

The Catholic Spirit of Protestantism:

A Very Methodist Take on the Third Article, Visible Unity and Ecumenism

Tom Greggs

Protestants have a reputation for being schismatic. Were it not enough that they broke with Rome in the sixteenth century, from the very off Protestants have been divided among themselves: Luther and Zwingli could not find agreement over the nature of Holy Communion at the Marburg Colloquy; more profoundly, Radical and Magisterial Reform divided; and ever since the Reformation, there is has been division upon division of churches who have all protested against their parent church that it has not proclaimed Scripture or performed church practice or celebrated the sacraments or ordered itself or articulated its doctrine correctly. Moving to Scotland in recent years, I have been particularly aware of this propensity to divide. Reading Scottish church history can feel a little similar to reading a script from an episode of *Dallas*: unending fall outs, divisions and divorces, followed by the odd make-up and ostentatiously glamorous wedding. Diagrams of Protestant church history can bear an unhealthy similarity to complex plumbing maps, with lines dividing off and coming back together in almost inscrutable ways. It is rumoured indeed that one particularly narrow and exclusive Protestant sect even has a hymn that goes:

Heaven's not a big place;
It won't be very crammed.
We alone are the chosen few,
And all the rest stand damned

While this is obviously a satire on schismatic propensities within Protestantism, there can nevertheless often exist (particularly within ecumenical circles) the sense that it is the Reformation's fault that we no longer have visible ecclesial unity in the West. As such, some ecumenical discourses can give the appearance (if they really and honestly examine themselves) route plans for the journey back to Rome en route to Constantinople.

This paper considers what catholicity and visible unity in an ecumenical context might mean for a Protestant family of churches;¹ and in relation to the understanding of catholicity and visible unity offered, how to account for the plurality of churches and opinions that the Protestant emphasis on conscience seems to give rise to. The paper seeks to locate the theological reasoning for a Protestant account of visible unity in proximity to the way in which Protestantism understands the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the institutional church. In articulating the relationship between ecclesiology and Pneumatology thus, the

¹ In referring here to the Protestant family of churches, the paper primarily refers to those Protestant churches which are non-episcopally structured, though the points herein may well be directly relevant to episcopal Protestant churches as well. The paper notes that particularly the Anglican churches would require a more detailed engagement with the office of the bishop and the role of episcopacy in maintaining unity. While the points in this paper does not necessary debar such an account, for historically episcopal Protestant churches, a more detailed engagement with the office, role and function of the bishop would need to supplement the account offered herein. To that end, the reader is directed to the helpful and nuanced account of episcopacy in the context of ecumenism in Paul Avis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole?* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), esp. ch. 7; and his *Becoming a Bishop: A Theological Handbook of Episcopal Ministry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), esp. chs 7 and 8.

paper wishes to offer what might potentially be a corrective to the dogmatic topography of ecclesiology within the broader Protestant tradition in order to make it possible to understand the manner in which Protestantism can understand itself as a visibly catholic church.

The title of this paper arises in part from one of John Wesley's sermons, 'A Catholic Spirit', and it is this sermon with which I will be in dialogue throughout the paper. The sermon obviously refers to spirit with a lower case 's'. However, this article seeks to examine how the account of catholicity offered by Wesley relates to a particular understanding of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's work in and in relation to the church; and to unpack the constructive benefits of this account for a Protestant understanding of visible unity in the context of ecumenical discourse. Section one of this paper will exegete Wesley's sermon. This sermon is described to offer an hypothesis about the manner in which Protestantism understands visible unity and catholicity. The second section of this paper seeks to explore what is meant in theological terms by visible unity from a Protestant perspective. The third section offers a theological reason for this re-description of visible unity, locating the church in relation to the work of the Spirit, and considering the significance of dogmatic topography in placing ecclesiology in the proximate dogmatic res of pneumatology. The conclusion points to the sanctifying work of God the Spirit in the lives of believers, and its effects, as the basis for catholicity in a context of the multiple illuminative work of the Spirit.

1. Wesley's Sermon 'A Catholic Spirit'

John Wesley's sermon, 'A Catholic Spirit', is based on a text from 2 Kings 10 concerning Jehu:

And when he was departed thence, he lighted on Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him. And he saluted him, and said to him, Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? And Jehonadab answered, It is. If it be, give me thine hand.²

Wesley takes this text as his basis to explore relationships between Christians from different Christian traditions.³ Wesley's argument is that this is a text that can be used as a way of accounting for Christian brotherly and sisterly love. The question Christians of different traditions need to ask each other is the question that Jehu asks of Jehonadab: 'Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?' Wesley uses his exegesis of this text to differentiate between thinking alike and walking alike in the faith, and bemoans that failing to think alike is often the grounds and justification for failures in Christian love, and failures of Christians to share visibly in fellowship and the work of the faith. Christians who do not agree with the form of the other's Christianity should, according to Wesley, focus on the question of love for the other and whether their *hearts* are one such that they can walk together, rather than

² 2 Kings 10:15; as cited in John Wesley, 'Catholic Spirit', Sermon 39, *The Works of John Wesley Volume 2: Sermons II*, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 79-95. Henceforth, 'Catholic Spirit' will be cited as CS with section and paragraph given.

The quotations from Wesley are quoted exactly, and have not been repaired in relation to gender inclusive language.

³ Although clearly written more than a century before the nascence of the ecumenical movement, Wesley's writing of this sermon coincided with the writing and publication of his open Letter to a Roman Catholic, which also stressed an emphasis on a right heart, and a greater openness and degree of tolerance than might be expected for a churchman of his generation. See Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodist* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 173.

agreement between them in relation to opinions about the church.⁴ Wesley does not expect there to be an thorough-going and absolute need for what he terms ‘external union’ between people who have different opinions about the faith or practise different modes of worship. The question he poses is this: ‘Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?’ And for Wesley the answer is clear: ‘Without all doubt we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.’⁵ For Wesley, love of the one with whom he disagrees trumps the disagreement that exists.

