Post-Reformation Trends
Towards Ecumenicity

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The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was not intended to be a divisive force within the community of Christians. Its real aim was to purify rather than to divide. The most representative leaders of the movement repeatedly demonstrated their desire for unity within the church universal. As John T. McNeill has recently affirmed,

The Reformation was a revolt, not against the principle of unity and catholicity, but against the privileged and oppressive monarch of Rome—an uprising not merely of national, but of catholic feeling, against what had become a localized and overcentralized imperialism in Christianity, which made true catholicity impossible.¹

Luther asserted his belief in "one Holy Catholic Church" when he formulated his Larger Catechism and described the nature of such a church as follows:

I believe that there is upon earth a holy congregation and communion of pure saints ruled under one Head, Christ, called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, in the same mind and understanding, furnished with multiple gifts yet one in love and in all respects harmonious, without sects or schisms.²

Likewise as late as 1530, during the constitution of the Augsburg Confession which was being formulated by Luther and Melanchthon, one clearly sees the irenic spirit which breathed within this theological instrument. It was marked by a continuing desire for reconciliation with Rome. Its tone was moderate, and it sought to find a common source of truth in the fathers and the Scriptures which might prove acceptable to Rome as well as the followers of Luther.

Zwingli, Calvin, and many other reformers of the first generation would agree in such a definition of the nature of the church and

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2. Dr. Martin Luther Werke (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1906), 1.
would seek to provide for a practical demonstration of its essential unity. But there was begotten, perhaps as a by-product of the Reformation, a so-called freedom with too little obligation and a spirit of independence with too little concern for the well-being of the total Christian community in all the world. Such attitudes led to unnecessary separation with the household of God.

The ecclesiastical authority by which the unity of the church of Rome had been maintained throughout the Middle Ages, was by 1517 not only questioned, but denied and broken. An adequate substitute for this lost authority was difficult to find, and if it could be found, men found it more difficult to accept unitedly. In large measure the early reformers sought to establish a Christian unity at the point of doctrine. But the question then arose, what is doctrine? And how much of it must be believed in order to unite all believers?

CALIXTUS AND LUTHERAN UNITY

There arose within Lutheranism during the first half of the seventeenth century a new kind of appeal for a stronger unity. George Calixtus, who taught at the University of Helmstedt from 1614 to 1656, became known as the professor of irenics. He came to see that there was an existing internal union (communio interna, virtualis) among all the families of the Christian Church. This he would have all to recognize and encourage. In promoting his plan for such encouragement he recognized the existence of truth in the realm of fundamentals and non-fundamentals. Fundamental doctrine is that body of truth which one is required to believe in order that he may be saved. Such doctrines are: belief in eternal life, bodily resurrection, salvation only through Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit in the holy Christian Church. The non-fundamentals for Calixtus are those theological doctrines which have been derived from the fundamentals and have been formulated into the creeds.

Calixtus claimed a certain authoritative tradition for the church of the first five centuries. Likewise, he held that the Apostles' Creed represents a complete doctrinal norm of truth for all time and contains the fundamentals of the Scriptures in such a way that nothing needs to be added, amplified or defined. 3 To be sure he was not seeking to place either the tradition of the ancient church or the Apostles' Creed upon the same basis of authority as he would the holy Scriptures, but he did place the former two in a distinct category

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above all other doctrine and creed. Thus upon these he seems to have placed a distinct finality in the realm of human authority.

Calixtus further contended that teachers and theologians of the church were prone to spend too much time in debating and philosophizing in the area of the non-fundamentals. While this secondary emphasis did have relevance to the life and well-being of the church, it should be subordinated to a clear and emphatic presentation of the fundamentals. This mistake of church leaders, Calixtus believed, contributed in large measure to the divisiveness within the Christian community. Opposing fellow Lutherans answered Calixtus by saying that it was not sufficient for a believer to know that Christ is the Saviour, but he must also know how He saves. And with this claim the irenic professor would be in virtual agreement, except to insist that the former was an absolute necessity, whereas the latter was only of relative importance.

