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Ecumenism:

Gospel imperative, harsh reality, and pilgrim journey

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Abstract

This paper offers a series of reflections on ecumenism today, first delivered on the occasion of the Shaw Lecture in St Andrews in February 2023. It begins with the gospel imperative of ecumenism, exploring its substance and its history. In a second section, it considers the harsh reality of ecumenism, and reflects upon its persistent challenges. In a third section, it proposes that present-day ecumenism might be conceived as a particular kind of pilgrim journey – as a difficult *peregrinatio* that seeks the place of resurrection but that has no clear destination. And by way of conclusion, it offers some observations on the specific ecclesiastical context of Scotland.



Introduction

It is a great honour for me to be invited to St Andrews to give this prestigious lecture in honour of Professor D. W. D. (Bill) Shaw. I cannot claim to have known Bill even a fraction as well as many of the people present at this lecture. But in the course of the few conversations I did enjoy with him, I gained a sense of the insight and wisdom that lay beyond his grace and kindness. He is a colleague and friend dearly missed.

It is in line with Bill's own interests that I have been asked to deliver a lecture on the theme of ecumenism. Ecumenism, for Bill, was no merely

academic matter: he served in 1963 as an ecumenical observer at the Second Vatican Council, for ten years as Chair of Livingston Ecumenical Council (1965–75), and in 1991 as a Fraternal Delegate at the First Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops in Rome.¹

In my lecture this evening, I hope to honour Bill by thinking together with you through some aspects of ecumenism today. I begin in a first section with the gospel imperative of ecumenism, exploring its substance and its history. In a second section, I continue by considering the harsh reality of ecumenism, reflecting upon its persistent challenges. In a third section, I propose that present-day ecumenism might be conceived as a particular kind of pilgrim journey – as a difficult *peregrinatio* that seeks the place of resurrection but that has no clear destination. And by way of conclusion, I offer some observations on our own ecclesiastical context, here in Scotland.



I. Gospel imperative

To think through ecumenism means to begin with the Greek term *oikoumenē*, a word used in Scripture simply to refer to the whole world – the whole world which is to be registered for the census of Caesar Augustus, throughout which the Gospel will be proclaimed, which the apostles have been turning upside down, and to which the hour of trial is coming.² This global meaning of *oikoumenē* is still relevant today: in their 2020 document, *Cultivate and Care*, for example, the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches (WCC) approves of a

¹ See respectively: George Newlands and David Fergusson, “Obituary: Bill Shaw, Dean of Divinity faculties of Edinburgh and St Andrews universities”, dated 11th August 2020, in *The Scotsman*, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/obituaries/obituary-bill-shaw-dean-divinity-faculties-edinburgh-and-st-andrews-universities-2937586>; Russell Barr, “Douglas William David Shaw”, *The Church Service Society Record* 55 (2020): 42, <https://www.churchservicesociety.org/sites/default/files/journals/Record55-42-46.pdf>; D. W. D. Shaw, *Much Ado: A Reminiscence* (published privately, 2017), 54–57.

² These references can respectively be found as follows: Luke 2:1, Matthew 24:14, Acts 17:6, and Revelation 3:10. The term derives from the Greek verb *oikein*, to dwell or to live, and as its passive participle literally means ‘that which is inhabited’.

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‘vision of *oikoumenē* [that] affirms creation as an organic, interdependent, coherent, and comprehensive whole’.³

In the course of the early church, however, the word came to take on a particular shade of meaning. It came to describe in turn the major councils of the early church and its leaders: so Eusebius writes of Constantine calling ‘a world-wide council’ at Nicaea in 325 (*synodon oikoumenikēn sunekrotei*), while scarcely a century later, it is used to describe Dioscorus of Alexandria, the leader of the church in Constantinople, as ‘ecumenical patriarch’ (*oikoumenikos patriarchēs*).⁴ In both cases, the sense of the whole world has been lightly transposed to refer to the whole church – the church in its entirety, serving God in the world far beyond any local or even regional gathering. The implicit claim is that there is in fact such a whole church in and for the whole world: one ecumenical church, with general and universal character, one that – in Otto Weber’s terms – ‘crosses over’ ecclesiastical, national, and social boundaries.⁵

Of course, the idea that there is one world-wide church was not a *novum* that arose simultaneously with the church starting to deploy the word *oikoumenē*. This claim goes far deeper than that. The idea is prominent already in the New Testament:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all ...

Ephesians 4:4–6a

³ World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, *Cultivate and Care: An Ecumenical Theology of Justice for and within Creation* (Faith and Order #226; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2020), §17.