Wesley’s prioritization of love of the other even in contexts of disagreement does not mean that for him questions of the truth are or should be set aside; or that one should pretend to agree. Instead, there is to be a recognition of the liberty of the Spirit present here in the context of disagreement: ‘Every wise man, therefore, will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions, than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs.’⁶ The single criterion that is to be applied in relation to a member of the faith with whom one disagrees is the refrain question: Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? This point is something to which Wesley returns at the end of the sermon. Almost as a post-script, Wesley states that there are three issues that the listener or reader should not confuse his point over. First, for Wesley, there is no sense that doctrine does not matter. Wesley does not subscribe to latitudinarian thought. Wesley writes that: ‘a catholic spirit is not *speculative latitudinarianism*. It is not an indifference to all opinions. This is the spawn of hell, not the

⁴ CS, I.3.

⁵ CS, I.4.

⁶ CS, I.6.

offspring of heaven.’⁷ Second, a catholic spirit does not mean latitudinarianism in practice either. Wesley states that a catholic spirit is:

not any kind of *practical latitudinarianism*. It is not indifference as to public worship or as to the outward manner of performing it. This likewise would not be a blessing but a curse. ... But the man of a truly catholic spirit, having weighed all things in the balance of the sanctuary, has no doubt, no scruple at all concerning that particular mode of worship wherein he joins. He is clearly convinced that *this* manner of worshipping God is both scriptural and rational.⁸

Third, there can be no indifference according to Wesley in relation to which congregation it is that one chooses to worship within. One should belong to a particular congregation with particular patterns of order: someone with a truly catholic spirit ‘is fixed in his congregation as well as his principles. He is united to one, not only in spirit, but by all the outward ties of Christian fellowship. There he partakes of all the ordinances of God.’⁹ Catholicity for Wesley is not an account of universality within the church by virtue of relativism or a laissez-faire attitude to forms of church order or governance, or the truthfulness of doctrinal standards and statements. However, for him, disagreement over such matters should not prevent loving Christian fellowship in relation to those of the Christian faith persuaded differently in relation to denominational commitments. Put otherwise, catholicity for Wesley, is not brought about by a negative denial of the significance of doctrines and practices, but is brought about by a positive loving enactment of fellowship in the context of disagreement: catholicity is the

⁷ CS, III.1, italics original.

⁸ CS, III.2.

⁹ CS, III.3.

context in which we learn to disagree better, to improve the quality of our differences and disagreements within the Christian faith.¹⁰

Wesley recognises that there has always been difference in the church in relation to beliefs about God and the form of practice that worship of God should take,¹¹ and that it is down to the individual and the individual's conscience to choose which form of the faith he or she should follow.¹² Here, Wesley points to the difference between the creator and the creature in

¹⁰ Scriptural Reasoning follows this logic in relation to members of other faiths, and it is from colleagues in Scriptural Reasoning that I owe this insight; see See Ben Quash, 'Deep Calls to Deep: The Practice of Scriptural Reasoning', available at

<http://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/resources/scripturalreasoningresources/deepcallstodeep>

(accessed 3rd June 2016). However, the same logic can be applied ecumenically as much as between religions.

¹¹ CS, I.8. For an outworking of the kind of logic on display in this sermon, see Wesley's sermon which takes up the question of the imputation and impartation of Christ's righteousness (a point of debate between himself and the Calvinists): 'The Lord our Righteousness,' Sermon 20, *The Works of John Wesley Volume 1: Sermons I*, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 444-65. Cf. Heitzenrater, *Wesley*, 221-3. For a discussion of Wesley's understanding of the variety of approaches to the pattern and order of the church even in apostolic times, see Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (London: Epworth, 1960), 145-9. Also of relevance as a contrastive case is Wesley's sermon, 'On Schism,' Sermon 75, *The Works of John Wesley Volume 3: Sermons III*, edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 58-69.

¹² CS, I.9.

terms of knowledge of the Deity: God has not given ‘any *creature* power to constrain another to walk by his own rule.’¹³ Wesley goes on to state: ‘God has given no right to any of the children of men thus to lord it over the conscience of his brethren. But every man must judge for himself, as every man must give an account of himself to God.’¹⁴ Modern individualism is plain for all to see here, but the theological basis of this for Wesley is grounded in the creator-creature distinction and the very otherness of God (as much as the rights of the individual and her conscience). Since no creature has the mind of God, no creature can impose his or her view on another: the implications of this distinction does not make the truth unimportant, but the point at stake is one which recognizes that none of us possess a monopoly on the truth of God.¹⁵ Geographical location also cannot be the reason for a person being a member of a particular denomination: the idea that if one is born in England one should be Anglican and so forth; the ecclesiastical settlement of the Augsburg Compromise (*cuius regio, eius religio*). Wesley confesses that he was once a zealous believer in this idea, but has come to reject it since, if the place of one’s birth had been the basis for denominational affiliation, there could not have been a Reformation: instead, there should only be the right of private judgement on which, he states, the whole of the Reformation stands.¹⁶

¹³ CS I.9, emphasis.

¹⁴ CS, I.9.

¹⁵ CS I.10. This point about not having the monopoly on truth about God is something I have devoted considerable discussion to in my *Theology against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (London: Continuum, 2011).

¹⁶ CS, I.10.

