



REFLECTIONS FIVE YEARS INTO ECUMENISM

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Since this fall marks the completion of my fifth year working as an ecumenist, I thought I would take the occasion to reflect on what I have learned in a field that could not possibly have been less interesting to me when I took the job.

I wasn't anti-ecumenical before; I just didn't care. What I'd seen from a distance of institutional attempts at ecumenism seemed to be theologically impoverished at best. The people I'd met who were most enthusiastic about ecumenism seemed to have flimsy doctrinal convictions. In all my many years of theological education, I'd been exposed to exactly two ecumenical documents—*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*—but I'd learned absolutely nothing of ecumenical history or theory, so I had no context in which to place these important but rather less than riveting works.¹

On the other hand, I had not failed to notice that the people most determined to patrol their confessional borders, Lutherans as well as others, were noticeably lacking in the charity that is supposed to characterize Jesus' disciples. In time I came to suspect that there was a certain amount of intellectual compromise, not to say vested interest, in keeping the old polemic alive. I count it an enormous blessing that I have been shown a more excellent way by my colleagues at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg.²

What follows are some of the lessons I have learned along the way. But a half-decade of discovery can't necessarily be condensed into a few pages. I'm not sure that what I say here will be so evident to anyone else; it might be better to think of these as points to consider rather than conclusions to accept or reject. Ecumenism depends on the evaluation and acceptance of its proposals by the whole people of God—so consider this your invitation to join in.

1. Ecumenism is incoherent because a divided church is incoherent. I was trained in systematic theology, the goal of which is to be internally consistent. That goal is unattainable in ecclesiology. Anyone who sits very long with this doctrine is finally going to be overcome by the dissonance between its claims (especially on behalf of a single denomination or confessional tradition) and lived reality, both now and in past history. Ecumenism is, fundamentally, admitting that the old one-sided ecclesiologies don't work and never did.

However, having given up on that dissonance, an ecumenist almost immediately stumbles upon the multiple dissonances within ecumenism itself. Ecumenism is incoherent because, on a very basic level, the church of Christ cannot and should not be divided—but it is. (Sectarianism is easier to defend logically but impossible to survive spiritually.) Ecumenism doesn't add up because the repair job on the broken church is, at this point anyway, a piecemeal business. It depends on varying human personalities and historical circumstances, not a logical flow-chart progression from broken to whole. It is also incoherent because all participants are still entangled in the tribal ecclesiologies that failed them in the first place. To put it simply, I am a Lutheran ecumenist. I maintain and insist on my tribal Christian identification, even while I am trying to figure out how to be in fellowship with other baptized Christians who believe that Jesus Christ is Lord. It doesn't really make sense. Welcome to ecumenism.

There are countless examples of the pervasive incoherence of ecumenism. One of the classics is transitivity—when ecumenical agreements logically should but actually do not extend between different churches. For instance, here in Strasbourg, I frequently attend the local anglophone Church of England parish.³ (Why should it even be Church of England when we're in France? But that's

another incoherence for another day.) As a member of the ELCA, I'm in fellowship with The Episcopal Church, which is part of the Anglican Communion, which includes the Church of England. Because the ELCA is a member of the Lutheran World Federation, which includes the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches, I'm in communion with them, which are in turn in communion with the Church of England through the Porvoo Agreement. But for all that, I am not directly in communion with the Church of England through my ELCA membership. The fact that I attend the church, commune, and even preach there on occasion means nothing, either. I'd have to be (re)confirmed an Anglican to qualify.

And that's just the beginning. The Orthodox consider themselves the only true and real Christian church, yet they call themselves Orthodox and not simply Christian, and they acknowledge others as Christians. They are allowed to pray (sometimes) with these other Christians but not to "worship" with them, though we can sit in on their services and they can sit in on ours. They have no official model for ecumenism other than proselytism (that is, the total return of everyone else to Orthodoxy) even though proselytism is the one thing they are most likely to object to in other Christians. The Catholic Church now admits that even Protestants count as "separated brethren" although the fullness of the church "subsists" in themselves, and that even our sacraments can contribute to salvation, though they are somehow, at the same time, invalid. At Vatican II, Catholics rejected the "home to Rome" model of unity, yet they still feel compelled to issue statements that suggest as much, as in the infamous *Dominus Iesus*. And let's not even get started on all the Protestant denominations adhering to the same confessional standards that nevertheless refuse to be in fellowship with each other!

