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THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH AND THE UNITY OF HUMANITY

BY

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Thirteenth Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity

The Unity of the Church and the Unity of Humanity

John B. Cobb, Jr.

This lecture, like so much we do in the Church, has three parts. Section I includes an assessment of the gains made in the twentieth century in expressing the unity of the Church. It also discusses the new rifts that occurred early in this century and the prospects of their being healed.

The second section deals with the new waves of divisions, by which we are currently buffeted. I will mention examples of the current polarizations and suggest ways of responding to them.

The third section discusses one of these polarizations more fully, that between those for whom faithfulness to Christ means exclusiveness and those who see traditions other than Christianity as also mediating salvation. It proposes a way of understanding salvation that affirms both that Christ is the one savior of the world and also that other religious traditions have much to contribute to that salvation.

Although I hope that what I say has somewhat wider relevance, it is important to acknowledge that my perspective is that of a member of one of the oldline Protestant denominations in the United States. The situation in the Black and other ethnic Protestant churches in the United States is different, as is that of other Protestant churches throughout the world. The history and experience of Orthodox and Catholic churches are also very different.

I

The twentieth century has been one of enormous accomplishment on the part of those who have sought to realize and make visible the unity of the Church. At the beginning of the century most Christians belonged to one of three great branches: the Eastern Orthodox, the Roman Catholic, and the heirs of the Protestant Reformation. Each of these had great suspicion of the others, and suspicion played a large role also in relations among some of the Protestant denominations.

To an astonishing degree these suspicions have been allayed. There is extensive rapprochement between the Eastern and Western churches. Protestants and Catholics work together on many matters. And among the oldline Protestant denominations, mutual respect and cooperation are taken for granted. Councils of churches have become widespread, culminating in the World Council of Churches. In the latter the younger churches play a role that could hardly have been envisaged at the beginning of the century.

There are, of course, disappointments. Intercommunion, especially between Roman Catholics and others, remains elusive. Despite church unions, the number of Protestant churches has increased. At present the impetus toward further denominational mergers has sharply declined.

But these limitations should not cloud the picture of achievement. Mutual respect and recognition of others as authentically expressing Christian faith have largely superseded exclusivist claims and mutual suspicion. In part it is success in overcoming exclusivism that has reduced the impetus toward further ecumenical work. Denominational leaders, for example, see that the recognition that denominations are only particular expressions of the one Church has reduced denominational loyalty to a disturbing degree. They are often more interested in recovering and reemphasizing the distinctive contributions and emphases of their denominations than in institutional merger.

On the other hand, during the century in which, for the first time, there has been a great move toward unity of long antagonistic segments of Christianity, major new fissures have developed with respect to which ecumenists have been far less successful. While the old

animosities based on Trinitarian and soteriological issues are healed, new divisions have fractured the unity of Christianity.

One such division resulted from renewed emphasis on spiritual gifts in the popular life of the Church. The charismatic movement within the oldline churches has played a role. But by far the most important developments have been the Pentecostal churches that have become a major religious factor especially, but not exclusively, in Latin America.

At least at the level of the World Council of Churches, an ecumenical hand has been extended to these churches with modest success. Little more can be expected in the immediate future. Many oldline Protestant denominations, while they were successful in aggressive evangelistic strategies, showed only a secondary interest, at best, in ecumenical relations to other denominations. These issues become more pressing when ecclesiastical communities settle down to a more stable existence. As this happens with the Pentecostal churches there may be the possibility of ecumenical discussion and cooperation. This will require an end to condescension on the part of the older churches and a willingness to engage in new types of theological reflection on the part of the Pentecostal churches.

The grounds for hope here lie in the origins and history of these churches. The Pentecostal churches grew up around an experience that was not cultivated or even recognized in the established denominations. They are not committed by their experience to a negative attitude toward the teachings of the older churches, except as such teaching is taken to exclude that experience. The older churches will need to respond with new openness to a consideration of the gifts of the Spirit.

The origins of Pentecostalism in experience contrasts with that of the other great fissure in the twentieth century. Fundamentalism arose as a direct attack on the positions and policies of the oldline churches, viewing these as betrayal of the faith. The prospect of ecumenical relations with churches that maintain a strictly Fundamentalist posture remain dim. Such churches can sometimes form their own interdenominational alliances, but their self-understanding is incompatible with give-and-take relations to non-Fundamentalist groups.