Having cleared this ground, Wesley moves on to speak materially about what it is positively that he believes a catholic spirit should consist of in a believer. Stating that he believes his own practice and doctrine to be ‘truly primitive and apostolical’ but does not intend to enforce his belief onto another, Wesley advocates his belief that the basis on which he should unite with another in love should be a question not of denominational affiliation, order, liturgy or sacramental beliefs, but of whether the other’s heart is right with one’s own heart, as one’s own heart is right with the other’s.¹⁷ The differences in opinion should stand, and can be talked of in a convenient season and in the context of a mutual recognition of the rightness of each other’s hearts; but the principal concern should be an outward posture of love towards the other.

Wesley works out the content of what the basis for this posture means in seven steps. First, Wesley asks questions of belief in God. Wesley does so in a manner which mirrors creedal formulations themselves, but – significantly – he relates the articles of faith to the *life* of faith. The first question, he states, implied by the question ‘Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?’ is the question of whether one’s heart is right with God: ‘Is they heart right with God?’ asks Wesley.¹⁸ For him, seemingly, to have a heart which is right with God is to believe in the classical attributes of the Divine Life, and in God’s justice, mercy, truth, and providential governance.

Second, Wesley wishes to establish the same with Jesus Christ. Wesley is not only concerned that one believes in Christ, but, he asks further:

¹⁷ CS, I.11.

¹⁸ CS, I.12.

Is he ‘revealed in’ thy *soul*? Dost thou ‘know Jesus Christ and him crucified’? Does he ‘*dwell* in thee, and thou in him’? Is he ‘formed in thy *heart* by faith’? Having absolutely disclaimed all thy own works, thy own righteousness, hast thou ‘submitted thyself unto the righteousness of God’, ‘which is by faith in Christ Jesus’?¹⁹

Wesley finds one whose heart is right as his is with theirs in one who has received the *benefits* of Christ’s work of salvation, expressed by him in terms of justification by grace through faith. This clearly establishes some level of generous doctrinal commitment in his catholicity around receiving the works and benefits of Christ, but these works and benefits are in themselves pietistically described in their effects: it is necessary to know Christ and his works *in one’s soul*. The pietistic posture seems more important than the Christological dogmatic formulae.

From this point, the third criterion is established in relation to the response and posture of the believer to God and God’s work of salvation. Wesley sees someone who has a catholic spirit as someone whose faith is *energoumene di agapes* -- ‘filled with the energy of love’. Put otherwise, a catholic spirit will exist in one who is on a path of *de facto* sanctification – one who lives a life of grateful thanks to God.²⁰

This spiritual posture, fourth, should impel the one in whom one can identify a catholic spirit to good works. Wesley sees the one with a catholic spirit as employed in doing the will of the Father, and in aiming in work, business and conversation at glorifying God in all that one does.²¹ The seriousness with which one should do this is, fifth, as a result of the urgency of

¹⁹ CS I.13, emphasis added.

²⁰ CS I.14.

²¹ CS I.15.

the gospel: the reality of the possibility of hell should provoke the believer to hate all evil ways and to avoid sin.²² The way that this sense of urgency is to be recognised and the law fulfilled rests, sixth, for Wesley, in the one with a catholic spirit loving their neighbour and enemies, feeling moved by them, and praying for them.²³ This love has to be shown, seventh, in acts and works – in doing good to all people, giving to them, and ‘assisting them both in body and soul.’²⁴

For Wesley, if a Christian is able to fulfil these conditions, or desires to fulfil them, then he or she can be adjudged to have a heart which is right as one’s own heart is right towards that other.²⁵ This identifies a Christian with whom one can walk. These seven conditions are the conditions for Wesley of a catholic Christian faith, and are, as such, the basis on which one can have Christian unity with another from a different denomination or of a different doctrinal persuasion. That love of God and the other is the condition for Christian unity reduces the significance of the capacity of doctrine, liturgy, order or polity to be the basis on which the catholicity of a Christian is judged. There is no need, according to Wesley, for Christians to be of the same opinion; or to dispute points constantly; and fail to engage with each other as a result of these differences. Instead, the Christian with a catholic spirit is, like Jehu and Jehonadab, to walk together with others of the same spirit. At this point in the sermon, Wesley shifts the refrain from ‘Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?’ to the end of the verse: ‘give me thine hand.’²⁶ Wesley identifies examples of difference over

²² CS I.16.

²³ CS I.17.

²⁴ CS I.18.

²⁵ CS I.18.

²⁶ CS, II.1.

polity (between episcopal and Presbyterian order) and in sacramentology, and yet states that he does not want the Christians who hold different opinions on such matters to change their minds in relation to their commitments, only to be prepared – having satisfied the conditions of a catholic spirit – to walk in the faith with other Christians.²⁷ The Christian's concern should not be the relatively minor (to Wesley's mind) differences that exist between different denominations, but whether the self and the other love God and love humankind. Having described the seven conditions of a catholic spirit, Wesley *requires* four things of the one with a catholic spirit to walk with him in faith – four demonstrations, we might say, of *active catholicity*. First, he requires love from Christians of different traditions. This love, however, is a particular form of love – a love which is greater than love for neighbour or for enemy. Wesley requests of the other who can assent to his seven conditions:

‘If thine heart be right, as mine with thy heart’, then love me with a very tender affection, as a friend that is closer than a brother; as a brother in Christ, a fellow-citizen of the New Jerusalem, a fellow-soldier engaged in the same warfare, under the same Captain of our salvation. Love me as a companion in the kingdom and patience of Jesus, and a joint heir of his glory.²⁸

This kind of love, for Wesley, is a higher degree of love than that for the rest of human kind. Christians' love for each other should – as the saying goes – cover a multitude of sins such that whatever the other considers amiss in him should be pardoned in the hope that the grace of God will correct it, and whatever is considered wanting in him should be supplied through

²⁷ CS, II.2.