2. Selective ecumenism is not ecumenism. People who get excited about ecumenism at all usually start by getting excited about another group of Christians. For many Lutherans of a liturgical bent, it's the Roman Catholic church. For C. S. Lewis enthusiasts, it's the Anglican tradition. For me, it was the Orthodox. This is a good start: a gut-level appreciation for the truth and beauty found outside our own Christian borders gives us the energy and drive to reassess long-held differences of opinion.

The problem is that love for one other church body rarely translates into love for *all* other church bodies. How many Lutherans do you know who are really jazzed about Baptists, Methodists, or Adventists?⁴ The particular kinship we feel with another church motivates us to straddle that particular gap, but we can hardly fail to notice that what strengthens unity on one side may well weaken it on another. Yet this is counted no great loss, because what matters is *this* particular church, not *that* one.

When such selective ecumenism succeeds, all it does is reinforce the division of the church. The recent merger of the Lutherans and Reformed of France (outside of Alsace-Lorraine), itself intended to heal the ancient breach, was touted as a way of increasing their profile over against Evangelical Protestants—hardly a victory in the cause of Christian unity! Plenty of Lutherans will object to a Lutheran-Reformed merger on other grounds, namely that it will compromise their reconciliation to Catholics. Protestants and Orthodox have often grown nearer to one another through joint rejection of Catholic claims. Catholics and Orthodox have done the same against non-episcopal churches. The issue here is not whether any particular merger or fellowship agreement is a good idea (some are and some are not): the problem is the use or refusal of them in order to consolidate the power of one strategic Christian alliance against another.

This has nothing to do with the

prayer for unity or the instruction to love that Jesus spoke on his last night with his disciples. Ecumenism seeks the unity of the whole church, not certain segments of it. Looking in one direction only is politics, not ecumenism.

3. An ecumenical document doesn't work like a confessional document. If you have ever tried to read an ecumenical document, you may have found yourself glazing over and wondering what on earth it was all about, much less how it could represent progress. Or, if you have been able to penetrate the fog, you may have taken offense at what you perceived to be compromises of some vital point. Here is a case where taking redaction history and genre into account are every bit as useful as they are in biblical studies.

Ecumenical documents are not the work of a single, focused, brilliant mind. They are almost without exception the product of a committee. Committees are the butt of many jokes in our bureaucratic era, with good reason. The problem is that ecumenism requires this approach because it attempts above all to be cooperative and representative. For a document to be the product of a single brilliant mind would be inherently at odds with the process of working toward reconciliation. The prose and focus inevitably suffer, but it's by reason of the process, not because of negligence or stupidity. Furthermore, it is usually a subcommittee that drafts the statement, which is then exposed to the critique of all the members of the main group. Everyone's concerns, ranging from the theological to the linguistic, have to be taken into account. Sometimes things have to be reworded because they can't be properly expressed in another language into which document will be translated, resulting in less than luminous English. So you essentially have scads of editors working over what was already a jointly drafted statement to satisfy a variety of interests and worries.

Even more importantly, all of the

tension, excitement, and struggles that characterize dialogue meetings (and let me tell you, they are rife with tension) generally vanish from their written end results. A hint of theological drama may linger, but it will be muted. Unless you were there, it's almost impossible to guess the backstory behind any given word or the battle fought over a half-sentence. On occasion, minutes are recorded from ecumenical dialogues that can subsequently shed light on why the document turned out the way it did, but you'd have to do the hard work of tracking the minutes down to find out, and in any event they never have the official status of the final document itself. Ecumenists maintain a kind of oral history to fill each other in, but diplomacy requires keeping it spoken privately, not published publicly, at least until one is old enough to get away with a memoir. It's another limitation inherent in something that is happening now and tries to open a way toward the future.

