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The One Church, the Many Churches: A Catholic Approach to Ecclesial Unity and Diversity—with Special Attention to Abraham Kuyper’s Ecclesiastical Epistemology

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I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. . . . Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. —1 Cor 1:10, 17 EST

The very mystery of the Church invites, rather compels us, to ask about the perspective ahead for the difficult way of estrangement and rapprochement, of dialogue, contact, controversy, and for the ecumenical striving to overcome the divisions of the Church.... Our thoughts about the future of the Church must come out of tensions in the present, tensions that must creatively produce watchfulness, prayer, faith, and commitment, love for truth and unity, love for unity and truth. —G. C. Berkouwer¹

What is the church?² That is the question I shall address in this article. I agree wholeheartedly with Baptist theologian Gregg Allison that a fundamental orientation to ecclesiology should take as its starting point “the ontology or nature of the church.”³ From a Catholic perspective, this question is really two fundamental ecclesiological questions: “What is the Church? In other words, what is its nature? But also: Where is the Church and where is she realized in her fullness?”⁴ The Catholic approach

1. Berkouwer, *Vatikaans Concilie en de Nieuwe Theologie*, (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1964), 316. Translated by Lewis B. Smedes as *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 249-50.

2. This article is an adaptation of Chapter 6 from the revised and expanded second edition of my book, *Pope Francis: The Legacy of Vatican II* (Hobe Sound, FL: Lectio Publishing, 2019).

3. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 32.

4. Walter Cardinal Kasper, *Katholische Kirche, Wesen, Wirklichkeit, Sendung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2011); Kasper, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission*, trans. Thomas Hoebel, ed. R. David Nelson (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015). Both sources will be cited throughout the notes, first the original followed by the pagination for the English translation in square brackets. See also, Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*

to these two questions is made in light of the confession *credo in unam ecclesiam*, which is one of the marks of the Church—indeed, it has first place in the list of marks: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381). Differing from Allison, however, these marks of the Church are more foundational for answering the ontological question than the constitutive characteristics of the Church such as “being doxological, logocentric, pneumadynamic, covenantal, confessional, missional, and . . . eschatological.”⁵

I turn below, briefly to answer these two fundamental ecclesiological questions. But my main concern in this article is a Roman Catholic approach not only to ecclesial unity and diversity but also Catholicity. Essential to this approach is distinguishing unity from uniformity, division from diversity, and conflicting from complementary formulations of the truths of faith. Briefly, I distinguish the unity of meaning and truth in dogma from its diverse linguistic and conceptual formulations. John XXIII suggests this distinction between truth and its formulations in dogma in his opening address to Vatican II, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*: “The deposit or the truths of faith, contained in our sacred teaching, are one thing, while the mode in which they are enunciated, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment [*eodem sensu eademque sententia*], is another thing.” The subordinate clause in this passage from *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* is part of a larger passage from Vatican I, *Dei Filius*,⁶ and this passage is itself from the *Commonitorium* 23 of Vincent of Lérins: “Therefore, let there be growth and abundant progress in understanding, knowledge, and wisdom, in each and all, in individuals and in the whole Church, at all times and in the progress of ages, but only with the proper limits, i.e., *within the same dogma, the same meaning, the same judgment*.”⁷ Unity here is at the level of meaning and truth but not necessarily at the level of formulations. This distinction has ecumenical significance, as argued in *Unitatis Redintegratio*.⁸ The following passages also

(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), 153.

5. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29; 162.

6. H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum et definitionum: quae in rebus fidei et morum*, ed. P. Hünemann (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1991), §3020; Cited subsequently as Denzinger, *Dei Filius*.

7. Vincent of Lérins, *The Commonitories*, trans. Rudolph E. Morris (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1949), 309. The translator informs us about Vincent and the reason for the title of his work, “Although the *Commonitories* were written shortly after the General Council of Ephesus (431), it is doubtful if they were published during his lifetime. At any rate, he used a pen name and wrote as ‘Peregrinus’ (the Pilgrim); he may have felt, just as we do today, that each of us is only a pilgrim, having no secure place on earth. He called his work *Commonitories* in the strict sense of the word. He wrote them, as he tells his reader, because he felt his memory getting weak and because he had observed that persistent reading of his notes helped him to see more clearly in matters of decisive importance” (259). My study, “Vincent of Lérins and the Development of Christian Doctrine,” will appear in the forthcoming book, *Faith Once for All Delivered: Tradition and Doctrinal Authority in the Catholic Church*, eds. Kevin L. Flannery, SJ. and Robert J. Dodaro, OSA (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021).

