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Apostolic ministry and the Church's unity

INTRODUCTION

The unity of the church has become a common topic over the last several decades in most Christian circles. We thank God for that fact. Still, it is one of the more important subjects to be dealt with adequately, especially in the Protestant sector of the church.

Often, when unity is mentioned, the application is made exclusively to the congregation or denomination of the person addressing the issue. Although that is a valid starting point, it is incorrect to limit the issue to such a small frame of reference. Others enlarge the circle a bit as they seek unity with others who are similar to themselves. For instance, the unity of all charismatics, or of all Pentecostals or of evangelicals in general.

Most Christians are in favor of fraternal unity. They prefer that the denominations continue intact, each maintaining its own identity, but they would like for all to deal with each other with love, respect and proper ethical conduct, as well as sharing in activities from time to time. Although this would mean significant progress for many—for which we thank God!— and is in fact occurring in many places, still we should see such a step as an intermediate goal.

There are also those who say: “We are one in Christ; our unity is spiritual in nature.” This is partially true. But it is also true that in practice we Christians are divided. The situation is similar to that of a marriage where, even though in the eyes of God the man and his wife are one flesh, they are in fact separated.

What is the responsibility today of apostolic and prophetic ministry in this matter? And what can and should these ministries do to move forward toward the unity of the Lord's church in fulness, just as Jesus requested of his Father in John, chapter 17?

I. THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. ⁹And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

Ephesians 1:7–10, NIV

The key thought in this text which reveals the “mystery of his will” is “*to bring all things ... together under one head.*” This verb in Greek is *anakefalaiosastai*. The prefix *ana* means *anew* or *again*, and the root is *kefalai*, which means *head*. It means “to reunite under one head.” The significance of the text is that God revealed to us the knowledge of the mystery of his will, which is to “unite all again under one head,” which is Christ.

This expression was used in ancient times after an army had been defeated, broken and scattered and then acquired a new general under whose command the entire army was reunited, regrouped and reorganized. The affirmation presupposes that originally it was all harmoniously united and then that unity had been broken, so that they were all divided. However, God, in his foreknowledge determined in himself to reunite all again under Christ as head.

The world (*cosmos*) was created by God. *Cosmos* means harmonious order. God created all things in unity, order and perfect harmony. The root of the word “universe” is ONE. The universe was one under the command of Christ as head.

What was God’s original plan? The unity of everything and everyone: a world united, beautiful and harmonious; man in fellowship with God, united in love to his creator. The husband united with his wife, with his children and with his neighbor. A united society, mutually supportive, with strong bonds, without selfishness or rivalry. Humanity living in peace and love, where each one, filled with the love of God, loves his neighbor as himself. And man in harmony and unity with all creation.

Unfortunately, man rebelled against God. He accepted the proposal presented him by God’s enemy and sinned. Thus sin entered into the world and through sin, death. Death means separation, division. Man became God’s enemy as well as the enemy of his neighbor. Jealousy arose, envy, conflicts, homicides, fratricides, wars, injustice, divorce, greed, unjust distribution of riches, social conflicts, racial discrimination, etc. Man’s history has been stained by blood, full of hate, violence, crime and death, far from the model for society that God had projected. Nature itself was affected by man’s sin and the fall of God’s viceroy over his creation.

The model for the kind of society projected by God can be summed up in one word: the CHURCH.

II. WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Although the affirmation seems obvious, I believe it is pertinent to clarify at the outset that the church is not a physical building where we meet to worship God.¹ Nor is it a human institution of a legal or juridical nature.²

The church is that part of human society which is now in Christ. We are the children of Adam who have acknowledged Christ as our Lord and, in virtue of the redeeming sacrifice of the Son of God, we have been reconciled with God and with our neighbor.

In a world that is divided, at enmity, where individualism reigns supreme, with pride, injustice, competition and war, the church is that portion of humanity which is united in Christ with God and with the brothers and sisters in God’s family. The church, in its essential nature, is synonymous with forgiveness, peace, reconciliation, love and service. The church is community,

family, unity; it involves a holy kiss, a brotherly hug, broken and shared bread, fellowship of material goods, sincere affection; it is the end of loneliness and individualism, the end of divisions and wars. The church is God's *shalom* shared among men which show to the world the greatest of all miracles: THE CHURCH. The church is God's visible proposal to resolve all the problems of humanity: the salt and the light, the model which God presents to all the nations.