⁴ See Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), III.vi, 123 (cf. http://kharzarar.skeptik.net/pgm/PG_Migne/Eusebius%20Caesariensis_PG%2019-24/Vita%20Constantini.pdf) and Klaus Geus, *Oikoumene/Orbis Terrarum*, in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, available online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.8008>. There is irony here in so far as the Council at Nicaea was called to preserve church unity, while Dioscorus himself was deposed by the later Council of Chalcedon.

⁵ Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, volume II, translated by Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 561.

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For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:13

The oneness of the church here connects to a series of claims regarding the one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit, the one calling of this God, the one faith that arises, and the one baptism that is demanded. And this New Testament notion of the oneness of the people of God in the world is both a transposed reflex and a faithful continuation of the original call of God to the people of Israel sounded in the Hebrew Scriptures:

And you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Jeremiah 30:22

For all the diversity of human beings, of their contexts and callings, there is thus a recurring note sounded in Scripture that the people of God are one. And more than this: this fundamental dimension of the being of this community is not one for which they must strive or towards which they must travel, but *one from which they always already emerge*, one which is given to them in advance in their relation to God. Their *koinonia*, their communion, is a gift. And so, as Paul insists, there cannot be more than one church, or else Christ himself is divided.⁶ There is thus a clear gospel *indicative* at stake: the world-wide – ecumenical – community of God is *by definition* one, universal, catholic. Being ecumenical in this sense belongs to the *esse*, the very being of the church called by God; it is not some optional extra, or twentieth-century fashion.

Immediately, however, a descent is demanded from such heights of patristic and biblical rhetoric, down from the vision of unity and wholeness held out there. For everywhere that one turns in the history of the people of God, it seems that difference and division prevail in the church: its unity has been destroyed; its witness shattered. And if this is indeed the case, is the *oikoumenē* of the church nothing more than an abstract ideal, far removed from the messy vicissitudes of religious life?

Three observations might be ventured in respect to this pressing question.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:13a.

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The first observation is scarcely comforting – these things have never been entirely straightforward for the people of God. At the very outset, the unity and harmony of Eden is shattered, and the pages of Scripture are full of the tragic consequences of division. Included in the highlights reel might be the division of the Kingdom of Israel, the fight for priority among the disciples of Jesus, the apostolic dispute over admitting Gentiles to the church and the factionalisation of the church in Corinth; and perhaps even a highlights reel would not be bold enough to broach the tragic division of the covenant people between Jews and Christians.⁷ The history of the early church is similarly littered with divisions, usually associated with the great heresies of each era: from Gnostics and Marcionites through Arians to Nestorians and Eutychians. And the tale scarcely improves as the church ages: among many other differences and divisions down the years, there might be highlighted the Great Schism of East and West, and the schisms of the Magisterial and Radical Reformations. Moreover, the recent sheer cascade of churches emerging within the evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal movements seems to offer little hope in respect of recognising their *given* unity.

A second observation might be to wonder why the wholeness of the church has so regularly appeared to be shattered on the anvil of history. As G. C. Berkouwer notes, ‘all disunity, rupture, and schism within Christ’s Church [...] appear[s] to be ridiculous and impossible’.⁸ Yet they are there nonetheless. There is no doubt that human sinfulness has played a role at every point – the usual culprits of pride and envy, of sloth and greed, of falsehood and wrath have loomed large in the community of the people of God. Herman Bavinck comments: ‘As Christians we cannot humble ourselves deeply enough over the schisms and discord that have existed all through the centuries in the church of Christ’.⁹ Though the Spirit of God is a reconciling force, the sin of human beings has again and again provided the schismatic factor.

⁷ These occasions can respectively be found as follows: prophesied in 1 Kings 11:31–35; noted in Luke 9:46; recorded in Acts 15; protested in 1 Corinthians 3:4–5; and in the complex text of Romans 9–11.

⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, translated by James E. Davison (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 30.

⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, volume IV, edited by John Bolt, translated by John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 316.

At the same time, it might be wondered beyond this whether there is an insidious and corrupting force in play across the ages, the zenith of whose ambition and triumph is the fracturing of the people of God and the frustrating of the Kingdom of God. Such talk risks being unfashionable, of course, an antiquated return to benighted views of evil not yet purified by the wisdom of the Enlightenment. But I suspect the matter remains live: there may yet be powers in act who are arrayed against the church.

A third observation is that divisions and disruptions in the wholeness of the church have never gone entirely uncontested. There has always been present an instinctive ‘endeavour to reunion’¹⁰ in face of the schisms of the church, and so there have arisen throughout the course of history persons and movements who have been concerned for the *oikoumenē* of the church, who have thus embodied a concern for *ecumenism*. This story of attempted repair may be less prominent or continuous than might be desired. Yet history nonetheless attests to regular and repeated efforts to restore the ecumenical nature of the church. From the apostolic council at Jerusalem and the reconciling work of Paul in Corinth and the early ecumenical councils,¹¹ through the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1445), the Regensburg Colloquy (1541), and the Prussian Church Union (1817), church history is not without witnesses to a great counter-movement to dissipation, and thus to the ecumenical force of reconciliation. And of course the late-modern ecumenical movement – about which more below – is itself the clearest expression of this interest, gathering a wide swathe of churches together for conversation as well as action.¹² At their best, the people of God have not taken division lightly, but have striven to overcome it, to work towards ecumenism.