Nevertheless, there is hope for reducing barriers here too. To understand this hope requires a brief review of the context in which

Fundamentalism arose and of the subsequent history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Church rather easily came to terms with the Cartesian-Newtonian view of the world as a machine. This presupposed a machine-maker who stood outside the machine and occasionally interrupted its normal operations for his (the masculine pronoun is appropriate here) purposes. The greatness and complexity of the created order attested to the greatness of its Maker. The one who made the machine could also intervene in its workings; so the supernatural element in the Christian tradition could be maintained.

By the nineteenth century, however, this adjustment of Christian teaching to the natural sciences began to break down. The problems were recognized first in German theology, and in response Christian teaching was separated from the natural sciences and placed in a different compartment of human knowledge. In the English-language world, objections were fended off until the doctrine of evolution mounted a frontal attack. To this attack, a vigorous response was required.

If God's role was the initial creation, then what God created was far less interesting than what evolved from it! Human beings, instead of being created separately in the image of God, were now seen to be just one highly evolved species in the natural world. Moral teachings were drawn from this doctrine that were in sharp tension with Christian faith. Finally, there was a direct denial that the story of creation in Genesis could be trusted as providing an accurate account of creation.

One widespread response was to conclude that Christianity as a whole had been discredited. Since so much of its previous apologetic was no longer tenable, and since honest openness to science appeared to refute its doctrines, the long decline in Christian credibility was accelerated. For example, in the United States, Christian teaching was by and large ejected from the burgeoning universities.

Despite the radical character of the changes required, the oldline churches in general sought to accommodate the factual assertions of the new biology without allowing them to overturn the moral and religious teaching of the Bible. There were two main ways of doing this. One was to follow the German pattern and separate the moral and religious dimensions from the natural one, leaving the latter to scientific investigation while preserving the former for church teaching. A

second way was to relocate God's creative action from a single founding event to continual working in the whole evolutionary process. This required major modification of the mechanistic worldview, if not its outright rejection.

In either case, the Bible had to surrender its authority to tell us factually about origins. This surrender was aided by the great accomplishments of nineteenth-century Biblical scholarship which employed secular historical methods in understanding the ancient texts. With their help it displayed the "evolution" of thought embodied in the Bible itself. Thus there was a close relation between the acceptance of Biblical criticism and the acceptance of new scientific theories that conflicted with those that had been drawn from the Bible.

The joint acceptance of critical Biblical scholarship and evolutionary theory by leadership in the oldline churches understandably provoked a crisis. This "Modernist" understanding of the Bible and the world was a sharp break from the traditional one. The understanding of basic religious concepts such as salvation was affected by the change. In short "Modernism" was a truly revolutionary development in Christian thought.

The majority response of those who remained in the Church was moderate and mediating. Most people accepted some distinction between scientific and religious teaching without knowing much about the historical criticism of the Bible. They preferred to minimize the difference between an evolutionary account of creation and the Biblical one.

Still others saw both Modernism and such halfway houses and compromises as faithless to Christ. They reaffirmed unqualified commitment to all those doctrines that were being questioned, calling these the Fundamentals. Fundamentalists thus uttered a flat "No" to all the concessions to historical and scientific knowledge that were made by Modernists and moderates. To avoid any of the loopholes employed by their opponents, they developed doctrines of Biblical authority that were more rigid than any previously devised. Because they believed the Genesis account of creation must be literally accurate, they disputed the evidence for evolutionary origins that conflicted with it, arguing that all valid evidence could be read instead in "creationist" terms. They claimed that this was a scientific theory as well as Christian dogma. In this way they continued the received Christian tradition little changed, although considerably rigidified.

Many of those who were convinced that Modernism had abandoned much that was precious to the Christian, and hence followed Fundamentalist leadership, nevertheless found unattractive the preoccupation of Fundamentalists with refinements on the doctrine of inerrancy and disputes with the dominant community of scientists. They wanted to proclaim positively what they believed to be the Good News of Jesus Christ in a way that was faithful to the spirit as well as the letter of the Bible.

As a result, there have been encouraging developments within churches with Fundamentalist histories. The most distinctive Fundamentalist doctrine, Biblical inerrancy, has provoked extensive discussion. Alternative interpretations of what is inerrant and of what inerrancy means are considered. There are also those who move away from the language of inerrancy altogether. Many have rejected the label "fundamentalist" in favor of "conservative evangelical." And under this label they have been joined by others who do not have Fundamentalist backgrounds.