And that leads to the other major issue, regarding genre. People often expect an ecumenical document to read like a confessional document, but they are most decidedly not the same thing. Most confessional documents have fewer (even single) authors, arise in a situation of stress and danger, and are retrospectively recognized for their significance. Their purpose is to achieve perfect clarity about very specific issues in dispute. An ecumenical document, by contrast, is exploratory and experimental, while trying to maximize the common and uncontroversial content. Its background is division and distrust, so it has to proceed by tentatively proposing points of convergence that were not otherwise thought to exist. Quite the contrary to the danger that usually characterizes confessional documents, ecumenical statements are drafted in situations of peace and often unexpected goodwill between the dialogue members, who then have to express in the committee-drafted document the existential leap they have made toward one another—

and as you might expect, that is no easy trick. Hostility and suspicion are much more likely to reside between dialogue members and their home churches than among the dialogue members themselves.⁵ Finally, ecumenical documents deliberately seek the approval of their respective communities, hoping to be widely recognized as valid, instead of speaking against the community in a way that is later seen to be prophetic. Still, ecumenical documents almost never intend to be the final word. They recognize themselves as merely provisional.

4. Dialogue work is useless without reception.

Reception is a technical term in ecumenism that bears some similarities to *sensus fidelium*. The idea is that the whole people of God consider and eventually either internalize or reject aspects of church teaching and practice. It is a process that is recognized in hindsight and that can be influenced to a modest extent but not directed. The acceptance of the books of the New Testament, for instance, is a case of universal reception. Athanasius may have written the festal letter, but he did not choose the books himself; in a way, the books had proven themselves to the church and so they were recognized to be authoritative. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds enjoy almost the same level of reception. Melancthon did not set out to write a charter for evangelical churches in the Augsburg Confession, but Lutherans afterward received it as such. Luther may have liked very much for there to be widespread reception of his Small Catechism, but he didn't have the capacity to force it on anyone; its reception was a genuine response of the pastors and people. By contrast, Lutherans deliberately "de-received" the deuterocanonical books. Hymns are good examples of reception: some are widely received, some are never received, some enjoy only a temporary reception and some prove to be timeless. Once people grasp the concept of reception, they usually want to figure out how to control it,

but by definition it eludes control. We may hope that the Holy Spirit is frequently involved in the process.

The relevant point here is that ecumenical dialogues and documents have, in themselves, no power at all. Even the statements that the Catholic team agrees to under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity have no binding authority on Catholics.⁶ Ecumenical results are purely an offering that may be accepted or rejected or some combination of the two. What they principally suggest is that more people get involved and discover for themselves what the ecumenists have found out. It is easy to criticize the results of a conversation with another body of Christians when you have never actually met, talked to, or prayed with any of them. The personal quality that is stripped out of ecumenical documents has to be reinserted by everyone else in their own lives. Official statements can give some context for such encounters, and they can encourage persistence when one meets with unpleasant representatives of other churches—a sadly common reality. Those who are alarmed by ecumenism should be comforted to realize that it can never be successfully imposed. Everyone should realize that successful ecumenical reception may take on contours never imagined or desired by its official proponents.

5. What divides the church is the church.

This insight has several different facets. One of them can be summarized: "church-dividing is as church-dividing does." When the church divides, one party thinks that whatever it's saying or doing is within the bounds of acceptable Christianity, and the other thinks it's not. So on one level, church divisions are not about what they're about but about the fact that the two sides can't agree as to how evaluate the item in question. (Examples: the Donatists thought denying Christ under persecution was serious enough to stop qualifying as "the church"; the Catholics did not. The Roman-

ists thought rejecting papal authority and indulgences was serious enough to stop qualifying as “the church”; the Lutherans did not.) It is useless to say that something “ought not” divide the church. If it does, it’s church-dividing. Which then means that both sides are obligated to say that the true church resides with them and not with the other. It’s no wonder that reopening negotiations is such a fraught business, since it will strike at the very heart of both churches’ claim to be the true church.

But there is another way in which it is true that the church divides the church. By now, after a hundred years of multilateral and fifty years of bilateral dialogues, there is no denying the fact that, doctrinally speaking, we’re all within spittin’ distance of each other—at least if we are speaking of the Orthodox, Catholic, Reformation-era, Methodist, and most Evangelical and trinitarian Pentecostal churches, which is pretty much everybody except “extra revelation” Christian sects like Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. We all agree on the primacy of Holy Scripture. We all agree on the Trinity. We all agree on the divine and human natures of Christ in the incarnation. We all agree that salvation is God’s doing, not ours (even if we are rather skeptical of how others express that reality). There is a surprising amount of agreement on the sacraments. In a sense, the bilateral dialogues are done. They have proven what they set out to prove. All the major dialogues have declared overwhelming consensus on most doctrines. *Except* where ecclesiology is involved.