²⁸ CS, II.3.

the riches of the mercy of Jesus Christ.²⁹ In addition to this love, second, the one with a catholic spirit should pray for the other. Rather than argue with the other, Wesley commands the one with a catholic spirit to wrestle with God on the other's behalf that *God* (and not the believer) would correct what is amiss and supply that which is wanting. The one with a catholic spirit is to pray earnestly for the other, for the other's growth in faith in and love of God.³⁰ Third, these prayers should be accompanied by good works directed towards the other which have the intent of provoking the other also to love and good works (a competitive outstripping one another in love effectively) – that is to a more faithful and active form of discipleship.³¹ And fourth, the one with the catholic spirit can walk with the other in working together and joining together (even while retaining their own opinions and modes of worship) in the work of God, and in supporting the other in the other's work for the Kingdom (including speaking well of the other, sympathizing with them, and assisting them in any difficulty or distress).³² The catholic spirit which arises from a sanctified life must display this life in relation to the other (of different denominational affiliation and doctrinal commitments) in enacting these marks of sanctification in the joint journey of discipleship all Christians are to undertake. Differences of opinion do not require Christians to cut themselves off from one another. Instead, these differences require the Christian to orientate their love towards other Christians and – to a degree – to recognise that which is primary in the faith (a sanctified life in response to God's grace) and that which is secondary (distinctions in polity and theological commitment).

²⁹ CS, II.4. There is a parallel here with Augustine's interpretation of Cyprian during the Donatist controversy; see Augustine, *On Baptism: Against the Donatists*, Book 2.

³⁰ CS, II.5.

³¹ CS, II.6.

³² CS, II.7.

What are we to make of these claims of Wesley in the contemporary ecumenical context? It is to this that we now turn in addressing visible unity in Protestantism.

2. Visible Unity in Protestantism

In order to understand the significance of this move by Wesley, it is necessary to trace (albeit briefly) the idea of catholicity as it develops in the early centuries of the Christian church.³³

Classical patristic accounts of catholicity rest in figures such as Ignatius, Cyprian and Augustine. As early as Ignatius in the late first / early second century, the idea of unity for the church was connected innately to that of the church's polity and order. While clearly the need for Ignatius to make this case suggests that reality was otherwise in the church, and while as well the material content of the nature of the orders is not set out in a way that corresponds to present understandings, it is Ignatius who seems to connect the idea of unity under a bishop, and to the clergy who serve under him, to the idea of catholicity: the symbiotic relationship we might say between catholicity, apostolicity and the institutional forms of the church.

(Ignatius is, in fact, the first to coin the term 'catholic'.) The church is to be united, for Ignatius, as the clergy are to the bishop, so as to praise Jesus in 'unison' and 'harmony'.³⁴

The point, therefore, is not only that the church is subject to the bishop, but that the bishop in his apostolic authority teaches them how to be united to one another in Christ and fulfils the condition of ecclesial unity (or – we might say – catholicity). For Ignatius, the need for this unity is so that members of the church can be united so as not to fail at the last to offer the ultimate sacrifice to God in martyrdom, being confident in their unity in receiving the

³³ On this topic, see Mark J. Edwards, *Catholicity and Heresy in the Early Church*

(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009); and the classic, Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Mifflintown: Sigler, 1996).

³⁴ Ign.Eph., 4.

eucharist that they are ‘with undivided minds ... to share in the one common breaking of bread — the medicine of immortality, and the sovereign remedy by which we escape death and live in Jesus Christ for evermore’.³⁵ Unity under the bishop is the condition for the efficacy of the eucharist and this is in itself the way in which a martyr can be confident of immortality.

The *locus classicus* of the mature version of this account of Christian unity related to orders is found in St Cyprian. In Cyprian’s thought there is a clear relation of causation between the presence of appropriately ordained clergy and efficacy of the sacrifice of the eucharist.³⁶ It is this which guarantees the unity and universality of the church. It is only in being connected to the priest who stands under the apostolic authority of the bishop that the Christian can understand herself as a member of the church catholic. Cyprian states:

Does a man think he is with Christ when he acts in opposition to the bishops of Christ, when he cuts himself off from the society of His clergy and people? He is ... waging war upon God’s institutions. An enemy of the altar, a rebel against the sacrifice of Christ; giving up faith for perfidy, religion for sacrilege; an unruly servant, an undutiful son and hostile brother, despising the bishops and deserting the priests of God, he presumes to set up a new altar, to raise unauthorized voices in a rival liturgy, to profile the reality of the divine Victim by pseudo-sacrifices ...³⁷

³⁵ Ign.Eph., 20.

³⁶ Cyprian, *De Lapsis: The Unity of the Catholic Church*, trans. Maurice Bévenot (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 18.

³⁷ Cyprian, *Unity*, 17.

Only by being in full communion with a priest who is in full communion with his bishop (who is in communion with the bishop of Rome as Peter's successor and heir to the keys of the kingdom) is the Christian a true Christian: unity in the church exists only in this way – a visible expression which has a causal effect in guaranteeing salvation and preserving the Christian in the faith and in salvation through the sacrifice of the eucharist. For Cyprian, visible unity as thus expressed is the manner by which the church is able to preserve the unity of the body of Christ.³⁸ visible unity grounded in the institutions and polity of the church is the way in which catholicity is expressed. We see this emphatically in the discussions which follow his talk about the clergy:

God is one and Christ is one, and His Church is one; one is the faith, and one the people cemented together by harmony into the strong unity of a body. This unity cannot be split; that one body cannot be divided by any cleavage of its structure, nor cut up in fragments with its vitals torn apart. Nothing that is separated from the parent stock can ever live or breath apart; all hope of its salvation is lost.³⁹

What is key, however, for Cyprian is that this unity and catholicity are found in a set aside priesthood: it is a single group exclusively within the church that (in its relation to bishops and the bishop of Rome) grounds church's unity and sets the limits of universality. The guarantee of catholicity is expressed by the polity of the church and its unity is guaranteed episcopally and ultimately in relation to the episcopate's communion with the Pope. The episcopally ordained clergy, we might say, provide the catholic limits of the church, and this

³⁸ We should note that claims for the clergy are variously grounded in the idea of apostolicity in Cyprian; see, for example, Cyprian, *Unity*, 2-5.

