The doctrine of a world-wide Church, currently the concern of the Ecumenical Movement, can scarcely be said to find a full formulation in the New Testament. Some have wished that Scripture might have been more explicit at this point. Such a formulation, however, would scarcely be consistent with the kind of a Bible which we possess. Had there been, from the beginning of the Christian movement, a full-orbed ecclesiology (from the twentieth century point of view) the Bible would have appeared a weird book for many centuries. This fact suggests that God has in His wisdom left many adiaphora the contingencies of human judgment and human action.

The question has, quite normally, presented itself in our century: Does the New Testament in general envision a world-wide Church? and more particularly the question, Did our Lord anticipate a visible Church of world-wide proportions? It is the purpose of this article to note what the Gospels teach at this point, and to observe some of the implications of ecumenism for the study of the Gospels.

I

The first locus classicus for the study of Christ and the Church is, of course, Matthew 16:17-19. In this passage Peter showed himself, for the moment at least, a "scribe instructed from heaven." He identified Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God," and drew a reply which is in reality a play upon words no less than a promise of a Church-to-come. Our Lord, in responding to Peter's Confession, turns to a Wortspiel: "Petrus...Petra," and suggests in effect: "Peter, you have given expression to a revealed truth, and your name, Petros is a metaphorical name for it." There is, of course, a continuation of this metaphor in the New Testament, expressed in the language of the corner-stone. (See Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; I Peter 2:4-8.)
A crucial question to be raised at this point is, Did our Lord consciously intend to establish a Church? Now, those who would seek to understand Him as a simple peasant of Galilee would logically reply in the negative. Happily this type of understanding of Jesus Christ is largely a thing of the past. Expressive of the contemporary trend are such writers as Alan Richardson, who suggests in this connection that

The New Testament indicates clearly enough that Jesus conceived of his divinely appointed mission as that of creating the Church, the new people of God.¹

He adds, significantly, that no part of the New Testament contains any suggestion of any "successors" for St. Peter. Rather, the position of Peter is a unique one, and his position as a foundation stone is a unique and one-time one.²

Any understanding of Matthew 16:17-19 which takes its words seriously must acknowledge that our Lord was expressing a coherent plan of the construction of a projected Church. His words are clear, "I will build my Church." This passage presupposes, not a genial "human Jesus" who sought to return to the "simple ethical monotheism of the prophets and the pristine simplicity of natural religion"³ but One who looked with clear insight into the coming dynamics of history. This is, in the simplest form, the basic New Testament statement of our Lord's purpose with respect to His role as Founder and Builder of the Church.

The question of the relationship between the Kingdom of God and/or Kingdom of Heaven and the Church is one meriting a study by itself. Some have attempted to show a disjunction between Church and Kingdom, and in so doing have found it necessary to distinguish separate "layers" of New Testament teaching—usually at the expense of the integrity of the Gospel record. Others have felt that our Lord's teachings concerning Church and Kingdom represent differing contextual treatments of a single reality. Or, to say it another way, Church and Kingdom are basically the same institution, viewed in differ-

²Ibid., p. 310.
³Article by James M. Robinson, in Christian Institutes, Oct. 21, 1959, 1. 1207.

NOT TO BE USED WITHOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSION
OF ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
ent ways and from differing perspectives.

The second *locus classicus* for the study of our Lord's attitude toward the Church—and this is the passage to which the ecumenical movement tends to look for guidance—is John 17. Ecumenical interest in this chapter centers, of course, in the words of verse 21: "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." It should be observed that this text occurs within a context which is profound and serious. Both text and context are futuristic: they look ahead to events not apparent to the natural eye. They are, moreover, conditioned by an impending crucifixion, and take us into the secrets of our Lord's pre-Calvary heart.

It is significant that the chapter is in itself a prayer. This prayer centers in a pattern of relationships including the following: a) Christ and the Disciples; b) Church and world; and c) a Christ—now—present in a changing relationship by which He is shortly to disappear from the natural eye. As a prayer, the chapter is morally oriented, as are its components. This text (verse 21) is rooted in considerations of human character. Applied to the Church, it suggests no forced organic *union*, but a *unity* growing out of a mutually-shared condition of sanctity.

