

Called to be the One Church

How Much Diversity Is Enough? Thoughts on the Unity and Doctrinal Diversity of the Church Today

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In my current work as a teacher in religion I am in the privileged position to meet and discuss with a number of young people who come from various, although mainly Christian and more specifically Lutheran, backgrounds. Religious education in Finland is a compulsory subject all through the nine years of basic education and two to four years of high school. The nature of religious education is not “general” but it is not “confessional” either. The rule of thumb is that you participate in religious education organised according to your own confession or religion but the nature of the education is more academic than catechetical. This means that the religious education is not “practising religion” but discussing and learning about religion. Putting aside some of the questions this raises about separating the “learning” and the “practising” I would like point to a specific challenge I have encountered with my students which brings us to the ecclesiological theme of this Faith and Order meeting. The challenge is this: the whole idea of the “unity” of the Church very rarely has any significance to my students. After having engaged in questions of encountering “the other”, the relevance of working with each other for justice and peace, after pondering the challenges faced in inter-church families and after looking into the history of the ecumenical movement the students look to me and say: all this is very fine but *why* should we be concerned about unity. The question does not arise solely from youthful ignorance but out of their experience of the diversity of everyday life. Unity, for them, means coerced uniformity, the loss of individual identity and the necessity to conform to something alien. It means that someone in an authoritative position tells you how you have to think and behave. From these premises it is very difficult for them to understand all the fuss about unity. Is it not interesting, they ask me, to have also different people in the world? Does not everyone have the right to think and believe what he or she wants? What does the teacher have against different people? It is the reactions of my students in mind and with the understanding of the purpose of the Faith and Order Plenary Commission to reflect on the church’s calling to be one that I begin to share with you my impressions on the relevance and possibility of the unity of the Church today. I will approach the Church’s unity from the viewpoint of diversity. The question in my mind is not so much how much diversity can Church’s unity tolerate but how much diversity does the Church’s unity need.

Historically speaking it has been of utmost importance for the Church to emphasise its oneness and integrity both across time and across space. The call for oneness is explicit in the early creeds but also other examples, preceding the earliest creeds could be given. Although the desire for unity is in the heart of Christianity, it is not self evident what “unity” has meant and means for us today, even within the Church. It is evident that for some “unity” means “sameness” in the sense that one can recognise that the faith of the other is the same faith one has. Or even in a more simple sense that the faith is the same. Side by side with the strong tendency towards oneness there has been a strong theological intuition, if you will, of diversity, dynamism and life. The text *Called to be the One Church*, one of the inspirational texts given to us for our meeting, draws on this intuition. It is noted in this text that the Bible itself describes “the body of Christ whose interrelated diversity is essential to its wholeness” (par. 3).

In the contemporary world when other cultures and traditions come to us through newspapers, television and internet and when we encounter diversity not only when travelling ourselves but

also though the diversity in the cultures that exist in the place we call home, it is very easy to think of diversity as a kind of decoration for our aesthetic enjoyment on the surface of the essentially one Church. It is my perception that in my country, the standard intellectually enlightened person with a more or less positive sense of religion would, in general, think in this way. They would say that religions in general and churches in particular are essentially about the same thing and differences are nothing more serious than variety of configurations of “the same”. But if we say that the Church is “the body of Christ whose interrelated diversity is essential to its wholeness” (par. 3), this kind of decorative diversity is not enough.

To describe the Church as essentially diverse while holding on to the quest for unity is challenging both intellectually and practically. It calls us to take diversity very seriously because diversity in this view becomes the essence of the oneness itself.

It is intellectually challenging to construct and grasp concepts that do not collapse either to some unspecific pluralism where all means of discernment are lost or to rigid, lifeless uniformity. In ecumenical contexts the Greek word *koinonia* has become commonly used to incorporate both aspects of the essential oneness through sharing and the essential diversity of those who share. As *koinonia* the Church is the multitude of the most intimate imaginable relations. We can differentiate at least three kinds of relations: the intra-Trinitarian relations within the one God, the (vertical) relations between God and the Christians and the (horizontal) relations between Christians. The being of the Christian God is ultimately mutual indwelling. It is co-existence in a “unity-in-distinction” and “distinction-in-unity”, a kind of “differentiated unity” where neither part loses its identity but gains it instead. Relations in *koinonia* are not interchangeable. They possess characteristics that cannot be transferred from one context to another. E.g. none of the intra-Trinitarian relations could be substituted with another within the Trinity. From our human point of view it is easy to experience the uniqueness of each and every one of our personal relations. *Koinonia* relations quite often follow a principle of asymmetry. This means that they allow functional, logical or ontological priority or priority-in-status to one of the instances in the relation without destroying their mutual indwelling.¹ It is the specific nature of the relations in a *koinonia* that has made this word very appropriate in relation to the Church as one and many. It seems to preserve a certain tension between one and many within the concept itself. It allows us to speak of Christianity where plurality is a constitutive feature, not just decoration for our amusement. It helps us to take plurality seriously as a constitutive feature that cannot be reduced without inhibiting access to Christianity’s true identity.²

To perceive the unity and diversity of the Church as *koinonia* is not easy. Even the advantages of the description are challenging. One of the challenging advantages is that whatever we think or say about the Church is essentially linked with how we are in relation to others. In speaking of the Church it is not enough to speak. We must also be and live in the multitude of relations that the Church is. As it is written in the first letter of John: “let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1. Joh. 3:18).

