

## LOCAL CHURCH – UNIVERSAL CHURCH

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What do we mean when we speak the word “church”? In everyday speech the word evokes a variety of conceptions and images that are maintained kaleidoscopically, with ever-shifting changes in pattern and hue: buildings, people, congregations, organizations, denominations, communions, and more. The situation is only marginally better when the word is used theologically, thus the necessity for qualifiers such as “local” and “universal” and alternates such as “ecclesial communities” to specify what we mean by our use of the word.

What we mean by the word is important because the church is central in the reception, preservation, and transmission of Christian truth. That is why ecclesiology was a point of friction between Reformed and Catholic at the beginning, and remains a point of friction between Reformed and episcopally ordered churches on the one hand, and between Reformed and “free churches” on the other. Underlying both are differences in understanding the essential meaning, nature, and purpose of the church. Before he was Benedict XVI, Cardinal Ratzinger readily acknowledged that “the difference in the ways in which Church is understood . . . has proved to be an insuperable barrier.”<sup>1</sup>

It is a fundamental conviction of Reformed ecclesiology that the gathered congregation is the basic form of church . . . but not a sufficient form of church. The gathered congregation *is* the one holy catholic apostolic church, not of itself alone – as if it were a solitary, self-sufficient ecclesia – but only in its essential communion with the Lord and therefore with other gathered congregations.

The sixteenth century Protestant Reformation led to unprecedented fragmentation within the Christian church. The Reformation’s centrifugal force was a matter of concern to the reformers themselves, and a cause of sharp rebuke from the Catholic Church. The spectacle of a multiplying number of disputing churches caused confusion everywhere. How could believers make judgments about who was faithful and who was not? What was true and what was false?

One Reformation answer centered on discussions of “true church.” John Calvin is typical: “Wherever we see the Word of God rightly preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”<sup>2</sup> The Word of God rightly proclaimed and heard . . . Baptism and

the Lord's Supper celebrated in fidelity to Christ . . . *these* are the clear indicators of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. So central are these two marks, Calvin continued, that we must embrace any church that has them, "even if it otherwise swarms with many faults."<sup>3</sup>

Calvin's "two marks of the church" center on lived faith within congregations. He does not speak in the first instance about a church's orthodox doctrine or its sacramental theology, much less about its structures, but about the faithfulness of proclamation and reception, and the faithfulness of sacramental practice, within gathered Christian communities. Calvin's marks of the true church point us to congregations, not academies; to churches, not libraries; to worship, not books. Doctrinal purity and sacramental precision are not the primary issue, as if the marks serve to critique other churches. Calvin's marks concern fundamental ecclesial faithfulness that allows the gospel to be received, believed, and lived by ordinary men and women.

Calvin's marks of the true church are not articulated in order to function as boundaries. They are better understood as directional signs that point to the core of faithful church life. Any community claiming to be a *Christian church* must place proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ at the heart of its life, both through proclaiming and hearing the Word and through faithful celebration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The continuing application of word and sacraments as marks of ecclesial faithfulness is not mere nostalgia for Reformation clarity. Calvin placed Word and Sacrament together at the core of the church's true life because he took it as "a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace."<sup>4</sup> Word and sacraments set forth the reality of Christ's presence, and so provide the church with foundational identifiers of ecclesial faithfulness. The question to be asked of any congregation or denomination is whether word and sacraments are found at the heart of common life. When we look at a Christian community, do we see – at the center of its life – proclamation of the gospel.

Proclamation in word and sacrament is not the only thing churches do, of course. Congregations and denominations order their institutional lives and engage in a wide variety of activities that go beyond preaching and celebrating the sacraments. However, designating word and sacrament as marks of the true church means that ecclesiastical structures and other church activities must not bury word and sacrament, or push them to the periphery of church life. Furthermore, the whole range of church programs must remain subject to authentication by word and sacrament, for these crucial realities are the

embodiment of the gospel in the life of Christ's women and men. Word and sacrament stand as the controlling core of church activities, the marks of a church's true life.

