

Contextual Unity for the Churches

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Unity is stated to be the theological undergirded precondition for the credibility of the proclamation of the gospel.¹ Unfortunately, many types of unity have proven unacceptable to churches. Organizational, organic, or institutional unities are unwieldy. Theological unity (in the sense of uniformity) is unacceptable to many. Cooperational unity is pragmatic but hardly provides a theological precondition for credibility. Relational unity (in the familial sense—calling each other brothers and sisters) may even be difficult for some. Dialogical unity (which opens conversations) seems to me the most acceptable type of unity given the constraints of cultural, historical, and theological presuppositions. Any credibility we wish to attain cannot be won at the expense of our own integrity. We dare not abandon who we are. This credibility can be won by recognizing the sources of our differences (be they cultural, historical, or theological...among other categories), yet continuing the journey toward understanding each other in the Christian tradition.

This article is written with the presupposition that context influences who we are and how we view the world. It also, therefore, impacts our theological positions. In this perspective, 'there is no "theology" as such—no "universal theology"—there are only contextual theologies. "Context," however, while it is a reality that allows one to see clearly from a particular perspective, is also something that can, if not *blindfold* one, then certainly cause one to wear blinders that severely limit visionⁱⁱⁱ While I neither wish nor consider it acceptable to say that one culture cannot understand another culture, nor that one ecclesial tradition cannot understand the theological assertions of another theological tradition, the 'blinders' of which Bevans speaks do create hindrances to the unity which we are trying to attain in the church.ⁱⁱⁱ Using this perspective and a particular idea of unity which must be rejected, Paul Hiebert penned the agonizing question, 'How can we work toward the unity of the Church when people and their societies are so different?'^{iv} Indeed, we need to look for a different type of unity for the churches.

An acceptable unity must accommodate theological divergence. Accommodating divergence is easier or more difficult depending on how one defines that divergence. The early church had easy categories: either a theological statement was orthodox (conforming to the rule of faith and ecclesial teaching) or it was heterodox/heretical. There was a clearly bounded set of acceptable teachings.

The shift we see in the world today from a centralized model of unity to a polycentric one presents its own problems. If we picture the earlier centralized model as one circle which bounded all of the acceptable theology of the early church, then we are inclined to picture the contemporary polycentric model as a multitude of circles which define the acceptable theologies of the multitudes of ecclesial communities. Some of those circles may overlap (United Methodists, Free Methodists, and even the Church of the Nazarene share some theological affirmations). Others of those circles are almost completely distinct from any other (The Kimbanguist Church of the Democratic Republic of Congo offers many unique affirmations). The trouble is evident when one tries to make connections, see similarities, apply constraints, or search for the theological unity. This polycentric model allows a theological pluralism which affords the absence of an authoritative commonality. This model allows a situation where 'diversity may also lead to divisions, to discrimination, to intolerance, to animosity, and even to violence.'^{iv} Each circle needs justification and power to maintain its own boundaries.^{vi} The

polycentric transformation to the old model of theological integrity is helpful, but insufficient. There have to be other changes to the model as well. In the following paragraphs I would like to improve this mental image for unity in the church.

First, we need to fuzzy-up the edges of each circle. Unity necessitates humility. Alister McGrath enumerates four functions of doctrine: (1) Social Demarcation, (2) Interpretation of Narrative, (3) Interpretation of Experience, and (4) Truth Claim.^{vii} Even though I will be coming back to these ideas for other parts of this modified model, in this point we really are talking about truth claims. Although our doctrinal systems have specified in (sometimes overwhelming) detail what is true and what is false, it could be the case that not all that has previously been affirmed has the same justification as other parts. To say that Jesus has died and rose from the dead is more certain in most doctrinal systems than the date of his second coming (or even the form of that second coming). We should recognize which parts of our admissible (and inadmissible) doctrines carry more weight. Once that is done, our openness to listen to other options is indirectly proportional to the certainty allowed by the biblical witness. It could be that some of our fuzziness allows more overlap with other traditions than initially expected.

Second, we need to put a temporal axis in the graph. There is a wonderfully interesting website which puts a great deal of information on one graph and then puts that information in motion to indicate how it has changed with time.^{viii} It would be interesting to see a similar chart of doctrinal limits for ecclesial communities. In April 2010, I was conversing with several leaders of the African Inaugurated Church, “Chrétien Celeste” about the development of their doctrines and practices. One of the leaders admitted that it is possible that the rumors are true that in the past some forms of Voudou or traditional religion were practiced among their believers. (What African church can categorically deny such a thing?) But the church is changing, cleaning up such practices, and developing in such a way that it is difficult to say how the church will think, look, and believe twenty years from now. While it is true that official doctrines are slow to change in established churches, popular theology moves more rapidly with the change of cultural expectations and political movements.

