



# Lukas Vischer: Unity of the Church in the New Testament and Today Difficulties in Looking to the New Testament for Guidance

## 1. Place and Date of Publication

Lukas Vischer/Ulrich Luz/Christian Link: *Unity of the Church in the New Testament and Today*, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010, Introduction 1-6 and Article 7-27.

## 2. Historical Context

It was in the 1980s, that - in view of the obvious stagnation of the ecumenical movement - an inter-denominational group of professors and students of the universities of Berne and Fribourg took a fresh look at the unity of the church in the New Testament. Their results appeared in 1988 (*Ökumene im Neuen Testament und heute*, Göttingen 2009), and later in this revised and translated edition.

## 3. Summary

Inter-denominational looking to Scripture for guidance about unity proves to be more complicated than assumed. Some churches claim that the Scripture has been faithfully developed in the tradition of the ancient church; the churches of the Reformation see it as a critical court of appeal with regard to the church and its errors. The World Conference for Faith and Order in Montreal (1963) bridged the gap: *We exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church*. But the question remains, how one can distinguish between true and distorted tradition. - The ecumenical movement understood itself as the effort to recover the *original unity* of the church. Such unity has never existed. Even the word appears seldom in the New Testament, only in late writings, and not in connection with church. The NT just shows how people struggled in the multiplicity of interpretations on behalf of *community in Christ*. One can speak of the church's unity only because it is founded in the one Lord. This unity is destroyed by the hardening of positions, by exclusivity and self-contented isolation. The question we must ask today is, to what degree community in Christ has room for a multiplicity of interpretations, expressions, and forms, and how the ecumenical movement can continue the struggle for community in Christ.

Some presuppositions have changed since biblical times: 1) Only after the canon had been established, *the* Scripture became a factor of unity. 2) Today the separated churches are faced with the task of giving shape to a worldwide fellowship. 3) In many places the majority of the population are Christians, so they bear a responsibility in their respective society. 4) From today's point of view, the attitude of the earliest church e.g. toward slavery and the subordination of women contradicts the spirit of the gospel. Both in the early periods and today unity has been nothing more than *lived* community. It carries the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels. The Scripture does not relieve the church of the responsibility of asking questions which, under the promise of the Holy Spirit, the call to unity raises *today*. - In the course of time, the ecumenical movement led from spontaneous alliances to common structures, from the concept of *organic unity* to the concept of *unity in reconciled diversity* and to the concept of *conciliar fellowship*. Conciliar fellowship measures unity by how the church fulfils its task in today's world.

In recent times the goal of the ecumenical movement is described as *koinonia/communio* or *fellowship*. This study, nevertheless, is based on the understanding that, among the concepts presented thus far, the idea of *conciliar fellowship* best reflects the witness of the New Testament.

Lukas Vischer,  
Ulrich Luz,  
and Christian Link

Unity  
*of the*  
Church

*in the*  
New Testament  
*and Today*

*Unity of the Church  
in the New Testament and Today*

Lukas Vischer†  
Ulrich Luz  
Christian Link

*Translated by*  
James E. Crouch

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

First published 2009 in German under the title  
*Ökumene im Neuen Testament und Heute*  
by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

English translation © 2010 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company  
All rights reserved

Published 2010 by  
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.  
2140 Oak Industrial Drive N.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505 /  
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.

Printed in the United States of America

16 15 14 13 12 11 10      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vischer, Lukas.  
[Ökumene im Neuen Testament und heute. English]  
Unity of the church in the New Testament and today /  
Lukas Vischer, Ulrich Luz, Christian Link; translated by James E. Crouch.  
p.      cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-8028-6376-8 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Church — Unity. 2. Church — Unity — Biblical teaching. 3. Church history.

I. Luz, Ulrich. II. Link, Christian, 1938- III. Title.

BV601.5.V5713 2010

262'.72 — dc22

2010023279

www.eerdmans.com

## Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Translator's Preface</i>	xi
<i>In Memory of Lukas Vischer</i>	xiii
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Lukas Vischer</i>	
<b>PART ONE</b>	
<b>Difficulties in Looking to the New Testament for Guidance</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>Lukas Vischer</i>	
1. Scripture and Tradition	8
2. Scripture: Witness of an Active History	12
3. Unity Today	15
4. Concepts of Unity	18
<b>PART TWO</b>	
<b>On the Way to Unity: The Community of the Church in the New Testament</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>Ulrich Luz</i>	
Introduction	29
1. Jesus: The Origin of the Community of the Church	34

<b>THE APOSTOLIC AGE</b>	43		
2. The Beginnings of the Church after Easter	43		
2.1. Tensions and Divergences	44		
2.2. Unity-promoting Forces	47		
3. The Beginnings of Ecclesiology	54		
4. The First Basic Conflict: The Church's Unity with Israel	57		
4.1. The Apostolic Council	58		
4.2. James and the Church's Unity with Israel (by Christoph Knoch)	61		
4.3. Paul and the Church's Unity with Israel	64		
4.3.1. The Antioch Conflict (by Peter Lampe)	66		
4.3.2. The Conflict between Strong and Weak in Rome (by Peter Lampe)	68		
4.3.3. Paul and His Opponents	69		
4.3.4. The Collection (by Andreas Karrer)	71		
4.3.5. Paul's Last Journey to Jerusalem (by Andreas Karrer)	73		
4.3.6. Church vis-à-vis Israel and for Israel	74		
5. The Church as the Reality of Christ in Paul's Thought	76		
5.1. The Basic Gift of Unity: Christ	76		
5.2. The Whole Church and the Local Church	79		
5.3. Christ's Effectiveness in the Whole Church (with Corinna Diestelkamp)	81		
5.4. Christ's Effectiveness in the Local Church	84		
5.4.1. The Parties in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1–4) (by Peter Lampe)	85		
5.4.2. Meat Sacrificed to Idols (1 Corinthians 8–10)	86		
5.4.3. Divided Lord's Supper? (1 Corinthians 11:17–34)	87		
5.4.4. Tensions in Worship (1 Corinthians 12–14)	88		
5.4.5. Conclusion	89		
<b>THE POST-APOSTOLIC AGE</b>	91		
6. Developments in the Church after the Death of the Apostles	91		
6.1. Tensions and Divergences	91		
6.2. Unity-promoting Forces: Overview	95		
		6.3. Christianity as an Independent Religion	96
		6.4. Tradition as a Unity-promoting Factor (with Joachim Diestelkamp)	100
		6.5. The Apostles as Primary Figures of Unity	106
		6.5.1. James	107
		6.5.2. Peter	108
		6.5.3. Paul (with Joachim Diestelkamp)	113
		6.6. Ministerial Offices as a Unity-promoting Force (with Jürg Liechti)	118
		7. The First Ecclesiological Concepts of Church Unity	126
		7.1. The Epistle to the Ephesians	127
		7.2. The Apocalypse of John	129
		7.3. The Gospel of Luke and Acts	132
		7.4. The Gospel of John (with Anne Liedtke)	136
		8. The Second Basic Conflict: Church Fellowship in the Controversy with Christian Gnosticism	142
		8.1. Introduction	142
		8.2. The Gnosticizing Opponents as Seen by Church-Christians (with Andreas Karrer)	147
		8.3. The Church-Christians as Seen by Their Christian-Gnostic Opponents	153
		8.4. Final Observations	159
		<b>PART THREE</b>	
		<b>The Unity Movement: Church Fellowship in the Oecumene</b>	163
		<i>Christian Link</i>	
		1. On the Way to Unity	163
		1.1. Unity as Process	164
		1.2. Which Fellowship Do We Mean?	170
		1.3. Dealing with Church Schisms: Basic Conflicts	173
		2. The Church's Unity with Israel	179
		2.1. With Which Israel Is the Church Dealing?	179
		2.2. Christian Identity in the Mirror of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue	184

## CONTENTS

2.3. Israel and the Oecumene	189
3. Flash Points of Unity	193
3.1. Scripture	195
3.1.1. Scripture and Tradition	196
3.1.2. The Authority of Scripture	199
3.1.3. The Differences	202
3.2. Confession	204
3.2.1. Church Confessions	205
3.2.2. Contextual Confessing	207
3.3. Lord's Supper	209
3.3.1. The Fellowship Meal	212
3.3.2. The Lord's Supper as Rite	214
3.3.3. Lord's Supper and Ministry	217
3.3.4. The Social Location of the Lord's Supper	220
3.4. Ministerial Office	222
3.4.1. The Problem	223
3.4.2. Foundations of Church Law	226
3.4.3. Institution and Ministry	230
4. Conciliar Fellowship	235
4.1. The Council	237
4.2. Characteristics of Conciliarity	239
4.2.1. Worship	240
4.2.2. Conflict Orientation	241
4.2.3. The Search for Truth	243
5. Church Unity and Missions	245
<i>Index of Subjects and Names</i>	249
<i>Index of Selected New Testament and Other Ancient Texts</i>	252

## Abbreviations

BEM	<i>Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry</i> , Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: WCC, 1982)
BG	Biblische Gestalten
BiKi	<i>Bibel und Kirche</i>
BThSt	Biblich-theologische Studien
BU	Biblische Untersuchungen
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CA	<i>Confessio Augustana</i> (Augsburg Confession)
CD	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , 5 vols. in 14 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-1977)
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CV	<i>Communio Viatorum</i>
DBW	Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke
DV	<i>Dei Verbum</i> . Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation
EKK	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ET	English translation
EvTh	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte
GNT	Grundrisse zum Neuen Testament
GSL	Geistliche Schriftlesung
HFTh	<i>Handbuch der Fundamentaltheologie</i>
HST	<i>Handbuch systematischer Theologie</i>
IKZ	<i>Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>KuD</i>	<i>Kerygma und Dogma</i>
<i>LG</i>	<i>Lumen Gentium</i> (Dogmatic Constitution of the Church of the Second Vatican Council)
<i>LThK</i>	<i>Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche</i>
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint
<i>NHC</i>	Nag Hammadi Codices
<i>NHS</i>	Nag Hammadi Studies
<i>NT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTD</i>	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>OiC</i>	<i>One in Christ</i>
<i>ÖR</i>	<i>Ökumenische Rundschau</i>
<i>PuP</i>	Päpste und Papsttum
<i>QD</i>	Questiones disputatae
<i>SBS</i>	Stuttgarter Bibelstudien
<i>StANT</i>	Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>Str-B</i>	Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, <i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch</i> , 2nd ed. (4 vols. Munich: Beck, 1956)
<i>TB</i>	Theologische Bücherei
<i>TEH</i>	Theologische Existenz Heute
<i>ThV</i>	<i>Theologische Versuche</i>
<i>ThZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>UR</i>	<i>Unitatis Redintegratio</i> (Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council)
<i>VIEG</i>	Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte
<i>VuF</i>	<i>Verkündigung und Forschung</i>
<i>WCC</i>	World Council of Churches
<i>WCS</i>	World Council of Churches. Studies
<i>WdF</i>	Wege der Forschung
<i>WMANT</i>	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>WPKG</i>	<i>Wissenschaft und Praxis in Kirche und Gesellschaft</i>
<i>WUNT</i>	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZMiss</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Mission</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZThK</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>

*Translator's Preface*

One of the most important concepts of this book, *Vorgabe*, has no easy English equivalent. Look in a good German dictionary and you may find that in sports it refers to a handicap or to points or odds given in betting. German-language theologians use it as a technical term for what is given before and apart from human effort. It is close to the idea of prevenient grace, but translating *Vorgabe* literally as “pre-gift” would not be satisfactory since, among other reasons, the prefix *vor* indicates rank as well as time. I have settled on the translation “basic gift.” For more on *Vorgabe*, see Part Two, footnotes 8 and 27.

By contrast, the other technical term in this book, *Gemeinschaft*, suffers from an embarrassment of riches. One can, and I do, translate it as “community” or as “fellowship.” It corresponds to the Latin *communio* and the Greek *koinonia*. It can also have the sense of communion, sharing, and participation, as, for example, in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.

The book includes extensive discussions of *Amt*, or “office,” in the church, what one generally thinks of as the ordained clergy. Usually I follow the practice of translating it with “ministry,” as in the Lima document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Occasionally I leave it as “office” or use “ministerial office.”

JEC

## *In Memory of Lukas Vischer*

Lukas Vischer died on March 11, 2008. For the last year of his life he struggled against an unrelenting and destructive case of pancreatic cancer. He resisted this illness as long as he could, without bitterness, calmly and peacefully, often even cheerfully. He rejected any kind of resignation because he was looking forward to what the coming years would bring: to the great Calvin Jubilee of 2009 for which he had prepared with an inspiring international conference in the John Knox Center (Geneva), to an increasing human sensitivity about climate change, to a growing fellowship among Christian churches, especially at the base level, and therefore also to the new edition of this book. He was looking forward to the appearance of an English edition; on one of his last days he signed the contract with Eerdmans Publishing Company. And he was delighted that Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht would bring out the new German edition.

His death is a great loss for theology and the ecumenical movement. Lukas showed us what it means to do theology in and for the church. For him, theology and church were inseparable. Conversely, he continuously reminded the ecumenical movement and his own Reformed Church of their biblical and theological roots. He was for them both inspirer and admonisher.

Above all, he was filled with the conviction that God, the creator of the world and the redeemer and liberator of his human children, is always ahead of us and therefore is the sustaining ground of all human action. This faith kept him from being depressed even, and especially, about the condition — which he himself strongly criticized — in which the ecumenical movement finds itself today almost fifty years after the Second Vatican Council. When writing the new introduction to our book he refused to speak of ecumenical stagnation or even of an ecumenical ice age. The difficulties were already well known; now it was time to look back to the Bible's beginnings and in this way to look forward into the future.



Thus this new-old book is also a legacy of Lukas Vischer. The revision of the introduction and the continuation of his own “Part One” are among the last texts he wrote. He made only modest changes to “his” texts, and in that way he remained true to himself. With gratitude we look back on the mutual journey with him that finds its expression in this book.

*Berne and Bochum*  
*April 2008*

ULRICH LUZ  
CHRISTIAN LINK

## Introduction

*Lukas Vischer*

There may be good grounds for the rise of these divisions. There may be serious obstacles to their removal. There may be many things which can be said by way of interpretation and mitigation. But this does not alter the fact that every division as such is a deep riddle, a scandal. . . . For the matter itself . . . demands always, and in all circumstances, *unam ecclesiam*. And if history contradicts this, then it speaks only of the actuality and not the truth. Even under the fatherly and effective providence of God which can cause it to work for good, a scandal is still a scandal. The disunity of the Church is a scandal.

Karl Barth<sup>1</sup>

When the church says that she is one, she says just as emphatically that she has been injured by the rupture in her heart and in her maternal body, that she bears open wounds that are constantly bleeding and that make her life poorer and her witness in the world more cumbersome.

Abbé Paul Couturier<sup>2</sup>

These are only two of the many quotations one might find that say essentially the same thing. While in every age there have been people who have experienced

1. *CD*, vol. IV/1, pp. 675, 677.

2. "Téstaent œcuménique," in Maurice Villain, *L'Abbé Paul Couturier*, 3d ed. (Tournai: Casterman, 1959), pp. 356-57.

division in the church as a contradiction of the gospel of reconciliation, the radical and increasingly rapid changes to which all areas of human life are subjected today have made that contradiction intolerable. For our witness to the gospel to be credible we must overcome the separation and bring to clear expression our common life in Christ. There was a time when the separated churches did not shrink from this task; in the nineteenth and especially in the twentieth century they made a beginning. They drew closer to one another. They replaced polemic with dialogue. They began to bear a common witness and to work together in shared structures. The ecumenical movement was born.

The movement gave rise to great hopes. For many people, the World Council of Churches, established in Amsterdam in 1948, was a foretaste of the unity they were hoping to make real. As great as were the differences among the participating churches, there was unanimity about one thing: we shall stay together. After the horror of the Second World War a new future opened up for the churches. With the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) there was an unexpected expansion of the ecumenical movement. Now the whole range of denominational traditions was participating in the movement. The dams appeared to be broken. Christians of all confessions were able to come together without prejudice, to pray together, and to come to a common understanding of what discipleship means today.

The sense of community permeated all levels. With theological dialogue came the recognition that it was possible to see many differences in doctrine and practice in a new light. The joint Lutheran-Catholic declaration on the doctrine of justification represented a high point in this development. Increasingly, biblical scholarship became a common enterprise. Above all, however, contact among the separated churches gave rise to a deepening of spiritual life. Spiritual traditions of other churches that previously had been regarded as "foreign" came to be at home in one's own church. The great challenges of our day — poverty, the use of power, the destruction of the environment — came to be seen as common tasks.

It is true that in recent days this movement has stagnated. Within the past few decades there has been a renewed emphasis on denominational identity. Anyone who believed that the denominational age was over must be disappointed. Once again each church is emphasizing the profile of its own tradition. To be sure, the churches continue to proclaim their commitment to the ecumenical movement. There is scarcely any church that would not speak of the imperative of unity. They even declare their solemn obligations to unity. Yet this ecumenical discourse has little credibility. In reality, the churches have retreated into their denominational shells. The ecumenical movement continues to be celebrated, but actual cooperation is stagnant.

For many people this development is deeply disappointing. It stands in direct contradiction to the fellowship they have experienced. What they had in common seemed to them to be so much greater than what separated them that it is difficult for them to return to their earlier positions. Why not risk plunging wholeheartedly into community? Why do we go our separate ways at the Lord's table when in so many areas we are able to share what is essential? For many people this disappointment leads to a disappointment in the gospel as a whole. What are they to do with churches that focus their attention on their own distinguishing features rather than on their central message?

One could cite many reasons for this development. Doubtless one of the most important reasons is the churches' helplessness in the face of the great questions of our age. Whether it is the Orthodox churches of the East, the Roman Catholic Church, or the Protestant churches, each church in its own way feels forced on the defensive by its dealings with the modern world. It is extraordinarily difficult to share this helplessness with other churches. To do so would call into question those pretensions inherited from the past that until now appeared to offer security. It is easier to gloss over them with a renewed emphasis on one's own fundamentals. This is also why the ecumenical movement is especially constrained when ecumenical commitment appears to jeopardize the institutional independence of the individual churches. One simply is not permitted to give up the symbols of continuity.

Why does it make sense in this situation to bring out a study about the unity of the church? In the late 1980s, when we were working on the first edition of this volume, one could still hope for common initiatives. In 1983 the World Council of Churches had summoned the churches to a conciliar movement for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, and in those days it was by no means clear yet that the proposal would founder on the resistance of the churches. Why, however, does it make sense today to invite people to consider a unity that would include all churches?

For us there is no doubt about the answer. Precisely because the ecumenical movement appears to be stagnant, it is important to take a fresh look at the New Testament. Even a brief look in its pages reveals that in fact God in Christ does want to create a community that is united in love. Every rupture indicates a failure on the part of the church. Paul calls out to the conflicted church at Corinth: "Is Christ divided?" The community of the church is not an incidental matter; it is the gift and favor of Christ. Ecumenism is not optional; it belongs to the essence of the church. Bishop Charles Brent, the founder of the movement for faith and order (1862-1929), once said, "If unity has slipped away from our grasp, it is the common fault of the Christian world. If it is to be regained it must be by the concerted action of all Chris-

tians.” Concerted action! As long as the separated churches confront one another like *chiens de fayence*,<sup>3</sup> as long as each demands that the others conform to and join its ideas of unity, one can hardly expect further progress. No tradition can create unity by itself; it is an enterprise that must be done together. Brent continued: “Every section has shared in shattering unity. Every section must share in the effort to restore it.”<sup>4</sup>

Our study has grown out of an inter-denominational Protestant, Old Catholic,<sup>5</sup> and Roman Catholic discussion led by professors and students of the Old Catholic–Reformed theological faculty of the University of Berne and the Roman Catholic faculty of Fribourg in Switzerland. It is a theological rough draft. After a thorough discussion of the general perspectives, individual members of the working group were commissioned to examine and report on various aspects of the theme. It took nineteen sessions, some of them lasting more than one day, to cover all of the relevant questions. Three members of the working group (Lukas Vischer, Ulrich Luz, and Christian Link) accepted the responsibility for recording the results of the sessions. That none of the Catholic members of the group — Heinrich Stirnimann and Hermann Venetz and, representing the Old Catholic side, Kurt Stalder — served as co-authors was due to technical rather than theological reasons. Since we were in agreement on all the essential matters, the denominational membership of the “writers” was not all that important. Student members of the working group also contributed to Part Two of the book. Their offerings contain the summary of studies they had prepared as seminar papers. They are Christoph Knoch (pp. 61-64), Andreas Karrer (pp. 71-74, 150f.), Peter Lampe (pp. 66-69, 85f.), Corinna Diestelkamp (pp. 83f.), Joachim Diestelkamp (pp. 104f., 116f.), Jürg Liechti (pp. 121f., 123, 124-26), and Anne Liedtke (pp. 137-39).

More than fifteen years after the appearance of the first edition, it was clear to us that we had to rework the book. Indeed, parts of many sections needed to be rewritten. Thus in many ways the study we offer today has a new appearance.

Our point of departure is the New Testament. Instead of spending time on general matters, we have asked ourselves what can be inferred on this theme from the various witnesses of the New Testament. How did early

3. *Chiens de fayence* are porcelain dogs with a particular kind of glazing. A close English-language equivalent might be “china dogs.” The point here is that the figurines simply sit there smiling at each other without doing anything. — Trans.

4. H. N. Bate, ed., *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference, Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927* (New York: Doran, 1927), p. 4.

5. The term is *christkatholisch*, the name by which the Old Catholic Church is known in Switzerland. — Trans.

Christianity deal with the call to unity? And what can we derive from the evidence of the New Testament for the task of the churches today? We know, of course, that the Bible cannot directly solve our modern problems, but it can show how earliest Christianity dealt with the tensions that already existed in the New Testament period and how it made community real. That serves as a guide for us, for we can follow the earlier example. The Bible is all the more important for ecumenism since it is one of the few bonds of unity that has lasted through all the centuries of Christian division and was never completely “denominationalized” by churchly interpretations. The underlying thesis of this book is that unity is a permanent and never-ending task of the church. Unity is never conclusively established. It is true, of course, that it is something given us and that we therefore do not need to invent it. Christ’s work and message are its firm starting point. At the same time, however, it is something that is constantly in the making. The New Testament already bears witness to us of this movement toward unity. The apostolic preaching is a singular call to unity. The apostles also had to deal with centrifugal forces, and they emphatically resisted them. Today we must carry forward this movement toward unity. From generation to generation the horizons shift, and we must deal with new presuppositions. Yet the thrust remains the same. The *communio* in Christ must be established by means of “bonds of love.”

Unity as movement! Unity as process! On the one hand, it is clear that unity does not mean uniformity. The church we meet in the witness of the New Testament is marked by a multiplicity of expressions of the gospel. Unity need not do away with differences. That cannot mean, on the other hand, that, as is increasingly the case today, differences and contradictions are simply accepted as unavoidable. The church’s schism remains a scandal that must be eliminated, and every generation must step up to the task of helping to bring God’s gift to fruition. The New Testament continually summons us to enter the struggle on behalf of the visible *communio* in Christ.

Our book consists of three parts. First, we will offer a few general reflections about what one can learn from the New Testament and what this witness can mean in the life of the church today. The second part attempts to recapitulate in the form of a survey how the Christian movement struggled for unity in the first century. The third part is a systematic-theological reflection on what was said in the second part, and it draws some conclusions for today’s discussion about the unity of the church.

It only remains to offer our thanks — first of all to our excellent translator, James E. Crouch, and then to the staff of the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

The first edition was dedicated to the memory of a member of our

working group, Michael Zenger. We want to remember his name in this edition as well. He departed this life in the summer of 1986. Michael suffered much because of the church's barrenness and divisiveness, and his desire and hope were for its living unity.

## PART ONE

# Difficulties in Looking to the New Testament for Guidance

*Lukas Vischer*

All churches appeal to Scripture. They regard it as the necessary foundation of their doctrine and life. They know that they are obligated to listen to its witness.

Should it then not be the case that if the separated churches would examine Scripture together and give heed to its witness in their midst they would remove the barriers to unity? In the course of the ecumenical movement people have often made this assumption. They hoped that going back to the original witness would make it possible to achieve a breakthrough. The common study of Scripture would bring together the representatives of the various traditions. It would, so to speak, have a cleansing effect by making it possible to distinguish between what is primary and what is secondary. Confronting the biblical witness would make visible the true foundation and the appropriate form of the church's unity.

To a degree the assumption proved to be right. Returning to the original witness did indeed often lead to positive results. The ideas of unity that the representatives of various churches brought from their tradition were called into question when they had to be justified in a joint discussion before the witness of Scripture. Thus Protestant Christians discovered anew the significance for unity of the worshiping community, and Roman Catholic Christians had to see for themselves that certain ecclesiastical structures they regarded as an absolute precondition for church unity had not been ordained by Jesus himself but were the result of historical developments. On both sides, working with the biblical witness led to a new emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.

At the same time, however, the assumption was too naïve. Looking to Scripture for guidance about unity proved to be much more complicated than was originally assumed.



## 1. Scripture and Tradition

The inquiry is difficult first of all because the churches are not able to start from a uniform understanding of Scripture and its meaning for the church's life and witness. As much as they regard it in general as a necessary foundation, their ideas differ widely in the details. The meaning and the role of Scripture are circumscribed by differing theological and ecclesiological presuppositions. For example, the different traditions define the relationship between the authority of Scripture and the authority of the church in fundamentally different ways. Scripture also plays different roles in the life of the individual churches. One thinks, for example, of the position Scripture occupies in worship. It makes a difference whether the emphasis lies on the regular reading of selected passages of Scripture or on their interpretation in the sermon.

Thus from the very beginning the presuppositions that are accepted in the various traditions influence the study of Scripture. Scripture does not stand above the differences among the individual traditions as a neutral referee. It is, rather, read and heard unavoidably in the context of each tradition. Of course, it is possible to agree about the proper exegesis of certain texts on the basis of historical-critical study, but when it comes time to interpret the text's original sense discovered by this method in its meaning for the life of the church, the differences in understanding Scripture and its authority come once again to the fore.

The difference becomes especially clear when it comes to defining the relationship between Scripture and tradition. One can read Scripture under the assumption that finally there can be no disagreement between its witness and the church's tradition preserved through the centuries. A special form of this opinion is the claim that the witness of Scripture has been understood in an exemplary manner in the tradition of the ancient church. Scripture can also be understood, however, as a critical court of appeal. It contains the original witness on which the church is dependent if it is to be preserved from distortion and error. God always speaks anew to his church through the testimony of Scripture. Tradition is always under the suspicion of having deviated from the original message. The churches of the Reformation were forced to this understanding of Scripture by their own experience. The tension between Scripture and ecclesiastical conditions had become so obvious that the protest against tradition was unavoidable.

For a long time the different understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition appeared to be one of the unbridgeable contrasts among the churches. Thus it is no wonder that in the ecumenical conversa-

tion special attention was focused on this question. And the efforts were not fruitless. The World Conference for Faith and Order in Montreal (1963) was able to offer the following jointly formulated statement:

Our starting-point is that we are all living in a tradition which goes back to our Lord and has its roots in the Old Testament, and are all indebted to that tradition inasmuch as we have received the revealed truth, the Gospel, through its being transmitted from one generation to another. Thus we can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel (the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*) testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Tradition taken in this sense is actualized in the preaching of the Word, in the administration of the Sacraments and worship, in Christian teaching and theology, and in mission and witness to Christ by the lives of the members of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

This text is so important because it looks at the question of the relationship between Scripture and tradition from a new perspective. The usual emphasis is turned on its head. One could say that instead of "Scripture and tradition" it speaks of "tradition and Scripture." It makes it clear that in all ages and even today the church draws the good news from the living tradition that from the beginning has been passed on from generation to generation. The transmission of the gospel is the precondition for the church's existence and life. For its part Holy Scripture is nothing other than the mirror of this tradition. At the same time, however, it is the criterion that permits us to distinguish between the true tradition and stunted or even distorted traditions, for in it is indelibly fixed the original witness of the tradition. "For the post-apostolic Church the appeal to the Tradition received from the apostles became the criterion. As this Tradition was embodied in the apostolic writings, it became natural to use those writings as an authority for determining where the true Tradition was to be found."<sup>2</sup> Thus the question has shifted. The primary question is no longer to what degree Scripture and to what degree tradition bear witness to God's revelation. The question is rather how one can distinguish between true tradition and distorted tradition and what role the witness of Scripture plays in this task.

Somewhat later, the Second Vatican Council made a similar pronouncement when it gave up the traditional idea of two independent sources of reve-

1. P. C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer, eds., *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963* (New York: Association, 1964), pp. 51-52.

2. Rodger and Vischer, eds., *Montreal*, p. 52.

lation. "There exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 9). In view of this change in the way the question is put, one can at least raise the question whether applying the term "authority" to Scripture is really appropriate. Does this term do justice to the close connection, indeed, the blending of Scripture and tradition? Or does it instead deceive us into thinking that Scripture is completely separate from tradition and stands over against the church as a self-contained court of appeal? If Scripture bears witness to the true tradition in the church's tradition, it does matter whether the church, the community that has grown out of the tradition, has a living relationship with that original witness. It must allow itself to be inspired, corrected, and led in a continuous conversation with those first witnesses. In this role Scripture can be described with the catchword "authority." The witness of Scripture carries so much weight that in no circumstances can the church ignore it. Indeed, its weight is so great that in certain circumstances one can, or even must, speak of the sole authority of Scripture. Yet one may never forget how closely and inseparably Scripture and tradition are allied.

As one can see in these texts, the differing positions have moved closer together. Yet, differences remain. Although the contrast is seen in a new perspective, it has not been eliminated. Scripture continues to be read from different presuppositions. The primary difference is that a different value is accorded to the tradition of the ancient church. To what degree is Scripture a court of appeal even for the earliest tradition? To what degree are they so interwoven that they interpret one another reciprocally? To what degree are Scripture and the tradition of the ancient church normative for the church of all ages?

The different presuppositions have radical consequences precisely when we are talking about the unity of the church, consequences that three examples will illustrate.

What significance does the credo of the ancient church have for the unity of the church? How are Scripture and credo related?

What importance are we to attribute to the development of the ecclesiastical ministries in the first centuries? What stage of the development is binding for the following ages?

What significance does the role of Peter have for the unity of the church? Is the idea of a Petrine office a legitimate development of the biblical testimony about Peter?

These examples show that the appeal to Scripture does not alone make unity possible. The theological and ecclesiological presuppositions of the various traditions complicate the effort to come to a common understanding of the biblical witness. Even if the joint effort to discover the original sense should be successful, the question remains how one is to make use of the results.

Thus appealing to Scripture does not by itself enable us to move beyond the differing conceptions of the unity of the church because the differing conceptions of unity influence how Scripture is read and interpreted. The result is a contradiction: all churches acknowledge that Scripture is a criterion for distinguishing between true tradition and distorted traditions, yet this criterion is embedded in the context of the traditions. For this reason even the text of the declaration of Montreal ends with the open question, "How can we overcome the situation in which we all read Scripture in the light of our own traditions?"<sup>3</sup>

Of course, to recognize this dilemma is not to say that the attempt to come to a common understanding of Scripture's witness is inevitably hopeless. The mutual study of Scripture is fundamental to every ecumenical conversation. At the same time, however, one must examine critically one's own presuppositions. One must constantly ask whether the theory and practice of one's interpretation really agree or whether it turns out that in view of the challenges of one's age the theory no longer does justice to Scripture's witness. One must ask whether certain criteria of interpretation that proved to be of value in given historical situations have become a "pre-judgment" that in a new historical situation makes it difficult to hear the witness of Scripture without bias. One thinks, by way of example, of the way Paul's statements in Romans 13 on the role of authorities are used. His call to the Roman church to obey the authorities may in many situations prove to be the central instruction to which other statements about one's relationship to political power are to be subordinated or indeed even connected. If it is understood as a principle, however, and applied without distinction to all situations, one does violence to the diversity of the biblical witness. The problem becomes even greater when the interpretation that was valid in a given situation becomes a part of one's denominational heritage. In any case, the task of gaining clarity about the witness necessary in one's own historical situation will inevitably lead to a clash among the differing starting positions of the denominational traditions.

3. Rodger and Vischer, eds., *Montreal*, p. 54.

## 2. Scripture: Witness of an Active History

The attempt to learn what Scripture, and especially the New Testament, has to say about the unity of the church comes up against a further difficulty, one that lies in the nature of the New Testament texts themselves. The New Testament contains a variety of writings that, although revolving around the same center, in many other ways differ from one another. They are all born of different occasions, and in their content as well as in their form they reflect the presuppositions, purposes, and emphases of certain authors and situations. Only later were they brought together in the collection in which we read them today. For this reason, whoever consults the New Testament inevitably is faced with a multiplicity of voices and statements that cannot simply be reduced to a common denominator.

It is, therefore, not proper to expect from the New Testament a consistent doctrine of the unity of the church. Given the nature of the New Testament, it is not able to provide a coherent theology, and the attempt to bring together the various statements of the New Testament like the pieces of a mosaic is from the very beginning a futile endeavor.

Yet the difficulty goes even deeper. The diversity of statements about the nature of the church and its unity, which on closer examination are obvious in the writings of the New Testament, raises the question whether the nascent church actually lived in unity or whether even this first age was characterized by controversies and conflicts. In the ecumenical movement the assumption is often unthinkingly expressed that the first Christians were “of one mind.” Yet closer examination of the New Testament writings shows that they bear witness to an active history full of conflict. It is time to abandon once and for all the image of harmonious agreement. Clearly, the gospel could be appropriated and proclaimed only by working through controversies.

For this reason, the task can be simply to re-tell the active history we know from the New Testament witnesses. How did the Christians of the first generation deal with the gospel’s impulse? What tensions arose as a result? In what interplay of forces did various interpretations develop? What forms of Christian faith and life emerged? How were conflicts overcome — or not overcome? The New Testament does not first and foremost exhibit a coherent concept of the unity of the church; rather, it shows how people struggled in the multiplicity of interpretations and concepts on behalf of community in Christ.

Indeed, one can ask whether the term “unity” already creates false expectations and thus blocks access to the New Testament witness. To begin with, one must recognize that the word “unity” appears relatively infre-

quently in the New Testament. One finds it only in late writings, and even there not in connection with “church.” The author of Ephesians speaks of the “unity of the Spirit” (4:3) and of the “unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (4:13). He uses the word “unity” to develop the confession to the *one* Lord. Because Christians have been called to hope through the one Spirit, they are to maintain the bond of peace in the unity of the Spirit. Later, in Ignatius, the term “unification” (*henosis*) takes on greater importance.

The term is especially encumbered by a long philosophical tradition. Its use in Platonic philosophy has left its mark on the word. Wherever the word is used, the idea of multiplicity is implied as its opposite. The “one” denotes what is real, and one must reason a posteriori to it from the “many.”

When the term is used against this background, the emphasis is unavoidable that the church can exist only in the singular, and the multiplicity of churches must stand in contradiction to Jesus Christ, the one reality. Admittedly, this consideration makes sense in the present situation. In view of the multiplicity of churches that mutually exclude one another, we must be reminded that in Christ God has chosen *one* people.

Yet the difficulty is that, in its philosophical sense, the term misses the personal character of community in Christ. The fellowship of the church is firmly bound to the person of Jesus Christ. One can speak of the church’s unity only because it is founded in the one Lord. If this bond is overlooked, a too static understanding of the church can easily become associated with the idea of unity. The character of the movement that belonged to the Christian community in the earliest period can no longer come into its own.

Thus, as much as the idea of unity emphasizes an important aspect in the understanding of the church, it also constricts the inquiry. The idea of community/fellowship (*communio*) is without doubt more appropriate to the New Testament witness. In that day the issue around which the controversies raged was not how one could achieve unity (in the sense of a singular number or especially of uniformity); it was how the fellowship in Christ could be preserved as a living reality.

From these findings one may draw two important conclusions. The picture that emerges from a closer examination of the New Testament witness most certainly requires us to ask anew to what degree community in Christ has room for a multiplicity of interpretations, expressions, and forms. To what extent is the diversity we meet in the New Testament also a model for the church today? The ecumenical movement has often been led by the view that the original unity was shattered over the centuries — that the guilt of Christians led to increasingly diverging separations. Against this background the ecumenical movement could be understood as the effort of the churches

to recover that original condition. "If unity has slipped away from our grasp it is the common fault of the Christian world. If it is to be regained it must be by the concerted action of all Christians" (Charles Brent).<sup>4</sup> The biblical witness offers hardly any support for this view. To be sure, this conception is the basis for the image of the first church that Luke presents in Acts. The community is of one heart and soul; later it is afflicted by ravenous wolves that destroy its unity. A closer reading of the New Testament, however, soon shows that this picture is the expression of an ideal view of the church. From the very beginning the community had to struggle for its unity. For this reason, the question we must ask today is how in the present ecumenical movement we can recover and continue the struggle for fellowship in Christ, a struggle that was characteristic of the early church. Unity shatters when this struggle ceases. It is destroyed primarily by the hardening of positions, by exclusivity and self-contented isolation. It will be restored when the fronts start to move and the living discussion begins anew.

On the other hand, the observation that the New Testament reflects a multiplicity of ecclesiological perspectives does not permit us to conclude that the differences among the denominations are already present in the New Testament. The diversity of the New Testament period is not to be compared with the differences among today's denominations. The diversity we meet in the New Testament is the diversity of living debate, but the denominations are characterized by the institutional hardening of given positions. The confessional statements one finds in the New Testament are acts in which one sees something of the active history of the earliest church. They are part of the effort to make community real. The confessional statements characteristic of denominational traditions are the signs of institutional identity. They define community.<sup>5</sup>

The diversity in the New Testament is not to be misunderstood as a static condition any more than unity may be understood as something static. Otherwise the misunderstanding to which the term "unity" so easily gives rise would simply return as its distorted mirror image. It is so difficult today to recognize and understand Scripture as bearing witness to an active history because it appears to be present in a self-contained whole. The writings, which according to the judgment of the church bear witness to the true tradition, have been selected by the formation of the canon. In the process they have been divorced

4. H. N. Bate, ed., *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference, Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927* (New York: Doran, 1927), p. 4.

5. Cf. here Ernst Käsemann, "The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church," in Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 95-107.

from the historical context in which they originated. For this reason the modern reader is tempted to read them as a timeless text. To be sure, the formation of the canon is of the greatest significance for the church. By distinguishing between the primary and secondary witnesses, the church laid the groundwork for identifying the true tradition within the church's tradition, and today's church cannot ignore this fundamental decision. Therefore, it is important to remember that the formation of the canon itself is part of the "active history" to which the New Testament bears witness. Differentiating among the witnesses did not take place overnight. A protracted process was necessary before the boundaries of the canon were finally established. This reality suggests to us how important it is to read the writings of the New Testament in their historical context.

### 3. Unity Today

This last consideration suggests a third limit with which the study of the New Testament has to deal. To what extent are the New Testament statements about the unity of the church really able to answer the questions churches in the ecumenical movement are asking? Assuming that we are able to describe the different conceptions of unity one finds in the New Testament and to trace their interplay, what would we gain for the question of the unity of the church today? Is it not the case that today's situation is so radically different that the example of the New Testament age is relevant only to a limited extent?

Of course, our point of departure has not changed. The reasons that compelled the first generations to struggle for community are still valid today. What was true for the authors of the New Testament is still true for the modern ecumenical movement — that with his reconciling work in Christ God has laid the foundation for a community in love, and that obedience to God involves giving visible expression to this unity. The call to unity is the same, and it is therefore not surprising that the great texts of the New Testament in which the drive to unity has been formulated are also relevant today. Some of these texts recur in ecumenical worship services with such regularity that they come close to evoking a feeling of satiety (John 17:20-21; Rom. 15:7; Eph. 4:1-6).

It is true that already in the earliest age the task of making unity real did not appear everywhere in the same way. It makes a great difference whether the call to unity confronted the community in Jerusalem, the one in Antioch, or those that grew out of Paul's mission. Above all, however, the question of unity was posed in a new way when the living witness of the apostles died out and the church no longer had access to it in its preaching. The church of the



“post-apostolic” age had to demonstrate the authenticity of its witness in a different way. It had to find ways of laying claim to the apostles’ witness for themselves. We see this process already at work in the writings of the New Testament. Without doubt, the most important and influential event in the process is the formation of the canon.

The situation becomes complicated, however, when we ask how the unity of the churches is to be realized today on the basis of the biblical witness. Then it becomes very clear how the presuppositions have changed. The church has been led a long way since those lively beginnings. New questions have been raised. Controversies have led to conflicts and schisms, and while these schisms were hardening the churches have been led in the direction of new horizons with new questions. Simply describing how the first generation dealt with the call to unity cannot answer this question. We must take seriously the principle formulated in Montreal. Holy Scripture lets us look, as through a window, into the first phase of the tradition that flows from God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Yet the tradition did not end with this first phase. It continues throughout the centuries. Four considerations may illustrate how the questions have changed.

(1) With our reference to the canon we have already suggested the first difference. In that earliest period, Scripture was not yet seen as an authority. The Christians struggled for unity on the basis of the proclamation they had received. Scripture was not a factor in the controversies that characterized the earliest period. Only later did the various writings with which we can trace the earliest history become the “Holy Scripture” to which the church appealed when dealing with controversial issues. “As this tradition was embodied in the apostolic writings, it became natural to use those writings as an authority for determining where the true Tradition was to be found.”<sup>6</sup> The appeal to Scripture was possible only after the canon had been established in its broad outlines. Only then for the first time could one ask what *the* Scripture has to say about the unity of the church. Scripture thus has taken on a new role in the church. It now becomes a factor of the church’s unity. No longer can unity be realized without at the same time according to Scripture its due place. Now the question is what relationship this witness, recognized as apostolic, has to other authorities whose task it is to keep the community in the true tradition. One cannot decide this question on the basis of Scripture alone.

(2) The worldwide expansion of the church that has taken place throughout the centuries, and especially in recent times, can serve as a second example. The church’s missionary effort has always extended the boundaries.

6. Rodger and Vischer, eds., *Montreal*, p. 52.

Today the gospel has gone to all continents. As a result, the separated churches are faced with the task of giving shape to this worldwide fellowship. The horizon of the ecumenical world has expanded. Just as the church had to prove the unity it had received from Christ in the *oecumene* of the Roman empire, today it must give appropriate shape to this unity in the human *oecumene*. What does unity mean when the most distant parts of the world live in mutual dependence? What does a genuine common witness to reconciliation in Christ mean in a world of unrighteousness and repression? How much agreement in word and deed is necessary beyond the borders of countries and continents? What significance do the modern possibilities of communication have for the unity of the church? What structures are appropriate for promoting the necessary exchange? What would the apostles say about it today? None of these questions can be answered directly on the basis of Scripture. They have only been raised at all because of the church's success in fulfilling the missionary task.

(3) And to what extent is the church on all levels of its life also charged to be involved in the shaping of society? This question, too, cannot be answered on the basis of Scripture alone. We must also take into consideration that in many places the proclamation of the gospel made the churches not only an acknowledged religious fellowship but also the majority of the population. The responsibility of a minority is not the same as that of a majority. A theologian has pointed out, not without justification, that Scripture is the book of a minority that is read today in the context of a majority in society. It is precisely the church's social engagement that represents one of the decisive "burdens" of unity. Still, the church cannot evade this engagement. Today the unity of the church can be realized only on the basis of clear positions on social questions.

(4) Must we not take this consideration even a step further and ask whether in certain areas the earliest church made flawed decisions? One thinks, for example, of its attitude toward slavery and toward the role of women in the church. Both themes are addressed directly in the New Testament. It is becoming increasingly clear today that the solutions of that age did not reflect the gospel's deepest spirit. A sensitivity has developed in the course of the centuries that in retrospect must be critical even of the witness of the earliest church. In those days it obviously was not felt that the toleration of slavery and the subordination of women contradicted the community God wanted. Today the contradiction has become unmistakably clear.

In view of these new questions, of what use is it then to sketch out the course of the church's earliest history? Do we not have to conduct the debate about

the unity of the church on a completely different level? Without doubt, such a conclusion would be precipitous. Although it is true that we must recognize the limits the church faces in consulting Scripture, it would be a mistake if the church saw in Scripture nothing more than a general call to unity. The effort to trace as faithfully and completely as possible the complex development of the early church from the perspective of fellowship in Christ can also provide important impulses for the task one faces in the present ecumenical movement.

First of all, we must say that the attempt to re-tell that early history does greater justice to the character of the biblical witness. Narrating the history makes it clear that both in the early periods and today unity has been nothing more than lived community. We see the picture of a community that carries the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels and therefore never has unity as a secure possession. When we tell the story, Scripture becomes the mirror in which we recognize ourselves.

Above all, however, dealing with Scripture can open new perspectives for us about our present task. By keeping in view how the church dealt with the task of community in the beginning, the separated churches today can avoid many misunderstandings and false expectations. Limiting our examination of Scripture to the "classical" unity texts, however, will soon lead to a certain helplessness. How are we to make progress in realizing unity there? Nevertheless, a description exploring the details of the struggle for unity can uncover unexpected aspects and provide new stimulation. Scripture will become, so to speak, a competent partner in fulfilling today's task.