Meanwhile "Modernism" was largely superseded in the oldline church leadership by Neo-Orthodoxy or Neo-Reformation theology. Especially with Karl Barth this involved a high view of Biblical authority. Although Fundamentalists were initially suspicious of Barth because he did not reject Biblical criticism in its entirety or affirm Biblical inerrancy, eventually Neo-Orthodox views of Biblical authority came to have a place in formerly Fundamentalist quarters. An important instance is *After Fundamentalism*, by one who had long been respected in Fundamentalist circles. In this book Bernard Ramm recommended Karl Barth's view of Biblical authority. There are thus indications that much of the Fundamentalist movement may move toward a posture of openness to interaction with non-Fundamentalist churches. Mutual acknowledgment of authentic faith, mutual respect, and considerable cooperation are quite possible, as the issues that first set off the Fundamentalist reaction subside. Achieving ecumenical relations among oldline, Pentecostal, and post-Fundamentalist Christians in the next century is the same sort of challenge as achieving such relations among Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants was for this one.

II

Unfortunately, just at the time that ecumenical dialogue with Pentecostals and post-Fundamentalists appears potentially fruitful, a new reaction to the changes going on in the oldline churches is becoming a threat to their unity and effectiveness. These changes do not result from developments in the natural sciences or historical criticism of the Bible. They are responses to criticisms primarily of the Christian tradition. But the teachings and practices criticized have been so pervasive of the tradition that most Christians have supposed, with considerable justification, that they grew quite directly out of the Bible.

The opposing parties within oldline Protestant denominations today are by no means well-labelled with the terms "Modernist" and "Fundamentalist." Nevertheless, there are, at a deep level, similarities between the current conflict and the earlier one. Modernists were prepared to make revolutionary reforms in the thinking and practice of the churches in order that theology would correspond with the best thinking of the time and the churches would be able to give effective leadership in society. Fundamentalists were committed to continuing the inherited tradition intact. For the former, the encounter with new knowledge is an occasion for reform. For the latter, it is a test of faithfulness to the tradition.

If we re-label the two groups as radical reformers and conservative traditionalists, we can use these labels to characterize the responses to both challenges. The current division between radical reformers and conservative traditionalists in responding to the moral challenges of the late twentieth century is as deep as the earlier division responding to the challenge coming from the biological sciences.

The new challenges have been posed chiefly by growing awareness of the negative role the Church has often played in the past. There has been wave after wave of such criticism. One of the first waves came from the sexual revolution which forced recognition that Christian teaching and practice through the centuries had led to massive sexual repression with negative consequences psychologically, sociologically, and theologically. Every liberation theology has offered new evidence of specific oppressions in which the Church has been at least complicit.

Feminists have shown that Christianity has embodied and supported patriarchy. Recognition of environmental degradation has led to the charge the Christian support of anthropocentric thinking shares responsibility for this critical problem. We have also been told that exclusivistic claims about salvation have led to terrible consequences in the relation of Christianity to people of other faiths, especially Jews. I will return to this topic in Section III.

In face of these searing critiques many former Christians have rejected the Church altogether. The progressive elements in oldline church leadership, on the other hand, however slowly and reluctantly, have responded, as earlier to the challenge from science, with openness and self-criticism and efforts to reform. They are trying to lead the churches through another change at least as revolutionary as that involved in Modernism.

From the perspective of the defenders of continuity with the tradition, the reformists appear to cave in to whatever becomes popular or politically correct in the secular social context. The traditionalists believe that only by continuity with the tradition can Christianity retain its integrity and provide its distinctive witness. The alternative that seems to them an imminent threat to the faith is that the institutional leadership take current, nontraditional ideas as normative and use scripture and tradition, if at all, only to rationalize their adoption of these views.

That there are real dangers of drift into faithlessness cannot be doubted. But the leaders in the various reform movements that arise in response to these critiques see the threats quite differently. To them it seems that to continue traditional teaching and practice once they have been shown to be unjust and oppressive is what is truly unfaithful. Even where, as with anti-Judaism and patriarchy, the evils are promoted within the Bible itself, the reformers see deeper elements in the Bible that call for the criticism of its own errors. It is only by clarifying these deeper elements and embodying them faithfully in our corporate lives today that we can be truly faithful both to the Bible and to the tradition that appeals to it.

