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Does the Unity of the Church Still Matter?

The program planners of the Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington identified this theme almost a year ago and I was happy to grab onto it - Does the Unity of the Church Still Matter? A year ago, who could imagine the deep divisions in our culture, our politics, and our religious communities – who could have imagined how timely, how urgent this topic is of the unity of the church?

The divisions that separate us are deep and wide. Politically – especially in this town, I imagine – this is profoundly urgent. Although, I can testify to the fact that in Atlanta, where I live, close to the 6th congressional district of Georgia, a deep political division is being played out in these next few weeks – I can testify to the fact that divisions are also acute wherever we look.

So, although the political divisions are front page news nearly daily, we are here to reflect on the ecclesial divisions. Incredibly, the divisions that have marred the Christian church have been going on for centuries – they stretch back to nearly the founding of the church. I suppose it is cold comfort to observe that our ecclesial divisions are even longer than our

political divisions. It is true that the Christian church has experienced profound splits ever since the Jerusalem Council that is narrated in Acts 15.

Walking down the street of any city or town in America is living proof that we are divided as a Christian community. Historic town squares are surrounded by First Presbyterian, First Baptist, and First Methodist. Further out, a scattering of Pentecostal, nondenominational, Catholic, Lutheran, and a plethora of others bear that same proof. We are divided in the church in a number of thorny ways – we are doctrinally divided – that is, we understand God and God's plans for the world differently. We are liturgically divided – that is, we worship and pray and sing in ways that are dramatically different. We are sacramentally divided – Christians around the world understand the sacraments differently and even bar one another from celebrating the sacraments together. We are governmentally divided – that is, we organize and govern ourselves differently and have different reasons for that.

But are you aware of just HOW divided we are? The *World Christian Encyclopedia*, published in 1982 by Oxford University Press, estimates that there are 33,000 distinct Christian groups or denominations. This estimate is ferociously disputed – a whole literature has grown up around this number – some of it scholarly and some of it found in social media form. This number has caused a social media firestorm in some circles – there are actually people with passionate opinions on the number of Christian denominations. Go figure.

I don't know if 33,000 distinct Christian groups is right. But for the sake of our reflection this morning, let's just agree that there are a lot of different Christian denominations or church groups. And let's agree that this is a problem when we see in Scripture a call to quite a different model.

So, here is what we are going to do this morning. First, we are going to briefly look at some of the biblical touchpoints for unity. Why is it that the church has, for nearly 2,000 years, thought unity was so important? Some of these biblical resources will give us a clue. We cannot possibly linger here very long – they are only a hint, a marker, and a hope.

Second, we are going to take a brief journey – more of a sprint, really – through church history to see what the unity of the church meant to church leaders.

Third, we are going to look a bit more closely at the 20th century. The ecumenical movement of the 20th century started in 1910 in Edinburgh at the meeting of the World Missionary Conference. That is our starting point and we will look at developments throughout that century.

Notice, just for a moment, that date. 1910 – before the First World War. If ever there was a time of optimism on the world scene, it was right at the beginning of the 20th century. It would be another decade before what is sometimes called the Great War – an event so horrific that cultural optimism was crushed. If you will permit me a footnote: I of course am referring to the optimism of the elite – those in business and finance and education and science and medicine and government. It was a time of oppressive colonial expansion in Africa, Jim Crow laws in the American South, a massive famine in China, to name just a few of the broader realities. So, the claim that 1910 was a time of optimism in Edinburgh must be tempered with a more global awareness. Nonetheless, ecumenical hopes were seeded and began to flourish at this time.

Fourth, we will reflect on what happened as the calendar turned to the 21st century after nearly a whole century of ecumenical efforts. At the end of the 20th century, there was a sort of re-assessment. What did we achieve? How can we move forward?

Fifth, we will propose some new understandings of unity that have emerged that are more contextual than the 20th century often admitted, more enacted or embodied or practical than the 20th century often was aware, more grounded in God's initiative than our initiative, and more modest yet maybe more bold than the 20th c. folks imagined.

ONE

You all know the line near the end of the Nicene Creed: "And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church." There they are – the four marks of the church – unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. We are looking today at the first one – one-ness or unity.

