

PASTOR'S NOTES. One Holy Catholic (universal) and Apostolic Church, part 3.

So are we really taking seriously the many pleas from scripture for unity, and the prayer of Jesus that we would all be one (John 17:11, 20-23)? How can we be obedient to this important theme of the Bible? Consider the contrasts in these passages:

*“I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons— not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one.”*

(1 Corinthians 5:9-11, NRSV)

*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.*

*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.*

(Ephesians 4:1-6, NRSV)

Today there is (in our American culture at least) a value in creating the perfect church, almost to the level of obsession. Perhaps this is a reflection of our consumer mentality, which expects our local church to cater to our needs, and inevitably nearly every church will fail in some way. But this is not a new way of thinking: this was part of the motivation of some of the first settlers to come to America; and by the mid-to-late 1800s there was considerable attention to forming the perfect church. Probably slavery and the Civil War played a major role in this. In that time period began the Holiness churches, Latter-Day Saints, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many of the larger denominations split. Since then the divisions have continued. An idea that was almost unthinkable a few centuries ago, that a small group can (and should) go out on their own to form the perfect church, has become the norm in our culture, even within oldline denominations. In this environment the rise of non-denominational churches makes sense. It is not uncommon for church members to assume that every local church apart from their own is corrupt in some way. In the places where there is collaboration between churches, this has usually been the result of the willingness of members to work through that distrust.

Because this way of thinking is pervasive, it rarely gets critical examination, and I am convinced this is largely a problem for the church in the world. To the world outside the Christian faith, this kind of focus on our own personal perfect church makes little sense. To them, scandals within the Roman Catholic Church, or the Mormon Church, or of televangelists, or the splits in the United Methodist and other Churches, all of these are evidence of the failure of all Christianity – period. Wherever the Christian church falters, there are persons who leave or discontinue their interest in the faith, and the data is clear that most of them do not come back.

Because we have been able to see that there are faithful churches besides our own – especially if they are out of town so they don't “compete” directly with us – I have heard countless preachers tell people to find a “Bible-believing” or “Spirit-filled” church in their community to join. While this is no doubt

well-meaning, it sends a message that there are only a few churches that can be trusted. The reality is that every Christian church is called to be Bible-believing and Spirit-filled, and God is calling some of us TO straying churches to help hold them accountable.

Also, I haven't mentioned that a lot of the divisions in churches were the result of misunderstandings, or differences that later evaporated. I know at least one historic case where people who wanted to separate from their parent denomination sent invitations all over the country, but some of the invitations got lost, so the "uninvited" people who wanted to separate formed a third denomination – and all three are still separate denominations! Sometimes reconciliation happens: most of the group who left the Evangelical Association in 1894 rejoined it in 1922 (including Maple Street Church!). However, most of our churches are still divided, though the original reasons no longer apply.

As a pastor who has been asked over the years to participate with groups of pastors of different denominations, and sometimes as the leader, I found myself convicted by my own narrow-mindedness; there were churches in our groups with whom we could do hardly anything together without arguing, many of our differences seemed irreconcilable, and yet I could not deny that God was using them to change lives nonetheless. I had to learn (and am still learning) that God is working with people and churches very different from me, including some who have no respect for my ministry or that of my church.

I have come to believe that living in unity does not mean uniformity, doing all things alike, nor does it mean being under united control. I would not claim that we should all return to the Catholic Church or even that the United Methodist Church should have stayed together. Actually I advocated for many years that local churches in our church family should have more freedom to choose their associations.

Living in unity includes recognizing that God has given us variety and difference as part of His plan, just as Paul reminds us of the body and its different parts in 1 Corinthians 12. We could look at the various churches and denominations as different families, with their own style and ways of raising their "children." Imagine if a group of people were suddenly presented with 20 children who need to be adopted. Which makes more sense, to have the most respected family adopt all 20 children, or have the children spread out over 10-20 families where they will get the individualized care and attention they need? We could ask a similar question about the lost and hurting people in our community: should we have one or two churches try to reach them all in their own limited style, or should each church play its unique role in reaching the people only they can reach...

That we are not living in unity is a sin we all must confess. It is that important to our Lord. It is also a condition that is in many respects beyond our power to fix; but what we can do is trust in the One Who is still praying that we can be one, and do our part to be united in purpose with God's people across churches. In my experience, while divisions and corruption in the churches fuels the unbelief of people, whenever churches work together for their community, people notice.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive, flowing style.