



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*  
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, January 21, 2001**

*The Third Sunday after Epiphany in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*

*Choral Eucharist  
at 11am*

+

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Prof. J. Robert Wright  
The General Seminary

+

### *CHRISTIAN UNITY*

This Sunday falls within the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and the Epistle for today, the twelfth chapter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, is one of the three biblical passages upon which the ecumenical position of the Episcopal Church is traditionally based. In addition to being a priest who is a church historian, I give much of my spare time to working for the restoration of Christian Unity, working to rebuild it by mending the schisms that have divided it in past history. This effort, for the Episcopal Church, is based upon the biblical and theological imperatives for the ecumenical movement that are found in First Corinthians chapter twelve, John chapter 17, and Ephesians chapter 4. Ecumenists who work for the unity of the church, both historians and theologians, are sometimes caricatured as a certain breed of quasi-political horsetraders, who climb into aircraft to attend conferences in far-away places like Venice or Moscow or Lima, where they proceed to negotiate infinitely ingenious compromises on vital questions which others back at home think to be matters of truth and principle. Sometimes I am even suspected of being such a horse-trader! In fact, however, I want to assure you that it is a rare miracle when ecumenical representatives do finally reach agreement about anything, for they – we - usually find disagreement so much more interesting, and the pressure from back home is always to take a tough line and not to agree too easily with the other side. Some say to us: 1) If you think you have reached an agreement, this proves you have not seen the real problem! Others will say: 2) We can accept this agreement, but if the other side also accepts it then they must have mental reservations about it; and if they do not, then we should! And still others put it in a different way: 3) Any statement at all which the other side can conscientiously accept must, if they accept it, be unacceptable to us!

The biblical basis for ecumenism as traditionally understood in the Episcopal Church is usually found, as I say, in three passages of which I Corinthians chapter 12, St. Paul's explanation of spiritual gifts that we have heard read today, is one: "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are differences of administrations but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God that works all in all...For as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of that one body being many are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body...and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member but many...They are many members yet one body. For the eye can not say to the hand, I have no need of you; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you...There should be no schism in the body, but the members should have the same care one for another. And if one member suffers, all suffer with it, or if one member is honored, all rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members in particular."

That is literally what the good book says. But of course Scripture must always be interpreted, by both tradition and reason, because Scripture alone, without the collective and developing interpretation of the church catholic in the light of the minds that God has given us, can easily result in an individualistic and unhistorical fundamentalism, just as tradition alone can result in an uncritical conservatism and reason alone without a foundation in Scripture and tradition can give way to sheer rationalism. Thus it is important to observe that in I Corinthians 12, the interdependence among all the members of the church implies that, alongside unity there is also within the church an ecumenical goal of legitimate diversity. Each member of the Christian community is needed for the unity of the church precisely because they are all different, not because they are all the same. These very thoughts of I Corinthians are echoed for us in the Anglican tradition in two statements by our famous theologian of the seventeenth century, Richard Hooker: “God hath created nothing simply for its selfe, but each thing in all things and of every thing, each part in other hath such interest that in the whole world nothing is found whereunto any thing created can say [to any other] ‘I need thee not’.” And also: “Participation in Christ is fellowship in one body, like the distinct members of the Trinity are yet one God.”

This we observe from today’s appointed reading, but there are also two more Scriptural passages upon which the Episcopal Church’s approach to ecumenism is traditionally founded. The first of these is Our Lord’s high-priestly prayer in St. John’s Gospel chapter 17: “That they all may be one, as you Father are in me and I in you, that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you have sent me.” In the light of tradition and reason, then, we can observe that John chapter 17 implies that unity or ecumenism is necessary not only for its own sake but also for holiness, truth, and mission. They are all related. The ecumenical goal of legitimate diversity must not be allowed to dissipate into division, because this goal is not an end in itself but is precisely for the sake of mission, of holiness, and of truth, as St. John put it. The ecumenical movement is in favor of diversity but opposed to division; it favors unity but opposes uniformity. And it seeks to promote holiness and truth at the same time, all for the sake of the church’s common mission to restore all persons and all things in Christ.

This leads us to the third key passage, from the Letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4: “There is one body and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism; One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” Here it is clearly implied that Christ our Lord is the first cause, the origin, of our unity, and Christ is also the final cause, the goal of all ecumenical efforts. Christ is our primal unity, but once others began to follow him and write about him, even within the New Testament itself, diversity arose. And so as the church moves along through history, from its single beginning in Christ towards its single end in Christ, there must necessarily be a unity in diversity, and hence the goal of ecumenism is to achieve unity but preserve diversity, to end divisions without imposing uniformity. Just as the ancient Greek word “oikumene,” from which we get the word “ecumenism,” meant that the world is “one household”, so it has also come to imply “one church” for the sake of the one Lord. We must grow up in every way into Christ, from whom the whole body, not just our particular part of it, is joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part if working properly promotes the body’s growth by building up the one lordship of Christ in love.