This should make every Christian deeply suspicious. The one area where we most disagree is the one area that ensures our separate and independent existence from one another. As long as we keep disagreeing about the church, we never actually have to knuckle down and obey Jesus’ prayer for our unity.

And it’s even worse than it appears at first glance, for disagreeing about ecclesiology is really code language for

disagreeing about the clergy. And the clergy are, overwhelmingly, the ones involved in ecumenical dialogue, so the most invested in maintaining their own status quo; and the clergy are the only ones that a church can really control. Except in the most insular of communities, and whether for good or for ill, the discipline of the laity is a thing of the past, insofar as it ever existed. The only group a church can control is its clergy, so it will be most resistant to any actual change in this domain.

And behind *that* hides the dirty little secret that every ecumenist knows perfectly well, namely that for all our ardent defenses of the doctrinal systems we find so illuminating and

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truthful, the reality in our churches is the staggering percentage of persons on our rolls (and not only the laity!) who don’t know and don’t care. Much of the time we are defending an image and perhaps an idol of what our church *should* look like. But if we admit to the gap between image and reality, we fear that the other church(es) will take advantage of that fact and push us somewhere we really don’t want to go. Which brings us to the next point.

6. Looming over, under, and around every ecumenical discussion is the threat of intra-Christian conversion. I have been astonished to discover that virtually no work has been done in the past century on this topic. The closest you get are discussions of either a) “rebaptism,” since that can only happen in the case of a Christian moving from one church to another, or b) “proselytism,” which is conversion

conducted on an unethical basis. The topic is so explosive that nobody wants to touch it, even now. It’s probably a good one for American Lutherans to take the lead on, since we enjoy the strange condition of a dozen or so of our notable theologians converting to Rome or Orthodoxy while our parishes are populated with thousands of wounded ex-Catholics.

It happens not infrequently that, when people find out I’m working toward the unity of the churches, they ask why I don’t just convert. The longer I’m in the business, the odder a question it strikes me. For one thing, personal conversion does not solve the problem of estranged communities and quite often exacerbates the estrangement. Church division means that converts often feel compelled to reject everything in the old church and accept uncritically everything in the new church. This creates resentment on both sides, including in the long-term members of the new church who have been dealing for years with battles that the convert doesn’t perceive. But would such an attitude be an option except in a bitterly divided church? Intra-Christian conversion often reflects a mentality of trying to get on the winning team. It’s striking how many intra-Christian conversions boil down to ecclesiological claims.⁷

For another thing, the question about conversion usually assumes that history can be undone or put in reverse—especially when Protestants are urged to become Catholic, or Catholics to become Orthodox. Reunion is taken to mean going backward in history to some time before division happened. This conveniently overlooks the fact that the conditions for division were present in that undivided church, so whatever unity it had was not as flawless as we would like to imagine. And it has a naïve protological pull, as if the intervening years are simply to be deleted from the record. Far more important is the task of mutually telling our history together, taking responsibility for our crimes against each other, confessing

and repenting and forgiving but not forgetting—in this life, forgetting our past evils is dangerous.⁸

If people resist ecumenism, even for many bad reasons, it's often because they rightly see that such models ultimately assume that one church will swallow up and digest the other. It will be a violent reunion, however bloodlessly managed. It will be a regressive union, even if in the name of progress. But that is not real unity, either. Nor is ecumenism supposed to be a “joyless exchange” in which, say, Lutherans give up married clergy if Catholics give up the papacy. Whatever unity lies ahead of us has to be built on a different foundation from what we had in the past. (Of course, if I knew what that was, I'd get the Nobel Peace Prize.)