And yet we must finally say that describing that history cannot by itself open the way to unity. It does not relieve the church of the responsibility of asking those questions which, under the promise of the Holy Spirit, the call to unity raises today. As much as the witness of the earliest period is able to inspire us, the churches are still faced with the task of carrying on together the tradition whose first phase we see in Scripture.

#### 4. Concepts of Unity

It is against this background that we are to understand the joint efforts to gain clarity about the unity to be realized in the ecumenical movement. How can the unity given us in Jesus Christ be made visible? What shape must it have? We have seen that the separated churches are not yet able jointly to answer these questions. The answers every church has given and continues to give on the basis of its own tradition are simply too far apart. And even a joint study of Scripture does not necessarily lead to a concept that can be pursued jointly.

The common description of the goal can come about only through hard work done together in wrestling with the issues of a given age.

Since the beginning of the ecumenical movement, repeated efforts have been made in this direction, yet we are still — indeed, probably more than ever — far removed from a common vision that can be shared by all churches.

Initially, the ecumenical movement led to spontaneous alliances. The movements resulting from the conferences of Edinburgh (1910), Stockholm (1925), and Lausanne (1927) made it clear that the great themes of the ecumenical movement could be pursued and clarified only with the help of common structures. Regular cooperation began, and as it grew deeper and broader it became clear that more solid structures were also needed. The challenges of the period before and during the Second World War led to the establishment in 1948 of the World Council of Churches. The separated churches resolved to create a kind of alliance or federation. Even though they were not in agreement on numerous doctrines, especially on the understanding of the church and its unity — indeed, only in a limited sense were they able to acknowledge one another as churches — they were ready to bear a common witness. They had in common their confession of Jesus Christ as God and Savior. They were led by the conviction that the message laid out in this confession had to be carried jointly into today's world. From the very beginning it was clear that this alliance did not at all mean that church unity had been achieved. The World Council of Churches was nothing more than a "temporary community" that permitted the churches to raise the question of unity concretely — in some measure the scaffolding that made possible the construction of the common house. In common prayer, in mutual exchange, and especially in the common struggle with the major questions and tasks of the age, the contours of unity were to become clear step by step. There had been similar confederated alliances before, especially in the framework of the international missionary movement. In connection with the founding of the World Council of Churches, they became a foundational structure of the ecumenical movement. At all levels — continental, national, local — there sprang up "ecumenical councils," or sometimes less pretentiously named "working fellowships of Christian churches."

In the early years of the ecumenical movement, many people were of the opinion that such federative associations were already an adequate expression of unity in Christ. What more was needed? What is essential is that the churches come together on the basis of their common confession. They need not surrender their own unique character in order to make their unity visible. It is enough that they acknowledge one another as churches of Jesus Christ

and let themselves be led mutually by the gospel's witness. It was asserted, especially by certain Protestant circles, that true unity is invisible anyway and will always remain so. The historical denominations are basically nothing more than shells not worth arguing about. Each represents part of the many-sided Christian truth. Each has its own contribution to make to the whole. The federation gives the churches the opportunity to develop it together.

It became increasingly clear, however, that the federation could be no more than a transitional goal. It is not enough to presume unity to be an "invisible reality"; it must become visible. It presupposes that the sacraments must be recognized reciprocally — above all, that the eucharist is celebrated together without qualification. The community in Christ must prove to be harmony in love. The image of visible separation that the churches have offered for centuries must be overcome by recognizable reconciliation. In this regard, the Second World War represents a turning point. Although at the conferences on Faith and Order in Lausanne (1927) and Edinburgh (1937) the relationship between invisible and visible church was still intensively discussed,<sup>7</sup> the call to visibility characterized the post-war period. Behind the formation of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam stood the clear will to bring an end to division and to make a new beginning in unity.

In the last decades, three concepts of unity in particular have been developed and debated in the ecumenical movement. Initially, the concept of *organic unity* stood in the foreground. The claim here was that, in order to make visible the unity given in Christ, it was necessary for the churches to agree not only in confessing Christ but also in the main articles of faith. They must come together in the administration of the sacraments and be able to take joint responsibility for ordination to the ministries of the churches. In addition, they must work toward agreement on structures that make possible common doctrines and action. Where this concept is advocated it is at the same time emphasized that today's denominational separation is an intolerable violation of God's will. Unity can be expressed appropriately only when the individual denominations are ready to surrender their separate existence and sink into the background in favor of the one church. For the individual churches, the transition from separation into organic unity is in a sense a dying and rising. They leave behind their sinful separation and rise as a community that "sings to God a new song."

The debate over this concept goes back to the beginnings of the ecu-

7. Cf., e.g., Hermann Sasse, ed., *Die Weltkonferenz für Glauben und Kirchenfassung, Lausanne 1927* (Berlin: Furche, 1929), p. 534.

menical movement. It lay behind the founding of the movement for "Faith and Order," for this movement wanted nothing more than to produce the common basis in the areas of doctrine and the churches' sacramental structures that is necessary for unity. Those who consistently advocate this concept can a priori not be satisfied with a simple federation. In order to reach the goal of organic unity, one needs an actual union. Negotiations were then initiated among separated churches in a number of countries. As early as 1925 various Protestant churches came together to form the United Church of Canada. The Church of South India originated in 1947, a year before the founding of the World Council of Churches. Additional unions followed in North India (1970), Australia (1977), and other countries. They showed that the model of organic unity did not have to remain a mere vision; it can become a historical reality.

The concept was also accepted in the World Council of Churches. As we have seen, the question of the nature of the unity to be realized initially remained unanswered when the Council was formed. The common denominator holding the churches together was simply the confession of Jesus Christ as God and Savior. Of course, it was taken for granted that the churches that joined the Council were committed to working for the unity of the church. What unity meant in its details, however, was intentionally left open. The answer to the question was to come out of the dynamic discussion within the Council.

Early on, there was an initial attempt to give an answer. At the third full assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi (1961), the assembly voted to approve the following text:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.<sup>8</sup>

This description of the "unity we seek" is on the whole determined by the concept of organic unity. In the background stands the experience of the un-

8. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, ed., *The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (New York: Association, 1962), p. 116.

ions, in particular the founding of the Church of South India. Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998), the architect of the declaration, had worked in southern India and had participated in the negotiations that led to the formation of the Church of South India. First and foremost, the text speaks of "one fully committed fellowship." That means that the churches unite without reservations. The declaration then lists the elements belonging to the united church. In addition to baptism they are the common confession, agreement in the preaching of the gospel, the eucharistic fellowship, the mutual recognition of the ordained ministries and the members of the church, the common ordering in prayer, in witness, in service. As important as this declaration is, one must immediately add that the full assembly was not in a position to go beyond listing these elements. It was not possible to provide agreement on the details in New Delhi. The declaration merely makes clear to what aspects the separated churches need to give their special attention if they want to do justice to the business of unity given them by the ecumenical movement.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the debate took a new turn. The Second Vatican Council and the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the ecumenical movement produced a new constellation. The Roman Catholic Church with its tradition and especially its understanding of church unity had to be included in the discussions about the nature of the unity we seek. New aspects had to be taken into consideration. As we have seen, the concept of organic unity was entirely realistic in the area of the Protestant churches, but would it do justice to the new situation? The member churches of the World Council of Churches were organized on a national or territorial basis; now, with the Roman Catholic Church, a church with a universal structure was entering the ecumenical movement. Its presence made unavoidable the question of how unity would have to be expressed on a universal level. The declaration of the full assembly of New Delhi puts the emphasis on the unity of the church at the local level. It speaks first of all of the unity of "all in each place." The unity of the church is constituted, so to speak, from below. There were only passing intimations of the unity of the church at the universal level. To the degree that the ecumenical movement encompassed wider circles, however, this question had to receive a clearer answer.

In this new situation the concept of *unity in reconciled diversity* began to be circulated, especially by the Evangelical-Lutheran side. This idea seeks to emphasize that today's confessional traditions will continue to maintain their significance in the future. Every one of them has unique experiences and insights to contribute to the whole. The move toward unity is to be understood primarily as an event of reconciliation. To be sure, it presupposes wide-

ranging agreement. The churches must come to an understanding about confession; they must celebrate the sacraments together and be able to recognize mutually and completely the ordained ministries. They must also be in a position to speak and act jointly when the situation demands it. Thus none of the denominations existing today will be able to continue to exist in their present forms in the one church. Each will be changed by the experience of reconciliation. Yet, the identity of each — and this is what is essential in the new concept — will not be eradicated; it will still be recognizable. The unity of the church is the reconciled diversity of the previously separated churches.

The idea intentionally differs from the concept of organic unity. Unity in reconciled diversity is understood as an alliance of existing churches newly united by acts of reconciliation. By making room in their midst for God's gift of unity, the denominational differences are, so to speak, cleansed. Yet they do not have to die; they are included in the whole.

Of decisive significance for the concept of unity in reconciled diversity is the question of the relationship between unity and diversity. In the ecumenical movement it had been clear from the very beginning that unity is not the same as uniformity. There is room in the one church for differing expressions of the one truth. What is essential is not the identity of the declarations and forms but mutual recognition and the willingness to make a common witness. The New Delhi declaration allowed no doubt about that. And yet there is in this regard a difference between the concepts of organic unity and unity in reconciled diversity. Although the advocates of the first concept were interested primarily in the elements that establish unity, the advocates of reconciled diversity were primarily interested in freeing differences in the church from the stigma of illegitimacy. In a declaration formulated in the spirit of the concept, we read: "Diversities which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic or historical contacts *are integral to the nature of communion . . .* (italics added). In communion diversities are brought together in harmony."<sup>9</sup> Immediately the warning is added that diversity cannot be unlimited. It is illegitimate, it is said, "when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever." Basically this brings us back to asking again what commonality is necessary for bearing witness to the gospel today.

The idea of "reconciled diversity" becomes more understandable when we remember that following the Second Vatican Council there was a new

9. Cf. the declaration on "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling," in *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly*, ed. Michael Kinnamon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 173.



form of ecumenical activity — bilateral dialogues at a worldwide level. As a universal community, the Roman Catholic Church could not join the community of the World Council of Churches. Its “natural” partners were the worldwide denominational unions. In the decades following the Council, an extended network of dialogues grew up. The hope was that careful theological work might broaden the common basis among the denominations. The dialogues were to clear the way for “reconciliation in diversity.” As a matter of fact, noteworthy results were realized. Probably the most spectacular example was the common declaration of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church on the central issue of the Reformation, the doctrine of justification (1997). Yet, the question is whether this way can lead to a breakthrough to unity. The network of bilateral dialogues builds on the existing denominational traditions. When one faces off with denominational partners, one is compelled to deepen and solidify one’s own denominational identity. For this reason the bilateral dialogues have led initially to consolidating the denominational reality of Christianity. The traditions face one another — admittedly, with a deepened understanding of what they have in common and of their differences — but they are hardly less separated than before. The dialogues clarified a great deal, but they did not make possible the kind of unity the churches could have in common.

And can it really be said that Christianity consists of “denominations” and that they are the decisive actors of the ecumenical movement? What is the significance of the movements that attempt to give new expression to the church’s witness across denominational boundaries? What share in this do the spiritual impulses that break out from decade to decade have? What contribution can something like the Pentecostal movement make to realizing unity?

The obvious weakness of the concept of unity in reconciled diversity is the reality that the dimension of a common witness is missing in it today. The bilateral dialogues have contributed little to clarifying the major questions and tasks facing the churches today. Taken as a whole, it looks backward. Yet, the common struggles with the signs of the age are of decisive importance for the quest for unity. None of the churches has at its disposal the necessary answers. By facing the new challenges without prejudice they can even see themselves in new ways. What is considered to be a denominational characteristic takes on a new value in the common witness.

A third concept of unity was developed in the fifth full assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi (1975). It described the unity we seek as *conciliar fellowship*.

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, witnesses to the same apostolic faith, and therefore recognizes the others as belonging to the same Church of Christ and guided by the same Spirit. As the New Delhi Assembly pointed out, 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. To this end, each church aims at maintaining sustained and sustaining relationships with her sister churches, expressed in conciliar gatherings whenever required for the fulfillment of their common calling.<sup>10</sup>

This description is built on the New Delhi declaration. It attempts to express more clearly how unity can become a reality not only for "all in each place" but also for "all in all places." It goes back to the church's conciliar tradition. Just as in the course of the centuries the church occasionally needed representative assemblies to call to remembrance the truth of the gospel and to determine the way into the future, so also today the churches must be able to come together as a council when the situation demands it. In order to be able to "celebrate" a council, there must be basic agreement about the apostolic faith as well as baptism and the eucharist and an unqualified recognition of the church's ministries. In addition, there must be an understanding of how common decisions can be made and how they can be received by the local churches.

A worldwide council that speaks in the name of all churches may well lie in the distant future; indeed, it is possible that it will never happen. In any case, however, the goal of conciliar fellowship — that is, a fellowship that is capable of calling a council — continues to exist. The ecumenical movement serves to fulfill the necessary presuppositions step by step both by means of theological dialogue and by means of joint witness in today's world. To a certain extent the ecumenical movement is to be understood as a "pre-conciliar" fellowship. By keeping its eye on the major goal, it can inspire people to make strides toward increasingly close community. All kinds of obstacles — differences in doctrine, past injuries that continue to fester in the present, conflicts about the church's witness in today's world — are named and cleared away. When the churches increasingly share a common

10. David M. Paton, ed., *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975: The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 60.

life, the community that binds them together in Christ becomes more visible to the world.

The concept of conciliar fellowship places the emphasis on the church's common task. The vision goes beyond the concept of reconciled diversity to the degree that it not only aims for reconciliation but also measures unity by how the church fulfills its task in today's world. In the here and now, the churches are challenged to be part of a common movement toward the one church in which God's gift can be reflected.<sup>11</sup>

Unity? It is interesting to note that in recent times one can detect a certain reserve toward the term "unity." When people speak of the goal of the ecumenical movement, there is a much greater tendency to use the term "fellowship," or *koinonia/communio*. As a matter of fact, the term "unity" does have obvious limits. It makes clear that there can be only one church of Jesus Christ. All the images used in the New Testament confirm it: the church is one body, one people, one temple, one bride. Separation is contrary to the nature of the church. That in the creed all churches profess their commitment to the one church emphatically reminds us of this. When it comes to describing their one church, however, new aspects must be taken into account. The separated churches that are on the way to unity face the task of making room in their midst for fellowship with Christ. They must open themselves to one another. They must communicate with one another. They must join together in following the leading of the Spirit of Christ. The term *koinonia* has the potential of expressing how unity can be lived. The concept of conciliar fellowship has already offered a first step in this direction. It describes the goal of the ecumenical movement as "fellowship." Yet the emphasis in the declaration of the seventh full assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra (1991) is even clearer. The title already indicates the direction: "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling." The text of the declaration then says: "The church is the foretaste of this communion with God and with one another. . . . The purpose of the church is . . . to point to the fullness of communion with God, humanity and the whole creation in the glory of the kingdom." And at another

11. The churches can contribute to this movement with common initiatives in the here and now. A good example of this kind of conciliar initiative was the appeal of the World Council on the occasion of the sixth full assembly in Vancouver (1983) to come together in a "conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation." The appeal was heard, and in the 1980s and early 1990s it gave rise to numerous joint actions, but the movement was not able to achieve long-term success. There was not enough energy to overcome denominational resistance, especially that of the Roman Catholic Church, and above all the lack of the churches' readiness to come to grips with the major issues of the age.

place one finds the lapidary sentence: "The unity of the church to which we are called is a *koinonia*."<sup>12</sup>

Without doubt, there are benefits to emphasizing the church as *communio*. It makes it possible for the call to unity to be more concrete. After decades of work, there are signs of fatigue in the ecumenical movement. Must the separation of the churches really be as intolerable as the fathers of the ecumenical movement claimed? In many circles one detects a retreat to denominational positions. It is therefore all the more important to present the goal of the movement in such a way that the churches will be tempted to move together and to become engaged as a *communio* for God's kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \*

How then are the concepts of unity that have been presented here to be seen in light of the New Testament? We must ask this question even if it is not possible to derive a description of the goal directly from Scripture. Every attempt to put into words the "unity we seek" has to justify itself before the witness of Scripture. Unity is more than simply the cross section of the convictions and claims of the individual churches. The unity in which the churches are to come together today must be a legitimate continuation of that earliest phase of the living tradition to which the New Testament bears witness.

This study is based on the understanding that, among the concepts presented thus far, the idea of conciliar fellowship best reflects the witness of the New Testament. Before we substantiate and elucidate this understanding more thoroughly, however, we turn our attention to the witness of the New Testament itself.

12. Kinnamon, ed., *Signs of the Spirit*, pp. 172, 173.

13. For additional material on the concept of conciliar fellowship, see *Councils and the Ecumenical Movement*, WCS 5 (Geneva: WCC, 1968); Reinhard Frieling, "Konziliare Gemeinschaft," in *Wandernde Horizonte auf dem Weg zur kirchlichen Einheit*, ed. Reinhard Groscurth (Frankfurt: Lembeck, 1974), pp. 137-47; Lukas Vischer, *Veränderung der Welt — Bekehrung der Kirchen* (Frankfurt: Lembeck, 1976), pp. 83-106; Harding Meyer, "'Einheit in versöhnter Vielfalt,' 'Konziliare Gemeinschaft,' 'Organische Union,' Gemeinsamkeit und Differenz gegenwärtig diskutierter Einheitskonzeptionen," *ÖR* 26 (1977): 377-400; Lukas Vischer, "Ist das wirklich die 'Einheit, die wir suchen?'" *ÖR* 41, no. 1 (1992): 7-24.

## PART TWO

# On the Way to Unity: The Community of the Church in the New Testament

*Ulrich Luz*

### Introduction

Beginning with Constantine, for the Roman emperors the church was a decisive factor in the cohesion of the Roman Empire. It was able to be this because it was *one* church. In the late Roman Empire *one* church meant synods, intensive ecclesiastical communication, bishops, and metropolitan bishops. It also meant unity in the rule of faith and identical dogma. Finally, one church meant a common Bible, common worship identical in its principal features, a common calendar, and efforts to achieve a common practice in, for example, such matters as the questions of penance, of military service, or of divorce. After a long development, the unity of the church meant in the West a hierarchical organization with the pope at the top, and in the East the councils and the ecumenical patriarch as the central representative of the church.

All of this seems obvious to us, but we must keep in mind that in the context of the religions of late antiquity it was by no means self-evident. Christianity was only one of a number of religions that, beginning about 200 B.C., spread from the Orient throughout the entire Roman Empire. As was the case with all of them, at the local level Christianity was organized as a religious association analogous to the mystery religions. All the other Oriental religions in the Roman Empire, including the powerful religion of Mithras, remained at that stage of development. That is to say, they formed individual mystery communities that were only loosely connected. Christianity, however, was united in a church. Thus the church's visible unity made it relatively distinctive in the context of ancient religions. What we have here may well be something of the essence of Christian faith. To be concerned about the struggle for the church's visible unity in the New Testament period is to reflect on something that is essential to Christian faith. *That church unity must be visibly*

*lived is at the heart of Christian faith.* That is the first supposition that guides this study.

Of course, we must immediately qualify what we have just said. Christianity's visible unity is not completely unique. Judaism offers an analogy precisely in this regard. It too has common institutions and rituals that are known to all Jews: the Temple, the Bible, the Torah, circumcision and Sabbath, calendar, and later, in a sense, the rabbis and the patriarchs. The Jews also struggled to achieve a common practice and a Halakah that was binding on all. Was the importance of visible unity in Christianity inherited from Judaism? It would certainly not be a mistake to say so. When it began, Christian faith simply wanted to be the final and definitive expression of Israel's faith in its God. In earlier times, as well as later, the biblical heritage was every bit as central for Christianity as was initially the connection of its own fellowship to the actual people of Israel or, as was later of paramount importance, to the idea of Israel. Even if one no longer wanted to have anything to do with actual Israel, one still understood oneself to be the people of God or the true Israel. Yet there were also differences early on. In Judaism visible unity is the expression of the election of a special people, Israel, whose institutions and laws clearly distinguish it from other nations. It was precisely this association with a special nation that the Christian church soon abandoned. Already in early Christianity Israel's faith made way for a *religion* for all nations. In late antiquity it became increasingly clear that *belonging to the people of Israel* was what was decisive for Judaism. By contrast, for Christianity, which understood itself to be a universal religion for all nations, special *doctrines* became the decisive characteristic that differentiated Christians from non-Christians or heretics.<sup>1</sup> Thus, even in comparison with Judaism, the struggle for unity in Christianity was something out of the ordinary; or, to be more precise, in the course of its historical development it became something out of the ordinary.

Yet we must extend the horizon even more. Is not the effort to achieve visible unity in a sense characteristic of every established religion?<sup>2</sup> If that is the case, Christianity's uniqueness in late antiquity would be that it was the only established religion that in that day prevailed throughout the world. One

1. Cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

2. Following Gustav Mensching (*Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft*, 2d ed. [Heidelberg: Quelle-Meyer, 1949], p. 151), I understand "established [*gestiftete*] religion" as a religion in which "a historically ascertainable personality with a characteristic religious way of looking at things has a decisive influence on the shaping and the spirit of concrete religion for an unforeseeable duration of its further development." Established religions have, in contrast to folk religions, universal and missionary tendencies.

cannot reject this suggestion out of hand, but we must differentiate. There is probably something in the nature of visible unity in every established religion, but its form and intensity vary widely. Among the Zoroastrian state religion; the monastic orders in Buddhism; Jainism; the hierarchically structured church of Manichaeism; the Islamic *ummah* (congregation/community) with its prescribed confession, scripture, sacred language, and religious law; and the Christian church or churches there are appreciable differences that express something of what is unique for each of these religions. Thus one cannot simply understand the unity of the church by subsuming Christianity under the heading of an established religion. One can comprehend what is unique about it only by re-telling and interpreting the distinctive history of the Christian struggle for unity. It begins with Jesus and the New Testament period.

This observation brings us to another problem, however, that forces us to differentiate. Christianity's unity has not always been understood in the same way. It has changed throughout history and has been — and still is — a matter of dispute among the several Christian communities. It is immediately obvious that church unity did not mean in the Constantinian age what it meant in the New Testament period. Less obvious is what the different understandings of church unity have in common. Even within the New Testament age, the differences are quite substantial, and there were considerable developments and changes precisely in this period. Not even the word "unity," which heads our book as a title, is found throughout the entire New Testament. It appears relatively late and in only a few New Testament works.<sup>3</sup> Earlier and elsewhere one did not speak of the church's unity. Thus we must ask: Were the efforts to achieve unity so different in different epochs and situations that in reality they did not have anything "Christian" in common? If that were the case, it would doubtless also mean the end of every attempt to get directions from the New Testament for our modern quest for unity. For the present, the only thing clear is that the wide range of diversity we find already in the New Testament keeps us from transferring our findings from the New Testament directly into the present.<sup>4</sup> For this reason we add to our first supposition a second: *Just as the struggle for church unity belongs to Christian faith, so the variety and the differences of these efforts also belong to Christian faith.*

Three levels are important for the following discussion.

(1) First of all, we will try to trace the course of the struggle for unity in New Testament times. We are interested in *history*, not merely in theology. It

3. Cf. above, pp. 12-13.

4. Cf. above, p. 11.

is our opinion that this is the best way to do justice to the texts.<sup>5</sup> We differ here from most of the (not very many!) existing studies of our theme.<sup>6</sup> As a rule they are interested primarily in “higher” theology and less in history as it is lived. Above all, however, we are of the opinion that only in this way can we do justice to what early Christianity experienced as the basis of unity, namely, the power of the exalted Lord Jesus. Thus we will give an account first of all of how Christians in the New Testament age sought church fellowship, how they struggled to achieve it, and how they realized it. The subject matter of the first level of this book is church history, not the history of theology.

(2) According to the testimony of the New Testament, however, the church is given a *basic gift*, called by different names in different works, to help in its struggle for church fellowship. Paul, for example, speaks of the “fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:9), the presupposition of the fellowship of the believers, or of the “fellowship of the body of Christ” in the Lord’s Supper on which the one body of the church is based (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Mat-

5. Cf. above, pp. 12-15.

6. Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Quest for Unity in the New Testament Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Raymond E. Brown, “The Unity and Diversity in New Testament Ecclesiology,” *NT 6* (1963): 298-308; Commission Pontificale, *Unité et diversité dans l’Eglise: text officiel de la Commission biblique pontificale et travaux personnels des membres* (Città del Vaticano: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1989); Oscar Cullmann, *Unity through Diversity: Its Foundation, and a Contribution to the Discussion Concerning the Possibilities of Its Actualization*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); James Dunn, “Instruments of Koinonia in the Early Church,” *OiC 25* (1989): 204-16; Ferdinand Hahn, Karl Kertelge, and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Einheit der Kirche: Grundlegung im Neuen Testament*, QD 84 (Freiburg: Herder, 1979); Ferdinand Hahn, “Die Einheit der Kirche nach dem Zeugnis des Apostels Paulus” in *Ekklesiologie des Neuen Testaments: für Karl Kertelge*, ed. Rainer Kampling and Thomas Söding (Freiburg: Herder, 1996), pp. 288-300; Ernst Käsemann, “The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church,” in Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 95-107; Ernst Käsemann, “Unity and Multiplicity in the New Testament Doctrine of the Church,” in Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 252-59; Karl Kertelge, “Koinonia und Einheit der Kirche nach dem Neuen Testament,” in *Communio Sanctorum: Einheit der Christen, Einheit der Kirche, Festschrift für Bischof Paul-Werner Scheele*, ed. Josef Schreiner and Klaus Wittstadt (Würzburg: Echter, 1988), pp. 53-67; Ulrich Luz, “Unity of the Church in Pauline Times,” in *Agia Graphē kai synchronos Anthropos*, Festschrift Ioannis Karavidopoulos (Thessaloniki: Pournara, 2006), pp. 555-71; Ulrich Luz, “Das Problem der eucharistischen Gastfreundschaft in neutestamentlicher Sicht,” in *Diakonia — Liturgia — Charisma*, Festschrift Georgios A. Galitis (Lebadeia: En plo, 2006), pp. 377-93; Franz Mussner, *Petrus und Paulus, Pole der Einheit: Eine Hilfe für die Kirchen*, QD 76 (Freiburg: Herder, 1976); Adolf Martin Ritter, “Die Einheit der Kirche als Problem des 1. Millenniums post Christum natum,” *ThZ 60* (2004): 43-61; Jürgen Roloff, *Die Kirche im Neuen Testament*, GNT 10 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), esp. pp. 310-23; Gerd Theissen, “Die Einheit der Kirche: Kohärenz und Differenz im Urchristentum,” *ZMiss 20* (1994): 70-86.

thew speaks of the Risen One who is the Lord of the whole world and who sends forth his disciples (Matt. 28:16-20), Luke of the Spirit whom the Risen One sends (Luke 24:49), John of the unity of the Father and the Son “in” which the believers are (John 17:21). Ephesians speaks here of “one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:4-6). In the Pastorals the basic gift consists of the received tradition. In Ignatius it is the heavenly unity of the Father, the Son, and his apostles represented in the threefold ministry. In Tertullian it is the one immutable rule of faith. In Justin the prerequisite for participating in the eucharist is believing Christian doctrine, baptism, and a life lived in accordance with Christ.<sup>7</sup> There it is most clear how in time the basic gift of unity increasingly has taken on the characteristics of a *precondition* of unity. In each case tradition is in some way connected with the basic gift. No New Testament author speaks of the basic gift of unity without in some way making use of the story of Jesus of Nazareth. In all of the cases, however, the basic gift is a living reality and not merely identical with the received tradition, for, although the basic gift is an experience, it can be formulated and interpreted only in a concrete situation with human words as a theological statement. Thus the second level we must consider is the *basic gift of unity*. Of course, from the perspective of the New Testament witnesses it is the first level.

(3) Finally, the third level is then *theological reflection on church unity* in the New Testament. This level accompanies and thinks through the experiences of the unity that is both given and practiced. With our theological reflection on the process of unity initiated by Jesus we will discover repeatedly how ecclesiological concepts and narrative outlines originate. Thus theology is something secondary, or even tertiary — it is human response.<sup>8</sup> Of course, we will also see how theological outlines can become in turn ways of expressing the unity that is bestowed as a gift. That is to say, when they are transmitted to people who come later they can become expressions of the basic gift. They came into being as human efforts to express in words the gift of unity and one’s own struggle to achieve it. For later generations they became the way of expressing the basic gift, and they pointed to the living Lord himself, Jesus Christ.

Yet history as it is lived is where Jesus Christ, the basic gift, is experienced and where the movement toward unity begins. It is where all theology

7. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis* 1; Justin, *Apologia* 1.66.1-2.

8. Our distinction between basic gift and theology corresponds in principle to Rudolph Bultmann’s distinction between kerygma and theology (*Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel [London: SCM, 1965], vol. 2, pp. 237-41). Of course, the level of history is largely obliterated in Bultmann’s theology.

has its roots. By putting it in the center of the report we want to keep the New Testament ecclesiological statements from becoming an abstract “doctrine” about the unity of the church — a doctrine people then can believe to be true and can use in the present. Such doctrines are historically conditioned expressions of the power of Jesus Christ who has wanted and continues to want to move his church to fellowship and to unity.

After we briefly describe the significance of Jesus for the struggle for unity in the later church that appealed to him as its authority, we want to divide the New Testament age into two main epochs — the apostolic and post-apostolic periods. First of all, we want to give a general portrayal of the most important issues and the most important unity-promoting forces or ways of experiencing the “basic gift” for each epoch (sections 2 and 6). Then we will try to outline approaches to a theological analysis of the efforts to create church fellowship (sections 3 and 7). Then from each epoch we will describe the basic conflict that left its mark on the age — in the apostolic age the controversy over the church’s relationship to Israel (section 4) and in the post-apostolic age the conflict (admittedly in its earliest stage) between Gnostic and so-called Early Catholic Christians (section 8). We will devote a separate section to a portrayal of Paul’s thoughts on church fellowship (section 5).

### 1. Jesus: The Origin of the Community of the Church

Who, according to the New Testament, founded the church? There are two classic answers to this question. One of them is: “I believe that the Church . . . was instituted immediately and directly by the true and historical Christ himself and . . . was built on Peter, the first of the apostles.”<sup>9</sup> This answer of the anti-modernists has been rejected by both Catholic and Protestant scholarship. Jesus almost never speaks of the church in his own words. The important saying of Matthew 16:18 speaks of the establishment of the church expressly in the future, and even then we are dealing with a saying that for a number of reasons can hardly be an authentic word of Jesus. Thus New Testament scholarship increasingly has come to the opposite conclusion and declared that the church was a post-Easter creation of the Risen One: “The Church has its origin and its beginning in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

9. For the Latin text, see Heinrich Denzinger and Adolf Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 36th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), no. 3540.

10. Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James M. Robinson (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 186.

This second thesis has both historical and substantive difficulties. If taken as an absolute statement, it becomes historically difficult to explain the origin of the church at all. In twentieth-century Protestant scholarship it was long a widely accepted thesis that discontinuity prevailed between Jesus and the early church, in Christology as well as in ecclesiology. The general opinion was that Jesus himself had no explicit Christology — that it originated in earliest Christianity because of the resurrection, as a response to Jesus. Parallel to this view was the thesis of ecclesiological discontinuity — that Jesus founded no church, that he instead proclaimed the kingdom of God. What came after his death was not the kingdom but the church.<sup>11</sup> Yet the question is: How did the church happen to come into existence after Easter if there were no links to Jesus for such a development? In that case we would have to assume that when the disciples stayed together in the name of Jesus after Easter and carried on his proclamation they were trying to do something completely new — indeed, that in doing so they may even have been acting contrary to the Jesus in whose name they did it. That is historically improbable. In history there are developments and changes but no absolute breaks.

The thesis would cause severe substantive problems for today’s churches. They could no longer claim Jesus as their authority. Or, if one wants to be somewhat less radical, when they did appeal to Jesus, they would no longer need to be concerned about the form of the church, since it wouldn’t have had anything to do with Jesus anyway. Then the unity of the church, this great dream of so many Christians, would not be important as far as Jesus is concerned. The ecumenical movement would then be deprived of an important foundation, and in all probability even this book would not have needed to be written. If the church is founded only on the belief in the resurrection, it seems that it is in danger of losing its grounding in history. In that case there is no longer any historical basis for coming to an agreement about the shape of the church. Historically, Protestants have always exhibited a fatal tendency to regard the visible form of the church as unimportant. They have always found it relatively easy to pattern their church order after whatever political system happened to be dominant — for example, after a monarchy with the king or ruling nobleman as the supreme bishop or after a republican system with a synod that functioned like a secular parliament. They were able to do this since the *one true* church was invisible anyway. The visible state churches simply could not be the true church. One could call this Protestant tendency

11. Following an often-quoted statement from Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, trans. Christopher Home (1903; reprinted Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 166.



“ecclesiological docetism.”<sup>12</sup> It is quite compatible with the historical thesis that Jesus did not want a church and that the church had no historical roots in Jesus.

On the other hand, however, it is clear that Jesus did not establish a church. There is no New Testament evidence that he did so. That the word “church” is almost completely absent from sayings attributed to Jesus speaks for itself.<sup>13</sup> By no means are we to understand that the Jew Jesus of Nazareth founded the post-Easter church, which consisted of Jews and Gentiles and very soon consisted almost solely of Gentiles. Jesus was certainly open to Gentiles in special cases, as his meetings with the centurion in Capernaum and the Syrophenician woman show (Matt. 8:5-13; Mark 7:24-30), but those were exceptions. That the Gentiles would come to Israel was something he expected for the future kingdom of God, not for the present (Matt. 8:11-12). Christian theologians should be very suspicious of all attempts to understand the church as something established by Jesus, because to a great degree such a thesis reflects their own wishes and the needs of the church. In historical questions the wish is never permitted to be the father of the thought! Therefore, in view of the textual evidence, one can speak only of starting points or roots in Jesus that then after Easter led to the formation of the church.<sup>14</sup>

Who then founded the church is a question most New Testament witnesses do not even ask. The Gospels, which at least indirectly answer it, are for our understanding remarkably ambiguous. Admittedly, according to Luke the earthly Jesus already called and sent out apostles and disciples (Luke 5:1-11; 6:12-16; 9:1-6; 10:1-22), but it was the risen Lord who first made of them the church through the gift of the Spirit (Acts 1-2). According to Matthew, Jesus called his disciples in “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Matt. 4:15, 18-22) and sent them to Israel (chapter 10), but he relates the narrative in such a way that the future history of the church always shimmers through the story of Jesus. By contrast, the command “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19) comes first from the risen Lord. It is, therefore, a post-Easter command. Something similar is true of the Gospel of John. Like the Gospel of Matthew, John is also transparent regarding the experiences of the post-Easter church. Here Jesus calls his disciples in the same way that people be-

12. “Docetism” is the tenet that Christ only appeared to be human. One can call the view that the concrete-historical form of the church is irrelevant for faith “ecclesiological docetism.”

13. The word “church” appears only in Matt. 16:18 and 18:17. It is highly probable that neither saying comes from the historical Jesus.

14. Jürgen Roloff (*Kirche*, p. 19) speaks of an “implied ecclesiology” in Jesus. He means by the term the same thing I am calling “starting points” or “roots.”

came “disciples” later, after Easter. Not only are people called directly by Jesus; they are also won for Jesus and come to recognize who Christ is through the testimony of others (John 1:35-51). In both Matthew and John, the story of the historical Jesus and the deeds of the risen Lord after Easter are seen as if they were interwoven. If one were to ask New Testament witnesses who the church’s founder was, they probably would not say who *has* founded the church; they would more than likely say that the risen Lord Jesus *is* its foundation. That means at one and the same time an element of freedom and of obligation. That Jesus is *risen* meant for them that as the living Lord he accompanies his church to new shores. That it is *Jesus* who is risen meant that, in this new beginning, all of them referred to *his* story. That it was a concrete human being, Jesus, who was risen made it both possible and necessary to come to an understanding after Easter about what it meant to believe in him. And since according to the witness of the New Testament the church is the church of the risen *Jesus*, it was also necessary and possible to come to an understanding about the church. All New Testament believers had to come together and stay together for the simple reason that they understood themselves to be disciples of the *same* Lord.

What, however, was the historical reality?

Jesus understood himself as God’s messenger sent to Israel, perhaps as the coming Son of Man—World Judge. He inspired a missionary movement in Israel (cf. Luke 10:2-12). He understood his task to be to gather the people of Israel for the eschatological rule of God that was beginning to dawn with his activity.<sup>15</sup> The rule of God meant for him God’s new and definitive turning to his people — a new, unsurpassable love. Thus God called his people to himself through Jesus, no longer on the basis of his previous saving deeds — the Exodus, the Sinai covenant, the Torah — but in a completely new way. He threw open the circle of the elect in Israel and called *all*. Especially Israel’s people at the margin — the women, the unclean, the sick, the poor, the Samaritans, the tax collectors, and the children — entered the light of God’s love. Jesus was interested in the entire nation of Israel, not simply in the righteous and not simply in a pious remnant. Thus Jesus was interested in God’s people Israel and not in a new community separate from Israel. This new, entire people of God/Israel is based solely on God’s love.

There were around Jesus two special groups, both of which were concerned with the gathering of God’s people Israel and both of which consti-

15. On this point and on the entire chapter, see especially Gerhard Lohfink, “Jesus und die Kirche,” *HfTh*, vol. 3: *Traktat Kirche* (Freiburg: Herder, 1986), pp. 49-96; Thomas Söding, *Jesus und die Kirche: Was sagt das Neue Testament?* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007), pp. 89-213.

tuted something of a bridge between Jesus and the later church: the group of the Twelve and the people who followed Jesus, that is, the disciples. In all probability they are not identical; the latter group is larger than the former. We can regard them as an inner circle and a somewhat wider circle of people who followed Jesus.

We turn first to the Twelve. Jesus gathered a group of twelve disciples “that they might be with him” (Mark 3:14). The historicity of this group has been contested, but in my judgment the arguments for that view are not very convincing. How could this group have originated after Easter, when precisely then — because of Judas’s betrayal — it was no longer complete? How could one have invented the embarrassing fiction that a member of this closest circle had betrayed Jesus? Furthermore, nowhere after Easter do we see that the Twelve performed a real function — for example, in the leadership of the church.

Why did Jesus create this group? It is possible that it functioned as a sign. The twelve disciples in this circle represented the twelve tribes of God’s people Israel (cf. Matt. 19:28) that Jesus was gathering. The group of twelve was a symbolic anticipation of the totality of Israel that Jesus wanted to restore. In a similar way it was a present sign of the coming kingdom of God, just as, for example, the demon exorcisms were a sign of the final victory over Satan or the fellowship meals with tax collectors and sinners were a sign of the heavenly banquet in God’s kingdom. Perhaps we can add the following: there is wide agreement in the New Testament about the names of the disciples who belonged to the Twelve. Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot, two extreme opposites in Israel, belonged to the group. In all probability Jesus intentionally formed the Twelve as a concrete example of his open understanding of Israel. The barriers in Israel will be overcome in the kingdom of God, and a new community will come into being.

In addition to the Twelve, there were others whom Jesus called to follow him. Jesus’ call to follow him has nothing to do with rabbinic discipleship; it is directly patterned after the biblical model of Elisha’s relationship to Elijah (1 Kings 19:19-21). To begin with, one sees in this group of followers similarities to the Twelve. Here, too, there is a connection to the task of gathering the eschatological people of God/Israel. The difference is that these followers do not represent the twelve-tribe nation. Their calling is rather to share in Jesus’ task of gathering the people of God. The call to follow is the call to assume a task — namely, to be “fishers of men” (Mark 1:17) and to proclaim the kingdom of God (Luke 9:60). For this reason Jesus also sent his disciples to preach in Israel (cf. Mark 6:7-13; Luke 10:1-16), and he let them share his own authority (cf. Matt. 10:1). Even in the group of followers one can see something of

the openness of the eschatological Israel: the name of a tax collector, Levi, turns up (Mark 2:14). Above all — and for the Jewish society of that day this is quite noteworthy — there are also the names of women who were disciples of Jesus, supported him, and at least to some extent shared his itinerant life (Luke 8:1-3; Mark 15:40-41).<sup>16</sup>

Yet there are also other characteristics of the group of followers — features that were to become important for the later church. Discipleship involves a personal bond with Jesus, the primary characteristic of which was that the followers shared Jesus’ own itinerant life devoted to proclaiming the kingdom of God. Like Jesus, they also renounced vocation, family life, and possessions. The sayings about bearing one’s cross (Mark 8:34; Matt. 10:38) and about saving and losing one’s life (Mark 8:35; Matt. 10:39) are presumably not general maxims; they focus on the martyrdom facing Jesus and the disciples. “Cross” suggests execution, capital punishment; the metaphorical sense did not come into use until after Jesus’ death. If we may assume that Jesus reckoned with his own death, discipleship involves suffering with Jesus already in his lifetime. Thus a personal bond with Jesus does not mean primarily having a close personal relationship to him. Nor does it simply mean affirming his teaching. It means joining him in proclaiming the kingdom of God with all the consequences that involves for one’s own life.

What would that involve? The life Jesus lived in the light of the kingdom of God included his healings; his exorcisms (Luke 11:20); his renunciation of the orders of the world, of possessions, of structures of power and rank (Matt. 23:11); his renunciation of force in, for example, the passion narrative; and, above all, his association with outcasts, women, tax collectors, unclean people, and Samaritans. These things all belong to the life of the disciple-followers as well. They, too, practice nonviolence openly (Matt. 5:39-41), and in so doing they let a bit of the totally different world, the kingdom of God, shine through. They, too, travel about in obvious poverty (Luke 10:4), and in so doing they raise up a sign of the reversal of worldly power and worldly wealth in the kingdom of God. And above all they, too, live the fellowship of love that flows from God’s love to the outcasts in Israel. It is no accident that there are so many reports of table-fellowship in the Gospels. In all of these things the group of followers is a sign of the dawning kingdom of God, much as the small mustard seed is already the beginning of the full-grown plant (cf. Mark 4:30-32). By taking over Jesus’ own lifestyle, the fol-

16. This fact is important for the question of how women today should perform church ministries — more than ever a central question for the unity of the church.

lowers also become “parables” of the kingdom of God.<sup>17</sup> The existence of the group of followers is every bit as important for Jesus’ proclamation as is his own life. When everything that is involved in the dawning of the kingdom of God is already lived and is already happening in a small circle of people, Jesus’ proclamation is no abstract doctrine; it becomes something concrete people are able to experience.

Jesus then went to Jerusalem, and there he accepted — if he did not actually seek — his death.<sup>18</sup> In the judgment of today’s scholarship, that again is something we can say with some confidence. Of special importance for our theme is the last meal Jesus ate with his disciples in Jerusalem. All the Synoptic witnesses tell us that there was such a meal. We can no longer say with absolute certainty what words Jesus spoke on that occasion. In all probability the early-sounding statement looking forward to the kingdom of God comes from that last supper: “Amen, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25). This saying shows that Jesus’ anticipation of the coming of the kingdom of God was by no means shaken by the fact of his imminent death. It also confirms that wine was drunk at that farewell meal. All witnesses agree about *the* cup from which they all drank. That is noteworthy, since at Jewish meals as well as at the Passover feast every guest drank out of his own cup.<sup>19</sup> At that meal, however, a single cup, the cup of Jesus himself, made the round of all the disciples. That was so unusual that Jesus was forced to say something about it. The most immediately plausible suggestion is that this cup is to be understood as a sign of the community. Before his death Jesus wanted to strengthen the community of the disciples one more time, because he wanted them to stay together beyond his own death. That may also mean that he believed that he himself would have a special significance in the future. We no longer know for certain what Jesus said about this one cup, yet because there *must* have been an explanation of its meaning it is most probable that the cup saying transmitted to us (Mark 14:24; 1 Cor. 11:25) in some form also comes from Jesus. That would mean that in some form Jesus attributed soterio-

17. In his last Jesus book, Eduard Schweizer proposed understanding Jesus as a “parable of God.” *Jesus, the Parable of God: What Do We Really Know about Jesus?* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1994).

18. Ulrich Luz, “Warum zog Jesus nach Jerusalem?” in *Der Historische Jesus: Tendenzen und Perspektiven der gegenwärtigen Forschung*, ed. Jens Schröter and Ralph Brucker, BZNW 114 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), pp. 409-27.

19. See Heinz Schürmann, *Jesus Ureigener Tod: Exegetische Besinnungen und Ausblick* (Freiburg: Herder, 1976), pp. 76-77. There is an analogy in the bread ritual. Jesus breaks one loaf into pieces and divides it among his disciples.

logical significance to his death. That is not certain, however; here we can do no better than make educated guesses.

Thus Jesus wanted his community of disciples to continue beyond his death. Since this was related to the kingdom of God, that meant that they should continue to proclaim the kingdom of God until it finally arrived. We do not know with what period of time he may have reckoned or whether he thought the kingdom of God and the judgment would come in connection with his death (as Luke 12:49-50 appears to suggest).

