

Introduction to William Stringfellow, “The Unity of the Church as the Witness of the Church”

BILL WYLIE-KELLERMANN*

William Stringfellow was an Episcopal layperson and theologian, author of sixteen books and, significantly for this article, a participant in the global ecumenical movement. In 1956, having just graduated from Harvard Law School, he joined the East Harlem Protestant Parish to do street law in New York City. It was from there that he began to comprehend and write about the “principalities and powers,” effectively bringing them back onto the map of biblical theology and social ethics. In 1962 Stringfellow was on the panel querying Karl Barth on Barth’s visit to the United States; he was the only panelist who was not an academically trained theologian, though he was fully capable of writing in that mode. He was made notorious when the great Swiss theologian turned to the audience and urged, “You should listen to this man.”

Stringfellow discerned in racism a principality, a demon, a spiritual structure with a life of its own. As a civil rights activist, he helped goad the white mainstream church into the freedom struggle.

Likewise, he recognized the power of death at work in militarism and so was also an early critic of the war in Vietnam. Subsequently, he and his partner, Anthony Towne, were indicted for “harboring a fugitive,” when Daniel Berrigan, SJ, as a guest in their home, was arrested

* Bill Wylie-Kellermann is a nonviolent community activist and United Methodist pastor, who most recently served St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Detroit. He is author of *Seasons of Faith and Conscience: Reflections on Liturgical Direct Action* (Orbis/Wipf & Stock, 2008); *William Stringfellow: Essential Writings* (Orbis, 2013); *Where the Waters Go Around: Beloved Detroit* (Cascade Books, 2017); *Principalities in Particular: A Practical Theology of the Powers That Be* (Fortress Press, 2017); and *Dying Well: The Resurrected Life of Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann* (Cass Community Publishing House, forthcoming in 2018). He has recently resumed work on a biography of Stringfellow, and served as the series editor for the republication of all Stringfellow’s books by Wipf and Stock Press.

by the FBI for antiwar action and underground resistance. Consider it an event of Christian unity.

The unity and integrity of the church were also at issue when he advised the first Episcopal women priests ordained in Philadelphia. He served as canonical lawyer to William Wendt, who faced charges for welcoming one of the eleven, Alison Cheek, to celebrate eucharist in his church—a sacramental act of that unity.

It is pertinent to this article to understand Stringfellow's own ecumenical involvement. As an undergraduate, and even through law school (so for more than a decade) he was active in the World Student Christian Movement, including participation in the 1946 post-war World Conference of Christian Youth in Oslo, Norway. There he was touched by the confessional witness of the anti-Nazi resistance, as well as by students from Latin America and the Far East. The politics of church unity, east and west, north and south, were vivid.

At the time this essay appeared he represented the Episcopal Church on the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, a work that for years he honored and loved. This paper might well have circulated there. In the wake of defending the women priests, he was summarily removed from the position.

Though this piece may appear abstract, its ethics and politics have concrete import, after the manner of Pentecost itself, in which public unity invited arrest, harassment, and martyrdom. In the period of this publication, Stringfellow created a stir at the first Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago (1963). In addressing white supremacy, he all but quotes this article:

In other words, the issue here is not equality among humanity, but unity. The issue is not some common spiritual values, not natural law, nor middle axioms. *The issue is baptism.* The issue is the unity of all humankind wrought by God in the life and work of Christ. Baptism is the sacrament of that unity of all people in God.¹

What follows unpacks that ecclesiology. And it opens the way on what he called “the ethics of reconciliation.”

¹ William Stringfellow, “Care Enough to Weep,” *The Witness*, December, 21, 1963.

The Unity of the Church as the Witness of the Church

WILLIAM STRINGFELLOW*

I do not pray for these only, but for those who are to believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. (*John 17:20–21*)

The unity of the Church of Christ is a gift of God bestowed in the birth and constitution of the Church at Pentecost.

The unity of the Church is a *gift*, not something sought or grasped or attained, but, as with any gift, something which may be refused or dishonored or misused.

The gift of unity is, in the first instance, in its origination, something which belongs to God. He gives at Pentecost something of His own, something of Himself, His Holy Spirit, to the Church.