¹⁰*His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*

Ephesians 3:10–11, NIV

III. THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

The holy Trinity is itself the model of this unity. Jesus prayed specifically for the church:

¹¹*I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name--the name you gave me--so that they may be one as we are one ...*

²¹*that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

John 17:11, 21, NIV

Jesus asked of the Father the visible unity of all his disciples, not in heaven but here on the earth, according to the sublime model of the holy Trinity. He prayed for unity and holiness.

The church is the fulfillment of God's dream for the earth, his eternal project for humanity. That dream was fulfilled potentially on the cross:

¹⁴*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility*

Ephesians 2:14–16, NIV

In Jerusalem

God's dream became visible in the earth on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended and filled the hundred and twenty disciples, and then three thousand, with the power of the resurrection of the Son of God. Luke described the scene with much grace:

⁴⁴*All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere*

hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2:44–47, NIV

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

Acts 4:32, NIV

This social project of God for humanity can be realized only in those that are in Christ, those who have fled from the life style and the corruption of the world and have been made participants of the divine nature. In this manner, at last, the first community emerges in the world but lives according to the will of God. Selfishness has been overcome by the love of God that now lives in the hearts of the disciples through the Holy Spirit.

In Jerusalem the number of the disciples grew rapidly, yet *“all the believers were one in heart and mind.”* And the church continued in unity. The apostles stood together in a united ministry. There were no selfish conflicts, such as had characterized them before Pentecost, for they had learned to walk in the Spirit.

The church was a dynamic and versatile community; they met in the temple and in the homes, but they always maintained their identity and their unity. The Bible text never refers to them as *“the churches”* (in plural) in Jerusalem. The church, in singular number, always refers to the totality of the believers in a city.

“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47, NIV).

“On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1, NIV).

“But Saul began to destroy the church” (Acts 8:3, NIV).

In times of persecution, the entire church was unable to meet in a single place. However, this did not change the reality of their unity; they continued in unity as the church, functioning as a single body, with a single pastorate, even though they were only able to meet in their homes.

In Antioch

The gospel spread to other regions and cities, meaning that the church spread out as well. It is in Antioch that there arises for the first time a large church with a *“mixture”* of Gentiles and Jews converted to Christ. And even though the first Christian council had not yet met in Jerusalem, nor had the epistle been written to the Ephesians, God’s life in every disciple, whether Gentile or Jew, was so strong, the embrace and the love between brothers and sisters of different races and backgrounds so authentic that, without having studied theology or ecclesiology, they were experiencing the glorious reality of simply BEING THE CHURCH in its purest expression. Men and women, Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, slaves and free, now in Christ, were one. They constituted *“the church at Antioch”* (Acts 13:1). A plural and multi-cultural ministry shepherded the church. There was a diversity of gifts: prophets and teachers, but not a diversity of churches. It didn’t occur to anyone to even suggest the

formation of two different churches in the city: a Gentile Christian Church and a Jewish Christian Church, or the GCC and JCC denominations. The ancestral division between Jews and Gentiles had disappeared. The Gentiles, formerly resentful against the Jews for despising them, now loved them. They were brothers. When they heard that there would be great hunger in the earth, they immediately sent help to the brethren that lived in Judea (see Acts 11:27–30).

The principal concern of the first century apostles was the unity and sanctity of the church. The resolution that came out of the Council in Jerusalem was precisely to avoid the division of the church on the issue of circumcision. For the apostles the church's unity was a non-negotiable issue.

IV. DIVISION IN CORINTH

When Paul learns that in the city of Corinth there are conflicts among the Christians and that four bands existed in the church, he wrote them an urgent letter. It is directed explicitly *“to the church of God in Corinth”* (1 Corinthians 1:2). Observe the term “church” in the singular. Paul does not admit under any circumstance the possibility of the division of the church within the city. Functionally, there must be a church in Corinth and another in Thessalonica, for they are two different cities, but not two or more churches in the same city.

Paul's first argument is overwhelming and clear: *“Is Christ divided?”* (1 Corinthians 1:13). Paul was an apostle who understood the revelation of the mystery of Christ and of the church. He knew that the church of Christ constituted two sides of the same coin. He knew from his own experience that to persecute the church was to persecute Christ. If Christ is one and cannot be divided, the same is true of the church.

“³⁰For we are members of his body. ³¹For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. ³²This is a profound mystery— but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

Ephesians 5:30–32, NIV

The division of the church is a grotesque caricature of the new creation, for it is an attack against the very essence and nature of the church. It is incoherent.