In summary: the basic dimensions of what later became the church were already laid out in the group of the Twelve and the group of followers, although the intention of Jesus was not that the two groups should become the later church. It was that they should become the first germ-cell and the vanguard of the new Israel that God created with the beginning of his kingdom. Only historically, but not according to Jesus’ intention, the church then evolved from this beginning when the disciples turned to the Gentile mission and when it became clear that they were rejected by Israel’s majority. These primitive cells of the later church were essentially part of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God. Their basic characteristics are:

1. looking *forward*, the relation to the kingdom of God. As a kind of parable, the disciples portrayed the kingdom of God and in so doing set up a countermark to the world — to its wealth, its relationships of domination and control, and its religious barriers.
2. looking *backward*, the relation to Jesus, who embodied the kingdom of God in his activity. The disciples took over Jesus’ mission, his lifestyle, and his suffering.
3. *outwardly*, the relation to Israel as a whole, of which the group of the Twelve was a symbol. The proclamation of the kingdom of God was meant for this larger group.
4. *inwardly*, the love and the fellowship of the disciples among themselves and the inclusive power for outsiders and people at the margins as it reflected Jesus’ proclamation of God’s love.

Anticipating what is to come, we might say that from Jesus’ perspective the later church has to portray and live its own gospel. Since Jesus’ central concern was the gift of God’s love, overcoming barriers, and integrating outsiders, *fellowship and love are the essential features of church that most clearly correspond to the gospel of Jesus Christ it proclaims*. Or, to say the same thing negatively, whenever in the church either the gospel or love is obscured, the

church is in danger of losing itself. Thus from Jesus' perspective the task of combining gospel and love is the church's basic mission. The New Testament period will already show that sometimes the two are in danger of living in deep tension with one another.

What happened after Jesus' death? We know that initially the disciples fled and scattered. It was the Easter appearances that brought them together again. What did the Easter appearances and the belief in the Risen One mean for the church? They are not simply the church's primal date, but they effected more than a connection with what had existed before Easter.

The confession that God has raised Jesus from the dead is much more than belief in a miraculous resuscitation. When the disciples interpreted the Easter appearances this way, they probably were thinking of the praise of Israel's God they prayed daily: "Blessed art thou, O Lord, who quickenest the dead."<sup>20</sup> People expected that when the new age came God would raise the dead and thus demonstrate his divinity. Now when the disciples testified that God raised Jesus from the dead it meant for them that God has revealed himself definitively in Jesus. By aligning himself with Jesus and rescuing him from death, God has newly made known his name. From this point on, Israel's God was inseparably connected with this man, Jesus of Nazareth. From this point on, Jesus' followers could speak of God only in connection with Jesus. For the community of disciples that meant that because of Easter it was finally clear that Jesus was not simply one member of this community who was no longer present while the community as such continued on. Rather, Jesus is the continuing basis of this community. Without him this community could not proclaim God's kingdom. Without him it could not even exist — even, indeed, especially not after his death. He is living in his church. Of course, none of that had been foreign to the earlier fellowship with Jesus. Before Easter it had also been the case that Jesus himself called people to discipleship. It may be that at his farewell supper, when he broke the bread and passed the one cup around the circle, he had already intimated that he wanted to give his life for the sake of the disciples. Such intimations then became quite clear after Easter. Because God who raises the dead aligned himself with Jesus and raised him, Jesus became the foundation of his disciples' vital fellowship. They could live only because of him. They oriented their lives toward him. Because of him they continued to be called to the proclamation of the kingdom of God and to love.

We began by designating Jesus as the basic gift that always precedes the

20. Benediction 2 of the Eighteen Benedictions (*Shemoneh Esreh*).

church's struggle for community and unity and that makes the effort possible. Precisely this basic gift has its basis in the Easter event.

## THE APOSTOLIC AGE

### 2. The Beginnings of the Church after Easter

"Now the multitude of believers was one heart and one soul. . . ." These are the words with which Luke begins his portrayal of the primitive church in Jerusalem (Acts 4:32). The Lukan picture of the primitive church is well known. It was gathered in Jerusalem; Luke says nothing about other locations. It was united under the leadership of the twelve apostles, it prayed in the Temple, it broke the bread of the Lord's Supper together, it had possessions in common, and it praised God (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37). At the same time, it is equally well known that this is a Lukan ideal. Luke had a theological interest in Jerusalem; the primitive church in Jerusalem represented the church's continuity with Israel. Primitive Christian communism is an ideal image, although it is not without some historical basis.<sup>21</sup> Equally idealistic is Luke's portrayal of the group of the twelve apostles. It is probable that the linkage of the Twelve and the apostles, at least in part originally two separate groups, had already taken place before Luke.<sup>22</sup> We know almost nothing of earliest Christianity outside Jerusalem, perhaps because Luke knew nothing about it, perhaps because he did not want to talk about it. In all probability there were followers of Jesus elsewhere, especially in Galilee. Luke says nothing about what happened to them. He tells only about the Jerusalemites — that is, about the followers of Jesus who stayed in Jerusalem or went there after Easter. Luke also says nothing about the so-called itinerant charismatics. According to his description, traveling and doing missionary work is the task

21. Acts 4:36-37 conveys an early report that was well remembered. Joseph Barnabas sold a field and gave the proceeds to the apostles. Acts 5:1-11 presupposes that members of the community made available to the community the proceeds of property they sold, but not necessarily all the proceeds. (The charge against Ananias and Sapphira was merely that they had lied.) The practice of Jesus (Mark 10:17-27; disciples are called to leave their profession) and the situation of the Jerusalem church (the Galilean disciples had no way of supporting themselves in Jerusalem) both make it likely that the practice of holding possessions in common was widespread (a communism of consumption, not of production).

22. The earliest text, 1 Cor. 15:5, 7, presupposes that the Twelve and the apostles were at least partially two different groups, but Rev. 21:14 and Mark 6:7 already assume that the Twelve were apostles.

of the apostles, to whom one might add the evangelist Philip. Only occasional notes such as Acts 11:19 or the figure of the prophet Agabus, who appears more than once (cf. Acts 11:27-28; 21:10), suggest that Luke may have known more than he said. Above all, the uniformity of primitive Christian preaching was a basic concept of Luke's portrayal. One sees that, for example, when the Lukan Paul's preaching to Jews follows the same pattern that underlay Peter's sermons to Jews.<sup>23</sup> Not until Paul preached to the Gentiles did he follow a different pattern (Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31). It is the addressees rather than the person of Paul or of Peter who determine for Luke the content of the preaching.

Very likely, the reality was not quite like that. Gerd Theissen summarizes a brief survey of primitive Christianity: "Life in primitive Christianity was quite Protestant-like. Where two or three were together they formed a divergent minority. It was precisely because of these many groups that people projected the ideal of an original church unity."<sup>24</sup> Luke, but also John or the author of Ephesians, were among the New Testament authors at the end of the first century who projected such ideals as a counterpoint to a completely different reality.

We offer two theses: (1) *From the beginning there were in primitive Christianity tensions and diverging tendencies.* (2) *From the beginning one senses a very strong tendency, the goal of which was that the followers of Jesus stay together.*

Since we have little actual knowledge of the earliest period, we will confine ourselves to rather general considerations.

### 2.1. Tensions and Divergences

Beginning with Acts 6:1, Luke tells of the tensions in Jerusalem between the Greek-speaking Jewish followers of Jesus (the "Hellenists"), who presumably had immigrated from the Diaspora, and the Aramaic-speaking disciples. These tensions must have had their roots in, among other things, a different interpretation of Jesus' understanding of the Jewish Law, the Torah. The Hellenists around Stephen criticized the Temple, and their understanding of the Torah was freer than was that of the Aramaic-speaking Christians (Acts 6:11, 14; 7:48-53). For this reason they, and only they, were persecuted in Jerusalem,

23. Acts 13:16-41; cf., for example, Acts 2:14-41.

24. "Die Einheit der Kirche: Kohärenz und Differenz im Urchristentum," *ZMiss* 20 (1994): 71.

and after Stephen was murdered they left Jerusalem.<sup>25</sup> At a very early date, therefore, the different attitude toward the Torah was a question that divided the followers of Jesus. It may be that the law-free Gentile mission was first carried on by such Greek-speaking Jewish followers of Jesus from the Diaspora (Acts 11:20).

Nevertheless, from the very beginning there must also have been other tensions in primitive Christianity. Gerd Theissen has called our attention to the phenomenon of primitive Christian itinerant charismatics.<sup>26</sup> What we have here is nothing more than the reality that after Jesus' death the Jesus movement continued literally as a movement of itinerant preachers. One is not to be misled here by the reality that in later Christianity (at the latest since the Gospel of Mark) "following Jesus" became a concept that could also be used metaphorically for a life in the service of Christ. Initially "following Jesus" meant the continuation of Jesus' itinerant life in the service of proclaiming the kingdom of God. Undoubtedly there were problems here. Who took care of the wives and children of those who went away to follow Jesus? Who took care of the wandering charismatics who became sick and old? What authority did these itinerant messengers of Jesus have who often understood themselves as prophets (cf. Matt. 23:34) and who appeared in the churches as representatives of the risen Lord (cf. Matt. 10:40-42)? Most of the conflicts we read about in Galatians, Philippians, and 2 Corinthians are conflicts with Christian emissaries who came into the Pauline churches from elsewhere. Later, Diotrephes (3 John 9-10) or Luke (Acts 20:29) also had to deal with such emissaries.

First Corinthians 1:12-17 suggests another problem, one that will not have been an isolated case. Where missionaries or apostles appeared, congregations became attached to personalities. In Corinth the groups of Paul, of Apollos, of Peter (and the mysterious "group of Christ"?), confronted one another. Obviously the members of the church honored in a special way those who had converted and baptized them, even as they rejected claims made by others. Paul, who in Corinth was clearly aware that he worked in cooperation with others (1 Cor. 3:9-10), still could not keep from boasting of his special position as the church's "father" (1 Cor. 4:15). Without the special role the apostles played as the founders of churches, it would be impossible to con-

25. According to Acts 6:1-8:3, the twelve apostles are also regarded as residing in Jerusalem. They, too, remain there after Stephen's death. In Gal. 1:18-19 Paul also expects to find Cephas and possibly other apostles in Jerusalem.

26. Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); Gerd Theissen, *Die Jesusbewegung: Sozialgeschichte einer Revolution der Werte* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2004).

ceive of the fundamental importance they had in retrospect in the second, post-apostolic generation.

*Cultural factors* in different regions could lead to tensions. There was doubtless a cultural factor in the different ways the Torah was understood by the “Hellenists” from the Diaspora and the Aramaic-speaking followers of Jesus in Palestine in Acts 6. Obedience to the Torah was more vigorously discussed in the Diaspora, and its consequences, separation from the Gentiles, were more noticeable than they were in Israel’s heartland. That could have had different effects. Many Jews in the Diaspora laid special emphasis on exact obedience to the Torah, because in so doing they underscored their difference from the Gentiles. Others were more interested in being assimilated. The message of Jesus, which emphasized the love command rather than ritual laws, was more accommodating to such tendencies. It joined forces with the need of many Hellenistic Jews for assimilation, and thus in Antioch, for example, it led temporarily to table fellowship between the Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus. The need for this kind of table fellowship was certainly greater in Antioch, where the Jews belonged to an ethnic and religious minority, than it was in Jerusalem, where there were few non-Jews. Thus the different cultural situation led to tensions. Different still was the situation for the church in Rome, where in Paul’s day the Jewish followers of Jesus were an ethnic minority not only in the city but also in the church. The different practices in, for example, the question of food regulations led to tensions and conflicts.

There were also other tension-causing issues that were present especially in the local church. I offer here only a few suggestions. Many tensions have social causes, such as, for example, the tensions between poor and rich in Corinth. One sees also conflict between generations. At issue in Matthew 10:34-37 is the struggle between young people and (non-Christian?) parents. In later texts it is more the case that the young people (that is, the second Christian generation) are exhorted to be obedient to their elders (1 *Clement*). Frequently there is evidence of conflicts between charismatics and non-charismatics (1 Cor. 14; Matt. 7:15-23; Mark 13:21-23). The ancient saying of Galatians 3:28 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female”), known throughout Pauline Christianity, also reveals something about the potentials for conflict within the Christian communities as well as in the larger society of the day. They are important for our theme. Since in all New Testament texts “community” has both a local and a trans-regional dimension, and since in many cases the difficulties are the same in the local churches and the church at large, we have to look at the local level as well when we speak about the “unity of the church” and the things that threaten it. It is only the thematic arrangement of this present work, and not

the subject matter itself, that justified placing the emphasis primarily on the transregional, “ecumenical” sense.

Soon, then, tensions caused by *different understandings of Jesus Christ as the basic gift* were added to these more general tensions. It is amazing how early Jesus Christ, the foundation that all followers of Jesus had in common, began to divide them as well as unite them. What ultimately separated Paul from his opponents was not social or cultural causes of tension; it was the “other Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4). Why that was the case probably has something to do with the fact that Jesus himself had made very strong and very binding claims, indeed exclusive claims for his proclamation and his person. Whether one stands or falls in the last judgment depends on one’s attitude toward him (cf. Luke 12:8-9). “Whoever hears and does *my* words” — not, for example, the words of the Torah as the rabbis said in similar images — “has built his house on the rock” (Matt. 7:24-27). The belief that God raised Jesus from the dead means that God had said yes to the man Jesus. As soon became obvious, that led to a fundamentally new orientation of Jewish monotheism. That, however, was not initially clear. Only gradually did it become clear that Jesus of Nazareth, who wanted to call Israel back to God, had the potential to become the gravitational center of a new religion — a religion that would burst the boundaries of the Jewish people. Of course, precisely that was a controversial issue, as the first basic conflict of the nascent church demonstrates. It was a conflict over the church’s relationship to Israel. Was it to be part of Israel or separate from Israel? (See below, section 4.) Ultimately, it was precisely the “basic gift,” Jesus Christ, the one who kept his followers together, who became the reason for their separation.

## 2.2. *Unity-promoting Forces*

From the very beginning there was a strong sense of the church’s solidarity in primitive Christianity. It is amazing, indeed quite rare, how much primitive Christianity understood itself from its inception as a unity. From the very beginning unity-promoting forces were in play — forces that at best have only limited analogies in comparable contemporary religions.<sup>27</sup> These forces are as follows:

27. James Dunn (“Instruments of Koinonia in the Early Church,” *OiC* 25 [1989]: 206-11) makes a distinction between “sources” and “instruments” of church unity. His distinction is similar to our distinction between “basic gift” and “unity-promoting forces.” Among his “sources” are the Spirit, the story of Jesus, and the connection to Israel, and among his “instruments” are sacraments, confessions, and episcopacy. In the third part of this book, Christian

1. *Baptism.* As far as we can see, everywhere in the earliest churches new converts were baptized. In baptism the Jesus movement possessed a special rite of initiation that was the same for all — men and women, Jews and non-Jews. Why did baptism exist, presumably from the very beginning, as an entrance ritual? That is a difficult question. Of course, baptism goes back to John the Baptist, but he and his followers did not understand it as a ritual of entrance into a particular movement. Jesus was baptized by John, but whether he himself also baptized is an open question. It is reported in no early Christian writing, with the exception of the Gospel of John (John 3:22, 26). The Gospel of John contains some quite old information precisely from Israel's South, from Jerusalem and Judea, where John was also active. Thus it is quite possible that it passed on here something that is historically accurate, yet the silence of all other New Testament writings is quite strange. We can make no more than a cautious supposition that Jesus also might have baptized at the beginning of his activity. We can only say with some certainty that some, but not all, of Jesus' followers came from the groups around John the Baptist (cf. John 1:35-42).

The post-Easter disciples of Jesus did not simply take over John's baptism without changes. What remained of it was its relationship to Israel: baptism is the seal of those who belong to the eschatological people of God (cf. 2 Cor. 1:22). By taking over John's baptism, the followers of Jesus claimed to be the people of God/Israel whom John called and Jesus gathered. Thus the general acceptance of baptism presupposed an awareness of being God's people. What was new was the relationship to the risen Lord, Jesus. Baptism took place everywhere in his name. In contrast to the baptism of John, Christian baptism was associated with what God in his grace had done through Jesus. In baptism his followers experienced the power of the risen Lord.

Why did baptism establish itself in the Jesus movement so quickly and so universally as a rite of initiation? Whether Jesus himself baptized remains uncertain, and no New Testament witness says that Jesus ordained baptism during his lifetime. I suspect that the sense of the young Jesus movement that in its meeting with Jesus it had experienced God in an impressive and life-altering way was so strong that it had to be expressed in a new and unique rite of initiation. This rite had a fundamental significance that bound all followers of Jesus to one another. It is noteworthy that early Christian baptism was

---

Link speaks more of "flash points" of unity than of "forces" (below, pp. 168-69). I can agree with that as long as "flash point" (*Brennpunkt*) does not mean merely an empirical field where the question of unity is especially urgent. It must also mean a "burning point" (*brennender Punkt*) that not only makes unity necessary but also leads to it.

valid *everywhere* and did not have to be — indeed could not be — repeated. When Christians moved to another place, they did not need to be baptized again, as was said to be the case in mystery religions.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, a second baptism was also inconceivable. If persons baptized once had apostatized or had seriously broken the obligations they had accepted when entering the Christian community, no second baptism was possible. In short, baptism was radical, transforming, and uniting.

2. *The Lord's Supper.* It is less surprising that the Lord's Supper was spread throughout the entire Jesus movement, since it comes from Jesus himself. In the "for many" of the cup saying (Mark 14:24) there is at least implicitly a reference to the entire church. The words of institution that were probably found everywhere and the *maranatha* cry (1 Cor. 16:22; cf. Rev. 22:20; *Didache* 10.6) suggest that other ritual elements of the Lord's Supper were also found everywhere. The ecumenical aspect of the Lord's Supper is emphasized already in early interpretations of the Lord's Supper. Paul says, "The bread which we break, is it not a fellowship of the body of Christ?" And he explains: "If there is *one* loaf, the many are *one* body, for we all partake of the *one* loaf" (1 Cor. 10:16-17). The eucharistic prayer of the *Didache* contains the petition that the church be gathered from the four winds into God's kingdom (*Didache* 10.5).

3. *The confession.* In 1 Corinthians 15:3 Paul introduces his quotation of an early Christ confession with the words: "I delivered to you first of all what I also received." For him the confession is the basis for speaking to the Corinthian church about the common Christian belief in the future resurrection. It is a confession Paul has received. It is suggested in current scholarship — correctly, in my judgment — that we are to look for the origin of this confession in Palestine, since it is for Paul an expression of the faith he shares with the first apostles (cf. 1 Cor. 15:11). In any case, the text makes clear that there were confessional texts very early in the church. As a common basis of faith they have a uniting function. Also, at the beginning of Romans, the apostle Paul — personally unknown to the Roman church and perhaps a not uncontroversial figure — introduces himself with a Christ confession in order to establish the common basis of faith between him and the church (Rom. 1:3-4).

Of course, it is obvious in the New Testament that these early confessional formulas are worded quite differently. There is not *one* confession; there are many confessions, and in quite different ways they emphasize quite

28. Apuleius (*Metamorphoses* 11.27-29) states that the devotees of the Isis mysteries had to be initiated anew whenever they moved to a new location.

different aspects of Jesus' significance. There are no reasons to conclude, however, that there was ever a Christianity without enunciated confessions. They all point to the *one* Jesus Christ, but they do so in multiple ways. Both are important — the number of confessions that have been preserved and their common reference to the risen Lord Jesus. Both show that it was not the confessions themselves that bound the early Christians together; it was he to whom they point.

4. *The mission.* An unknown number of Jesus' followers continued his itinerant lifestyle, traveling without possessions throughout the land of Israel and proclaiming the kingdom of God with authority. The various forms of the sending discourse (Matt. 10:5-42; Mark 6:7-11; Q [= Luke] 10:2-16), with their tradition-historical antecedents, give us a glimpse of their life and their problems. Initially these wandering messengers of Jesus continued his mission in Israel. They viewed themselves as a movement in, not alongside, Israel (cf. Matt. 10:5-6, 23; 23:34-36, 37-39). Early on, however, they must have also taken on an important "inner-church" function: their preaching resulted in settled communities. The itinerant missionaries went out from and returned to these communities, and they were answerable to the communities as prophets and teachers. The Sayings Source Q<sup>29</sup> is full of the traditions of such itinerant prophets, but it also contains texts that reflect the problems of settled communities, and in the form in which it can be reconstructed today it most certainly was composed in such a community. It shows in an exemplary way how itinerant prophets and settled communities lived together. Especially in Palestine these itinerant prophets who moved from community to community must have played an important role in developing the consciousness of being part of the "whole church." They shared traditions and news with the communities. They provided contact among the communities. They created in the communities the awareness that they were part of a larger movement, the "whole church."

Already the sending discourse of the Sayings Source enunciated the principle that the worker is worthy of his pay (Q 10:7). This principle is quite old; obviously it was valid everywhere in the church. Paul presumes it, even when he forgoes the right of support for himself and Barnabas (1 Cor. 9:4-18) and must defend himself against the charge of not having done the same with others (2 Cor. 11:7). The significance of this right to be supported was that therein the communities acknowledged the itinerant missionaries as their "workers" for whom they had an obligation. With this support they assumed

29. Matthew and Luke probably used the Sayings Source Q as a source. It is generally cited as Q with Luke's chapter and verse numbers.

an element of "whole church" responsibility for the mission and for those who carried it out. They took their place in the whole of the Jesus movement. It is not unimportant that for one thing this becomes conspicuous in their physical support.

Our discussion of the itinerant charismatics showed that the communities understood mission as a joint task. Paul's life and missionary work make the same thing clear. What is noticeable right away about the apostolic council in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1-10; Acts 15) is that those present had to come to an agreement about mission and that they were able to do so. That may appear to us to be self-evident, but in the context of ancient religions it is by no means a given. Seldom are ancient cults aware of a transregional missionary connection. Why should a Serapis devotee in Egypt care what happened with his god when he was proclaimed in the streets of Corinth? One *had* to come to an understanding about the Lord Jesus, however, because the fact that there was only *one* Lord had consequences for the church. Thus the Gentile mission, wherever it was affirmed as the common task of the church, became a unity-promoting force. At first it relied on the existence of the Jewish Diaspora; increasingly it became independent of it.

5. *Tradition.* Well before the post-apostolic age, the reference to the common Jesus tradition bound all the communities together. One can see that already in the earliest period. The earliest Christ confessions are crystallization points of the tradition. One can see that well in the confession of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 that was shared by Paul and the Jerusalem apostles. It is like a short version of the passion and Easter narrative. Or, inversely, the passion and Easter story narrates and develops this confession. Thus Paul also knows about the night "in which Jesus was betrayed" (1 Cor. 11:23).

In the process of its development, the Sayings Source shows that the communities' body of tradition was continually expanded. There is also a long process of gathering traditions behind the Gospel of Mark. Local traditions became common property. The community in which the Gospel of Mark originated was not located in Palestine, yet it is clear that there must have been an exchange of traditions between it and the representatives of the Sayings Source. Otherwise we would not be able to explain the things that the beginnings of the Sayings Source and the Gospel of Mark have in common: the appearance and preaching of the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, the temptation, and a programmatic proclamation of Jesus (Mark 1:2-15; Q [= Luke] 3:1-4, 13; 6:20-49). We see such contacts elsewhere as well. One can compare, for example, the Sending Discourse of Q (= Luke) 10:2-16 and Mark 6:7-13. In my judgment the structure of the Gospel of John is not understandable without assuming that the Johannine community in some form knew about the Gospel



of Mark or about all the Synoptic Gospels. In short, Jesus traditions are *common* traditions. They were not only collected; they were also exchanged and passed on. From the very beginning the church was constituted by a *common* tradition. One sees it also in the area of worship — for example, in the early and widespread use of the *abba* cry or the Lord's Prayer.

6. *The apostles.* An apostle is a person appointed and sent by the risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:7), who with his authority represents the Lord himself. In our context it is important to observe that an apostle exercises the Lord's authority in the entire church. We can see that clearly in the case of Paul but also with Peter and even with James, the Lord's brother, who was an authority in the entire church even though he scarcely left Jerusalem. The three "pillars" (Gal. 2:9), presumably the innermost circle of apostles, understood their ministry as a church-wide ministry. They were the decisive "bearers" of the church, God's temple or edifice. In any case, it is noteworthy that from the very beginning there was in Jesus' communities a whole-church ministry, although the functions, tasks, and charismatic gifts could be quite different in the individual communities. As "apostles of Jesus Christ," the apostles represent Christ, the basic gift of unity for the *whole* church.

7. *Jerusalem.* I speak with hesitation of Jerusalem's significance for the entire church, for here we enter a controversial area.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, there may not even have been agreement about it in primitive Christianity. That Jerusalem was important for the Jerusalem church and its representatives is clear. The Jewish Christians regarded Jerusalem as the center of the people of God, of whom they understood themselves to be the nucleus. Think of the testimony of people who were not particularly interested in Jerusalem: Two years after his conversion Paul went to Jerusalem to see Peter, and he expected to meet other apostles there as well (Gal. 1:18). Later, on at least two occasions, Paul went to Jerusalem at important points in his life (Gal. 2:1-10; Rom. 15:25, 31). He has "fulfilled the gospel of Christ *from Jerusalem* and around into Illyricum" (Rom. 15:19). The Gentile Christian Luke is of the opinion that the mission of the church extends from Jerusalem unto the ends of the world (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). Thus on this point he is a faithful Paulinist. In various

30. Since Karl Holl's article ("Der Kirchenbegriff des Paulus in seinem Verhältnis zu dem der Urgemeinde," in Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 2: *Der Osten* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964], pp. 44-67), the thesis of Jerusalem as the "presiding capital" [*Vorort*] of primitive Christianity has been a constant part of the discussion. He claimed that Paul broke with the juridical claim of this center. I prefer the thesis that Jerusalem was a "spiritual presiding capital" with which Paul in no way could have broken, nor did he want to. Did the Jerusalem church understand itself to be the center of the entire church, which for it was the *ekklesia tou theou*, the "assembly of God"?

areas of early Christianity one finds the concept of the eschatological church as a heavenly Jerusalem (Paul, Hebrews, Revelation). Is it only in the memory of John the Seer that the heavenly Jerusalem bears the names of the twelve apostles on its gates (Rev. 21:14)? Or do we have here something of the knowledge that the earthly church and the earthly apostles were associated with the earthly Jerusalem? It seems to me that the entire early church knew of the significance of Jerusalem for the church, even if it was interpreted in quite different ways.

In most of these factors we discover the two fundamental points of the church's unity that we already noticed in the Twelve and in Jesus' circle of disciples: (1) the reference to Jesus, who made the community of disciples possible and who in the Easter experiences became the permanent basic gift of the church's fellowship — and the related point, (2) the reference to the people of Israel for whom Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God and whose God according to the Easter confession had permanently and definitively allied himself with Jesus.

*We summarize:* since the early beginnings of Christianity one can see on quite different levels that the church at large is something real. It is by no means simply an idea that bound together local churches and Jesus groups. From the very beginning the common basis, Jesus, and the common horizon, Israel, determined that the earliest Christianity would become something different from other religions. From the very beginning the sense of belonging together and the lived ecumenical fellowship were constitutive. The centrifugal tendencies that exist in every religious movement were opposed from the very beginning by such strong centripetal forces that the church was never able to develop merely as a group of local churches existing side by side. It always struggled for solidarity and community. From the very beginning there was *the* whole church as a lived fellowship in a multiplicity of expressions.

The picture we have sketched here needs clarification. When we look at the centrifugal and centripetal forces at work in the earliest church, it might appear that it was primarily cultural, social, or socio-psychological factors that led to tensions in the church, while it was primarily the basic gift bestowed on the church — that is, Jesus Christ himself as he was experienced in preaching, in baptism and the Lord's Supper, by means of the figure of the apostles, etc. — that created community. Yet the view that "here are people, who cause division, there is God who brings them together" is too simple to be true.

Jesus Christ is at work as the basic gift in the centrifugal as well as in the

centripetal impulses in early Christianity. One can see that, for example, in the conflicts in Galatia and in Corinth. There it was the conviction that the opponents proclaimed “another Jesus” that led to Paul’s separation from them, and presumably the opposite was also true. A differing interpretation of Christ, the basic gift, was combined here with differing cultural and religious presuppositions and led to division. The role of the apostles is also ambivalent. On the one hand, they are people commissioned by the risen Christ for the entire church, and as such they are one of the strongest cohesive factors of the earliest period. On the other hand, they too interpreted Christ in differing ways and had at their disposal differing charismatic abilities. In addition, there were varying degrees of intensity in their relationship with the members of the community. First Corinthians 1:10-14 shows that they, too, could become the reason for divisions. In all these cases the unifying and at the same time dividing basic gift, Christ, and differing cultural, socio-psychological, and social factors work together. Thus it cannot be the case that “human” dissonance factors are played off against theological coherence factors. It is more the case that we are to think of the effectiveness of the basic gift Jesus Christ *in* human reality.

### 3. The Beginnings of Ecclesiology

There was also quite early a whole-church consciousness, something like a *rudimentary whole-church ecclesiology*. Of course, we learn very little from this early period.

The likely earliest self-designations of the followers of Jesus provide little information about a whole-church ecclesiology. One thinks here first of the self-designation *disciples of Jesus* that was important in various areas of earliest Christianity (Synoptic Gospels, John, Acts). One can at most indirectly derive a whole-church self-understanding from the term. The situation is similar with the expression *the chosen*, which is usually used in an attributive or predicate sense but can also be a name the Christians used for themselves (Mark 13:22, 27; Rom. 8:33; Rev. 17:14). Its roots lie in Israel’s self-designation as the people of God. Much more widespread is the self-designation of the earliest Christians as *holy ones* (saints), which is found especially in Paul but may also have had earlier roots (cf. Acts 9:13, 32; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1; Revelation). The term expresses that one belongs to God. It does not explicitly call attention to Israel.

It is different, however, with the word *ekklesia*, the most important self-designation in the ancient church. It appears in almost the entire New Testa-

ment, especially in Acts, in the Pauline and deutero-Pauline letters, and in Revelation. In most of the places — especially in Paul, in Acts, and in Revelation — the word refers to a local church. In profane Greek *ekklesia* means the popular assembly that could be found in most free cities. One can still see something of the concrete meaning “assembly” in several, primarily Pauline, texts (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:18; 14:23, 34-35; Matt. 18:18). At the same time there are a number of texts in the New Testament where *ekklesia* clearly refers to the entire church and not a local assembly (Matt. 16:18; Acts 20:28; cf. 9:31; Col. 1:18, 24; nine times in Ephesians; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 12:23). This use of the word cannot be related to the popular city assemblies. In addition one finds, especially in Paul, the expression *ekklesia tou theou*, occasionally when he speaks of the churches in Judea or Jerusalem (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; 1 Thess. 2:14), but also other places where the apostle wants to emphasize that the local church belongs to God (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2; 11:16, 22). In these texts, too, the idea of the popular assembly does not adequately explain the term. Instead, we should remember that in the Greek Bible *ekklesia* is one of the words used to translate the Hebrew *qahal* (= assembly), which is usually used for the assembly of the people of Israel. One also finds in the Greek Bible “assembly of the Lord” and “assembly of the Highest” but not “assembly of God,” a term with which several texts from Qumran are familiar.

When we survey all the evidence, it becomes clear that in its meaning the word *ekklesia* resembles an ellipse with two focal points. On the one hand, it evokes biblical associations. The assembly of the nation Israel, the assembly of God, is behind the word. From the perspective of this focal point it is understandable that the word can be used for the entire church. On the other hand, it evokes associations with the popular assemblies of ancient cities. From the perspective of this focal point it is understandable why a local church is so often referred to as *ekklesia*. The meaning of *ekklesia* appears to oscillate back and forth between the two focal points. First one, then the other is more strongly emphasized. Often there is at least the connotation of both meanings.

It is therefore difficult to decide how to translate the word *ekklesia*. It is no accident that thus far I have simply used the Greek word. The Reformers translated it consistently as *gmeynd* (Zwingli) or *Gemeine* (Luther) (= Congregation). That was an innovation over the Vulgate, which had rendered it as *ecclesia*, but it does not do justice to the whole-church “focal point” in the word’s ellipse. The Revised Standard Version of 1961 translates it sometimes as “congregation,” sometimes as “church.” However, that obscures the fact that it is always the same word. The New Revised Standard Version of 1989 translates it consistently as “church,” but then one loses the sense that in many

places the individual community, and often the concrete congregational assembly, is meant.<sup>31</sup>

What is probably decisive, however, is that both nuances of meaning belong together quite early. The *ekklesia* is a concrete fellowship gathered in one place that is also God's assembly and as such part of the whole church. Or, conversely, the church is the people of God but always manifest in a concrete local community.

This semantic discussion is important for the question of the unity of the church. Based on the linguistic evidence of the entire New Testament, one can say first of all that in every individual church the entire church is, so to speak, included. Every individual church, wherever it meets, is part of God's *ekklesia*, the "assembly of God" called by God that is gathered not only in a particular place but "with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2). In its essence the church is concrete-local and ecumenical-universal. Second, one can say that the unity of the local assemblies consists in the reality that each one gathers up and carries on Israel's heritage. The local churches belong to the assembly of God that has found its historical form in the people of Israel. Stated concisely: the unity of the local churches lies first of all in the reality that they are Israel, or at least a part of Israel.<sup>32</sup>

Related to the designation *ekklesia* is the understanding of the church as *God's Temple*. In contrast to the designation *ekklesia*, we are dealing here with a metaphor that never became a direct designation of the church. The metaphor of the church as an "edifice" or "temple" is common in the New Testament (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 3:10-17; 2 Cor. 5:16; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:1-6; 1 Pet. 2:4-9; Rev. 3:12). It is probably quite old. I think it is related to the designation of the three principal apostles, Peter, John, and James, as "pillars." They are "pillars" of the "temple" that is the church (Gal. 2:9). If that is correct, this metaphor comes from the earliest period. It probably also signifies the whole church and, as corresponding parallels from the Qumran texts show, also has its roots in the concept of the people of God.

31. For this reason our working group has settled on *Kirche* ("church") or *Ortskirche* ("local church") or *Gesamtkirche* ("whole/entire church"), whereby *Kirche* expresses the semantic (and substantive!) unity of both ideas and *Orts-* or *Gesamt-* expresses the sphere or extent that is meant. Cf. Kurt Stalder, "Die Einheit der Kirche in den Lokalkirchen," in Stalder, *Die Wirklichkeit Christi erfahren* (Zurich: Benziger, 1984), p. 111. [The careful reader will be aware that the problem is no less severe for the English translator. For *Gemeinde* one can use "church," "local church," "congregation," or "community." — Trans.]

32. This systematic arrangement of the systemic usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament is not in the strict sense historical. Most New Testament authors will not have been aware of it.

Finally, it is probable that the metaphorical designation of the church as the "body of Christ," a concept Paul presupposes in his letters to the Corinthian church, originated in the Hellenistic sphere.<sup>33</sup> Properly speaking, this metaphor applies only to the whole church. It is not conceivable that Christ would have had separate bodies in the various churches such as in Corinth or in Rome. That is all the more probable if behind this metaphor is the concept of a cosmic body — for example, of the body of Zeus or of the body of the universe — an idea with which Philo also appears to be familiar. That the church is Christ's body emphasizes above all the close connection between the church and the risen and exalted Lord. It also underscores its own solidarity in one body. Paul will use this metaphor for the individual local churches when he develops it further (1 Cor. 12:12-31; Rom. 12:3-8).<sup>34</sup>

*In summary:* there were probably numerous designations for the church in the early period that were theologically important. They emphasized that the Christ fellowship belongs to Christ ("body of Christ," "disciples"), or they allied the Christ fellowship with the people of God/Israel ("temple," "assembly," perhaps "chosen"). Those are precisely the two dimensions we discovered in the "centripetal" forces of the Christ movement.<sup>35</sup> If that is correct, then with his own usage of "body" and "assembly" Paul applies what one might call congregational accents. The reality of the body of Christ must be shown in the individual local church. The individual local church — as it meets, for example, in Corinth — is "God's assembly" in the full sense of the word. But in no sense did Paul deny the reality of the whole church with these accents. His entire life's work will make that clear. But with that observation we have anticipated later discussions.

#### 4. The First Basic Conflict: The Church's Unity with Israel

A Christian Gentile mission arose quite early that did not require circumcision. Dispensing with circumcision in this way was unusual, but it was still conceivable in Judaism of that day. In those days one could at least debate the question whether one should actually require Gentile converts to be circum-

33. One sees that in 1 Cor. 1:13; 6:15; 10:17.

34. Cf. below, pp. 79-80. On my view of the "body of Christ," cf. the brief excursus in Ulrich Luz, "Der Brief an die Epheser," in Jürgen Becker and Ulrich Luz, *Die Briefe an die Galater, Epheser und Kolosser*, NTD 8, no. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), pp. 126-30.

35. Cf. above, pp. 53-54.

cised.<sup>36</sup> The “god-fearing” Gentiles who participated in the synagogue service as uncircumcised persons were not yet unanimously rejected as part of the people of God as they were by the later rabbis. Jesus’ critical attitude toward the ritual law and his openness toward individual Gentiles (cf. Matt. 8:5-10, 13; Mark 7:24-30) may have eased this move to the Gentiles. Still, it was felt to be an innovation, and it was expressly legitimated by a special word of Jesus (e.g., Matt. 28:16-20) or by an intervention by the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:26-39; 10:1-11, 18; 15:8). For his legitimacy Paul appealed to the commission he had received from God in his revelation near Damascus (Gal. 1:16).

This development forced the church to ask whether it could still maintain its understanding of itself as the core of the eschatological people of God/Israel. What position did the Gentiles hold in this people of God? Further, the addition of uncircumcised Gentiles to this core tarnished the Jesus communities in the eyes of that part of Israel which did not believe in him. In Jerusalem, Stephen’s lynching because of his criticism of the Torah further complicated this relationship. The success of the Gentile mission must have had negative consequences for the mission to Israel.

The Gentile mission led to the first fundamental conflict that shook the Christian church and threatened its unity. This conflict came to a head primarily in the person and work of Paul.

#### 4.1. The Apostolic Council

In Galatians 1:11-12 Paul understood his law-free gospel as something mediated to him not from humans but through a revelation from God. What did he do after receiving this revelation? According to the Lukan report of Acts 9:10-25, he joined himself to the community of Christians in Damascus. Galatians 1 says this only indirectly (v. 17), but it makes clear that he was conscious of belonging to the church of God he had previously persecuted. Thus the revelation of the Son to him made Paul not the founder of a religion but a member of the church. After two years he went to Jerusalem and made contact with Peter and James. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 he says the same thing with a different emphasis. Paul’s concern here is to show that the gospel he had re-

36. One can see that, for example, in Josephus’s report (*Antiquities* 20.38-48) of the discussion about the circumcision of Prince Izates, but the discussion between Rabbi Joshua and other rabbis, transmitted in *b. Yebamoth* 49a, shows that circumcision was always regarded as the normal ritual of entrance for male proselytes. Louis H. Feldmann (*Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1933], pp. 348-56) offers many positive Jewish opinions about god-fearers from Hellenistic and Palestinian early Judaism.

ceived as tradition was identical with that of the original apostles. The revelation to Paul appears here also (1 Cor. 15:8), but it does not have the fundamental importance Galatians 1 has. It is obviously important for Paul that the gospel revealed to him is the same as that of the Jerusalem apostles. Jesus, who revealed himself to Paul from heaven, is none other than the earthly Jesus about whom the disciples in Jerusalem spoke. It is thus the revelation of the Son that brought Paul to the church and its tradition.

Fourteen years later the “council” in Jerusalem took place, about which Paul reports in Galatians 2:1-10 and Luke in Acts 15:1-11.<sup>37</sup> There was an open conflict between the representatives of the law-free Gentile mission and parts of Jewish Christianity. The unity of the church was threatening to come unraveled. The main issue in Jerusalem was whether one could dispense with circumcision for the Gentiles who believed in Christ. The question was vital for Paul, for on it was determined whether Christ alone saved people. He was opposed by Jewish Christians whom he disparages as “false brothers brought in secretly” (Gal. 2:4) and whom Luke makes marginal by referring to them as “some believers from the party of the Pharisees” (Acts 15:5). In today’s scholarship they are often called, again in a disparaging sense, “Judaizers.” Since we do not want to join history’s winners in this negative labeling, we will use the neutral term “radical Jewish Christians.” The circumcision question was just as vital for them, for it determined whether the church really was the eschatological people of God/Israel in the way that Jesus understood it. For Paul’s Jewish Christian opponents, the Pauline gospel of the Gentile mission’s freedom from the law made it impossible to understand the church as a church *in* and therefore *for* Israel. For Paul, however, that understanding of the church and the understanding of Israel lying behind it destroyed his gospel of God’s unconditional grace in Christ. The Gentiles were still free to join the people of God/Israel by means of circumcision; for that Christ was not necessary.

Between Paul and the radical Jewish Christians there were the “pillars” (Gal. 2:9). These leaders of the Jerusalem church were also Torah faithful, but they were more liberal. They were James, the brother of the Lord; Peter; and John, the son of Zebedee. We will describe their theological positions later.

The upshot of the deliberations was that Paul and Barnabas came to an agreement with the Jerusalem “pillars,” and that the Jewish Christian brothers, who demanded that Gentiles be circumcised, were not able to prevail. We can no longer know for sure why the decision went against them. For Paul, it

37. I proceed from the “normal hypothesis” that both texts refer to the same event, although that view is not uncontested in recent scholarship.

was obviously because they required for salvation a condition alongside Christ, and that made Christ superfluous. It would be interesting to know whether the "pillars" shared this view. Subsequent history does show that the conflict continued. Obviously many problems remained unsolved, and it is difficult to say whether both parties understood the unity they had achieved in the same way.

Paul's account in Galatians 2:1-10 leaves a number of questions open. He emphasizes his independence: he went to Jerusalem because of a revelation; he was, therefore, not summoned to give an account of himself to higher authorities. For him the meeting was a conversation between equal partners. But is that really what it was? It is noteworthy that the negotiations took place not in Antioch, where the problem was acute, but in Jerusalem. Paul feared that he was "running or had run in vain" (Gal. 2:2). In what sense did the truth of his gospel depend for him on the approval of the people in Jerusalem? He submitted his gospel to the opinion of the Jerusalem authorities (verse 2), not vice versa. "Even Titus was not compelled to be circumcised" (verse 3). Could the "pillars" have compelled him? Verse 6 is quite unclear, since Paul does not finish the sentence he had begun. Did he originally want to say that nothing had been imposed on him by "those who were reputed to be something"? It is then clear again in verse 9 that the "pillars" gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship — thus that the two partners did not shake hands with one another. It is further noteworthy that verse 8 mentions Peter's apostleship but not that of Paul. And, finally, in verse 10, the collection for the poor is indeed an imposition of sorts. It moves in only one direction, from the Gentile churches to Jerusalem. It is, of course, questionable whether one can really make use of all these observations, but a certain asymmetry of the two conversation partners does show through the Pauline account against his best intention. Do we see here on the two sides different understandings of the church and church unity?<sup>38</sup>

We will try to ask both conversation partners how they understood church, church unity, and the church's relationship to Israel. Admittedly, that will be much more difficult with James, since we can approach him only indirectly.

38. All of these observations show that Karl Holl's thesis of Jerusalem as the church's presiding capital (above, n. 30) is not a mere fabrication. Martin Hengel ("Jakobus der Herrenbruder — der erste Papst?" in Hengel, *Paulus und Jakobus: Kleine Schriften* 3, WUNT 141 [Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2002], p. 567) accepts it.

#### 4.2. James and the Church's Unity with Israel (by Christoph Knoch)

Unfortunately we do not have a letter written by James the brother of the Lord; the Epistle of James was not written until late in the first century A.D. Thus we must depend on the scarce information in the letters of Paul, in Acts, in the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37 to circa A.D. 100) and in the church fathers. In spite of this precarious situation with the sources, we can still try to describe him and his idea of church unity.

In the western Christianity influenced by Paul, James quickly lost his initial important and influential position in favor of Peter, who, like Paul, was martyred in Rome. Yet the leader of the church in Jerusalem was long remembered in the Jewish Christianity of the East. One sees that in the canonical Epistle of James as well as in further apocryphal writings written under his name.<sup>39</sup> The oldest extant liturgy of the Orthodox Church, which remained active especially in Jerusalem, was named after him: "the Liturgy of James." The fact that in many Eastern biblical manuscripts the Epistle of James appears before Paul's letters also shows the esteem in which he was held in the East.

All of the sources agree that James was faithful to the Torah and to the traditions of the fathers. It was self-evident for him, who lived in Jerusalem, the center of Judaism, that one was to obey the food commandments and to keep the festivals. We can see that, for one thing, in his attitude in the conflict in Antioch: Peter and the Jewish Christian part of the church break off the table fellowship with the Gentile Christians when "people from James" come (Gal. 2:12). For another, it is confirmed by the role Luke gives him in Acts: the regulation that Gentile Christians should eat only meat that has been ritually slaughtered (Acts 15:19) comes from him. The Syrian Hegesippus (circa A.D. 115-185) also gives a detailed and fanciful description of his faithfulness to the Torah.<sup>40</sup> Finally, his surname, "the Just/Righteous," which appears in all the texts, is an important indication of the way he lived. It is given him already in the *Gospel of Thomas*: "Jesus said to them, 'Wherever you are, you are to go to James the Righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being'" (logion 12). In much the same way that the surname Cephas (= the Rock, cf. Matt. 16:18) was to invest Simon with special authority, the Jesus saying from the *Gospel of Thomas* legitimates the authority of James, which continued to be influential in Jewish Christianity for many years. He was able to stay in Jerusalem for such a long time only because he was faithful to the Torah. Still,

39. Cf. the so-called *Protoevangelium of James*, the two apocalypses of James, and the so-called *Epistle of James* from Nag Hammadi.

40. Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.23.

that Paul's companion Titus did not have to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3) indicates that the Jerusalem "pillars" did not require Gentile Christians to be circumcised. That shows that James also had a more open understanding of the people of God than did Paul's opponents in Galatia who required circumcision (Gal. 4:10; 5:2-3).

James was able to stay in Jerusalem for more than twenty years, although the people associated with Stephen had to flee from the city much earlier because of their critical attitude toward the Torah (cf. Acts 6:14). Several years later Peter suffered the same fate (Acts 12:17). In the decade of the 60s of the first century A.D., the situation in Jerusalem became polarized. The latitude allowed to the messianic believers associated with James was increasingly limited. Eventually the Sanhedrin, the majority of whose members were Sadducees, sentenced the Lord's brother to death for violating the law, and, as Flavius Josephus reports,<sup>41</sup> he was executed in A.D. 62. James, however, was not the only person who suffered this fate. Since the "most zealous observers of the Law," that is, Pharisees, complained to the new governor about the executions, they cannot have regarded James as an opponent. Probably soon after his death, the Jerusalem church fled from Jerusalem, thus destroying a bridge to Judaism's majority that James had built with his faithful observance of the Torah.

How did James understand the unity of the church? One can still hear his voice indirectly through Paul's letters. We must try to open a way to his understanding of the church from his behavior. We can try to confirm from later witnesses what we surmise from the Pauline letters. It is clear that for James Jerusalem was the center not only of the people of God/Israel but also of the disciples of Jesus. We never hear that he left the holy city. From that we may probably conclude that for him the Jesus community was not a group alongside Israel but a group *in* Israel. In all probability, for him — just as presumably for Jesus himself — the disciples of Jesus were the nucleus of the eschatological, reconstituted twelve tribes of Israel. It was obvious for him that the Torah, as interpreted by Jesus, continued to be valid for the disciples of Jesus. That is why James demanded that the Jewish Christians in Antioch avoid eating with Gentile Christians. That probably meant for him that they were thus to observe the food commandments.<sup>42</sup> Peter, Barnabas, and the Jewish Christians of Antioch were "carried away" by his argument (Gal. 2:12-14). That makes sense

41. *Antiquities* 20.200.

42. In that day, table fellowship with Gentiles was possible for Jews only when they could eat their own kosher food (cf. *Epistle of Aristeas* 182; *Judith* 12.19; *Joseph and Asenath* 7.1). According to the stricter opinion advocated in *Jubilees* 22.16; Acts 10:28; 11:3; and later by most rabbis, table fellowship with Gentiles was to be completely avoided (cf. Str-B vol. 4, pp. 375-78).

only if the "men from James" of Galatians 2:12 actually spoke with the authority of the brother of the Lord. Yet Paul does not criticize James, the brother of the Lord. He accepts his decision and accuses only Peter and Barnabas who to that point had engaged in table fellowship without any difficulties.

Later witnesses confirm this picture, although they mirror only partially and indirectly the "historical James." The most important thing for us from the canonical Epistle of James is the opening line: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes of the Dispersion: Greeting" (Jas. 1:1). Thus there must have been a group within early Christianity that started from the idea of the gathering of the twelve scattered tribes into a reconstituted Israel and claimed for this the authority of the Lord's brother. One also sees this conception clearly in Luke, who attributed it to James. In Acts 15:16-17 he lets James quote the word from Amos about rebuilding the fallen tent of David, and in so doing he certainly does not misrepresent James's attitude.

A final important area with regard to James's concept of the church is the question of circumcision. Doubtless for Jewish Christians he continued to practice circumcision as the Jewish sign of the covenant. About the circumcision of Gentile Christians, however, the opinions are divided. There were three possible answers.

1. Israel is open to Gentiles, but all Gentiles who want to join the Jesus group and thus Israel must be circumcised and then also keep the commandments of the Torah. According to Galatians 5:2-3, this was the position of Paul's opponents in Galatians, the "radical Jewish Christians." Thus their understanding of the church is tantamount to identifying the church with the people of God/Israel. The church is nothing more than the true Israel called by God through Jesus in the end-time. This answer probably comes the closest to representing the view of Jesus himself.

2. Paul has the most open attitude. Not only does he never require circumcision of the Gentiles; he actually forbids it (Gal. 5:2). At the same time, all of the Torah's regulations are invalid for the Galatians with the exception of fundamental moral laws such as those of the Decalogue. According to Galatians, the entire Torah is fulfilled "in one word" — the commandment to love one's neighbor (Gal. 5:14). That is "the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Although this answer accepts a concern of Jesus, it changes it and makes it more fundamental. Israel's openness becomes the fundamental universalism of the Christian church.

3. James and the people of Jerusalem probably take a middle position. Gentile Christians do not have to be circumcised, but they must observe part of the Torah (at least the food commandments in the common meals). That

follows from the demand of James's people in the conflict in Antioch (Gal. 2:12). Gentile Christians belong to the people of God even without circumcision. We see that when we read Galatians 2:3 and 2:12 together: Titus does not have to be circumcised, but he is still accepted into the Jerusalem church.

How are we to understand this liberal position? Wherever there were synagogues there were god-fearing Gentiles (*sebomenoi*), who observed the entire Torah of Moses but who nevertheless were not circumcised. In the view of most people in later rabbinic Judaism, they did not belong to the people of God. As we have seen, the situation was somewhat more open in the earlier period.<sup>43</sup> James and the "pillars" probably regarded the uncircumcised Gentile Christians as full members of God's people that had been gathered from the Dispersion. Otherwise they could not have received Paul with the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9). James was "a man with a balanced position who attempted to maintain the unity of the messianic community of Jesus."<sup>44</sup> His answer is a middle solution that, although it remains relatively close to Jesus', takes into account the changed circumstances, namely, the unforeseeable and successful Gentile mission.

*In summary:* James understands "church" as the people of God newly gathered in the end-time by the message of Jesus. For him it consists of two concentric circles. First of all, there is Israel proper, the winning of whom is the task of the "apostleship to the circumcised" (Gal. 2:8), given especially to Peter. The second circle is made up of the god-fearing Gentiles whom Paul is to win for the people of God. James may be thinking here in terms of prophecies (Isaiah 2), and he sees the place of these Gentiles within the eschatological people of God/Israel. For this reason they are to keep parts of the Torah of Moses. Thus the unity of the church is possible only as a unity *within* Israel.

#### 4.3. Paul and the Church's Unity with Israel

It is easier to understand Paul's concern than it is to understand James's, since we can trace it through all his letters. Even here, however, there are great difficulties. For one thing, it appears that his attitude toward Israel was not always the same. In 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, the Israel that does not believe in Jesus is declared to be the enemy of Jesus, of the prophets, of God, and of people in general. It is an Israel that stands under God's final judgment. This statement

43. See above, n. 36.

44. Hengel, "Herrenbruder," p. 570.

even makes use of ancient anti-Semitic motifs. According to Galatians 4:21-31, only the church corresponds to the heavenly Israel and the promise of Abraham. Israel, by contrast, is identified not only with the earthly Jerusalem but also with Hagar's descendants in a way that turns the biblical texts upside down. In Galatians 6:16, the church — and only the church — is regarded as "God's Israel."<sup>45</sup> According to Romans 11:25-32, for the sake of the gospel all Israel will finally be saved when Christ comes from Zion at his parousia. One cannot harmonize these differing statements of Paul. The only way to understand them is to assume that on this point Paul's theology has evolved. From a harsh rejection of Israel — a rejection that reflects his own conversion near Damascus and his negative experiences as a missionary of Christ with many representatives of Judaism — he made an about-face and developed in Romans a new, positive view of Israel. He came a long way in his thinking, and from the gospel of God's faithfulness and God's righteousness he gained a new understanding of Israel.

His relationship to the Jerusalem church also remained full of tension. From his letters one gets the impression that Paul almost always strove for fellowship with precisely those Jerusalem apostles who may have been very skeptical about his apostleship<sup>46</sup> and who as a result may not have accepted without reservation his gospel served by this apostleship. Since Paul's relationship to the people in Jerusalem remained unstable and full of tension,<sup>47</sup> one might ask why he wanted fellowship with them.

We have already gained insight into what for Paul was the defining basis: Jesus, the Son of God, is a historical figure, not simply an imaginary mythological construct. Thus one can believe in him only together with those who also believe in him and only when that belief is nourished by the common traditions that are related to Jesus.<sup>48</sup> That is why, after Christ was revealed to him near Damascus, he became not the founder of a religion but an apostle of the church.

That means that the Pauline gospel had two fundamental dimensions.

45. In Gal. 6:16, "Israel of God" cannot refer to the part of Israel that does not believe in Jesus; it can refer only to the church. Otherwise we would have a completely unexplained break in Paul's thought.

46. Cf. above, p. 60. In Paul's report about the Apostolic Council there is explicitly no reference to his *apostleship*.

47. Walter Rebell, *Gehorsam und Unabhängigkeit: Eine sozialpsychologische Studie zu Paulus* (Munich: Kaiser, 1986), esp. pp. 30-43.

48. This presupposes that one understands the well-known text 2 Cor. 5:16 not as a rejection of the earthly Jesus but as an expression of the reality that as a "new creation" one cannot understand Jesus apart from faith — that is, not "according to the flesh."

One is the experience of God's unconditional and universal love: the gospel of Christ means that, through Jesus, God gives to all people his redeeming love. Through Christ, the God of Israel calls all people, Jews and Gentiles, to himself. Every attempt to declare that along with this love other things are necessary for having access to God is for Paul contempt of God, one's "own righteousness" (Rom. 10:3), and thus sin against God's being God — that is, against the first command of the Decalogue.

The other dimension is that of fellowship. It, too, corresponds to Jesus' proclamation of love and to the community that had emerged in Israel through his activity. Thus it is part of the Pauline gospel that in the name of Christ it brings people into the new fellowship of the one church. Accepting the gospel means for him that people are "new creatures" (2 Cor. 5:17) and that the differences between Jews and Greeks as well as between men and women or between slaves and masters become irrelevant. It is a part of the gospel that baptized persons "are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Thus for Paul a rupture of the fellowship of the church would also have destroyed the gospel, for the Lord Jesus Christ who embodies God's unconditional and universal love is at the same time the basic gift for the community of the church. Sharing in Jesus Christ leads to fellowship in the church (cf. 1 Cor. 1:9).

Nevertheless, for Paul there were also situations in which it was the gospel itself that made the fellowship of the church impossible. It is not always easy to trace the decisions Paul had to make in these situations. We will try to describe them here to the degree that they deal with the relationship to Jewish Christianity and thus to Israel.

#### 4.3.1. *The Antioch Conflict (by Peter Lampe)*

At issue in the Antioch conflict between Paul and Peter (Gal. 2:11-21) was the table fellowship of Gentile and Jewish Christians. In Antioch the two groups met in their homes to eat together. That was possible because the Jewish Christians, including Peter and Barnabas, had decided to eat without worrying about the Torah (Gal. 2:14, 12). For a long time nothing stood in the way of this table fellowship, which presumably included the eucharist, until the arrival of James's people from Jerusalem.

For a number of reasons, in Antioch the Torah-faithful people from James ate separately from the Gentile Christians. One reason was that in Jerusalem the situation was different from that in the Gentile metropolis of Antioch. In Judea the Jewish Christians struggled to convince their Jewish neighbors that in spite of their faith in Christ they were still proper Jews. They were even persecuted by the synagogues (1 Thess. 2:14; cf. Luke 6:22; 11:49-51).

Thus it was important for them to keep the Law as strenuously as possible so that they would not give even greater offense to their Jewish neighbors.

A further and more principled reason was that under "people of God" they obviously understood something different than did the people of Antioch. In following Jesus, James's people were of the firm opinion that Israel was the people of God to be renewed and that the Jesus community constituted the already renewed nucleus. The Jewish Christian Peter had to confront the question whether he had renounced the fellowship of the Jesus community *with* Israel and thus had placed himself outside the people of God. In addition, James's people will have remonstrated with him: "How can you abandon the Torah when at the Apostolic Council you were appointed missionary to the Jews? How does someone hope to convince Jews when he knowingly violates the commandments of the Torah? It may be permissible for Gentile Christians not to keep the Torah, but how can Jewish Christians stop being obedient to the Torah?"

Peter gave in to James's people, either from conviction or under pressure. He no longer went to the common meals with the Gentile Christians, and the other Jewish Christians, including Barnabas, followed his example. Thus Jewish and Gentile Christians were separated. In Antioch the one church consisting of Jews and Gentiles was fractured.

For Paul, who continued to participate in the law-free table fellowship with the Gentile Christians in Antioch, Peter's step meant two things:

1. By acting as he did, Peter was forcing the Gentile Christians to join James's people in their Torah obedience if they wanted to continue to eat with the Jewish Christians (Gal. 2:14). Peter may not have directly demanded that of the Gentile Christians, but that was the practical consequence of his behavior. Whether he wanted to do so or not, Peter was forcing the Gentile Christians to be obedient to the Torah. Paul understood Peter's behavior as an attack that had to be resisted (Gal. 2:11).

2. It did not bother Paul that Jews such as James's people, who had obeyed the Torah from their youth, continued to do so after their baptism. Nowhere does he engage in polemics against James's people. Furthermore, he had shared in the Jerusalem agreement that permitted a Torah-faithful mission to Jews. What aroused his anger was something else. People who, like Peter, had already given up the Law and who then "built [it] up again" (2:18) — or especially those who, like the Gentile Christian Galatians, introduced it after their conversion — demonstrated that for them the gospel of Christ's death on the cross did not have sufficient saving power. When he took this step, Peter revealed, whether he wanted to or not, that he attributed justifying power only to the works of the Torah and not to faith in Christ alone (2:16). In



so doing, Peter contradicted himself, since he knew (2:16a) that this was not the truth. Otherwise he would not have previously lived a law-free life. For Paul, the consequence of Peter's behavior was that it represented Christ as having died in vain (2:21).

Paul reacted sharply: Peter has departed from the "truth of the gospel" (2:14); he is a hypocrite who acts contrary to his better knowledge (2:13, 16); he is "condemned" by his behavior (2:11). Paul openly opposed him (2:11, 14), and there was an open break between Peter and Paul. Or, more precisely, Paul himself placed his seal on Peter's abandonment of the table fellowship by separating himself from Peter. "The truth of the gospel" (2:14) was more important to him than fellowship between the two apostles.

For Paul, fellowship was not an end in itself — not a goal to be reached at any cost. In Antioch he subordinated it to the truth of the gospel. It had to correspond to the gospel of the unconditional love of God, not betray it. Thus the gospel justified both things: the table fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians *and* breaking off the fellowship between Peter and Paul. It united and separated at the same time. By contrast, what was important for James's people was the fellowship between the Jewish Christians and the as yet "unbelieving" part of Israel. *Here* is where they placed the emphasis. In so doing, were they, too, wanting to express the "truth of the gospel"? Was their understanding of the gospel different from that of Paul (cf. Gal. 1:6)? Probably so. Ultimately, for them the community of Israel was more important than the new, universal community of Jews and Gentiles established by Christ. Paul, however, did not let it come to a break with James. The break with Peter in Antioch — a temporary break as it turned out — was enough for him. It was for Paul a sign of the truth of his gospel.

#### 4.3.2. *The Conflict between Strong and Weak in Rome (by Peter Lampe)*

Some years later in Rome Paul dealt with what was probably another conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians observed holy days and food regulations (Rom. 14:2-3, 5), and Paul called them "weak in the faith" (14:1). By contrast, for the Gentile Christians and for Paul nothing was in and of itself unclean "in the Lord" (14:14). What is noteworthy is that at first glance Paul's decision in this conflict is completely different from his decision in Antioch. For the Romans, Paul recommended that out of love to the Jewish Christians the strong believers should forgo their freedom from the Law and at the common meals eat only kosher food (14:21).

Paul was able to do that because in its symptoms the situation was different. In Antioch the behavior of the Judaizing Peter constituted an assault.

For all practical purposes it forced the Gentile Christians to act like Jews. In Rome — and this was the first difference — it was probably the law-free members of the community who aggressively (cf. 14:1) went after the Jewish Christians. They had no patience (cf. 15:4-5) with them and their weak faith that still clung to the Torah. It was not the "weak" who posed conditions; the "strong" obviously wanted to get the weak to practice their own freedom from the Law, and thus were demanding something the weak were not yet able to give (cf. 14:14, 20). Therein lay the second difference from Antioch. In Antioch the Jewish Christians had already shown that their faith was strong enough to live without the Torah. Previously they had eaten food that was not kosher and had lived free of the Law. In Antioch the "strong" and "aggressive" members were Jewish Christians. In Rome they were Gentile Christians.

What do Rome and Antioch have in common? Paul says that the strong people in Rome do not accept the weak ones as they are (Rom. 14:1), even though Christ has accepted them (14:15; 15:7). With their uncharitable attitude they are in danger of defaming the saving work of Christ, who also loves the weak and died for them (14:20, 16, 15). As a result they must receive the same reproach Paul leveled against Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:21). Both of them act contrary to the gospel of Christ's saving death, except that each one represents it differently. Either way, one disgraces Christ's saving death. The gospel of this death on the cross is the sole criterion for determining where and how one is to have fellowship in Christ, be it without or with kosher meat.

If Paul has not himself changed since the incident in Antioch — that is, if we must understand the two conflicts together — then it is clear that Paul's gospel in Antioch did not mean that one or the other attitude toward the Torah is right in every circumstance. It is not important whether one is free from the Law or obedient to the Law. Such things are *adiaphora* (cf. 1 Cor. 7:19). In Paul's eyes they contradict the gospel only when they become obligations, as did the Torah observance by the Jewish Christians in Galatia or practically by Peter in Antioch, or as did the freedom from the Law on the part of the strong in Rome.

#### 4.3.3. *Paul and His Opponents*

Paul was continually forced to deal with opponents in his churches. It seemed that they were always following him. Wherever Paul did his missionary work, sooner or later they showed up. It happened in Galatia, in Corinth, and in Philippi. Scholars are not in agreement about who these opponents were. They were certainly Jewish Christians, not only in Galatia but also in Corinth and Philippi (Phil. 3:3-6; 2 Cor. 11:22). In my judgment they were part of the

great Jewish Christian opposition with which Paul had to deal his entire life.<sup>49</sup> In Galatia and Philippi (Phil. 3:2-3, 8) the issue was circumcision; in Corinth it was Paul's apostleship. At the very least the opponents in Galatians and in Philippians are from the "radical Jewish Christians" we have already met at the Apostolic Council. Their concern was that the Gentile Christians who had been converted to Jesus should be completely integrated into the people of Israel through circumcision.

In a portrayal of the early Christian struggle for unity, there must also be a place for these radical Jewish Christians, for in their own way they impressively indicate how fundamentally important was the idea of the unity of the church. Wherever there were people who believed in Christ, these Jewish Christians obviously could not leave them as they were — half, or even completely, "pagan." No matter the cost, they had to integrate these followers of Jesus into what for them was the "true church" — namely, into the people of Israel, the center of whom were the Jesus communities. That is why their circumcision was so important. "Church unity" meant something quite different for Paul and for his radical Jewish Christian opponents; nevertheless it was, paradoxically, a concern they shared.

Paul's reaction here was sharp and abrupt. He said that such people had a "different Jesus," a "different Spirit" (2 Cor. 11:4), or a "different gospel" (Gal. 1:6). It is important that not every theological difference of Paul was evaluated this way. It is clear from 1 Corinthians that Paul had completely different opinions about Peter and Apollos. That is especially interesting in Peter's case, since 1 Corinthians shows that Paul obviously had not maintained his harsh judgment and the repudiation of fellowship he had made in Antioch. The false brothers in Galatia and the false apostles in Corinth, however, were not part of the fellowship Christ had made possible through the gospel. The reason for their exclusion was that they took something that was for Paul an *adiaphoron* and made of it a condition. Where the gospel was negated as the gospel of God's grace solely through Jesus Christ, it could not work for Paul as a fellowship-promoting force. Where there is no "fellowship of Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:9), the fellowship of the church is also not possible. This is Paul's basic conviction, but it does not completely exclude the possibility of having church fellowship with Jewish Christianity. In spite of his puzzling intimations in 2 Corinthians 11:5, Paul knew that the Jerusalem apostles did not side with his opponents. Otherwise neither his enthusiasm for the collection nor his final trip to Jerusalem would be understandable.

49. I am essentially agreeing with the view of Gerd Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), pp. 35-111.

#### 4.3.4. The Collection (by Andreas Karrer)

Part of the church fellowship between Paul and the Jerusalem church that had been worked out in Jerusalem was a collection to be taken up by the Gentile Christian churches for the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:10). Even before we have clear news about the beginning of this collection, the fellowship had been damaged by the incident in Antioch.<sup>50</sup> The practice of Gentile and Jewish Christians of eating together as a visible sign of their unity was broken off. Paul broke with Barnabas and Peter and in so doing apparently also broke with the church in Antioch. Yet it was clearly important for Paul that this disagreement not lead to a break with Jerusalem, and for that reason he adhered to the agreement to gather an offering for the Jerusalem church. The money was gathered in all the churches with no problems. Paul was even able to emphasize the zeal of the Macedonians (2 Cor. 8:3), and he used it to encourage other churches. When there were questions from Corinth about how the money was to be gathered, Paul recommended that each one lay something aside on the first day of the week. In this way a considerable amount would gradually accumulate, and no one would have to scrape together extra money when Paul came again (1 Cor. 16:1-4).

Later there were difficulties in Corinth when opponents caused an uproar in the church and raised doubts about Paul's apostleship. Thus, after he had been reconciled with the Corinthian church, he needed to advise them again in detail about the collection (2 Corinthians 8-9). To get the Corinthians to complete the collection they had already begun, he had to emphasize his own sincerity (8:20-21). There were also other co-workers active in the collection (8:6, 18-19). Paul mentions Titus by name and emphasizes his commitment (8:6, 16-17). The latter traveled from church to church, perhaps as a kind of "collection specialist." He had also been present at the meeting in Jerusalem when the decision was made about the collection, and he was accepted there as an uncircumcised Gentile Christian. He thus personified a continuity in the checkered history that had taken place since the Jerusalem meeting.

Originally Paul may have assumed that the churches would bring their offering to Jerusalem independent of one another. In that case he would have given letters to the delegates of each church and would have gone to Jerusalem only "if it had been worth the effort" (1 Cor. 16:3-4). Obviously the effort then became necessary. The situation between him and Jerusalem had become so sharp that he decided that he could not avoid going to Jerusalem himself. Since he knew he would be in personal danger, before his departure he even asked

50. Cf. above, pp. 66-68.

the church in Rome, which he had not founded, to support him in prayer (Rom. 15:30-31). In addition, all the churches were to turn over to him the money they had collected. In Acts 20:4 delegates from Beroea, Thessalonica, Derbe (the province of Galatia), and Asia (Ephesus) are named as his traveling companions. In spite of tensions within and among the churches, Paul had succeeded in getting almost all the churches he had founded to participate in this collection for Jerusalem.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, according to 2 Corinthians 8:20, he expected to have a large amount to turn over to the church in Jerusalem.

We can discover the purpose of the Jerusalem agreement about the collection only from Paul's notes. He first mentions it in Galatians 2:10. In other letters (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Rom. 15:25-28) he offers abundant reflections about it and emphasizes aspects that may not have played such a major role in Jerusalem. Unfortunately we have no sources from the Jerusalem side that could inform us whether they understood this agreement in the same way Paul did. According to Galatians 2:10, the purpose of the collection was to support "the poor." It was a one-sided assistance from the Gentile Christians for the Jerusalem church. The wording does not preclude thinking of a continuing arrangement rather than a one-time offering, even if in reality it came to only one major operation. The text gives no indication that either Paul or the people of Antioch were in any fundamental sense legally subject to Jerusalem. It is no longer clear whether behind the "poor" of Galatians 2:10 there is a term the members of the Jerusalem church used for themselves. It is clear, however, that when Paul uses the term he is thinking of those people in the Jerusalem church who are actually poor (Rom. 15:26). This social aspect is very important for him. In addition, with the collection for the Jerusalem church the Gentile Christian churches show that, even without the sign of circumcision, they are aware of being united with the Jerusalem people. It is a sign of thanks in the "physical" sphere to the mother church in Jerusalem for letting the Gentiles share in the "spiritual" sphere (Rom. 15:27). For both — the physical and the spiritual — Paul uses the term *koinonia* (= share, fellowship). The collection is to make visible in the fellowship of the church made up of Jews and Gentiles the "sharing of Christ" God has already made available. From this perspective it became for Paul the model and test case of his Christology and his ecclesiology.

Especially in 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul uses the collection as the occasion for further theological reflection. He designates it as *charis* (= act of grace; 8:4-7) and thereby associates the human offering with God's prevenient demon-

51. Wolf-Henning Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter*, WMANT 50 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979), esp. pp. 52-58.

stration of grace that is also designated as *charis*. God's free turning to human beings, the saving act of the Lord Jesus Christ for people (8:9), is what makes the collection possible as *charis*. From God's demonstration of grace, the abundant stream flows in the spiritual area from Jerusalem to the Gentiles and in the material area from the Gentile Christians back to Jerusalem (8:14-15). Overwhelmed with acts of grace by God himself, the Corinthians can by no means keep them for themselves. They can only pass on to others what they themselves have received. Paul's will is that the local churches should always deal with one another this way.<sup>52</sup> In this manner the collection becomes a "gift of grace" alongside the other charismata such as faith, word, and knowledge (8:7). When the collection is given this kind of theological justification, the idea that it was originally an arrangement with the Jerusalem church that the Gentile churches had to comply with almost disappears, yet even the material settlement is not the sole reason or final goal of the collection. And this interpretation also means that its reason and goal can no longer be simply to support the poor. As a *charis* it involves received grace, passing on material possessions, and devotion to God (cf. 8:5). Properly understood, it finally leads all who participate in it to praise, thank, and glorify God (cf. 8:16; 9:12-15).<sup>53</sup> One can regulate charity but not devotion to God. For this reason Paul emphasizes free will and the givers' own initiative. He also refuses to command the people to complete the offering. Instead, he calls attention to the zeal of other people as a way of encouraging the churches to gather the money. It is in the collection that love shows that it is genuine (8:8).

#### 4.3.5. Paul's Last Journey to Jerusalem (by Andreas Karrer)

Paul personally took the collection to Jerusalem, even though in doing so he risked not only his life but also his missionary work. Clarifying his relationship to the Jerusalem church was that important to him. Unfortunately, we have no direct news from Paul himself about what happened with the collection after he arrived in Jerusalem. Even the author of Acts lets us down in this matter. From his portrayal in Acts 21:17-30 one can infer that, given the already existing tensions in the Jerusalem church, Paul's visit had to lead to a stress test. Once Paul appeared in the headquarters of the Jewish Christians, a clearing of the air was unavoidable. James, who was still the leader of the church, had a difficult time as mediator. In this situation James and Paul

52. Cf. the general statements in 2 Cor. 9:13, and already in 8:4.

53. As far as the structure is concerned, Paul argues the same way in his comments about the Philippians' financial contribution to him (Phil. 4:10-20).

worked out a balancing act they could both live with. Paul, himself a Jewish Christian, would publicly show his obedience to the Torah by fulfilling a Nazarite vow and performing acts of purification. In this way James could take the wind out of the sails of the conservative Jewish Christian group and free the way for accepting the collection and thus demonstrating the fellowship with Paul and his Gentile Christian companions. Yet the agitation of extreme Jewish Christians led to Paul's arrest, and he probably was not able to deliver the collection. That explains why the author of Acts, a man so concerned about harmony, persistently says nothing about the delivery of the collection. As Acts 24:17 shows, he obviously knew about the collection. When it failed, he preferred to say nothing about it rather than display such inner-church conflicts before his readers. Paul was never released from custody and was probably executed.

What did the journey to Jerusalem and the meeting there mean for Paul? Would it not have been easier for him to avoid the obvious dangers, which after all were largely connected with his person, by carrying out his original plan of simply sending the delegates from the churches? Did he perhaps make the problem worse by going to Jerusalem himself? Paul saw the situation quite differently. The journey to Jerusalem came at a new turning point in his mission. He was wanting now to turn his attention to the area west of Rome, reaching as far as Spain. Delivering the collection thus coincided with the end of his missionary activity in the East. He had interpreted the collection of money as an "act of grace" in such a way that it became what one might call the confirmation of his gospel of God's love for Jews and Gentiles. He had to be and wanted to be responsible for it himself. He could not leave it to the delegates from the churches. Precisely because of the strong Jewish Christian hostility, to which he was continually subjected in his churches, he wanted to use the symbolic act of handing over the collection to exhibit and confirm the fellowship of Gentile and Jewish Christians. To this point he had not been able to leave his old mission areas and turn to new ones. He first had to be certain that his Gentile Christian churches would continue to be united with the Jerusalem mother church. He came to Jerusalem for the unity of the church, even at the risk of his life; and he gave his life for it.

#### 4.3.6. Church vis-à-vis Israel and for Israel

It is fundamental for Paul that Christ establishes fellowship between Jews and Gentiles in the church. This fellowship comes from the gospel that unconditionally justifies both of them, Jews and Gentiles, as sinners before God. Paul

hoped that James, the brother of the Lord, would agree with him on this point. Where he differed from James was in his understanding of the church over against the part of Israel that did not believe in Christ.

Although for James there could be church only *within Israel*, in Romans 11:11-32 Paul understands the Gentile mission as distinct from Israel: God has indeed broken off some branches from his tree and grafted in others (Rom. 11:19-20). That does not simply mean, however, that Israel has been replaced by the church; it means that the church remains vis-à-vis Israel. Its existence will make "some" in Israel jealous and lead them to salvation (11:14). In the end, however, God will in Christ, despite Israel's unbelief, save all Israel (11:25-26), true to his own word. At the beginning of the three chapters on Israel, Paul asks rhetorically if the Word of God has failed (cf. 9:6). At its conclusion he can answer this question: "The free gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (11:29).

Thus the original concept of the church as something *within Israel*, always advocated by James, was replaced for Paul only temporarily by the idea of a church *without Israel*. Nevertheless, it would be better to characterize the Pauline concept as one of a *church vis-à-vis Israel* that, however, is also a *church for Israel*. For Paul the church is an ecumenical fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians created by the gospel. It is temporarily divorced from Israel but remains disposed toward Israel, and in the eschaton it will be with Israel again. Thus even for Paul church unity without Israel is not conceivable, even though it is no longer a unity within Israel.

To be sure, with this understanding Paul is no longer in full agreement with the original understanding of the Jesus community of disciples and of the church in early Christianity. He has incorporated into his thinking the experience that large parts of Israel rejected the gospel of Jesus. Although in his understanding of God's righteousness as God's unconditional love he was close to Jesus' understanding of the reign of God and simply expanded God's unconditional love to include the Gentiles, his missionary experiences led him to an understanding of the church's relationship to Israel that differed from that of mainstream Jewish Christianity. Because, however, Paul thought through the experience of Israel's rejection in the light of the gospel of God's gracious righteousness, he was able to preserve essential concerns of Jesus and of Jewish Christianity in his own new view.

One can no longer say that of many of the later descriptions of the relationship between the church and Israel — descriptions found in the New Testament and in church history. The experience of Israel's temporary rejection of Jesus became the experience of a definitive rejection, and it was cemented when the synagogues and the Jesus communities went their separate ways.

The theological concepts that incorporated this experience — such as the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John, and Hebrews — come close to a model that one can best describe as *church instead of Israel*. When later the church understood itself as a new people of God or even as the only people of God and thus forgot that its Lord spoke initially not to it but to the people of God/Israel, there opened up, in our judgment, an enormous gulf between the church and its Lord. When the church's relationship to Israel is broken off in this way, an essential part of the heritage of Jesus and his early disciples is lost, even when Israel's theological heritage and Bible are highly valued in this church.

By contrast, our question is: *Can the church define itself without defining its relationship to Israel?* Can one talk about church unity and be enthusiastic about it without at the same time being enthusiastic about the church's unity with and for Israel? Our conviction is that from the perspective of the deeds and words of Jesus one cannot.

Yet that is what largely happened in the later history of the church. Unity is defined by a way of thinking whose beginnings are expressed especially clearly in the Gospel of Matthew or in the Gospel of John: Israel's election has passed over to the church. The kingdom of God is taken from Israel's leaders and given to another nation that will produce its fruits (Matt. 21:43). The church later became the church without Israel — indeed, often enough it has been a church against Israel. Because this is what largely happened in the later church, historical developments have moved beyond the radical Jewish Christians as well as James and his understanding of the church and have made both of them obsolete. It would be more accurate to say that Paul as well, who on the whole has remained victorious in the church, was able to do so only because a not inconsiderable part of his thinking about the church has been repressed.

## 5. The Church as the Reality of Christ in Paul's Thought

### 5.1. *The Basic Gift of Unity: Christ*

In Corinth there were divisions among the followers of Peter, of Apollos, and of Paul, and the so-called Christ party. Paul asked the Corinthians: "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:13). The question was not merely rhetorical. For Paul, dividing the church is dividing Christ himself. As constituted by the exalted Lord, his church is that real. The concept of the church as the body of Christ probably lies behind this imagery. In another place Paul says: no one can lay

another foundation of the church other than the one that is laid, Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). Christ is the foundation of the church. The metaphor of the church as a building or edifice lies behind this language.

For Paul, Christ is the church's real, basic gift and the real foundation of its unity. For Paul, Christ is more than merely a word. In various ways his reality can be concretely experienced in unity's "forces."<sup>54</sup>

a. Paul understands *baptism*<sup>55</sup> as being incorporated into the body of Christ — a body that exists before and is given to the individual. Greeks and Jews, slaves and free have experienced one and the same Spirit and are baptized into one and the same body (1 Cor. 12:13). Paul may also be thinking of the universal body of Christ when he says that the contrasts between women and men, slaves and free, Jews and Greeks are overcome. All have "put on" the same Christ, and "in Christ" all are "one man" (Gal. 3:28). They are "one body" — the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5).

b. Something similar is true of the *Lord's Supper*.<sup>56</sup> In 1 Corinthians 10:16 Paul speaks of the "fellowship" of the blood and the fellowship of the body of Christ in the Lord's Supper or, more precisely, of the "sharing" in Jesus' blood and Jesus' body — that is, in his death. This sharing establishes the fellowship of the church: "Because there is one bread, we the many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17). Thus the "vertical" sharing in Christ's death is the basis for the "horizontal" fellowship of Christians with one another. This is what one can experience intensely in the Lord's Supper. In the Corinthian church the Lord's Supper is a fellowship-creating power. Nowhere do we hear that the individual Corinthian groups — the Peter people, the Paul people, or the Apollos people (cf. 1 Cor. 1:12) — had celebrated separate eucharists. The Lord's Supper is the meal of the *entire* church, yet that is also true beyond the individual church. "We, the many, are one body" is as fundamental a statement as it is possible to make.

c. Third, Paul refers to the experience of the *Spirit*. It is here especially clear that the "basic gift" of unity is ambivalent. What unifies can also divide. In Corinth it was probably the experience of the Spirit itself that made many of the Spirit-filled people "rich in all things" and thus led them to act arrogantly as a spiritual elite. By contrast, Paul understands the Spirit as a power that creates unity. Before he applies the idea of the body of Christ to the individual congregation in 1 Corinthians 12, he speaks of the differences of the gifts of the Spirit and of the *one* Spirit: "There are varieties of gifts, but the

54. Cf. above, pp. 47-54.

55. Cf. above, pp. 48-49.

56. Cf. above, p. 49.

same Spirit; there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord; there are varieties of workings, but the same God who is working in all" (1 Cor. 12:4-6; cf. verse 11). In 1 Corinthians 12:13 he says again emphatically that in baptism we are "all given to drink of *one* Spirit." And in Philippians 1:27 it is "standing in *one* Spirit" that makes possible the harmonious striving in faith.

Why is Paul able to associate the Spirit with the idea of unity? For Paul, experiences of the Spirit are not simply any special religious experiences by individual persons. It is rather the case that *in* these experiences the person experiences the *one* God and the *one* Christ, in and for the church. For this reason one cannot separate the Spirit from Christ and neutralize it as if it were simply a religious experience, for the Spirit is the Lord (cf. 2 Cor. 3:17) and is united with the Lord (cf. 1 Cor. 6:17). It was only for this reason that Paul was able to remind the Galatians that they had received the Spirit not by works of the Law but by the hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2). Not only does the Spirit bring together all Spirit-filled persons; it binds them to the Lord Jesus and his gospel.

d. Finally, we need to speak here of the *confessions*.<sup>57</sup> Paul refers to traditional *Christ confessions* and uses them as the basis for creating community and overcoming divisions. He appropriates quite different confessional formulations and makes use of them in quite different ways.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 it is the crucified Christ who exposes as foolishness every human wisdom that causes division. Because Christ is the basic gift of unity and because all members of the church and apostles belong to Christ, it is foolishness to make human authority absolute.

In Romans 14:9 it is the confession of the lordship of the Risen One that makes human points of view on such things as eating or not eating unclean meat penultimate. Practices of eating or not eating and opinions about clean and unclean do not constitute the church's fellowship; it is the Lord who forbids judging one's brother.

First Corinthians 12:3 is interesting. Here the basis for the apostle's argument is the acclamation of the Lord Jesus: "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord!' except by the Holy Spirit." Of course, *all* Christians in Corinth confessed that Jesus is the Lord. The supposition one sometimes hears that some Corinthian Christians may have cursed Jesus is absurd. Nevertheless, by reminding people of this acclamation Paul formulated a criterion that enabled him to "discern the spirits." The effect of the criterion is inclusive, not exclusive, however; it works to create community, not to divide. Paul uses it against the Corinthian Spirit-Christians for whom their spiritual wisdom and their char-

ismatic gifts were so important that they felt superior to "normal" Christians. At the beginning of his three chapters on the gifts of the Spirit Paul says: *all* Christians who call on the Lord Jesus have the Spirit. Then on this basis in 1 Corinthians 12-14 he brings to the foreground the charismata that create fellowship, especially love.

In Romans 1:3-4 Paul begins his letter to the unknown church in Rome with a confession that serves as the common basis on which the church and he, the controversial Paul, both stand. That is not a trick Paul uses because he wants to be accepted in Rome and because he needs support for his mission to Spain. He is interested, rather, in the common ground that supports him and the church in Rome — Christ, to whom Paul owes his apostleship. Thus the confession calls attention to the basic gift of unity — to Christ.

All of this is not to say that words alone constitute the unity of the church. The living Christ, of whom the confessions bear witness, is actually present in the church. Indeed, the church is his "body." The presence of Christ in the church — that is, the "basic gift" of unity — is something that can be experienced! That is why Paul speaks in this context of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Spirit. They are unity-creating "forces."<sup>58</sup>

## 5.2. *The Whole Church and the Local Church*

As one can see in Galatians 3:28, 1 Corinthians 1:13, and 1 Corinthians 12:13, the body of Christ is for Paul *one* body, the *one* church. Our thesis was that in his genuine letters Paul also presupposes a whole-church understanding of the "body of Christ."<sup>59</sup> To be sure, in the letters he wrote himself he emphasizes that this church is *lived* locally by its members. Therefore in Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 1:13, and 1 Corinthians 12:14-31 he applies the body-of-Christ idea to the local church. Paul's basic idea here is not that the whole church is broken up into individual churches but that the whole church is experienced and lived in the local churches. One sees that in the double Pauline use of "body of Christ" for the whole church and for the local church.

It is much the same with the metaphor of the church as a "building" or as a "temple," which also originally referred to the whole church. Paul combines the two images and applies them to the individual congregation. For him, "building up" (edification) is the most important criterion for how the Spirit is to work in the churches. Here "building up" does not have the mean-

57. Cf. above, p. 49.

58. See above, n. 27.

59. Cf. above, p. 57. On Colossians and Ephesians cf. below, pp. 127-29.

ing common in modern pious speech of the personal edification of the individual. Instead, “building up” means the “upbuilding” of the community (1 Cor. 14:4-5, 12, 26). That is why love is for Paul the highest charism: it “builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1).

One can also see the close relationship of whole church and local church in another basic Pauline word for church, namely, in the word *ekklesia*. We have noted that the term *ekklesia*, formed by the Old Testament, was an old Jewish Christian designation of the entire church.<sup>60</sup> Paul uses the word almost exclusively, however, for the local church, for it is a visible, concrete “assembled” community. For this reason Paul speaks often and probably intentionally of the “the assembly,” or “the assembly of God that is [assembled at a particular location]” — for example, in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), in Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1), in Galatia (Gal. 1:2), or in a particular house (Phlm. 2; cf. Rom. 1:5). Thus he says, “as I teach in every *ekklesia*” (1 Cor. 4:17) rather than some such thing as “as I teach everywhere in the church.” Or he uses the plural and speaks of “the churches of God in Judea” (1 Thess. 2:14). Thus Paul can also make a verb from the word “assembly” (*ekklesia*) in a fluid way. He uses the verb “to come together” (1 Cor. 14:23; cf. 11:17-20). “Coming together” is his word for what we would call today the worship service. It is important for Paul that the *ekklesia* comes together concretely and visibly. In the process the word *ekklesia* does not lose its biblical and salvation-history reference. It is God’s assembly that is gathered in a particular place. When Paul speaks of *ekklesia*, he does not mean that somewhere a number of people just happen to meet; he means that these people who come together are the assembly of God’s people he has called together in a particular place. In his letters Paul makes concrete for the local church what the church is.

Thus it is not true that “Paul . . . knows nothing of a whole church.”<sup>61</sup> It is right that he does not have different terms for the whole church and the local church, because for him the whole church is present in the local churches, and the local church lives as a part of the whole church. All local churches are cells in which the whole lives, yet the life of the whole is more than simply a group of individual cells living for themselves. It also belongs to the essence of the whole church that the individual cells live together (cf., e.g., the collection).

*To summarize:* in Paul’s thought the church lives from its fellowship with Jesus Christ; it is his body. As the body of the one Christ it is more than the sum

60. See above, pp. 55-56.

61. Thus Josef Hainz, *Ekklesia: Strukturen paulinischer Gemeinde-Theologie und Gemeinde-Ordnung*, BU 9 (Regensburg: Pustet, 1972), p. 251.

of individual assemblies in particular places. The fellowship with Christ has an ecumenical dimension, and at the same time it determines the life of the local churches.

We turn now to an attempt to make both of them concrete, beginning with the whole church (section 5.3) and moving then to the local churches (section 5.4).

### 5.3. *Christ’s Effectiveness in the Whole Church* (with Corinna Diestelkamp)

We have already spoken of Paul’s unceasing struggle for fellowship with the church in Jerusalem and of the collection.<sup>62</sup> Here we will speak of some of the other aspects of Paul’s ecumenical practice and theology.

(a) Above all, we must call attention to the Pauline *missionary activity*.<sup>63</sup> Paul consciously thought of his mission ecumenically. He “fulfilled [the gospel] from Jerusalem and around as far as Illyricum” (Rom. 15:19). His mission was part of the Lord’s universal rule. It was grounded in salvation history, for the gospel went out from Jerusalem, the sacred city of the people of God. As an apostle it was his task to proclaim the gospel in the entire Gentile world. That is why the horizon of his plans reached as far as Spain and why he set up bases of Christ in the metropolitan centers of the provinces. Corinth, Philippi, and Thessalonica represented their provinces, Achaia and Macedonia (Rom. 15:26; 1 Thess. 1:7-8; 2 Cor. 1:1), just as the Christian Epaeetus was the first convert in Asia (Rom. 16:5). Although Paul established “assemblies” in various places, he did so to “fulfill” the gospel in the whole world — that is, to plant the universal church. Paul understood and organized his mission as the task not of an individual but of the church. It is not the mission of an individual and his co-workers; it is the mission of the apostle and his churches. Ollrog’s study<sup>64</sup> in particular has demonstrated that Paul systematically involved his churches in his missionary work. They were responsible for providing and supporting co-workers in the mission. Second Corinthians 8:23 makes a distinction between Titus, obviously Paul’s personal companion, and the “representatives” (*apostoloi*) of the churches who are Paul’s brothers. Among them were, for example, Epaphroditus from Philippi (Phil. 4:18), perhaps Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus from Corinth (1 Cor. 16:17),

62. Cf. above, pp. 64-65, 71-73.

63. Cf. above, pp. 50-51.

64. Cf. above, n. 51, esp. pp. 119-61.

Aristarchus (from Thessalonica?; cf. Acts 19:29), Tychicus and Trophimus (from Ephesus; cf. Acts 20:4; 21:29), and others.<sup>65</sup> Paul intentionally involved the churches in his missionary work and in so doing made clear that the task of proclaiming the gospel is a task of the whole church, of all congregations, and indirectly of all their members. The note in Acts that in his journey with the collection Paul was accompanied by delegates of the churches (Acts 20:4) also fits in with this picture of the Pauline mission.

