, understanding the church as the 'outcome' of Jesus' ministry has not led churches in this camp to unity. There is disagreement over precisely what that mission is and ought to look like today.

2. Norms

Secondly, there is disagreement about what is normative for the church in scripture and early church history. This is at least partly a product of the nature of the New Testament. The vast majority of material about the church comes from pastoral letters written to real historical churches in real historical settings. As a consequence, it is not always easy to discern what elements are to be read as normative for the church in all places at all times and which elements are merely descriptive of the church at a particular juncture in its historical evolution, i.e. historically contingent. Both elements are present in the text (the *kat'oikon* churches mentioned in the New Testament, for example, are surely not normative for church order today).

The Eastern Orthodox Church takes the period of the New Testament and the first seven ecumenical councils as normative for the church. The Roman Catholic Church takes these ecumenical councils and adds subsequent councils, and in reality, what the Pope determines on matters of doctrine today. Calvin begins and ends with the Word (i.e. the text of Scripture) and today's Pentecostals take Jesus' ministry and mission as normative, and in reality whatever is validated by the Holy Spirit today.

3. The 'two ways'

While disputes over the origins of the church and what is normative for it are important explanatory factors for why and how different traditions have emerged, there is actually a much deeper and more significant cause at the heart of the tension over the one

and the many in the church. This is that the church, contrary to the thrust of much of the ecumenical movement, is in fact by its nature exclusionary.

Christianity presents all people with the starkest of choices: heaven and hell. It offers no real alternative. The *Didache,* one of the earliest Christian texts, opens with this choice: 'There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways.'[51] Lesslie Newbigin was aware of this truth when he wrote that '…the New Testament… surely assumes that there is a real people of God in the world…and that it makes the most awful and ultimate difference conceivable whether you are inside or outside of that place'.[52]

This dichotomy forces the church, in whatever shape or form it takes, to wrestle with the issue of where the boundaries of its membership end, and where those of its mission begin. If there is no boundary between Christian and non-Christian, then the church ceases to exist as an intelligible concept and is incapable of being a concrete social reality. But drawing the boundary is no easy matter.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that while the New Testament presupposes a simple dichotomy between those belonging to Christ, and those belonging to the world, it neither presupposes nor speaks to a situation of a plurality of churches all believing to be truly the body of Christ, yet not in communion with one another. This is not because the New Testament church was in some way perfect or ideal—it was beset by many of the same types of disputes that create disunity today: doctrine, discipline and authority, for example. Rather, it is because followers of Christ then still formed a single community (church), despite their factions, leadership cliques and doctrinal disputes.

Simply put, communion had not yet broken down in the way that it subsequently came to be. This is why the term 'catholicity' makes no appearance in the New Testament. It simply wasn't an issue. It doesn't make its first appearance in Christian literature until Ignatius' letter to the Church in Smyrna in the early 2nd century, a time when the unity of the church was coming to be tested more seriously and gravely, and without the benefit of living apostles.[53]

At the edges the boundary between Christian and non-Christian remains clear. Atheists, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims are not members of the church. They don't claim to be, nor do they desire to be, and nor do Christians regard them so. But the boundary is much more opaque and difficult to define with respect to those who profess to be Christians, yet belong to churches that are not in communion with each other. In this sense, the issue is one of intra-tribal conflict rather than inter-tribal conflict. The issue of the status of 'other' Christians who do not belong to one's own tradition is an

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51 'The Didache', in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations,* ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 345.

52 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 56.

53 I have taken this dating of Ignatius' letter from Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers,* 170.

inescapable question and challenge for all Christians.

The central difference between the four ecclesiologies investigated above is that they all draw the boundary in a different place with respect to those who claim to be Christians and to belong to the church. The result is that each of the four excludes different groups of Christians, according to their own distinctive ecclesiology.

Some do this explicitly, as in the case of Eastern Orthodoxy. Others are less explicit, such as the Assemblies of God, whose ecclesiology implies that those who aren't members of the kingdom of God are with Satan. Its definition of membership in the kingdom of God (e.g. testimony to an experience of the 'new birth' and baptism in water by immersion)[54] excludes even many evangelicals, let alone members of the traditional episcopal churches.

Even Calvin, who was very conscious of the need and difficulty of drawing a boundary around the people of God, produces just as exclusive a church as the others. His communion with the visible church is a mere concession for the present age until the real, hidden church, with a very definite boundary of membership, is separated from the transient visible church, most of whose members will end up at the destination of the second path outlined by the *Didache*.

The problem is not boundary drawing per se, for this is unavoidable—it is forced by the exclusionary nature of the Christian message with its 'two ways'. Rather, the issue is that Christians, churches and traditions cannot agree on where the boundary between the two ways is located in the concrete world. This is a key reason for schisms, splits and the proliferation of churches and traditions.

III The Central Challenge

The central challenge for the church in the ecumenical age is to strive for common understanding on where to locate the boundary of membership in the body of Christ, and to do so in the most inclusive way possible without sacrificing the integrity of the message. Miroslav Volf understood this problem. He argued in *After Our Likeness* that the problem of the one and the many consists in the 'relationship between *exclusivity and inclusivity*' (original emphasis).[55]

The need to draw a distinction between Christian and non-Christian, uncertainty about where to draw the line between the two, a multi-denominational Christian context and a secular culture that celebrates pluralism all work together to create an acute theological tension between the one and the many for all Christians today. As a consequence, the church confronts something of a paradoxical mission. It must preach the most exclusive of messages, yet do so with the most open of hearts, while modelling the most inclusive of communities.

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54 'Recommended Bylaws for Local Assemblies'. The General Council for the Assemblies of God, August 2009, accessed 11 October 2013, http://ag.org/top/about/recommended_ch_bylaws.pdf, Article VI, Section 1.

55 Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 262.