The situation in the oldline churches is not as polarized as I have presented it. Most church members are somewhere in the middle. Most are prepared to repudiate explicitly the unbiblical idea that all sexuality is dirty or sinful, but they still want to restrict acceptable

expressions to marriage or, at least, to heterosexual relations. Most are prepared to accept women ministers and give them a chance to play leadership roles in the denominations, but they are not ready to change the way the Church worships or makes decisions so as to give equal place to feminine images and women's sensibility and modes of relating. Most are prepared to renew Christian teaching about the value of the whole of creation, but they are not ready to promote the overall social and economic changes that are needed to prevent further environmental deterioration.

How is a Christian ecumenist to respond in this situation? If ecumenism is understood chiefly in terms of keeping as many Christian churches as possible related to the conciliar movement, then the ecumenist will side with the moderate majority and seek to find compromise statements acceptable to most. But if ecumenism has a deeper meaning, if it continues to be a quest for unity that emerges from fresh wrestling with issues, involving people from all parts of the world and all stations in life, especially the poor and the oppressed, then the task that lies before the ecumenist is enormous.

Despite the magnitude of this task, it is not unprecedented. The achievements of the ecumenical movement in this century have been along just these lines. Bringing together highly diverse people representing long-conflicting positions, it has provided a context within which new understandings have emerged that were experienced by all the contending parties as doing justice to their central concerns.

The pursuit of this task requires that persons on both sides of the divide recognize and trust the authenticity of faith on the part of the others. Unfortunately, that requirement is not currently met in all instances. But just as the ecumenical movement has in the past brought together persons who represented communions with long histories of mutual enmity; so now we face the task of bringing together those who are divided by quite different issues.

The pattern cannot be the same. In the earlier ecumenical task, it was possible to seek representatives of well-established churches who could interact with one another. Today the issues that threaten to disrupt ecumenism cut across the traditionally ecumenical denominations, sapping both their energies and their ability to support ecumenical organizations. Much of the work of ecumenism must be done

within denominations, although some of it can be done inter-denominationally as well.

The reconciliation that is needed is between those who have relatively consistent, though polarized, views. Of course, the moderate middle should be involved. But the ecumenical goal is to find a way to do justice to the deepest convictions of both the traditionalists and the reformers, not to find compromise formulations that will avoid institutional splits. This is where the World Council has shown the way.

The importance of reconciliation can hardly be exaggerated in terms of its contribution to the visible unity of the Church. I have proposed, perhaps too optimistically, that the two major groups which have stayed apart from the growing ecumenical consensus, the Pentecostals and the Fundamentalists, are moving toward a point where their inclusion will be possible in the coming century. But if the churches that now constitute the councils of churches, the most vivid expression of the oneness of the Church, are torn apart by strife between reformists and traditionalists, they will not be able to enter dialogue with Pentecostals and Fundamentalists. Or if they do, and the latter side with the traditionalists, then the reformists, who have in the past given leadership to the ecumenical movement will themselves be driven out.

Another danger is that, in their effort to hold together institutionally, denominations will alienate those with strong convictions on both sides. Compromises may prolong the life of the institution, but they typically express the triumph of institutionalism over faith. An ecumenicity based on compromise rather than creative transformation may express sociologically some unity of the Church, but it will not do so theologically.

The possibility of achieving authentic reconciliation lies in the existing unity. This unity is in Christ. Unless both partners to the disagreement affirm Christ as their primary loyalty, there is no starting point for reconciliation. This is an important qualification, because today it is by no means always clear that persons in the Church share this commitment. Some seem to care more for the victory of a particular program on either the traditionalist or the reformist side than whether that program is faithful to Christ. We need not read such people out of the Christian fellowship, but they cannot function as the primary representatives of their cause for purposes of seeking a Christian position that does justice to both sides.

Needless to say, the fact that two people both sincerely identify their deepest commitment as Christ does not assure much agreement! What is meant by "Christ" can vary greatly. For some, "Christ" may function exclusively as the proper name of the Galilean carpenter and what contemporary historical scholarship can say about him. For others, "Christ" may identify the Second Person of the Trinity and the fact of the Word's incarnation, with little reference to the particular character or teaching of Jesus.