³⁹ *Unity*, 23.

limit is indexed to their institutional expression of dependence on apostolic authority which is traced ultimately back to Peter's successor.

Unity and catholicity as found under the clergy who are united under a bishop who are united under the bishop of Rome is a long way from the account of unity and catholicity that Wesley expresses.⁴⁰ Does this mean that Wesley, and the Protestant theologians who like him are not

⁴⁰ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, in Vatican Council II: 'Fully incorporated into the society of the church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept its entire structure and all the means of salvation established within it and who in its visible structure are united with Christ, who rules it through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops, by the bonds of profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion' (14). For the most comprehensive account of catholicity from a Roman Catholic Perspective, see Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); see also Karl Rahner, *Bishops: Their Status and Function* (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), especially ch. 6. For further discussion of obedience to the Pope, see Joseph Cardinal Lefèbvre, 'Obedience to the Pope' in *Obedience and the Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968). The account offered in this paper is equally a long way from the account of unity offered by the Orthodox Church. See Pantelis Kalaitzidis, 'Theological, Historical, and Cultural Reasons for Anti-Ecumenical Movements in Eastern Orthodoxy', in *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism: Resources for Theological Education; 'That They All May Be One' (John 17:21)*, ed. Pantelis Kalaitzidis (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 135–136; Alexander Schmemmann, 'Ecclesiological Notes,' *St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 11 (1967), point 6; John A. Jillions, 'Three Orthodox Models of Christian Unity: Traditionalist, Mainstream, Prophetic', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 9, no. 4 (November 2009): 295–311; and for an excellent recent and constructive overview of the idea of unity in relation to

in communion with Rome (and furthermore participate in or have even given rise to non-episcopal forms of the church) are schismatics whose Christianity falls outwith the bounds of catholicity?⁴¹ Is the very act of reform a breaking from the universality of the church, a rejection of the idea of the church catholic? For Wesley and others from a Protestant persuasion in relation to the visible church, the answer must surely be no. Indeed, it may be that the reasoning for this answer in the negative rests in the Protestant critique of the institutional church's propensity to over-identification with the work and activity of the Spirit. Calvin perhaps summarises this best when he writes that the church should not be tempted 'to pretend ... that God is so bound to persons and places, and attached to external observances, that he has to remain among those who have only the title and appearance of a church [Rom. 9:6].'⁴² Unity is not, indeed, for the Reformers, to be found in any visible unity of the institutions of the church catholic, since – after all – the church itself is in the first instance hidden and known ultimately only to God.⁴³ For the Protestant churches, there

ecumenical discourse, see Petre Maican, 'The Form of Christ: Sketching an Ecumenical Ecclesiology for Eastern Orthodoxy', PhD dissertation, University of Aberdeen (2016), especially the introduction.

⁴¹ Wesley had a complex relationship to questions of church order and polity. For a helpful overview of this topic, see David Rainey, 'The Established Church and Evangelical Theology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12:4 (2010): 420-34.

⁴² John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4.2.3, p. 1044. These discussions concern Roman Catholicism polemically. However, outside of that polemic, the dogmatic content remains helpful and can usefully be redirected back to the Protestant church as itself an *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

⁴³ Schwöbel summarizes nicely the approach of the reformation churches to catholicity: 'The catholicity of the Church does not guarantee the universality of the truth of revelation. The

cannot be an un-self-reflective over-identification of the salvific works of God with the institutions and polity of the church.⁴⁴ Unity to the polity of the church might well be unity to that which has only the semblance of a church; and this can be no true catholicity. Catholicity has to be described otherwise, and to be located elsewhere than in the concrete institutions of the empirical church.

In Wesley's 'A Catholic Spirit', it is possible to see, therefore, an account of visible unity whereby the visibility of the unity is differentiated from that which had traditionally been considered to be the markers of unity and catholicity. Wesley does not differ from the Catholic (upper case) concern for catholicity and unity; nor indeed does he differ in wanting this unity to be visible. Where Wesley differs is in terms of *how* he expresses, understands and identifies this unity and catholicity. Rather than understanding visible unity to reside in

universality of the truth of revelation is the foundation for the catholicity of the church' (Christoph Schwöbel, 'The Creature of the Word: Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers', in *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, eds Colin E. Gunton & Daniel W. Hardy, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 128). This point is also made by one from an episcopal tradition in the work of Michael Ramsay: 'Catholicism, created by the gospel, finds its power in terms of the gospel alone. Neither the massive polity of the Church, nor its tradition in order and worship, can in themselves seem to define Catholicism; for all these things have their meaning in the gospel, wherein the true doctrine of Catholicism can be found' (Michael Ramsay, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London: Longman's, 1936, 179-80).