If division, jealousy, contention, ambition, envy and competition, so prevalent in the world, subsist in the church, then the greatest contradiction has been reached and the church has lost its essential nature. It has become carnal and its conduct is the same as the world (see 1 Corinthians 3:3–4).

With apostolic authority Paul corrects this division that is rearing its head in Corinth. In no way will he allow one church under Paul, another under Peter, another under Apollo and another under Christ. The church does not belong to Paul, nor to Peter, even though they have been God's instruments. The church belongs to God and to no other. Paul and Apollo are

servants, not lords. The foundation of the church is not an apostle or other leader; it is Jesus Christ. No one can lay another foundation (1 Corinthians 3:5–11).

Lewis B. Smedes, in his book *All Things Made New* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970) has written:

“There is only one Lord Jesus Christ. Does he have only one body to do his work in the earth? Or have we really created many bodies of Jesus Christ? When Paul questioned—horrified and unable to believe it— ‘Is Christ divided?’, he was reacting to a consummated fact. On the other hand, that was his way of arguing to the effect that, given the church’s identity, its division was unthinkable, contradictory, inconceivable ...

“It is impossible to conceive of a divided body; it is contradictory, unthinkable. And yet it is true. Paul does not say: This cannot happen here. He says: This horrible situation is anti-natural ...

“If in a community—whether in Corinth or anywhere else— there are various bodies, seated at various tables or even in conflict with each other, we have arrived in our sin to the horrible impossibility: Christ is divided. And here is where the most urgent and difficult healing process should be initiated in prayer ...

“The current situation of the body of Christ should be deplored and declared intolerable. It is less tolerable at the local level, where competing communities, exclusive, embittered and capriciously separated, all pretend to be the body of Christ.”

pp. 212–214, in the Spanish edition

V. APOSTLES AND PROPHETS: CHANNELS OF REVELATION

¹For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— ²Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

Ephesians 3:1–5, NIV

The apostle Paul declares that the mystery hidden for centuries in God was revealed to the apostles and prophets of his generation by the Holy Spirit, and that through them it was made known to the saints (Colossians 1:26). That mystery (or secret) he calls “*the mystery of Christ*” (Ephesians 3:4), “*the mystery of his will*” (1:9), and “*the mystery of Christ and his church*” (5:32).

The letter to the Ephesians is without a doubt the one that reveals the highest level of revelation concerning the church. In it Paul communicates the vision of the church that God conceived in his mind and heart before the creation of the world. It is the church which God purposed in himself, according to his good pleasure.

What was the circumstance that motivated Paul to write this letter from his prison in Rome? During his third apostolic trip Paul dedicated three years of ministry to the city of Ephesus. The city had been moved by a great awakening (Acts 19). All indications are that a large number of

Jews had believed in the Messiah and an even larger number of Gentiles. The Christian community in that city, just as in many other cities, was made up of Jews and Gentiles converted to Jesus Christ. The frequent use of “we” and “you (plural)” shows that Paul addresses explicitly those two defined groups. He does not deny nor gloss over that reality which, in fact, did generate tensions and difficulties among the brethren, and he saw a threat of division because of the impositions of the judaizers on the one hand, and on the other, the converted Gentiles who perceived themselves as second-class members. The old roots of racial rivalry between Jews and Gentiles could sprout again.

In the first three chapters of the epistle and in half of the fourth, Paul, with apostolic authority conferred by the revelation he received, clearly rejects any thought of division, such as the formation of two churches in the city of Ephesus, one Jewish and the other Gentile. Everyone that understands the biblical revelation concerning the church knows that such is diametrically opposed to the work of the cross. It would be the equivalent of building again the dividing wall that Christ destroyed on the cross. With great clarity and heavenly authority Paul proclaims and affirms the unity of the church, not only for the Ephesians but for all generations as well.

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Ephesians 2:14–22, NIV

⁴In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 3:4–6, NIV

In accordance with the revelation given to the apostles and prophets, the church is a single people, a single new man, a single body, a single family, a single nation, a single building,

properly coordinated and growing to become a single temple, the dwelling place of God. There are no categories or divisions within the church. Every child of God, without regard for the race or nation from which he comes, belongs to the same family of God and is a member of the same body. This is the church which the Father planned from all eternity. It is the church that Christ brought into being through his death and resurrection. And it is the one church that the apostles labored with God to build.

In the New Testament, the dominant figure referring to the church is the body: many members, but one body. There is a diversity of gifts and ministries, but never a diversity of churches.