8. I show this point in my article, “Hierarchy of Truths Revisited,” *Acta Theologica*, 2015 (35)

touch upon the mutually complementary rather than conflicting formulations of the meaning and truth of dogma,

All in the Church must preserve unity in essentials. But let all, according to the gifts they have received enjoy a proper freedom, in their various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in their different liturgical rites, and *even in their theological elaborations of revealed truth* . . . What has just been said about the lawful variety that can exist in the Church must also be taken to apply to the differences in theological expression of doctrine. In the study of revelation East and West have followed different methods, and have developed differently their understanding and confession of God's truth. It is hardly surprising, then, if from time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed it to better advantage. In such cases, these various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting. . . . Thus they promote the right ordering of Christian life and, indeed, pave the way to a full vision of Christian truth.⁹

I will return to this Lérinian ecclesiastical epistemology below.

For now, regarding the distinction between division and diversity, Catholic ecumenism is predicated upon the presuppositions, as *Unitatis Redintegratio* (§1) holds that “the Church established by Christ the Lord is, indeed, one and unique,” and that Christ himself is not divided. Furthermore, “Discord [division] openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world [Jn 17:21], and inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the good news to every creature.” But ecclesial division is not the same as theological diversity. As the quotes above make clear, *Unitatis Redintegratio* distinguishes between truth and its formulations, and this distinction has ecumenical significance. Hence, diversity pertains to theological elaborations of revealed truth from various traditions, and in some instances, one tradition or another has a deeper appreciation of some aspect of the revealed mystery of the Christian faith. For example, the Reformed tradition has a deeper appreciation than Catholicism of the revealed mystery shared by both traditions of the Lordship of Christ, as Kuyper demonstrates in his three-volume

2: 11-35, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v35i2.2>.

9. Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), §§4, 17, emphasis added.
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html.

work, *Pro Rege*.¹⁰ In this context, we can understand why John Paul II regards ecumenism as an “exchange of gifts, not merely an exchange of ideas.”¹¹

Moreover, following G. C. Berkouwer (1903-1996), I argue that Abraham Kuyper’s (1837-1920) ecclesiastical epistemology purports to account for ecclesial unity and diversity. I pay special attention in this article to Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology. Does Kuyper help us to distinguish unity from uniformity, division from diversity, and conflicting from complementary formulations of the meaning and truths of faith? For all its significance in raising the question of ecclesial unity and diversity, Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology fails to account for a “commensurable pluralism,”¹² or what Kuyper called an “organically connected multiformity,”¹³ which is what he was arguably attempting to develop.

Following my critique of Kuyper, I then turn to the Lérinian ecclesiastical epistemology of Vatican II alluded to above—allowing for legitimate pluralism and authentic diversity within a fundamental unity of meaning and truth; and thus, a commensurable pluralism. Lérinian ecclesiastical epistemology accounts for legitimate ecclesial unity and diversity as well as Catholicity. Unlike Kuyperian ecclesiastical epistemology, it succeeds where Kuyper failed to arrive at a commensurable pluralism. Commensurable pluralism can (a) account for the need for new dogmatic formulations; (b) explain why propositions of dogmas and (or) doctrines are unchangeable, irreformable, or definitive; and (c) justify the distinction between propositions and sentences, content and context, form and content, and message and the medium.

Turning now to the question of Catholicity and the Church’s self-description as *Roman Catholic*, I argue that these two terms—“Roman” and “Catholic”—are not mutually contradictory, as some Protestants have suggested.¹⁴ Put differently, it is

10. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §17. The council is speaking, in this paragraph, about the relationship of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. I am applying this point about complementary theological formulations to Catholicism and Reformed theology, for example, Kuyper’s theology of the Lordship of Christ. See Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Living under Christ’s Kingship*, vol. 1, *The Exalted Nature of Christ’s Kingship*, Abraham Kuyper: Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

11. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, *Encyclical Letter* (1995), §§28-29. [http:// www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html).