The unity given to the Church at Pentecost is vouchsafed for all men baptized into the body of the Church since Pentecost. It is this same unity received and enjoyed within the Church among the members of the Church and manifested and verified in the life of the Church in this world which is the witness of the Church to the world.

The Integrity of Witness in Unity

The unity which God gives the Church is not given for the sake of the Church as such to be secreted within the Church, or to be merely prized or praised therein, but the unity of the Church is given

* William Stringfellow (1928–1985), theologian, lawyer, and social activist, was a graduate of Harvard Law School and the London School of Economics. His many books include *Free in Obedience* (1964), *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (1973), and *The Politics of Spirituality* (1984). This article was originally published in volume 46, no. 4 (October 1964) of the *Anglican Theological Review* (394–400).

to be the content and shape of the Church's love for and service to the world.

Nor does God give unity to the Church for His own sake, as if He needed anything at all, even the unity of those who call upon His name. The gift of unity is not an act of necessity for God, but an act of generosity of God.

It is for the sake of the world, for the sake of all persons and powers who do not or will not call upon God's name, that unity is given to the Church, for it is in the unity of the Church that the world may behold the unity into which God invites the whole of the world.

The unity of the Church of Christ which is the gift of God is the same unity revealed in the world in Christ Himself, that is, man reconciled to God and, within that unity, reconciled within himself, with all men and with all things in the whole of creation. This is the unity which the Church is given and which the Church embodies on behalf of the world which has no unity at all. It is the unity which the Church receives as the representative of the world before God. The unity given to the Church is the exemplification and forerunner of the restoration of the unity of the whole of creation in Christ. *Hence the very unity of the Church is the authentic witness of the Church.*

Where the Church denies or rejects or perverts the gift of unity the witness of the Church to the world is lost. That is a loss which the Church suffers even more acutely than the world, though it must be remembered that God thereby suffers no loss whatever. The disunity of the Church does not stop God's love for the world, nor does the disunity of the Church modify or diminish God's witness to Himself. The disunity of the Church, rather, deprives the Church of the joy of witnessing to God's care for and work in the world.

And precisely because God's love for the world is not dependent upon the unity of the Church, and His action in the world is not mitigated when the Church does not witness to Him, the world is not pardoned from failure to acknowledge and honor God by the mere disunity of the Church and immobility of the Church's witness. The world is not excused for unbelief by the dissipation of the Church's unity or the collapse of the Church's witness in unity, but the world is thereby abandoned to death by the only people born of the resurrection from death.

Disunity does not compromise or interrupt the Word of God for the world, but it does distort and even destroy the Church's witness to

the Word of God in the world. The recovery of unity—of visible unity, of a unity which the world can see, comprehend, and recognize—nowadays in the Church, as in some earlier times, does not mainly involve questions of ecclesiastical uniformity, liturgical conformity, dogmatic nicety, regularity of discipline or homogeneity of polity, but it does essentially involve the establishment and existence of the Church as a living people, a holy nation, manifest and militant, in this world, which embraces as its witness to a broken, divided and fallen world all diversities of mankind and which empirically transcends here and now and already all that separates, alienates and segregates men from themselves, each other and the rest of creation.

The witness of the Church to the world is to be the image of what the whole of creation is and is to be in the final reconciliation, and that witness requires a unity in the Church which is notorious in all the world and which the world can directly and plainly behold. Any specific schemes or proposals for merger or consolidation among the sects and denominations, any plans or prospects for reunion of the Church, must grasp and serve this end: unity is integral to witness; the Church exists merely for the sake of the world.

The Sacrament of Unity

The unity of the Church which is the witness of the Church is not necessarily a monolithic institutional unification of the several churches—a “super church”—for the very reason that the witness requires a unity encompassing all diversities of human life. But that unity does inherently involve a total community and organic union of all who are baptized professing the same Biblical and Apostolic faith, living in communion with one another now, and with the whole of the people of God who have gone before and who are yet to be, and sharing a manifold but common ministry for the world.

The ecclesiology and polity of the total community of the Church are not matters of indifference or unimportance, but they are secondary and auxiliary to the unity of the actual common life of the Church. The style of the common life of the Church and of the members of the Church is most manifest and most comprehensive in the sacraments given and ordained by Christ Himself: in baptism and in the holy communion. There can be no unity which is witness unless there be both a common understanding and universal recognition, within the whole Church, of the baptism of each member of the Church.