Despite the great differences among persons equally devoted to what they understand by "Christ," unity in Christ is not devoid of meaning. Even those with little interest in Trinitarian and Christological dogma believe that in some way through Jesus they learn something about God or are related to God's ongoing reality. On the other side, even those whose emphasis is on eternity and the basic structure of the divine drama of salvation, recognize that it was in the historical figure of Jesus that this drama reached its climax. The Church has affirmed this duality in its Chalcedonian Creed, and whether either side accepts the ancient language of this formulation, both can acknowledge the dual reference to a historical figure and to divine reality.

Such agreement functions only to insure that the explanation for either traditionalist or reformist views will need to refer both to what we know of the historical Jesus and to God as we know God especially through Jesus. This leaves open whether the emphasis is on the fact of incarnation, the teaching, the deeds, the personality, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the living Lord, the earliest testimony, or the subsequent creedal formulations. Most Christians can recognize authentic faith in another, even when the locus of emphasis differs.

Furthermore, whether the primary reference is to the historical Jesus or to the divine reality incarnate in him, the whole Bible is brought into play. One cannot abstract what is known of God through Christ from the witness of the Jewish scriptures, nor can one understand the Jewish carpenter apart from his immersion in these scriptures. The appeal to these scriptures adds both to the unity among disagreeing Christians and to the complexity of the arguments through which they explain how their views are faithful to Christ.

I share the conviction of most thoughtful Christians that the scriptural witness supports both the importance of continuity with tradition and the necessity of repeated reform. Hence, in principle the

rift that threatens us can be overcome. The issue is *what* reform is in faithful continuity with the history of reform that constitutes the tradition at its best. Careful listening to one another can well lead to mutual acceptance as authentic believers, even when disagreements remain. In this way the ecumenical goal of mutual recognition can often be attained.

Furthermore, there is the possibility that mutual understanding and respect can lead to proposals for institutional reform sensitive to continuity with tradition, proposals that are accepted by both parties as embodying their deepest concerns. It may be possible to change liturgy and Church teaching in ways that are truly sensitive to women's experience without breaking with fundamental elements in the tradition. It may be possible to think through changes in practice in relation to the natural world that are both continuous with Christian tradition and also substantially reduce the destructive impact of human actions on the environment. This is the hope of those who believe in Christian unity.

III

One of the important polarizing issues, barely mentioned above, is the Christian understanding of those persons who reject the Christian faith, especially those who identify themselves with some other community or tradition. Here the problem already noted as an inner Christian problem becomes acute. That is, it seems that if one recognizes Christianity as just one of the great ways of salvation, one's fervor for Christianity declines, just as when a denomination recognizes the equal validity of other denominations as part of Christ's Church, denominational commitment declines. Hence, openness to truth and wisdom outside of Christianity appears to be detrimental to Christian faith.

This problem is, for the Christian, far more serious than the denominational one. I can recognize that my own denomination, United Methodism, is but one expression of the Church. This *will* reduce my commitment to the denomination in the sense that as long as the Church as a whole flourishes, it becomes less important to me

whether my denomination participates in that flourishing. If I moved to Canada, I could without discomfort become a part of the United Church of Canada. If certain hopes I have for my denomination seemed to be frustrated for the foreseeable future, I can imagine joining another denomination in which I could give myself to the denominational program more wholeheartedly.

None of this is a truly serious problem for me because as a United Methodist I believe my basic loyalty is to Christ and the inclusive Church, not to my own denomination. Precisely because my denomination teaches this, and is relatively consistent in following its implications, I am comfortable to remain a United Methodist. I fully expect to die as a member of this church. But there is nothing ultimate about my loyalty to it.

Adopting a similar attitude toward the Christian faith as a whole, on the other hand, would be quite impossible for me. Whereas United Methodism is simply one historical expression of the Christian Church, there is for me no wider category under which to fit Christ as simply one representative. My loyalty to Christ is ultimate as my loyalty to United Methodism is not.

Does this mean, then, that I must view other traditional ways as false or even evil? Since my *ultimate* loyalty is to Christ, must I see myself in competition with those who do not share this loyalty? Does my faith establish toward those who share this faith with me a negative relationship, so that the more deeply I am a Christian believer the more I am separated from those who do not share this belief?

Clearly, faith in Christ has often functioned in this way in the past and continues to do so for many today. Other Christians who can no longer share in a negative appraisal of the other great traditions believe that they can express their new appreciation of these only be relativizing Christ. Some leave the Church unable to remain with integrity in a community that experience as denying the validity of other ways. Others with similar appreciation of other traditions, remain in the church, continuing to appreciate Christ as one Savior among others, even as the one who is *their* savior. But they, too, find the radical Christocentrism of the New Testament and of the tradition alien.

