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## Christian Unity Under the Lordship of Jesus Christ: A New Vision of Catholicity?

Paul Anderson

# “CHRISTIAN UNITY UNDER THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST: A NEW VISION OF CATHOLICITY?”

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With the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict XVI, many of us have been wondering whether the new Pope will be open to ecumenical dialogue with other Christian groups. While Cardinal Ratzinger, in defense of official Catholic doctrine, was known for limiting salvation and full Christian fellowship to official membership in the Catholic Church, the question is how he might now approach ecumenical ventures as the head of the Roman Catholic Church. It could be that the new Pope, because he is a versatile and creative theologian, might be open to new possibilities. Wouldn't it be great if the Bishop of Rome might grasp a new vision of Christian unity under the lordship of Jesus Christ? This might pose a new vision of Catholicity that could make a difference in the world. This is what I have written to the Vatican, and here's the story of what has happened—so far.

Several years ago Cardinal Kasper, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, distributed to the churches four paragraphs in Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical, echoing the prayer of Jesus that his followers “might be one” (Jn. 17:11, 21-23).<sup>1</sup> These four paragraphs were organized under the heading, “Petrine Ministry,” and they dealt with the problem of how the Bishop of Rome was to carry out his commission to gather the believers in Christian unity when many individuals and groups did not respect his authority.

After dozens of individuals and groups had responded, the invitation to respond was extended further to other denominations and Christian organizations around the world, including the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ.<sup>2</sup> While the Commission worked hard in preparing its response, a 50-member editorial committee cannot say it all. There were several further things I felt deserved to be said about the New Testament presentation of Petrine and other forms of apostolic ministry, and most importantly, the leadership of Christ within the Church. Therefore, I was invited by the Director of the Commission, Ann Riggs, to write an independent response, which I did.

This response to the Vatican was sent to the other 50 members of the commission soliciting their input, and after a slight revision it was then sent to Cardinal Kasper at the Vatican. Ann Riggs also sent it to *One in Christ*, a Catholic ecumenical journal published in England, for publication consideration. It was indeed accepted for publication, and it appeared in the January 2005 issue.<sup>3</sup> Because the essay is rather long (over 16,000 words!) and many might not have seen that journal issue, I have been asked to summarize some of the main points of the essay for the readers of *QRT*. I write as a New Testament scholar who is also a Quaker, and yet, many of my Quaker convictions come through, if not in the answers, certainly in the questions that are asked. Readers may peruse a draft of the essay in its entirety online,<sup>4</sup> but here is a summary of some of the concerns.

At the outset, I should point out that some of this content grows out of the tenth chapter of *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel* and is explored in the “Christian Leadership in Biblical and Theological Perspective” course that Chuck Conniry and I have taught in the Doctor of Ministry program at George Fox Evangelical Seminary. Some of it may also be found in the 1991 *Quaker Religious Thought Essay*, “Was the Fourth Evangelist a Quaker?”<sup>5</sup> Of course he wasn’t, but there are good, historical and biblical reasons why spiritual movements developed within the history of the Church, as well as structural ones. Back to the main subject, though, this friendly letter to the Vatican has seven parts to it, which I shall summarize below.

## PETRINE MINISTRY AND CHRISTOCRACY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Under this section, I point out that the main goal of every model of Christian ministry, exemplified by Peter and the other Apostles, is centrally concerned with furthering the leadership of Christ. While some structuring of leadership did evolve in the early church, structure and hierarchy were never the primary interest—*Christ’s leadership* was—and it deserves to be so in every age and sector of Christianity. The Johannine witness emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit in facilitating Christ’s leadership, but just as the Petrine concern never was one of structure over charisma, neither is the Johannine goal one of charisma versus structure. Indeed, all effective Christian leadership facilitates the attending, discerning, and obeying

of Christ's leadership. In the early church and today, the central issue is Christocracy—the means by which the risen Lord continues to lead the church. Facilitating that goal is that calling of every Christian leader, whether one be the Bishop of Rome or a pastoral elder in a local meeting or congregation.

