



# THE NEW ECUMENISM

BY CHRIS HEUERTZ

## BECOMING THE LIVING BODY OF CHRIST

I was raised Catholic, but when I was around 10 or 11 years old, my parents joined a Protestant church.

As a child, the only noticeable difference was that mass had been shorter but required much more physical participation. The standing, sitting, standing, kneeling was disruptive to my attempts to sleep through church, while the Protestant service was notably longer, allowing for fairly undisturbed sleep.

As I got a little older, the differences became much clearer. I noticed that former Catholics were the most critical of Catholicism, often using the term *conversion* to describe their journey out of Catholicism into Protestantism. In the town I grew up in, you were either “Catholic” or “Christian.” And sadly, to this day, those impressions of division remain imprinted in my memory and perceptions.

When my wife, Phileena, and I moved back to Omaha in 2002, we wanted to make a commitment to live, work and worship all within the same part of town. While looking at several churches, Phileena suggested we visit a Catholic church, and sarcastically I commented, “That’d be hilarious. Think of all the support we’d lose if we went to a Catholic church.”

A couple years ago, Phileena joined the Catholic Church. It makes sense. We’ve pitched tons of Henri Nouwen books around the community, and truth be told, he may be the best spirituality author of our age. We spent quite a bit of time with Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity. If you’ve been with them, then you understand how beautifully they wear their faith. Phileena had exposure to and mentoring from Father Thomas Keating and a 10-day silent retreat at his monastery; we participated in pilgrimages to Assisi and Santiago. When she did join the Catholic Church, I got the “margin call on her soul” (as I put it) from her concerned father. And we did lose support, even from some of our longest-standing friends.

Her journey to Catholicism comes after almost 20 years of sorting through our own community’s journey toward ecumenism.

## CHURCHIANITY'S STRUGGLE WITH ECUMENISM

For many evangelicals, ecumenism is a concept we react against. To many, it implies liberalizing our faith communities through compromise and assumes that ecumenical unity dilutes the commitment to the values and truth found in the Scripture. In *Word Made Flesh* we refer to ecumenism as not moving away from values and truth for the sake of unity but moving toward the center—Christ. When Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians can come together in the name of Jesus, we see signs of restoration in the body of Christ. How will the world know we are his by our love for one another if we are a fractured and segmented body (John 13:34-35)?

This is difficult because Christians are so adept at theological reductionism that thousands of denominations have spun off from the teachings of Jesus. We reduce the complexities and beauties of the vastness of God into tight little contained doctrinal packages. Many of these versions of Christianity are differentiated by slight hermeneutical nuances, nearly undetectable to the theologically untrained. Others argue that the heart of the gospel beats within the incubators of their doctrinal laboratories, rendering all others diluted versions of Christianity.

Some splinters of the larger evangelical community avoid these doctrinal divisions by merely resonating with styles of worship, teaching or mission toward which their constituents have strong affinities; they simply agree to disagree over doctrinal divides.

Whatever the issue, Christians are a divided people. Yet Christ shunned such ecclesial, theological and human reductionism and division by maintaining a simple center based on love and reflected in unity.

Throughout the gospels, Christ attempts to form a community that doesn't exclude deeply committed religious people, including the Pharisees and Sadducees—they do a fine job of excluding themselves. Rather, Christ looks for common ground as a hinge to community, even tucking voices on the fringes into the company of his message bearers.

Mark 9:38–41 expands our notion of the “whole church.” Someone on the doctrinal margins (insert

whomever that might be in the reductionist standards of one's tradition [e.g., the emergents, liberation theologians, prosperity gospel preachers, charismatics]) is ministering under the name of Christ. The disciples attempt to arrest his activity, eliciting this response from Christ: “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Today, many evangelical churches draw sharp lines to indicate who's in and who's out. Citing doctrine, evangelicals sort out the issues around an understanding of the saints, negotiating a relationship with Mary, the in-filling of the Holy Spirit or using icons in worship. Doctrinal lines allow unenlightened evangelicals to suggest they are the whole church.

The historical, Christ-centered, worshiping community of believers, however, includes sisters and brothers committed to mainline Protestant denominations, Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism. For any one of these historic Christian traditions to lay exclusive claim to the title “whole church” would be a direct assault on the others.

Similarly, evangelicals, though a significant and crucial part of the global Christian mosaic, would be presumptuous to assume that our expression of the greater Christian tradition embodies the “whole church.”

## REACHING TOWARD HEALTHY ECUMENISM

Evangelicals who presume they have figured out the whole gospel are misled. As the director of an international community engaged in missional service, I can't count the letters and emails we have received from various evangelical churches concerned that we don't follow a particular doctrine that is central to their worshiping community's identity. Their “whole” is made up of bits and pieces.

Christ spent much of his time dismantling doctrinal divides by embodying the motivating force of love. He healed a man's hand on the sacred Sabbath, not only to do the compassionate thing but to pick a fight with an institution that placed humanity second. The intentional conflict of Christ was redemptive, restorative and a hope-filled effort to breathe life back into humanity.

Back in 1991, when *Word Made Flesh* began, we were a handful of young evangelical idealists. During



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the first five to six years that we were forming the community, our time with Mother Teresa was profoundly formative but also a little edgy for some of the born-again Christians who were supporting the mission. Of course, Mother Teresa was sort of the only well-known “good” Catholic whom Protestants back then acknowledged.

We were, of course, a missional community and therefore aware of the core theological tenets that held us together. But after 10 years, we encountered our first experiences with ecclesiological mutiny. One of our guys started dating a Catholic girl. In the safety of their relationship, he started questioning his Protestant upbringing. We were old friends, grew up in the same town and had enough history to create open, honest dialogue and, at times, fair fights. I remember emailing back and forth, sending pointed questions that really did more to draw deeper lines between Catholicism and Protestant evangelicalism than to provide sincere ways for both of us to find our way closer to Christ.