In my view it is faithfulness to Christ that leads them in this way to relativize Christ. Nevertheless, their faith suffers as a result. A

relativized faith does not have the power of an ultimate commitment. Their ultimate commitment becomes something else, such as the salvation of all, however that is understood. This something else, for them, transcends Christ and is no longer defined by Christ.

Seeing the weakening of Christian faith that is entailed in this move, others reaffirm traditional exclusivist views of Christian salvation. We have here another, and very important, instance of the tension between the reformist and the traditionalist impulse. The reformers are sensitive to the evils worked by Christians under the belief that those who did not believe in Christ cannot be saved. They want an explicit rejection of this exclusivist teaching of the church to insure that such destructive practices will not be continued. The traditionalist may recognize certain abuses in the past—and even in the present. But these are seen as deviations from the understanding of salvation through Christ alone. This doctrine is central to the whole tradition and cannot be compromised. Indeed, the traditionalist is convinced that it is crucial for the faithful Christian to act on this doctrine in actively seeking the conversion of all who are not Christian.

Those concerned for the unity of the Church encounter here another instance of the deep divide that now threatens to rupture anew the unity of the Church. Is reconciliation possible? And, in particular, can there be not only mutual recognition of authentic faith but also a way in which the deepest concerns of both sides can be affirmed in a coherent understanding that also gives rise to satisfactory practice?

I pointed out that there is no tension between my loyalty to the United Methodist Church and my commitment to the ecumenical Church as Christ's. An important element in the teaching of John Wesley, one carried on with some consistency among his followers is that our movement is only one expression of the Church and that we are to respect and appreciate other forms of Christianity. I have already stated that I cannot simply adopt that same attitude as between Christianity and other great traditions. Nevertheless, before setting up the alternatives as exclusivism and relativism, it is important to ask: What is entailed in faith in Christ with respect to attitudes toward those who do not acknowledge Christ?

Clearly, advocates of both of the polarized positions noted above can support their views with appeals to Christ. The reformists can argue that Jesus himself emphasized that it is our actions toward our

needy neighbor—not beliefs in or about him—that are decisive for salvation. If members of other communities serve their neighbors well apart from faith in Christ, they, too, are saved. We Christians find our deepest motivation for such service in Christ, but Buddhists may be chiefly moved by the teaching of the Buddha, and Muslims by the Koran. Obviously, the Jewish scriptures provide both similar motivation and similar teaching about what God requires.

Those who hold that there is no salvation except through faith in Jesus Christ are unlikely to emphasize the same passages from scripture. They point out instead that human beings are pervasively corrupted. Even their best actions are not truly virtuous, they are not purely motivated by the love of God and neighbor. Hence their "good deeds" cannot save them. They are saved *only* by God's forgiveness, and that forgiveness is bound up with the atoning work of Jesus. Apart from hearing the message of the atonement and responding to that message with faith in Christ, there is no salvation.

These summary statements are merely illustrative of the range of positions that are held. Advocates of relativizing Christ *may* argue instead from their interpretation of the atonement. This can be viewed in terms of the image of the Lamb slain from the foundations of the World. This shows that God forgives all apart from their explicit knowledge of Jesus. What is important is not whether they know about this but how they live and how they seek to realize the ultimate reality in their lives. Advocates of exclusivism, on the other side, can quote quite exclusivist claims that are placed on the lips of Jesus by the gospel writers, especially John.

My interest is in finding a way that both emphasizes Christ's radical salvific uniqueness and also opens us to a positive attitude toward other traditions. That, too, can be found in scripture. I believe it can help us to reconcile the divergences that now threaten our unity in Christ.

We need to ask, first, how salvation is to be understood. Too often Christians have interpreted it to mean going to heaven when we die (or after an extended stay in purgatory). There is some basis for this in the Bible and especially in the New Testament. But the message of Jesus, continuing widespread Jewish understanding, is primarily focused on the Realm of God, in which God's will is done on earth. That blessed situation has not arrived. Its nonarrival was a major reason so

many Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. It has been a problem for the Church, too.

There have been several responses to the delay. Some have reinterpreted the Realm of God to be another term for true religion. They argue that Jesus did bring true religion to the world. Others have simply transposed the Realm of God on earth to heaven to be entered at death.