12. For this phrase, I am indebted to Msgr. Thomas Guarino, Seton Hall University, *The Disputed Teachings of Vatican II, Continuity and Reversal in Catholic Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

13. Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology, Its Principles*, trans. J. Hendrik de Vries (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1898), 170.

14. For example, Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1901), volume 4, translated by John Vriend as *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). See also, most recently, Kenneth J. Collins and Jerry L. Walls, *Roman but not Catholic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 97-100, 265-66.

about Catholicity in a concrete form. The Church is a *concretum universale*. Walter Cardinal Kasper explains,

Just as in Jesus Christ God has taken form not in any general humanity, but by becoming “this” man Jesus of Nazareth, it is analogously true that the fullness of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ is also present in the Church in a concrete, visible form. Thus, the Catholic Church is convinced that in it—which means in the church in communion with the successor of Peter and the bishops who are in communion with him—the Church of Jesus Christ is historically realized in a concrete, visible form, so that the Church of Jesus Christ subsists in it—in other words, it has its concrete form of existence.¹⁵

This scandal of ecclesiological particularity in *this* concrete Church “provokes opposition in other churches and church communities.”¹⁶ Still, Catholic teaching holds that Catholicity is closely connected with unity. Her Catholicity derives from Christ himself, who is the Lord and Savior of the whole world and of all humanity (cf. Eph 1:3-10; 1 Tim 2:3-6). In particular, this means that the Church is, as the International Theological Commission correctly states, “at home in every nation and culture, and seeks to gather in everything for its salvation and sanctification.” In sum, the Commission adds, “the fact that there is one Savior and Lord shows that there is a necessary bond between catholicity and unity.”¹⁷ Let us turn now to briefly consider the two fundamental ecclesiological questions I raised above: what is the nature of the Church? And where is that Church most fully found?

What is the Nature of the Church?

The answer to this question is fundamental to dispelling the attraction of ecclesial relativism or pluralism. The nature of the Church is such that “the Church established by Christ the Lord is, indeed, one and unique.”¹⁸ In his 1970 dogmatic study, *De Kerk*, Berkouwer reflects on the Church’s confession, “*credo in unam ecclesiam*.”¹⁹ In this light, he considers the unicity of the Church (that is, its singularly unique nature such that there is only one Church) and her substantial inner unity (that is, that the Church constitutes a single whole and a complete unity). Berkouwer does not ignore

15. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 261 [179]; see also, Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits*, 154.

16. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 233 [158].

17. International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*, (2011) §2, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_tologia-oggi_en.html.

18. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §1.

19. Specifically, see Chapters 2 and 3 of *De Kerk*, vol. 1, *Eenheid en Katholiciteit* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1970); *De kerk*, vol. 2, *Apostoliciteit en Heiligheid* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1972). These two volumes are translated in one complete volume by James E. Davison as *The Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976). Both sources will be cited throughout the notes, first the original followed by the pagination for the English translation in square brackets.

the division among Christians; the disunity in the Church, which has its origin in sin; or the difference between ecclesial diversity and division. Given the Church's pluriformity, Berkouwer develops an ecclesiology in which the unicity—there is only one Church—and inner unity of the Church, as an independent ontologically self-contained subject, is not shifted into the future or into an *ecclesia invisibilis* (a purely Platonic entity, as it were), with the latter seeking “to make everything dependent on the already present, but hidden, unity of the invisible church.”²⁰ He, for one, is persuaded that the New Testament teaches that there is only one Church, not many churches, and this Church is the concrete, visible Church, here and now, rather than a prospective future reality.

For Berkouwer, the Church's unity as unicity—that is, the one and only Church—is the foundation of the inner unity of the Church. He says, “We have in mind the reference to the unity between Father and Son: ‘That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me’ (John 17:21, EST). Unity cannot be indicated more deeply than in this analogy.”²¹ Thus, according to Berkouwer, “The being of the Church, as willed by God, implies unity.”²² He adds

Our conviction that the plural for “church” is an inner contradiction is confirmed by the numerous characterizations of the Church of Christ in the whole of the New Testament: the one people of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the building of God, the flock of the good Shepherd. These images indicate in various ways the one reality of the church.²³