⁴⁴ The concern here is the repeated reformation concern to ensure that there is appropriate and strict demarcation between divine and human action, even in their relationality. For an overview, see Schwöbel, 'The Creature of the Word'.

the Eucharistic and / or clerical (episcopal or pontifical) polity of the church with bounds created by the apostolic limits on catholicity, Wesley understands visible unity to rest in the capacity to identify visibly the fruits of the life of faith in different Christians from across the universal church. Wesley is neither a latitudinarian nor a schismatic. Instead, Wesley is one who identifies the visibility of a Christian, and the unity with that Christian to which we are called, as resting in sanctification not primarily in its *de iure* condition but in its *de facto* reality in the life of the Christian, as this is effected by the work of the Holy Spirit. This, it seems, is a distinctive Protestant (or more narrowly, Pietistic) contribution to understandings of visible unity; and such an account does not rest on a particular account of Scripture or of doctrine or of the polity of the church. Instead, such an account rests on the visible fruits of the sanctified life of the Christian. It is the life of faith visibly enacted which is the grounds for visible unity between members of different denominations. For Wesley, it is not so much the case that he is uninterested in visible unity; but it is rather the case that visible unity is described differently and located elsewhere than in more classical Roman Catholic (or for that matter Orthodox) accounts. In this way, it might be easier to see greater unity between the different forms of Protestant churches than the histories of divisions might suggest: those divisions do not undermine unity and catholicity, but express the individual integrity and freedom of conscience of the Christian (in the context of the recognition of the creator-creature distinction and a critique of the over identification of the empirical church with the exclusive actions and activities of God's saving grace), an integrity and freedom of conscience that should recognize the same commitments in others, and still see oneself – despite all differences – united to them through the sanctifying presence of the Spirit within the lives of the believers in the church catholic.⁴⁵ It is then for these Christians to live lives

⁴⁵ Cf. the words of the dissenter Thomas Binney in nineteenth century Britain: 'I am a dissenter because I am a catholic; I am a separatist because I cannot be schismatical; I stand

sanctified by grace that orientate them towards those other Christians who similarly recognize a heart which is right with their own hearts, such that there is an attractiveness to one another or a resonance between the lives of faith and commitment each believer lives.

3. The Church, the Spirit and the Third Article

I have taken a long time to get to a central aspect of the title of this paper – pneumatology and the third article. But I hope in the foundations that I have laid the direction of travel might be clear. The point that this paper is moving towards is that in Protestant theology there is a distinctive account of the relationship of the work of the Spirit and the church to that which is articulated in more Roman Catholic or Orthodox theology. There exists within Protestantism an account of the church which recognizes its continual dependence on the ongoing *act* and *events* of the Spirit for its existence. The church comes into being in time in a Protestant account by the activity of the Spirit in space and time. It is not in the church's institutions or forms that the church's genuine being rests, but in the act of the Spirit who brings the church into being in a given place at a given point in history. Put formally, we might say that the ontology of the church is actualistic, and its being rests in the reality that the Spirit who acts is the eternal and holy Spirit of God; the church's being rests in the eternality of the acts of the Spirit who brings it into being time and time again in history – not in the continuance of its temporal forms. However, for Protestantism, while the Spirit is the *sine qua non* of the true church, the church and its institutions (of whatever form) is not the *sine qua non* of the Spirit. The visibility of the church, and the unity of the church, on a Protestant account, is not, therefore, grounded on the structure or polity of the church, but upon the epicletic call of the

apart from some because I love all; I oppose establishments because I am not sectarian; I care not about subordinate differences with my brother, for *Christ* has received him, and so will I' (Thomas Binney, *Dissent Not Schism* (London: Robinson, 1885), 65).

church for the descent of the Spirit and upon the sanctifying activity of the Spirit in the life of the believer.⁴⁶ As Colin Gunton puts it:

Sometimes it has appeared that because a *logical* link has been claimed between the Spirit and institution, the institution has made too confident claims to be possessed of divine authority. The outcome ... has been too 'realised' an eschatology of the institution, too near a claim for the coincidence of the Church's action with the action of God. Against such a tendency it must be emphasised that, as christology universalises, the direction of pneumatology is to particularise. The action of the Spirit is to anticipate, in the present and by means of the finite and contingent, the things of the age to come.⁴⁷

The church (as a contingent anticipation in space-time of the eschatological Redemption of God) does not have the capacity to determine its own conditions of unity on the basis of its external polity and form. Instead, for Protestants, the church exists *under* the third article of the creed – under the sovereignty of the Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life. It is the presence of the Spirit which gives life to the church, not the church which dictates or demarcates or limits the universality of the presence of the Spirit. There is a prevalence at times to think of Spirit as 'an essentially immanent force: as something *within* an already given person or

⁴⁶ As Alan Sell puts it, 'Far from this being an exclusive claim, the Spirit's work is Church-creating no matter by which confessional body it is processed' (Alan Sell, 'The Holy Spirit and the Church: Some Historical Soundings and Ecumenical Implications', Paper Presented at Society for the Study of Theology 2012, 8)

⁴⁷ Colin E. Gunton, 'The Church on Earth: The Roots of Community,' in *On Being the Church*, eds Gunton & Hardy, 61.

institution qualifying its existence.⁴⁸ In contrast to this, with Gunton, it seems best to understand the Spirit as the one who constitutes the church from ‘time to time’ in a Protestant account.⁴⁹ This determines that one should not recognize the catholicity and validity of the church in the church’s own composition and form, but in the inworking power of the Holy Spirit who comes from without the church to create the conditions that Wesley lists in his ‘A Catholic Spirit’. Unity can, therefore, be visible for Protestant churches, but the form of the visible unity rests on the *de facto* sanctifying presence of the Spirit in the life of the believer, not the *de iure* structures of the churches to which the believers belong.⁵⁰ This sanctifying presence of the Spirit need not be any less visible than the structure of the church (indeed, it may be more so), but an account which rests on sanctification does determine that unity does not rest in human forms and practices of doctrine, polity and liturgy, but in the free and active presence of the Sovereign Spirit of God who – as part of God’s saving and sanctifying work – gathers people together for the outworking of salvation in the horizontal conditions of time and space.