(b) There was also a great deal of *contact among the churches*. Christians traveled frequently to other churches. An indication of this contact is the large number of members of the church whom Paul knew in Rome even though he had never been there (cf. Romans 16): Phoebe, the deaconess from Cenchreae; Prisca and Aquila; Epaphroditus, the first convert in Asia; Andronicus and Junia; and Urbanus, one of Paul's co-workers, were all in Rome. In some six cases Paul's acquaintances in Rome were active church co-workers. Are we to assume that all of them had come to Rome privately and by coincidence? In many cases a church-related mission may have been combined with personal motives. Paul knew at least four different house churches in Rome. First Corinthians 16:3 shows that church-related journeys — in this case by Corinthians to Jerusalem — obviously were taken for granted, and 1 Corinthians 16:6 and 11 show that the Christians traveled not alone but with brothers and sisters. Obviously, there were always people who were able to interrupt their work and to travel on behalf of the church. It may be that the churches bore the expenses of the journeys. Hospitality and personal friendships were part of the travel. In most ancient religions only the upper classes of the Roman Empire were generally mobile. Christians, by contrast, including the poorer members of the church, traveled more frequently in the service of the church. One sees here an example of the lived fellowship of the body of Christ.

(c) At the Apostolic Convention in Jerusalem there was an *agreement about mission*. The practice of working in "another's field" (2 Cor. 10:16) did not sit well with Paul. Nevertheless, it is significant that as a rule he assumed that other people would work in his churches. He opposed such work only when it involved a counter-mission that challenged his mission. He himself was not going to Rome as an apostolic founder but simply to comfort and be comforted by the church (Rom. 1:11-12). Apollos was in Corinth, and Paul encouraged him to go back there (1 Cor. 16:12), not alone but in the company of others. And he did so in spite of the earlier difficulties in Corinth with the Apollos party. One can trace something similar in later times as well. Peter,

65. See above, pp. 71-72.

the missionary to Jews, later found a field of activity among the Roman Christians. After the Jewish War, John, the Jewish Christian prophet and author of Revelation, and his people settled quite naturally among the Pauline churches of Asia Minor. Obviously they knew brothers and sisters there, even though these brothers and sisters were Gentile Christians, some of whom even ate meat sacrificed to idols (Rev. 2:14, 20). Similarly, in the earliest period the itinerant radicals in Palestine and Syria accepted the support and hospitality of churches where they were not known. For their part, the churches recognized that they had a responsibility for such itinerant preachers.

(d) One can see an important dimension of Paul's lived ecumenicity in the *introductions and conclusions of his letters*. In Romans 1:9-10 he says that the faith of the Romans is known throughout the entire world, and he thanks God for it without ceasing. First Corinthians has an ecumenical character and is directed to all who call on the name of the Lord "in every place" (1 Cor. 1:2). Had Paul always thought that his letters would be exchanged among the churches (cf. Col. 4:16)? Or does this simply mean that the Corinthian church is part of the Oecumene? Prayers of intercession and requests for such prayers (1 Thess. 5:25) are important.

Also informative are the closing greetings. They show that the Pauline letters always include the entire local church and also want to connect the local churches to one another. Of course, the letters, even Philemon (2), were read when the church was assembled (1 Thess. 5:27). The closing greetings are nothing short of stereotypical, consisting of three elements that are especially clear in 2 Corinthians: (1) the blessing of God, thus the vertical dimension of the fellowship (2 Cor. 13:13; 1 Cor. 16:23-24; Phil. 4:23; 1 Thess. 5:28); (2) the greetings of "all the saints" (2 Cor. 13:12; cf. Phil. 4:22), not only of the sending church to the receiving church; in 1 Corinthians 16:19-20 the ones sending the greetings are "the local churches of Asia" and "all the brothers," and in Romans 16:16 they are "all the local churches of Christ"; (3) the fellowship within the local church that is encouraged by the reading of the letter: "Greet one another with the holy kiss" (2 Cor. 13:12; Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 1 Thess. 5:26). Together one has here in almost stereotypical form the three basic elements of the Pauline understanding of community: the sharing of God — or Christ — and the Spirit, the universal fellowship of the church, and the local fellowship in each "assembly." It is characteristic of Pauline letters that the apostle's understanding of community is condensed in such practical actions as the closing greetings.

(e) *Galatians*, an epistle we have not yet mentioned in this context, shows us an interesting variation of this schema. Corinna Diestelkamp makes the following contribution to our discussion:

In Galatians Paul does not wait until the closing greetings to mention the



relationship of the churches to one another; he does it already in the heading. He does not want to be seen as the only sender, the person responsible for the contents of the letter. In this special case it is also not enough for him to mention other missionaries as co-senders (as in 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1). All the brothers who are with him (Gal. 1:2) “sign” this letter.

But do the churches in Galatia really know who is with Paul? Obviously names are not a factor this time. What is important here is that it is not an individual but a community of brothers that speaks to the Galatian Christians, for something decisive is at stake: the truth of the gospel itself (2:5). It is betrayed when the Galatians let themselves be circumcised (2:21; 5:2) as the Jewish Christian missionaries demand (5:13). In this situation Paul has to muster every conceivable effort — his own as an apostle of Christ (1:1) but also that of all the brothers who are with him (1:2). Whether that means his co-workers, the entire church where he is at the moment, or even all the Christians of a province is, perhaps intentionally, unclear. The readers have the impression that all the Christians around Paul share his opinion, and Galatians is an epistle of the entire church.

When the gospel is in danger, the fraternal community brings its authority to the controversy. An understanding of the church that overcomes geographical and cultural distances comes to bear here: churches are responsible for one another and influence one another. This is not an authoritarian responsibility; a letter should be enough to move the recipients to change their behavior. The decision remains with the Galatian Christians themselves. Thus in a sense the Galatian epistle constitutes a first step toward the Roman church’s “ecumenical” intervention in Corinth in *1 Clement*.

*In summary:* in the Pauline mission, in the life of the churches, and in the Pauline letters the fellowship of the whole church is strongly emphasized. Worldwide community is not merely an idea for Paul; it is something lived. It is founded on Christ as its basic gift; one feels that repeatedly. To be sure, in his extant letters Paul did not develop his understanding of the fellowship of the entire church into a systematically reflected ecclesiology. He simply assumes an ecclesiology that interprets the whole church.

#### 5.4. Christ’s Effectiveness in the Local Church

In the local church one can see even more clearly how the reality of Christ is embraced and experienced as fellowship. We will choose four examples from 1 Corinthians.

##### 5.4.1. The Parties in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1–4) (by Peter Lampe)

Fissures were tearing apart the church at Corinth. Christians who were converted by the missionaries Paul, Apollos, or Cephas called themselves by the names of their spiritual fathers and thus formed three different parties that were “puffed up” toward each other. They announced with pride, “I belong to Paul,” “I to Apollos,” “I to Cephas.”

The Corinthians saw nothing wrong with this behavior. From their pagan surroundings they knew that anyone who was inducted into a mystery religion developed a close relationship with the priest who had initiated him.<sup>66</sup> Thus it is understandable that they felt a special relationship to “their” apostle. They will have been astonished when one of the honored apostles himself rose up against that kind of personality cult. Paul proclaimed that the church’s division into apostle-parties was keeping Christ from being realized in the Corinthian church. If the Corinthians do not change, Christ himself will be divided (1 Cor. 1:13).

Why was their behavior wrong? In honoring Paul, Cephas, and Apollos they had forgotten that the same person works through all three of these men. With his spirit Christ created everything that happened through these apostles. For this reason the Corinthians could boast only of Christ the Lord, not of these three men — men who did not work by their own power and on the basis of their own qualities. Indeed, the apostles had not come to the Corinthians with exalted human wisdom that would have distinguished them as human teachers worthy of honor. Instead, they — or at least Paul — preached “in weakness and in fear with much trembling,” “not in eloquently persuasive words of wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:3–4, 13). Paul came to them as “the world’s rubbish” (4:9–13). The spirit of Christ could work full of power only in the weak apostle in whom the cross of Christ was portrayed. The honor belongs to Christ alone, not to the apostles.

Paul has “planted, Apollos watered, but God has given the growth” (1 Cor. 3:5–6). This “but God . . .” is the key to solving the conflict among the parties. To the degree that people lose sight of God and his activity in the church and thus make absolute what humans do, the church is in danger of splintering into partisan groups following “great men.” Instead of boasting of allegedly distinguished human beings (3:21), the Corinthians should learn to boast in the Lord (1:31). They are encouraged to think more of what Christ does in the church. The Corinthians belong not “to Paul,” not “to Apollos,”

<sup>66</sup> For the Isis and Osiris initiations, cf., e.g., Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* xi.21.3; 22.3; 25.7–26.1; 27.3–8; 30.1; 20.1.

not “to Cephas,” but to Christ (1:21; 3:23). If they do not take this to heart, they will divide the one body of Christ, the church, with their apostle-parties.

#### 5.4.2. Meat Sacrificed to Idols (1 Corinthians 8–10)

In Corinth there were “strong” members who unhesitatingly exercised their freedom to participate in cultic banquets in the pagan temple, for they knew that the pagan gods are nonentities about whom Christians, who stand under the lordship of Christ, no longer need to worry. Other Corinthian Christians, however, did not have this strength. They were afraid that if they ate meat sacrificed to idols they would once again be under the power of the heathen gods. They are the “weak.” Unlike the dispute in Rome,<sup>67</sup> the issue in Corinth was not the validity of the Jewish ritual law. Unlike the controversy in Antioch (and also unlike Rome?), the issue in Corinth also does not seem to have been the problem of the meals in the church. It was, rather, a question of the personal life of the “strong” Christians — their participation in the city’s temple feasts. The strong did not demand anything of the weak, nor the weak of the strong. Doubtless the issue was that the publicly flaunted freedom of the strong created a problem for the conscience of the weak (1 Cor. 8:10).

Paul says in Corinth what he probably also said in Rome and Antioch.<sup>68</sup> He does not say that eating meat sacrificed to idols is right in all circumstances. Eating or not eating “will not commend us to God” (1 Cor. 8:8). The issue in Corinth was not that one or the other group declared its own position to be the absolutely right position or tried to force it on the other group. That would have given the lie to the truth that Christ alone “commends us to God.” The issue, rather, was that Christ creates community and that therefore all behavior by a Christian that wrongs a brother and violates his conscience is a sin against Christ (8:12). When it is Christ who creates a community, all behavior that damages this community becomes a sin against Christ, even when it has to do with *adiaphora* — that is, with things that in themselves do not matter. Thus 1 Corinthians 8 supplements Galatians 2. Just as negating the gospel of Christ destroys the fellowship of the church that the gospel creates (as in Gal. 2:11–20), breaking fellowship with the brother destroys fellowship with Christ — the fellowship that wants to lead us to the brother for whom Christ died (1 Cor. 8:7–13). When you sin against your fellow brother, even if it is in the name of an opinion you regard as Christian, you sin against Christ, and you fall away from the gospel.

67. Cf. above, pp. 68–69.

68. Cf. above, p. 69.

#### 5.4.3. Divided Lord’s Supper? (1 Corinthians 11:17–34)

Tensions broke out in Corinth around the Lord’s Supper. They revolved not around today’s controversial questions about the understanding of the Lord’s presence in the supper but around much more “worldly” questions. In Corinth the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was connected with a common evening meal the church held. It took place in the private house (of Gaius? Rom. 16:23) in which the church met. Many members, especially the rich, came early and, without waiting, began to eat. Others, especially slaves and poor people who had to work, came late and, in any case, had little to bring to contribute to the common meal. They found that their wealthier sister and brother Christians were already full and that nothing was left for them. “When you come together it is not possible to eat the supper of the *Lord*. For in eating each one eats *his* own supper before the others, and one is hungry, another is drunk” (1 Cor. 11:20–21). To celebrate the Lord’s Supper this way is to be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

The text is interesting in a number of ways. First of all, because it shows how closely the “vertical” fellowship with the Lord and the “horizontal” fellowship with the brother or sister belong together. Destroying the fellowship of the church means destroying the Lord’s Supper itself. Second, because it shows how Paul thought of church fellowship holistically. It takes place not only in the spiritual area but also in the physical area — in eating and drinking and becoming filled together. Earlier we saw something similar with the collection that Paul understood as a physical repayment of the Jerusalem church’s spiritual gift.<sup>69</sup> Third, because it shows that church fellowship is not a precondition of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper; it is response and analogue. Paul excludes no one from the Lord’s Supper, but whoever in celebrating the Lord’s Supper does not become part of the fellowship that goes along with it eats judgment on himself.

Looking at our own situation of the “divided” Lord’s Supper, the Pauline insights are so striking that we might be permitted a small observation in passing. As 1 Corinthians 10:1–13 shows, Paul is little concerned about the precise understanding of the presence of Jesus in the Lord’s Supper. In this text he is merely concerned to prevent a magical understanding of the real presence that would negate the fundamental significance of the way Christians act. Yet the destruction of the Lord’s Supper by the social disruption of fellowship troubles him. It is possible that if Paul were alive today he would only shake his head over the absence of eucharistic fellowship among the classical

69. Cf. above, p. 72.

Christian denominations, but he would probably call attention to the problem posed by the existing eucharistic fellowship between starving Christians in the South of our planet and well-fed Christians in the North. But after this digression let us return to the past and to the Corinthian church.

#### 5.4.4. *Tensions in Worship (1 Corinthians 12–14)*

In the Corinthian church, a church “enriched in him in everything, in all speech and in all knowledge” (1 Cor. 1:5), spirit-filled people were feeling self-important. People who spoke in tongues and “gnostics”<sup>70</sup> ran the risk of making absolute their possession of the Spirit. In this situation Paul accentuates anew the body-of-Christ idea. For him the body of Christ — that is, the church as the reality of Christ — begins in the local congregation. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–31, to be the body of Christ does not primarily mean to draw spiritually from the fullness. To be the body of Christ means, rather, something as simple and humdrum as what in those days was expressed with the idea of an organism. One part of the body is dependent on the other part; none can live without the other; each must give to the other the honor due it so that the body is really a body. The idea of an organism is here a way of talking about the love of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 13. Thus Paul says that the reality of Christ that has been given us is only real when those who have been embraced by it live it in the practical everyday life of the local church. Possessing the Spirit without love is not the reality of Christ; it is a “clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). Thus in Paul’s view the reality of Christ becomes a process; it becomes human action. Of course, that does not mean that it is only human action; it is, rather, the already-given reality of Christ out of which one lives. On the basis of 1 Corinthians 12:13 one could say that to live in the body of Christ is to grasp the potential for action in baptism. Or on the basis of 1 Corinthians 1:9 one could say that “sharing” in Christ leads to embarking on the way of “fellowship” with one’s brother and discovering Christ there. Or in the language of 1 Corinthians 14 one could say that the church as God’s “building” (edifice) becomes real when the “building” becomes a process of “building up” (edification). Christ’s work as the basic gift is dynamic. When no dynamic results, one has lost Christ.

70. The reference here is not to “Gnostics” in the sense of the pagan gnosis that appeared in Syria toward the end of the first century or in the sense of the Christian gnosis of the second century. It is likely, however, that “gnosis” in a pre-Gnostic sense was an important word of the religious vocabulary of the Corinthian pneumatics (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1, 10; 12:8; 13:2).

#### 5.4.5. *Conclusion*

In Paul, the fellowship of the church is not a fellowship whose boundaries and conditions one can *first* define and then *later* realize. It is, rather, a living gift that can and must be embraced. It brings those who receive it into a process and leads them to sisters and brothers, into the local churches and into the whole church. The process of community that results is a continuous struggle and an unceasing series of ever new efforts. For their part they are a flaring up of that already-given unity, a fragment of the reality of Christ himself. In Paul, Christ’s fellowship is first celebrated and confessed and then practiced. And when it is not practiced, it has not been correctly confessed and celebrated. One sees an example of that in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in Corinth.

Two questions remain to be clarified and require more thorough consideration.

(a) *The problem of “heresy.”* Where are the limits of the dynamic of Christ? In several of his letters Paul spoke quite sharply. There are the false teachers in Philippi whom he calls “enemies of the cross” (3:18). There are the “false apostles” who proclaim “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4, 13). There are above all the radical Jewish Christians in Galatia who advocate a “different gospel” (Gal. 1:6). Here Christ, who elsewhere is the basic gift and power of unity, becomes the dividing line that prohibits fellowship. Admittedly Paul would not say it that way. Presumably he would say: since Christ is denied here, he is not able to exercise his own unique power of love. For Paul, it is never Christ who nullifies unity; it is always the people who deny Christ. Of course, we should not forget that Paul presupposes his interpretation of Christ. According to Paul, his opponents in Corinth proclaim “another Jesus,” but according to their own self-understanding they also preach the *one* Jesus. They, too, regarded *their* interpretation as the right one. Here one can see clearly the basic problem: we always have Christ, the basic gift of unity, only in particular interpretations. Obviously that must be the case, otherwise Christ would have no content. It is the interpreted Christ, however, who becomes the wall of separation.

For Paul, this interpretation lies in his gospel of justification. Its main point is that Christ alone is the way to God. Only those persons who acknowledge Christ alone as the form of God’s love stand with him in the energy grid of fellowship. Thus every attempt to place something else alongside Christ, be it works of the Torah or apostolic authorities, becomes a denial of Christ. Now we must admit that Paul was more than ready to speak on behalf of his gospel of justification in the church. He was also ready to move beyond his own dark side and to reconsider his theological decisions, as he did, for exam-

ple, about Israel. He was ready to return to a previously disrupted church fellowship, as he did, for example, with Peter. His “anathema” against specific people was not always definitive. In a given conflict, however, there were limits to his willingness to communicate. According to his own words, he would break off church fellowship even with angels if they proclaimed a different gospel (Gal. 1:8).

In my judgment, there are open questions here. Who has the final word about the *right* interpretation of Christ and thus about the boundary between one’s “own” Jesus and the “other Jesus”? Above all, however, is there a timeless “right” interpretation of Christ that is always valid beyond a concrete situation? The Risen One is the living Lord who speaks in the Spirit. Could that mean that the divisive distinction between him and the “other Jesus” must be sought and determined anew in every historical situation? If so, then we would have to draw a distinction between exclusions and ruptures that Christ would require in concrete situations, and passing on and making permanent those ruptures which in new situations may miss the gospel.

(b) *The “ethical heresy.”* Along with the betrayal of Christ that could lead Paul to break fellowship, there is another form of betrayal that is just as severe. It is the breach of fellowship that ultimately is a form of destroying Christ. That is the issue with which Paul deals in Romans 14–15. There he declares that loving the weak brothers is more important than clearly documenting that in the Lord there is no longer purity or impurity (Rom. 14:14–15). The argument is similar to that in 1 Corinthians, where destroying the fellowship is destroying the Lord’s Supper itself (1 Cor. 11:27). Here the sin against the weak brothers is a sin against Christ himself (8:12; cf. 1:13). One could say that, although in the conflict in Galatia and in Paul’s controversies with his opponents in 2 Corinthians and in Philippians we have the basic form of what later was called dogmatic heresy, the content of these texts deals with the later so-called “ethical heresy.” Its essence in Paul is the destruction of love, the essence of the “law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Thus with Paul there is not only the case that fellowship must sometimes be terminated for the sake of the truth of faith; there is also the case that the destruction of fellowship destroys Christ himself. It is not only the maintenance but also the breaking of fellowship that can destroy the church. The church can also betray her Lord by refusing fellowship.

The most difficult problem lies in deciding when fellowship can no longer be continued for the sake of the truth of faith, and when, on the other hand, refusing fellowship *destroys* the truth of faith. Paul was able to decide one way, as he did in Galatia with Peter and the Jewish Christians, or the other way, as he did in Romans with the weak brothers. Is there a criterion for this

decision? We have suggested that whenever “brothers” make their own position a *condition* and thus declare it to be necessary, Paul resisted them.<sup>71</sup> That was the case where “false brothers” tried to win the church over to their side. Wherever people (such as those who thought differently from Paul in matters of the Torah) did not try to do this, Paul continued to regard them as brothers. That is to say, where Christ is no longer the *sole* creator of fellowship, but it is based on other principles and truths along with him (for example, the *principle* of freedom from the ritual law or the *principle* of obligation to it), the fellowship is destroyed with him. That is true even when this “other” is a particular interpretation of Jesus Christ himself.<sup>72</sup>

## THE POST-APOSTOLIC AGE

### 6. Developments in the Church after the Death of the Apostles

#### 6.1. Tensions and Divergences

Even after Paul’s death, his conflict with Jewish Christianity had by no means come to an end. It is true, of course, that historical developments worked to the advantage of law-free Gentile Christianity. It increased numerically and geographically. Especially wherever Jews did live as minorities, it had a considerable absorbing power. Adult second-generation Christians of Jewish Christian families, who in primarily Gentile Christian churches no longer actively participated in Jewish community life, most likely were simply assimilated into the Gentile Christian church. They brought into the churches many of the traditions of the Diaspora synagogues, but the problem of Torah observance and circumcision just naturally disappeared. One sees this, for example, in *1 Clement*, which throughout shows the influence of Hellenistic Jewish traditions. In many ways the same is true of James and Hebrews. Even the Deutero-Pauline epistles and the Lukan writings show, each in its own way, how the problem of Law observance and circumcision disappears.

On the other hand, where Torah-faithful Jewish Christianity was able to maintain itself — that is, in areas in the East with a large Jewish population — Paul often remained controversial and fiercely opposed. As examples one can cite the Ebionites, the Elkesaites, and the Jewish Christians of the Pseudo-

71. Cf. above, pp. 68–69.

72. As a critical question to myself I acknowledge that one might ask: Is that the interpretation of Paul of a liberal Protestant who has no place for absolute (e.g., dogmatic) principles?

Clementines.<sup>73</sup> They all rejected him. Luke, who in Acts writes a story of Paul with an extensive introduction, has to defend him. He anchors Paul firmly in the primitive apostolic church, has the twelve Jerusalem apostles approve of his move to the Gentiles, and introduces James, the brother of the Lord, as his greatest defender (Acts 15:13-21; cf. 21:22-26).

The Apocalypse of John bears witness to a sharp religious-cultural conflict. Behind this work stands a group of Jewish Christian prophets who, presumably after the destruction of Jerusalem, found a new home in the Pauline churches of the province of Asia. Admittedly, the conflict is primarily between church and state in the time of the Domitian persecutions of the Christians, but the way these persecutions are considered in the Apocalypse is characteristically different from the somewhat contemporary authors of 1 Peter or the Lukan writings. Why? It is because one also sees in the Apocalypse a social and cultural conflict between Hellenistic-Roman urban life and poor Jews from an outlying area of the Roman Empire who had suffered through the gruesome times of the bloody rebellion against Rome. The visions of the Apocalypse give us a glimpse into the hearts of people who were not at home in the Hellenistic-Roman, urban-capitalistic world. The religious traditions they brought with them made them strangers in this world. They represented an apocalyptic dualism and a rigorous ethos and rejected every compromise with the Gentile-urban world. The prophet John rose up against the crushing luxury of the "whore," Rome, and against the Roman state, the beast from the abyss (Revelation 13 and 17). He saw no way out of the situation, and his only hope was that Christ would soon return.

From the letters of Revelation 2-3 one can get an impression of how much — or how little — the prophet John and his Jewish Christian fellow prophets were able to attract a following in the Gentile Christian churches of Asia Minor. It happened in various degrees, depending on the church. According to the letters, in some of the churches there are serious tensions with the Gentile Christian majority. John has only words of condemnation for people who find nothing objectionable about meat sacrificed to idols or who share in the prosperity of the age (Rev. 2:14, 20; 3:17-18). He says nothing at all about the apostle Paul, who directly or indirectly influenced many of the

73. *Ebionites*: an imprecise term usually used as a collective designation of the Torah-faithful Jewish Christians of the post-apostolic period about whom the church fathers report; cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.26.2. *Elkesaites*: followers of a Jewish Christian prophet (name unknown) active in eastern Syria at the time of Trajan. His followers called him "hidden power" (Aramaic: *hjl ksj*, bowdlerized as *Elxai* or *Elkesai*). *Pseudoclementines*: a voluminous Jewish Christian work of fiction from the third/fourth century, parts of which were older. On the anti-Paulinism of Jewish Christianity, cf. Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul* (above, n. 49), pp. 119-99.

churches to which he writes. There is no place for Paul's name on the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. 21:14). On the other hand, it is important that John and his like-minded supporters regarded the Gentile Christian churches of Asia Minor without reservations as "their" churches. That is by no means self-evident in view of the difference between their understanding of faith and that of the Pastoral Epistles that came from the same area. Thus the existence of this Jewish Christian circle of prophets in the Gentile Christian churches of Asia Minor itself calls attention to the integrating power of the common confession of Jesus, and at the same time it is an indication of the breadth and tolerance that was possible in those churches. In any case, that the Johannine Apocalypse was accepted into the canon shows that the Gentile Christian church was able and ready to integrate these prophets with their uncompromising dualism and their severe Jewish Christian ethos.

Other tensions from the early period continue to exist. It is likely that *tensions between rich and poor* lie behind the Epistle of James. Such tensions also lie behind the Lukan writings. The fundamental renunciation of possessions on the part of Jesus and his disciples is designed to summon the well-to-do members of the churches to solidarity with the poor. The detailed slave paranesis of some of the household codes may reflect *controversies about the position of slaves* in the church (Col. 3:22-25; 1 Pet. 1:18-25).

We find a *generational conflict* in the Corinthian church at the time of 1 Clement, but now the signs are reversed from those in Matthew 10:34-37. Now the young are admonished to be obedient to the (Christian) elders. We hear little of possible *controversies over the position of women in the churches*. Only 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 (in my judgment a post-Pauline addition) and the parallel instructions of 1 Timothy 2:11-15, which deprive women of the right to speak in worship, might serve as evidence of such controversies.

In the post-apostolic period, however, there are new tensions and problems we have not yet seen. An important problem is hidden in the designation "post-apostolic period." The *death of the apostles* confronted the Christian communities with problems of a special nature. The death of Peter or of Paul or of other apostles left an authority vacuum in the churches. For the first Christian generation, the apostles, and only the apostles, were authorized representatives of the exalted Lord Jesus. Yet the apostles had not only a unique authority but also an authority in the whole church. Except for the itinerant prophets and teachers in the region of Syria, after the death of the apostles there were no living persons who were recognized as authorities in the whole church. The apostles had not arranged for successors. We do not know whether the reports that they appointed elders in the churches (Acts 14:23; cf. 1 Clement 42.4) are historically reliable, but it is certain that in their

churches the elders were able neither to replace the authority of the apostles in the whole church nor to carry on their unique authority rooted in the authorization granted by an appearance of Jesus. Characteristic here is the evidence of the Pastoral Epistles. They are aware of an ordination, presumably of the presbyters by a council of presbyters, but they give no indication that the apostolic disciples Timothy and Titus had been appointed by Paul to a function in the whole church. Even in *1 Clement* we read only that in the districts and cities in which the apostles preached they had appointed “their first converts . . . to be episkopoi and deacons” (42.4). Thus there is a “succession” of the apostles only in the local churches, not in the whole church. It is possible that after his death disciples of Paul to an extent may have carried on his work (cf. *2 Tim.* 4:9-13; *Col.* 4:7-17), but they did this not as apostles and not with an authority in any way comparable to that of the apostles.<sup>74</sup> Thus the death of the apostles meant the loss of something irreplaceable and was a major problem precisely for the oecumene.

Moreover, we see in the post-apostolic period that the churches were increasingly disturbed by *false teachers*. I am not yet speaking here of Gnostics, whom (in my judgment) we do not meet until the latest New Testament writings, produced around the year 100 (Pastoral Epistles, *2 Peter*, perhaps the Johannine letters, and Acts). Even before the threat from Gnosticism, however, we meet an amazingly large number of false teachers. Several factors play a role here. As the temporal and geographical distance from the origin of Christianity increased, unruly and damaging elements were introduced into the tradition. The number of churches increased and thus also the possibility of diverse developments. In Gentile areas early Christianity ran into a milieu in which syncretism and religious borrowing were simply taken for granted. Prophecy posed a special problem. Early Christianity was a movement strongly influenced by prophecy. The more prophets and prophetic traditions there were, the greater became the problem of constraining and controlling them. One can scarcely find any writings from this period in which prophetic false teachers do not appear (cf. *Mark* 13:6, 21-22; *Matt.* 7:15-23; 24:11-12; *Rev.* 2:20; *2 Pet.* 2:1; *1 John* 4:1-6; *Didache* 11-13; *Hermas Mandate* 11). And this was precisely in the difficult time of transition after the death of the apostles, when the corrective function of apostolic authority was missing. Naturally, in this time of transition after the death of the founding fathers, such experiences caused great uncertainty in the churches.

74. The pseudonymous Pauline letters make that quite clear. They presuppose the continuing authority of the apostle and not an authority of his disciples that would compare with his authority.

## 6.2. Unity-promoting Forces: Overview

For the following period we must now repeat much of what is true of the church of the first generation.

*Baptism* and the *Lord's Supper* continue to be a fundamental bond of unity. One sees that in texts such as *Ephesians* 4:5 or *Didache* 9.4. Many texts also make clear how important the *Christ confession* is as a verbal expression of the basic gift of unity. *First Timothy* 2:1-6 understands the confession of the *one* God and *one* mediator Jesus Christ as the basis of the church's prayer for all people. This in turn goes hand-in-hand with the missionary task that Paul, the teacher of the Gentiles, and the churches have received from God. In his letter to the Smyrnaeans Ignatius of Antioch describes the death and resurrection of Jesus as the “insignia” of the *one* church (1:1-2). *First John* 4:15 says: “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he in God.” Since God is love, this remaining with the confession also means remaining in love, and that means remaining in the lived unity of the church. The Pauline idea that the truth of the gospel and the fellowship of love are inseparable is expressed in *1 John* with special clarity.

In this period the *contacts among the churches* continued to be important as an experience of belonging to one another. It is true that, apart from the timely light the journey to Rome of the martyr-bishop Ignatius gives us, there are almost no direct sources, but it is possible to draw conclusions from the evidence. The circle of prophets around the apocalyptic-thinking John in Asia Minor or the circle around the Elder of the Johannine letters shows how interregional contacts among the churches functioned. *Ephesians*,<sup>75</sup> *1 Peter*, and the *Apocalypse of John* with its letters are directed to several churches in Asia Minor. The Pastoral Epistles speak to all the churches in Paul's area, and they presuppose intensive communication among the churches. For the area of Syria, Palestine, and, in part, Asia Minor, contacts among the churches continued to be maintained by itinerant prophets or disciples of the Lord such as the ones who were important for Papias. From the *Didache* one can see how numerous they were and how much, under certain conditions, they could cause problems.<sup>76</sup>

The rapid *spread of traditions and writings* also suggests that there were many contacts among the churches. The Sayings Source is known not only in its native Palestine but also in neighboring Syria and in that area of the church (perhaps Rome) where Luke expanded it with his special material and

75. *Ephesians* is a circular writing directed to several churches in Asia Minor.

76. *Didache* 11-13.

used it as an important source of his Gospel. Quite soon after the Gospel of Mark was written (possibly in Rome), it was used by Matthew (in Syria) and by Luke. It must have also directly or indirectly influenced the Johannine circle. The historian Luke was a great collector of traditions; his Gospel and his book of Acts give the impression that he was well traveled. Ignatius is already familiar at least with the Gospels of Matthew and John and with several letters of Paul. We must ask ourselves whether the Gospels, much like certain pseudonymous letters, had not been written from the very beginning for larger areas of the church or even for the whole church.<sup>77</sup>

That brings us to the unifying forces that in our age have received special, new importance. They are the following:

- The young Christian movement was increasingly regarded by its contemporaries as a separate religion. That was not without consequences for its own inner cohesion (section 6.3).
- The common tradition gained increasing importance — both the tradition of Jesus and the apostolic traditions (section 6.4).
- The figures of the deceased apostles became founding figures of the entire church (section 6.5).
- A homogenous structure of ministries gradually developed in the entire church (section 6.6).
- And, finally, there now arose ecclesiological concepts that regarded the whole church as a given and that reflected on the unity of the church (section 7).

### 6.3. *Christianity as an Independent Religion*

Our first unity-promoting force has nothing to do with Christ as the basic gift of unity; it is an external factor. With the beginning of the post-apostolic pe-

77. This is the thesis of Martin Hengel, *Der unterschätzte Petrus* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2006), pp. 51-52. In Matthew's case, 28:16-20 could be cited in support of the thesis. In the case of John, the Johannine circle was made up of itinerant teachers who maintained contacts with the churches and could circulate the writings (2 John; 3 John). In the case of Mark and Luke-Acts, both of which may have been written in Rome, the network of churches in the capital city helped spread their material quickly. We can assume that almost all early Christian writings were read in church gatherings — something that naturally helped make them known. Unlike other ancient authors, the earliest Christians did not need to organize special "readings" to promote their books. In the case of Luke-Acts, it is also possible that Theophilus, as the person to whom the book was dedicated, was expected to disseminate the work.

riod, early Christianity was increasingly recognized as an independent religion separate from Judaism. In quite different ways this was the case from both Jewish and non-Jewish perspectives. This change in the way outsiders perceived Christianity had internal consequences.

I will begin with the Jewish perspective. In the period of time we are discussing, the church experienced an increasing separation from Israel. Naturally it happened in quite different ways. Generally one can say that it was hardly noticeable in Gentile Christian churches. The former pagans who became Christians without first having been proselytes or "god-fearers" did not need to separate from Israel. They had never worshiped in synagogues. As time passed, they became more and more numerous.

On the other hand, for many Jewish followers of Jesus the separation from Israel was quite painful. The Gospel of Matthew speaks, for example, of persecutions (23:34-36), and the Gospel of John of expulsions from the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). Such experiences and the identity crises associated with them make it understandable that we find sharp demarcations from Judaism precisely in New Testament texts with a Jewish Christian background. Matthew's wholesale and largely historically unjustified polemic against the "hypocritical scribes and Pharisees" (Matthew 23) is well known. It ends with Jesus and his disciples leaving the Temple — for good, never to return (Matt. 24:1-2). After this harsh polemic, followed by Jesus' pronouncement of judgment (Matt. 23:34-39), readers who were at least inwardly undecided had no choice but to follow Jesus. They, too, left the Temple with Jesus. One of the purposes of this chapter was to underscore the inner break with the Temple and its leaders. Yet severing the connection to the Jewish leaders and to the Temple automatically strengthened the fellowship of the followers of Jesus among themselves. Now they had to depend on themselves.

Things are similar in the Gospel of John. In its first part (chapters 2-12) it portrays Jesus' increasingly harsh conflict with the Jewish leaders, who with growing frequency are simply called "the Jews." The central point on which they take offense is that Jesus, who of course is a human being, "made himself equal with God" (5:18; similarly 10:33). For this reason the Jews wanted to stone him. The official decision of the high priests and the Pharisees that Jesus must be killed (11:47-53) serves as the transition to the passion. Jesus himself says conclusively that the majority of the nation is hardened (12:38-41). After the foot washing and before his death, Jesus gives his disciples alone his farewell discourses, introduced with the new commandment of brotherly love that corresponds to Jesus' love for them (13:34-35). In the large trial scene before Pilate, however, the hostile "Jews" demonstrate that they are definitively incapable of meeting and understanding Jesus. Along with rejecting Jesus, they be-

tray their own faith. They say, "We have no king but Caesar" (19:15). In the Gospel of John "the Jews" are blackened in studied and literarily skillful ways. The kinds of negative "antitypes" we find in the Gospels of John and Matthew strengthen the reader's own identity and the consciousness of belonging to a new religious community different from Israel. People who must burn their bridges know the significance of the new community that supports them.

The parting of the ways of Israel and the Jesus communities is mirrored in other New Testament writings as well. It is almost always accompanied by a people-of-God ecclesiology. The church is understood in them as the people of God that has replaced Israel as the people of God or that has tacitly inherited the position. People-of-God ecclesiologies are always oriented toward the whole church, and thus at least indirectly they strengthen the unity of the church. The opposition to Israel that is part of such a people-of-God ecclesiology is not necessarily explicit. Sometimes the church can also assume people-of-God titles as if Israel had never existed, but usually the antithesis is explicit. It does not always lead to a "hard" substitution theology according to the model, "Israel rejected Jesus; the church has replaced Israel as God's people." There are also various kinds of models of "transition" theologies. This model says: "Israel has become the church, because parts of Israel have accepted Jesus." One can also connect the "hard" substitution model and the "transition" model and call the result a "soft" substitution model.

The canonical Epistle of James is an example of a work with an implicit people-of-God ecclesiology. In literary style it follows the pattern of a Jewish Diaspora letter, and it is directed to the "twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (Jas. 1:1). The reference is to the church, and that means the whole church — not Israel, which is not even mentioned. Another example is 1 Peter. The members of the church are "the chosen race, the royal priesthood, a holy people, the people of the possession." Earlier they were "no people, but now [they are] God's people" (1 Pet. 2:9-10). Israel is mentioned only indirectly: the "chosen and precious cornerstone" that had been laid in Zion has become the stone of offence (cf. 1 Pet. 2:6-8).

More numerous are the works that mention Israel explicitly. Ephesians 2:11-22 is an example of a "soft" substitution model.<sup>78</sup> Christ, "our peace," has reconciled with one another and with God those who at one time were near — namely, Israel — and those who at one time were far — namely, the Gentiles — and he did so by bringing them together into *one* body, the church (Eph. 2:14-18). Acts is an example of what one might call a "half soft" substitution model. Jesus, and after him the twelve apostles, and finally James, the brother

78. Cf. below, p. 127.

of the Lord, gather the people of Israel to Jesus with great success. It is Paul's missionary activity that increasingly shows another picture. Now the Gentiles flow to Jesus, and with increasing clarity the Jews become nay-sayers and disturbers of the peace. At the end of Acts, Paul calls out to the Jews of Rome that now God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles who will listen to him (Acts 28:28).<sup>79</sup> Hebrews offers an example of a "hard" substitution model. It speaks of the pilgrimage of the true people of God who have a heavenly high priest, and it sets the old and the new covenants in opposition to one another. The "disinheritance" of the old people of God/Israel is especially drastic here: the Temple cult in the old covenant is obsolete and ineffective. The Apocalypse of John is also one of the writings with a "hard" substitution model. The titles and the hope of the people of God/Israel are transferred to the church; harsh words are spoken on Israel itself.<sup>80</sup> The Gospel of Matthew evidences tendencies toward a "hard" theology of substitution: the kingdom of God will be taken from Israel's leaders and given to a people who produce its fruits (Matt. 21:43). Admittedly, this new people is not directly identified with the church; it will have to prove itself in the final judgment as the true church.

All of these works use Israel's self-understanding to lay out a whole-church, people-of-God ecclesiology. In all of these cases, this ecclesiology serves to strengthen the church's own identity, and in so doing it also strengthens its solidarity and unity. The connections between a people-of-God ecclesiology and the unity of the church are not explicitly clear in all cases. Later we will discuss in more detail several places where this happens (sections 7.1-3). In all the cases it will be true, however, that this people-of-God ecclesiology has little to do anymore with the people-of-God ecclesiology of James, the brother of the Lord ("church in Israel"), and the people-of-God ecclesiology of Paul ("church vis-à-vis Israel and for Israel"). It is true that in the later history of its influence this people-of-God ecclesiology often strengthened the unity of the church, but it sometimes did so in problematic or even horrible ways.

Not only from the Jewish side but also from the Gentile side, in the post-apostolic period Christianity was increasingly seen to be an independent religion distinct from Judaism. According to what is likely a historical note in Acts, the disciples of Jesus were called "Christians" from the early days of the church in Antioch (Acts 11:26). The name was not a Christian self-designation; it was given by outsiders, and it presupposes that in those days the followers of Jesus were already recognized as an independent entity. That

79. On Luke's ecclesiology and his view of church unity, cf. below, pp. 111-12 and 132-36.

80. Cf. below, pp. 129-32.



was not true everywhere. It was not the case in Rome at the end of the 40s, if the note in Suetonius that Emperor Claudius expelled the Roman Jews who “were constantly causing disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus” (Suetonius, *Claudius* 26.4) actually refers to Jesus Christ and the inner Jewish controversies between Jesus Jews and Jews hostile to Jesus. A decisive turning point, however, was the persecution of Christians in Rome under Nero, who made scapegoats of the Christians for the fire in A.D. 64 that he himself may have started. That was possible only because, first of all, in the Rome of that day the populace saw the Christians as a special religious group — as Christians — and in the second place because the Christians did not have the best reputation. Their religion was widely regarded as a “pernicious superstition” (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.3). Naturally, these events in the capital city quickly became widely known and influential. They introduced the epoch of Christian persecutions that flared up from time to time. Internally they became a powerful force promoting cohesion. Suffering creates bonds among people! Since the suffering came from the Roman state and thus was “ecumenical,” it strengthened not only the local churches but also the ecumenical fellowship. The Apocalypse of John is the best example here (section 7.2).

#### 6.4. Tradition as a Unity-promoting Factor (with Joachim Diestelkamp)

The post-apostolic period was a time of increased orientation to tradition. It was characterized by the need to receive the traditions of other churches as well — that is, of openness to the church’s entire tradition.

The most important tradition was the *Jesus tradition*. Especially in the communities far removed from the land of Israel, one had to explain who this Jesus was whose teachings, atoning death, and resurrection the church confessed; and with the passage of time it became increasingly important to secure the traditions about him. Far from Israel, probably in Rome after the persecutions and martyrdoms under the emperor Nero, there arose the need to tell the entire story of the earthly Jesus and in the process to focus attention on his path of suffering to Jerusalem. That was the permanent basis of tradition, the authoritative “beginning of the proclamation” (Mark 1:1), and it was the concern of the Gospel of Mark.

In Syria there lived the Jewish Christian evangelist Matthew, whose communities looked back on the break with the synagogues and in addition were troubled by prophets who performed miracles and exorcised demons in the name of Jesus (Matt. 7:22-23). In this situation Matthew retold Mark’s story of Jesus. In so doing he wanted to say that this Jesus is the one who “is

with us always until the end of the world” (28:20); he is God’s Immanuel (1:24). An important part of his story of Jesus was Jesus’ preaching — Jesus’ gospel of the kingdom (4:23), the message the Jesus missionaries proclaimed in the whole world (28:20).

Luke, who was probably a companion of Paul in his earlier years, may also have lived in Rome. He collected the traditions about Jesus more thoroughly and more reliably (Luke 1:3) than any of his predecessors. It was he who first made many of the Jesus traditions known in the churches of the Diaspora. His purpose was to provide the Christian catechumens with a complete and reliable basis in tradition for everything they had been taught (1:3-4). We have already seen that the Gospels were understood as a priceless possession of the whole church.<sup>81</sup> They were sent immediately to other local churches and quickly became known in the entire church.

In the post-apostolic period it was also clear that Jesus Christ is the basic gift for church unity. More than earlier, however, one found this basic gift in the common, authoritative tradition. In the second century the appeal to the Jesus tradition became increasingly important. One understood Jesus’ words as the words of the living “Lord.” As a rule they were mediated through the texts of the Gospels, but then they were again made part of the oral tradition and were applied anew in new contexts. The *Didache*, 2 *Clement*, and Justin show this with special clarity.

Along with the words of the Lord, there was the tradition of the *apostles*. Here, too, traditions of the entire church were collected and exchanged. In the case of Paul, his letters were already an expression of his ecumenical authority. When he composed his letter to the Roman church as a comprehensive account of his beliefs, it was more than a tactical move to introduce himself in Rome. He also directed 1 Corinthians to the believers “in every place” (1 Cor. 1:2), Galatians to the churches in Galatia (Gal. 1:1), 2 Corinthians to the church in Corinth and to “the saints in all Achaia” (2 Cor. 1:1). Colossians — perhaps written by a companion of Paul while he was still living — was to be read in Laodicea and, conversely, the (lost) letter from Laodicea was also to be read in Colossae (Col. 4:16). Kurt Aland has conjectured with good reasons that the Pauline letters were passed on by the churches to which they were addressed “to the neighboring churches as soon as possible to strengthen the sense of solidarity.”<sup>82</sup> That would explain why Galatians was preserved even though the Galatian churches did not survive and why differing small collec-

81. Cf. above, p. 96.

82. Kurt Aland, “Die Entstehung des Corpus Paulinum,” in Aland, *Neutestamentliche Entwürfe*, TB 63 (Munich: Kaiser, 1979), p. 350.

tions preceded our present Pauline corpus. Thus the churches did not regard the apostolic letters they received as a private possession that spoke only to them. When the Pauline churches collected and exchanged apostolic letters, they demonstrated that the authority of the apostle was something permanent, unique, and unrepeatable for the whole church. Given what it was, it could not be taken over by some other officeholder in the church.<sup>83</sup>

This is the very thing the pseudo-apostolic letters also express. It would be wrong to try to understand them simply in terms of the (multiform and complex) general phenomenon of ancient pseudigraphy, for it is evident that there was a special outpouring of pseudonymous writings precisely during the post-apostolic period.

