



# RESURGENCE

## Introduction to Church Unity

**John H. Armstrong**

The church of Christ is truly one! We do not confess in vain when we profess to believe “in the holy Catholic Church; the communion of saints....” There really should be no question about this. It is a matter of divine revelation. Period. The very words of our Lord’s prayer to the Father express this reality plainly:

Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given Me; for Thou didst love Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, although the world has not known Thee, yet I have known Thee; and these have known that Thou didst send Me; and I have made Thy name known to them, and will make it known; that the love wherewith Thou didst love Me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:24–26).

The unity of the family of believers is the very *purpose* of our Lord’s prayer in John 17. It is His desire, not that of some man-made organization, that believers—past, present and future—be united in love (cf John 13:35). And the apostle openly declares: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). The body of Jesus Christ is not Baptist, Methodist, Reformed, Lutheran, Roman, Greek, or otherwise. It is one, and it is His!

But when evangelicals, properly taught allegiance to the written Scriptures, think of the church, the first thing that usually comes to their minds is a local congregation, as emphasized by our Lord in Matthew 18:15–20. Or, if they think of the church beyond this understanding, they see it as universal, *invisible* (to everyone but God of course) and consisting of *all* the elect throughout all the centuries. The last thing that comes to evangelical minds is the idea of some kind of *organizational* expression of Christian unity; e.g., the National Council of Churches (NCC), the World Council of Churches (WCC), or the recently revived efforts of the Consultations on Church Unity (COCU).

Although the Christian church was not tightly organized in its early centuries, it was, at least to most who would have viewed her from the outside, an organization with a great degree of *visible* unity. In 1054 this was shattered. The Roman Pontiff of the West and the Orthodox Patriarch of the East formally excommunicated each other. Things have not been the same ever since. The disunity which resulted contributed to the loss of the Holy Land to the Moslems and the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in the East. During the so-called Middle Ages the papacy grew increasingly corrupt and persecuted her opponents, whether true heretics or simple, faithful believers.

During this same period of time a number of evangelical movements arose: the Petrobrusians, Arnoldists, Henricians, Waldenses, Taborites, Humiliati, Lollards and Bohemians, to name only a few of the best known ones. By 1517, when the German Reformation erupted without human planning, or control, the image of a single, visible, universal church body was gone, at least for the next four centuries. Only in the early twentieth century did this picture begin to change again. What happened?

By the turn of the present century a good number of the historic sending churches of the West had begun to experience the corrupting influences of theological liberalism. These churches still sent missionaries, often because the piety of the previous generations still produced a fervor to evangelize the nations in obedience to the final words of Christ. (In time this fervor would begin to wain and the story of what happened is quite well known. Historic mainline churches eventually suffered drastic losses in overseas missionary personnel. Liberal theological teaching always eviscerates life in the church but not always in the first generation.) In the early stages of this shift there was confusion on many mission fields because the number of missionaries still grew and the resultant competition for various areas became a norm. Many missionary leaders saw the fruit of devastating sectarianism and wanted to do something about this problem. The disunity of the church, in the face of hostile religions, weakened the church's effective witness and work. In 1910 the International Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh, Scotland, with the goal of creating a common approach for world evangelization. Out of this conference grew the International Missionary Council (IMC), an inter-denominational movement that in time would become the World Council of Churches. Though it is far too simple to say the *only* motive for this rising ecumenical movement was to develop a more effective missionary effort, it is a simple fact that this was the initial driving force behind the developments.