Therefore, Berkouwer continues, “Unity belongs essentially to the Church's being: the expression ‘one church’ is really a pleonasm.”²⁴ He concludes that in light of the reference in the fourth gospel to Jesus rounding up the scattered sheep, “Nothing else than one flock and one Shepherd (John 10:16) is conceivable.” Hence, “The Church may forget neither the harvest nor the Shepherd of the sheep, for the Shepherd is known and recognized in the one flock. The picture of the Shepherd shows us Christ's unique work of gathering, which brings and holds the flock together.”²⁵

Berkouwer adds the following: “The unity is unquestionably clear: the Church is the household of God (1 Tim 3:15), the temple of God (1 Pet 2:9f.), the one flock of the one Shepherd (John 10:16). All such characterizations make any thought of the plural simply ridiculous.”²⁶ As Paul wrote in 1 Cor 12:12-13, “For just as the body is one

20. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 61 [51].

21. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 56-57 [48].

22. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 32 [30].

23. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 94 [77].

24. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 33 [30].

25. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 59 [50].

26. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 47 [42].

and had many members, and all the members . . . are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” We should add here that the Church is the new and reborn humanity in Christ, the Bride of Christ, the People of God, the Church as Mother, and the Church as an independent metaphysical subject. So, there cannot be many churches. Still, Berkouwer distinguishes between unity and uniformity, urging us to recognize not only ecclesial pluriformity but also the calling to unity within the unicity of the one Church, the one fellowship.²⁷

In Kasper’s Catholic ecclesiology, the inner unity of the one Church is not only baptismal, as alluded to by Berkouwer, but also Eucharistic: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). Says Kasper,

The inner unity has its foundation in one Holy Spirit through one baptism (1 Cor 12:13) and participation in the one Eucharistic bread (1 Cor 10:17). Paul can even say we are “one” in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). In short, the Church *is* one in Jesus Christ. Again and again, Paul calls for unity and unanimity in the Church. He believes “there is one body, one Spirit, just as one hope is the goal of your calling by God. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all” (Eph 4:4f).²⁸

Furthermore, we need to make clear that pluriformity is not the same thing as ecclesiastical relativism or pluralism. As Kasper explains, “It would be an anachronism to read into the New Testament the situation of today, which history produced, of separated denominational churches existing side by side. In the eyes of Paul, such a coexistence and pluralism of different denominational churches would be a totally unbearable idea.”²⁹ Denominationalism would affect Christ himself by leaving us with a divided Christ. But given that the Church has *one* Lord, *one* Mediator, and *one* Savior, we cannot “replace the singular with a plural for the Church.”³⁰ The reality of many separated churches would also leave us with a contradicting pluralism, or a confessional relativism,³¹ meaning thereby a pluriformity that tolerates contradictions such that we can be indifferent to claims that purport to be equally valid. Says Kasper rightly, “Sooner or later, this causes new divisions or leads to indifference and

27. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 93 [75-76].

28. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 227 [154].

29. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 226 [153].

30. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 47 [41]. Peter J. Leithart’s position on pursuing unity in a fragmented Church agrees with Kasper and Berkouwer that “denominationalism is not what Jesus desires for his church. It does not fulfill his prayer [John 17]. Denominationalism does not produce a church that is united as the Father is united with the Son and the Son with the Father.” P. Leithart, *The End of Protestantism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 4.

31. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 82.

relativism in the question of truth.”³² Rather, there exists a plurality of churches in the one and only Church, which Kasper calls a “complementary *communio*-unity.”³³

Allison is right that this plurality of churches qua churches should be “characterized [as] doxological, logocentric, pneumadynamic, covenantal, confessional, missional, and spatio-temporal/eschatological.”³⁴ Of course, in Catholic ecclesiology, the linchpin of the Church is the Eucharist—Eucharistic presence, Eucharistic sacrifice, and Eucharistic unity. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). Kasper’s concept of a “complementary *communio*-unity” anticipates the import of distinguishing division from legitimate diversity in one’s ecclesiological epistemology.

Where is the Church and where is she realized in her fullness?