Nor can there be such a unity of the Church lest all and any who are baptized be welcome into the common life of the Church which is the holy communion.

Both baptism and the holy communion are ecumenical sacraments in the broadest meaning of ecumenical, that is, both are sacraments of the unity of all mankind in Christ. It is too misleading to the world as well as to many church people to speak of these sacraments as sacraments of the unity of the Church as such. They are sacraments of that, all right, but only in the sense in which the Church is and is called to be the image of the world in reconciliation. Baptism and the communion—far from being mere esoteric religious rituals—are most concretely political and social in character. Baptism confesses the faith and experience of the Church, and of the people of the Church, in all times and places in the grace of God in Christ reconciling the whole world including, now, this particular person being baptized, and marks the initiation and guarantee of the new life of the one baptized in this world in the society of the Church. Holy Communion is the characteristic form of the new life given to men in this world as the society of the Church and at once recalls and re-presents and enacts the whole history of God's grace in the world from the beginning of the world, and anticipates and calls for and expects the consummation of the work of God's grace in the end of the world, and celebrates and enjoys and relies upon the vitality of God's grace in the world, here and now, in the present age between Creation and the Eschaton. Let it be emphasized that the holy communion is not a celebration of God's presence in any sanctuary or shrine, but it is the celebration of God's presence and activity in the world and those who gather now and then in a sanctuary of the Church do so as a witness to the world that God's presence and action in the world is truly reconciling since those who gather have been and are in fact already reconciled, despite their sin, despite all their worldly cares, despite all their different conditions, despite any affliction common to men, despite even the power of death itself, despite everything known and suffered in this world by men.

Unity as witness requires a recovery in the presently separated churches of the sacramental integrity of both baptism and the holy communion, and that may too easily imply that, since the validity of baptism in most denominations and even sects is already generally acknowledged in the several churches, the main course to unity is inter-communion. Surely inter-communion, such as that which exists

between the Episcopal Church and the Philippine Independent Church or between the Church of England and the Church of Sweden, is a venture in unity. But inter-communion between churches in different places, such as in these examples, is a different matter, from the point of view of unity as witness, than inter-communion among churches in the same place. It is a witness to the unity of the Church if an Anglican visiting Sweden is welcomed to the holy communion in the Church of Sweden. But it is no witness to that unity if there were inter-communion between, say, Lutherans and Episcopalians in America and there still existed in the cities and towns of the land separated congregations of Lutherans and Episcopalians. For how is such separation to be explained to the world or understood by the world? How is the communion a sacrament of common life if we now and again share the Lord's table but then are separated in the other practices of our lives? While inter-communion between churches in different places is a step toward unity which is witness, inter-communion without organic union among churches in the same place would, I suggest, further confuse the witness of the Church. Yet inter-communion with organic union among churches in the same place faces the obstacles which are perhaps most difficult to resolve for the sake of unity, that is, the so-called non-theological divisions among the churches. Inter-communion without organic union would permit the various congregations of different denominations in the same place to cling a little longer to that which divides and distinguishes them one from another according to class or wealth or social status or race or ethnic origin or language or local tradition. Inter-communion with organic union locally would mean that one congregation would have to share its endowment and investments with other uniting congregations. Some pastors might lose their jobs. And if organic union went so far as to involve the reorganization of dioceses and conferences and similar ecclesiastical jurisdictions, then some bishops would no longer have sees and some district superintendents would have to surrender their offices and power. Local inter-communion and organic union would, in other words, most profoundly test whether the Church will be the Church whose unity truly is a witness to the world because it in fact transcends those very things—like class and status and property and all the other vested interests—which divide the world and alienate men from each other.

Yet any unity is too cheap which merely represents a formal theological entente or an abstract reciprocity respecting baptism and the

communion, without a resolution in the organic union of the Church of all the secular divisions of the several churches. Comity may be more faithful and mature in a Christian sense than hostility but it is much less than the unity which is witness.

Or, to put it all very bluntly, the unity which is witness inherently requires an organic union of *all* the churches in a shared common life in all things.