Conservative evangelical theologian Harold O. J. Brown properly notes that:

The more direct ancestor of the World Council, however, was not the IMC but two so-called "movements." One, the "Faith and Order" movement, was established in 1910. Convened by Episcopalians and Anglicans, it appealed to representatives of Eastern Orthodoxy as well. "Faith and Order" was essentially a theologically-oriented, conservative movement seeking to bring various denominations to agreement concerning the incarnation and deity of Jesus Christ. It had evident "high church" or "catholic" tendencies, although Roman Catholicism itself was not represented. The other movement, called "Life and Work," was more activist and practically oriented; its influence ultimately came into predominance. Its first major conference was held in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1925, 1,600 years after the first ecumenical council was convened by Roman Emperor Constantine in Nicea. Pope Pius XI refused the invitation to Roman Catholics and demanded instead that the participants achieve unity by submitting to Rome.<sup>1</sup>

What eventually transpired, in 1938, was a merging of the two movements mentioned above. The outbreak of World War II, in 1939, actually hindered formal meeting until 1948 when an initial assembly was convened in Amsterdam. This gathering adopted a simple statement of faith which required members to acknowledge Jesus Christ as "God and Savior." It wasn't to be long, however, until liberal churchmen attacked even this most simple and basic formula for agreement.<sup>2</sup>

What follows might surprise ardent conservative readers. The WCC clearly showed itself to be concerned with the person and natures of Christ, i.e., with his incarnation. It not only retained the standard set by this first assembly, it even made it a bit stricter.<sup>3</sup> What *actually* happened, however, is a far different story. Churches, delegates, and especially bureaucrats, generally ignored the theology of these statements and used the concept of "liberty" to adopt all kinds of agendas that had very little to do with the gospel of Christ. By the 1960s the direction had radically been altered. Terms such as the "secular city" and the "secular meaning of the gospel" became the buzz. Finally, "death of God," "liberation theology" and "the theology of revolution" took center stage. Even former WCC president George Florovsky openly suggested the WCC was lost.

But of what real importance is this story? Well, I answer very simply, when large numbers of evangelical Christians think of Christian unity at the end of this present century, the first thing that comes to their mind is the failed agenda of the World Council of Churches. What we have is a very *negative* image of what happens when Christians attempt to express organic and essential unity in any visible manner. The sad result is that the enemy of the church has succeeded with many evangelicals. He has succeeded in causing us to focus entirely on the failure of ecumenism rather than upon its potential and its positive prospects. He has succeeded in causing us to ignore a vital part of our faith. We have embraced a type of separatism that is both unhealthy and unscriptural. The result, in the latter half of this century, is tragic. Let me explain.

On one hand we have had a series of massive popular movements for visible oneness, which ignore catholic and orthodox doctrinal substance at almost all costs. These grassroots ecumenical expressions are often neither healthy nor biblical at the end of the day. They quite often decry denominational labels, which is not all bad, while at the same time they ignore the great truths recovered by biblical reforming movements of the past; e.g., recovery of the doctrinal importance of justification, the essential nature of the Trinity, the authority of Holy Scripture, etc. On the other hand we have a host of smaller evangelical "reforming" movements that have arisen in the past thirty years that seem to be completely suspicious of other evangelicals unless they adopt our particular confession of faith. (You fill in the blank; e.g., *Westminster Confession of Faith*, *Savoy Declaration*, *London Confession of Faith*, etc.) Whether or not one uses the erstwhile labels or not (e.g., "neo-evangelical," "pseudo-fundamentalist," "modified fundamentalist" or even "confessional evangelical") the issue is often the same—what is there about how you *understand* the Christian faith that leads me to "separate" from you in order to remain faithful to Christ? Rarely is the question put the opposite way: What is there that would allow me to remain in some kind of relationship with you even though we have some important matters to resolve in the mean time? American Christians are particularly prone to this disease since we have the luxury of separating and building new ministries at will. (We have the financial resources and the historical patterns that allow us to do this freely!) Third World Christians and churches take unity far more seriously. Ever wonder why?

Even the word ecumenical has almost totally negative connotations for large numbers of evangelical Christians. Most have forgotten that the word "ecumenical" comes from the Greek word which really means "the whole inhabited earth." This is why the early church, when faced with various destructive heresies which attacked her understanding of the person and work of Christ, convened "ecumenical" councils to deal with the problems and determine confessionally the clear teaching of the Scriptures. These councils were "catholic" precisely because the universal church spoke as one through its various representatives.