¹⁰ The expression is from Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, edited by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, translated by H. R. Mackintosh et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), §156.2, 694.

¹¹ The apostolic council is narrated in Acts 15, and Paul’s efforts at reconciliation span the text of 1 and 2 Corinthians. The first four ecumenical councils (Nicaea in 325, Constantinople in 381, Ephesus in 431, and Chalcedon in 451) are generally considered normative across all the major denominations.

¹² A wry comment of Karl Barth might here be taken seriously: ‘It is actually rather odd that lately there has been a need for a particular ecumenical “movement”’. Karl Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, volume III, 1964–1968, edited by Eberhard Busch, Darrell L. Guder, and Matthias Gockel, translated by various (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2019), 311.

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Such ecumenical witness corresponds to the fact that the gospel indicative – that the community of God *is* one – does not exist without an accompanying gospel *imperative* – that the church of God *should be* one. On this basis, ecumenism as a concern for the *oikoumenē* also belongs to the very *esse* or being of the church. The prayer Jesus offered to God just prior to his betrayal finds illuminating purchase at just this point:

I ask not only on behalf of these [my disciples], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, *that they may all be one.*

John 17:20–21a

Both sides of this realisation must be held in tension. On the one side, the church *is* one, really and truly. Stated differently, the church is ecumenical *by definition*. As Wolfhart Pannenberg affirms, ‘in spite of everything the unity of Christianity has not been lost. It has its basis in Jesus Christ himself, and by faith in the one Lord it persists even in divided Christianity’.¹³ At the same time, in light of its manifest differences and divisions, the church is again and again *called* to be one, to restore its ecumenical nature in a visible way. The division of Christianity is a scandal, in both the general and the technical sense – a stumbling-block to the preaching of the Gospel and the advance of the Kingdom. Consequently, the church is called to work against it, to strive in prayer and in action towards the unity, the *oikoumenē* that is already the implicate of its foundation and calling. This is the gospel imperative of ecumenism.



II. Harsh challenges

From the bright shining lights of the gospel indicative of the unity of the church in Jesus Christ, it is a quick and steep descent to the empirical dividedness of the community of the people of God. In the work of ecumenism in general, and of the ecumenical movement in particular, there is no shortage of harsh challenges to be encountered. Here, two general comments may be ventured by way of orientation.

¹³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, volume III, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 405. Thus, Pannenberg continues, Christian unity is both gift and task.

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The first thing to be noted about such challenges is that they inevitably vary according to context: there is, after all, no such thing as ecumenism in the abstract. Divisions in the church are always concrete, relating to specific issues arising between specific people in a specific time and place; so too, the efforts at repair are always particular, and indeed must be so to gain any traction on the ground. My concluding remarks will be similarly contextual – no one has comprehensive knowledge here.

The second thing to be noted about such challenges is that they are hugely diverse. In a moment, I will focus on some of the specifically *theological* challenges of ecumenism, but there are several other types of contemporary challenge. One might mention, to begin, the problem of *priorities*. Churches have all sorts of priorities, from the highly noble – the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments, to name two not quite by chance¹⁴ – to the less salutary – the desire to protect vested interests or to serve their own narrow agenda. Sometimes, and intensively in contemporary situations of persecution, the priority of a church is simply survival. The upshot is that ecumenism is not always a vibrant and demanding priority on the agenda of churches. This situation is compounded, moreover, by the problem of *resources*. Churches are not always wealthy, and ecumenical commitment costs time, effort, and money. In an era of limited resources, ecumenism can come to be a luxury that can no longer be afforded. There is, further, the problem of *frustration*: as we will note shortly, for all the progress in ecumenism over the past century – constructive conversation, ecumenical agreements, social co-operation, and much else – there are areas on the ground where things have not changed. The pervasive sense remains one of deadlock – I have heard the phrase ‘ecumenical winter’ more than once in recent weeks – and the corresponding fear that such enterprise is all in vain and ultimately for naught.