### *Universal Church and Local Church*

The question remains: what is this "church"? Vatican II opened a rich conversation, within the Catholic Church and beyond it, on the nature, purpose, and mission of the church. Tracing all lines of the ecclesiological dialogue occasioned by *Lumen Gentium* is too complex a task for this essay, but at the heart of the matter is the distinction between local church and universal Church, and in the shape of the relationship between the two.

Before he was Benedict XVI, Cardinal Ratzinger repeatedly made the point that Eucharist makes the church; the church is Eucharist. He maintains that the church came into being when Jesus gave bread and wine, body and blood, and said, "Do this in remembrance of me." The church is the response to this commission. Because Eucharist is the act of a real community of believers, the Eucharistic nature of the church points first of all to the local gathering: "Eucharist is celebrated in a concrete place together with the men who live in it. It is here that the event of gathering begins."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the church's origin and basis in Eucharist is the source of its nature as *communio* – communion with the one triune God through communion with Christ, and communion among those who share in the body of Christ, becoming the body of Christ.

Reformed churches put it somewhat differently, although not antithetically. In the words of the early sixteenth century "Ten Theses of Berne" (1528), "The holy Christian Church, whose only head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, and abides in the same, and listens not to the voice of a stranger."<sup>6</sup> As *creatura verbi*, the church comes into being through the real presence of Christ in Word and Sacrament, the real presence of the living Christ in proclamation, Baptism, and Eucharist. Unfortunately, however, Reformed churches have too often tended to forms of sacramental minimalism and an insufficient apprehension of the deep communion inherent in proclamation of the gospel and participation in the sacraments.

In any event, the church as *communio*, points first to the local congregation, called by Christ and gathered in Eucharist, or more broadly, in Word and Sacrament. Communion is not confined to the local church, however. The multitude of Eucharistic celebrations "cannot stand side by side as autonomous, mutually independent entities," said Cardinal Ratzinger, and the so "the Church "cannot become a static juxtaposition of essentially self-sufficient local Churches."<sup>7</sup> There is *one* Christ and so there is *one* body of Christ and so there is *one* holy catholic apostolic church. The church's unity and catholicity are guaranteed in the communion of local churches with their bishop, the

communion among bishops, and the communion of bishops with the pope. Thus, in Ratzinger's words, *church* signifies "not only the cultic gathering but also the local community, the Church in a larger geographical area and, finally, the one Church of Jesus Christ herself. There is a continuous transition from one meaning to another, because all of them hang on the christological center that is made concrete in the gathering of believers for the Lord's Supper."<sup>8</sup>

Reformed ecclesiology embodies an understanding of the church as communion that bears a certain conceptual resemblance to the Catholic view, but that places the dynamics of communion in councils rather than episcopacy. In the Reformed view, the church is the body of Christ, in communion with Christ who alone is head of the church. A local church (congregation) is gathered in communion by Word and Sacraments, served and led by the pastor and elders together in council (session, consistory). Congregations are in communion with one another as pastors and representative elders gather in regional councils (presbyteries, classes). Regional councils are in communion with one another in national councils (general assembly, general synod).

While it is glib to refer to regional councils as "corporate bishops," it is nevertheless true that presbyteries bear responsibility for teaching and oversight, for mission and governance. In theory, the same bonds of communion that are effected in bishops are realized in presbyteries composed of pastors and elders from each congregation.

Reformed churches are quick to assert the advantages of conciliar over episcopal systems, but less aware of their inherent dangers. Among the dangers of Reformed communion ecclesiology is the obvious tendency for communion to become progressively weaker at each conciliar level. Communion *among* congregations within presbyteries fades as conciliar life is reduced to practical legislative relationships, effectively confining communion in Word and Sacraments to congregational life. Communion among presbyteries is virtually non-existent. At the level of the national council, the general assembly, commissioners from presbyteries are little more than a momentary gathering of strangers whose relationship ends with the concluding benediction. Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that these weak forms of communion are confined within political boundaries. The absence of a global structure of communion is not mitigated by loose alliances of national churches.