It is fair to say that the original political context of the Council of Nicea in 325 was that of political unity. Emperor Constantine called the council because of political unrest that was growing due to theological skirmishes in the empire. He wanted things to settle down. He himself gave the opening address at the Council, exhorting the Bishops gathered there to unanimity and concord. Did the word "one" find its way into the Nicene Creed because of that political context? Maybe. But there are important biblical streams that flow in that direction as well.

The most famous verse of the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 6:4, the Shema – Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

Some of you may be aware of Eugene Peterson's adaptation of the Greek text, The Message. The Shema in that version goes like this: Attention, Israel! God, our God! God the one and only!

There are two famous unity texts in the New Testament. John 17 is Jesus' high priestly prayer, the prayer that he prayed to his heavenly Father before he was betrayed, a prayer of unity. John 17:22, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one."

And then Eph. 4:4-6, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

There are more biblical resources for us to consider – but these three key verses – from Deuteronomy, the gospel of John, and Ephesians - certainly seem to call us to a unity that is both real and visible. We have not, in fact, achieved the kind of unity that Jesus prayed for.

TWO

Very early on, the unity of the church was fractured. Paul and Apollos; Peter and Paul and Barnabas vs the Christians who had been Pharisees (Acts 15) are two examples from the pages of the New Testament itself. The first few centuries of the church continued to see division – and it is fair to say that it has never let up.

One of the fathers of the early church was a bishop, Cyprian, in Carthage, Egypt in the middle of the third century - - so, this was about 50 years before the controversy that led to the Council of Nicea. There were other arguments going on in the middle of the third century and

Cyprian had something to say about them. He waded into controversy but his most famous writing was a treatise on unity.

He said this about the unity of the church, "This unity we ought to hold firmly and defend. . . Let no one deceive the church by lying; let no one corrupt the faith by a perfidious prevarication of the truth. . . The Church is **one**, . . . just as the rays of the sun are many but the light is one, and the branches of the tree are many but the strength is one founded in its tenacious root, and, when many streams flow from one source, although a multiplicity of waters seems to have been diffused from the abundance of the overflowing supply nevertheless unity is preserved in their origin. Take away a ray of light from the body of the sun, its unity does not take on any division of its light; break a branch from a tree, the branch thus broken will not be able to bud; cut off a stream from its source, the stream thus cut off dries up. Thus, too the Church bathed in the light of the Lord projects its rays over the whole world, yet there is one light which is diffused everywhere, and the unity of the body is not separated. She extends her branches over the whole earth in fruitful abundance; she extends her richly flowing streams far and wide; yet her head is one, and her source is one, and she is the one mother copious in the results of her fruitfulness. By her womb we are born; by her milk we are nourished; by her spirit we are animated."

There is a lot going on there - - but you notice that Cyprian is creating analogies. Light, trees, streams – these are all analogies of unity. And he is convinced that the church must be united.

Did it happen? No, divisions persisted and expanded. The biggest schism in the history of the church – between the Latin West and the Greek East - happened in 1054 over – how

ironic – a controversy about the Nicene Creed. The Protestant Reformations of the 16th century are the divisions we are most familiar with – Luther and Calvin and others challenging the Catholic Church. You have maybe noticed that we have been in continual 500th year commemoration mode for the last few decades. Back in the 80s, celebrations marking the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth were held. In 2009, celebrations marking the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth were held. This year, it is the 500th year anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 theses. And on it goes.

I wish I could tell you that the Protestant Reformation healed the divisions that had already accumulated. Instead, the divisions multiplied in the Reformation and spread out like kudzu through the Old World and the New World. The family tree of just the Presbyterians in the United States has about 20 branches. The family tree of Presbyterians in South Korea has about 100 branches. It appears that divisions and splits are depressingly predictable from the very beginning to the present time. So, the title of the presentation this morning is apt – Does the Unity of the Church Still Matter?

Here, well into the presentation, I would like to say, YES. Yes, it does matter. But we need to think about what that means – why does it matter, what does unity mean anyway? In order to unpack that, let's go on to the third part of the lecture: What happened in the 20th century?