## ON ANSWERING THE PRAYER OF JESUS—UT UNUM SINT (THAT THEY MAY BE ONE)

Jesus prayed that his followers would be one, and furthering that goal is also the calling of every Christian leader. Reasons for disunity, however, also exist. *Organizationally*, we have different church structures and groupings. *Theologically*, Christians may differ on important issues, just as they do *morally*. *Proclamationally*, Christians may even differ some on the content of the Gospel message. Most ironically, however, Christians continue to be divided on the way to establish Christian unity and to celebrate *Koinonia* fellowship *Sacramentally* (even among national gatherings of ecumenical officers, denominational representatives still break off into their own eucharistic services). Jesus, however, prays for the unity of his entire flock (Jn. 17:21) and declares that in time he will also gather the sheep that are “not of this fold” (Jn. 10:16). In exploring how we might help one another follow Jesus more faithfully and authentically, we work together in *answering* the prayer of Jesus for his followers: “that they may be one.”

In responding to the encyclical, then, each of the four paragraphs is posted and engaged directly. Following are the cited passages (in italics) and outlines of my responses. Under each of the lettered points are three or four full paragraphs if any would like to delve a bit deeper.

### 1) PASTORAL ASPECTS OF EPISCOPAL SERVICE

*“The mission of the Bishop of Rome within the College of all the Pastors consists precisely in ‘keeping watch’ (episkopein), like a sentinel, so that, through the efforts of the Pastors, the true voice of Christ the Shepherd may be heard in all the particular Churches” (#94)*

- a) Episcopal authority has its root in episcopal responsibility rather than power or structure.
- b) The primary episcopal responsibility is to feed and love the sheep.

- c) The primary calling of all Christian leadership is not to be heard or seen, but to insure that the voice and leadings of *Christ* are heard and discerned in the world.
- d) Representatives of Christ in the world point to his Truth, the singular authority across time and space and corporate boundaries.

## 2) ECUMENICAL RESPONSIBILITY

*“With the power and the authority without which such an office would be illusory, the Bishop of Rome must ensure the communion of all the Churches. For this reason, he is the first servant of unity”* (#94), and that *“Whatever relates to the unity of all Christian communities clearly forms part of the concerns of the primacy”* (#95).

- a) Just as Jesus gathers sheep that are “not of this fold,” his superintendents must reach out to the scattered sheep of Christ around the world.
- b) Human shepherds further the work of the True Shepherd as they bind up wounds, lead sheep to water and pasture, and protect them from danger.
- c) As primal servants of unity, all Christian leaders are called to raise up the centers of faith and practice rather than drawing needless boundaries.
- d) The central feature of *Koinonia* fellowship—Christian Communion—is being gathered together under the all-sufficient workings of Christ, leading the church by means of the Holy Spirit.

## 3) WAYS OF EXERCISING PRIMACY

*“As Bishop of Rome I am fully aware, as I have reaffirmed in the present Encyclical Letter, that Christ ardently desires the full and visible communion of all those Communities in which, by virtue of God’s faithfulness, his Spirit dwells. I am convinced that I have a particular responsibility in this regard, above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation”* (#95).

- a) Christ indeed desires the unity of his church, and Christian leaders participate in that desire by virtue of their charge to care for the flock of Christ.

- b) Particular responsibilities of Christian leaders root in serving the particular needs of those under their care, and the full and visible sign of Christian Community will ever be *the love of Christ*.
- c) Primacy itself deserves to be reconceived, not as a factor of position, privilege, authority, or power, but as a function of stewardship, service, responsibility, and love.
- d) A place for catholic ecumenism appears to be growing in the world today, and the mission of the Roman Catholic Church could be fulfilled within an emerging new situation.