7. Division kills faith, as does imposed unity.

We Americans often look down rather sneeringly on the state of European Christianity. I can't say I've seen much to cure me of that tendency. However, it's not what I've *seen* but what I've *learned* that holds it in check. Europe's faith is in tatters because Europe's Christians have shed so much of each other's blood. It started already in the Middle Ages as Christian nations went to war against one other in utter disregard of their mutual faith in the Prince of Peace; France and England's long hatred, to take one example among many, is legendary. The single most atheistic nation in Europe, namely the Czech Republic, already began falling away in the fifteenth century when its indigenous leader John Hus was condemned and burned at the Council of Constance, and it has never recovered. In the sixteenth century, as a result of the Reformation, electors, princes, and emperor summoned their hosts arrayed not in white but in battle gear, reaching an apex of violence during the Thirty Years' War the following century. We tend to be dismissive of the Enlightenment's overweening epistemology and disdain for the Christian faith, but they had pretty good reason for their

skepticism. World War I spawned the massive crisis of faith in the twentieth century; European Christians were staggered to discover what they were capable of doing to each other. And it took still another massive bloodletting in the 1940s, with six million Jews as civilian casualties, before it really stopped.⁹

Division is bad for Christian faith. But so is enforced unity. The *cuius regio eius religio* policy, forcing religious homogeneity within the territories of Europe, was not good for any church. It forced the gaze inward and enabled a church culture based on ritual repetition and conformity rather than living encounter with Christ. (That's why Pietism arose, but when not matched with a missionary outlook it also festered inward.) All that mattered was paying your church tax; then you got your due services at the big milestones of life and a burial at death. You were an inevitable Christian. By now it is a truism that the state and folk churches of Europe are empty yet put all their energies into preserving their “heritage” rather than evangelizing their all too obviously godless charges, while immigrant and free churches flourish in part because they are not caught up in the standardized unity of their official counterparts. That is also why independent, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches have been wildly more successful in the Global South and Far East than the historic ones have been. The latter have tried to replicate their standardized, enforced unity abroad; it has not been convincing. The former have been much better about allowing local control and development in response to the gospel.

In 2010, at the hundredth anniversary of the famous Edinburgh Missionary Conference, ecumenism momentarily recalled that its origins were in the mission movement. It was the bitter experience of Christian division exported abroad and exercised as competition for converts that finally made Protestants and then Orthodox come together to reassess their long-standing hatreds; Faith and

Order, Life and Work, and the World Council of Churches all derive from that 1910 gathering. (Catholics joined in after Vatican II.) But after a brief commemoration, mission has slipped from the radar again. Yet mission and unity are explicitly linked in Jesus' prayer “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). One of the proofs that we don't care that much about making unity happen is how little the mission urgency thereof impacts us. Nor are we willing to take serious lessons from recent objects of mission who are now becoming the agents of mission themselves. Ecumenism will keep limping along as long as it thinks that all the answers are to be found in sorting out the past of the historic churches based on theological answers already given.

8. Ecumenism is the victim of its own success, and even more the victim of growing interest in interreligious dialogue.

I mentioned dissonance a bit earlier. It's a great motivator. Ecumenism got its first energetic start as the dissonance of division finally became intolerable to Christians. Enormous efforts were made to dismantle false and slanderous perceptions of the Christian other.

The problem is, it worked. There is no dissonance any more, we can all be friends with other Christians, we are less alarmed by “intermarriage,” and so the pressure is off. We can keep on having annual meetings and saying nice things when significant leaders retire or die, but the internal mechanisms of our respective churches remain utterly untouched. We were helped along for awhile by communism, since that external enemy forged bonds on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Now we can be nice enemies to each other—not dangerous enough to shed blood, but not close enough to threaten our existing communities or move in on our market share. We

have succeeded in landing ourselves in a stagnant pool.

If avoiding bloodshed was a major motivator for ecumenism, then the pressure has shifted from intra-Christian relations to interreligious relations. Of course, it's a different kind of thing entirely. The unity of the church is premised on the idea that we are one church anyway because we all belong to Christ in faith and baptism, so our visible divisions deny our invisible unity. No such unity is envisioned in interreligious dialogue. That tends more toward political unity, or at least political détente, so we won't blow up our planet. I can't say that I object to that project or doubt its urgency. But it does tend to suggest that ecumenism has been welcomed more as a way of saving our own skins than as a way of fulfilling Jesus' prayer. In general, He does not look favorably upon that kind of prioritization.

Incidentally, I often hear people wonder whether church unity would really be such a good thing for the world, especially if it rivals interreligious cooperation. My first instinct is to say of course it would be a good thing for the world. But honestly, I'm not so sure. Sometimes I wonder if the Lord let the church divide for the safety of everybody else.