THREE

As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, the identified beginning of the ecumenical movement is 1910 in Edinburgh. For one hundred years and counting, the Christian churches

have tried – have genuinely tried – to work toward unity. It is a remarkable story of really dedicated people. I am not going to be able to tell the whole long story of ecumenical dialogue in the 20th century. But it is fascinating to look back and notice some things about that meeting that now strike us as incredible. Three things: first, of the 1400 delegates in Edinburgh, only 17 were non-European or non-North American; second, the strong assumption throughout that meeting – and beyond – was that unity means institutional unity; third, the conference called for the worldwide conversion of the heathen. One hundred years later, each of those things are very different. Now, the ecumenical conversation is genuinely multi-cultural and multi-ethnic; in fact, the center of gravity has shifted from the Northern hemisphere to the Southern hemisphere, where Christian churches are growing. Now, the ecumenical conversation has shifted from institutional unity to unity based on conversation and cooperation – more on that later. Now, the ecumenical conversation is more respectful of cultural contexts and speaks of proclaiming the gospel in ways that does not crush or invalidate receptive cultures.

A focus throughout this lecture will be on the issue of how unity is understood. Edinburgh 1910 assumed unity is institutional. For the first half-century, that assumption remained. But it slowly changed. There seems to have been a bit of movement by the WCC Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1975. There unity was understood as a common commitment to the apostolic faith, a common baptism and eucharist, and a common recognition of each other's members and ministries. This is a giant step from a unity of organization or structure. Those three goals – unity of apostolic faith, a common baptism and eucharist, and a common recognition of each other's members of ministries. This was the new benchmark in mid-century.

Nairobi attempted to identify specifically what unity would require. It was a tall order. As I read this statement from Nairobi, try to listen for the three unity aspects – unity of faith, unity of sacraments, unity of ministry. Here is the quote: "The one church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship, each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fullness of catholicity, witness to the same apostolic faith, and therefore recognize the other as belonging to the same Church of Christ and guided by the same Spirit. . . they are bound together because they have received the same baptism and share in the same Eucharist; they recognize each other's members and ministries. They are one in their common commitment to confess the gospel of Christ by proclamation and service to the world."

We can acknowledge that Nairobi set the bar high. Can you imagine what that would be like? Roman Catholics and Pentecostals affirming one another's ministries, celebrating the Lord's Supper, in very different liturgies, together, all expressing the common faith of the church. What an incredible thing that would be.

The WCC in Vancouver, in 1982, reaffirmed these three goals of unity and then said, "Such a unity – overcoming church divisions, binding us together in the face of racism, sexism, injustice – would be a witnessing unity, a credible sign of new creation." Notice the addition of the theme of justice that emerged in the early 80s.

Then, a blockbuster of an achievement happened in 1982. The WCC released the document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* and it was a stirring call to common acknowledgement of sacraments and ministries. It was – and still is – a major accomplishment.

All the major Christian traditions – including the Roman Catholic Church – affirmed this document. Ecumenical dialogue, after 70 years, seemed to make a real stride forward.

The WCC meeting in Canberra, Australia, in 1991, continued to affirm the three goals as stated in Nairobi and Vancouver and then they added: "The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all of the churches are able to recognize in one another the **one**, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in its fullness." Clearly, the longing is for some kind of community of cooperation. Canberra also recognized the importance of diversity but yet saw the limits of diversity. It said: "Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Savior the same yesterday, today, and forever. . ." Canberra recognized that there is a tension between unity and diversity. Unity can crush the expressions of diversity; but diversity can tear the cloak of unity. This is a deep problem that the Church has seen from the New Testament to the present.

The WCC issued a Vision Statement in 1995 that underlined, once again, the three goals and also expressed bold and comprehensive implications. I am going to read a number of sentences from this statement. This is a document of real vision and reach. It says things like this:

"We are drawn by a vision of a church that brings all people into communion with God; a church that is visibly one, sharing one baptism, celebrating one eucharist, and enjoying the service of a reconciled common ministry." – VISIBLE UNITY

"We are compelled by the vision of a church whose unity is expressed in bonds of conciliar communion which enables us to take decisions together and to interpret and teach the apostolic faith together, with mutual accountability and in love." VISIBLE COOPERATION

"We are inspired by the vision of a church that engages in dialogue and cooperation in service with people of other faiths." INTER-FAITH

"We are challenged by the vision of a church that is fully inclusive, mindful of the marginalized, overcoming divisions based on race, gender, age, and culture, promoting justice and peace, and respecting the integrity of God's creation." SEEKING JUSTICE

"We aspire to the vision of a church that reaches out to everyone through a life of sharing, proclaiming the good news of God's redemption, being both sign and servant, drawing all ever more deeply into the fellowship of God's own life." COMMUNITY

These statements from the 1995 WCC Vision Statement are genuinely moving. They are not timid. They are not defeated. They express hope and determination and longing.