The church which comes into being in time is the church of Pentecost – the church brought about by the descent and presence of the Spirit who comes again and again to the church in time and creation. The visible structures of the church are in place in the first chapter of Acts

⁴⁸ Colin Gunton, *Theology Through the Theologians: Selected Essays 1972-1995* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), 191.

⁴⁹ Gunton, ‘The Church on Earth,’ 137.

⁵⁰ This is a point which is made powerfully by Gordon Rupp who cites it as a mistake to confuse catholicity with a system of polity, dogma or order rather than ‘the fellowship of a great experience ... fellowship with the saints through common access to God’ (E. Gordon Rupp, *Protestant Catholicity* (London: Epworth, 1960), 44-5 (cf. 34-5).

(liturgy, polity, etc.), but it is only in the second chapter that the church comes into being.

The words of Robert Jenson are wise:

If the church understands herself as founded in events prior to Pentecost and not also in the event of Pentecost *as* a divine initiative commensurate to the Resurrection, she will be tempted to seek her self-identity through time in a sanctified but still worldly institutionalism ...⁵¹

Visible unity as attached to a form of ecclesial polity is not the only way in which visible unity can be understood. In fact, as Jenson suggests, there may be good reasons for being nervous of such approaches. Indeed, it is worth noting that '[a]n inescapable characteristic of the Church is ... that as part of creation it, too, is finite and contingent.'⁵² The church is not the perfect expression of the presence of the Spirit (even if it might be the most intense presence of the Spirit in creation), but a contingent and created reality which is not yet (and nor ever will it be the totality of) the Kingdom of God. As a result, Protestant churches with their different understandings of the relationship between the Spirit and the church need a distinctive account of visible unity rather than presuming that there is only one account of what visible unity might mean:⁵³ rather than an account of visible unity on the basis of an

⁵¹ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology vol. 2* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 180.

⁵² Gunton, 'The Church on Earth,' 67.

⁵³ This point gestures towards the account that Daniel Hardy gives of the need for ecumenical discussion to take place with full attendance to and within the different dimensions and dynamics of different ecclesial self-understandings. Ecumenical discourse cannot presume partners that share the same bases for approach or presume a static mode of or basis for multi- or bi-lateral discourse. See Daniel W. Hardy, 'Receptive Ecumenism – Learning by

institutional ecclesiastical unity, the Protestant account may well be of the sort that Wesley offers – an account based on the free presence of the sanctifying Spirit which resonates with those others in whom the Spirit is also working out their sanctification.

However, often Protestant theology has failed to address the way it understands its visible unity in a manner which has allowed it to seem schismatic. It is here, as a Pietist, I wish to offer a small potential corrective to Protestant theology in the mainstream – a corrective which arises from seeking to understand the logics of Wesley’s account of the catholic spirit. This corrective involves the dogmatic topography of ecclesiology. Much Protestant theology locates the church in relation to the second article of the creed as its proximate dogmatic res, to Jesus Christ and to the Word of God. The test of the truthfulness of the church is found, for example, in Calvin in relation to the preaching of the Word and the correct celebration of the sacraments. In Calvin’s words: ‘Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.’⁵⁴ For Luther, also, it is the mutual ministering of Christ to each other in sharing the Word of God and in prayer that is the mark of the church. To those worried about how to identify a church, Luther states: ‘If you are troubled and anxious as to whether or not you are truly a church of God, I would say to you, that a church is not known by customs but by the Word.’⁵⁵ These accounts are correct in disinvesting ideas of unity from politics of the institutional church, but they may well replicate the same problems as those they critique, just in a slightly distinctive form. This propensity to locate the proximate

Engagement,’ in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, ed. Paul D.

Murray (Oxford University Press, 2008), 428-41.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.9 (p. 1023).

⁵⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther Works*, vol. 40 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1958), 41.

dogmatic res of ecclesiology in the second article can render visible unity in the church needing to expressed in relation to a particular form of the preached word or a particular theological commitment – replacing particular structural polity with particular understandings of the Word of God’s interpretation and potentially a distinctive polity which arises from that. This can lead, in the words of Daniel Hardy, to a certain “purism” of the Word’,⁵⁶ which can exclude others and produce a non-generous, schismatic so-called catholicity in which one understanding of the true church unity (based on church polity) is replaced with another based on particular interpretation of scripture and forms of its preaching (potentially the ‘soundness’ of its preachers and ministers). What can arise is a replication of the logic of the more classical accounts of catholicity, but in a form which imagines an idealized pure church separate from the human reality of difference. As Gunton highlights, ‘An overweighting of the christological as against the pneumatological determinants of ecclesiology together with an overemphasis on the divine over against the human Christ has led to a “docetic” doctrine of the church.’⁵⁷ This docetism also presumes a particular form of the visible church to which all others should be ordered – a divine church which is not able to unite with the material reality of the created-empirical *ekklesia*.

The other option in terms of problematic approaches to ecclesiology within Protestantism is to see the church as entirely independent to the work of God, and to locate ecclesiology in relation to the proximate dogmatic res of anthropology and human will: this is the account of the church as a free and voluntarist organisation.⁵⁸ As such unity does not matter at all, but

⁵⁶ Daniel W. Hardy, *Finding the Church* (London: SCM, 2001), 33.

⁵⁷ Gunton, ‘The Church on Earth,’ 65.