As we have already stated, for the apostles this unity must have a practical and visible expression in the church in each city. Paul did not allow the divisions to prevail in Corinth. Nor in Ephesus nor in any other city. The Christians met largely in private homes. In a single city they might meet in a variety of homes or in a large number of homes, in accordance with their numerical growth, but all of them as part of the single church of Christ in that city. Toward the end of the first century, after some forty years of having established the church in Asia, Jesus Christ addresses the church in Ephesus, as well as in each of the other seven cities of the region (Revelation, chapters 2 and 3).

The foundation established by the apostles upon the church's unity was so clear and so firm that, in spite of the struggles, heresies and great difficulties that were evident in the succeeding centuries, the church always sought to maintain her unity. Historically, the church has always seen itself as ONE, HOLY, UNIVERSAL and APOSTOLIC.

VI. HISTORICAL DIVISIONS

The first official division of the church did not occur until the year 1054, in what the Western church calls "the Eastern schism." But that division did not have a great effect on the people. Rather, it was a division at the international level of authority. In each city and nation the church continued to maintain its unity.

The present division of the church began in the sixteenth century. And the current picture of thousands of denominations in all the world is much more recent. Luther believed in the unity of the church. He desired to be a reformer within the church of the West, but was left no option, for he was excommunicated. We know the history well from that time forward. More and more divisions occurred. Some were caused by doctrinal differences, others for more noble reasons. Often the traditional church did not understand the need to be more pliable in the face of legitimate changes that came with awakenings. On other occasions, because the agents of renewal went too far beyond wholesome orthodoxy.

The practical reality is that today the church, especially in the Protestant sector, is divided. The current division of the church has no biblical or theological foundation. It can only be explained historically as we observe with pain what happened, knowing that it never should have occurred.

VII. TWENTIETH CENTURY MOVEMENTS

The Pentecostal movement

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Pentecostal movement was born. God sovereignly poured out his Spirit in spontaneous prayer meetings, with no preestablished liturgy. Outpourings of the Spirit, charismatic manifestations, power, healings, conversions, prophecies and miracles begin to be more and more frequent. The possibility of knowing God experimentally imparts to the believer the necessary fervor (“fire”) for the expansion of this movement locally and round the world. In a relatively short time it becomes the fastest growing religious movement in the world. Yet with this expansion the divisions grow and multiply on a large scale.

Toward the middle of the twentieth century, another great division is observed: between the Pentecostals and the non-Pentecostals. (Thank God, this is now practically overcome, or at least in the process of being overcome.) The Pentecostal movement in general never dealt with the problem of the division of the church; it inherited the existing historical divisions and, through a lack of theological reflection on the matter, multiplied them through its own dynamic and spontaneity.

More recent movements

Over the last forty years, the sovereign move of the Spirit of God has reached all parts of the world, leaping across denominational barriers, even the seemingly insurmountable ones, such as the division between Catholics and Protestants. Those of us who are present here can give testimony to the fact that we too have been reached by this move of God. Some have defined it as a “charismatic movement,” “neo-pentecostalism,” “renewal movement,” “church restoration,” etc. We are not concerned to find the most appropriate name, but rather to faithfully interpret God’s intention and orientation in the movement at this transcendent juncture in history, so that we might collaborate with him.

In the decades of 1960 and 1970, a key word in many of these charismatic or neo-pentecostal circles was “restoration.” The vision and the faith that had been received was to the effect that in the present move of the Holy Spirit, God would restore in the church the spirituality, the principles and the truths that had been lost in the course of its history. We are aware that the recovery of biblical truths began in the Sixteenth Century Reformation, yet we are also aware that it should continue until the recovery is complete. Some of the more important truths and practices that were revealed to God’s servants in many parts of the world in our times are: worship, the gospel of the kingdom, the unity of the church, discipleship, God’s eternal purpose, the continuing validity of all the gifts and ministries (including the apostolic gift), the church’s integral mission in the world, etc.

Many have sensed a growing conviction that God’s purpose is to visit his church in all the

world and restore it completely to the foundation established by the apostles and prophets of the first century. In greater or lesser measure, many today are experiencing a spiritual renewal and are gradually returning to biblical principles. This is a fact of very positive significance and a great challenge to our faith. We are also aware that every change and transition creates tensions and presents new dangers.

VIII. A GREAT HISTORIC MOMENT (A *KAIRÓS* OF GOD)

A significant point of inflection has been produced in our generation. The many divisions that originated from the time of the Reformation as divergent lines have begun to break and be transformed into convergent lines. Today there is a “rapprochement” worthy of note between the different sectors of the church. The aggressive and bellicose attitudes of the past are being laid aside. There is now dialogue, aperture, reflection, fellowship, change, reconciliation. There are risks as well, and some of them are serious, such as: unity without holiness, without truth, without the purity of the faith. This is a humanistic brand of ecumenism that has no true regard for what is believed or how a person lives. Clearly, that is not the unity that God desires.