Did you notice in these statements some real movement in the understanding of what unity is? Gone – mostly – was the hope for structural or institutional unity. A new understanding and several models of unity emerged.

We might be feeling quite cheerful by this time. In the 70s and 80s and 90s, there was richer and more lively understanding of what unity is – different models, ongoing conversations, deep longings. But the reality of unbridgeable divisions still existed. The editor of the monthly magazine of the WCC, Marlin Van Elderen, of course saw all the hopeful signs, but, nonetheless, in 1982 said that Christians must have a "humbling acknowledge that disunity in the church is unfaithful to our confession and disobedient to God." Ecumenical efforts toward unity had been long and serious and sometimes fruitful - but the divisions still existed and the prayer of Jesus for oneness still unrealized.

The hopefulness continued in 1995 when Pope John Paul II issues an encyclical called *Ut Unum Sint,* which said, incredibly, lots of respectful things about the Protestant tradition. It, was a hopeful harbinger of things to come. I remember *Ut Unum Sint* – it created quite a stir and the long-standing distance between the Protestant and the Catholics seemed a little less daunting.

Then, another achievement – the Lutherans and the Catholics sorted out the issue of justification by faith. This was the issue that caused Martin Luther to break off from the Catholic Church all the way back in 1517. In 1999, the two churches issued a paper which said that they had come to a place of understanding and were willing to continue to talk.

Then, a bombshell. In the year 2000, the Roman Catholic Church issued a statement called *Dominus Jesus* – this was a document written by Cardinal Ratzinger – who became Pope Benedict in 2005. But in 2000, he had an important job in the Vatican. And he wrote this document which said, "There exists a single church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter. . ."

I very clearly remember when *Dominus Jesus* came out. Protestants who had worked for so long in ecumenical conversation were stunned. "There exists a single church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church," said this statement. It felt like decades of hard patient work had been destroyed by the stroke of a pen.

FOUR

After nearly a century of ecumenical efforts, *Dominus Jesus* made a lot of people feel that we had to start over. So, let's think again about what unity means. We will look to some contemporary voices in our review.

There are still contemporary voices that insist on the criterion of institutional unity. Reformed theologian Peter Leithart insists that institutional unity is required of us. This might be called the restrictive sense of unity. Leithart says that denominationalism is "a defection from the gospel. If the gospel is true, we are who we are by union with Jesus in his Spirit with his people. It then cannot be the case that we are who we are by differentiation from other believers." (p. 6 *The End of Protestantism)*. He goes on, "Salvation enters a world of many gods, many lands, many peoples, many histories and it proclaims instead a set of singularities – one God, one world, one humankind." (P. 15). I confess that I do not warm to Leithart – his refusal to take seriously contexts and cultures is puzzling to me. If there is anything that Christians have learned – or should have learned – in a post-colonial era, it is that context matters and, in fact, actually shapes how and what we think. I am actually sympathetic to Leithart's strong reminder of the goal of unity. But I think his rhetoric is not helpful as we try to live in a diverse world.

Another contemporary thinker, Daryl Guder, has a suggestion for how to understand unity. He notices that the Nicene Creed presents the marks of the church in a certain order – one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. He says, "What if we reverse this order?" What if we were to say that the church that we confess is apostolic, catholic, holy, and therefore one? By "apostolicity," we do not merely mean "the church descended from the apostles," as important as that is. We mean "apostolicity" in the active sense of the New Testament, meaning "to be sent out." An "apostle" is a "sent-out one." So, the church is apostolic if it is sent out to participate in God's plans and purposes for the whole world.