How can we remember all this, so that we can integrate it into our hearts and minds and act upon it in our lives? I suggest a simple mnemonic device, and it involves several words all beginning with the letter C, which recall the historical development of the ecumenical movement over the last century or so and then indicate the transformations of ecumenical attitude that each of us needs to consider and embody. Beginning with CHRIST, our unity of origin, the first cause, we need to move through these stages: First, from an attitude of CONVERSION and COMPETITION (Not a good model, but we used to be that way a hundred years ago!). Then, the ecumenical movement moved from that attitude to one of COMPROMISE and CO-EXISTENCE (This kind of ecumenism did get ridiculous at times, even to the point of the trade-offs proposed by some church leaders, such as a compromise that we might be prepared to give up infant baptism if only the other side would give up grape juice!) From that approach, then, the ecumenism of only yesterday moved into

COMPREHENSION and COOPERATION (Here we are close to Anglican territory!) Finally in our own day, we have the ecumenism of CONVERGENCE and COMMUNION, as some agreements and accomplishments are gradually being reached. Convergence and Communion, I suggest, are the way forward for our time and our future, until we finally come at the last, once again, to CHRIST, our unity of goal, the final cause, the alpha and omega, Jesus Christ the beginning and the end of all things.

This FULL COMMUNION, as it is sometimes called, is summarized for us as Anglicans in terms of Scriptures, Creeds, Sacraments, and Bishops, or the “Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral,” at the back of the Prayer Book where our understanding of them is found. The succession of Bishops, or Historic Episcopate that points back to the faith and tradition of the apostles and also forward to the unity of the church in common mission for the future, is the most difficult for churches in the protestant tradition to understand. And this is why it is both remarkable and a good and joyful thing that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a church over twice our own size, has recently voted by nearly seventy percent to accept the Historic Episcopate and enter full communion with us for the sake of common mission. That decision was celebrated by both our churches, led by the Presiding Bishops of each, on January 6 in Washington National Cathedral, although the implementation process will of course take a while. It was an event of momentous significance, taken by both churches in obedience to the biblical imperative as both see it, and for this we can indeed be thankful, even as we work also towards an eventual reunion with the great Church of Rome, from which so many of our origins come, not to mention our long friendship with the Orthodox churches of the East and our contacts with the various separated protestant bodies. The Episcopal Church has ecumenical dialogues under way with most of these groups.

It is not by accident that Anglicans ever since the schisms created by the protestant reformation have seen the biblical imperative of church unity as expressed in, and deriving from, the concept of Eucharistic communion. Early on, this was beautifully summarized in an anonymous and remarkable devotional writing called the “Companion or Spiritual Guide at the Altar,” which people often used to have bound in with their Books of Common Prayer as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, indicating our Anglican conviction that the Eucharist itself constitutes the basis and paradigm for our understanding of the full communion to which the biblical imperative calls us. I quote from it:

“This sacrament [the Communion] is also a bond of union amongst Christians. They who believe in one common Savior and partake of the same sacrifice will never forget the duty of [this biblical admonition]: ‘Beloved, if God so loved us’ as to give his only begotten Son to die for our sins, ‘we ought also to love one another.’...When our Lord took the bread which is kneaded together and is made up by the union of many [grains of corn], called it his body, he thereby denoted all Christian people. In the same manner, when he took the wine which is pressed from many grapes and gathered together in one cup and called it his blood he also denoted his flock, or the congregation of the faithful, joined by the mingling together of a united multitude. Therefore, when we partake of the table of the Lord, let us consider that as we are thereby made one with Christ we are joined in close union one with another. And let us remember when we are preparing to receive this heavenly banquet, that as we are going to commemorate the dearest love of our Lord and to profess our love to him, so we at the same time [must] engage [ourselves] to love all the members of that body of which Christ is the head; [and] that we there enter into covenant one with another, as well as with Christ, by eating of the same bread and drinking of the same cup, never to be unreconciled unto each other and never to hate, revile, injure, [or] backbite one another or fall out any more; but to live for the time to come in the peace of God and in unity and godly love.”

And so, this is our spiritual and ecumenical heritage as Anglicans; the Eucharist is the paradigm for us as to what church unity means; the biblical imperative for us is based on I Corinthians 12, John 17, and Ephesians 4; and we see Christ himself as not only our common origin but also our final goal.