

Is Ulf Ekman Right? Does the Path to Unity Lead to Rome?

The March 9, 2014, issue of Charisma News reported that the well-known **Word of Faith** pastor in Uppsala, Sweden, **Ulf Ekman**, had converted to Roman Catholicism. This did not come as a complete surprise, for Ekman had for several years shown an interest in Catholic theology and liturgy.

In fact, the Nov. 24, 2008, issue of Charisma News reported that Ekman had participated in a conference convened by Catholic and Protestant leaders who advocate uniting all Christians “under the pope.” The conference conveners were unapologetic in their belief that such unity, centered in the pope, is necessary if Europe is to withstand the onslaught of Islam and secularism.

In an interview that was published in the March 9, 2014, issue of Charisma News, Ekman revealed that he has embraced this view that the path to Christian unity does, indeed, lead to Rome and recognition of the authority of the pope. Ekman made this very clear when he was asked about the Catholic doctrine of a teaching magisterium, centered in the pope, that has the final authority and say on doctrine and matters of faith. Ekman agreed that such a teaching authority is necessary if there is to be Christian unity. When asked if he believes the pope to be the utmost expression of such an authority, Ekman replied, “Yes, he definitely is.”

Progress Has Been Made on the Path to Unity

I appreciate the progress that has been made in the Catholic Church as a result of Vatican II (1962-65), which opened the door for dialogue and cooperation with other churches, particularly in regards to social issues such as **pro-life** and **marriage**. That council dispensed with the word *heretic* in

referring to Protestants and used the softer term *separated brethren*. It also made an important statement about the gifts of the Holy Spirit being “no peripheral or accidental phenomenon in the life of the Church” but on the contrary to be “of vital importance for the building up of the mystical body.”

This more open stance of the council toward non-Catholics and toward spiritual gifts opened the way for the **charismatic renewal** in the Catholic Church, which erupted shortly after this council closed in 1965. This, in turn, resulted in more dialogue and fellowship between Catholics and Protestants. I have personally found Catholics, who are spiritually hungry, to be some of the most delightful people to be around and the easiest to lead into the baptism in the **Holy Spirit**.

Problems Remain on the Path to Unity

Nonetheless, the path to unity does not lead to Rome as Ekman now believes. What is ironic about what Ekman and others are advocating as a point of unity—the universal authority of the pope—is the fact that this has, historically, been the cause of the major divisions in in the Church. The development of the papal office, which is not found in either Scripture or early Christianity, has been a long and problematic process that encountered much opposition along the way and was never accepted by all of Christendom. In fact, the ancient churches of the East (now known as the Eastern Orthodox) never accepted the authoritative claims of the bishop of Rome in the West.

The split between the churches of the East and West, which culminated in the official division of 1054, was not rooted in doctrine but in the illegitimate power claims of the bishop of Rome (i.e., the pope). Hans Kung, the most widely read Catholic theologian in the world today, makes this point and quotes the Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff, who says, “All historians today are agreed that East and West separated on the basis of a progressive alienation which coincided with the

equally progressive growth of papal authority.”

In a similar way, the major rift that took place in Christendom at the time of the Reformation was not first and foremost about doctrine (i.e., justification by faith) but about the bishop of Rome’s claim of absolute authority over all of Christendom. As in the former split between the churches of the East and the West, the division that took place at the time of the Reformation concerned the pope’s claim of priority and authority in all the Church.

Martin Luther never wanted to leave the Catholic Church but was excommunicated and declared a heretic when he refused to yield to the demands of the pope that he cease teaching justification by faith and the ultimate authority of Scripture. In the end, it was a power struggle over where ultimate authority lies for the church and the individual believer. Luther decided that it lies with Scripture. Ekman, it seems, has decided that it lies with the pope.