What is the impact of Daryl Guder's idea? If we start with apostolicity, sent-ness, then we end up defining catholicity and holiness and oneness in rather different ways – in ways closer to the actual sequence of formation that we find in the New Testament. The early church was first sent out and engaged in the work of proclamation, mercy, and worship. From the perspective of sent-ness, the diverse forms of witness that we see in the church testify to the same Jesus Christ. Christian discipleship is experienced in a great variety of ways: prayer, worship, praise, proclamation, reconciliation, acts of justice and mercy, endurance under persecution. When people in diverse cultures observe Christian communities in their midst living in these distinctive ways, they encounter the witness which points them to Jesus Christ. The unity of the church is expressed in that unified witness, all communities disclosing God's love for all creation, enfleshed in and through the story of Jesus.

So, two authors from the Reformed tradition – one who insists that institutional unity and the demise of denominations are essential to living into the prayer of Jesus. The other who suggests inverting the order of the Nicene Creed four marks so that unity is clearly a unity of witness in a wide diversity of ways.

Now, let's look at two Roman Catholic thinkers to see if they have some new suggestions on what unity means. Jonas Jonson is a Roman Catholic bishop from Sweden. He wrote a book called *Wounded Visions*, which tells the story of ecumenical disappointments, including the document we mentioned a moment ago, *Dominus Jesus.* Jonson helps us understand what unity is by placing it squarely in a theology of the Holy Spirit. He says, "A proper balance between unity and diversity requires an appropriate theology of the Holy Spirit

as an indispensable presupposition. For the Spirit both creates and sustains diversity while at the same time holding and knitting our diversities together." (P. 90 *Wounded Visions*).

This is good – let me say that last sentence again: "For the Spirit both creates and sustains diversity while at the same time holding and knitting our diversities together." Bishop Jonson identifies a theological perspective rooted in a theology of the Holy Spirit. It is a sort of Pentecost understanding of church unity, which we celebrated just last week.

Roman Catholic theologian Kristin Colberg from St. John's University in Collegeville, MN also takes a theological approach to unity. Kristin is an expert in ecumenical dialogue. I met her a few years ago when she and I were both members of the Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue. This dialogue achieved a major success in 2013 – we came to an official agreement that the baptisms of our two communities – Roman Catholic and Reformed – are mutually acknowledged and affirmed.

But let me get back to her insight about how theology must support unity. She tries to analyze why it is so hard to move toward unity. She quotes a colleague who puts it this way: "Not everyone who owns a smartphone is technologically savvy but most understand that if computers or smart phones are using incompatible operating systems, their users cannot communicate, work together, or even recognize one another." Likewise, after 2000 years of division, Christian communities, embedded in their cultures, have different 'operating systems.' This makes effective communication difficult – sometimes impossible.

But if we pay attention to what we can and do agree on, we can perhaps find a compatible operating system, says Kristen Colberg. She then focuses, just like Bishop Jonson, on the Holy Spirit. A recent WCC document claims that the Holy Spirit gives multiple gifts to the

church. Two of those gifts are: unity and diversity. Unity is a gift of the Spirit. Diversity is a gift of the Spirit. The document says, "Christians are called not only to overcome divisions and unite as a community; they are also called to preserve and treasure their legitimate differences of liturgy, custom, and law and to foster legitimate diversities of spirituality, theological method and formulation. . . "(TCTCV 30). There are still questions about how to discern what is Spirit-gifted diversity and Spirit-gifted unity – that is the ongoing challenge of ecumenical dialogue.

Kristin Colberg illustrates her hopes for ecumenical dialogue with a wonderful analogy from Mark's gospel. You will remember the story in Mark 2 where four friends bring a paralyzed man to Jesus for healing. They encounter a barrier at the door of the house where Jesus is – the door is completely blocked with a crowd of people. So, they devise another way. When these four friends encountered an obstacle, they created a new point of entry. Likewise, ecumenical dialogue is often blocked by competing opinions, politics, deep misunderstanding, old grudges. Just like in Mark's gospel, we must find another way.

In the 21st century, it is clear that ecumenical dialogue and efforts toward unity have largely moved beyond a sense that unity can only be in uniform structures. We noticed that Peter Leithart would perhaps be a minority report here – but the majority report is toward more contextual, practical, and theological ways, especially rooted in a theology of the Holy Spirit.