It is not sufficient to answer the first ecclesiological question about the Church’s nature, namely, that it is one and unique. Since Berkouwer rejects both a spiritual and future unity, the question regarding the concrete place where the Church is realized in all her fullness must be addressed. In the Catholic answer to this second question, we come upon the *scandal of particularity*. Why? The catholic church of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is no abstract entity but a specific, concrete, identifiable church. The late Lutheran systematic theologian Robert Jenson responded as follows to a question regarding Protestants such as Reinhard Hütter, Bruce Marshall, Rusty Reno, and others who came into full communion with the Catholic Church,

I think one thing is common to all or most of them: they intend to inhabit the one, historically real church confessed by the creeds, and could no longer recognize this in their Protestant denominations. And indeed, if the church of the creeds does not, as the Second Vatican Council put it, “subsist in” the Roman Catholic Church, it is hard to think where it could.³⁵

Vatican II, following a venerable and long-standing part of Catholic tradition, speaks of the one and indivisible Church of Christ as “subsisting in” the Catholic Church,³⁶ meaning thereby that Christ’s Church is realized in her in a singularly unique way unable to be affirmed of any other community of faith. Thus, *subsists* means that the “Church of Christ is one, indivisible, unique and irrepeatable, and that

32. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 263 [181].

33. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 263 [181].

34. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29.

35. Robert Jenson, “God’s Time, Our Time: An Interview with Robert W. Jenson,” *Christian Century*, May 2, 2006, 35.

36. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium* (1964), §8, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. Subsequently cited as *Lumen Gentium*.

its one reality exists concretely as the Catholic Church.”³⁷ These two are one in their concrete being, an identical subject.

Given the limits of this article, I must briefly state the first principle of Catholic ecclesiology; namely, the Church possesses “the extraordinary unity, fullness of being, self-sufficiency, and thoroughly concrete existence that characterizes Christ’s Church.”³⁸ Furthermore, as I shall argue in a moment, this unparalleled identification between Christ’s Church and the Catholic Church does *not* preclude ecclesial existence outside the visible boundaries of the Church. But it does leave no room for a multiple subsistence ecclesiology—ecclesiological relativism—“suggesting that Christ’s Church be identified simultaneously with a plurality of Christian communions.”³⁹

Of course, neither Berkouwer nor Kasper are blind to the reality of a divided Church. Hence, in view of that division, unity is both a gift and a task, an indicative and an imperative, with the former preceding the latter; and the latter being an admonition to restore unity among a divided Church, heeding Jesus’s ecumenical imperative in his prayer that all should be one (John 17:21). Berkouwer says, for example,

The problematic of unity and division affects the *credo* [*in unam ecclesiam*] from the beginning on. There is no other Church than the earthly Church—in Corinth, in Philippi, in Smyrna, or in any other part of the world. As a result, whoever speaks confessionally about the unity of the Church must give account of what is in full view, namely, the Church in her disunity.⁴⁰

Yes, there is division among Christians, disunity in the one Church, but this division is the fruit of human sin, and such disunity is sharply placed “under the criticism of the gospel.”⁴¹ This, too, is the view of Vatican II’s *Unitatis Redintegratio* §1: “Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.” Berkouwer adds that “the disunity of the Church stands under God’s criticism!”⁴² Still, division and diversity, or pluriformity, are not the same thing. Significantly, pluriformity is not just another name for division, for unlike division, it is positive.

There is diversity, but it is “the pluriformity of the church” and not a “plurality of churches.”⁴³ Berkouwer’s ecclesiology “seeks to examine the concrete, visible church, and does so by placing her in the light of pluriformity.”⁴⁴ He explains, “One must definitely ask what we are to think of the undeniable ‘plural’ that dominates

37. Stephen A. Hipp, *The One Church of Christ, Understanding Vatican II* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2018), 3.

38. Hipp, *One Church of Christ*, 38.

39. Hipp, *One Church of Christ*, 11.

40. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 32 [29].

41. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 36 [33].

42. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 64 [54].

43. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 61 [51].

44. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 61 [51].

our speech, particularly in light of the self-evident singular.”⁴⁵ Thus, there must be another way to do justice to the pluriformity of the one church, of diversity within unity, and unity within diversity, and it is here that Berkouwer brings into this discussion Abraham Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology.⁴⁶ I come back to this ecclesiastical epistemology in the next section of the paper.