I appreciate the current pope’s expressions of humility, his identification with the poor and his reaching out to those outside the Catholic Church. But make no mistake about it! Until we hear a clear and official pronouncement otherwise, the view of Pope Francis and the Roman Church is that unity will only be realized when the “separated brethren” return to the Catholic fold.

Although Vatican II recognized that God is at work in other Christian groups, it stated clearly that the church of Christ “subsists” in the Roman Catholic Church. This is the thinking behind the popular program on the EWTN Catholic Network entitled *Journey Home* in which interviews are conducted with Protestants who have converted to Catholicism.

The pope could strike a powerful blow for true Christian unity if he would relinquish the traditional Catholic dogma that the pope holds authority over all Christendom and then recognize

leaders of the Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant churches as brothers (or sisters, as it may be) and equals in Christ.

Even Catholic theologians today are realizing that the traditional view of the universal authority of the pope is a major barrier on the path to unity. Kung writes, "No one can overlook the fact that with time the absolutist papacy has become the ecumenical problem number one. Paul VI was the first to concede this himself with ecumenical openness; instead of being a rock of unity, the papacy is a block on the way to ecumenical understanding."

The Path to Christian Unity Leads to Jesus Christ

In Ephesians 2:14, Paul writes, "For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation." I will never forget an incident that occurred many years ago when two young women from the Anglican Church asked to talk to my wife, Sue, and me about water baptism. They were a part of the evangelical Anglican Church Army and had been baptized in the Holy Spirit. In the meantime, they had begun to question the adequacy of their infant baptism. Our first meeting centered on doctrine, and we made no progress as each argued his/her traditional view of baptism. We finally concluded the meeting and they agreed to return the next day for further discussion.

Before their arrival the following day, I was praying and asking God for wisdom in relating to them. Suddenly I saw a vision of a target with a bull's eye in the center. Immediately I knew that the target represented a person and the bull's eye represented whatever was central in that person's life. The circles represented their doctrinal beliefs, with the inner circle representing that which they considered of utmost importance and each ring representing doctrines of lesser importance as they moved outward.

I saw immediately that if Jesus is truly Lord, then He will occupy that place of centrality—the bull’s eye—in the target. I also saw that two different individuals who hold different doctrinal beliefs can have a basis for fellowship if Jesus is truly central in both their lives. Their common ground is the lordship of Jesus. If, however, a doctrine becomes central, then there is no basis for true fellowship with others unless they hold to the same doctrine with the same tenacity. But in that case, Jesus is no longer Lord but has been replaced by a doctrine.

As I reflected on this vision, I heard the Holy Spirit say, “The issue is not baptism but the lordship of Jesus in their lives.” Based on this word from the Lord, when the two women returned, we did not discuss the doctrine of water baptism with them. I merely asked, “Is Jesus the Lord of your life?” They both answered yes. I then replied, “Then if you believe He is telling you to be immersed in water, do it. If you do not believe He is telling you to be immersed, don’t worry about it.” There was a lake nearby and one asked me to immerse her and the other did not; and that was the end of our discussion.

Summation

The path to Christian unity does not lead to Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Springfield, Cleveland or any other city but to Jesus Christ Himself. Christian unity will never happen organizationally. The Roman Church’s approach to unity, that unity will occur when all the “separated brethren” return to the Catholic fold, is not compatible with Scripture, history or reason. But so as not to point the finger solely at the Roman Church in this regard, many Protestant churches and Pentecostal-charismatic churches are just as prideful in their sense of ecclesial importance and superiority. Kung, himself a Roman Catholic, went right to the heart of the matter when he wrote, “The road to unity is not the return of one Church to another, or the exodus of one Church to join another, but a

common crossroads, the conversion of all Churches to Christ and thus to one another.”

May the Lord hasten that day!

This article is derived from Eddie Hyatt's latest book, entitled *Pursuing Power: How the Historic Quest for Apostolic Authority and Control Has Divided and Damaged the Church*, scheduled for release March 31 but available now in the Kindle format from Amazon.

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