Yet for all these diverse and contextual challenges, perhaps the greatest obstacle to ecumenism is theological. No church has ever denied, not even at the most intense moments of strife and division, that there is only one ecumenical church. But just here arises the real and most poignant issue of

¹⁴ These are, of course, the core defining marks of the church in the Protestant tradition – see, for example, the *Augsburg Confession*, VII, available at <https://bookofconcord.org/augsburg-confession/>.

contention: where is this one church? As André Birmelé notes, ‘the theme “ecclesiology” shapes the entire ecumenical work’.¹⁵

It is certainly possible at this point simply to reaffirm the ecumenical indicative that there is one church, and to specify that the oneness of this church is an invisible spiritual reality – spiritual, that is, by virtue of the Holy Spirit, who gathers the people of God and unites them with Jesus Christ by the will of the Father. This teaching, of an invisible church, is a *necessary* statement in ecclesiology for all sorts of reasons. Clearly, it is not exempt from abuse: Amy Plantinga Pauw memorably writes, for example, that ‘Reformed theological appeals to the invisible church have sometimes provided cover for a hypocritical indifference to a lack of reconciliation and visible unity among Christians.’¹⁶ Faithfully construed, however, this is a doctrine about the people of God which recognises the unity of the church across time, including those already passed on and those yet to come. It recognises that not all who are seated on the pews at any one point are necessarily Christians, and – conversely – that not all Christians are gathered in the church at any one point; it also recognises that at times of persecution, or pandemic, the people of God can fade from full visibility. Crucially, it recognises that, theologically, there is more to the church than its empirical, mundane reality.

Though a necessary teaching, however, the invisibility of the church is not a sufficient statement about the church. If this is all that can be said, then there is a real risk of a spiritualising approach to the being of the church, one that gives no shape to the ecumenical imperative and that leaves the church in a parlous state of disembodiment.

For this reason, then, the question ‘where is the church’ gains a new qualification: ‘where *on earth* is the church?’ ... and here the theological problems quickly multiply. The major denominational groupings in the world simply disagree fundamentally as to where the visible church is present, and consequently, this topic is central to much present ecumenical

¹⁵ André Birmelé, quoted in Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, volume II, *The Works of God* (Oxford; New York: OUP, 1999), 169.

¹⁶ Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Church in Ordinary Time: A Wisdom Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 8–9. She notes, ‘The harsh realities of human divisions of nation, class, and race are a scandal for the church [...] and are not solved by recourse to an abstract invisible unity as if issues of injustice, bigotry, and exclusion were peripheral to the church’s “real” identity’, *Church in Ordinary Time*, 9.

dialogue. Of course, each denomination considers itself to be or to be part of the visible church; but on the further question of its unity or division, as Hendrikus Berkhof notes, ‘each member church [of the WCC] has its own conception of the problem in accordance with its own ecclesiastical perspectives’.¹⁷ In other words, it is the church itself that poses the major ecumenical problem of today.

This is a relatively new place to be for the work of ecumenism. As Robert Jenson – drawing here on Georges Florovsky – notes, ‘Through most of the church’s history, [the church] has understood [itself] as a presupposition of theology rather than as a problem within it’.¹⁸ Yet even as this ‘new’ problem has been recognised, so earlier fractures and fault-lines have been illuminated again and again with searing brightness.

The basic fault-line regards the definition of the visible church. Bill Shaw beautifully wrote in one of his books that the church is simply ‘the community whose unifying feature is acceptance of Jesus as the Christ’.¹⁹ This, surely, no one can deny. Friedrich Schleiermacher presses the point further: ‘even in the state of division each part of the visible Church remains a part of the invisible, for in it are found the confession of Christ and therefore also the activity of the Spirit’.²⁰ But it might be that one would want to say much more, and – specifically – much more about certain ministerial offices and/or certain ecclesial practices as being additionally definitive of the visible church. And this has been the experience of the ecumenical movement, dominated by denominations self-identifying in relation to the European divisions of long ago.

To take the obvious example, the Roman Catholic Church confirmed at the Second Vatican Council that ‘the one Church of Christ [...] subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him’.²¹ And thus if one is not in the particular church governed in this way, by these personnel, one is not fully

¹⁷ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, translated by Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 406.

¹⁸ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, volume II, 168. He notes further that the Second Vatican Council was the first council of the church ever ‘to promulgate doctrine about the church simply as such’.

¹⁹ D. W. D. Shaw, *Who is God?* (London: SCM, 1968), 29.

²⁰ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §150.2, 682.