The progress toward unity is very significant, but still minute. It is significant if it is seen to be the beginning of a continuing process; otherwise, it is insignificant.

Our great question in regards to the subject proposed here is the following: In the face of the current situation of the church, with its complex and undeniable divisions, what should we do? What does the Lord want us to do?

More specifically, as set out in the introduction, what is the responsibility today of apostolic and prophetic ministry in this regard?

I perceive, in an overall view, three options or three possible paths to be followed.

1) MAINTAIN THE PRESENT “STATUS QUO” OF DIVISION

We are experts at arguing our points. We can justify the present division of the church with rational arguments, illustrations and even Bible verses and examples. For instance, that unity will be experienced in heaven, that unity is a spiritual and invisible reality, that the denominations are like the twelve tribes of Israel, or that the church is like a great tree with many branches, etc.

Many have developed a “theology of resignation.” I call it the theology of the fox, because when the fox discovered it couldn’t reach the grapes, it decided, “I’ll leave them since they are still green.” So it is with many who understand that unity is the will of God, but do not have the faith to believe it can be reached here on the earth.

2) START A REVOLUTION

We can take the biblical truths and attack the denominational structure, with a determination to establish unity ourselves. This path has already been proven; the only result has been to produce more divisions.

3) PROCEED IN A HOMOGENEOUS EVOLUTION

In biblical terms this is GROWTH. The growth of a child is a homogeneous evolution. The changes are not traumatic, but natural, normal and gradual. In the same way the unity of the church is to be a gradual process brought about by God himself in his people. In Ephesians 4:13–16, Paul refers to this process:

“...¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

(NIV)

Paul mentions in Ephesians chapter 4 three progressive levels of unity:

- **Unity of the Spirit:** *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit”* (vv. 2–3). To live at this first level of unity we need humility, meekness, patience and love, *“through the bond of peace.”*
- **Unity of the faith:** *“Until we all reach unity in the faith”* (v.13). We see here two facts: first, that it is a process, and second, that at some point we will all believe the same. We are in that process.
- **Unity of the body:** *“The whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament”* (v.16). God is at work uniting his church. The day will come when all God’s children will be joined in a single body, held together under the unique head, which is Christ.

Our responsibility is to believe that God wants to do this and that he is able to do it. But faith is more than that; it is *“being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”* (Hebrews 11:1). Faith is the declaration: God will do it! And with that faith, pray that it be done; with that faith, meet with your brother, love him, be reconciled with him, learn from him and, in fellowship with all the saints, believe together until we all *“attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”*

IX. THE RESPONSIBILITY OF APOSTOLIC MINISTRY TODAY

In the New Testament we find three kinds of apostles:

The twelve apostles: These are unique since they personally witnessed the life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, they received the direct teaching of Jesus. Once Judas was gone, the one who replaced him had to meet those conditions (Acts 1:15–26).

Other apostles from the first century: The Lord established other apostles, such as Paul and Barnabas who, with the original twelve, received the revelation of the mystery of Christ and the church (Ephesians 3:1–7). They had the responsibility of a pioneer, unique and unrepeatable, of laying the doctrinal and *kerygmatic* foundation of the church for all time (Ephesians 2:20). That foundation is complete and unchangeable, not admitting further additions or modifications (see Galatians 1:8–9).

A continuing apostolic ministry: According to Ephesians 4:11–16, Christ will continue to raise up some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors/teachers until the edification of the body of Christ is completed. The function of these apostles is to evangelize (with signs and wonders), establish churches, establish elders, supervise the churches, be the principal ministerial authority in the churches that are under their responsibility and to receive and communicate the revelation concerning the mystery of Christ and the church. The reference to “receiving revelation” does not involve revelation at odds with that received by the apostles and prophets of the first century. (If this occurs, those who teach such should be rejected and declared anathema.) The reference is rather to the illumination of the Holy Spirit who provides a clear and faithful comprehension of the ancient revealed truths that were given originally to the apostles and prophets of the first century, which are registered in the holy Scriptures. These truths have often been ignored and covered over throughout the centuries under the shadow of traditions and errors. We thank God for those he is raising up in the church today around the world, giving them revelation concerning the ancient truth of his word.