Taking a closer look at the subject of *pseudonymity*: with certainty, or probability, almost all<sup>84</sup> of the New Testament witnesses from the post-apostolic period are or became pseudonymous. The literary character of their pseudonymity varies. In some cases they are letters written by pupils, of which there were many in antiquity. They are to be regarded as forgeries only when they use literary devices to try to make their authenticity plausible.<sup>85</sup> In other cases — especially when other documents appear as letters — we have originally anonymous works that later were attributed to apostles.<sup>86</sup>

Usually the pseudonymous documents of the post-apostolic age are *letters*. That is noteworthy. It shows that later generations regarded the letter as a specifically early Christian form. As far as we know, however, the apostle Paul was the only one who wrote letters. When there are in addition pseudonymous letters under the name of Peter, of James, or of Barnabas, it shows that the apostle Paul had a wide-ranging influence far beyond his direct sphere of activity. This, too, is an expression of whole-church thinking.<sup>87</sup>

All pseudonymous texts are attributed to *apostles*.<sup>88</sup> In early Christian-

83. Cf. Kurt Stalder, "Die Nachfolger der Apostel," *IKZ* 59 (1969): 192-211.

84. Exceptions are, in my judgment, 2 and 3 John, Revelation (which comes from a prophet, John), and the Lukan two-volume work (which, in my judgment, was written by Luke, the companion of Paul).

85. That is the case with 2 Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and 2 Peter, but not with Ephesians, James, and 1 Peter.

86. I am thinking here of the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and John as well as the tracts Hebrews and 1 John.

87. In addition to James, works that show influences of or connections with Pauline ideas are the letters of 1 Peter (which also presupposes the Gospel of Matthew), 2 Peter, 1 *Clement*, *Barnabas*, and the letters of Polycarp.

88. According to 1 Cor. 15:7 and Gal. 1:19, James, the brother of the Lord, was regarded as an apostle. He is probably also regarded as an apostle in Acts 15:2, 13, 22. Apostleship is uncertain only for the Lord's brother, Jude. Cf., however, 1 Cor. 9:4-5.

ity there are no pseudonymous letters attributed to figures from a distant past, such as the letter of Baruch to the nine-and-a-half tribes (*Syriac Baruch* 78-86), which originated in Judaism at about the same time. That shows how strongly the post-apostolic period was focused on the authority of the apostles. It was a post-apostolic time not only in a temporal but also in a material sense. That is to say, it understood that it had a relationship to the authority of the apostles and that it was itself of a lesser order. In many pseudo-apostolic letters, the authors are not hiding behind the authority of the apostles simply to give weight to their own minimal authority. They are, rather, directly advocating in their own time the apostles' concern, and they are reminding the church of the apostolic authority that alone was the basis of the church's life. It may well be that after the apostles died and before there existed a clear official authority, there was a certain feeling of helplessness in the church. More important than this, however, is the conviction of the writers of letters that the church continued to be grounded on apostolic authority.

Finally, we need to remember the *ecumenical character* of most pseudo-apostolic letters. Ephesians is presumably a circular writing sent to several Pauline churches in the province of Asia. First Peter is directed to the churches in the northern, western, and central parts of Asia Minor. The Pastorals speak to the entire area of Paul's churches; their geographical horizon reaches from Nicopolis in Epirus to the border of Syria, and they were written possibly from Rome or Ephesus. James is directed to the twelve tribes of Israel in the Diaspora — that is, to the entire church, not merely to the Jewish Christianity scattered throughout the world. Second Peter, Jude, and the *Epistle of Barnabas* are also ecumenical letters. In the case of Hebrews, one can entertain the possibility that a concrete address — which, along with the name of the apostle, originally may have stood at the head of the letter — was omitted in order to emphasize its ecumenical character. Only 2 Thessalonians, which really was addressed to the church of Thessalonica, is an exception here.

In short, it is amazing to what extent the pseudo-apostolic letters are ecumenical letters. It is an indication that people were aware that apostolic authority embraced the entire church. The pseudo-apostolic letters make it clear that people regarded the whole church as a reality and that a church life in which each community was completely autonomous and lived only for itself would contradict the essence of the apostolic heritage. Thus people were aware that there was such a thing as the whole church centuries before it had a visible representative in the form of the papacy and quite some time before all local churches had secured an official structure in the form of the office of bishop — a structure that made communication and coordination possible among the churches in a relatively simple way.

All of that is captured in an especially meaningful way by the *Pastoral Epistles*. Here the apostolic tradition becomes the basic gift of church unity, and remaining in it becomes its condition. Joachim Diestelkamp explains (in the next six paragraphs):

At first glance the Pastoral Epistles appear to be private letters of Paul to two of his closest co-workers that quite by accident were passed on to the church. The ecumenical perspective seems to be completely absent from them. Yet this impression changes completely as soon as one looks at how these letters functioned in the churches for which in reality they were conceived.

Certain (probably Gnostic-oriented) false teachers are undermining large parts of Paul's former missionary territory (2 Tim. 1:15; Tit. 1:10-16). For the author of the Pastorals that threatens the Pauline-apostolic tradition. To counter the threat, he attributes to Paul the instructions, ordinances, and admonitions so characteristic of the letters. And he does so because he knows that he has an obligation to Paul's work and because he wants to protect the apostolic tradition.

The loss of the personal (or epistolary) apostolic presence must have been drastic. Paul's co-workers could not even come close to replacing it, and after they died the threat was even greater that the church would lose a coherent theological tradition that united churches and provinces and that previously had been embodied in living persons. Now a fictitious Paul, as he is presented in an exemplary way in the fourth chapter of 2 Timothy, must fill this vacuum.

Also, as presented in 2 Timothy, Paul is not a solitary missionary. Shortly before his martyrdom he holds all the threads of his mission work in his hand. The apostle's pupils are the bridge to the local churches. Beginning with Timothy and Titus, Paul orders his co-workers to and fro in the entire area of the church that is under his influence (1 Tim. 1:4; 2 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 3:12). He is informed about each of them, and he knows who is faithful and who is unfaithful (2 Tim. 1:15; 4:10; etc.). Through the apostle's pupils the author relates the various towns and provinces to Paul, and he combines a number of former mission areas. Through them Paul's instructions once again reach his church. Both temporally and geographically the co-workers bridge the distance to Paul. Paul himself is the "vanishing point" on which attention is focused. Thus what is at stake in the letters is the unity of the Pauline church.

The activity of the false teachers has raised the truth question. The Pastoral Epistles show pointedly how the issue was dealt with in the post-apostolic period. In them one no longer argues theologically; now one engages in polemics — indeed, one resorts to insult and slander (cf. 2 Tim. 3:1-

9). The bulwark the letters direct against the false teachers is in part a shallow and rigid Pauline "doctrine." Its purpose is to protect the gospel and keep it pure. As a consequence, the ongoing task is to preserve and pass on this tradition (1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2:1-2). Without the Pauline-apostolic tradition one can no longer truly have the gospel. Thus the tradition becomes a basic gift of faith. For those who do not believe in accordance with this Pauline-apostolic tradition, Christ is distorted, and they place themselves outside the unity of the church, together with the false teachers. Here the "healthy doctrine" has become a connecting link, but it is also a precondition of unity. In my judgment the process is justified by the situation. It was a time in which the church could preserve its identity only by preserving the apostolic tradition. And yet, when tradition becomes the highest principle, the gospel itself is shackled, because the tradition destroys the gospel's own freedom to find new expressions in changing situations.

Such an established apostolic tradition places limits on the separate development of local churches. A congregational principle is hardly compatible with it. Timothy is charged to bring certain congregations back "in line" (1 Tim. 1:3). That doubtless means that for all practical purposes a certain mutual supervision of the Pauline local churches is intended, but the Pastorals do not yet think in terms of an official supra-congregational structure that could provide this supervision institutionally. Even their author does not believe that he is empowered to speak by his own authority or, like Ignatius, to claim authority over congregations as a bishop. And yet he believes it is necessary to exercise authority over congregations, since various churches are going their separate ways. His letters are designed to spring into this breach. They require and urge their readers to remain steadfastly in the Pauline-apostolic tradition, to remain united under Paul's authority, and to struggle against the deviates who endanger that unity.

The attention given to tradition in its double form, to the "Lord" and to the apostolic writings, began the process that led to the creation and canonization of the New Testament. Thus the post-apostolic period prepared the groundwork for what today, because it is recognized as such by all churches, is probably the most important basic gift of unity — the Bible. Soon after 100, written texts — the Gospels — were already the most important container for the transmission of the authority of the Lord. For its part, the apostolic tradition had a written form from the beginning. The need for a catholic basis in tradition that was as comprehensive as possible, such as one sees, for example, in the preface of the Gospel of Luke, is analogous in the second century to the reality that four Gospels rather than a single Gospel transmit the words and

deeds of the Lord and that not only the Pauline letters but — in contrast to the Pastorals and to Marcion — the entire apostolic tradition becomes the foundation of the church. Thus initially the tradition given the church as its basis was by no means uniform.

We should not think that collecting the books of the New Testament was a defensive act on the part of the church. From the very beginning the New Testament canon was not suited for combating Gnostic heresies, since the canon of the Christian Gnostics never looked different from that of the orthodox Christians. Unlike Marcion, who in his exclusive attachment to Paul is much like the Pastorals, the churchly Christians emphasized how much more open they were. Only later did the developing canon *also* take on a defensive character — namely, in the church's defense against the claims of the increasing number of Gnostic and non-Gnostic pseudo-apostolic works. Collecting the canon, however, was initially an acknowledgment of the basic gift of unity that is authoritative for all Christians, Christ, and the apostles who represent him and who now, in the second and third generations, become the tradition.

Something similar is true of the rule of apostolic faith, the creed. Here, too, the development proceeds slowly. In the second and third early Christian generations we still find a multiplicity of different and sometimes newly accentuated confessions. The concept of the "apostolic" confession of faith emerges gradually.<sup>89</sup> Only in the anti-Gnostic struggle of the second century are certain formulations of the confessions used against the heretics,<sup>90</sup> and not until the anti-Gnostic struggle of the third century is the thesis widely accepted that the solid and unchanging wording of the creed in the whole church is something fundamentally important.<sup>91</sup>

### 6.5. *The Apostles as Primary Figures of Unity*

Not only the apostles' tradition but above all the apostles themselves became in the post-apostolic period a unifying bond for the church. *Peter and Paul — Poles of Unity*: under this title Franz Mussner has written a small, widely respected book on the unity of the church, and in view of the division between Catholicism and Protestantism he has spoken of Peter and Paul as the "ecu-

89. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.10.1: the universal church has "received from the apostles and their disciples this faith."

90. Cf. the "truly" in Ignatius, *To the Trallians* 9–10; *To the Smyrnaeans* 2.

91. Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis* 1: "The rule of faith is altogether one (*una*), alone immovable, and irreformable (*sola immobilis et irreformabilis*)."

menical yokefellows."<sup>92</sup> We would like to add a third person to these yokefellows — James, the brother of the Lord. In the post-apostolic period he also became a primary figure of unity — admittedly, in his way and limited in part to Jewish Christian circles. By adding him to the "ecumenical yokefellows," we want to remind ourselves of Jewish Christianity, which in the post-apostolic period was repressed and largely forgotten, and of its concerns, which were rendered marginal. An essential part of the unity of the church is its unity with Israel.

#### 6.5.1. *James*

In later times James, the brother of the Lord, became a primary figure of unity. In the Lukan Acts of the Apostles it is he, of all people, who becomes the great defender of the Pauline mission to the Gentiles (15:13–21).<sup>93</sup> There Luke develops a line that is already intimated in the Pauline letters. In Galatians 1 and 2, Paul takes it for granted that James is part of the one church. Thus he mentions him only when he knows that the two of them are in agreement (Gal. 2:9–10). When that is not the case, he mentions him only indirectly (cf. Gal. 2:12; perhaps 2 Cor. 11:5).

In the Epistle of James, written to the "twelve tribes in the Diaspora" (Jas. 1:1), the brother of the Lord is a primary figure of unity for the entire church. To be sure, this letter is far removed from James's basic concern — the church's tie to Israel and to the principle of faithfulness to the Law. Only in the work's deep skepticism about some (vulgar distortion of) Pauline ideas (2:14–26) is there an echo of one of James's concerns. On the other hand, when the work understands the church as the twelve tribes (1:1), thus divorcing the idea from the actual nation of Israel, it turns what James wanted on its head.

A number of Jewish Christian texts speak of something resembling a "primacy of James." According to the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* (logion 12), James the Just is "great" among the disciples after Jesus' death. The disciples are to go to him, because heaven and earth were created on his behalf. For the Jewish Christian (in part, Torah-faithful) Pseudo-Clementine writings, a Jewish Christian romance written in the third century, as the bishop of Jerusalem James is the "bishop of the bishops" and "lord" of the entire church.<sup>94</sup> Our

92. Mussner, *Petrus und Paulus*, p. 5.

93. Jacob Jervell, "James: The Defender of Paul," in Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), pp. 185–207.

94. *Epistle of Clement to James* 1.1.

meager sources are in agreement that James was *the* (sole) leader of the Jerusalem church. If the Jerusalem church in any way understood itself as the “presiding capital” of all Christianity, historically the first monarchical episcopate and something resembling a claim of primacy may well have been in Jerusalem and not in Rome.

The Pseudo-Clementines include many other important figures of early Christianity (for example, Peter) in their view of the church, and in this sense they have in their own way a strong ecumenical and whole-church orientation. Admittedly, Paul is not part of this oecumene.

On the whole, as a primary figure of unity James reflects the diminished significance of Jewish Christianity in the entire church. James is primarily a “unity figure” of a marginal group. Only in the church’s beginnings was this marginal group an integral part of the movement. That is why it was relatively easy to alienate the figure of James from those things for which it originally stood and to make him the advocate of other concerns. Since the Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem, of which he had been the leader, no longer existed, it could no longer come to his defense. With the author of the canonical epistle James has little in common and almost nothing at all with the (Jewish Christian) Gnostic authors of later James texts.

#### 6.5.2. Peter

We are speaking here of the image of Peter in the post-apostolic period — that is, of Peter as a primary figure of unity in the retrospective of a later time. We have not yet spoken of the significance of the historical Peter for the unity of the church, because much here is hidden in obscurity. Nevertheless, a few brief observations should help reveal how and for whom Peter was able to become a primary figure of unity.<sup>95</sup>

It is probable that Peter already had a prominent position among the disciples of the earthly Jesus. That may have been because he had been called to discipleship especially early. It is conceivable that his surname, *kepha* (Aramaic = stone, lump of stones, seed-stone, infrequently = boulder),<sup>96</sup> comes from the time of Jesus. Therefore, its interpretation as the “rock of the church

95. Following especially Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, and John Reumann, *Peter in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973); Rudolf Pesch, *Simon-Petrus: Geschichte und geschichtliche Bedeutung des ersten Jüngers Jesu Christi*, PuP 15 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1980); Christfried Böttrich, *Petrus: Fischer, Fels und Funktionär*, BG 2 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2001); Joachim Gnllka, *Petrus und Rom: Das Petrusbild in den ersten zwei Jahrhunderten* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002); Hengel, *Der unterschätzte Petrus*.

96. Peter Lampe, “Das Spiel mit dem Petrusnamen,” *NTS* 25 (1978/79): 227-45.

of Jesus” in Matthew 16:18 is probably secondary. In all probability, after Easter he received special attention because Jesus first appeared to him (1 Cor. 15:5; Luke 24:34).<sup>97</sup>

In the earliest period he most certainly played a leading role in the Jerusalem church. Not only Acts but also Paul, who soon after his Christ vision went to Jerusalem to meet Peter (Gal. 1:18), testify to this. In contrast to James the brother of the Lord, he traveled early, visited Christians in other places (Acts 8:14-24; 9:32-43), and engaged in missionary work, so that it is no accident that at the Apostolic Council it was he and not James who was entrusted with the mission among the circumcised. Similarly, according to Galatians 2:12 he was personally in Antioch, unlike James. In the Antiochene conflict he assumed a mediating (according to Paul, a vacillating) attitude between Paul and James. Obviously he affirmed table-fellowship with the Gentile Christians and was personally willing to act contrary to the Torah’s purity regulations, yet he let the people from James persuade him that table-fellowship did not mean freedom from the Law for all Jewish Christians.<sup>98</sup> Thus the table-fellowship with the Jerusalem people and with it the fellowship of the entire church was very important for him. The old note in Acts 9:43 also testifies to Peter’s openness in ritual questions. There Peter was living in Joppa with Simon, a tanner — in other words, with a tradesman for whom ritual purity most certainly was not characteristic.

We know little about the later missionary activity of Peter. The division of the mission into Jewish and Gentile spheres undertaken at the Apostolic Council could not be maintained in the Diaspora, especially since everyone agreed that there should be no separated churches. Thus Peter also became a missionary to the Gentiles. That is reflected in the Cornelius tradition of Acts 10. Although there is a Cephas party in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12), it is not certain that Peter was ever there. The relationship between Paul and Peter in the years after the Apostolic Council is also a matter of debate. Some assume that in 1 Corinthians 3:10-17 Paul is indirectly speaking against Peter. Martin Hengel even thinks that Peter is the actual authority and a “superlative apostle” (2 Cor. 11:5) behind Paul’s opponents, who, according to 2 Corinthians 11-13, attack Paul’s apostleship.<sup>99</sup> I do not believe that is the case. If it were, then in

97. Assuming that the first appearance of Jesus was not to Mary Magdalene, which is historically quite possible.

98. Thus, when confronted with the emissaries from Jerusalem, Peter returned to the purity laws of the Torah for the sake of fellowship with them. Did he “become as a Jew to the Jews” (1 Cor. 9:20) for the sake of the fellowship of the church? Paul could well have interpreted his behavior this way. In this case his judgment would have been less harsh.

99. Hengel, *Der unterschätzte Petrus*, pp. 124-25, 149.

1 Corinthians 3:5-15 Paul most likely would have based his argument on the example of Peter rather than on the example of Apollos. Thus, relatively soon after they clashed in Antioch, Peter and Paul had a rapprochement. Another argument in support of this view is that the Cephas people, like the Apollos people and Paul, in principle stood for freedom from the Law. It is clear then that later (after Paul!) Peter worked in Rome and suffered martyrdom there.

Finally, let us consider the controversial question of the origin of the two primacy texts, Matthew 16:18 and John 21:15-17. The Johannine version is part of an Easter appearance, the Matthean version not. A remaining question is whether it is historically appropriate that John 21:15-17 connects the primacy of Peter with an Easter appearance. On the whole, however, John 21 is a much later text,<sup>100</sup> and, just like Matthew 16:18, it does not speak of a *first* appearance of Christ to Peter. It is conceivable, and in my judgment more probable, that both texts have been formulated looking back on the apostolic period. That is to say, they came from a time when it became clear that the apostles really were the “foundation” on which the edifice of the church is built (cf. Eph. 2:20). Naturally, one could write this way only if Peter actually did have a “supporting” significance for the emerging church in the first generation — a significance that exceeded that of the other apostles.

Peter becomes a key figure in the post-apostolic period. What is more, he does so in writings that bear a Jewish Christian imprint (in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John) as well as in writings with a Gentile Christian stamp (in the Lukan writings, in the Petrine epistles, in the Gospel of Mark according to the church’s early tradition<sup>101</sup>). In the Gospel of Mark he is by far the most frequently mentioned disciple of Jesus. Furthermore, he appears in key passages in the composition of the Gospel: at the beginning (Mark 1:16-18), in the middle (8:27-33), and at the end (16:7). In the Gospel of Matthew he is the first disciple called by Jesus (4:16-18; 10:2) as well as the most frequently mentioned spokesman for the disciples; in addition, he is the one who in his “little faith” is the typical disciple (for example, 14:28-31; 16:13-23; 26:69-75). In the first part of Acts, Peter appears as the leader of the Jerusalem church, as *the* one who proclaims the message of Jesus to the Jews, and as the virtual initiator of the Gentile mission, before disappearing from view after the Apostolic Council. In the Gospel of John, Peter is not only the spokesman for the disciples (6:68; 13:6-9); he is also — especially in the postscript

100. The text presupposes Peter’s death.

101. The Gospel of Mark has been associated with Peter since Papias and Justin, probably even since 1 Peter.

21:15-19 — the shepherd and representative of the whole church. From the many accents and colors of the New Testament portrait of Peter we will single out those that are especially important for the unity of the church.

First of all, Peter passes on the *Jesus tradition* that is fundamental for the church. This is related to Matthew’s report that he was the “first” one called (Matt. 10:2). Luke emphasizes Peter’s call even more clearly (Luke 5:1-11). Since for Luke the twelve apostles are witnesses of everything that happened between Jesus’ baptism and his ascension (cf. Acts 1:22), one does expect that Peter, as the first one called, would play a special role in the early church. He is also the one who gives the Gentile Cornelius the basic report “from Galilee after the baptism John preached” down to Jesus’ resurrection and missionary command (cf. Acts 10:37-42). Second Peter also regards Peter as an eyewitness and guarantor of the tradition. He heard the heavenly voice on the mount of transfiguration (1:16-18), and along with the other apostles he conveyed to the descendants the “commandments of the Lord and Savior” (3:2). The author sets this tradition against the seductions of the false prophets and false teachers. Thus the author of this, the latest New Testament letter, argues not by appealing to a ministry or to the power of the keys given Peter according to Matthew 16:19, but solely on the basis of the tradition of which Peter is the guarantor. In the same way and at about the same time in Asia Minor, Papias appealed to Peter as the guarantor of the tradition contained in the Gospel of Mark.<sup>102</sup> Later, the ancient church interpreted the primacy text of Matthew 16:18: “For the true faith and because his teaching was an exceedingly secure foundation, [Simon was] appointed . . . to be a foundation-stone of the church.”<sup>103</sup>

A second important dimension of the New Testament portrait of Peter most likely builds on the mediating position of the historical Peter. In a special way Peter becomes the figure who represents the unity of the *whole church*. One sees that initially in Acts. Luke portrays the primitive church in Jerusalem as being in complete harmony, praising God with *one* heart and *one* soul. It is under the leadership of “Peter and the apostles” (for example, Acts 5:29). Peter is then also the one who, in the name of the church, proclaims the word that increases the church (Acts 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 5:29-32; 10:34-43). Peter’s function as a unity figure is especially important with reference to Paul. According to Luke, Peter programmatically takes the lead in the law-free Gentile mission that Paul will later follow in agreement with the Jerusalem apostles. Peter presents to the Jerusalem assembly the Pauline

102. Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.39.15.

103. *Epistle of Clement to James* 1.2.

kerygma of justification by faith alone apart from works of the Law (Acts 15:8-11). Conversely, Luke can have Paul deliver a sermon to the “Israelite men” of Antioch in Pisidia that has the same schema as Peter’s previous sermons to Jews and in many of its expressions is reminiscent of them (Acts 13:16-43). In Acts Peter’s preaching is Pauline and Paul’s is Petrine! It would be difficult to image a more skillfully created testimony to the unity of the church. It may be that we can see something similar in 1 Peter, which a number of exegetes regard as the most Pauline of all pseudepigraphic apostolic letters. Be that as it may, it is clear that its author is not at all interested in advocating a specifically Petrine theology under the pseudonym Peter.<sup>104</sup> In the Gospel of John, Peter represents the mainstream church over against the sectarian Johannine circle.<sup>105</sup>

*In summary:* especially after his death Peter becomes important as a unity figure of the church. Nowhere does he represent a particular group in competition with other groups. Instead, in the words of 2 Peter, he belongs with his “beloved brother Paul” (2 Pet. 3:15), and together with him he represents the *one* apostolic church.

In the New Testament we are still far removed from a primacy or office of Peter for the whole church. Still, what we know about Peter and the post-apostolic New Testament portrait of Peter, makes it understandable why the Pontifical Ministry of Peter was later able to appeal for legitimacy to the New Testament traditions about Peter. (A “ministry of Paul” or a “ministry of James” for the whole church would be less conceivable in terms of the New Testament.) Both as a disciple of Jesus and as a post-Easter apostle and missionary, Peter was a commanding figure. Like no other unity figure, he built bridges among various parts of the church. As with no other early Christian figure, his work encompassed the whole church geographically. Like no other unity figure, he was able to authenticate and embody both parts of the New Testament tradition — the tradition of the “Lord” and the apostolic tradition.

Nevertheless, there is no basis in the New Testament for a consistent and linear development to the later primacy of Peter, for the fact that Peter suffered martyrdom in the imperial city of Rome and thus became an especially important figure for the capital city is as much a historical accident as is the fact that Christianity’s expansion took place in an “ecumenical” impe-

104. Which, of course, does not mean that Peter did not have a theology of his own. We simply do not know what it is.

105. Cf. below, pp. 137-39.

rium headed by a monarch whose political structure then called for a corresponding ecclesiastical structure.

### 6.5.3. Paul (with Joachim Diestelkamp)

Paul is the third major unity figure. Here the picture the texts give is somewhat different, because during his lifetime Paul was by no means a unifying person; he was a controversial figure over whom the spirits divided. In addition, Paul so openly and unchangeably advocated a theology of his own and publicized it with his letters that it was impossible to strip his preaching and his activity of its special profile, as was done with Peter and James, and to draw it back into apostolic unity. The most important texts for us are the Deutero-Paulines, especially Ephesians and the Pastorals, as well as Acts. First, however, I would like to make a few general observations about how Paul was received.

1. Paul became not only an apostle of a particular area of the church or a particular ecclesiastical school of thought. He also became, except for Jewish Christianity, an apostle of the whole church. Among the people to know and use the collection of Paul’s letters are not only the “Paulinist” Polycarp but also the theologically un-Pauline Ignatius and the author of 2 Peter. Paul is consistently seen as world missionary, as “herald in the East and in the West” (1 *Clement* 5.6), and as an apostle of the Gentiles (Col. 1:27; Eph. 3:8). His “mission field” is the cosmos. Thus Paul is accepted in the whole church.

2. Paul is almost always included in the oecumene of the apostles. He is not the only apostle. He stands together with Peter (1 *Clement* 5.4-5; 2 Pet. 3:15) or is organically part of the circle of the other apostles (Acts). That confirms what Colossians already states: Paul is a “servant of the church” (Col. 1:25). Admittedly, there are two exceptions to this generally valid observation. In the writings of the church, the Pastoral Epistles give the impression that Paul is not an apostle but *the* apostle, herald, and teacher. For Marcion, then, Paul becomes simply *the* apostle.

3. In keeping with this point is a third observation. The fact that a later period was interested in Paul does not mean that it was interested in his theology. People have often observed (and then drawn conclusions from their observation) that in the post-Pauline mainstream church Pauline theology played a reduced role. That may be because most members of the church did not understand it either during his lifetime or after his death. But it could also be because many of its basic themes, such as the controversy with the Torah, in a later period were no longer relevant or at least no longer appeared to be relevant. Of course, it may also be a matter of our modern perspective. Perhaps we take it too much for granted that Paul was primarily a theologian,

while the post-apostolic witnesses understood him primarily as a missionary, as apostle and planter of churches. Above all, however, here too we can see a clear tendency of the post-apostolic period. Pauline theology is accepted to the degree that it becomes the theology of the whole church. With Luke, for example, Jesus (Luke 18:9-14; cf. 10:29; 16:15) and Peter (Acts 15:8-11) proclaim the Pauline message of justification. Otherwise, Luke takes over little Pauline theology; he does not use Paul's letters as a source. One sees that precisely in his sermons of Paul in Acts. In another way Pauline theology appears in 1 Peter. Here it is taken over as Peter's theology — that is, to the degree that it has become a common Christian possession, apostolic theology. The Pastoral Epistles speak of the tradition that is to be preserved without change (*paratheke*) and of the "healthy doctrine" entrusted to the church without explaining what its content is. They combat false doctrine, but they do so without making use of Paul's theology. Only the two indirectly Pauline or deutero-Pauline letters, to the Colossians and the "Ephesians," constitute, relatively speaking, an exception, since their authors as immediate disciples of Paul were strongly influenced by him. But even they interpret Paul clearly as *the church's teacher*.

We can summarize as follows: the people who come after Paul understand him not as a thinker or as an individual but as *one* of the principal apostles and teachers of the church alongside others.

Here we can only sketch briefly some of the special features of the picture of Paul found in individual New Testament writings. For the post-Pauline *Epistle to the Ephesians*, Paul's apostolic activity is part of the divine stewardship (*oikonomia*) (Eph. 3:2). The revelation to Paul near Damascus becomes a milestone of God's comprehensive economy of salvation (Eph. 3:3). Since Colossians and Ephesians meditate on the church as a whole, they reflect on the significance of the Pauline apostleship for the whole church. Ephesians does this in a form that is especially relevant for the question of the church's unity. Ephesians 2:11-18 looks back to the proclamation of "our peace" through which the dividing wall between Israel and the Gentiles, the Torah and its regulations has been broken down. For the author, the miracle of reconciliation brought through Christ is that Jews and Gentiles have become *one* church. Through God's plan the apostle Paul has become the instrument through which the *one* church consisting of Jews and Gentiles came into being. For the author, that is Paul's apostolic work. When one considers how much Paul struggled his entire life for this unity, sacrificing his own life for that cause with his journey to Jerusalem, one sees that the author of Ephesians understood Paul well. He differs from his teacher in only one point. Now that Christ has broken down the dividing wall between Israel and the

nations, Israel's special "citizenship" no longer has any significance. The church, the body of Christ that reconciles Jews and Gentiles, makes it superfluous. The author says nothing about the remaining promise for Israel, the *old* people of God. Nothing in Ephesians corresponds to Romans 9–11.

Luke also sees the apostle Paul in the service of the one apostolic church. We will probably find the readers of the Lukan writings where Paul's journey ends: in the law-free Gentile Christianity of Rome, detached from Israel. Luke describes the way from Israel to the Gentiles that God went first with Peter, then especially with Paul. It is a way led by the Spirit and approved by the whole church (Acts 15). Paul is the representative of this way to which Luke's readers owe their own existence in the church. In various ways Luke makes it clear that it is not Paul's own private special way: Paul is accepted by the local church in Damascus (Acts 9:10-22). Peter begins (Acts 10) and provides the theological basis (Acts 15:7-11) for Paul's Torah-free Gentile mission, and James demonstrates that this way is biblical (Acts 15:13-21). After his missionary journey Paul returns to Jerusalem, where Luke once again emphasizes his agreement with James, the brother of the Lord (21:18-26). Finally, under the leading of the Spirit and according to God's plan (cf. Acts 20:22-24; 21:10-14), Paul goes to Rome, to his execution, just as once Jesus had gone to Jerusalem. Polemically, perhaps against a Jewish Christian opposing position, that means that Paul's way is not an arbitrary distortion of the original gospel. Nor is it the way of a God-contrary defection from the church's original unity in the midst of Israel. According to Luke, it was the unbelieving Jews, not Paul, who shattered this unity. James himself stands on Paul's side in this conflict. Again, what that means is that Paul is an apostle for the entire church.

A number of scholars are of the opinion that Luke wanted to portray Paul as a great proclaimer among the church's witnesses but not as an apostle. I think this widely held thesis is completely wrong. Acts 14:4 and 14, which refer to Barnabas and Paul as apostles, are by no means merely expressions Luke took over with his tradition or the result of literary carelessness. One would not expect such things from a careful stylist like Luke! For Luke, "apostle" is a collective term. He never uses it for an individual — neither for Peter, nor for another member of the Twelve, nor for Paul. Thus the title of "apostle" appears only where Paul appears with other apostles, such as in 14:4 and 14: "the apostles Barnabas and Paul." In my judgment it is obvious that Luke regarded Paul as an apostle and that he was not in the least inclined to place him on a lower level in the church as, for example, a "thirteenth witness."<sup>106</sup>

106. This is the title of a book by Christoph Burchard, *Der dreizehnte Zeuge*, ERLANT 103 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970).



In the *Pastoral Epistles*, Paul plays a distinctly central, almost exclusive role. Joachim Diestelkamp describes it as follows (in the following five paragraphs):

Based on the way he appears in the Pastoral Epistles, one would not automatically include Paul as a primary figure of the one church. The church's apostleship is here exclusively limited to Paul. Does the author of the Pastorals ignore all other apostles because he regards them as insignificant? Or is he writing for a Pauline part of the church? In any case, here there is quite a difference from Luke's portrayal of Paul. Paul alone is the normative teacher, preacher, guardian, organizer, colleague, master, model, and martyr.<sup>107</sup> Is this an appropriate description of Paul for Christianity at large?

The Pastoral Epistles are notable for their wide geographical scope, ranging from the border of Syria to Rome and from Epirus to Crete. It is therefore significant that they take no notice of the East. Syria and Palestine, areas that played an enormous role in Paul's life, are not mentioned, not to speak of the theologically important city of Jerusalem. The relationship to Jewish Christianity — even retrospectively, as with Luke — is completely missing in the Pastorals, thus omitting something that for Paul was a fundamental dimension of the one church. Yet, the geographical horizon is almost identical with the areas in which Paul or his co-workers did their missionary work. Thus if the Pauline local churches are the author's intended recipients, it is understandable why the person of Paul is so prominent, almost to the point of being the object of the proclamation (cf. 1 Tim. 1:16). The churches attribute their Christian identity to Paul (1 Tim. 2:7). He is honored as teacher of the Gentiles and as apostle (2 Tim. 1:11). This is where the author begins. When now the Pauline tradition appears to be in danger, he is not satisfied to let Paul simply speak authoritatively; he also presents him as the prototype of the true Christian (1 Tim. 1:16) and the model in the Christian way of life (2 Tim. 3:10-13; 4:8). Thus he is able to motivate the readers to form the necessary tie to the Pauline apostolic tradition by appealing to their personal obligation to the person of Paul.

With great psychological skill he makes this concrete by using the relationship between Paul and Timothy as a model. He dedicates all of 2 Timothy to this theme. Thus the image of the apostolic disciples Timothy and Titus has a twofold function. For one thing, it is, of course, part of the historical fiction. For another, however (and this is the more important point), Timothy and Titus perform tasks that at the time the letters were written were to be carried

107. Norbert Brox, "Historische und theologische Probleme der Pastoralbriefe des Neuen Testaments," *Kairos* 11 (1969): 86.

out by the typical local officeholder (e.g., 2 Tim. 4:2); the reader is able to identify with them. Thus the reader has his ideal role model before his very eyes, and at the same time, if he sees himself in the apostle's disciples, he forms such a close relationship to Paul that the distance between them disappears.

Thus the epistles secure the unity of the church not through the apostolic tradition — that is, abstractly — but emphatically through the pattern-copy (*Vorbild-Nachbild*) structure and thus by means of a personal dimension. In this way the author's concern becomes more concrete, livelier, clearer. This personal element is also part of the understanding of ordination (2 Tim. 1:6) and of transmitting the Pauline tradition (2 Tim. 2:1-2). Of course, one cannot find evidence in the Pastoral Epistles for what today we call apostolic succession, but one can see certain "trace elements" that have contributed to the later doctrine.

*In summary:* thus the exclusive Paulinism attributed to the Pastoral Epistles serves a basic concern of the letters. Every Christian, especially every officeholder, has a duty to Paul, to his work and his apostolic tradition. The suggestion that the Pastorals have no ecumenical consciousness, or even that they represent a provincial development of a strange kind of early Christian literature, overlooks the thrust of this exclusive focus on Paul. The relationship to the other apostles, to other circles in the church, and to Jewish Christianity is not the theme of the epistles. The oecumene and other traditions are automatically blocked out because the author is primarily anxious about Paul's work in his own churches.

Looking back: in the post-apostolic period, James, Peter, and Paul become primary figures of unity. They usually represent the one, apostolic church together. As eyewitnesses and heralds, as bearers of the Spirit and representatives of his life and suffering, they transmit Christ to the church. They become part of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and thus belong to the basic gift of unity. What James, Peter, and Paul have struggled for in their lives, the unity of the church, now in retrospect becomes part of the basic gift of unity that molded and supported the church. The apostles whom the Lord has appointed are singular figures with special authority at the beginning of the church. Thus they are permanently given to the later church as representatives of the Lord and his spokesmen. That would explain why nowhere in the New Testament do the apostles have successors.

One could say pointedly that in the first century and the first half of the second century what we call "apostolic succession" was above all that the *tradition* of the apostles — later the apostolic *canon* of the New Testament — represents the authority of the apostles, and that the *person* of the apostles

and their activity is an exemplary model, especially for the officeholders. Nevertheless, according to the New Testament there is simply no such thing as a succession of the apostolic *ministry*.

### 6.6. Ministerial Offices as a Unity-promoting Force (with Jürg Liechti)

Already in the New Testament period, the ministries of the church became an important factor supporting the unity of the church. This was true for the various local churches but not yet true for the whole church. In the New Testament period there were only some initial beginnings of supra-congregational ministries. To say it pointedly, the nascent “early catholic” official church was “congregational.”

First, an overview. We see in the post-apostolic period a development in the ministerial offices about which there was as yet no theological reflection. Paul’s order of ministries in 1 Corinthians 12:28-30 could not be transmitted in later times without being changed. Paul says that God appointed apostles, prophets, and teachers in the church (1 Cor. 12:28). Beyond that he mentions only functions, no ministries: healings, leadership functions, serving, mighty deeds, speaking in tongues. In addition, in the Pauline churches there were deacons (Phil. 1:1; Rom. 16:1; cf. 12:7) and “overseers” (*episkopoi*) (Phil. 1:1). In neither case do we know exactly what their functions were.<sup>108</sup> The (male and female!) deacons may have served at the table for the Lord’s Supper. The deaconess Phoebe in Cenchreae obviously owned a house and entertained guests of the church, including Paul. With the “overseers,” who are first mentioned in Philippians 1:1, we are completely in the dark. Obviously the leadership in the Pauline churches was arranged in different ways. Sometimes the first converts played a role (cf. 1 Cor. 16:16). Paul can also speak in general terms of the “leaders” (1 Thess. 5:12). Thus the question of church leadership was not determined in a way that was binding on the future.

In the post-Pauline period, what had proved its worth was preserved. Among them was the office of deacon, which appeared in the entire church relatively early. The apostles, prophets, and teachers had been primarily responsible for the task of preaching, although in principle all members shared the responsibility. Here there was a natural evolution. When prophets, teach-

108. From the Greek word “overseer” (*episkopos* = a supervisor in government and in social organizations) evolved the later “bishop.” *Episkopos* is a secular title taken over in the Philippian church that can designate completely different kinds of supervisors. In Philippi the term may refer to the supervision of the collection.

ers, or other members of the church performed their task well, they automatically acquired a certain prominence in the church, and when they were not effective the opposite was true. It was likely that the weight such proven people carried in the church was early connected with the designation “elder,” which came from Jewish Christianity. It was a term that in contemporary Judaism designated not only members of the ruling body of the synagogue or the *gerousia* of a city; it was in general a title of honor without official character. “An elder is only a person who has wisdom” (*b. Qiddushin* 32b). The word “elder” first appears in Acts 11:20 (cf. 15:2-23) in connection with the Jerusalem church. We do not really know, however, whether “elder” had already become the designation of an office in early Jewish Christianity or what functions the elders had there.

The tendency was for the preaching in worship increasingly to become the task of such proven members of the church. What then was more natural than selecting from their number someone for the “oversight” (*episkope*) of the church, thus for church leadership? In the texts we must decide case by case whether “overseer” is merely the description of a function or whether it has already become the designation of a fixed ministry. The former appears to be the case in Acts 20:28, where the elders of Ephesus are addressed. Their “supervisory function” is described with the word “to shepherd.” This verb and the noun “shepherd” appear in other New Testament texts as metaphors for church leadership (Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:2; cf. John 21:15-17). In the Pastoral Epistles “overseer” is already an officeholder, and “oversight” is a ministry a man<sup>109</sup> can seek (1 Tim. 3:1). Then, in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, the bishop is indirectly referred to for the first time as “shepherd” (*Romans* 9.1; *Philadelphians* 2.1). Thus in time, tested and honored members of the church (with the designation “elder”) became the holders of an office. The transition from function to the designation of a ministry is fluid. That is also clear in Acts, where elders — in itself an open title of honor — were “appointed” by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:23).

The development to a local church order with the ministries of deacons, elders, and bishops progressed naturally and without a break. Yet it is by no means linear. As late as the Deutero-Pauline Ephesian epistle we can still only recognize that the task of preaching was essential for the church but not how it was made institutional.

109. But not a woman, in contrast to the office of deacon (cf. 1 Tim. 3:11, which does not refer to the wives of deacons). There absolutely were female officeholders in the ancient church, however — not only deacons, presbyters, and prophets but occasionally bishops as well. See Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000).

Ephesians 4:11 says that Christ appointed some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as shepherds and teachers. The author uses 1 Corinthians 12:28 as a pattern, but he limits himself to the ministries of preaching and leadership. Healings, miracles, speaking in tongues, and serving are no longer mentioned. It is not possible, however, to connect the “evangelists” and “shepherds” mentioned before the “teachers” with concrete church ministries. Instead, the author is interested in expressing the tasks of preaching and leadership that are fundamental for the church. He is not interested in the persons in a church who assume the functions of evangelists or shepherds. Thus we do not learn whether in that day there were “overseers/episcopos” in the post-Pauline churches of Asia Minor.

Hebrews speaks simply of “men in a position of leadership” (13:7, 17, 24; cf. 1 Clement 1.3). James (5:14) is familiar with church elders, obviously a fixed council. First Peter (5:1, 5) offers a similar picture. Here the age of an elder is clearly important (cf. 1 Tim. 4:12). At the time of the Pastorals one must assume that Pauline local churches in Asia Minor and elsewhere had an order of elders with the ministry of “overseer” and “deacon.”<sup>110</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that for the Seer of Revelation these officeholders are so unimportant that in his letters to the seven local churches of Asia Minor he completely ignores them. He simply addresses the churches and is familiar only with the prophetic ministry.

The same is probably true for the churches of the Gospel of Matthew, which comes from Syria, perhaps Antioch. It mentions prophets and teachers, criticizes exalting them too highly (23:8-10), and presupposes a brotherly and sisterly church order. The responsibility for church discipline lies not with a church leader but with the assembled community (18:15-18). Even two or three people gathered in the name of Jesus constitute a congregation of Christ where he is “in their midst” (18:19; cf. 28:20). Matthew clearly uses Jesus’ word about serving in the context of claims made in connection with church ministries (23:11). He never implies the existence of bishops and elders. Likewise, the Gospel of John nowhere alludes to leadership structures in the churches; Jesus alone is the “good shepherd.” Of course, Ignatius of Antioch emphasizes the monarchical episcopacy, yet it is noteworthy that in his letter to the Roman church he mentions no bishop there. Obviously there was none.<sup>111</sup>

Thus in the first and second centuries the development to a uniform

110. For the details, see below, pp. 121-22.

111. Peter Lampe (*From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* [Minneapolis: Fortress; London: Continuum, 2003], pp. 397-412) shows that a monarchical episcopacy in Rome first evolved slowly in the second half of the second century.

structure of bishops and elders progressed very slowly, and it happened differently in different parts of the church.

Admittedly, one can see a certain tendency toward unification of church structures. Sooner or later, what had proven to be successful was adopted generally. Because the church understood that its parts belonged to one another, the individual local churches also intentionally organized themselves in similar ways. This de facto unification had important consequences, for only an intentionally identical organizational structure in all churches could achieve theological merit and itself become a basic gift of unity.

“Proving itself” means primarily that the ministries of elders, and especially that of the bishop, have proven their value extraordinarily well in the struggle against false doctrines. The experiences of the churches showed that the common tradition and the Scriptures were not enough to secure union, for the Scriptures could always be interpreted differently. Even the quintessence of the tradition, the “rules of faith,” the firmly formulated creeds, proved to be inadequate as a basis of unity in the struggle against Christian Gnostics, for the Gnostics also laid claim to the apostles. Thus, over and over, the early catholic, orthodox churches experienced their ministries as the instrument through which the church’s Lord most visibly cared for its unity.

For the medium term, that could not be without consequences for ecclesiastical organization. The experiences of the apostolic period had made the apostles the indispensable ingredient of every ecclesiology. Now the same thing happened with the episcopal structure of the church. Through the experiences of the post-apostolic period and the second century it became an indispensable part of every ecclesiology. An important reorientation was introduced that has determined the nature of the quest for unity down to the present day.

In the post-apostolic period we are standing at the very beginnings of this new orientation. We will take a closer look at these beginnings in the light of three documents. Jürg Liechti writes of the *Pastoral Epistles*:

The author of the Pastorals discusses church ministries with a detail that is remarkable for the New Testament. Here it is simply taken for granted that the ministries of bishop and deacon and the elders are part of the structure of every local church. They even express the wish that elders be appointed “in every city” (Tit. 1:5). Nevertheless, the Pastorals are still far removed from the established order of ministries of later times. Much is still fluid or unclear.