The addition of a temporal component puts extra value on convergence and divergence rather than simple identity. In this article, we are talking about similarity between movements. However, that convergence should normally be around a fixed standard: the text of scripture. Even though there are diverse interpretations of scripture (which will be addressed in the fifth element of this discussion) scripture has been the historic point of connection for Christianity.^{ix} So, one would hope that the various communities' fuzzy circles would rotate around that pole in ever tighter proximity to it. The point was not relation to other groups, but rather coherence with the teaching of the Bible when Hiebert explained two types of syncretism, 'In one sense syncretism is a message that has lost the heart of the Gospel. In another sense, it is moving in the wrong direction, away from a fuller knowledge of the Gospel.'^x The unity we seek can be evidenced as the circles are all progressing toward a fuller knowledge of the Gospel, and, thus, toward a greater congruence.

The use and abuse of scripture (especially from the perspective of one or another group) is a particularly sticky point in the unity of the church. But if we are willing to view each other in diachronic perspective, we are more likely to see the efforts and progress in the use of scripture and a clearer understanding of willingness toward unity.^{xi}

Third, we must add dialogical arrows between circles. Unity demands interaction. As an example, let me use the Church of Christ – Harris Mission (as it listed in the World Council of Churches membership directory).^{xii} In a recent interview with 4 preachers and half a dozen apostles of the local church in M'Badon, Cote d'Ivoire, I learned of the history of the theology of this church. When many of the faithful were illiterate, they held to the belief that William Wade Harris (the charismatic preacher from Liberia who preached in Côte d'Ivoire in 1913^{xiii}) was the messiah himself. A charismatic leader taking the role as spiritual intermediary closely coheres to what could be expected in the Anyi culture in which Harris was preaching. The present day preachers to whom I was speaking attributed a doctrinal change to the fact that more and more literate people became leaders and

introduced what they saw as the biblical teaching that Jesus, not Harris, was the messiah. This example could serve for the previous point that we need to look at the movement of any particular church. I have reserved it for this point because of the context of this particular interview: I was not alone with these leaders of the Harrist church (as it is called in Côte d'Ivoire), but was surrounded by a dozen evangelical seminary students. These students had certainly heard of the Harrist church in the past. They thought it was a cult which glorified its founder and practiced a syncretistic Christianity which had replaced key biblical truths with Anyi values. If our interview had been conducted 50 years earlier, these students may have been correct. But this interview was held in 2010 and these students were astonished to find their core beliefs about Jesus Christ in close agreement. The interaction between those students of traditional evangelical churches and this African Inaugerated Church produced a unity previously unknown. We need to keep our knowledge up to date and we need to do it in different ways: 'Intercultural theologizing should take place at four levels: between churches of different cultures, between individuals of different educational and social levels within the churches of each culture, between different denominations and theological traditions, and between the church of each generation and the church of past generations.'^{xiv}

Fourth, we need to reexamine the motivations which produced divisions in the past. Unity revisits the past, forgives, and eliminates baggage. Historic animosities foster a 'surface tension' on the circles to inhibit co-penetration with other communities. Admittedly, the phrase 'amicable church split' is used, but it seems a theological oxymoron unless the administration was just two large for efficient operation. Whenever there is a dividing of paths, the fuzziness of the doctrinal boundaries are polished into blinding clarity. That is not to say that the necessary faithfulness to the judgments of scripture are respected, but that both groups become very clear about why they split. We may refer once again to McGrath's function of doctrines. It could be that the difference between two groups at the time of their separation was more a matter of interpretation of narrative or experience than truth claim. When reading the accounts of the different movements' responses to the Azusa Street Revivals, it is not surprising that the Christian and Missionary Alliance (to which I am connected) and the Assemblies of God (a close sister organization) decided to form different organizations. Their polishing of the edges on the criterion of 'tongues' as evidence of the fullness of the Holy Spirit made clear differences in interpretation. The suspicion which started long ago remains with some from one or the other group. It is those suspicions which need to be revisited, reconsidered, and reduced by interaction in the contemporary world...not the world of past animosities or misunderstandings.