9. We live at each other's expense. This is the most important thing I've come to see. Identity works oppositionally for most groups. You know who you are first and foremost by knowing who you aren't. Start paying attention to how often Christians of one denomination define themselves in reference to another, *against* another. How often we use another denominational name to mock what we dislike. (Until recently I used the term "Anabaptist" to describe Christians who ignore the Bible. Meeting some real-life Mennonite heirs of Anabaptism has cured me of that forever.) How often and eagerly we distance ourselves from some other Christian position that is odious to us. How we position ourselves to be more

like *these* guys and less like *those* guys. How we exult at another church's failures and rationalize our own. It is absolutely endemic and runs through every Christian family. In fact, you could say that the one thing we all have in common is our determination not be like each other.

I know the standard response to this: it's an unfortunate habit, but it's rooted in real disagreements. Well, sometimes it is. There are real issues at stake. But the fact is, most of the time arguments about pure doctrine are really arguments about pure community in disguise. It's a decision we have made to say that doctrinal disagreement must necessarily result in the end or division of the community. This logic is so deeply rooted in us it's hard even to notice it, much less question it.

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It seems self-evident: *of course* we can't carry on together if we disagree. This puts truth over love, distorting Paul's dynamic pairing in Ephesians 4:15. It's just as false as putting love over truth, which is the other face of division, refusing to admit when an issue is church-dividing and in the name of unity mocking the concern for truth.

Ecumenism has made significant progress by following the intuition that we aren't as far apart as we previously thought. Its hope has been: because we agree after all, therefore we can be together. This is an important step, but I don't think it's enough, because consensus in some areas has led to an inflated concentration on the remaining areas of disagreement, which possibly will never be resolved.¹⁰ I think we actually have to say: because I think you are wrong, or (more radically) because you really are wrong,

and yet you are a baptized believer in Jesus Christ, I have to stick it out with you. I have to stay in fellowship with you *so that* the quarrel will continue. I dare not abandon you to your error! And if we are going to stick it out with such severe disagreements about truth, then we will actually have to bear the fruit of the Spirit—most notably love, peace, patience, gentleness, and self-control—instead of deciding that your bad behavior gives me license to respond in kind. This goes against every assumption that has been formed in us, the foundation upon which all of our divisions are built.

Division makes us stupid and cruel. It does not actually serve the cause of truth. It allows for the insularity and self-referentialism that shrinks our horizons down to almost nothing. "Unity at all costs" is not a good principle, but it's time we realized that disunity costs the truth dearly, too. The paradox of ecumenism is that it actually makes us better at our own confessional traditions. We think more clearly and more charitably when our words are held accountable to others who can actually point out where we have misread them or missed their points. We get a better sense of the range within our own tradition when we have to represent the whole thing instead of jockeying for the advancement of our own particular slice thereof. And we get a much better sense of our own weak spots, as well as resources for addressing them that don't exist within our tradition, when we are forced to pay serious attention to others. I'm not sure I could say that I believe in the goal of the visible unity of the church if that means forging a single organizational unit. But I can definitely say that I now no longer believe in the legitimacy of the divided church.¹¹

10. What does this mean for us? It has become increasingly clear, especially in the last decade, that *intra*-denominational ecumenism is needed as badly as the *inter*-denominational kind. This pertains as much to Prot-

estants who cannot manage to unite under their commonly held confessions as it does to the bitter infighting among Catholics and the still nationalistic rivalries of the Orthodox. The need to deal with in-house crises tends to make church bodies draw back from ecumenism, whether because of limited finances or the notion that internal unity is a necessity before external unity is pursued (a very questionable assumption).