⁵⁸ One can see this type of account of the church in the likes of John Owen. See, for example, *The Works of John Owen Volumes 15 and 16* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965).

only a sense of the purity of the given community to which one voluntarily belongs by virtue only of one's conscience. If the preceding problem is to locate the church under the second article (the effects of the work of Jesus Christ), the current problem is one which concerns the location of the church under an independent article of the creed – a fourth, one might say, potentially a proximate dogmatic *res*, independent of the divine life and works, or at best in relation to a theological account of anthropology. However, structurally, this is a wrong reading of the creed. The church should not be understood to be a separate fourth article of the Constantinopolitan creed, but to exist under the third, under the summary of the work of the Spirit. There is no *eis* preceding *ecclesiam* in the earliest editions of the creed, as there is preceding the divine persons – a point Calvin is at pains to remind us. There is a clear differentiation between belief *in* the Holy Spirit, and the church which exists underneath the third article and not independent of it.⁵⁹ In a similar way to the way in which the account of salvation and judgement follow from the second article, so follows the church and its activity from the third article. The point is also clear even in the truncated Apostle's creed: '*Credo in Spiritum Sanctum, sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam*', etc. The proximate dogmatic *res* of ecclesiology is properly, creedally, pneumatology: ecclesiology is not its own independent dogmatic *res*. The reason for this is that the church rests on the work of the Spirit who sanctifies the people of God; the church is not independent of the Spirit, and nor is the church the condition of the presence of the Spirit.

⁵⁹ The point is also clear in the Greek: one can compare Καὶ εἰς τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον, τὸ κύριον and Εἰς μίαν, ἁγίαν, καθολικὴν καὶ ἀποστολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν.

Protestantism would be wise in its account of visible unity to emphasize this particular articulation of the relationship between the work of the Spirit and the institutional church.⁶⁰ It is the sanctifying work of the Spirit which is the basis for the church's existence and the content of the church's self-description. Sanctification is that work of God the Holy Spirit which takes effect within people (corporately and individually). It is the sanctifying presence of the Spirit which is the material content of the church's sense of its universality and catholicity: where the Spirit is present sanctifying the lives of believers, there the church is visibly present and believers being sanctified should recognise this in the hearts of others (by way of resonance with them and the work of the Spirit's sanctifying grace within them). Wesley's account of the catholic spirit is an account of the Spirit's activity within the believer, and the way in which the believer can recognize another as a member of the catholic church. Far from being schismatic, the Protestant church on this basis has the potential to offer a broader and more capacious understanding of catholicity and visible unity (in line with the argument offered by Wesley). The account offered here has the capacity to include a wider range of churches even in the description of the Protestant Reformation and its heritage: more narrowly theological discussion moves away, by virtue of this kind of description, from majority or minority Protestantism, Pietist or Scholastic Protestantism, Radical or Magisterial Protestantism, authority or dissent, experience or Scripture; and moves instead to the question of whether we are able to recognize the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the other, and – if so – whether we are prepared to follow the charge to walk with one

⁶⁰ In a very helpful article which engages Roman Catholic and Methodist reflections on catholicity, David Carter argues in a similar vein to this paper that catholicity rests in a given church tradition's ability to observe the Spirit's work both within its own life and the lives of other ecclesial traditions. See David Carter, 'Catholicity and Unity,' *One in Christ*, 40:2 (2005).

another in an active catholicity which arises from a visible unity which exists in the context of disagreement over theology and polity. Catholicity on this basis concerns recognizing the visible work of the same Spirit in the other universally within broad experiential bounds of the sort Wesley describes: the more the Spirit is at work in our lives, the more catholic we are able to be, and the more visible the church.⁶¹

4. Conclusion: Visibility, disagreement and illumination

In an age of ecumenism, it is important to understand the basis on which we are to speak of the ecumenical task: it is necessary to be clear what is meant by the visible unity for which the churches strive, as the terms visible unity and catholicity are themselves disputed in terms of their meanings; and different churches enter into the quest for visible unity with vastly different expectations of what that might mean. The Protestant spirit is one which recognises the church as a work of the Spirit of God, and sees the church's dependence on God as one not related to visible institutional form and authority, but to the visible sanctifying presence of the Spirit in believers – a presence which traverses denominational bounds.⁶² As Wesley

⁶¹ Although his focus is more on the relation of faith and merit, and although he has an eye to the post modern context, Ralph Del Colle raises the ecumenical possibilities of Wesley's thought in his 'John Wesley's Doctrine of Grace in Light of the Christian Tradition', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4:2 (2002): 172-89, esp. 185-9.

⁶² This has profound effects upon the ecumenical task of establishing visible unity. If one were to consider, for example the World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper Number 111 (Geneva: WCC, 1982), the paper describes itself as arising from 'obligation to work towards manifesting more visibly God's gift of Church unity' (v). However, it may well be that for some Protestants, this obligation is not

makes clear in his 'A Catholic Spirit' such an account does not neglect the differences that exist nor think that they are unimportant. But such an account does not make questions of catholicity dependent on particular institutional commitments either. It is perhaps here where we are to think of the work of the Spirit in illumination. The Word of God has an end point: its terminus is as it is heard and received in the lives of the believers. Believers vary; the times they live in vary; the geographical locations they have vary; their contexts, philosophical paradigms and their presumptions vary. It is the Spirit whose work of illuminating grace relates the unchanging Word of God to the changing contexts of peoples, times and places. Such an account is no disguised relativism but a recognition of the Spirit's work in reaching into the hearts of human beings who are not replications of a single idealised Platonic form, but who exist in contingency, difference and vast variety across geographical and historical bounds. It is such an account of the work of the same Spirit in illuminating the hearts of human beings and sanctifying them by God's grace, which is the basis for the catholicity of the church, for its universality across space and time. As the Spirit works within the believer, so the effects of the Spirit's work are seen in the life of the believer, and so the believer can be enabled by the Spirit to recognize those effects in another, and to resonate with them. When we recognize this work of illumination in our lives as creatures, we are perhaps more likely, in a context of difference in which the Spirit works in meeting us in our human difference, to say: 'Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?', and to answer: 'It is.' 'Well, if it be, give me thine hand.'

expressed in discussing the baptism, eucharist and ministry of the church, but the shared life of sanctification.