

Mimetic Unity or Christian Unity? - Michael Hardin, Patheos Blog

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John 17:20-26

I begin today with (an apocryphal) story I have heard with apologies to all of our friends in the Churches of Christ. Sometime at the beginning of the twentieth century there was a Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas. When people came to church, dressed in their Sunday best, the men would have to keep their hats with them in the pews, so someone suggested that they build a hat-rack and place it in the narthex where hats could be hung. This led to division in the church for some people did not want a hat-rack in the narthex. The church ultimately split and it is said that there is now the Hat-rack Church of Christ and the Non-Hat-rack Church of Christ.

This story, while probably not true (although in America anything is possible) illustrates the degree to which we have taken so-called religious freedom. In America, churches split over the silliest things. There are hundreds of thousands of different churches registered with the federal government as non-profit organizations. In the course of my life I have had the privilege of attending many different types of churches all over the country. One thing I have consistently noticed is that churches often take their identity by asserting what they are not, that is, they are not this or that. If they hold to a symbolic view of the sacraments, they do so in opposition to those who hold a sacramental view. If they sprinkle with water at baptism, they do in opposition to those who dunk. If they perceive church leadership in terms of pastors, they do so in opposition to those who have priests. If one group doesn't ordain homosexuals they do so in opposition those who do. If one group accepts inerrancy they do so in opposition to those who don't. And the list could go on ad infinitum (or ad nauseum as the case may be).

Christian unity is no longer a reality. While we may confess that 'we believe in one church' we do not live it in practice, it has become for us an ideal to be pursued but not realized. The twentieth century has seen all kinds of ecumenical conferences and conversations and the establishment of the World Council of Churches which some have not joined in opposition to liberalism. And so we continue to splinter further and further apart so that we create confusion as to who is the true church. We are holy, they are not. We are saved, they are not. We are righteous, they are worldly. We are God's children, they are doomed to hell. And so on and so forth.

We might ask what kind of message this sends to the world. Suppose you were not a Christian but desired to study the Christian faith, where would you begin? Which branch of Christianity would you say is the 'true people of God?' Catholic? Episcopal? Lutheran? Reformed? Baptist? Holiness? Pentecostal? Nazarene? Church of Christ? Check out the Yellow Pages for any major city and note all the varieties of Christianity represented. Which is the right place to begin? Which has any claim to be 'historic Christianity? Does longevity give this right? Does doctrinal purity give this right? Does morality give this right? Who is the true example of Jesus in the world today?

If all of this does not turn your stomach it should at least turn your head, for what we are up against is what occurs when churches have allowed mimetic rivalry to dominate instead of the Lordship of Jesus. If you are a pastor, you are more than well aware of how mimetic rivalry can afflict a church. Just look to your last board, council or consistory meeting. How many times have you had to defuse conflicts between parishioners over the most trivial of problems? How many times have you had to mediate between power hungry people who in genuine piety believe that what they assert is God's will? Maybe you yourself have struggled with this in relation to another pastor in your locality.

The relevance of Christianity was a theme for the twentieth century, but as we have passed into the twenty first century it must be asked whether or not we have passed this time and whether or not we have become totally irrelevant because our messages, whether conservative or liberal, Catholic or Protestant all represent varieties of the same religious paradigm: that of mimetic violence. Is the God that we proclaim any different than that found anywhere else on the planet? We have sought to demonstrate that Christian theology, particularly in its more popular forms is in reality no different than ancient myths. The Christian faith today might just as well be called the Christian myth, for in its structure it is sacrificial, in its message it lies. It lies about God and it lies about Jesus. In too many ways it makes God out to be a persecutor, a judge who will demand recompense. It has failed to articulate clearly the love which God has for the world, conditioning this love with law and obligating it to violence. Bonhoeffer was absolutely correct, Christianity, today, no longer tastes, feels, smells or seems like Jesus.

Christian unity within congregations and within denominations can easily be seen to be unity against. Like political or familial unity, church unity often depends on a scapegoat, someone extruded, discounted, marginalized and all too frequently demonized. We are not like this group or that one. It is the false unity found in random victimage. The unity created by victimage will always have as a marker an anti-alterity (an against-the-otherness). In contrast to this, the unity found in the gospel is a unity that also begins with a victim, but it is a unity that stands with the victim. In short, the church is the community who stands by Jesus, and consequently, all victims. Or as Bonhoeffer put it in his poem *Christians and Pagans*, 'Christians stand by God in his hour of suffering.'

John 17 indicates that Christian unity is the unity found by accepting God's verdict that we are all persecutors and that we stand under the love shown to us in the cross of Christ. This is indicated in two ways, first in the use of *'doxazo'* (to glorify) which refers to the glory revealed in Jesus' suffering and second in the phrase *'katabole kosmou'* (vs 24). This is a phrase worth exploring. It has two potential meanings which are not mutually exclusive. *'Katabole kosmou'* can mean from the 'creation/foundation of the world' (= the created reality or nature) or from the 'false creation of the world' (the foundation of human culture). The phrase occurs in Matthew 13.35 (as a LXX quote from Psalm 78.2), and again in Mt 25.34, Lk 11.50, Jn 17.24, Eph 1.4, Heb. 4.3 and 9.26, I Peter 1.20, Rev 13.8 and 17.8. It is foreign only to the genuine Pauline letters. The translation of *'katabole kosmou'* will depend upon whether or not we see the *'kosmou'* as referring to the created order or to the 'order' which we have created in victimage. In most cases, the *'katabole kosmou'* refers to the founding myth of Genesis 3-4, although occasionally it refers to the saga of Genesis 1-2. There are two foundings, the founding or creation of God and the founding of human culture. The Johannine use of *'kosmos'* seems to us to indicate that it is the origins of

the sacrificial mechanism that is in view, particularly when we take into account the author's use of '*doxazo*.'

As 'the lamb slain before the foundation of the world' Jesus is the archetype of all victims, this is particularly true of Matt 25.34 and Luke 11.50 in the Synoptic tradition as well as Eph 1.4, I Peter 1.20 and the references in Revelation. There is no unity apart from the victim; the only question is whether that unity is unity against or with the victim. In the Johannine prayer of John 17, the unity that obtains between the Jesus and the Father is the unity given to the believers, to those who have 'believed Jesus 'logos' (message). The purpose of this unity is so that the '*kosmos*' might believe that the Father has sent the Son (17.21). On the road to Damascus, Jesus does not ask the apostle Paul, 'Saul, Saul, why don't you believe in me?' but rather 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' It is our persecutorial or retaliatory tendency (our 'original sin') that is queried. Faith arises when we recognize our place as persecutors, as those who unjustly victimize and repent and take the side of the victim, thus breaking the false unity of the victimage mechanism. As long as those in Rome or Geneva or Plano, Texas insist on marginalizing others in the name of Jesus they will not bear witness to the Lamb slain from the '*katabole kosmou*' but to the sacrificial myth and thus will never experience the unity found in the Trinity.