²¹ *Lumen Gentium*, VIII, available at https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

in the one Church of Christ. Now certainly, the same Council recognises that ‘many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of [this] visible structure’, and indeed these ‘are forces impelling toward catholic unity’.²² Hence, in the years since the Council, the Roman Catholic Church has engaged much more fully with the conversations of the ecumenical movement. But it is difficult to see any kind of ecumenical unity can be intended that does not involve the institutional structure of the Roman Catholic Church. After all, other ecclesial bodies are here categorised according to the extent to which they reflect that structure. Thus in later texts, the Orthodox churches are thus described as ‘true particular Churches’, where ‘the Church of Christ is present and operative also’, whereas the Reformation churches are described as ‘ecclesial communities’, and thus are ‘not Churches in the proper sense’.²³ The Eastern Orthodox churches think similarly: for all their regional autonomy, there is an expectation of full communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, itself dependent upon holy orders and eucharistic rite.²⁴ Little wonder that sceptics have suggested that the ecumenical movement is all about unity – but only by way of a journey to Rome via Constantinople, or vice versa. The Anglican churches are not dissimilar, being ‘committed to maintaining the sign of historic succession and to sharing in it as an essential step towards full visible unity’.²⁵

There is, of course, another approach, favoured by a diverse array of Reformation churches and stated in the Augsburg Confession. According to this view, ‘to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments’.²⁶ Here, the unity of the church is not grounded in a particular

²² *Lumen Gentium*, VIII.

²³ *Dominus Iesus*, XVII, available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html.

²⁴ For a contemporary expression of this historical position, see “The Orthodox Church”, at <https://www.goarch.org/about>. The Orthodox communion is currently experiencing significant internal tensions, particularly in relation to the Russian Orthodox Church.

²⁵ The Church of England-Church of Scotland Joint Study Group, *Growth in Communion, Partnership in Mission*, §30, available at https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/31675/Report_of_the_CofS-CofE_Joint_study_group.pdf.

²⁶ *Augsburg Confession*, VII.

structure or personal hierarchy, but in material Christian teaching and practice. Thus in so far as different churches set forth a commensurate understanding of the Gospel and the sacraments, there is no impediment to church unity. This is the model of the Leuenberg Agreement between Lutheran and Reformed churches and of the Council of Protestant Churches in Europe. Here, there can be a diversity of polity, liturgy, and (even) theology; but there is also an over-riding affirmation of the unity of the church founded on shared core beliefs regarding the Gospel, and thence a greater openness to mutually recognised ministry and to shared table fellowship.

Of course, in reality, more sectarian impulses can intrude in such an approach as well, hampering progress towards unity. Many churches with Reformational, evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal tendencies might subscribe to the idea of unity around shared teaching and practice. In reality, however, they regularly disagree as to the *detail* of belief and practice. And so divisions abound also in these areas of the world-wide church, with an array of closely held independences, locally focussed ministries, and regularly shifting allegiances rendering unity problematic. And beyond this, it is a fact that, for many churches, ecumenism and its furtherance is irrelevant, or even noxious.

Yet even where churches are committed to ecumenical work, the distance between seeing the church as institution and the church as teacher is vast: there is here a clear impasse. This is evident within the two major textual ‘achievements’ of the ecumenical movement thus far: the 1982 text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, and the 2013 text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.²⁷ For all the shared ground here identified, and for all the irenic intentions that are now pervasive in the ecumenical movement, there remains real distance with regard to the understanding of the being of the church, and little sign of any major movement. Tom Greggs thus avers that ‘an approach to visible unity based on these kinds of issues of polity [...] remains doomed to fail’.²⁸

²⁷ Respectively World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order #111; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982) and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order #214; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013).

²⁸ Tom Greggs, “The Promise and Challenge of Ecumenism in the Twenty-First Century: What Do We Really Mean by Visible Unity?” (unpublished paper, forthcoming in print).

In view of this difficulty, it is no wonder that reference is still made to an earlier slogan in the ecumenical movement that ‘doctrine divides, but service unites’, encouraging the church to seek its unity elsewhere. However, following such a principle exclusively immediately risks the church losing its distinctive voice and profile. And such a teaching itself risks becoming a teaching that further divides churches. Now there is no doubt that the church as a whole and in its parts is compelled to engage together in and with and for the world. But to expect cross-ecclesiastical service to generate agreement between denominations seems optimistic, and perhaps even naïve. Lack of agreement about the church itself remains the fundamental stumbling-block.



III. Pilgrim journey

With both the gospel imperative and the harsh challenges of ecumenism clearly in view, and institutional unity seeming to be an impossibly distant possibility, the question now to be confronted is simple: what on earth is to be done?