Unity means not just friendly relations and fraternal collaboration—nor even intercommunion—among the several churches of Protestantism Orthodoxy, Anglicanism and Rome, as welcome as that may be, but in the end it means the organic union of all the churches for the sake of the world.

The Apostolic Precedent of Unity

In the end, unity means *that* because that is what unity means in the beginning of the Church. The unity of the Church which is witness to the world is a gift of God in Pentecost. As the account relates (Acts 2) in Pentecost is God filling the Apostles with His Holy Spirit in a way which shows on-lookers and strangers the universality of the Word of God, in a way which discloses that the Word of God is addressed to all men in all times in all the world, in a way, in other words, in which it is clear that the Word of God is present and active in this world and accessible to every man whoever he be, wherever he be, in a way, indeed, in which the on-looker is converted. In Pentecost, the gift of unity, the gift of the Spirit which is one and the same for all who receive it, the gift of the Spirit which is unifying, is given to the Church in a way which is versatile enough to reach and embrace all men in all of their diversities and divisions and separations. Pentecost is, remember, a public *witness* to the Word of God. Thus, though in the multitude, on the day of Pentecost, there are men of every tongue and nation and station, each hears the testimony of the Apostles to the Word of God in his own language, in a way which he may understand and believe in spite of any worldly distinction between himself and any other man. The unity given in Pentecost transcends all worldly disunities, and the worldly divisions common among men do not threaten the unity given to the Church.

At the same time, though the gift of the Spirit be manifold, it is not divisive of the Church. Though there be varieties of work and

service within the ministry and witness of the Church, each is a manifestation of the same Spirit, each attests to the same Word of God.

The Apostolic precedent of unity is, at once, a unity entrusted to the Church for the world which heals all worldly divisions and a unity within the Church encompassing the full diversity of service and function.

It is that unity which is nowadays to be besought of God, for the churches nowadays suffer both from the separations common to the world, which, in the view here, can only be resolved in organic union, and from divisions related to the manifold nature of the gift of the Spirit.

Consider, now, the latter.

It is clear that the manifold gift of the Spirit—the gift of the charisms—the utterance of knowledge, healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, tongues, discernment of spirits, administration, and the like (1 Cor. 12:4–11, 27–31; Eph. 4:11–13) are given to the Church, distributed and appointed among the members of the whole Church, for the edification of the Church and for service and witness to the world. The charisms are the particular ministries exercised within the total ministry of the Church. Not every member of the Church has the same specific ministry. Nor does one member exercise all of the ministries (although Saint Paul seems to have had more than his share!). Some of the charisms, but not all of them, are associated with offices in the Church, as with pastors or teachers, or with administrators or leaders. (It must be a terrible comfort and disquiet to a bishop to know that administration is a charismatic gift!) But all of the varieties of ministries have their place within the total ministry and all are essential to the unity of the Church, according to the Apostolic precedent.

To observe the Apostolic precedent of unity with respect to the varieties of ministries, I suggest, broadens the meaning of Apostolic succession, an issue which remains such a stumbling block to unity and, specifically to organic union of the Church. Generally the term “Apostolic succession” refers to the unbroken succession and authority of the ecclesiastical ministry only, beginning with the Apostles, together with the transmission through the ecclesiastical succession of the Apostolic teaching. (As far as I can see, the transmission of the Apostolic teaching is in itself a wholly sufficient reason for the institution of Apostolic succession in the narrow sense). But in a

broader sense Apostolic succession is something which pertains to the whole Church, and to all baptized people, embracing all the ministries of the Church, and entrusting to every Christian the witness to the Gospel in faith in the Apostolic message. It is succession in this sense which is of the essential being of the Church, and it is succession in this sense which follows from the Apostolic precedent of unity. Within this context, then, the succession of the ecclesiastical ministry through the episcopacy is a safeguard and sign of the Apostolic succession of the whole Church, but it does not displace or obviate the Apostolic succession of the whole Church and of all baptized people, and it, in turn, itself is safeguarded by the submission of all Christians to the authority and veracity of the Apostolic faith and teaching and by the recognition of all the varieties of ministries within the one Church of Christ.