The extraordinary unity of the Church is not a human construction but a divine reality received as a gift. That is why Ratzinger can say, and Berkouwer and Kasper agree, “The true Church is reality, an existing reality, *even now*.”⁴⁷ In sum, Catholic ecclesiology holds that the one Church of Jesus Christ subsists in the Catholic Church on the one hand, and the plurality of churches on the other. “The Catholic Church dares and must dare to take the paradoxical position of attributing to herself in a unique way the singular form, ‘the Church,’” concludes Ratzinger, “despite and in the midst of the plurality she has accepted.”⁴⁸ Put differently, it is about Catholicity in a concrete form. The Church is a *concretum universale*, as I explained earlier.

This constitutive feature of Catholic ecclesial identity, as correctly underscored by Kasper, does not imply that others outside the Church are not Christians or, adds Ratzinger, “Dispute the fact that their communities have an ecclesial character.”⁴⁹ Briefly, in this connection, here is the dilemma that Catholic ecclesiology seeks to avoid,

- *Either* correctly affirming that the Church of Christ fully and totally subsists alone in its own right in the Catholic Church, because the entire fullness of the means of salvation and of unity, which is not found in any other church, is present in her; and then implausibly denying that Orthodoxy and the historic churches of the Reformation are churches in any real sense whatsoever, such that there exists an ecclesial wasteland or emptiness outside the Church’s visible boundaries.⁵⁰
- *Or* rightly affirming that they are churches in some sense, in a lesser or greater degree to the extent that ecclesial elements of truth and sanctification exist in them, but then wrongly accepting ecclesiological relativism or pluralism—meaning thereby that the one Church of Christ

45. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 59-60 [50].

46. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 65-76 [55-63].

47. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 119. See also, 130-38.

48. Ratzinger, *Das neue Volk Gottes: Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1977), 149, as quoted in Maximilian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger, Life in the Church and Living Theology*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 309.

49. Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, 119; italics added.

50. *Lumen Gentium*, §8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §3-4; *Ut Unum Sint*, §14. See also, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration: *Dominus Iesus*, On the Unicity and salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, August 6, 2000, §16; on line: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html.

Jesus subsists in many churches, with the Catholic Church being merely one among many churches.⁵¹

Focusing on the second horn of this dilemma, what Berkouwer sees here as a “radical change in the Roman Catholic judgment of other churches” does not mean that she has either relativized,⁵² in the sense of ecclesiological pluralism, or taken back her first principle of ecclesiology (the entire fullness of the means of salvation are present).⁵³ He explains: “The other churches—in spite of their relatedness to Christ and the Holy Spirit—still do not partake in this *concrete, institutional condensation and centralization of fullness*.”⁵⁴ Yet, this aspect of fullness referred to by Berkouwer no longer means all or nothing, as Kasper rightly states. In other words, since there are “elements of sanctification and truth outside the Church’s visible structure,” the Church is present in these other ecclesial communities to a greater or lesser degree.⁵⁵ Hence, as I stated above, it is not the case that there exists an ecclesial wasteland or emptiness outside the church’s visible boundaries. To the extent that these elements or vestiges are present, the Church of Jesus Christ is efficaciously present in these particular churches to a lesser or greater degree. Vatican II introduces not doctrinal change to the Church’s historic ecclesiological self-understanding (namely, the Church of Christ fully and totally subsists alone in its own right in the Catholic Church, because the entire fullness of the means of salvation and of unity), but it does represent a development thereof.

Thus, Roman Catholic ecclesiology does not consider the matter of ecumenical relations to be an addendum or an appendage to her ecclesiology. The fundamental question regarding the “one Church and the many churches,” of ecclesial unity and diversity is at the core of this ecclesiology. Following from her ecclesiology is her corresponding understanding of ecumenism. Consequently, ecumenism has been at the core of her engagement with other Christians, especially since Vatican II, and hence, for the last half-century, as is evident from her formal ecumenical dialogues

51. *Lumen Gentium*, §8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §3-4, 20-21, 23. For helping me to formulate this dilemma, I am grateful to Msgr. Thomas Guarino.

52. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 138 [114].

53. *Unitatis Redintegratio* §4, “[T]he Catholic Church has been endowed with all divinely revealed truth and all means of grace.”

54. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 138 [114-15]. My emphasis.