#### 4) AN OPEN ECUMENICAL INVITATION

*“I insistently pray the Holy Spirit to shine his light upon us enlightening all the Pastors and theologians of our Churches, that we may seek—together, of course—the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned” (#95); and, “This is an immense task, which we cannot refuse and which I cannot carry out by myself. Could not the real but imperfect communion existing between us persuade Church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church and allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by his plea ‘that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me’ (Jn 17:21) (#96).*

- a) Indeed, the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit can and will lead “the Pastors and theologians of the Churches” into the venues and forms of ministry—that the service of love might be fulfilled.
- b) Likewise, the calling to Christian unity is larger than any individual or group can fulfill, and therefore the coming together of those who are *called out* of the world to follow Christ—the church? (*ek + kalō = ekklēsia*) forms the basis for shared mission and fellowship.
- c) Listening to one another as we all listen to Christ will ever be the way forward in the calling to Christian unity, and just as no one has sole access to Christ’s Truth, no one is without access to it, but each may contribute a glimpse of the Heavenly City, which is *why* listening to and sharing with one another are essential.
- d) The time may be now for a fresh consideration of the catholic vocation—extending to the Church visible and the Church invisible

alike—that all may be one under the dynamic leadership of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### RE-ENVISIONING THE CATHOLIC VOCATION: CHRISTIAN UNITY UNDER THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST

This indeed may be the day for the emergence of a new vision of catholicity, and the time may be now to call for Christian unity under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. There can be no other confession or commitment as central to the life of the authentic church than adherence to Jesus Christ as Lord. Conversely, if one is *not* willing to live under the Lordship of Christ, this may be a truer measure of non-participation in the Christian life than outward ones. And, whether or not one succeeds in doing so, the more important feature in Christian unity may be the *aspiration* to follow Jesus faithfully, having received his grace and empowerment by faith. Transcending all differences in measure among the churches regarding organizational membership, an open invitation to all who would receive Christ by faith and would follow him faithfully could provide a way forward in gathering the visible and invisible church of Christ around the world.

### RESPONSE AND A VISIT TO ROME

The response to the letter itself has only been indirect so far. In addition to Newton Garver's response in the recent issue of *Friends Journal*, I received a very gracious letter from Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, to whom I sent a copy, and another letter from Cardinal Kasper via Ann Riggs. Here are some of the things they say. From Rowan Williams,

The Paper on Petrine ministry I found very sympathetic. I have always believed that every ministry in the Church, like every charism in the Church, is a ministering of the primacy, the calling, the agency, of Christ; every ministerial form and its exercise thus needs to be accountable to this, and I read you as saying this in great depth and detail; so thank you. And of course the whole issue of authority is not exactly academic at the moment!

And, from Cardinal Kasper,

I appreciate very much Dr. Anderson's ecumenical spirit, his Christological focus, his engagement with the work of Catholic biblical scholars such as the late Father Raymond Brown, his

reflections on the role of a Christian pastor, his respect for the Bishop of Rome and for the uniqueness of his role as a minister of unity, his perspectives on primacy, his constructive challenges to the Catholic Church, his specific suggestions on 'Re-Envisioning the Catholic Vocation: Christian Unity Under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.' This is all obviously well thought out.

In thinking about these warm responses, though general, it leaves me feeling hopeful. When the Archbishop of Canterbury, the leading Cardinal on ecumenical relations in the Vatican, and a Quaker Bible teacher from Newberg all agree on the authority of Christ in the Church, that *might indeed signal a new day* for Christianity, and the world! Little did I envision, however, a further opportunity for the emerging dialogue with Rome to continue.

At the end of the summer I was invited by Nancy Irving, General Secretary of the Friends World Committee for Consultation, to attend the Conference for Secretaries of World Christian Communion held in Rome (October 23-27, 2006) as an advisor. The theme was "Visions of Christian Unity," and the meeting featured a visit with Cardinal Kasper and an audience with Pope Benedict XVI. Naturally, this seemed to be a timely opening, and I am very grateful for the privilege of such an opportunity. We met at the *Domus Internationalis* in Rome, inaugurated by Pope Paul VI, and on the last day of our meetings, we took busses across the Tiber for an audience with Pope Benedict.