Turning more explicitly to the quality of the unity for which Christ prayed, we observe that it is difficult to find much clear suggestion of a unity of organization. The Evangelist John has previously recorded words of our Lord at this point. In 10:16 he quotes Jesus as envisioning the unity of the flock—in terms of one flock and one Shepherd. In John 13:35, the badge of that unity has been announced: it is the unity flowing from the love of Christian for Christian. In 15:1ff it is a unity of branches belonging to the same "vine." Verse 22 of chapter 17 suggests, further, that the unity of the Church is to be a unity in a shared glory. If one asks, What sort of glory? the answer must be something like the following: It is not the glory of the Mount of Transfiguration. It is not the glory which might be thought to inhere in a mere human perfection of character. It must be a reflex of the glory of God Incarnate, so that Eternal Truth should be made manifest through human flesh and through human ministry. Ultimately, then, the unity of the Church is a reflex unity: "I in them, and Thou in me." This does not lend itself to precise logical analysis; but the words "I in them"
express the deepest aspiration of our Lord as He went forth to meet death.

Viewed from the standpoint of empirical reality, the unity of the Church certainly cannot be conceived totally in terms of an invisible and intangible unity. It is to manifest itself in such a manner that the world will be convinced through it that the Divine Master has come and has fulfilled His mission, and now impleads the loyalty of all men. This unity was to be manifest, first of all, through the Apostolic Body, the Disciples.

The chapter in hand suggests, further, that our Lord's concern for the Church is essentially a prolongation of His concern for the Twelve. He sees the Disciples as "not of the world" in a sense like to that in which He was not "of the world." The extension of the scope of this prayer is expressed in verse 20: "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word." The Disciples and the Church should face a common problem, and be confronted with the same complex of forces--the same Metropolis of Evil--since both must inhabit a world to which they were essentially strange.

II

With respect to the visibility factor in the doctrine of the Church, it should be noted that the very term "Church" implies a whole conception of social history. The Church is Christ's body, organic in a metaphorical sense. It is not, of course, His body in the sense that it will grow automatically and inevitably. Rather, the Church is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, person (not a person) rather than institution. Thus, it cannot properly be said that the Church is a mere prolongation of the Incarnation. Actually, it is more accurate to say that wherever men and women are bound together in a common faith and a common commitment, and in a consequent common sanctity, they become an identifiable part of the living Christ. It follows from this, that the unity, the koinonia or fellowship of the Church, will be a forced and artificial thing unless it be morally and spiritually based.

There have been proposed alternate means to the production of unity. Force and coercion have been tried, without abiding success. Ritual has been tried, again without conspicuous success. Philosophy and glamor of learning have been tried:
but the Gospel, at whose heart is the mystery of the Cross—a cross of shame—does not lend itself to this method. Others have tried to set the question, "How does unity come?" in the form of proximity or affinity. Historically the result has been, that proximity can, unless powerfully implemented by affinity, produce friction and disunity.

Granted that sin is the disturbing element, producing disunity, by what means can we hope to produce the "new man"? Can it be done by a simple beating of the drum ecclesiastic? Or must it come, if at all, as a reflex of the distaste for all which produces strife, of the quality of mind and heart which is ashamed of senseless strifes and divisions. (We note in passing that there are divisions which are not a direct result of sin, as the formulation of the "Principle of Comprehension" reminds us.)

To move more closely to the heart of our Lord's formula for unity, we observe that the broad basis for cohesion is inward and moral. It is no accident that at the heart of this chapter stands the prayer "Sanctify them through thy truth." Whatever wounds the doctrine of sanctification has sustained in the houses of both friends and enemies (and these have been many and grievous!) it remains that at this critical hour in His career, our Lord sensed that He had now sanctified Himself (committed Himself irrevocably) to the way of Golgotha, in order that those "not of the world" may be sanctified in truth. In the midst of this, certainly our Lord must have envisioned a Church in which men are, through close identification with their Living Head, sincere in their distaste for sin, ardent in their love for righteousness, desirous of bearing each other's burdens, and forbearing with the infirmities of the weak. Thus, He yielded Himself to effect in His own an inward moral cohesion, having as a by-product an ensuing unity.