Still others, and I count myself among them, find in Jesus' message the impetus to live in hope toward a future in which God's will is truly done. Such total salvation, in which not only all sins are forgiven, but all diseases, healed, all the hungry, fed, all the lost, found, and all prisoners, freed, remains for us a future hope. But here and now we can participate in the continuing work of Christ calling us and moving us toward that salvation. There is also a preliminary salvation here and now, in that co-working with Christ. Thus we look back to the work of Jesus Christ as our Savior. We experience salvation here and now. And we look forward with hope to the full and inclusive salvation that is the Realm of God.

This is not to deny life after death. I personally believe that death is not the end. But I also believe that describing that life in dualistic terms, as heaven and hell, and interpreting salvation primarily in terms of going to heaven, has provided a poor context for thinking Biblically about salvation.

The life of Israel with God was markedly different from that of any other people. This does not mean that God was not present and active elsewhere in human history. To deny that would be to deny that Israel understood God rightly. Nevertheless, the salvation we have received and are receiving, and for which we hope, is bound up with Israel's history. Jesus' work cannot be separated from that context. If we understand salvation in continuity with the understanding of Israel and especially of Jesus, there is no other savior.

Does this mean that there was no salvation in Israel before Jesus and has been none since? Certainly not. Jesus is part of the ongoing saving work of that divine reality we know as Christ. God has continued that work among those Jews who did not follow Jesus. Christians have paid far too little attention to this in our understanding of salvation.

But it was in and through Jesus that this salvific working of God broke radically through ethnic boundaries. It was in and through the

Christ-event that Gentiles in large numbers became engrafted into the history of God's saving work in Israel. Furthermore, although most of the ingredients of Jesus' message and even of the interpretation of Jesus' work may be found in Jewish tradition prior to and independent of Jesus, the Christ-event as a whole introduced a new understanding of salvation that has marked the Christian community. For us the cross, for good and ill, plays a role it had not played in Israel before Jesus and has not played there since.

Thus, Christians are not *only* engrafted into Israel. We are also called and shaped by the Christ event in new ways. The way God has continued to work salvifically in Israel is not identical with the way God has worked in the Church. We hope that some day Israel will reclaim Jesus as its own, that its inclusion of Jesus will play a role in shaping the future Israel's experience of God's salvation. We know that we Gentiles are already benefiting from recent Jewish studies of Jesus, and we can hope that as Jews continue to reclaim the Jewish Jesus, we Christians will come to a fuller understanding of God's intentions for us as well.

Clearly our relation to Judaism is fundamental, intimate, and unique. How we understand this relation has been from the first central to the theological tradition. Our errors in defining it have cost us dearly. They have been disastrous for Jews living in our midst.

If we understand salvation in this way, then, are there other "saviors" in human history? I do not think so. We can detect Christ's saving work everywhere, but many follow other spiritual leaders whose purposes and goals are not identical with what we mean by salvation. They have not located themselves in a Biblical type of salvation history.

There is another and quite different question. Do other key figures in the history of religions contribute to what we Christians know as salvation? To that question the answer is, resoundingly, Yes. There is much in other traditions that contributes to realization of a world in which God's will is universally done.

Many of the contributions of other religious ways parallel what we already have in Israel and in Christianity. It has been pointed out that something like the Golden Rule can be found in many traditions. Hans Küng has recently formulated an extensive global ethic to which representatives of many traditions can subscribe. He believes, with

justification, that peace among the religions is essential to world peace. He also believes that such peace can be advanced as we recognize how far we can go together in supporting movements toward justice, righteousness, sustainability, and human dignity. If we assume that peace rather than conquest is the way to the Realm of God, then working with one another toward a peaceful world is surely an advance toward that full salvation that we image as the Realm of God.

But is the only contribution that other traditions can make to the coming of the Realm of God one that we also can make? No! In the case of Israel we are specifically told to expect something more of the Jews, and I noted that above. Paul knew nothing of Islam, and next to nothing of the religious traditions of India and China. But when Christians later discovered them, they learned from them much that they had not previously known. As time has passed, some Christians have abandoned their faith in order to benefit more fully from the wisdom of other great traditions. Other Christians have appropriated from them elements that could be incorporated into their own tradition.