Above all, the relationship of the bishop (of whom one still speaks only in the singular) to the elders is unclear. Are they identical? One gets that impression from Titus 1:5, 7. Or is there in every church only *one* bishop, much

as there is only one master of every household? That bishops are mentioned only in the singular could support such a conclusion. In that case, the bishop would be the leader of the church, and the elders, for example, could aspire to that position. First Timothy 5:17, however, speaks of multiple presbyters who lead the church. Some of them also preach and teach, tasks for which they are paid.

The Pastorals appear to be familiar with an ordination of officeholders (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6) that took place with the laying on of hands, but in addition to elders and deacons hands could be laid on other members of the church as well (cf. 1 Tim. 5:22). Thus the laying on of hands is not exclusively a rite of ordination.

Nevertheless, most of the tendencies in the Pastoral Epistles are in the direction of a fixed order of ministries. They appear to presuppose, or at least to require, the same church order in all the churches in the Pauline area. Of special importance is the merging of the functions of teaching and leadership in the office of bishop and also in the office of presbyter.

And yet there is still no particular order of ministries that is a necessary prerequisite for the unity of the church. For the Pastorals the ministries have more of a serving character. An officeholder is to help the church remain in the "tradition" and the "healthy doctrine." He is to be a model for the church (Tit. 2:7; cf. 2 Tim. 3:10-11). The church is to hold him answerable for this task. In an extreme case this can even result in an accusation against him (1 Tim. 5:19).

From this perspective the Pastoral Epistles stand in the Pauline tradition. For Paul, except for the apostles, prophets, and teachers the churches were free to create their own organization. The further development in the Pastorals shows that the churches made use of the freedom Paul granted. The formation of the ministries in the Pastorals was a response to the changes in the situation of the churches since Paul's time. According to them, what is decisive for the unity of the church is not the ministry but the "healthy doctrine" and the things that have been "entrusted" — that is, the tradition.

Not far removed from the Pastoral Epistles is the non-canonical *1 Clement*. For Rudolph Sohm,<sup>112</sup> this work is an expression of the church's great fall from grace, since it is here that the church lost its own nature as a spiritual reality and took on a legal structure. For this reason the work is for him justifi-

112. Rudolph Sohm, *Kirchenrecht*, vol. 1: *Die geschichtlichen Grundlagen* (1892; repr. Munich-Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1923): *1 Clement* "was destined to bring an end to the early Christian constitution in the church" (p. 157); "At the end of the first century the epistle of Clement signaled the birth of canon law. An event of incalculable consequence!" (p. 160).

ably not in the canon. On the other hand, many authors associate *1 Clement* with the late New Testament works, not in spite of but precisely because it draws a sharp distinction between ministry and laity. It is the "function of the office . . . to continue the mission of the apostles."<sup>113</sup> Jürg Liechti advocates the view that *1 Clement* differs little from the Pastorals regarding the concrete form of the ministries. However, in part, at least, the ministry is given a different rationale. He writes (in the following three paragraphs):

In this letter Clement speaks to a particular incident in the local church in Corinth. A rebellious faction in the Corinthian church has removed the long-standing leaders of the church (*1 Clement* 3.3; 44.3) and replaced them with younger leaders who are superior to the older people in spirit and speaking ability (cf. *1 Clement* 21.5; 57.2). Clement argues in great detail that the old leaders of long standing should be reinstated.

It is interesting how Clement argues for their legitimacy. Although he refers to their faithfulness in preaching the right gospel and in their service to the church (44.3-4, 6), he bases his argument primarily on another point — on the order that regulates the entire cosmos (*1 Clement* 20). For him the Christian community, like the Old Testament cult, is governed by a divine order (40.1-41.4). This order is the primary reality; it is beyond question. Thus the church's existence is guaranteed not only by doctrine but also by the order of its ministries. That makes the church's ministry of decisive significance for the question of unity.

Clement is less concerned to argue for a particular structure of ministries than he is to say *that* the church should be regulated. His theory speaks more of the "that" of church order than of the "how." For him it is important that everything takes place "in accordance with the appointed order of God's will" (42.2). Here he differs from Ignatius, whose theory argues for a particular order of ministries.

Thus one can indeed say that according to *1 Clement* the "order" in the church is important for church unity, but one should not overemphasize the new element in *1 Clement*. The author is more interested in the local church than in the ecumenical dimension. He is focused on practical problems. He is concerned about peace in the church and in its fellowship — things that require an order imposed by God. He is not trying to develop a theory of the church but, in a concrete instance, to gather as many convincing arguments as possible in order to convince the Corinthians to retract the removal of their elders.

113. Otto Knoch, *Die "Testamente" des Petrus und Paulus*, SBS 62 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1973), p. 97.

It is with *Ignatius of Antioch* that we first encounter a fundamentally new view. Again, Jürg Liechti writes:

The letters of Ignatius of Antioch offer a new view of church ministries on two levels:

1. On the level of church organization we find for the first time the threefold ministry (bishop-elders-deacons). For the first time the elder is an independent officeholder under the bishop (*episkopos*) and over the deacon. What once was a lateral relationship has become hierarchical, above and below, "with the bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles," and "the deacons, who are most dear to me, are entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ" (*Magnesian* 6.1). The elders are subordinate to the bishop, and the deacons are subordinate to them. Apart from these three ministries, Ignatius speaks of no other ministry.

2. What is really new with Ignatius, however, is that only this ecclesiastical structure corresponds to God's will. A church without this structure of ministries is inconceivable for him. "Without these (that is, bishop, elders, and deacons) one cannot speak of 'church'" (*Trallians* 3.1). Ignatius justifies this with analogies "between heavenly and earthly realities, between the ideal apostolic time and the present."<sup>114</sup> The *one* bishop corresponds to God the Father, the council of elders to the assembly of the apostles, the deacons to Christ (*Magnesian* 6.1; *Trallians* 3.1). The use of various prototype-copy (*Urbild-Abbild*) relationships may reflect the idea that the church is the mystical body of Christ of which the local church is the visible image.

Thus with Ignatius the unity of the church is not guaranteed by tradition or "healthy doctrine," as it is in the Pastorals. It is represented instead in a very specific structure of ministries that is beyond question. As the head of the hierarchy, the office of bishop has an authority that appears to be almost unlimited.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong without further examination to describe Ignatius as an advocate for a church of hierarchically structured ministries or too quickly to interpret his view in terms of the later Catholic understanding. One must be mindful of the way the spiritual and the official are combined in his thinking. Ignatius speaks to his churches as a spiritual figure and never justifies his authority legally. Thus for him the authority of the bishop is not the abstract authority of an office but the living and lived authority experienced in the church of one who has the Spirit and who stands in the church in place of God. It is also important that Ignatius's order of minis-

<sup>114</sup> Peter Meinhold, "Die Anschauung des Ignatius von Antiochen von der Kirche," in Meinhold, *Studien zu Ignatius von Antiochen*, VIEG 97 (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1979), p. 59.

tries applies not to the whole church but only to the local church. Ignatius himself never claims the authority of a bishop over the (foreign!) churches to which he is writing.

Unity is a central theme for Ignatius's ecclesiology, as for all of his theology. In *1 Clement*, words with the root "to order/order" play a major role. In the seven letters of Ignatius, words that express and allude to "unity" dominate. He uses two words here. With the term *henotes* he designates the already existing unity given to the church — the unity of God that is seen as God's unity in himself, as well as the unity of Jesus Christ with God the Father. There is no longer any place in this unity for division. In God all differences are abolished or brought together into a unity. For Ignatius this divine unity is why the church's primary characteristic is that its members belong together. "As then the Lord was united to the Father and did nothing without him . . . so do you do nothing without the bishop and presbyters. . . . Let there be in common *one* prayer, *one* supplication, *one* mind, *one* hope. . . . Hasten all to come together as to *one* temple of God, as to *one* altar, to *one* Jesus Christ, who came forth from the *one* Father, and is with the *one* and returned to him" (*Magnesian* 7.1-2). Ignatius is thinking not of an inflexible, identically governed order but of a condition of abundance and harmony. He repeatedly describes it with musical images. "Now do each of you join in this choir, that being harmoniously in concord you may receive God's melody in unison and sing with *one* voice through Jesus Christ to the Father" (*Ephesian* 4.2).

With the word *henoosis*, on the other hand, he designates the task of "uniting" or "unification" that has been given to the church. The church must enter into God's unity through the gate opened by Jesus Christ; it must lay hold of the unity already given it. Thus Ignatius places the static, special concept of "unity" (*henotes*) over against the dynamic concept of "unification" (*henoosis*), which describes a process aiming at practical conduct in the church. Caring for unification is the bishop's task. Ignatius can even say that the bishop "is created for unification" (*Philadelphians* 8.1). Thus with the bishop and his council the two terms "unity" and "unification" come together. The bishop can "produce unification" because he is himself God's likeness and thus also shares in his unity.

Ignatius was ahead of his time. It took almost a century for the Antiochene structure of ministries to be accepted in the whole church. His heritage extends far beyond the ancient church even to the present day. The difficulty of his heritage for the present ecumenical dialogue is that it has been accepted on widely different levels. In the Roman Catholic Church it is predominantly centralized on the level of the whole church, with the focus on

a papal office of unity. In the Orthodox and Anglican churches it is predominantly regional and episcopal, focused on the “choir” of all the bishops. In many Protestant churches it is predominantly local, congregational, and focused on the “unity” within a hierarchically structured local church. We should not, however, understand Ignatius primarily as the precursor of a later time; we must interpret him as a theologian with his own imprint.

We *look back* at the development that came to a provisional conclusion with Ignatius. The freedom to determine the form of church ministries in a given situation that was present with Paul has disappeared. For Ignatius, God has provided the church with a particular structure. With him the threefold ministry clearly expresses the basic gift of unity. Therefore the bishop is for him not only the center of the event of unification; agreement with him is also a precondition for the unity of the church. With Ignatius the office of bishop has an authority similar to that of apostleship in early Christianity. The gap left by the death of the apostles in the post-apostolic church is filled here for the local church — *nota bene*, not by the idea of apostolic succession, an idea not yet known to Ignatius.

Finally, we should note that no modern Christian denomination may regard itself as the heir of Ignatius in a direct sense. The Catholic and Orthodox churches may not, because for them the *local* office of the bishop has become a *regional* office. The Protestant churches may not either, for even though locally the ministries of pastor, elder, and deacon often de facto correspond to Ignatius’s structure of ministries, they understand their ministries in a way completely different from that of Ignatius.

## 7. The First Ecclesiological Concepts of Church Unity

It was unavoidable that the first theological concepts of unity also appeared in the post-apostolic period. It is axiomatic that the reality of Christ that gathers the church preceded the theological concepts of the post-apostolic period. Preceding them also, however, was the struggle in the apostolic period on behalf of the church’s fellowship — the experience of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles and the experience that, through Christ, the Christians became a new fellowship that was different from the world. Theological reflection began with such experiences, took up already existing conceptual approaches, and developed them into theological concepts. Then, in later times, these concepts gave the impulse for new attempts to achieve church fellowship.

Five of these concepts are especially important for the theme of church unity: Ephesians, Revelation, Acts, John, and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch.<sup>115</sup>

### 7.1. The Epistle to the Ephesians

Paul reflected little, or perhaps not at all, about the unity of the universal church, but he practiced ecumenical fellowship and fought for church unity. When Ephesians thinks of the church, it is of the whole church. Ephesians is the only text of the New Testament that uses the word *ekklesia* exclusively for the whole church. Christ is the redeemer less of the individual than of the church (5:23). In its understanding of the church, however, it is influenced not by the biblical-Jewish idea of the people of God but by the body-of-Christ idea. The church is, much like the body of the world, a cosmic reality. Christ is the head (1:22; 5:23),<sup>116</sup> the church his cosmic body. In the body the power of the head that “fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23) is at work. Thus the church is understood in a dynamic way. It is Christ’s power grid in the cosmos, and as such it grows (Eph. 2:21). As a church filled by the power of Christ, it is characterized by movement. The reconciliation of the Jews and Gentiles, previously separated by the dividing wall of the Torah, also takes place in this body. The once “far off” Gentiles and the always “near” Jews, now reconciled by Christ in his body, become *one* new person (2:14-18).<sup>117</sup>

Along with the concept of the body of Christ, the author of Ephesians also makes use of another idea found in Paul, the concept of the temple of God. The apostles and prophets are its foundation, Christ its cornerstone, and the members of the church the building blocks of the holy temple in which God himself dwells (Eph. 2:20-22). Again the author speaks of the whole church. Again he thinks of it in dynamic terms — God’s temple is “under construction.”

The most important text for our theme appears at the beginning of the great hortatory section of the letter in Ephesians 4–6. The first and most important point of the exhortation deals with unity in the church (Eph. 4:1-6). Already that is important. Obviously there is no more central concern for the author. That is understandable, if the church is the power grid of Christ or if

115. On Ignatius, see above, pp. 124-26.

116. In a similar way, for Philo the Logos is the head of the world-body (*Questiones in exodum* 2.117).

117. Thus the Gentiles do not become members of Israel, the people of God; together with the people of Israel they become members of the church.

he himself is the peace who is now experienced in the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles (2:14). The author speaks of peace and of bearing with one another in love. Later it is clear that he is also concerned about the “unity of the faith” (4:13) in a situation where many find themselves “tossed about” by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery and scheming (4:14). His principal exhortation is: Be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit” (4:3). Thus the parenthesis returns immediately to the reality of salvation, for it is the Spirit who establishes peace. And instead of giving more exhortations, the author continues by praising the reality of the unity of the church in the style of an acclamation from the church’s worship. “One body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (4:5). The acclamation calls attention to the reality that unity already exists and that first of all one must give thanks for it. One can experience it concretely. To the one Lord, the object of the worshiping praise, belongs the unity of his body into which all were baptized; the unity of the Spirit given to all in baptism; the unity of the confession of faith, for which the church gives thanks; and the unity of baptism, through which according to 1 Corinthians 12:13 all of this has taken place, so that in the body of Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. Thus baptism stands at the beginning of unity; it is the basis and not the result of unity. Because the unity of the church expresses the unity established by Christ, human beings do not need to produce it; they can only give thanks for it.<sup>118</sup> The acclamation then continues — to God, the ground and the goal of all unity: “One God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (4:6). The author takes his stand here with the acclamation with which the community is familiar in its worship.

Here, too, the term “one,” which appears in Ephesians for the first time in the New Testament in connection with church fellowship, is rooted in the liturgical acclamation of the *one* Lord and the *one* God (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6). Thus in this letter the word “one” plays an important role for the first time; the word “unity” also appears (Eph. 4:3). It is important to see that this root refers exclusively to the given unity of God, of Christ, of the Spirit, of baptism, etc. The already given unity is “kept” (4:3), not produced. On the human level, the movement toward fellowship, expressed in Ephesians 4:2 by love and peace, corresponds to unity. We will see that in the Gospel of John the root “one” also places the emphasis on “above” with the basic gift that is given. Ignatius will distinguish between the unity that is given and the process of unification the church has taken up.<sup>119</sup> In light of this clearly developing New Testament

<sup>118</sup>. Presumably the author could have said similar things about the Lord’s Supper. It is too bad — for us — that he did not say it!

<sup>119</sup>. Cf. above, p. 125.

usage, we need to think carefully about talking about church unity as if it were something obvious. The unity of the church is *given*; it is not our *task* to produce it.

Ephesians gives us a basic model for thinking about the unity of the church. The universal church is understood dynamically, as the field of Christ’s activity. Human beings are taken into this dynamic, and they put it into practice; but they do so by first of all giving thanks for the already existing unity and praising God. Thus thanking and praising are the most important things the Christian has to do about church unity. And this is in a letter in which the unity of the church is the first concern of parenthesis! All of that is possible out of the knowledge that God and Christ *precede* human beings. That means that the faith given by God also precedes human interpretations of faith, the baptism instituted by Christ before human interpretations of baptism, and the body filled by Christ before human institutions. Ephesians says: the unity of the body of Christ *is* a reality, even though its members are “tossed about with every wind of doctrine” and even though in reality it obviously does not look very attractive with its unity. The reality of the church’s unity is almost understood as a sacrament, but for that very reason it is dynamic. Ephesians speaks of this reality not with descriptive language but with prayer and praise. It thus makes clear that church unity is not an objective reality one can grasp from a distance but a dynamic reality one grasps only when one lets oneself be grasped by it in prayer, praise, and conduct.

The author could only think this way *after* Paul. Paul’s engagement on behalf of the unity of Jews and Gentiles, his apostolic activity from Jerusalem to Rome, and his life lived out of the mystery of Christ have made it possible for him to comprehend Christ’s activity on behalf of the unity of the church and to express it in words. It is as if Ephesians were the seal of Paul’s life’s work, and it expresses retroactively what Paul had lived without as yet grasping it in theological language.<sup>120</sup>

## 7.2. The Apocalypse of John

In Ephesians, looking back on Paul’s missionary activity was a necessary prerequisite for theological reflection on the unity of the church. In the Apocalypse of John, by contrast, it seems to be external pressure that forces the churches of Asia Minor to expound theologically their own identity and their

<sup>120</sup>. On the theological deficiency of this view in Ephesians, cf. above, pp. 114–15.

unity. The prophet John, who may have emigrated from Palestine after the year 70, looks back on the separation of church and synagogue. The synagogue is a “synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9; 3:9). The holy city of Jerusalem that crucified Jesus is no longer Jerusalem but “Sodom and Gomorrah” (Rev. 11:8). What is decisive for developing the ecclesiology of his book, however, is not the pressure from Judaism but the pressure from the state. In the mythical insertion of chapter 12, the state is seen as the representative of the heavenly dragon who has been cast out of heaven and who now is waging war on earth against the children of the heavenly queen, the church (Rev. 12:7-18). It is the beast from the abyss that oppresses the saints (Revelation 13).

In this situation, the Seer speaks to the local churches in the letters of chapters 2-3. Their situation varies from church to church. Even though John speaks to each church individually, he sends all the letters to all of the churches as part of a book. The problems of an individual church are the business of all of them: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Thus the churches do not simply live for themselves; they are bound together. The whole church manifests itself in the local church.<sup>121</sup> That is the first level on which church unity is visible in the Apocalypse of John.

We see a second level in chapter 12 in the mythical figure of the heavenly queen. Primal mythological images emerge here. To whom do they refer? In the Bible and in Jewish texts, the image of a woman, especially a pregnant woman, often refers to Israel. The readers will initially have thought of Israel. In verse 5 the woman gives birth to a son “who is to shepherd the nations with an iron staff.” That, too, could refer to Israel, out of whom the Messiah Christ comes, but the readers quickly notice that the text cannot be speaking of Israel, because the woman who gives birth to her son is threatened by the dragon. Her child is carried off to God and his throne. The dragon is cast down from heaven, and since it can no longer destroy the child it turns to the mother and threatens her. She flees to the wilderness and stays there safely during the time predetermined for her. All of that fits the church well. It is as if the church has imperceptibly moved into Israel’s footsteps while the readers are forgetting about Israel. Thus the heavenly queen becomes the suffering church on earth.<sup>122</sup> She appears as a whole, something the traditional image of Israel permits. The church’s individual members appear only at the end of

121. Peter Lampe, “Die Apokalyptiker — ihre Situation und ihr Handeln,” in Ulrich Luz et al., *Eschatologie und Friedenshandeln: Exegetische Beiträge zur Frage christlicher Friedensverantwortung*, SBS 101 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981), p. 104.

122. Revelation represents a “hard substitution model” (cf. above, p. 99), although in chapter 12 there is a smooth transition in the image of Israel to the church.

the text as “the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and bear witness to Jesus” (verse 17). The dragon makes war against them, and many of them suffer martyrdom. Yet the church as a whole does not die; it is preserved in the wilderness “a time, and times, and half a time” (verse 14) — that is, during the predetermined 1,260 days of the tribulation. The distinction between the offspring, the individual Christians, and the woman (the whole church) offers a comforting perspective for the believers who are suffering. The church as a whole will be preserved, even if some of them have to die.

There is still another, a third way, in which the Apocalypse speaks of the one church. Visions of the heavenly church appear in the main section (7:1-17; 14:1-5; 15:2-4; cf. 19:1-8). They are not part of the horror visions John portrays in two passages beginning in chapter 6 and chapter 12. Instead, John sees the perfected church standing before the throne of God, and he hears it singing praises. It is the church of the people sealed by baptism (7:4-8), who, with white garments, will come out of the great tribulation to the throne of the Lamb. At their center is the Lamb enthroned on Mt. Zion, and they praise him (7:10-11; 14:2; 15:3-4). They sing a special song whose words the world cannot understand and learn, for they are redeemed out of the world (14:3-4). These visions are scattered among the images of terror as antitypes. They appear abruptly, as pauses for breath in the descriptions of the horror, as an invitation to look upward. When the author speaks of the 144,000 from the twelve tribes in chapter 7 (verses 4-8), he is not simply thinking of the Jewish Christians, to whom he then adds the countless number of Gentile Christians in verses 9-17. Instead, the subject in verses 1-8, as in verses 9-17, is the one, apostolic church. Its unity is not emphasized; it is assumed, reflecting the reality that divisions are not the Seer’s main problem with his churches. Thus the believers in the seven churches who read or hear the Apocalypse look upon the one, heavenly church and know that they themselves will be preserved for the heavenly Jerusalem.

The heavenly Jerusalem then appears in chapter 21. It comes to earth when the new heaven and the new earth are created. Again, an image of Israel — indeed, for Israel, *the* image of Israel — is the image used for the church. When it is applied to the church the image is changed. Although the basic biblical text of Ezekiel 40-48 describes the new Temple, there is no temple in the new Jerusalem of John the Seer (Rev. 21:22). Instead, the dimensions and the description of Ezekiel’s Temple have passed over to the city. The throne of God and of Christ the Lamb stands in the city. The holy city Jerusalem could be used to depict the church because, after the murder of the two witnesses, the “great city,” whose name is not given in Revelation 11, has become “Sodom



and Egypt" (Rev. 11:8). The new Jerusalem, this mighty picture of hope for a suffering and persecuted church, has a bitter aftertaste for us today.

For the suffering church, however, this picture is a picture of hope. It is *no more* than a picture of hope, because the new Zion has not yet come from heaven to earth. On the earth there are only the individual local churches whose situation and condition are not an occasion for joy. We can only hear the singing of the perfected ones, as though it constitutes the essence of the church, but the churches cannot yet join in the singing. Nevertheless, this church is for them not merely a dream church. Its center is the throne of the Lamb, who *is* already enthroned. The hoped-for *one* perfected church has already begun to live, and through John's visions its sounds reach the ears of the hard-pressed churches.

This view of the church is different from that of Ephesians; yet there are some common elements. As in Ephesians, the decisive reality is the *one* church created by God himself. As in Ephesians, here too worship is the place where one can sense something of it. As in Ephesians, here too the point is that the experience of what God has already given inspires and strengthens a movement. By looking to the coming Zion and to the throne of the Lamb, the Seer wants to encourage people to worship here on earth, to stay together, and to join in persevering. In the Apocalypse it is as if the one heavenly church has opened its window to earth.

### 7.3. *The Gospel of Luke and Acts*

Luke's two-volume work narrates God's history with his people, Israel, in the time when the promises began to be fulfilled. It is the history of a way that begins in Jerusalem, in the heart of Israel, and ends in Rome, the world capital. That is probably where we should look for the author, Luke, and his first readers. Luke attempts to make understandable the way the God of Israel and of Jesus has gone with them. He tells how Jesus has gathered his people of Israel<sup>123</sup> and how after Jesus' resurrection God has opened Israel for the Gentiles streaming to the nation. He tells how even after Jesus' martyrdom God remained true to his people, so that on his last arrival in Jerusalem Paul sees "many thousands among the Jews who have believed" — people who are zealous for the Torah (Acts 21:20). In the words of Simon, however, Luke also tells how Jesus "is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign

123. Gerhard Lohfink, *Die Sammlung Israels: Eine Untersuchung zur lukanischen Ekklesiologie*, StANT 39 (Munich: Kösel, 1975).

that is spoken against," so that it will be as though a sword pierces Mary's heart (Luke 2:34-35). In the passion narrative, and then especially in the second part of Acts, Luke tells how the opposition to Jesus becomes more intense. In almost every city where Paul, the Diaspora Jew and apostle, first gathers God's Israel in the local synagogue, he meets with opposition from the majority of the Jews and is harassed and rejected. For this reason Acts ends with Paul reciting to the Jews of Rome the "hardening" quotation from Isaiah 6:9 — a text probably familiar to all Christians — and announcing the definitive transfer of "God's salvation" to the Gentiles (Acts 28:26-28).

The core concept of Luke's ecclesiology is the idea of the people of God. One could say that Luke represents something like a theology of substitution in stages. I think that is at most half right, however, because for Luke it is not simply the case that the church replaces Israel. Perhaps it is better to remember Paul's form of the people-of-God idea in Romans 9: "Not all who come from Israel are Israel" (Rom. 9:6). It is rather the case that, according to Luke, Israel's election is repeatedly a new event. It happens anew in the mission of Jesus, but after Jesus' death God also acts anew in history and calls Israel again. It is always only a part of the nation that embodies Israel. By acting anew, God also changes the shape of Israel. Thus one most likely cannot say that for Luke the church has replaced Israel. Instead, "the church [is] . . . the Israel that has arrived at its salvation-history destination."<sup>124</sup> Thus the form of the people of God changes in the course of its history. Unlike with Paul, however, for whom in Romans 11 there is an unapologetic hope for the Israel that does not believe in Jesus, based on God's faithfulness to his word, Acts ends with the Jews who do not believe in Jesus simply disappearing from salvation history. God's ways lead to the Gentiles, where Paul can preach the gospel unhindered and find a hearing (Acts 28:28, 31).

Thus Acts tells about the people of God within Israel and how it grew step by step beyond and away from Israel. It helps assure the readers of Luke's two-volume work of their identity. They are not in a tributary or in a dead backwater; they are in the mainstream of God's ways with his people. For this reason Luke tells in Acts how the church under the leading of the Spirit has crossed boundaries: the boundaries of Jerusalem, of Israel, of the Torah, of Asia. It describes how it moves beyond its beginnings to the capital city of Rome and to the pinnacles of society. It has gone this way harmoniously, without quarrels, ruptures, and dissonances, under the leading of the Spirit and the apostles. Thus the harmony of the church is like a basic motif that appears repeatedly in his portrayal of the church's way from Jerusalem to Rome.

124. Roloff, *Kirche*, p. 200.

This motif first appears at the very beginning of Acts. The two summary descriptions of the primitive church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37) depict its fellowship in worship, in doctrine, in meals, and in possessions. The catchwords are: “were together,” “had all things in common” (2:44; 4:32), “share” (2:45), “with one mind” (2:46; 5:12), and “one heart and one soul” (4:32). Luke describes here the all-encompassing fellowship of the primitive church in the spiritual and material areas. The leaders of this fellowship are the twelve apostles; the place where it meets is the Temple, the heart of Israel.

As Acts continues, it will be clear that this fellowship is also valid for the whole church. The harmony in the local church corresponds to the harmony in the oecumene. Here, for Luke, Paul is the most important figure. In Acts 8:1-3 he appears for the first time as a marginal figure in the stoning of Stephen and as a persecutor of the church. Then Luke portrays in detail his meeting with Christ near Damascus, followed by his first visit to the apostles (Acts 9). The narrative returns temporarily to Peter, but Paul never disappears completely from view (Acts 11:25, 30; 12:25). The missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul to Cyprus, Pisidia, Lycaonia, and Pamphylia (Acts 13-14) leads up to the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, where the apostles and elders, on the basis of clear votes from Peter and James the Lord’s brother, approve of the circumcision-free mission of Paul and Barnabas to the Gentiles and regulate the table fellowship in the mixed churches on the basis of the apostolic decree (Acts 15). Then the twelve apostles and Barnabas disappear from view. From this point on, the narrator is interested only in the apostle Paul. Now Acts shows that it is not, as the title later attached to it claims, a “history of the apostles”; rather, it is a history of Paul with a very long introduction. Throughout the entire book of Acts, Luke shows how Paul acts in accord with the twelve apostles and with James. Luke — probably quite consciously<sup>125</sup> — downplays, or completely omits,<sup>126</sup> conflicts in the church.

That was true already for the controversies surrounding the Stephen circle in Jerusalem in Acts 6:1-8:3 (for Luke there can be in Jerusalem only

125. Luke does not use Paul’s letters. He does not even mention that Paul has written letters. In my judgment, it is inconceivable, however, that at the end of the first century an educated Christian knew nothing about Paul’s letters — especially a disciple or Pauline sympathizer who did his research as carefully as Luke did. In my judgment, the conclusion is unavoidable that Luke intentionally said nothing about Paul’s letters and intentionally refused to use this major source.

126. Luke accomplished this simply by reporting in detail only about the apostle’s first visit in a church, wherever possible.

one individual church).<sup>127</sup> It is then true for the Apostolic Council (Paul’s opponents become an insignificant marginal group, while James and Peter become Paul’s defenders),<sup>128</sup> for the conflict with the emissaries of James and Peter in Antioch (Luke does not even mention it),<sup>129</sup> for the (only briefly mentioned) dispute between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39), and for the delivery of the collection in Jerusalem (some scholars surmise, with good reasons, that Luke almost completely ignores it because he does not want to report that it was not accepted by the Jerusalem people).<sup>130</sup> What is especially noteworthy in comparison with Paul’s letters is that Luke never speaks of opponents who followed Paul, never of opposing Jewish-Christian missionary activities,<sup>131</sup> and also never of inner conflicts in the Pauline churches. His portrait of Paul’s mission is completely harmonious. The church — not only the earliest community — is united and harmonious. It completely supports the Pauline mission. There were never problems within the church — only problems outside the church, caused primarily by the Jews and by the Roman state.

By this time it is sufficiently clear that this portrait is fictitious, but there is disagreement about how much Luke knew of the historical reality. Even one who regards Luke as a largely reliable and informed reporter and probably even a companion of Paul must acknowledge that on this point his account is tendentious and ideal. Why? From history, from the struggle of the apostolic period on behalf of the fellowship of the church, and presumably from Paul himself Luke has learned that fellowship belongs to the essence of the church. The one Holy Spirit given to all disciples is active in the fellowship of the church. Thus Luke reported that the church had already achieved something for which in reality the apostolic church was still striving — something given by the exalted Lord and the Holy Spirit he had sent. Christ, the *one* Lord who reigns over the church, is portrayed in retrospect as having been victorious. Why does Luke describe the apostolic period this way? He is here not *only* interested in defending Paul. Luke would answer: because Christ, the one Lord who reigns over the church, intends to be victorious also in his (Luke’s) present day. His own (post-apostolic) time was a time of “ravenous wolves . . . speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30). In this situation the *portrait* of the unity of the apostolic church that Luke paints becomes a power designed to help people strive for unity in their own

127. Cf. above, p. 43.

128. Cf. above, pp. 59-60.

129. Cf. above, pp. 66-68.

130. Cf. above, pp. 73-74.

131. Cf. above, pp. 69-70.

present. Thus the same thing is valid for Luke's *narrative* of the apostolic history that was valid for the conceptually designed ecclesiology of Ephesians or the Apocalypse: the *ecclesiology* that resulted from the experience of struggling for the unity already given itself became part of the basic gift that is a force in the struggle for unity. Thus the *narrative* of the unity of the apostolic church in Acts is less a representation of past reality than a model designed to cause something.

Is that a falsification of historical reality? Yes and no. If we judge Luke on the level of a historian — even an ancient historian — one will, depending on which idea of historiography one chooses, have to take seriously the charge of falsification. Luke, however, is not only a historian; he is also a believer. In his portrayal of apostolic history there speaks the faith that Christ, the one Lord of the church, will be victorious. History must be told from this perspective — that is, from the perspective of faith. Is that an illusion, or can we say that the power that has flowed from his texts in the history of the church has at least somewhat justified him?

#### 7.4. *The Gospel of John (with Anne Liedtke)*

There is a widely accepted opinion among scholars today that the Gospel of John comes from a particular Christian group. The Johannine letters, which in my judgment come from the same milieu as the Gospel but were written later, show us a group of itinerant missionaries, who had a spiritual center in the person of the "Elder" (2 John 1; 3 John 1), but to which churches and sympathizers also belonged. In all probability, the group around the "Elder" comes originally from Israel's South, perhaps from Jerusalem. At the time the Gospel was written, the Johannine Christians lived outside Israel but presumably still within the compass of Judaism, for Jews repeatedly appear in the Gospel who have not yet decided whether they want to belong to the community (e.g., Nicodemus in John 3; cf. 7:50; 19:39), or who do not risk embracing the church openly for fear of being expelled from the synagogues (e.g., John 12:42-43). The Johannine Christians are no longer members of the local synagogues; they had been expelled (9:22; 12:42; 16:2), and this experience was for them the decisive event in their history. Nevertheless, their horizon extends far beyond Judaism. The Johannine message is "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (3:16). Greeks come to Jesus, and he points them to the time when the Son of Man will be glorified (12:20-23). Not only Jews but also the world hates and persecutes the community (15:18-22), yet in the Gospel the Jews become the embodiment of the world that is hostile to God. Thus in

the Gospel of John we meet "oppressed churches,"<sup>132</sup> which, much like the churches in the Apocalypse, are forced to articulate their own identity clearly. They do this by means of a quite special, "high," very exclusive Christology and in a special language that will be repeatedly misunderstood by outsiders.

How does the Gospel of John produced by these churches see the unity of the church? How are we to understand the relationship of these Johannine churches to the whole church? The Gospel of John does not answer such questions directly. I think the Gospel of John is not a book for an elite, perhaps a mystical or proto-Gnostic sect, but a book for the church. It is written for church-Christians who are familiar with one or more of the Synoptic Gospels, and it is designed to deepen their knowledge of Christ. It does this by deepening selected Jesus traditions, especially from the South of Israel, by means of Jesus' interpretations of himself. The primary configurations of his intended readers are the "ordinary" disciples — Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathaniel — whom Jesus calls at the beginning of the Gospel. The Gospel picks them up in their Jewish faith. They respond to what Jesus says, follow him, often ask him quite silly questions, and want Jesus to lead them into the deep things of faith without ever reaching these deep things. Among the configurations of the intended readers are also figures such as the Samaritan woman, Thomas, and Martha. They are joined in the second half of the Gospel by a special, nameless disciple, the "disciple whom Jesus loved" — a disciple whose identity the readers of the Gospel of John (unlike us) obviously know, but whose name they never mention. They always refer to him only with his title of honor.<sup>133</sup> He is close to Jesus and never asks silly questions.

In the following discussion (in the next five paragraphs), Anne Liedtke attempts to contrast the Beloved Disciple and Peter to gain further insights into the relationship of the Johannine Christians to the whole church.

We do not know for sure how much the figures of the disciples in John portray definite types of Christian faith at the time of the Gospel or how much they represent definite areas of the church. For at least two of them, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, that clearly seems to be the case. The Beloved Disciple appears for the first time in John 13:21-30. There he is lying next to Jesus at the farewell meal, and Peter asks him about the betrayer. In John 18:15-16 he arranges for Peter to gain entrance to the court of the high priest, Annas; he himself is an acquaintance of the high priest. In John 19:26-27 the

132. Cf. Klaus Wengst, *Bedrängte Gemeinde and verherrlichter Christus: Der historische Ort des Johannesevangeliums als Schlüssel zu seiner Interpretation*, BThSt 5 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981).

133. Much as the people in Qumran called their founding figure, whose name we also do not know, only by the honorary title "Teacher of Righteousness."

dying Jesus entrusts his mother to the care of the Beloved Disciple. John 19:35 also probably speaks of the Beloved Disciple. It is he who saw blood and water flowing from Jesus' side and had borne witness about it. John 20:2-10 is an especially important text. These verses tell how Peter and the Beloved Disciple race to Jesus' tomb. Peter arrives later but goes in first. Only the Beloved Disciple, however, recognizes what he sees in the tomb. He is the only one of whom it is said that he "saw and believed" (20:8). In the appended chapter, John 21, the story of the miraculous catch of fish at the Sea of Gennesaret is told. Jesus stands on the shore; the Beloved Disciple sees that the stranger is Jesus and tells Peter. Then comes the commission to Peter to feed Jesus' sheep (21:15-17). In this text it becomes clear that Peter, who in previous texts has often appeared as the spokesman for the disciples and in 6:68 also formulated the disciples' confession, is seen in the Gospel of John as the representative of the whole church. In 21:15-19 the leadership of the church is entrusted to him and martyrdom is predicted. In contrast to him, the Beloved Disciple will "remain until I come" (21:22). According to 21:24, he has also written the Gospel and left his true witness for the church. It is striking how often the Beloved Disciple appears with Peter.

The texts that speak of the Beloved Disciple are broken and uneven. For this reason people have often surmised that they could not have been an original part of the Gospel — that they were added by a later editor or reviser of the Gospel. Chapter 21 is in any case a later addition, although it is quite close to the Gospel. The style is almost identical, as is the way it views things. People from the Johannine church were probably involved in producing chapter 21. However, since the thesis that the Beloved Disciple passages in chapters 13–20 are also later additions of a reviser is difficult and can hardly be proven, we will interpret the Gospel in its present form.

Thus Peter represents the whole church. What then does the Beloved Disciple stand for? We can probably say two things. First, as a man from Jerusalem and an acquaintance of the high priest, he is understood as a guarantor of the tradition (cf. John 21:24-25 but also 19:35). As such he represents the Johannine group and is, so to speak, its ancestor. Yet that does not exhaust his meaning. The designation "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is a distinction that requires further explanation. People who know how frequently and with what importance love is mentioned in the Gospel of John cannot deny that precisely this substitute name says something quite important. In addition, there is the expression "lying on Jesus' breast" (13:23, 25), which, in spite of the different formulation, is reminiscent of Jesus' relationship to the Father (cf. 1:18). We are dealing here with a disciple who was especially close to Jesus. This closeness originated with Jesus, for Jesus loved the disciple, not vice

versa. One sees it in the reality that the Beloved Disciple "saw and believed" (20:8) — that is, he has the true, deep knowledge of Jesus (cf. 20:7).

What then is the relationship between the Beloved Disciple and Peter? The Beloved Disciple always appears in a better light than does Peter. He can ask Jesus the delicate question about the betrayer (John 13:21-30); he is the first to come to the tomb and to faith (20:4, 8), and he recognizes the Risen One before Peter does (John 21:7). Is there an attempt here to portray Peter as inadequate or even as bad? Certainly not! It is precisely the Beloved Disciple who lets Peter go into the tomb first (20:5-6). In the Gospel of John, Judas is the negative example of a disciple. He is not only the betrayer; he also misuses the group's money (12:6). Peter is a good disciple who denies Jesus three times but also confesses his love to him three times (21:15-17).

Thus Peter and the Beloved Disciple are more than two individuals. They represent two ways of being a Christian: the way of the main church and the way of the Johannine circle. In the opinion of the Gospel of John, the way of the Beloved Disciple is the better way, with clearer understanding. Peter and the Beloved Disciple, however, are not antagonists; they remain respectful and friendly toward one another. The Beloved Disciple is there for Peter, and he shares with him his knowledge of Christ. In some such way we might think of the relationship between the Johannine church and the whole church. That also describes the purpose of the Gospel of John. It is the book the Beloved Disciple has written for the church (21:24), and in a sense it carries on his role in the church.

The Gospel of John speaks about church unity in several passages: in Jesus' great farewell prayer (17:11-12, 20-24), but also even earlier (10:16; 11:52). What does church unity mean in the Gospel of John?

1. On a first level we can give an obvious, but still very important answer. Church unity does not simply mean the unity of the Johannine circle; it means the unity of the *whole* church. John 10:16 already makes that clear. Here Jesus speaks of "other sheep that are not of this fold" who will hear his voice. "And there will be *one* flock, one shepherd." The thought is probably of Jewish and Gentile Christians; the horizon of John's understanding of the church is universal. The author also speaks of Gentile Christians at the end of John 11 by making use of the traditional concept of the gathering of the tribes of Israel from the dispersion. In a narrator's commentary on the word of Caiaphas, that it is better for *one* person to die for the people than that the whole nation should die, he reveals its unintended ambiguity: "For Jesus should die for the nation, and not only for the nation but to gather into One the children of God who are scattered" (11:51-52). John expresses here the same idea that

Gnostics later interpret as the gathering of the sparks of light of the divine Spirit scattered in the dark world of matter into the heavenly *pleroma*. But John is no Gnostic. Unlike them, he is not primarily interested in the heavenly unity of the children of God lost in the world; he is interested in their coming together in the earthly church. This is why it is so important for him that his circle and the Petrine main church belong together. Therefore, in 2 John and 3 John the "Elder" sends his messengers to the local churches, even when, as in the case of the church of Diotrefes, they are not welcome there (3 John 9).

2. We penetrate a step deeper into Johannine thought when we say that the unity of the church in the Gospel of John is the unity of *love*. In the Gospel, brotherly love, the "new commandment" (John 13:34), is the identifying mark of the unity of the church. The church's brotherly love is not simply the central commandment; it is the only commandment of Jesus to his church. It directly corresponds to Christ's love for the church and to the love of the Father for Christ. The metaphor of the true vine in John 15 makes that clear. "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him, he brings much fruit" (15:5). *He is the true vine, and it is through the relationship to him that his disciples are church.* The relationship to Christ, however, is immediately given an ethical interpretation. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. . . . This is my commandment, that you love one another as [Greek: *kathos*] I have loved you" (15:9, 12). Church unity is a process of love. The Father's love for the Son manifests itself in the Son's love toward the church. That in turn is realized in the brotherly love in the church. What looks like a relationship of analogy is in reality a relationship of identity. The church's brotherly love is made possible by the love of the Father and the Son to such an extent that finally it is nothing other than this love. It is "abiding in my love" (15:9). Therefore the church's brotherly love is its identifying mark for the world and its "means of proclamation" par excellence. "By this all will know that you are my disciples" (13:35; cf. 17:21b). In substance, that corresponds exactly to the Pauline understanding of *koinonia*. The "participation" in Jesus Christ and in his love is realized in the "fellowship" of Christians among themselves.<sup>134</sup>

In the post-apostolic period, this reification of the unity of the church exclusively as love may have received a new accent. The Johannine brotherhood lives *in* and *with* and *for* the main church but was not identical with it. In that day the main church already bore the weight of the ecclesiastical ministry. Peter does not represent only the church; he also represents the one who feeds the sheep (John 21:15-17). That church unity is concrete *only* in love in the Gospel of John may mean an implicit counter-position against a cur-

134. Cf. above, pp. 72, 83.

rently growing tendency to understand the church in terms of ministries. Here John shares a tendency of the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>135</sup>

3. But we have not yet reached the center of the Johannine understanding of church unity. The most central unity text in the Gospel of John is a prayer, John 17. It is thus clear that in the Gospel of John church unity is by no means "a moral or organizational accomplishment of the church; it is entirely a divine gift."<sup>136</sup> It is not "a unity that results from a consensus of the members"; it is something from which the church "always and already gravitates."<sup>137</sup> Church unity is "not a sociological reality," and it "does not consist in a . . . community in which the people involved have the same opinions."<sup>138</sup> Unity is unity *in Christ*. Christ is the power of life flowing through the branches. Without the vine they are nothing. Again, the Johannine "as" (*kathos*) emerges. It speaks of much more than a corresponding relationship; it designates a foundation — indeed, in a sense identical realities: "as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us" (17:21). Ultimately, the unity of the church is nothing more than the Father being one with the Son. One can only pray that the disciples will be "in" this unity. Their unity is that the Father and the Son let their power become active in the disciples.

We can compare the Johannine metaphor of the vine and its branches in John 15:1-8 with the Pauline idea of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Paul reflects on the relationship of the members to one another. John, on the other hand, uses one of the great biblical images for Israel — Israel is God's vine (Isa. 5:1-7 and elsewhere) — but he does not use this image for the church; he applies it to Jesus himself, and he reflects exclusively about the relationship of the disciples to Jesus. Thus he can also speak of the disciples and in them think of the church. He uses — not without good reason — the word "friends" for the disciples, but he does so in the christological sense rather than in the ecclesiological sense. They are not friends among themselves; they are "my friends" (15:14). Decisive here is hearing. Disciples are those sheep "who will hear my voice" (10:16), who "abide in me and my words in you" (15:7), and who pray as Jesus himself prays (15:7). Thus ultimately unity in Christ means hearing the word and prayer.

135. Cf. Matt. 18:15-20; 23:8-10; and above, p. 120.

136. Josef Blank, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, GSL 4/2 (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1977), p. 282.

137. H. E. Weiss, "Ut omnes unum sint: Zur Frage der Einheit der Kirche im Johannes-evangelium und in den Briefen des Ignatius," *ThV* 10 (1979): 74.

138. Gerhard Friedrich, "Die Einheit der Kirche nach dem Neuen Testament," in *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke*, 2 vols., ed. William C. Weinrich (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), vol. 1, p. 182.