III

It is important in this connection to note certain implications of the question of the unity of the Church, as proposed particularly by the Ecumenical Movement. If we are to take John 17:21 seriously, we must recognize a Christ whose knowledge took in the sweep of the future, and who was not only able to foresee its course but to comprehend its dynamics. Such a prayer as that of John 17 would be an irrelevancy upon the lips of a mere human. Again, such a prediction as is en-
cased in Matthew 16:17-19 does not comport with the meagre conception of Jesus as a genial proletarian of Galilee.

Our Lord's anticipation of the establishment of the Church (chronicled by Matthew in 16:18-20) was preceded by His anticipation of the Cross. Putting aside metaphysics with respect to the two natures in Christ, we must recognize practically that during the career of our Lord there arose before His consciousness the conviction that certain things must be. His death did not present itself to Him as the result of a mission which failed. He walked the path of our common life with the certainty that He came to be rejected, and finally to die. But in the course of His career there came to His consciousness also the fact that He should establish a Church within human history.

The whole tone of John 17 comports with the general thrust of earlier accounts, in that during the hours preceding Gethsemane and Calvary He envisioned a course of history which was shot through with design and purpose. Or, to put it another way, the High Priestly prayer of Jesus took for granted a teleological view of history in which the passing of human events was interpenetrated by Divine action. In other words, if we take the words of John 17 seriously at all, we must accept concurrently a high Christology.

Another implication of the unity of the Church, as proposed by the Ecumenical Movement, in its reliance upon the words of John 17:21, is, that to be consistent we must accept the integrity of the message of the four Gospels. Unless this be granted, then when ecumenists pass the major part of the weight of the traffic of ecumenical thought over the bridge of this verse, they are handling the passage in a manner which reflects the most flagrant use of the proof-text. Further, if it be granted that John 17:21 reflects an eternal concern of our Lord for His Church, it seems probable that the context in which it is set contains a similar and authentic expression of concern, and should be regarded on the same level as historical source with, say, Matthew 5-7 or Matthew 16. Perhaps it is now time for leaders of the Ecumenical Movement to give renewed and serious attention to the historic understanding of Scripture in terms of the unity of its message and the constancy of its authority.

After all, the glorification of Christ, to be effected in part through the uniting of the Church, rests upon His willing ac-
ceptance of the Cross, and is to be reached through death, resurrection and ascension. The unity of the Church is, in consequence, seen to rest upon the acceptance of high views of the nature of Christ, and of the substitutionary quality of His sufferings and death. In turn, the unity for which our Lord prays is channeled to the disciples, and to all "which shall believe on [Him] through their word," through His mediation.

Alexander Maclaren sums up the nature and the result of the "unity which we seek" in these words:

> It is the Christ-given Christ-likeness in each which knits believers into one. It is Christ in us and we in Christ that fuses us into one and thereby makes each perfect. And such flashing back of the light of Jesus from a million separate crystals, all glowing with one light and made one in the light, would flash on darkest eyes the lustre of the conviction that God sent Christ, and that God's love enfolded those Christlike souls even as it enfolded Him.\(^4\)

IV

In summary, the following gather up what has been said concerning the relation of Christ to the Church in Process. First, the establishment of the Church was an all-absorbing concern of the heart of our Lord during the days of His flesh. It was no incidental, no after-thought; it was integral to the whole of His ministry. Second, the Church was to be confessionally-grounded. She was no product of human insight and human ingenuity. Third, the destiny and on-going of the Church was the all-consuming burden of our Lord's pre-Calvary heart. Recognizing the odds, humanly speaking, against the success and continuation of the Church, He initiated procedures which gave supernatural basis and assurance that the fledgling movement would survive and grow. Fourth, it has been made clear that He desired, with great desire, an organic and vital Church, drawing her life from, and finding her *raison d'être* in, her Living Head. Finally, in the exploration of the idea of unity, there has emerged the clear conviction that the Lord of the Church envisioned not necessarily

\(^4\)Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Scripture, St. John XV-XXI*, pp. 204f.
a forced or artificial union, but rather a unity resting upon an inner affinity within the components of the Church. This affinity was based, not on mere sentiment nor mere congeniality, but upon individual and personal sanctity, dependent in turn upon union with Christ.