There are a couple of easy conceptual moves that could be made at this point, neither of which is entirely inappropriate, but neither of which seems entirely sufficient. The first is that of eschatological deferral: to posit that the visible unity of the church will only be realised at the end of time. Now certainly there is truth here. Only at the consummation of all things will there take place the full gathering of all the people of God, the longed-for unity of God, the people of God, and creation. The second is that of providential affirmation: to posit that the lack of visible unity is terrible, but there may be a bright side to the current divided landscape. Louis Berkhof, for example, comments that it is ‘quite possible that the inherent riches of the organism of the Church find better and fuller expression in the present variety of Churches than they would in a single external organization’.²⁹ And certainly there is truth here also: the providence of God can surely bring good out of every situation. But in both these strategies, there lies a common danger: that the full iniquity of the present situation is not taken seriously and inadequate action results. The gospel imperative and call to action is obscured by these somewhat

²⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 574.

evasive perspectives. Hence in respect of the first, Catherine LaCugna observes that ‘communion is an eschatological hope’, but immediately continues, ‘This is not an invitation to complacency but the opposite’.³⁰ And in respect of the second, Berkhof himself warns that ‘This does not mean, of course, that the Church should not strive for a greater measure of external unity’.³¹

In place of such conceptual moves, I want here to articulate an alternative possibility: that instead of conceiving the visible unity of the church institutionally, we perceive it as embodied in a pilgrim journey. In the face of ancient divisions, sinful churches, and current challenges, and with organic unity seeming all but impossible, it may be that visible unity is best expressed simply by travelling with each other, by walking together and talking together. Now this seems a very simple conception, perhaps even a deflationary or unimpressive idea that does little to address real divisions. It brings us back, I think, into the orbit of the wonderfully simple account of church that Bill Shaw advanced: the church as ‘the community whose unifying feature is acceptance of Jesus as the Christ’.³² Yet the simple act of churches engaging with each other, in ecumenical movement, is a powerful sign of visible communion in spite of all the challenges. Theologically speaking, as Jenson observes, ‘the very fact of a dialogue in which renewed churchly fellowship is recognized as the goal – however distant – constitutes recognition that somehow there is church on both sides of the dialogue’.³³

It is, perhaps, no surprise that the World Council of Churches has adopted the idea of pilgrimage as well, even within its Faith and Order Commission. A recent text issued an invitation to ‘explore the ways that “pilgrimage” can help the churches deepen and express the commitment

³⁰ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 403. There would also be the possible move of pursuing ecumenism at any cost, of fabricating an external unity where no inner communion exists; on such a farce, no time need be wasted.

³¹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 574.

³² Shaw, *Who is God?*, 29.

³³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, volume II, 169. In line with this, Joseph Small avers that ‘Ecumenism does not dream of a “super church,” but rather hopes for deep communion among churches’, *Flawed Church, Faithful God: A Reformed Ecclesiology for the Real World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 79.

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to oneness in their work'.³⁴ Behind this invitation lies a shift in emphasis regarding its work, from 'staying together' to 'moving together', in the awareness that 'A theology of pilgrimage challenges the churches to reflect on these questions and to consider how the churches can continue to travel from broken communion to full visible unity'.³⁵ And the report argues that this act of journeying together creates, strengthens, promotes, and enhances unity and communion.³⁶

There is much that seems salutary in this shift of emphasis: the way forward may not be that which was originally conceived – a march to organic unity – but is seen to be a *way*, an active and even dynamic process, a voyage of possible transformation.

Yet we need to press into the contours of this idea a little more critically as well.

First, there is a perennial danger that a pilgrimage of this sort is conceived too narrowly, as something that only happens between ministers or theologians with specific ecclesiastical responsibilities. This may not be the intention, but may become the reality. Little wonder that Karl Barth worried that 'the ecumenical movement is still far too strongly a formal movement'.³⁷ Yet the notion of pilgrimage is capacious, and can point to the fact that there is a journey to be undertaken by all Christians.

Second, there is a danger that such walking and talking is conceived as being directed too much towards the *end* of visible unity. Clearly, if the church is committed to ecumenism, then the hope is to break down divisions to reflect more clearly the given reality of unity. Yet it is not clear that this should be stated as the *goal* of the movement. It may be that such

³⁴ World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, *Come and See: A Theological Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace* (Faith and Order #224; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2019), §I.2, 9.

³⁵ Faith and Order, *Come and See*, §I.I, 9 and §I.2, 10.

³⁶ Faith and Order, *Come and See*, §III.21, 20–21. The most recent work of the Commission has attended to issues that churches face in the world: environmental concerns and inter-faith encounters – theological issues for sure, but not issues directly connected with traditional areas of doctrine or polity. See Faith and Order, *Cultivate and Care*, and World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, *Love and Witness: Proclaiming the Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ in a Religiously Plural World* (Faith and Order #230; Geneva: WCC Publications, 2020).

³⁷ Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, volume III, 143.

teleological specification risks short-circuiting the movement, putting pressure on the pilgrimage in a results-driven way, and leading to frustration and disillusion at points of failure. Perhaps, in truth, the journey is the goal.

Third, there is a danger that the pilgrimage is conceived as a smooth path of progress, leading ever onwards and upwards towards the goal of visible unity. Yet it is not clear that this is the reality in ecumenism. It may be truer to relate that progress here is rather more haphazard than planned, that for every step forward there may be at least one step backward. Sometimes ecumenical conversation makes things worse. Sometimes ecumenical partnerships go wrong. Sometimes, there is no progress at all.