FIVE

We've come a long way – from biblical materials, to some moments in church history, to an overview of the 20th century's efforts at ecumenical conversation, to very recent

contributions and new insights. These new insights include an emphasis on the Holy Spirit, an awareness that both unity and diversity are gifts, and an encouragement to find another way if barriers are in the way.

So, we come to the place of looking forward. And we come to a direct attempt to answer the question: Does the Unity of the Church Still Matter?

Let's first give a cheer for the one hundred years of the ecumenical movement. The sheer effort, persistence, and patience are all astounding. One seasoned ecumenical worker once said, "The ecumenical movement's common vision has high aims – it speaks of nothing less than the transformation of the world." (p. 133 Wounded Vision)

The answer to the question, "Does the Unity of the Church Still Matter?" is a resounding YES. Yes, it matters – and the reason it matters is that our fresh understandings of what unity is propels us toward genuine engagement and action in the world. Three implications emerge:

First, unity is not something to be achieved but something to be lived. Stanley Hauerwas once remarked that conflict is part and parcel of Christian unity but disagreements should be a testimony to the existence of a reconciling people. How we handle disagreements and conflicts can be a marker of unity.

Bruce Kaye, an Anglican theologian, agrees with SH on this – he argues that the unity of the church is not the existence of a single great church to which all relate and on which all depend. "Rather, it is the universality of the Gospel which expresses itself in different circumstances. . . "(Bruce Kaye, "Reality and Form in Catholicity," Journal of Anglican Studies 10, no. 1 (May 2012): 10).

Rowan Williams tried to express this same idea to a global and divided Anglican communion when he was Archbishop of Canterbury. He believed that oneness is a dynamic of church life that is necessarily expressed locally.

"Throughout my time of my service as Archbishop I have tried to keep before my eyes and those of the Communion the warnings given by St. Paul about the risk of saying, 'I have no need of you' to any other who seeks to serve Jesus Christ as a member of His body. I make no apology for repeating this point. . . **we all therefore must be willing to receive from each other whatever gifts God has given . . ."** And then he adds, **"It is my conviction that the challenge of Christian unity will depend on how Christians discover that they need one another if they are adequately to learn to live in a world that Christians no longer control."**

Jesuit Michael Fahey admits the assumption he originally had in ecumenism: "At least in the beginning, the idea was that oneness required acquiescence so that differences would ultimately disappear. However, I am now convinced that just as there are notable differences among human regarding languages, manners, customs, political options, and the like, so too ecclesial differences are present – high church vs. low church, spontaneous vs. structured liturgies, emotionally exuberant vs cerebrally restrained worship, are essential to the fabric of belief." And theologian David Kelsey said that "proposals to understand God will be adequate only if they do justice to the irreducibly different ways for the Christian thing to be construed." (P. 132, APP) – the irreducibly different ways for the Christian thing to be construed is **needed** for unity. That is a genuinely fresh insight into the long efforts for Christian unity.

The WCC, which used to work for clear benchmarks in unity, now talks about unity in fellowship and cooperation. The Brazil WCC assembly in 2006 said this: "Being ecumenical

means praying together working together, suffering together, sharing together, witnessing together."

This has been the growing consensus in ecumenical dialogue: shared experiences and shared service is a presupposition for unity and, in some ways, an expression of unity. Deep shared experiences give wings to vision. Christian unity is not so much about documents and statements as the stories we share.

Think for a moment about the Jerusalem Council as portrayed in Acts 15. The apostles and all the members of the Council decided to send Paul and Barnabas and Barsabbas and Silas to all the churches to tell them that additional requirements such as circumcision were not required – that additional requirements were against the spirit of the gospel. And they said this, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." Such an interesting phrase. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. The discernment of the Jerusalem Council, of course, was one that that **caught up with a decision made already by God."** So, any unity that we can embody is catching up to God – God goes before us in the work of praying, worshipping, serving, struggling together.

Hospitality, then, is the most important form of unity in a contemporary ecumenical context. That makes Romans 15:7 perhaps the most important text of ecumenical unity in the Bible. "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." The unity of the church still matters because we are called to that central task of welcoming one another and glorifying God.

May it be so.