After exchanging statements between the head of our Conference and the Holy Father, each of us was invited to give Pope Benedict a personal greeting. Knowing the Pope is an avid reader of theological material, I brought along copies of my two books and a folder with a fresh copy of my response to the Vatican, the latest issue of *QRT*, and an essay on Quaker decision-making process. As I greeted Pope Benedict and handed him my gifts, he exclaimed, "Oh, Johannine Christology!" as he received them with eagerness. In turn, I was given a pontifical key chain, featuring an image of Pope Benedict and his newly-fashioned coat of arms. So, despite Jesus' having given Peter the Keys to the Kingdom in Matthew, Nancy and I both have in our possession nothing less than "*key-chains to the Kingdom!*"

Of course, Nancy Irving and I were not the first Quakers to visit the Vatican; in 1658 two Irish Quakers, John Perrot and John Luffe, traveled to the Vatican to witness to their convictions about Christ's being here to teach his people himself. In contrast to our warm reception, however, they were both imprisoned. Perrot was confined to an



insane asylum for three years, and Luffe was sentenced to death by hanging in the Inquisition. As I had not heard anything further regarding my response to the Vatican, I shared that story with Cardinal Kasper, as well as another.

“Recently,” I told Cardinal Kasper, “I was asked how my response to the Vatican was being received, and I was able to say that there’s been *some improvement* over times past. In the past, Quakers sharing their views at the Vatican were *hanged* in the Inquisition. Now, their contributions are simply *hung up* in committee.” At that, we both shared a laugh.

Will calling for Christian unity under the Lordship of Jesus Christ catch on as a fresh envisioning of the Catholic Vocation? Who knows? But as Everett Cattell said nearly four decades ago of divisions among Friends, perhaps the same might be said as a means of transcending barriers between Christians around the world: “May we not, in some sense, lay aside our party banners and join hand in becoming fresh seekers after the Lordship of Christ?”<sup>6</sup> After all, furthering the dynamic leadership of the risen Lord<sup>7</sup> is the calling of *every* Christian leader—whether in Rome, or Newberg, or the remotest parts of the earth.

## NOTES

1. Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism*, Rome: Pauline Books and Media, 1995.
2. Despite the fact that Evangelical Friends International is not a member of the NCCC, the Faith and Order Commission casts a wider net, seeking to include a broader spectrum of representation. Dean Freiday has long served this Commission on behalf of Friends, and Ann Riggs, its current Director, is a Friend. I have therefore been serving on the Commission for the last six years on behalf of Friends.
3. Paul Anderson, “Petrine Ministry and Christocracy: A Response to *Ut Unum Sint*,” *One in Christ* 40:1 (2005): 3-39.
4. It is posted with permission online at: <http://www.georgefox.edu/discernment/petrine.pdf>. See also the review by Newton Garver, “A Quaker Responds to the Pope,” *Friends Journal* 52:9 (2006), pp. 20-22; plus my response, “One Response after Another,” in the same issue, pp. 22-24. Both responses are also posted online at: <http://www.friendsjournal.org/contents/2006/0906/garver.html>.
5. The book on John’s Christology (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997) has as its subtitle: “Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6,” and one of the contributions it makes in Ch. 10 (pp. 221-50) is to sketch seven ways in which parallels to the “Keys-of-the-Kingdom” passage of Matt. 16:17-19 are found in John—plausibly dialectically, if not correctively. My new book, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus; Modern Foundations Reconsidered* LNTS 321 (London: T & T Clark, 2006), among other things, draws connections between the pneumatic emphases of the Johannine Christ with the charismatic ministry of the historical Jesus.
6. See Everett Cattell, “A New Approach for Friends” in *What Future for Friends* (Philadelphia: FWCC, 1970), 40.
7. See the author’s “A Dynamic Christocentricity: The Center of Faithful Praxis,” *QRT* 105 (2005): 20-36.