One of the most interesting illustrations of this dual process is Buddhism. Especially in its Zen form this has been presented persuasively in the United States by such great missionaries as D.T. Suzuki. Millions of non-Asian Americans have been deeply influenced. Some have converted from Christianity to Buddhism. Others, such as Thomas Merton, have believed they could be Buddhist as well as Christian. These have introduced Buddhist practices of meditation extensively into Catholic monasteries. In Japan, it has been said, there may be as many Christians as Buddhists practicing Zen meditation.

Another form of Buddhism is to be found in South Asia. There Buddhist leaders have a stronger sense of responsibility for their whole societies than has been true in Eastern Asia. For example, Sri Ariyaratne has led what is surely one of the most impressive programs of social action anywhere in the world. His followers spend their mornings in meditation in order to free themselves from the ego that can otherwise so easily taint and distort their actions. In my judgment, what they are doing in Sri Lanka is on the way to the Realm of God. How much more effective would much of our Christian activism be if it were less distorted by ego-involvement!

At quite another level, Christians are learning much from Buddhism. For historical reasons, Christianity formulated its theology chiefly in Greek categories. Much of this was beneficial, but the union of Biblical and Greek thinking entrenched a destructive dualism between spirit and flesh, soul and body, humanity and nature. Today most Christians want to repudiate these dualisms, but they are so pervasive in Western thought that they keep reappearing in theology as well.

The most thorough effort in human history to purge language and thought of dualisms of this sort was that of the Buddhists. They saw that a tendency toward dualistic thinking is very deeply entrenched in human life in all civilizations. Hence they did not treat it as a particular problem for Indians or Chinese, but rather as a human one. Their analyses of the problem and its outcome and the practices through which they freed themselves from it are unique in their profundity and effectiveness.

My argument, of course, is that there is much in Buddhism that contributes to the salvation of the whole world symbolized by the Realm of God, much that is absent from the Jewish and Christian traditions. For Christians to refuse to learn because this wisdom comes to them from outside their own tradition would not be an expression of faith. Indeed, resistance to truth because it comes from a new source is an expression of lack of faith. If we trust Christ, we will not fear wisdom whatever its origin. We can accept Gautama as the unique teacher and embodiment of enlightenment, in other words, as the Buddha.

My conclusion is that Christ is the only Savior. But for Christ's saving work to succeed, those who witness to it and seek to cooperate with it should be open to all that God has done in the world in other communities as well as ours. That God has worked among those outside the Church as well as among those within it should be no surprise to a reader of the Bible. That what God has accomplished there may supplement and enrich what we have inherited through our own tradition in no way diminishes the unique importance and saving value of that tradition. It does warn us against an idolatrous attitude toward our own tradition. The great strength of our tradition is that it points us forward to a future that transcends the past and present, one that can be enriched by the contributions of all people.

IV

The unity of the Church lies in the shared origin of all of its expressions. It began with faith in Christ and all its branches live by that faith. In spite of that unity its present form is fragmented, and worldwide the fragmentation continues to increase. If this means simply institutional divisions, that would not concern us greatly. But more often it means mutual rejections and denial to the other of authentic faith. The Body of Christ is not merely divided, it is broken into warring factions.

The visible and harmonious unity of the Body, we believe, is part of God's will for the world. We hope for that as we hope for God's will to be done in every dimension of the world's life. And we try to identify here and now how new brokenness can be avoided and how old wounds may be healed.

Meanwhile the Church witnesses to the unity of all humanity as well. This unity, too, lies in its origins. Whereas once we pointed to the Garden of Eden, now we recognize that our shared origins are in Africa. This does not matter theologically. What does matter is that we recognize all people as children of God in whom God works graciously for the salvation of the world. This universal working of God was recognized in Israel as nowhere else, so that it was there that the unity of humanity was identified not only in the common origin of all but also in the common destiny—the hope that God's will will truly be done on earth as in heaven. We who have come to share this vision and to discern Christ at work everywhere have now the opportunity both to celebrate all that Christ is doing and also to learn and appropriate from other traditions so as, more effectively, to live from and toward the Realm of God.

The Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity is delivered annually by an internationally recognized ecumenical scholar, and is intended to witness to the vision of Christian unity, which inspired the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Rev. Dr. Peter Ainslie, III. Dr. Ainslie (1867-1934), a distinguished ecumenist, was the minister of Christian Temple, the Disciples congregation in Baltimore, Maryland, and the first president of the Council on Christian Unity.

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BY

JOHN B. COBB, JR.

Webster Groves Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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