Whether in episcopal or conciliar form, it would be possible to conceive of communion as building the one church from the bottom up. Cardinal Ratzinger contended vigorously against this view, in both its Orthodox and Protestant forms. He has emphasized repeatedly that communion among local churches derives from their communion with the one body of Christ, the universal Church. The order – universal

Church, local Church – is made clear in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion.” “Aspects of the Church” attempts to draw together Vatican II’s multivalent uses of the term “universal Church” by stressing one aspect of the Council’s teaching: “the universal Church cannot be conceived as the sum of particular Churches, or as a federation of particular Churches, but, in its essential mystery, it is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular Church.”<sup>9</sup> In a vivid image, “Aspects of the Church” states that the universal church is the mother of local churches, not their product.

The ontological priority of the universal Church is the subject of an ongoing discussion that did not end with “Aspects of the Church,” however. Most notably, the discussion was heard in a public exchange of articles between Cardinals Kasper and Ratzinger, prompting the Prefect to write, “This ontological precedence of the Church as a whole, of the one Church and the one body, of the one bride, over the empirical and concrete realizations in the various individual parts of the Church seems to me so obvious that I find it difficult to understand the objections raised against it.”<sup>10</sup>

The Reformed tradition, together with other Protestant traditions, contains a particular version of the universal church-local church issue in forms of a distinction between the invisible church and the visible church. This distinction has a long and complicated history, but at its core is the notion that there must be more than meets the eye when we look at the reality of congregations, councils, diocese, denominations and churches. The evident flawed reality of what is visible to the eye must not be all there is. Since the church we see is divided, sinful, limited, and self-absorbed, the one holy catholic and apostolic church must exist as a reality that is not confined to what is seen by the naked eye.

In the popularized version of the invisible-visible church dyad, prevalent among ministers and members alike, the invisible church is the true church while the visible church is the flawed church, true only to the extent that it conforms its faith and life to the invisible church. The unfortunate but predictable result is a denigration of all institutional embodiments of the visible church, together with a view of their dispensability, often resulting in justification for easy exit from particular churches and the multiplication of separated churches. To the extent that the invisible church is understood as the ideal church, actual churches are reduced to hopelessly inadequate imitations of the real thing. Contempt for the visibly flawed church is the inevitable result of this pop view of the invisible-visible church distinction.

Unlike the widely held Reformed split between invisible and visible church, the Catholic understanding of universal Church and local church emphasizes their coherence,

not their distinction. The accent is on the *visibility* of the ontologically prior universal Church in the life of the local church. Cardinal Ratzinger: “The Church of Christ is not hidden behind the multitude of human constructions, intangible and unattainable; she exists in reality as a corporal Church that shows her identity in the Creed, in the sacraments, and in the apostolic succession.”<sup>11</sup> This visibility of the one and catholic church is captured in *Lumen Gentium*’s well known formulation: the one holy catholic apostolic church “*substitutit in Ecclesia catholica.*” Ratzinger accentuates the way in which the *substitutit* formulation counters all “ecclesiological relativism” by proclaiming that there is a Church of Jesus Christ in the world. “The Council is trying to tell us that the Church of Jesus Christ may be encountered in this world as a concrete agent in the Catholic Church.”<sup>12</sup>

Reformed churches are not likely to be convinced, and not only because they are omitted from the church “in the proper sense.” The task before Reformed churches is to relinquish the vision of a spotless, invisible churchly construct so that they can vivify conciliar bonds of communion that were at the heart of the Calvin’s vision. The one holy catholic and apostolic church *is* the communion of local congregations through councils, among councils, between councils and bishops, among denominations, across national boundaries. Such communion, real though at times almost imperceptible, must be made more clearly *visible*.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985) p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 4.1.9., p. 1023.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Institutes.*, 4.1.12., p. 1025.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.17, p. 1292.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Called to Communion* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1996) p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> “The Ten Conclusions of Berne,” *Creeds of the Churches*, Third Edition, John A. Leith, ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982) p. 129.

<sup>7</sup> Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, pp. 29 & 85.

<sup>8</sup> Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion,” ¶ 9.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*” in *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005) p. 134f.

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<sup>11</sup> Ratzinger, “Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*,” p. 146f.

<sup>12</sup> Ratzinger, “Ecclesiology of the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*,” p. 149.