GERMAN PIETISM

Another force in the post-Reformation era which gave itself to the encouragement of Christian unity was German Pietism. This general attempt at greater unity manifested itself by means of various proposals, systems of religious thought, and institutions. Among them were such suggestions as: the renewal of the church in order to recover the simplicity and zeal of apostolic Christianity, the church's recovery of a universal concern for and commitment to the salvation of all nations, the establishment of a universal seminary by the recruitment and preparation of a sufficiently large number of young men to meet the spiritual demands of the age.

Though Pietism is often looked upon as a separatist movement, on the contrary its leaders believed it would be an effective agent in uniting Christians among all denominations. The immediate background of this, as Martin Schmidt observes, may be seen in the proposal of Jean de Labadie (1610-1674):

He as a forerunner of Pietism who, in his own life's journey from the Jesuit order in France, by way of the Huguenot churches in France and Geneva, to the "Precisionist" theology in the Netherlands, from there to German Lutheranism in Herford in Westphalia, and finally to Mennonite Altona, set forth symbolically his conviction that the true church can be found in any existing church, but cannot be identified with any of them. His "congregation of the twice-born," which knows itself to have been separated from the world and from Babylon,
The work of Pietism, which had been founded and organized largely by Philipp Jabok Spener (1635-1705), and the creation of the University of Halle by the Elector of Brandenburg (1691-94), was continued and enlarged by his pupil and successor, August Hermann Francke (1663-1727).

Spener in 1675 had translated his most influential work (Pia Desideria) into Latin in order to give it a more general and widespread reading. This was the work which reflected the essential ideas of a book which had been published by John Arndt under the title True Christianity. Spener's writing was soon to have a marked effect upon the church in all Germany and beyond. It was an earnest appeal for a reform of the true evangelical church. As the best means of restoring the life of the church, six proposals were made:

1. The earnest and thorough study of the Bible should be made in private meetings (ecclesiæ in ecclesia),
2. The Christian priesthood being universal, the laity should share in the spiritual government of the church,
3. A knowledge of Christianity must be attended by the practice of it as its indispensable sign and supplement,
4. Instead of merely didactic, or often bitter, attacks on the heterodox and unbelievers, a sympathetic and kindly treatment of them should be observed,
5. A reorganization of the theological training of the universities, giving more prominence to the devotional life, should be effected,
6. A different style of preaching was needed; namely, in place of pleasing rhetoric, there should be the implanting of Christianity in the inner or new man, the soul of Christianity being faith, and its effects the fruits of life.

The Pietism of Halle was propagated in many ways under the forceful leadership of Francke. Apostolic Christianity as Halle had sought to recover it was to be presented to many nations and by means of many methods including spiritualism, missions, and education. The orphanage at Halle was intended to provide an ecumenical foundation. Here boys from Germany and other countries were brought to be placed with tutors who would instruct them in the basic ideas of this university and also seek to lead them to share in the primitive Christian fellowship which characterized the Pietistic movement. After such a course of training these young men would

return to their native lands in order to evangelize among their own people.

Likewise, many graduates of this young evangelical university were constrained by the love of Christ and by the new spirit abroad at Halle to commit themselves to go into all the world. Out of this ecumenical center many men and missions were sent forth. Into Poland, Bohemia, Scandinavia, southeast Europe, Siberia, Russia, Central Asia, England, and North America they came with undaunted life and energy. One of the major aims of all this was to deepen the fellowship of apostolic simplicity and to increase the strength of the one Body of Christ.

In the midst of this missionary and ecumenical outreach of Halle, Francke had eager hopes of a Universal Seminary. He believed that the rebirth of the church would be possible only by the spiritual renewal of the ordained ministry. And, as Spener had expressed in his philosophy of renewal and unity within the church, so Francke saw great hope in a new generation of preachers who had come to know God in vital, personal experience and would be thoroughly prepared to effectively share that divine knowledge with all the world.

