

PASTOR'S NOTES. One Holy Catholic (universal) and Apostolic Church, part 2.

*“Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,*

*‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Leviticus 23:12, Jeremiah 32:38, Ezekiel 37:27)’*

*‘Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, (Isaiah 52:11, Ezekiel 20:34, 41)’”*

(2 Corinthians 6:14-17, NRSV)

In the last article I wrote about how the church has understood itself to be ONE in CHRIST, even though it has many different expressions. I suggested that leaders of the early church never considered it an option to separate from the church to form their own church. So what happened?

You could say that division in the church was inevitable; false teachings were part of the church almost from the beginning. I was going to quote the passages in the early church letters (the New Testament letters of Paul, Peter, Jude, and John) that speak about false teachers, but there are so many: 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; Ephesians 5:6-7; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 2 John 1:7, 9-11; Jude 1:3-4; Revelation 2:14-15, 20-21, and others. Despite the arguments that arose out of these teachings, the goal seemed to be to keep the church united as much as possible. Consider this passage:

*“If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”*

(2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, ESV)

The point seems to be to eventually bring people back into the church. We don't think these disagreements in the early church led to “alternative” churches, although we don't know this for sure. There may have been other churches but none of their writings survived. It is also possible that John is mentioning another church group in this passage:

*“They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us.”*

(1 John 2:19, NRSV)

The early church was different than us in at least two respects: first of all, it was voluntary and often dangerous to be a Christian in the first place, so no one was forced to go along with the group. Secondly, the apostles, including Paul, were insistent on keeping with the tradition handed down from the first followers of Jesus, so no one felt they had the right to go out on their own.

The situation began to change in the year 313, when Christianity was tolerated and it was no longer dangerous to be a Christian; then in 325, when the Council of Nicaea was convened and declared what was “official teaching” of the church, with an early version of the Nicene Creed; then in 380, when

Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire. Now *not* being a Christian was more dangerous, and the Church had the authority to force people to accept its official teachings or be punished.

Though the Church now had the power of the government to force unity, there were some who did not fit in. Arian churches were forced out of the church in 325 and a few still exist today. Nestorian and Monophysite churches were forced out in 451 and some still exist today, though all three of these groups have faced persecution over the centuries. Differences between the Latin-speaking European Church and the Greek-Speaking Asian Church eventually led to a split in 1054: the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. These churches had the power of their respective governments behind them.

In the 1500s, the Protestant churches broke from the Catholic Church. In the case of the Lutherans and the churches of the Reformed tradition, they had various government support. This was even more true in England, where the church separated from the Catholic Church because of the order of the King. The churches of the Anabaptist tradition were not government supported, and they were persecuted by Catholic and Protestant leaders alike.

While the church was now split in about a dozen pieces, once in America this accelerated to thousands. From the time of the American revolution on, new denominations have been forming almost every day, and existing denominations like Lutheran, Baptist, Mennonite, Presbyterian, and Methodist split into several sub-divisions, often over what outsiders would consider rather minor doctrinal differences.

It is now estimated that there are more than 40,000 Christian denominations worldwide, and at least that many churches who consider themselves “non-denominational.” Many of our Christian brothers and sisters who grew up in this environment would never assume that one church is accountable to another, even as we read these and other scriptures about the unity of the Church:

*“For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”*

*“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling.”*

(1 Corinthians 12:13, Ephesians 4:4, NRSV)

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?

In the next article I will try to offer some suggestions on how we might do this.

Yours in Christ,

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