

Exploring the Meaning of Pentecost: Pluralism, Unity, and Christian Faith

Study #5: Maintain the Unity of the Spirit

Scripture Texts

Acts 2:1-12 (NRSV)

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, **11** Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” **12** All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

Ephesians 4:1-3 (NRSV)

4 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **3** making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Notes

Thesis: The expression of biblical and orthodox Christian faith is inherently and irreducibly pluralist

The plurality of the Christian faith is not a problem to overcome; Scripture both reflects and anticipates the diversity of the historic Christian faith community. This plurality is the blessing and intention of God.

However, God's intention is not simply plurality but pluralism. The call to unity and solidarity is a call to move beyond the reality of plurality to pluralism. Plurality is a fact; pluralism is an achievement.

Toward a Theology of Christian Pluralism: The Life of God (Trinity); God Speaks (Revelation); Witness to Revelation (Scripture); Witness to Revelation (Church)

Witness to Revelation (Church)

The Historic Christian Faith

Some try to settle differences among churches by appeal to "historic" faith; a famous early church formula invites Christians to believe that which was taught "everywhere, always, and by all"

Early Christianity: Incredibly diverse set of assumptions, convictions, disputes; no set of unified beliefs before advent of Christendom

Character of Christendom: Emphasis on the uniformity of faith and practice; Emphasis on the institutional church as the end of the gospel; Development of hierarchies to establish and enforce true faith and right church; Oppression and persecution of those who don't conform in faith or life; Mission becomes colonization

The Historic Christian Faith: Missiologist Andrew Walls, University of Edinburgh *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Orbis Books, 1996); Asks the question: *Is there a historic Christian faith?*

Walls invites us to use our imaginations and think of an exceptionally long-living scholar from another planet, a Professor of Comparative Inter-Planetary Religions if you will. This scholar studies the earth religion known as Christianity and is able to secure periodic grants (from the religion division of the Lilly Foundation?) for the purpose of visiting earth to do field research on Christianity and its historical development. Our professor conducts an inductive study of the practices, habits, and concerns of a representative sample of Christians over several centuries to determine the true nature of this religious tradition.

Five Visits: Original Jerusalem Christians (first century); Council of Nicea (fourth century); Irish Monks (seventh century); London (nineteenth century); Nigeria (twentieth century)

“Back in his planetary home, how does our scholar correlate the phenomena he has observed? It is not simply that these five groups of humans, all claiming to be Christians, appear to be concerned about different things; the concerns of one group appear suspect or even repellent to another.”

In the midst of this diversity, one constant is clear: “There is, in all the wild profusion of the varying statements of these differing groups, one theme which is as unvarying as the language which expresses it is various; that the person of Jesus called the Christ has ultimate significance.”

“The circle of the Christian tradition has an unusually wide circumference without ceasing to have a single, unifying center. It is Christ’s living presence that unites a diverse tradition, yet that single presence is experienced in richly different ways.”

It is experienced: Sacramentally by the liturgical traditions; Spiritually by the charismatic traditions; Morally inspiring by the liberal traditions; Social experiment by the pietistic traditions; Doctrinal teacher by the scholastic traditions; Sanctification by the Orthodox tradition; Grace perfecting nature by the Roman Catholic tradition; Word of scripture by the evangelical tradition

“All of these traditions and the periods of their hegemony have experienced the living and risen Christ in spectacularly varied ways. But nothing else than the living Christ forms the center of this wide circumference.” –Tom Oden, *Agenda for Theology*, 176-77

The followers of Christ must maintain the unity we have in living presence of Jesus Christ as a witness to the world of the peace God intends in the midst of our differences and diversity. “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Los Angeles Cathedral

“For most of us it is difficult enough to respect those with whom we might disagree, to say nothing of those who might be different from us in culture, language, and tradition. For all of us pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but for God it is the cornerstone of the universal design.”—Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis, 1989), 27

Questions for Reflection

What do you think about the diversity of the Christian faith throughout history? Does this surprise you? What might the implications of this be for thinking about the unity of the church in the present?

What do you think about the institutional effort to impose unity through uniformity of faith and practice on the church? Were you aware of this? How do you think this has effected the history of the church?

If the approach to unity of Christendom (see above) is inappropriate in relation to the teaching of Jesus, what other alternatives are available? Can you think of any historical examples?

What do you think of the idea that unity flows out of the living presence of Jesus in our midst? What might this sort of unity look like? Is the presence of Jesus enough for unity or do we need something further?

Have you ever experienced the “unity of the Spirit” in your life? If so, what did that look like? How did it manifest itself? What were the conditions that allowed it to happen? What difference did it make for you?

What is particularly significant to you in this study?

What questions do you have?