55. *Lumen Gentium*, §8, “The Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honored with the name of Christian, though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter. For there are many who honor Sacred Scripture, taking it as a norm of belief and a pattern of life, and who show a sincere zeal. They lovingly believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ, the Son of God and Savior. They are consecrated by baptism, in which they are united with Christ.”

Unitatis Redintegratio, §3, “Moreover, some and even very many of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and visible elements too. All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to Christ, belong by right to the one Church of Christ.”

with the Anglican, Reformed, Lutheran, and Methodist communities, with the fruits of these dialogues being manifested in the documents resulting from these dialogues.⁵⁶

Berkouwer agrees with this interpretation of Vatican II. “Since the relationship between churches is not simply a question of confession or denial of the truth, the problem arises as to degrees of [unity and] catholicity in the understanding of God’s truth.” Significantly, then, “‘Fullness’ is not always contrasted to ‘emptiness,’ but also to incompleteness and partiality.”⁵⁷ Kasper summarily states the point Berkouwer makes about the proper interpretation of Vatican II ecclesiology: “The Council thus advocates a graded concept of Church according to which the non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities participate in a graded way in the unity and catholicity of the Catholic Church.”⁵⁸ Different endowments of “elements” therefore bring about different degrees of unity and Catholicity, and hence of ecclesial status. Thus,

The one (“*unica*”) Church of Christ is (“*est*”) the Catholic Church, and this Church subsists in (“*subsistit in*”) the Catholic Church, and in her alone, while, in a way inseparable from the Catholic Church, it extends itself to and is present in (“*adest in*”) every communion in which (“*in quibus*”), by reason of the sanctifying action of Christ the Head and of his Body, elements (“*elementa*”) of this Church, in a partial way (“*ex parte*”), are found (“*adsunt*”).⁵⁹

Gift and Task: *Ressourcement*

The Church of Christ is really one thing (unicity) in an ontological sense; that is, “one *per se* and absolutely, existing in itself as one complete and perfect body with a single intrinsic constitutive principle, namely, the life of grace flowing from the Christ who, as Head, is organically one with the body.”⁶⁰ Evangelical Protestants have often criticized this claim by Catholic ecclesiologists as possessing an alleged tendency to “assimilate Christology into ecclesiology.”⁶¹ In other words, the inherent

56. See Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits*.

57. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 145 [120].

58. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 235 [160].

59. Hipp, *One Church of Christ*, 87.

60. Hipp, *One Church of Christ*, 29.

61. Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 152. Objections like this have been around for a while. The great American Presbyterian theologian, B. B. Warfield (1851-1921) raised this charge in his 1915 study, *The Plan of Salvation*, Chapter 3, Sacerdotalism. For example, “[The Church] does not, of course, supersede the work of Christ. . . . But in the present dispensation, the Church, in large measure, has taken over the work of Christ. It is in a real sense, a reincarnation of Christ to the end of the continuation and completion of his redemptive mission” (51). Again, “In one word, the Church in this [Roman] system is conceived to be Jesus Christ himself in his earthly form, and it is therefore substituted for him as the proximate object of the faith of Christians” (52). And again, “It is to the Church rather than to Christ or to the grace of God that the salvation of men is immediately ascribed” (52). Gregg Allison quotes Michael Horton to raise a similar objection. Allison is deeply distressed by the tendency in Catholic

incarnational relationship between Christ and the Church is substantial, such that there is an unqualified identification between the two according to Catholic teaching. The consequence of this claim is that it “forecloses the possibility of reforming the church’s teaching,” and hence, “Roman Catholicism has become master of the gospel rather than servant.”⁶² I have addressed at length elsewhere Vanhoozer’s critique of Catholic ecclesiology.⁶³ For now, I argue that the Church is committed to the project of *ressourcement*, particularly in an ecumenical context, given the division between Christians and the presupposition that the Church established by Christ is one and unique. Therefore, unity is both a gift (in an ontological sense) and a task, given the ecumenical call to restore unity among divided Christians.

Both unity and, indeed, Catholicity are already an existing reality—a concrete embodiment—given in the Catholic Church, but they are also dynamic realities because “in the fullness that the Church received [in Christ], she is directed toward fullness.”⁶⁴ Hence, unity, as well as Catholicity, are both divine gifts and human tasks. Perfect unity and Catholicity will be found only in the eschaton.