ZINZENDORF SEEKS FOR UNITY

Among the best known and most representative sons of Halle was Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-60). In the second half of the sixteenth century the ecumenical philosophy of Halle had been expressed by Spener. It was his belief in the continued existence of the Body of Christ (the church), that though it was sick, it could be renewed and strengthened. Now in the seventeenth century Zinzendorf was expressing the optimism of Halle concerning the unity of the church. His formula in brief was: "The invisible church can become visible in the eyes of the world through the fellowship of the members." He sought to apply this formula by the multiplication of many inter-church activities. Beyond the Herrnhut community in Germany many similar institutions were established throughout Europe, England, and America. Zinzendorf intended that this Christian fellowship would reach among all churches of every land. He believed that each Christian communion had some measure of truth to give and some to receive from every other one. Therefore he sought to build many bridges over which there might be a free flow of traffic in both directions among all churches.

Martin Schmidt observed that

Ecumenical activity was for Zinzendorf a necessary consequence of his faith: to be a Christian on any other terms was for him impossible. . . The ecumenical activities which grew up upon the foundations which he had
laid were important and fruitful. The greatest example of all is in the beginning of the Methodist Church, since it was through their contact with the Brethren, through admiration of the childlike simplicity of their manner of life, and above all through contact with Spangenberg and Peter Bohler, that John and Charles Wesley found the decisive inspiration for their own lives. John Wesley especially, in the summer of 1738, found in Herrnhut that which he had been seeking—an early Christian congregation in contemporary existence.5

In 1741 Zinzendorf continued his extensive missionary and ecumenical enterprises in America, compressing many activities within the year's sojourn. One major concern was to promote a spirit of unity among the numerous German groups in Pennsylvania. During the first half of 1742, more than one synod a month was held, and every German group in the state was represented at most of them. But soon all withdrew except Lutherans, Reformed, and Moravians, and Zinzendorf's apparent success was short-lived. Other of his labors, however, were abundant and fruitful. Several congregations were established and others strengthened by his preaching and leadership. Also he opened wide a door of opportunity for a great new day of missions among the American Indians. This new outreach of Christian faith was to be carried on by the Moravian Brethren and with David Zeisberger, their best known missionary leader, it was destined to become the most successful Christian movement among the Indians during the colonial period.

**WESLEY'S CATHOLIC SPIRIT**

In the remaining portion of this discussion we shall note the desire of John Wesley for an ecumenical spirit among all Christians. The heart of this concern may be found in the sermon which he entitled *Catholic Spirit.*6 The text was taken from II Kings 10:15. His thought for the sermon was based upon only a part of the verse as follows: "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, give me thy hand."

Wesley affirmed that the spirit of Christian unity did not depend upon an agreement in opinion, form of worship, or the same form of church government. The central question for him was: "Is thy heart right with God? And dost thou believe in Him and in His Son, the

Lord Jesus Christ? And is thy faith filled with the energy of love?” If these be so, then “give me thy hand,” said Wesley, for these are the evidence of a catholic spirit and the ground of Christian brotherhood. He proceeded further by saying, “If thou canst give me thy hand, then love me, and that not only as thou lovest all mankind . . . but as a brother in Christ, a fellow-citizen of the New Jerusalem, a fellow-soldier engaged in the same warfare, under the same captain of our salvation.” Second, he says, “Thou must commend me to God in all thy prayers; wrestle with him in my behalf, that he would speedily correct what he sees amiss, and supply what is wanting in me.”

In the third section of the sermon, Wesley warned against the danger of confusing the catholic spirit with “speculative latitudinarianism,” “practical latitudinarianism” or a spirit of “indifference to all congregations.” These are some of the major perils which must be avoided if the spirit of unity is to grow within the church.

The conclusion of this ecumenical message is presented by way of a summary. Here the purpose of the sermon reached its height. In brief, it is a description of the one who has achieved the catholic spirit, the unity that is possessed by the people of God. But while he is steadily fixed in his religious principles, in what he believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus; while he firmly adheres to that worship of God which he judges to be the most acceptable in his sight; and while he is united by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation—his heart is enlarged toward all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection, neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love, and he that has this is of a catholic spirit. For love alone gives title to this character: catholic love is a catholic spirit.