The distinctive character of apostolic ministry and the responsibility that this implies

Paul, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, was one of those most used by God to spread the gospel and establish churches in many cities and nations of the Roman empire. He possessed exceptional gifts and ministerial virtues; even so, the idea never occurred to him to establish a denomination and call it something like “International Association of Churches of the Apostle Paul.” He could have had the largest denomination of his time. Why did he not do it? The answer is simple.

- God had shown him the mystery of his will, which was to bring together all things under one head: Christ, not Paul.
- He knew that the foundation of the church is Christ and not an apostle. Paul built on that foundation alone.
- He knew that the church belongs to God. And he knew that he was the servant of the church, not its lord.
- He had received the revelation of the mystery of Christ and his church. The church is the body of Christ, and that body should never be divided.
- He knew that to take advantage of the churches he founded would be high treason against Jesus Christ. How meaningful are his words to the Corinthians: *“I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him”* (2 Corinthians 11:2). Just as the servant of Abraham did with Rebecca, he was

sent afar to find her and, in the long return journey, he took care of her, he honored her and presented her as a pure virgin for Isaac. Paul well knew that the church did not belong to him and it was not for him; it belonged to Christ and was for Christ.

The present danger of apostolic ministries

We praise God for the restoration of apostolic ministries in our days. At the same time, we lament some abuses such as: massive designations of apostles, the use of the term apostle as a status symbol of hierarchy in ministry, etc. Yet, as regards dangers, I want to refer to something more central.

Many observers point out that the church in general has entered a “post-denominational” stage. Denominational identity today is almost irrelevant. To say that someone is Baptist or Catholic or Anglican is hardly enough. There are Baptists who seem to be more Pentecostal than the Pentecostals themselves, and there are Catholics that are more believers than many evangelicals.

But the concern that I want to underline is the fact that many strong and energetic ministries are arising with apostolic characteristics, which are growing more than the denominations to which they belong or belonged at one time. The church in many nations, especially in Latin America, Africa and Asia is growing at an extraordinary rate, and we thank God for that. Yet many of these ministries, perhaps without proposing to do so, are becoming independent and personal in nature. This is accented by the restoration of the apostolic ministry, and is occasionally seen when an apostle acquires a network of churches and sometimes winds up being the only leader, with absolute authority and, for all practical purposes, is the sole owner of the work.

CONCLUSION

The restoration of the apostolic ministry without a vision of the unity of the church fosters this kind of danger. What is the future of ministry that is built around one person? What is the mid-range and long-range projection of renewal movements? We need to seriously reflect on this present reality and on the church’s unity with a view to establish clear parameters for a biblical ecclesiology.

The first great challenge before us is to cry out to God, asking him to pour out upon all of us and upon his ministers that are rising up in many parts of the world, *“the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that [we] may know him better”* (Ephesians 1:17). May God, by his Spirit, reveal to the apostles and prophets of our days the mystery of Christ and his church. There is an urgent need for true apostles of Christ.

Our second great challenge is to learn to walk together. This is not easy. It is costly. But it is the only path that will save us from individualism, personalism and from errors and heresies,

and liberate us from the temptation to use the gifts that God gave us to build our own kingdoms. It is the only pathway to becoming the true church, the church which the Father dreamed of and which the world and the angels long to see.

We need to create an international space for reflection, for prayer, a space for revelation, to hear God together and to listen to each other. We need communication and we need to know what God is doing in different places in the world, as well as what he is saying. We need a space to dream and to awaken, to fly and to land again.

We need to renew our covenant with God, a covenant of faithfulness and loyalty to the revelation of the mystery of Christ. A covenant of integrity, of self-denial, of consecration. A covenant of love between ourselves, of respect, of humility, of companionship and friendship.

²⁰May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Hebrews 13:20–21, NIV

²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3:20–21, NIV

ENDNOTES:

1. Even in the case where most people, including believers, refer to physical buildings as churches, this is an error. No physical structure is a church. We do not go to church; we ARE the church. This error, which is broadly accepted and which may seem unoffensive and without importance, nevertheless has serious consequences since it distorts the vision of the church given to us by God, both in regard to its unity and to the commitment of believers to live completely consecrated to God, without the false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular.

2. Even in cases where the church has a legal instrument (or several such instruments), in order to attend to certain temporal matters such as: civil association, foundations, non-profit institutions, etc. with papers of incorporation, the great error is to confuse the identity of the church with these temporal institutions and determine the activity of the church on the basis of statutes or human rules of order.

Jorge Himitian