The unity and diversity of the Church cannot be separated from the concrete contexts and the concrete web of relations where the relations exist. As in the *koinonia*-relations described earlier, also in concrete life situations we are faced with relations which can be described by mutual dependency, where logical priority or priority-in-status does not destroy the mutual indwelling and which are not interchangeable. This leads me to the practical challenge that follows from describing the Church as essentially diverse in its unity. If we are not to fall into an unspecific

¹ George Hunsinger, “Baptism and the Soteriology of Forgiveness”, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2, no. 3 (2000): 249 and George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace. Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 258-261.

² Christoph Schwöbel, *Christliche Glaube im Pluralismus. Studien zu einer Theologie der Kultur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 34-35.

pluralism, we need to retain the possibility to say and show what is and what is not properly Christian. But how is it possible to identify the “true Christian community” when the Church’s oneness can essentially be described only by diversity that reaches from the very being of God to the variety of cultural and linguistic contexts and when the essence of the community lies in non-interchangeable relations?

From very early on it was the church’s teaching that began to function as something to identify a truly Christian community. The Church’s self-understanding as a distinct community was accompanied by a gradual development of authoritative teaching. The early Church referred to consensus, a kind of agreement, as an instance in discerning truth. It is important to note that the identification did not take place only through discerning the orthodox beliefs but more widely through discerning orthodox way of being a Christian.³ The Church’s consensus was not only about consenting to true beliefs. One of the earliest normative principles of identifying a truly Christian community was the rule of faith.

In our strive for unity which is essentially diverse and the need for us, as a Christian community to identify ourselves as truly Christian in the midst of diversity and, essentially, in diversity, a kind of rule of faith appears highly plausible. A rule of faith both contains and refers to the essence of Christian teaching without, in the strict sense, being the essence. The content⁴ of the rule is something that has been preserved by the Church, something that brings coherence and consistency to the Church. In addition, the rule of faith provides a means of identification. Keeping with the rule of faith implies a faithful hearing and faithful “performance” in doctrine and ecclesial practises, that is, identifying with the universal claims of the Christian metanarrative without separating the words that we speak from the variety of actions we perform in the multitude of relations that the Church as community is.⁵

I believe ecumenical encounters have thought us that individual words or sentences detached from their context are not enough. Detached from their context they become alien and take up meanings and connotations that both distort their meaning and feel unsuited to the new situation. I can share a personal experience on this. For some years I served as a member of the Lutheran-Methodist dialogue commission in Finland. For the purpose of writing our final report the commission was divided into pairs with one Lutheran and one Methodist member. Due to some practical reasons we decided with my Methodist colleague that I would write the whole text on the theme allocated to us, also the “Methodist” parts of it, and he would then check that the text remained correctly Methodist. The feedback I received from my colleague was intriguing. Most of the time he said: what you say in the beginning is correct, what you deduce in the middle from the beginning is correct and where you end up in the end is correct. But it just does not sound right. What was missing was some kind of ethos, a way of argumentation or “Methodist sense”, which did not have that much to do with the actual content of the beliefs we were discussing. To put it bluntly, the text was completely true but completely unacceptable. Although the end result of the dialogue process was words on paper, a dialogue document, what I learned from the five years of working together was mostly things that are difficult to see in the text itself. I learned that how we speak and are the Church is really quite different. But despite the difference it is possible for me to explain the other to myself so that I understand my explanation, even if the explanation would remain strange to the one explained. I also learned that by labouring with the other through the years it is possible, even if only in short moments, to embrace the ethos of the other and to appreciate it. I do not think it would have been possible for us to prepare the text without the struggle of immersing ourselves to the way of thinking and acting, arguing and worshipping of the other and doing this with the full confidence of not losing

³ Paul M. Blowers, “The Regula Fidei and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith”, *Pro Ecclesia* VI, no. 2 (1997): 199.

⁵ *ibid.*, 206.

ourselves into the otherness. In the end we Lutherans remained Lutherans and the Methodists remained Methodists.

My presentation thus far has been circling around two themes; the Church's unity as essentially diverse and the necessity to embed the way we describe and define the church in how we live as a Church. In all this, what could the role of the Faith and Order Commission be? The Faith and Order Commission is known for its work on doctrinal questions. We study the moral discernment in the church, we investigate the sources of authority and we discuss the nature and mission of the Church. Yet if we are to be the facilitators of a Christian ethos of the kind that corresponds with the unity of the Church that is essentially diverse the focus of the Faith and Order should not be only on the intellectual end product but also on the process. The dichotomy between "theoretical doctrine" and "practical life" does not serve us well. The viability of what we say depends both on the clarity and intellectual integrity of our study and the relations that we create and the life we share. If we are to be facilitators of essentially diverse unity we can lose neither intellectual clarity nor the experience and understanding of the untidiness of life itself. As persons who enjoy intellectually aesthetic solutions where everything has their right and proper place we are tempted to idealise and decontextualise. But what is said and what is written cannot be separated from the person who writes and says and the context, which is the variety of relations, we live in.

Coming back to my students asking what the teacher has against different people I of course answer: nothing. But I think there is still some way to go for us to realise and take in the real strangeness of the stranger. The difference is not only for aesthetic enjoyment. On the contrary, the difference is of the kind that challenges our ability to receive from the other and to talk to each other. Yet the essential diversity of the Church's unity challenges us to reach beyond our comfort zones and to labour with words, tongue, actions and truth to live and speak as a truly Christian community. I do not think it ever ceases to be scary and challenging. But I do think the Faith and Order Commission continues to have an important role in facilitating the encounters where we can, if but for a short moment, embrace and appreciate the other without losing our own identity, were we can strive for intellectual clarity without losing touch with the untidiness of life we share as one community where diversity is essential to its wholeness.