The collateral damage of divided American Lutheranism is huge, horrible, and rightly driving away people who are looking for the gospel, not the nastiness of church politics. (Church politics is the ultimate insider game.) It's hard to imagine how either the ELCA or the LCMS would cope without each other as a whipping boy and straw man. And their internal politics are just as ugly. I know of an LCMS veteran who remarks that "every thirty years Missouri feels compelled to eat its young"; its ongoing efforts at total doctrinal control, most recently after the Newtown shooting, have become the stuff of legend. Missouri's culture-war posturing is causing a brain drain of talented women from the Synod. Farther abroad, three different people from small Lutheran churches in three different countries have informed me that Missouri has offered them financial support if they promise never to ordain women.¹² The ELCA is just as destructive, having spawned not just one but two break-off denominations, and its own bad decisions have reached beyond national boundaries as well. Its actions, together with the Church of Sweden's, have prompted the first breach within the LWF since it declared itself "a communion of churches" with full altar and pulpit fellowship—a communion that emerged from the sorrowful, prayerful, Federation-wide decision to suspend the membership of white South African churches because of apartheid at the communion table, and their subsequent readmission when that evil system ended.

In reaction to the Mekane Yesus church's termination of fellowship, the ELCA has cancelled scholarships for Ethiopian Lutheran doctoral students in the U.S., who are left high and dry, and Ethiopian Lutheran immigrant congregations in the U.S. are splitting not over the question of homosexuality itself (they are all agreed on that) but whether they should stay in fellowship with the ELCA when their home church has ended it—once again, the dispute is about what qualifies as church-dividing. And if I have expressed my doubts about the ultimate good to come of LCMC and the NALC, it is because I fear they have learned only too well the lessons of division and American exceptionalism from their parent body—as seen in the NALC's apparent desire to join the LWF's communion on a selective basis, exploiting the breach between the ELCA and Ethiopia. The longer I work with global Lutheranism, the more I see how, in classic imperialistic American fashion, we are exporting our filth all over the planet and expecting others to receive it as a gift. Our American Lutheran unity today lies chiefly in our desperate need to stand in opposition to one another.

There are hundreds of reasons to stay apart. There is only one reason to come together: because Jesus Christ our Lord prayed for it. Are we really willing to tell Him that wasn't good enough for us? ✠

Notes

1. Though I did hear William Lazareth preach on the day it was signed—for an entire half-hour, the longest sermon I had ever heard in my life—and it actually *was* riveting.

2. The Institute was founded as a legally and financially independent organization by an action of the 1963 Helsinki assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. It landed in Strasbourg as a city symbolic of Franco-German reconciliation as well as for its own remarkable ecumenical history. Check out the new website: <strasbourginstitute.org>. Only I should be held responsible for the opinions in this article, not my colleagues!

3. This after many desperate attempts to penetrate the local French Lutheran church. It

was not a success, though we still try, just not every Sunday anymore.

4. Yet the Lutheran churches of the world, both locally and nationally, have conducted dialogues with all three of these groups—and the Lutheran-Baptist bilateral statement is one of the best ever drafted! Read it at <www.strasbourginstitute.org/en/baptist-lutheran-dialogue/> (accessed July 15, 2013).

5. The German Lutheran drafters of the *Joint Declaration* took the biggest beating from fellow German Lutherans. It even made front page news in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. Greek Orthodox ecumenists have been severely criticized by their fellow clergy for showing up at ecumenical meetings at all.

6. The Joint Declaration is the one exception, but the pushback within Catholicism has been strong. Its reception is still contested—as it is, of course, among Lutherans. No one can say at this point what the outcome will be. Sometimes these documents need to sit neglected for years; that was the case with the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973, which was ignored for two decades before it began to be effective.

7. There are plenty of cases of intra-Christian conversion that are not about rejection or competition but are more like coming home at last. I wish to honor these conversions. I have seen for myself that they can, in fact, be ecumenically fruitful.

8. For this reason I can't stress enough the importance of the Lutheran-Mennonite reconciliation as discussed in *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*, Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission (Geneva and Strasbourg: Lutheran World Federation and Mennonite World Conference, 2010) and enacted at the 2010 LWF assembly in Stuttgart.

9. Ephraim Radner deals with the legacy of Christian violence in his challenging *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012).

10. And what if the ongoing disagreements are premised on commonly held, deeply rooted flaws that none of us perceives clearly? Such is the suggestion in Robert W. Jenson's *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992).

11. If this article has whetted your appetite for ecumenism rather than killing it, you can read more in my article, "Six Ways Ecumenical Progress Is Possible," *Concordia Journal* 39/3 (2013).

12. Which was, in every case, refused. I cannot cite my sources because of confidentiality; readers are welcome to believe or doubt what I say as they see fit.