What may be required at this point is therefore a rather chastened view of pilgrimage. Here, it may be helpful to borrow a distinction from Esther de Waal, who in a book on Celtic spirituality observes a difference between the mediaeval idea of pilgrimage and what she labels *peregrinatio*, a word she notes is ‘almost untranslatable’.³⁸ She observes that in the latter kind of journeying, there is ‘no specific end or goal such as that of [...] a shrine or holy place’; instead, it is undertaken out of ‘a passionate conviction that they must undertake what was essentially an inner journey’ – a journey seeking ‘the place of their resurrection, the resurrected self, the true self in Christ, [...] our true home’.³⁹ Such journeying is undertaken in love, but it may be costly for the way-farers – de Waal writes of ‘becoming a stranger and an exile to all that is familiar, safe’.⁴⁰ Change and transformation, an emptying of one’s own desires, may be part of the voyage. And lest the reference to inner journey misdirect, this *peregrinatio* is no isolated enterprise, but is in truth a journey ‘of belonging, of relationships’.⁴¹ This is therefore a vision of a pilgrimage motivated by love but demanding sacrifice, a journey with both inner and outer dimensions. And crucially this *peregrinatio* lacks a specified destination. Rather the journey itself is the thing, seeking the place of resurrection.

³⁸ Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), 9.

³⁹ de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, 9.

⁴⁰ de Waal, 11.

⁴¹ de Waal, 29.

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Transposed into a corporate idiom, this idea points towards the possibility of a *church peregrinatio*. Here the ecumenical journey of the church is motivated – for sure – by love for the other, by a desire for unity and reconciliation, but it is also ready to encounter bracing challenges and unexpected outcomes, to leave behind that which is well-known and comfortable for new horizons. On the one hand, the church travels deeper within itself in order to discover the truth of unity that already exists between God’s people; on the other hand, the church travels further outwith in order by walking and talking together to attest that truth of unity. This journey may be chaotic, surprising, or dangerous, and likely all three. It is likely to have both moments of real advance and moments of intense failure. And in the midst of this lived venture of *peregrinatio*, the church is confronted by the deep realisation that it is dead, dead in its sins, and requires resurrection to find its home. It is in no place only to journey as or with the holy, with the sanctified – it journeys instead as sinner with other sinners, and in doing so attests to the unity that lies within and to the unity that lies beyond.

This is the character of the bracing pilgrim journey to which the church may be called – and not just its leaders and clerics, but all the people of God. It is a dialogical journey of love, reaching inwards and outwards at the same time, undertaken as a quest for transformation, with a radically disarming openness to new possibilities and a deeply searing awareness of its limitations. So too it is a journey undertaken in constant prayer and humility, aware of and repenting for the sin of the church and calling for grace – that the *peregrinatio* might go on, whether there be progress or not. It is this idea of *peregrinatio* which may illumine the movement of ecumenism for the church today: and perhaps just this journey together that is the visible showcase of its unity.



IV. Contextual observations

To conclude, I wish briefly to reflect upon the context here in Scotland, and to consider briefly how the idea of *peregrinatio* might illuminate ecumenism here.

My particular context is the Church of Scotland, a church that explicitly recognises the gospel imperative of ecumenism. This imperative is explicit in the Church of Scotland Act 1921 that governed its reunion with the Free Church of Scotland. The Act obligates the Kirk ‘to seek and promote union

with other Churches'.⁴² But one church union in Scotland in the years since does not represent impressive progress.⁴³ Agreement on 'the Word to be purely preached, the sacraments administered according to Christ's ordinance, and discipline rightly exercised' seems hard to come by⁴⁴ – no wonder that a diagram of the schisms in the Presbyterian churches of Scotland over recent centuries looks like a complex circuit diagram.

Now certainly, more hopefully, one can speak of the serial ecumenical dialogues between the Church of Scotland and other churches in Scotland and beyond, and of several initiatives with ecumenical intent, among them the Scottish Churches Open College, the Action of Churches Together in Scotland, the Scottish Church Initiative for Union, the Joint Doctrine Commission. Yet all these named initiatives have faltered and failed, and the dialogues have brought little clear-cut progress towards visible unity. More recently, it should be noted, there have been agreements and declarations concluded with the Church of England, the Scottish Episcopal Church, and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, all tangible signs of friendship and co-operation, and the welcome emergence of the Scottish Church Leaders' Forum.⁴⁵ But it is perhaps too early and too hopeful to identify these as or progressing towards meaningful unity. The most vibrant ecumenical witness in Scotland today tends to be in the area of social action, where co-operation flourishes in refugee care, food banks, and much else. Such action gloriously embodies the prophetic demand of James Cone that 'the church cannot be the church in isolation from the concrete realities of human suffering'.⁴⁶ Yet in itself, shared social action is not, cannot be, the only mode of lived ecumenism.