That idea speaks to the deepest dimension of the unity of the church in John. Yet we should not misunderstand it in an individualistic sense. The point is not that the unity of the whole church is exhausted in the love of brothers and sisters in a small group. And it is certainly not that even the love of brothers and sisters is finally made relative through the individual's relationship to Christ. Instead, the point is that the fellowship of the believers awakens to the reality in which it lives. Thus the christological text of the vine takes an ecclesiological turn. Abiding in Christ means that Jesus' disciples keep Jesus' sole commandment: "that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Thus unity with Christ not only makes possible the movement to brotherly love; it is itself this movement. The "abiding" of the disciples in the vine of Jesus, which establishes the unity of the church (John 15:4), is an abiding in him who, according to John 14:6, is at the same time the "way" (that one goes), the "truth" (that one recognizes and does), and the "life" (that is both promised and given). Thus it is not "mystical" in the sense of something internal, isolated, and removed from the world. And yet it is "mystical" in the sense that it is the deepest and most fundamental experience of God — an experience one can never "make" oneself. Therefore, Jesus' farewell prayer closes with a sentence that brings together love and the hearing of the word and at the same time is a petition and its fulfillment: "I have made known to them your name and will make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them" (17:26).

We began by trying to understand the whole-church-universal, the brotherly-fellowship, and the Christological-individual dimensions of unity as different steps. That has now proven to be overly hasty. The three steps are more like aspects of the same thing. The unity with and in Christ cannot be separated from brotherly love, and this in turn cannot be separated from the integration into the whole church. The depth of the Johannine view proves itself by not spiritualizing Christ, the basic gift of unity. Instead, it draws him into the love lived in the local churches and in the whole church.

## 8. The Second Basic Conflict: Church Fellowship in the Controversy with Christian Gnosticism

### 8.1. Introduction

For the church, the second century was a century of major internal conflicts. There were essentially three of them: the conflict with the Gnostics; the conflict with Marcion; and the conflict with the so-called "New Prophecy," the Montanists. Of these three conflicts, only the conflict with the Gnostics left

traces in the latest New Testament writings. The other two conflicts came in later years. That is also true in the main of the conflict with Gnosticism. It begins in the latest New Testament writings and then comes to a head in the second half of the second century. In the first half of the second century it left definite traces only in canonical and other church writings; unfortunately, we cannot date the extant writings of the Christian Gnostics with any precision. The problem is that the New Testament texts seldom make clear what their opponents' positions were. Usually, therefore, we cannot be certain that the opponents are actually Gnostics, and we have no choice but to make use of later texts for our description of the Gnostic side of this conflict.

In addition to all of these difficulties, there are the unresolved problems in the study of Gnosticism. Today there is hardly any consensus about what one meaningfully can call "gnosis." An era of research influenced largely by Adolf von Harnack understood "gnosis" as a Christian heresy or, more precisely, as the acute secularization and Hellenization of Christianity.<sup>139</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, this understanding was replaced by the view that gnosis was a complex Oriental syncretistic religious phenomenon that was not limited to Christianity. It had various pre-Christian roots and a similarly structured redeemer myth.<sup>140</sup> Today the pendulum is tending to return to the first position, but at the same time people have recognized that "gnosis" is a label for a "movement" that never understood itself as a unified movement. More precisely, this label was used for the first time by the author of the Pastoral Epistles when he admonishes Timothy: "Avoid the godless chatter and polemics of the falsely so-called gnosis" (1 Tim. 6:20). This label may have been part of the self-understanding of the author's opponents. Then the church father Irenaeus made use of this label in his major five-volume work against the heretics to lump together a whole series of different groupings and schools that in any way at all were similar to Christianity and therefore dangerous. In this way he actually created "Gnosis."<sup>141</sup>

139. Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 1, trans. Neil Buchanan (1896; repr. New York: Dover, 1961). [The English translation is of the third German edition. A fourth German edition was published in 1909.] For the relevant texts, see Kurt Rudolph, ed., *Gnosis und Gnostizismus*, WdF 262 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), pp. 142-73.

140. Wilhelm Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, FRLANT 10 (1907; repr. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973). One can find a modern version of this position in Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. Robert McLachlan Wilson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

141. The distinction between "gnosis" (in the phenomenology-of-religion sense of a saving religious knowledge) and "Gnosticism" (in the sense of a Christian heretical or religious-syncretistic movement predominantly of the second century A.D.) has not been widely accepted

There was indeed one group of people — but only one — that called itself “Gnostic.”<sup>142</sup> The word “Gnostic,” however, does not appear in the manuscripts found at Nag Hammadi. Justin is revealing when he says, speaking of those people he calls (based on the names of their leaders) Marcians, Valentinians, Basilidians, Satornilians, etc.: “They call themselves Christians.”<sup>143</sup> That certainly does not apply to all the groups and schools that we, following Irenaeus and often going beyond him, call “Gnostics,” but it is true of many of them.

When we survey all of the texts and groups that people call “Gnostic” today and that also exhibit “Christian” contents,<sup>144</sup> we find a great deal of variety. I would suggest the following rough division of types:

1. “Pre-Gnostic” or “proto-Gnostic” Christian writings, groups, or teachers who are to be located in the foreground or in the wider surroundings of Christian gnosis and who exhibit only some of the characteristics that are definitive of Gnosticism.<sup>145</sup> To this group belong, for example, the Jewish Christian Cerinth<sup>146</sup> and other early “Gnostic” teachers down to Basilides<sup>147</sup> and perhaps Valentinus,<sup>148</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas*, and *The Odes of Solomon*.

2. Christian Gnostic writings, groups, or teachers who exhibit a majority of the characteristics definitive of gnosis and who also make considerable use of Christian traditions and understand themselves to be Christian. Examples of this group include many of the pupils of Valentinus, Gnostic writings such as *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Gospel of Truth*, *The Epistle to Rheginos*, and the *Testimonium Veritatis*, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, and *The Interpretation of*

---

by German-speaking scholarship. Therefore, I use “gnosis” in the sense of “Gnosticism” and thus maintain the terminology of Irenaeus.

142. Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.25.6, on the followers of a certain Marcellina who was said to have venerated icons of Christ.

143. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 1.35.6. On the self-designations of Gnostics, cf. Folker Siegert, “Die Selbstbezeichnungen der Gnostiker in den Nag Hammadi Texten,” *ZNW* 71 (1980): 129–32.

144. I am leaving out of consideration the Mandaean writings, the Hermetic writings, the Manichaean texts, and all works in which no Christian revealer plays a role as, e.g., *Zostrianos*, *The Apocalypse of Adam*, and other writings (e.g., “Sethian” works) that only marginally make use of Christian traditions.

145. Cf. here below, p. 146.

146. Cf. Winrich Alfried Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule: Eine Studie zur Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts*, WUNT 83 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1996).

147. Cf. Christoph Marksches, *Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur Valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins*, WUNT 65 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1992).

148. In all of these cases, the judgment must be based on the few fragments that actually come from them. It cannot be based on the church fathers’ organizing of their ideas into a “Gnostic” system.

*Gnosis*. In the case of the school of Valentinus, one could also speak of an increasing “gnosticizing,” while with other Christian teachers — for example, Clement of Alexandria — there was a decisive return to Christian tradition. From among the so-called “Barbeliot” or “Sethian” Gnostic writings one might attribute several writings given a strong Christian flavor to this group, such as *The Apocryphon of John* and related writings.<sup>149</sup>

3. Principally anti-church Christian Gnostic writings or groups that exhibit most of the characteristics definitive of gnosis and that refer to a great deal of Christian tradition but sharply reject it and have a polemical relationship to the Christianity of the church. Until recently the only known example of the type was *The Second Logos of the Great Seth*, but now there is also the *Gospel of Judas*.<sup>150</sup>

4. Syncretistic Christian Gnostic writings or groups that exhibit a majority of the characteristics definitive of Gnosticism but refer to Christian traditions only among others. Thus they are more “syncretistic” than Christian. For the most part they belong to a later phase of the Gnostic movement in which individual Gnostic groups understood their symbolic world as “a subsystem of a more universal sign world” that in many religions and philosophical systems “was present . . . as images and symbols of a process of self-discovery.”<sup>151</sup> To this type belong, in my judgment, such writings as the *Trimorphic Protennoia* and the *Pistis Sophia*.

Of course, this evolution of the Christian Gnostic movement to the point of an increasing loss of identity and an increasing universalizing is, in my judgment, only *one* of the possible ways Gnostic movements developed. Another is that they organized themselves into independent churches with their own rituals, doctrines, and institutional forms. Among “Gnostic” movements that have originated in Christianity, this is the case with the Marcionites and the Marcosians. In a sense it is also true of the Manichaeans, who have roots among the Elkesaites.

Following Christoph Marksches,<sup>152</sup> I will select the following features

149. Since in *The Apocalypse of John* the Christian traditions appear almost exclusively in the narrative framework, while the content of the revelation largely appears to be non-Christian, I am inclined here and with related works to speak of Sethian missionary writings or introductions for Christian readers. Their authors could have been either inside or outside the Christian communities.

150. Cf. below, p. 157.

151. Gerd Theissen, *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), p. 237.

152. Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction*, trans. John Bowden (London: T&T Clark, 2003), pp. 16–17.

as *typological characteristics* of “gnosis” that, taken together, permit us to designate a group or a writing as “gnostic.”

1. the experience of an other-worldly, distant, supreme God;
2. the introduction conditioned by this experience of further divine figures that are closer to human beings than the supreme God;
3. the estimation of the world and of matter as evil creation and the related experience of the alienation of the gnostic in the world;
4. a variously expressed tendency toward dualism in cosmology and anthropology;
5. the introduction of an ignorant or malicious creator God who in the Platonic tradition is called “craftsman” (*demiurgos*);
6. the assumption of a fall of a divine element into matter that is told in a mythological drama and that explains the present condition of the world and of human beings;
7. the knowledge (*gnosis*) of this state that is mediated by a redeemer figure from the other world and that leads to salvation.

The preceding excursion into gnosis scholarship should make clear how complex is the task of dealing with church fellowship in the “parting of the ways” between Gnosticism and orthodox Christianity. From the very beginning we must expect that there will be many different developments and forms of conflicts. That depends a great deal on the local churches and on the type of so-called Gnostics one meets. Concerning the latter, we can assume that before 150 we will be dealing primarily with the first group — thus, with “pre-” or “proto-Gnostics.” It seems that, as the decades went by, the gnosis that originated in orthodox Christianity relatively often emancipated itself from Christian faith; thus it has made itself “Gnostic,” as one sees, for example, in the school of Valentinus. This development will have been intensified by the accelerated “parting of the ways.” Presumably there was also the reverse movement in which an originally non-Christian gnosis moved in the direction of orthodox Christianity, as, for example, in the so-called Sethian or Barbeliot schools. In this case, however, the presumably oldest extant documents are largely non-Christian and do not come into consideration for our theme.<sup>153</sup>

On the Christian-orthodox side, our sources are those we have already considered: the New Testament texts and the Apostolic fathers. On the Christian-Gnostic side I have had to draw on writings that may have origi-

153. E.g., *The Apocalypse of Adam* (NHC V, 5) or *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII, 1).

nated after 150, because there are no other sources. We will examine first the orthodox (= 8.2) and then the Christian-Gnostic side (= 8.3). On both sides we will see, on the one hand, various possible ways of reacting, yet on the other hand clearly dominant tones. They will then lead to some closing considerations of our own (= 8.4).

### 8.2. *The Gnosticizing Opponents as Seen by Church-Christians* (with Andreas Karrer)

The opponents combated by the New Testament authors show “gnosticizing” features only in the latest New Testament texts, shortly before the turn of the century.

We recognize almost nothing of them in the only text where Luke speaks of such opponents — in Paul’s farewell address to the elders in Ephesus in *Acts 20:17-38*. In Paul’s speech, Luke admonishes the elders, whom the Holy Spirit has appointed to be overseers (*episkopos*) over the local churches, to shepherd God’s flock with vigilance (20:28). We learn that some of the opponents are “devouring wolves” who have come into the church from the outside (thus perhaps itinerant teachers). Others have come from the local churches and obviously with no little persuasive power have drawn the believers to their side (20:29-30). We do not find out who they are and what they teach. The label “devouring wolves” is enough to call forth the necessary defensive reflexes from the readers. Are they people with affinities to later Gnosticism? One could conclude that this was the case from verse 20, where Paul protests that there was nothing secret in his preaching. Is that an allusion to the favorite Gnostic practice of appealing to secret traditions and teachings of the risen Jesus? Or is it simply a traditional topos of asserting one’s innocence? It is certainly that, but its repetition in verse 27 could indicate that in that situation this topos was especially important. Thus we have no more than a vague suspicion that the combated “wolves” might have been precursors of the Gnostics. In this speech of the Lukan Paul, there is no theological debate with the opponents, only an appeal to the officeholders and an emotional reminder of the apostle Paul’s sacrificial concern for his church during the time he was with it (20:31). In many ways it is reminiscent of the picture of Paul in 2 Timothy (cf. 2 Tim. 3:12; 4:9-18).

The *Pastorals* give us a clearer picture. Here we learn not only that the opponents are very proud of their spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*) but that they may even call themselves “Gnostics” (1 Tim. 6:20). They claim that they “know” God (Tit. 1:16). We also hear that they teach in houses, perhaps for



payment (Tit. 1:11).<sup>154</sup> They are of Jewish origin (Tit. 1:10), claim to be teachers of the Torah (1 Tim. 1:6; cf. Tit. 3:9), and teach “Jewish myths” or “myths and endless genealogies” (1 Tim. 1:3-4; cf. 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Tit. 3:9). They prohibit marriage and require the observance of food regulations (1 Tim. 4:3; cf. 4:8). Some of them teach that the “resurrection has already happened” (2 Tim. 2:18) — that is, perhaps a spiritual resurrection in the here and now such as one finds in the Valentinian letter to Rheginos<sup>155</sup> and such as Paul confronted with the Corinthians. All of this would fit well with an early form of Gnosticism with a Jewish imprint that may have come into the churches from the outside.

The author of the Pastorals refuses to be drawn into a discussion of the issues of these opponents. He disqualifies them with deprecating comments such as “foolish,” “babblers,” “corrupters,” etc., and with a harsh catalogue of vices (2 Tim. 3:2-5). Even the label “Jewish” (Tit. 1:14; cf. 1:10) does not have a friendly sound. He cannot refrain from a harsh insult in the form of an obscure prophetic saying (Tit. 1:12). He turns to Timothy and Titus and — through them — indirectly to the ministers of the local churches, who are very important in this situation. They should pay special attention to what is going on “in the houses.” Both here and later in the history of the church, “house groups” often are seen as potential breeding grounds of immorality and heresy. A substantive theological debate with the opponents is lacking. Instead, the author urges people not even to respond to their foolish controversies (Tit. 3:9). After one or two reprimands, one should simply break off fellowship with them (Tit. 3:10), as obviously had already been done in the case of Hymenaeus<sup>156</sup> and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20). Thus the unity of the local church is to be achieved by administrative measures! That is logical, since one cannot even raise for discussion the tradition that is to be preserved uncorrupted and unchanged until the last day.

There is a similar situation in 2 Peter and in the *Epistle of Jude*, the latter of which underlies 2 Peter as a source. I will deal with them only briefly. Who the opponents are, whether they are the same in both epistles, and whether they belong in the context of nascent Gnosticism are questions we cannot answer with certainty. Although both authors revile the opponents prolifically, they give scarcely any information about them. With many of the insults, one can hardly determine whether they have any basis in reality or whether the

154. This would best describe itinerant teachers who have come into the church from the outside and who earn money with their “gnosis.”

155. *The Treatise on the Resurrection* (NHC I, 4).

156. Who advocated a false doctrine of the resurrection (2 Tim. 2:18).

negative names the opponents are called simply come from a standard repertoire of invectives. The author of Jude appeals to the “most holy faith,” the foundation on which the church is built (Jude 20), “which once for all has been delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). It is worth noting that the opponents obviously still participate in the church’s love (*agape*) feasts (Jude 12) and that the author does not stop trying to save the people who have fallen away. One should snatch those who are in danger from the fire and pray for the hopeless cases while protecting oneself from contamination by their spotted garment (Jude 22-23).<sup>157</sup> The author of 2 Peter no longer makes such attempts. He appeals to the “holy commandment delivered” — that is, to tradition — and, in addition, to the authority of the “holy prophets” and the apostles, especially to his own authority, which is strongly emphasized in this letter, written as a testament of the prince of apostles.

The *Johannine epistles* are the most interesting case.<sup>158</sup> According to 1 John 2:19, the opponents “went out from us.” Thus at one time they had belonged to the Johannine group. They do not know the truth because they deny that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22). In other texts this is made more precise: they deny that Jesus Christ “has come in the flesh” (1 John 4:3; 2 John 7). Thus they advocate a “docetic” Christology. Are they Gnostics? In my opinion that is not certain, although many later Gnostics (not all!) advocated a docetic Christology because they regarded the union of heavenly spirit and earthly matter as the deepest ground of the hopelessness of the human situation, and they wanted to keep the savior who had come from the other world free from being ensnared in earthly matter.

If we follow the clue Irenaeus gives us in *Adversus haereses* 3.3.4, according to which Cerinth was the main opponent of John the disciple in Ephesus, we discover affinities. Cerinth is said to have denied the virgin birth and to have claimed that the Spirit came down at the baptism in the form of a dove onto the human Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.26.1). The only thing that is certain is that Irenaeus understood Cerinth to be a Gnostic. He could also have been a Jewish Christian<sup>159</sup> whose Christology was later given a Gnostic interpretation.

The author of the Johannine letters denounces them harshly (cf. 1 John

157. Thus the most probable interpretation of “to have pity”; cf. Anton Vögtle, *Der Judasbrief: Der zweite Petrusbrief*, EKK 22 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag; Solothurn: Benziger, 1994), pp. 106-7.

158. I am proceeding here on the assumption that they were written *after* the Gospel of John and that their author, the “Elder,” was not the author of John 1-20.

159. Thus Christoph Marksches, “Kerinthos,” in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 20 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 2004), pp. 755-66.

2:21, 17). Indeed, they are “the antichrist,” who, as the believing readers know, will come in the last hour (1 John 2:18, cf. 22; 2 John 7). It is the last hour, and now many antichrists have appeared who lead the churches astray. One can no longer have fellowship with them in the church; indeed, the author says, since they did not remain with us, they never did belong to us (1 John 2:19). They are of the world, not of God (1 John 4:5). In 2 John the “Elder” gives the church clear guidance: “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into the house and do not greet him” (2 John 10). Even the universal commandment of hospitality is not to be observed when one is dealing with false teachers.

Where did the author see the boundaries of the church? Andreas Karrer writes on the subject (in the next five paragraphs):

The author appears to be aware of two criteria. The first is brotherly love. “By this are the children of God and the children of the devil manifest: Whoever does not do righteousness is not of God, and whoever does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10). The author cites this criterion, however, only in the non-polemical, parenetic parts of his letter. The second criterion is significantly more important. It is the confession: “This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22). That is the confession the church has “heard from the beginning” (1 John 2:24). This is where the spirits go their separate ways. Only those people are part of the fellowship who confess that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 John 4:2). Those who speak differently exclude themselves from the fellowship. Thus, unlike the texts we have previously considered, the author of 1 John has a clear, substantial criterion for what is true doctrine. At first glance, this use of the confession makes sense, but it carries with it the following difficulties.

1. According to the author of 1 John, one is to hold fast to the confession just as it was from the beginning, without changes (2:24). One’s own possession of the Spirit confirms that this is the true way (1 John 2:27; 4:2). It follows that without the Spirit the wording of the confession cannot guarantee the truth. The authority to which the author appeals is one’s own possession of the Spirit. Yet the apostates also claim to have the Spirit (1 John 4:1). Thus there is a face-off between Spirit and Spirit.

2. The confession bears witness to God’s love and at the same time clearly separates those whom God loves from the children of the world and the apostates. Thus it no longer opens itself to include others. It is scarcely able any longer to testify to and in the world about the Jesus who with his love transcends all boundaries. Instead, it places limits on God’s love. It is no longer granted the freedom to embrace the apostates. Judgment is given; even God’s love can no longer — indeed, may no longer — overturn it. Thus the

believer is now able to pass judgment about the range of God’s love and in the name of that love exclude people from fellowship.

3. As a result, love is limited to one’s own ranks. Love is determined as the love of brothers and sisters. The “children of the devil” are not brothers. God’s unconditional acceptance of people is made conditional on the right confession. The second letter gives an example of how this is practiced. There the Elder even forbids extending hospitality and greeting people whose confession is different. Loveless behavior is demanded as a sign of the confession. There is tension between confessing God’s love and accepting it in one’s own life.

4. That also changes the confession’s function. Instead of calling attention to Christ as the basic gift who creates fellowship, it now designates the boundaries of fellowship by unmasking false brothers. When it is passed on, especially in a canonical text, it permits or forbids fellowship in new situations. One can clearly see in what direction it is developing. The content of faith has moved from bearing witness to Christ himself to a rigidly formulated and unchangeably transmitted confession. No longer is the living Christ confessed; now a confession formulated for all times is believed.

We can quickly bring our *tour d’horizon* to a conclusion. Opponents who advocate a docetic Christology also appear in some of the *letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, especially in the letter to the Smyrnaeans (chaps. 1–8) but also in the letter to the Trallians (chap. 10). How they are related to the opponents in the letter to the Magnesians, who live as Jews do (*Magnesians* 8–10; *Philadelphians* 5–9), is controversial. It is worth noting, however, that Ignatius breaks off fellowship in principle only with those Christians who deny that Christ has come in the flesh and has truly died and been raised — not, however, with “Judaizing” opponents.<sup>160</sup> Only of them does he say: “I did not think I should write their names as unbelievers. Indeed, I would prefer not even to remember them” (*Smyrnaeans* 5.3). Since they also do not participate in the eucharist,<sup>161</sup> there is no fellowship with them: “So it is right to keep our distance

160. The different attitudes toward the docetic Christians in the *Smyrnaeans* and the “Judaizing” Christians in *Magnesians* and *Philippians* is one of the reasons why I surmise there were two different groups of opponents. *Philadelphians* 6.1 could indicate where Ignatius sees the limit of church fellowship. “When both of them (that is, Judaizing Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians) do not speak of Jesus Christ they are for me tombstones and sepulchers of the dead.”

161. We do not know why they did not. There are three possibilities: (1) Had they been shut out? (2) Did they belong to a different house church from that of the bishop? (3) Did their Christology lead them to reject the eucharist? The third possibility is improbable, because according to *Smyrnaeans* 7.1 they also do not participate in the prayer.

from such people and to speak about them neither in private nor in public" (*Smyrnaeans* 7.2). In only one place does he make the concession that one might pray for them (*Smyrnaeans* 4.1). The standard of measurement Ignatius uses is the confession he quotes, for example, at the beginning of his letter to the Smyrnaeans. Admittedly, he does not leave it unchanged; he accentuates it much as Paul had done earlier: "Truly of David's family according to the flesh . . . truly born of a virgin. . . ." And, looking to the future, he also interprets it, for example, with the claim that Jesus Christ "was in the flesh even after the resurrection" (*Smyrnaeans* 3). Ignatius is not merely a traditionalist; he is a great creative theologian.

*Polycarp's letter to the Philippians* is interesting for our theme because in 7.1-2 he cites a number of "basic beliefs" that are part of "the word delivered to us from the beginning" and that are essential for Christian identity. They are: the belief that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, the testimony of the cross, and the belief in resurrection and judgment. Believing these truths separates true Christians from the "foolishness of the crowd."

We bring the section to a close with a small prosopographic note. Marcion, who had come to Rome from Sinope in Asia Minor and taught there in the Roman church, was excommunicated in A.D. 144, and he immediately founded his own church. Valentinus, who later was represented by Irenaeus as the "father of the so-called Gnostic heresy" (*Adversus haereses* 1.11.1) came to Rome before A.D. 140 and worked there as a teacher of the church for at least fifteen years. According to Tertullian (*Adversus Valentinianos* 4.1), he even sought the office of bishop. We never hear that the Roman church excommunicated him. In the time of Bishop Victor, at the end of the second century, the Valentinian presbyter Florinus was even active in the Roman church (Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.20).

We summarize: the gospel and love — the truth of the confession and the fellowship of believers — were the two focal points of the ellipse that represents the church in early Christianity. In the slowly evolving conflict between the church's Christianity and nascent Christian Gnosticism, it seems that in the church the confession took precedence over church fellowship. The confession that was evolving into an unchangeable tradition became the condition of church fellowship. Former brothers became heretics with whom one was to break off all fellowship — indeed, about whom one did not even speak or whom one insulted in an extremely loveless way.

This picture is certainly right in its broad strokes, but only in its broad strokes. There are different shades of color and small exceptions. Among them is the firmly held admonition in the Epistle of Jude and Ignatius to pray

for the heretics as well. It is also important that the traditional confession was not only retained and repeated; sometimes, as with Ignatius, it was also theologically interpreted. It is also not unimportant that not *all* of the church's convictions became divisive truths. Ignatius and Polycarp show that with special clarity. And, finally, one must remember that one did not always, everywhere, and immediately excommunicate enemies or suspect teachers. Sometimes one waited patiently, even in Rome.

### 8.3. *The Church-Christians as Seen by Their Christian-Gnostic Opponents*

We begin by remembering a daring hypothesis. In 3 John the author, the "Elder," complains to his addressee, Gaius, that a certain Diotrephes, who "likes to be first," does not receive his messengers and "expels from the church" those members who do extend hospitality to them (3 John 9-10). According to Ernst Käsemann, Diotrephes is the orthodox bishop of a local church, and the "Elder" is a gnosticizing presbyter<sup>162</sup> whose sympathizers were expelled by the bishop from his church. If this bold hypothesis were correct, we could see in the Johannine letters the conflict between the Gnostics and the church as it might have looked from the other side. For several reasons, however, the thesis is improbable.<sup>163</sup> That means that we have no Gnostic sources contemporary with the New Testament texts that would permit us to have this view from the other side. Thus we have to make use of later sources.

As a general observation, we can say that in the extant Christian-Gnostic texts the polemic against the church-Christians does not play nearly as important a role as does the polemic against Gnosticizing Christians in the later New Testament texts or in the writings of the Christians who combated heretics.<sup>164</sup> The church father Irenaeus says clearly why that was the case. The Gnostics — he is speaking here of the Valentinians — work *in* the church. Their lectures are intended for the simple church-Christians; they want to win them and not repel them. "They complain . . . about us that we avoid their fellowship without reason, since their teaching is similar to ours, and that we call them heretics, even though they teach the same and have the

162. Ernst Käsemann, "Ketzer und Zeuge," in Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), pp. 168-87.

163. The "Elder" is not a Gnostic. In my judgment, there was not yet a full-blown Gnosticism in the context of the Johannine writings. Still, Käsemann's thesis was very attractive, because it suddenly brought the texts of Christian Gnostics into the church's canon.

164. The most important book on the theme is Klaus Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum*, NHS 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

same doctrine" (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 3.15.2). They feel that they are part of the church. They confess the same Christ. Justin also says that these people are confessing Christians and that they believe in the crucified Jesus as Lord and Christ (*Dialogue with Trypho* 35.2).<sup>165</sup> And they really believe what they say. The church father Tertullian complains in *De praescriptione haereticorum* 41 that the Gnostics have no sense of hierarchy and church discipline. That is understandable. Most Christian Gnostics are laypersons. At best, they are going to suffer under the church's official leadership. As we will see, their understanding of the church is influenced by the Pauline principle of fellowship in the body of Christ and by Jesus' principle of humility and rejecting status. Tertullian then continues: "As for peace in the church, they are peaceful with everyone, without distinction" (*De praescriptione haereticorum* 41).<sup>166</sup> They recognize no church divisions and act humbly (42.4.6). That is true not only of their relationships among themselves but also of their relationships with the Catholic Christians. They emphasize the "common faith" (Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos* 1).

My general impression is that polemics of genuine Christian Gnostics against the church are primarily a reaction. That is to say, they engage in polemics only when they must, and they do so as a reflection of their own experiences in the church. Of course, strictly speaking, there is little firm proof for that statement, because normally Gnostic texts reveal little about the context in which they are written. In the following comments I will give several examples of quite different reactions.

The work *The Interpretation of Gnosis*<sup>167</sup> is possibly a Valentinian writing that may date from as early as the middle of the second century. In its second part it contains a charismatic church order that closely follows 1 Corinthians 12. According to Koschorke's interpretation, the issue here is the relationship between church members who have full knowledge and the "ignorant" — that is, normal church-Christians. The author writes with the "knowing ones" in mind: "How do you know that someone is ignorant of the brethren? For you are ignorant when you hate them" (17.25-27). And to the "ignorant" he says: "But is someone making progress in the Word? Do not be hindered by this; do

165. Similarly, Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 5.18.1: "The heretics also confess the crucified one."

166. Tertullian adds: "In fact, although they have divergent doctrines, there is no difference between them."

167. NHC XI, 1. Cf. Klaus Koschorke, "Eine neugefundengnostische Gemeindeordnung: Zum thema Geist und Amt im frühen Christentum," *ZThK* 76 (1979): 30-60. The translation is by John D. Turner, in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson, 3d ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 472-80.

not say, 'Why does he speak while I do not?,' for what he says is also yours" (16.31-36). The text is an impressive attempt to strengthen the relationship between Gnostics and non-Gnostics in a local church under the signature of Paul's teaching about charismata.

*The Gospel of Philip* is certainly a Valentinian text from the second century.<sup>168</sup> Logion 26 contains a variation of the Gnostic doctrine of the various forms of Christ that explains their background: "Jesus took them all by stealth, for he did not appear as he was, but in the manner in which they would be able to see him. . . . He appeared to the great as great. He appeared to the small as small. He appeared to the angels as an angel, and to men as a man. Because of this his word hid itself from everyone. . . . When he appeared to his disciples in glory on the mount he was not small. He became great, but he made the disciples great, that they might be able to see him in his greatness." Here we are far removed from Paul's firm statement that other people proclaim "another Jesus." "Other Jesuses" are accommodations that correspond to the various human capacities for understanding. This means that there can hardly be a limit to Jesus' variability. In principle, every view of Jesus is possible.

We find harsher tones in *The Apocalypse of Peter*,<sup>169</sup> a short, impressive text, perhaps still from the second half of the second century. The author speaks on behalf of the "little ones" who have been captured and oppressed. Who are the people who oppress the little ones? Initially, the Savior, speaking to Peter, leaves it open. "Some who do not understand mystery speak of things which they do not understand, but they will boast that the mystery of the truth is theirs alone." They oppress their brothers by saying to them: "Through this our God has pity, since salvation comes to us through this." Thus the Savior is speaking here against an *exclusive* claim of salvation that leads to oppression. At the end of the vision he says openly: "And there shall be others of those who are outside our number who name themselves bishop and also deacons, as if they have received their authority from God. They bend themselves under the judgment of the leaders. Those people are dry canals."<sup>170</sup> It is characteristic of Gnostic polemics against the church that they are seldom directed against the "little ones" — that is, against laymen, only against the officeholders.<sup>171</sup>

*The Authentikos Logos*<sup>172</sup> is a relatively early, in any case still second-

168. NHC II, 3. Translation by Wesley W. Isenberg, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 139-60.

169. NHC VII, 3. Translation by James Brashler and Roger A. Bullard, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 372-78.

170. Quotations: 76.27-34; 79.13-16, 22-31 (allusions to Matt. 23:6 and 2 Pet. 2:17).

171. Koschorke, *Polemik der Gnostiker*, pp. 80-85.

172. NHC VI, 3. Translation by George W. MacRae, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 305-10.

century, work that presumably is to be located at the margin of Christianity. In its closing part it deals with a basic principle of Christian Gnosticism, the principle of seeking. We find it frequently, following Matthew 7:7, in Gnosticizing texts, such as, for example, in the opening of *The Gospel of Thomas*: "Jesus said, 'Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the all'" (logion 2). Tertullian formulates the most expressive of the church's polemics against this principle: "One must seek until one finds, and when one has found, believe, and then there is nothing more to do than to hold fast to what one has grasped in faith" (*De praescriptione haereticorum* 9). It is the same as with the woman in the parable of the drachmas: those who have found no longer need to seek. Now in the *Authentikos Logos* we find the Gnostic counter-polemic against this polemic. Once again the ecclesiastical officeholders are in the author's sights: "But these — the ones who are ignorant — do not seek after God. Nor do they inquire about their dwelling place, which exists in rest, but they go about in bestiality. They are more wicked than the pagans, because . . . they do not inquire about God, for their hardness of heart draws them down to make them their cruelty. . . . If they find someone else who asks about his salvation, their hardness of heart sets to work upon that man. And if he is not silent as he asks, they kill him by their cruelty, thinking that they have done a good thing for themselves. . . . For even the pagans give charity, and they know that God who is in the heavens exists, the Father of the universe, exalted over their idols, which they worship" (33.4-32). This is the voice of a man who has been excluded from the fellowship of the church.

The anti-church polemic in *The Second Logos of the Great Seth*<sup>173</sup> is part of a Gnostic system. The Gnostic work is perhaps to be dated sometime after 200, and it has in the broadest sense of the word a "Sethian" background. Formally, it is a revelation of the heavenly Son of Man, Christ, but the people who believe in this Christ have nothing more to do with the church-Christians since an intensive quarrel that led to persecution against the Gnostics. "We were hated and persecuted, not only by those who are ignorant, but also by those who think that they are advancing the name of Christ, since they were unknowingly empty, not knowing who they are, like dumb animals" (59.22-29). The Gnostics belong to the heavenly *ekklesia* (50.1-7), and they live in its "ineffable Monad" (51.16-17): "Then before the foundation of the world, when the whole multitude of the Assembly came together upon the places of

173. NHC VII, 2. Translation by Roger A. Bullard and Joseph A. Gibbons, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 362-71.

the Ogdoad, when they had taken counsel about a spiritual wedding which is in union . . ." (65.34-66.2). Although their Christ, the heavenly Son of Man, came to earth and performed miracles, he did not reveal himself to the inhabitants of these regions "in the love which was coming forth" (52.5-7). He remained a stranger to them. The archons created for them "an imitation, having proclaimed a doctrine of a dead man and lies so as to resemble the freedom and purity of the perfect assembly and joining themselves with their doctrine to fear and slavery, worldly cares, and abandoned worship" (60.20-29). Thus the *one* true heavenly church of the Gnostics has nothing to do with the visible, earthly church. The latter is only an imitation, much as the entire visible world is an imitation of the heavenly world above, created by the ignorant and arrogant demiurge, Yaldabaoth.

What may have been the harshest anti-church polemic appears in the *Gospel of Judas*.<sup>174</sup> It is a relatively early work, probably to be dated shortly after the middle of the second century, and a work of which Irenaeus had already heard.<sup>175</sup> It comes from a Gnostic group that also is to be assigned to Sethian Gnosticism. What sets this gospel apart is that the "arch-betrayer," Judas,<sup>176</sup> was chosen to be Jesus' conversation partner and to receive the Great Revelation<sup>177</sup> from the heavenly Jesus. His "betrayal" made it possible for Jesus to leave his body and to return to the Pleroma. For Judas it also meant his ultimate salvation. In this gospel the visible Catholic Church is represented by the twelve foolish disciples. They have a vision and see a temple with twelve priests who sacrifice, some of whom "sacrifice their own children, others their wives, in praise and humility with each other; some sleep with men; some are involved in slaughter; some commit a multitude of sins and deeds of lawlessness. And the men who stand before the altar invoke your name" (38). Jesus' interpretation is: "You are the twelve men you have seen. The cattle you have seen brought for sacrifice are the many people you lead astray" (39). Thus the church is an earthly apparition in the service of the lie, but the true church is the heavenly house that Judas, the "thirteenth spirit," sees in his vision, the dwelling place of the great men, the generation of Seth (44-45). The

174. Translation by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst, in *The Gospel of Judas*, ed. Kasser, Meyer, and Wurst (Washington: National Geographic, 2006), pp. 19-45. *The Gospel of Judas* belongs to group 3, above, p. 145.

175. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.31.1.

176. The work presupposes the Judas traditions of the canonical Gospels and turns them on their head.

177. This revelation is a short version of a Sethian cosmogony of a type such as one finds in *The Apocryphon of John* and in the so-called *Gospel of the Egyptians*, thus in the two classical writings of Sethian Gnosticism.

polemic against the church is similar to, but even sharper than, that of *The Second Logos of the Great Seth*. The difference is that here the Catholic Church of priests is morally slandered, much as were the Gnosticizing opponents of the church-Christians in the Pastorals or in 2 Peter. I can imagine that behind this text there is a group of Sethian — thus, in my opinion, originally non-Christian — Gnostics who tried to find a place for themselves in the early Catholic Church and were expelled from it.

*In summary:* in sociological terms, most Gnostic Christians were educated or partly educated laypersons, and often they were Christian teachers who tried to connect their Christian traditions with the material known to people familiar with popular philosophy. Initially, they had a clear tendency to believe that it was more important to maintain fellowship in the local churches than it was to prevail with their own doctrine. The nature of Gnostic thought facilitates this, since, as a basic principle of Gnostic thinking, asking and seeking salvation make it impossible to regard any knowledge as something definitive and final, as an “unalterable truth.” The multiformity of Christ, the traces of which Gnostics discovered not only in the different interpretations of Christ in the churches but also in their philosophical traditions and in other religions, led them to understand all linguistic formulations of divine truth merely as symbolic approximations or as metaphors and “myths.” For this very reason Gnostics continually had to turn to new formulations of artificial myths, none of which could serve as an adequate expression of eternal truth.<sup>178</sup> All of this led Gnostics not to be inclined to orthodoxies; they were tolerant both with their own kind and with the church-Christians. From the “Gnostic” perspective, that was the starting situation of the encounter between early Catholic church-Christians and pre-Gnostic church-Christians.

These encounters were often very difficult. From the side of early Catholic church-Christians, especially from the side of their officeholders, the leading impulse was a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” One smelled the scent of apostasy and false doctrine everywhere. People did not know the free teachers who came into the local churches from the outside; for that reason alone they were suspicious. Frequently the “hermeneutic of suspicion” simply meant not understanding and not wanting to understand. That led to rejections and exclusions, and they in turn to insults and calumnies. That is not to say that the suspicion was always without foundation. Texts such as *The Second Logos of*

178. Naturally, “the inconstancy of their teaching” (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.11.1) is a constant irritant for the people who combat heretics. They contrast the Gnostic innovations with the *one* and *invariable* rule of faith.

*the Great Seth* and the *Gospel of Judas* show that in fact non-Christian Gnostics repeatedly tried to make their way into local Christian churches and then failed to do so. But of course, in many cases the situation will have been reversed: The hermeneutic of suspicion and not wanting to understand among Christian brothers and sisters in the same local church sooner or later *caused* dissension and led to a break. One sees that in the history of the schools of the church teacher Valentinus. It is a history that shows how free Christian schools increasingly evolved into religious associations with their own rites alongside the church (or how they were forced into this development!) or how they even became separate churches.<sup>179</sup> Exclusions do not strengthen unity; they increase and harden the divisions — divisions the Christian Gnostics had not even wanted. That led finally to what one sees in *The Second Logos of the Great Seth* and in the *Gospel of Judas*: the anti-church polemic of the Gnostics who had been thrown out of the church largely became the mirror image of the church’s anti-Gnostic polemic.

#### 8.4. Final Observations

That brings us again to the fundamental problem we have already seen in Paul:<sup>180</sup> How does one reconcile the reality that Christ, who embodies God’s unlimited love, is a power that tears down barriers and creates community with the reality that this same Christ also limits the community he has created? In Paul’s case the question was: To what degree may — indeed, must — Christ be *interpreted anew* so that he becomes recognized as one’s own Christ no longer “according to the flesh” but “in the Spirit” (2 Cor. 5:16)? Or to say it differently: When does one reach the point at which the newly interpreted Christ becomes “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4) — the point at which every fellowship must end, because it no longer has the same basis? Paul answers this question formally: whoever makes God’s grace depend on conditions other than Christ has betrayed Christ. Yet in reality Paul’s answer was not formal; it presupposes an interpretation of Christ. Whoever, for example, was of the opinion that Jesus has “fulfilled Law and Prophets” (cf. Matt. 5:17) may well have disagreed with Paul in the Galatian controversy where the question was whether Torah and Christ can be combined.

A half-century after Paul, this same question began to be raised in the controversy with the Christian Gnostics. Again it was a question of the rela-

179. Thus probably in the case of the Marcosians.

180. Cf. above, pp. 89-90.

tionship between confession and fellowship. The church-Christians tended to make the confession the criterion for fellowship. They did not recognize that in so doing they called into question the Christ who was confessed, for the Jesus who had come in the flesh has demonstrated just how much God “has loved the world” (John 3:16). Jesus has broken down religious boundaries, not built them up. With this critical statement we are not saying that the complementary Christian-Gnostic position would be true to the gospel. Its weakness was that it often obliterated the clear grounding of church fellowship in the activity, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and increasingly replaced it with one’s own spirituality as the basis of fellowship. That had ecclesiological consequences. For many Gnostics, for whom it was not difficult to live at peace with all people in the church regardless of the doctrine they advocated or the ethos they practiced, the true church could *only* be the heavenly church. We have found such a position in *The Second Logos of the Great Seth*. As a consequence, they were able to accept their excommunication, since in any case the visible unity of the church in this world was not important. A further consequence was that the basis of their tradition soon became every bit as arbitrary as their interpretations of the tradition. If ultimately it made no difference how Christ was interpreted, then it also made no difference what basis people chose for their interpretation. Thus many Gnostic schools and churches increasingly lost their Christian identity and disappeared into a general syncretism. Historically, that had the consequence that many of the Gnostic schools and groups that were forcibly expelled from the church went under relatively soon, because after their separation from the church they did not form a new whole church. The Marcionites and Manichaeans, groups that emerged from the orbit of Gnosticism, are here the great exceptions.

The difficulty of the orthodox position as it appears in 1 John is more interesting for us, because *mutatis mutandis* it still is the difficulty most churches have in the struggle for unity with sisters and brothers “who went out from us but were not of us” (1 John 2:19). Today, too, it is either a confession, a dogma, or a doctrine that precludes church fellowship. Almost always such confessions serve as *boundaries* for God’s love, even though they confess him who lay down his life for God’s unbounded love. Since love crosses boundaries and the drive toward community constitutes the essence of the church,<sup>181</sup> the contradiction is deep. Or it is the office that was created as a *ministry* to preserve the church’s unity that serves as a boundary. It evolved from a ministry to a basic gift of unity that then became for others a precon-

181. Cf. above, p. 41, nos. 3 and 4.

dition of unity. Here, too, there is a deep contradiction. The ministry originally designed to serve community — from the priesthood to the papacy — makes unity impossible.

The first epistle of John says, “Whoever does not love God does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). The truth is also part of knowing God, and the truth includes negations. How then are truth and love, confession and fellowship, related to one another? Perhaps we can say: where a confession becomes the standard, subject to human control, that sets out the limits of community once and for all, beyond the concrete situation in which it has spoken, there it destroys the power of the living Christ to *create* community. Thus, in my judgment a confession can in a given situation prevent community, but it cannot define the condition of the possibility of community for all time, for the living Christ is not a condition but a basic gift — that is, *ground* and *power* — for his children to become one. Or one can also say: where a confession loses its relevance to life and becomes something other than a thanksgiving for the love of God one has received, or where a confession loses its *analogical character* and tries to define the living God instead of merely approaching him in metaphorical, provisional, human language, it threatens to become a precondition of unity rather than its basic gift.

All of that will be the subject of reflection in the systematic part of this book. We close the New Testament part with a quotation that in a different way tries to reflect the relationship of knowledge and fellowship from Paul’s perspective.

He who has knowledge of the truth is a free man . . .  
 He who is really free through knowledge  
 is a slave because of love for those  
 who have not yet been able to attain  
 to the freedom of knowledge . . .  
 Love never calls something its own,  
 and yet it may actually possess that very thing.  
 It never says “This is mine” or “That is mine,” but “All these are yours.”

This text comes from someone who probably had been expelled from the church — the Gnostic author of *The Gospel of Philip* (logion 110).

## PART THREE

# The Unity Movement: Church Fellowship in the Oecumene

*Christian Link*

### 1. On the Way to Unity

In the New Testament, the whole church was a reality one could experience. People may have argued about its unity, but they bore living witness to it as a unity to which they aspired just as they bore witness to the one Lord, Jesus Christ, whose living presence turned the fellowship of Christians into the church. How shall we deal with this witness in view of more than a thousand years of church schisms?

Yet we must ask: Who, or what, is the whole church? If we want to talk about it, we need a concept of church, but what constitutes the church — its “truth” — is always something we see only in perspective, never in concepts or tenets, because we meet it only in a particular historical or cultural form. Nevertheless, it is the task of theology to analyze the traditions, experiences, and doctrinal systems of the church’s various denominations, which come to expression precisely in concepts. When we try to express the situation in concepts modern people can understand, there are three levels or ways of looking at it.<sup>1</sup>

Externally, from the perspective of the neutral observer, we ask about the *that* of the church — its empirical reality. Here one describes its social appearance, its structure and its organization, its diaconal activity, but also its attitude toward such things as war, power, and poverty as well as its alliances with might and money and its proximity to national interests.

At the boundary where the external and internal perspectives meet, there is the question of the church’s *how* — of how it looks when seen with the eyes of a concerned party, or perhaps also a committed observer, who

1. Cf. Dietrich Ritschl and Martin Hailer, *Diesseits und Jenseits der Worte: Grundkurs Christliche Theologie* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2006), pp. 44ff.