Fifth, make visible the cultural layer. Each social location is different; a dynamic unity allows for cultural differences (within reason). In the movie "The Parent Trap" (staring Hayley Mills in 1961 or Lindsey Lohen in the 1998 remake), twins were raised apart with different views on the world and different practices which must be learned before they make the switch into the other's context. Values (like the 'out-of-doors'), resources (like capability at the piano) and vocabulary (notably a whole different register of speaking) are all obviously different.

The difference in ecclesial communities may be as liturgically specific as the use of feet: Processions have never been a strong component in evangelical protestant churches as in catholic churches. Physical response to music in conservative churches in America might (I said 'might') include clapping. In Africa, besides simple moving in place, processions ('dances') around the church are not uncommon. The difference may include a theological emphasis: the reality of God is important in secularizing Europe and North America where Africa is more concerned with access to God. The difference may be ways of formulating theology: instead of a written discourse, a song or dance may communicate far more powerfully an interpretation of the Bible.

Because no culture can understand all the traits of Scripture, and because each culture contains elements that will help it uncover what another culture might overlook, *intercultural theologizing* is essential for the universal church. Intercultural theologizing is the cross-pollination of many contextual theologies between churches and different

contexts. Intercultural theologizing plays at least two key roles in the process of doing theology. First, such sharing of theologies enriches the theology of the church in each context and the theology of the universal church...[by including] what they may have missed [and] prevent them from being blinded by their own cultural biases.... Second, intercultural theologizing helps ensure that each contextual theology remains biblical and congruent with the theology of the universal church.^{xv}

The propositions offered here will certainly not produce unity among all the churches, but it is hoped that it will lighten unnecessary or inappropriate differences and barriers. Although I am unconvinced that an organic unity will be produced, my hope is that this dialogical unity, this model of fuzzy, historical, interconnected, baggage-free, cultural circles of churches will enable movement forward in the expansion together of the Kingdom of God. The crucial element is conversation which emphasizes listening so as to hear what the Spirit is saying through the church(es).

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- i Kyriaki Avtzi, László Gonda, and Darrell Jackson. ‘Theme Eight: Mission and Unity – ecclesiology and mission’. Of the Edinburgh 2010 main study themes, <http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/8-mission-and-unity-aeur-ecclesiology-and-mission.html>, consulted 10 may 2010. p.204.
 - ii Stephen Bevans, *An Introduction to theology in global perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis): 2009, 4.
 - iii For a refutation of incommensurability, the lack of ability to understand another culture or ecclesial tradition, see Harold Netland,. *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP), 2001, 285-87.
 - iv Paul Hiebert, “Syncretism and Social Paradigms” in Gailyn Van Rheenen, ed., *Contextualization and syncretism: navigating cultural currents*. (Pasadena , CA: William Carey Library), 2006, 32. Seen on line 13 july 2010 at http://books.google.com/books?id=E84GB2f2a9QC&printsec=frontcover&dq=contextualization+and+syncretism&hl=en&ei=wXQ8TMCrGYT48AbsuYnGBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCgO6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false .
 - v Andrew Walls, “The Great Commission 1910-2010” submitted to the Edinburgh2010 consultation and available at www.edinburgh2010.org. 209.
 - vi See the Fundamentalist project for more discussion on the need to maintain boundaries. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995).
 - vii Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997, 35-80.
 - viii www.gapminder.org also provides software to view many charts offline. Consulted July 15, 2010.
 - ix Kevin Vanhoozer, “Christ and Concept: Doing Theology and the 'Ministry' of Philosophy.” in John Woodbridge and Thomas McComiskey, eds. *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*. Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1991, 99-146.
 - x Hiebert, 44.
 - xi I harbor no illusions. This diachronic perspective may also cause some communities to lose hope in any ecclesial unity because the use of scripture, viewed as fundamental, may be seen as diverging.
 - xii <http://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/regions/africa/ivory-coast/church-of-christ-harris-mission-harrist-church.html>, consulted 11 May 2010.
 - xiii David A. Shank, ‘Wadé Harris, William’, in *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*. http://www.dacb.org/stories/liberia/legacy_harris.html, consulted 11 may 2010.
 - xiv Steve Strauss, “The Role of Context in Shaping Theology” in Gailyn Van Rheenen, ed., *Contextualization and syncretism: navigating cultural currents*. (Pasadena , CA: William Carey Library), 2006. Seen on line 13 july 2010 at http://books.google.com/books?id=E84GB2f2a9QC&printsec=frontcover&dq=contextualization+and+syncretism&hl=en&ei=wXQ8TMCrGYT48AbsuYnGBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCgO6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false .119f.
 - xv Strauss, 119.