The wider challenges to ecumenism for the present-day Church of Scotland are real. There are competing priorities for attention in a time of rapid decline in ministers and members, and there are competing demands for finance in a time of declining resource and buoyant inflation. In the

⁴² Church of Scotland Act 1921, Article VII.

⁴³ What remained of the Original Secession Church united with the Church of Scotland in 1956.

⁴⁴ Church of Scotland Act 1921, Article VII.

⁴⁵ Respectively the Columba Declaration, the St Andrew Declaration, and the St Margaret Declaration, available at <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/connect/ecumenism>.

⁴⁶ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Century Edition* (New York: Orbis, 2008), 132.

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midst of this, there are frustrations too, at the perceived lack of progress or value from participation in the ecumenical movement. The chances of meaningful further church union in Scotland seem fairly remote, for all the reasons noted above: divergent understandings of church, of doctrine, and of practice. What then, for those seeking to follow the imperative of ecumenism today?

The motif of pilgrimage as *peregrinatio* may illuminate how engagement in ecumenism in just this context might be conceived. To close, I want to identify three aspects of this.

First, *peregrinatio* suggests that on the journey of ecumenism we need have no fixed goal in view. The goal of full institutional unity is no longer in view. Instead, not only the journey *but also the destination* is simply walking and talking together, embodying unity in diversity. Yet that means *really* walking and really talking together. In an article some years ago on ecumenism in Scotland, Sheilagh Kesting wrote: ‘there does not appear to be much of a genuine exchange, a getting to know one another at a deeper level’.⁴⁷ Little seems to have changed. It is remarkable, for example, that in so much of the conversation in the Church of Scotland around the recent Radical Action Plan and the Presbytery Planning Process, there has been so little reference to or engagement with other churches. Just so, it may be that there is in view even now a root failure to pursue the implications of the Church of Scotland’s own founding documents.

Second, *peregrinatio* warns that there is a need on the journey of ecumenism for humility and for openness. Both are remarkably difficult. The Kirk and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, the two largest denominations, are certainly committed to ecumenism; but, again in Kesting’s words, ‘in practice [they] find it very hard to do’.⁴⁸ One wonders here about the ongoing reason for this in the Church of Scotland: perhaps it involves some ongoing ill effects of its historical dominance, or some lingering traces of an imperialist attitude at many levels towards other denominations, or some baleful consequences of the legalistic nature of its governing structures, or some instinctive resistance to any meaningful change to the status quo. Perhaps it involves some complex and pervasive

⁴⁷ Sheilagh Kesting, “Being Ecumenical in Scotland Today”, *Theology in Scotland* 13, no. 2 (Autumn 2006): 14, <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/TIS/article/view/140>.

⁴⁸ Kesting, “Being Ecumenical in Scotland Today”, 5.

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weaving of all of these, and more besides. By contrast, the vision of pilgrimage calls for light travel, for readiness to engage critically not only externally but also internally. It calls for recognition that the source of life of the Church of Scotland lies always beyond its walls – never within its proud history, dominant position, or constitutional order – and thus for corresponding modesty.

Finally, the idea of *peregrinatio* warns there is no guarantee of progress on this way. Churches walking together can take diverging paths, and churches talking together can cease to dialogue. There is no smooth path to church unity. Yet it also counsels that failure is no reason to stop the journey. The walking and talking is always called to continue – from high-level church dialogues to neighbourly chats over a fence. As small steps are taken on each journey – steps of extending trust, building relations, and gaining insight – the opportunity arises again and again for the divisions between our churches to be revealed as what they are, what Barth called ‘the great illusion’,⁴⁹ and for Christian unity to be achieved – truly achieved – by the grace of revelation.

Just this may be the journey of *peregrinatio* that the Church of Scotland is called today to pursue, prayerfully and in engagement with others – seeking the place of its own resurrection, and in doing so, by grace, hoping to attest the unity of the church. This side of heaven, such a messy, broken pilgrimage, illuminated only by occasional flashes of divine inspiration may be the best we can pursue – searching with humility for life and life abundant, with others, on the shared journey that may itself be the goal.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, volume III, 316.

⁵⁰ The author would like to thank Oliver Crisp for the invitation to deliver the Shaw Lecture at the University of St Andrews, Eric Stoddart for his work on arrangements behind the scenes, and Susan Millar for all her work in respect both of the Lecture and its hospitality, and of the wonderful memorial to Bill Shaw that now graces the quad of St Mary’s College in St Andrews. The author would also like to thank Daniel Pedersen, Tom Greggs, and Paula Duncan for their assistance with the text of the Lecture.