Am I suggesting by all of this that we compromise truth? I hope not. I personally edited two books in the past few years, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Moody Press, 1995) and, *The Compromised Church* (Crossway, 1998), which demonstrate that I believe truth is *very important* for the health and strength of the visible church. But what I am suggesting is that all sectarianism, separatism and denominationalism (not denominations per se) should be abandoned. These are viral diseases that destroy the immune system of the visible churches and deny their true unity within the body of Christ. Let a champion of truth and unity speak to this issue:

I am in the truest sense, a very sound churchman, I am, indeed, a high churchman; a most determined stickler for the church. I do not believe in salvation outside the pale of the church. I believe that the salvation of God is confined to the church, and to the church alone. You say, "What church?" God forbid that I should mean either the Baptist, the Independent, the Episcopalian, the Presbyterian, or any other church; I mean the church of Christ, the company of God's chosen, the fellowship of the blood-bought, be they where they may, for them is provided the feast of fat things. There is but one church in heaven and earth, composed of those called by the Holy Ghost, and made anew by His quickening power.<sup>4</sup>

So wrote Charles H. Spurgeon, a man "censured" by a mixed denomination for his deep concern over orthodoxy!

But arguing *exclusively* for "invisible" unity is fraught with dangers of its own. It is true that there is a biblical sense in which the whole of the Christian life and community is "invisible" during this time between the advents (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 11:1; 2 Cor. 4:18). However, we must never use such a theological idea to evade our clear biblical responsibility to *maintain* the unity of the church before the watching world. Theologian Geoffrey W. Bromiley helpfully notes that:

... the insistence upon organizational unity on the one side, or indivisible unity on the other, does not give us an adequate answer to the challenge of disunity. On both sides there are valuable elements of truth which must have a place in a true answer. But neither of itself is sufficient in practice; and while the two may just as well be complementary as contradictory they do not easily combine in a satisfactory and invincible partnership.<sup>5</sup>

Are we left then with nothing that we can do to address this tension? Must we live with our present disunity? *Or must we* give up our commitment to truth to strive together for a visible unity which brings theological compromise? Finally, is the only unity possible an *invisible-only* unity? Bromiley is again quite suggestive when he concludes that we must learn to "take seriously the fact that Christ Himself really is the unity of the church..." He concludes that the key to unity is not found in putting our stress upon either an institution founded by Christ (i.e., the church) or upon a heavenly order of salvation inaugurated by Him. He writes:

To do this is to fail to find in Jesus Christ Himself, incarnate and crucified as well as resurrected and ascended, the true basis and center of the church's unity, its full and indestructible actualization, and therefore the one secure and triumphant answer to the false, if very real, assaults of disunity.<sup>6</sup>

If Christ Himself, in His person and work, is already the accomplished unity of the church, then it is because of this that "the church knows that it is already one, and can work and pray for the visible manifestation of its unity."<sup>7</sup> Bromiley rightly concludes:

The church is one church, whatever the facts may seem to say, because Christ is one, and because He is one for the church, and because the only true life of the church is that which it has in Him. This is our sole but sole-sufficient answer to the problem of disunity in a sinful order. This is the solid basis of our confession of unity, and the starting-point for all our attempts at its practical expression. The unity of the church exists already and indestructibly in Jesus Christ. It is one in Him.<sup>8</sup>

True Christians do have spiritual unity, this is a fact. But this does not lead us to conclude that "one world church" will necessarily be the best way to express this unity. Such unity seems, necessarily, to involve differing levels of fellowship among the churches. But such unity must become, for true evangelicals, a priority. Presently, it is hardly on our radar screen.

Evangelical theologian Donald G. Bloesch rightly sounds a note of balance in this whole matter of pursuing proper expressions of biblical ecumenicity.