In the end, he did join the Catholic Church. Around that time another one of our staff members also started dating a Catholic girl. They got married. He stayed Protestant, and she remained Catholic.

Real fears simmered throughout the corners of our community: *What will this do to us? Does this compromise our theological integrity? Will an ecclesial unraveling begin, and will we be able to stop it? How will this divide us?*

Ironically, nothing changed. In fact, we actually got stronger because of the richness of a few Catholics in Word Made Flesh. All of the externalized theological abstractions remained externalized. The only hurdle we really experienced was at the communion table. Other than that, community carried on, and the relationships and friendships continued growing.

Ten years beyond that first experience of ecclesiological mutiny we now actually look for ecumenical diversity and consider it a core value. Funny how things have changed. Today, 6 of our 12 board members are Catholic. In our Omaha community of 15, there now are 3 Catholics and 3 Episcopalians. In fact, the members of our office staff—though we live

basically in one zip code—worship at 11 different churches representing a variety of traditions.

Even with our own embrace of ecumenism, we’re mindful of the fractured relationships within the body of Christ.

At the Word Made Flesh community center in Galati, Romania, there is a beautiful little chapel with nine original paintings, neo-icons, each representing one of our Lifestyle Celebrations, adorning the walls. In the middle of the chapel hangs a large black crucifix, constructed from pieces of discarded scrap metal and other bits of industrial litter picked up throughout the neighborhood. There is also an altar, on which rests the traditional Christian communion, or Eucharist, elements. However, the elements go unconsumed. They abide as a symbol of lament. The bread and wine remain untouched as a sign of grief, a reminder of broken unity.

The Word Made Flesh community in Romania consists of Baptist, Pentecostal and Orthodox Christians—a real experiment in a Christ-centered ecumenical community.

Of course, the Orthodox have different doctrinal convictions and theology about the sacramental nature of participating in a Eucharist ceremony, and so their priest doesn’t yet allow them to participate in prayer or communion, but affirms their participation in service. And so the communion table, ideally a place of Christian unity, has become a place of lament.

## DISCOVERING THEOLOGICAL UNITY

We’ve learned that if we’re going to be the people of God, we’ve got to embrace a broad range of ecclesial diversity while simultaneously creating a stronger sense of theological unity. And over the past 20 years, we have stumbled into a few affirmations, or community confessions. They’re basic, almost painfully obvious, but they have held us together:

- 1 Christ is the head of these Christian faith traditions, and it is our love for Christ that unites us in community and compels us in service. We affirm that our Christian identity is rooted in Christ, while recognizing that we can’t separate Christ from tradition or we will perpetuate the Protestant tendency of rejecting

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other traditions. This can be difficult because some of us have over-identified our Christianity with a version of Protestantism or Catholicism.

- 2 We confess the tendency toward reductionism in our doctrine that creates holes in our Christian faith traditions. The theological continuity of the church can't be rejected by our stubborn ecclesiologies. Christ has always been present with communities that call on his name (Matthew 18:20), whether we like their doctrinal practices or not. This is especially important for those of us who are Protestant because, if we can't confess this, then we are left with treacherous questions about the integrity of the church from the descriptions of churches in the New Testament through the Protestant Reformation.
- 3 We seek to embody our hope for unity. *Is our church an institution or a community?* Reorienting ourselves around the person of Jesus and the community, we affirm that the Spirit of God forms us around our shared love for Christ. We have redefined our community around the church's center, not its denominational fragments.

When we talk about ecumenism, we're not suggesting that we all figuratively grab the central flagpole of Christ with one hand and then are allowed to reach out as liberally as we can with the other hand—just so we have one hand still holding onto our conservative roots. Rather, we recognize that all of us are at different places on the margins and within the embrace of our Christian identities; it's just that our aim is toward Christ as the center and that is our collective trajectory.

And truth be told, in our community there are different perspectives about all this. North Americans sometimes seem to be much less concerned about letting doctrine draw lines than our South American or Asian community members—for reasons perhaps cultural, perhaps another modern/postmodern collision, maybe even generational; it's not been easy.

These kinds of sensibilities, though gaining broader acceptance in Christian communities, are still divisive. A friend who also runs a mission organization serving among those who are poor told me his community's brief flirtation with ecumenism. They considered bringing a Catholic nun on their U.S. board of directors but decided against it after their South American partners threatened to leave the community if she were brought on.

But within this emerging ecumenical incubator of our Christian imagination, we have found that vocationally it is easy to bring churches and Christians together around things we know and believe to be wrong. We can all agree that God doesn't want children's sexuality exploited and commodified in the commercial sex industry. Discovering theological unity in that tragic space is easy. So we stay in those obvious places and inch our way closer to one another based on what else we can agree on, rather than highlighting and over-identifying the so-called *other* by what separates us.

When we affirm these places of unity, I am convinced the world will know we belong to Christ by the prophetic eruption of our love for one another. Until then, the divisions and fractured body we've become stand as an indictment against ourselves only.

May we find the courage to live into this wholeness for the sake of hope.

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An activist, author, visionary and public speaker, Christopher L. Heuertz has traveled with his wife, Phileena, through nearly 70 countries, working with the most vulnerable of the world's poor. Chris has led the Word Made Flesh community as the international executive director since 1996. He and Phileena reside in Omaha, Nebraska. *Simple Spirituality: Learning to See God in a Broken World* is Heuertz's first book, which shares touching stories from Chris's life working among the most vulnerable. His new book, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Mission and Service*, was co-written with Christine D. Pohl and released by InterVarsity Press in April 2010.