Church unity, however crucial, must not be placed above the concern for truth. True unity can only be on the basis of truth, but the whole truth can only be perceived and appreciated when Christians are united with one another in love. Erasmus made the unity of the church the highest good, even to the extent of clouding over the differences between the old Catholicism and the Reformation. Luther, on the other hand, strove to maintain the truth above all, even at the risk of disunity. Luther's way was the more biblical, but the Reformation was nonetheless a "tragic necessity" (Pelikan) because it meant that the valid insights on both sides were to be submerged in the interests of new sectarian unities.<sup>9</sup>

I realize that saying so might cause consternation for some, but I believe Bloesch offers us sound insight here, insight that if heard by more and more evangelicals, could bring great hope for biblical reformation in the next century. After surveying a number of failed efforts at working out the implications of unity, at the cost of evangelical truth, Bloesch concludes that "The only genuine way to true evangelical-catholic unity is a return to the message and teachings of Scripture with the aid of the tradition of the whole church."<sup>10</sup>

But this is the rub for many evangelicals. They have no place for the traditions of the church. This has, in itself, created a huge vacuum. We have a generation of leaders who know next to nothing of the catholicity of the church, both confessionally and spiritually. We react negatively to any discussion that dares to mention catholicity. Until we develop an ecclesiology that takes more seriously who we are, where we came from historically, and how we might more faithfully implement in our actions the unity that is already ours in Christ, we will never make progress toward realizing our Christian unity on very practical levels.

As you read this issue of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* would you pray that God might use the content to glorify His Son in the recovery of both evangelical truth and genuine catholicity? I pray: God hasten the day that we, your people, might more and more *experience* the unity that we already have in your dear Son. Cause us to work toward that goal because of your Son, who makes us one.

### **About the Author**

John H. Armstrong is president of Reformation & Revival Ministries and serves as editor of *Reformation & Revival Journal* and *Viewpoint: A Look at Modern Reformation & Revival in Our Times*, a quarterly magazine free upon request. A frequent conference speaker, John devotes his energies to the goal of strengthening churches through its pastors and leaders for the purpose of biblical reformation. He is the author/editor of seven books and has contributed to a number of other volumes. He lives in Carol Stream, Illinois, and has two adult children and one grandchild.

There is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that the apostles intended that separate Christian assemblies should be drawn into a larger ecclesiastical organization under a central government. The church at Jerusalem had no control over the church at Antioch; nor were Jerusalem and Antioch under the government of any supreme ecclesiastical authority. The churches which Paul and Barnabas founded in Lycaonia, Pisidia, and Pamphilia on their first missionary journey were independent of the church at Antioch and of each other. In every city there was a church, and in every church there were elders (Acts 14:21–23), but the narrative of Luke gives the impression that every church stood apart. No attempt was made to bring them into any ecclesiastical confederation or to place them under a common government. In the account of Paul's second visit to this part of Asia Minor we are told that the "churches" not the "church" "were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily" (Acts 16:5). They were standing apart still, and Paul did nothing to draw them together.

**R. W. Dale**

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Harold O. J. "The World Council of Churches: Community or Conspiracy?", *The Fundamentalist Journal*, April 1983, 28–29.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Brown notes that Rudolph Bultmann saw this statement as "too dogmatic" and openly questioned if it was consistent with the New Testament. (Bultmann insisted that the New Testament taught only that Jesus came, not who or what He is!)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Brown again notes that the WCC *added* a reference to the Bible, because of the Lutheran Church of Norway's influence, and then made special references to the Trinity because of the influence of Eastern Orthodoxy!

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Henry Cook, *The Theology of Evangelism*. (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, Ltd., 1951), 112.

<sup>5</sup> Bromiley, Geoffrey W. *The Unity and Disunity of the Church*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958). 39.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>9</sup> Bloesch, Donald G. *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 volumes. (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), II: 288.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 289. Bloesch offers the following people as representative of catholic evangelicalism: Peter Forsyth, Count von Zinsendorf, Thomas Torrance, John Nevin, Philip Schaff. He writes: "Schaff, it should be noted, maintained his warm relationship with the

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pietistic Evangelical Alliance, even after embarking on the road to an evangelical catholicism." In the same vein Luther and Calvin, Bloesch suggests, "... though in the heat of the controversies of their time ... were compelled to discard more in the Catholic tradition than they might have deemed necessary in a more tranquil period of history."