Regarding the former, the task of restoring unity, Kasper notes, “Unity is flawed because of the divisions. The ecumenical dialogue is to heal these wounds. Through it, the imperfect unity is to be brought to full unity. This dialogue is not only an exchange of ideas but also of gifts.”⁶⁵ This is receptive ecumenism. In other words, different theological traditions

have developed differently their understanding and confession of God’s truth. It is hardly surprising, then, if from time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has *expressed* it to better advantage. In such cases, these various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually *complementary* rather than conflicting. . . . Thus they promote the right ordering of Christian life and, indeed, pave the way to a full vision of Christian truth.⁶⁶

Thus, these traditions of other churches and ecclesial communities have a contribution to make—through integrating and respecting all their *legitimate* differences—to the

theology of substituting “the church in the place of its absent Lord.” Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000); Michael Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 5, quoted in Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 65. Similarly, Leonardo De Chirico, *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on post-Vatican 2 Roman Catholicism*, Religions and Discourse, ed. James M. M. Francis, vol. 19 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003).

62. Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 167, cited in Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel*, 228.

63. Eduardo Echeverria, *Revelation, History, and Truth: A Hermeneutics of Dogma* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2018).

64. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 135-36 [113].

65. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 236 [160].

66. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §17; emphasis added.

Catholic Church, bringing about a fuller and hence more perfect—that is, catholic—realization as possible of the church. In other words, our non-Catholic brethren have a real contribution to make to the fuller realization of the church's unity and Catholicity, and hence to the fullness of understanding and living of Catholic truth.⁶⁷

Moreover, there is a connection to be made between unity, Catholicity, and fullness. The Catholic Church alone is given the fullness of all means of salvation. Berkouwer's reflections on "fullness in Christ"⁶⁸ and the Church's participation in that fullness in Christ, having been entrusted to the Church of Christ in its concrete form, are very helpful for gaining a proper perspective on this ecclesiastical sticking point—the scandal of particularity—for Protestants in general. The Catholicity of the Church cannot be adequately understood except in light of Christ's fullness. Regarding Jesus Christ, he is full of grace and truth (John 1:14), full of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:1), with the fullness of God pleased to dwell in him (Col 1:19), and "in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (2:9). According to Dulles, "Jesus Christ is, so to speak, the concrete universal, for in the particularity and contingency of his human existence the plenitude of divine life is made available to all who will receive it."⁶⁹ Now, in what way is the Church related to the fullness of Christ and the fullness of God?

Significantly, "Fullness [in Christ] and fulfillment" are a gift to the Church's being, entailing a task as well since this gift does "not describe a tensionless 'being,' as if the Church had already achieved the final purpose of all her ways; rather they appear in living and relevant connection with her concrete life on earth."⁷⁰ Thus, Berkouwer rightly says, "In the fullness [of Christ] that the Church received, she is directed toward fullness. That is the fantastic dynamic characterizing Paul's view of the Church, and through it, he wants to make the Church rest in Christ's self-sufficient work."⁷¹ Furthermore, we cannot abstract the fullness that the Church received from Christ and his all-sufficient work from the calling to preserve this relatedness to him. Christology is not assimilated into ecclesiology as if we were left with a deistic conception of the Church, meaning thereby that she is "left to her own, independent existence, as if her acquisition of fullness meant that she could find and go her own way."⁷² What Berkouwer calls the "correlative language of the Scriptures" must be attended to so that we might see the Church in the light of the fullness of Christ: "Therefore, the Church, after receiving this fullness, must set her mind on and seek

67. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §4.

68. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 135-39 [112-15].

69. Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 9.

70. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 135-36 [113].

71. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 135-36 [113].

72. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 137 [114].

many things (Col. 3:1f); and from the fullness, the whole life becomes visible in a radical, utterly concrete admonition (Col. 3:5f.; cf. Eph 4:17ff).⁷³

The limits of this presentation will only allow me to give one brief example to illustrate that dynamic correlation between Christ and the Church, and hence, between fullness in Christ, the concrete universal, and fulfillment. *Ressourcement* is at the heart of this dynamic correlation. *Lumen Gentium* §8 states that the Church “is at one and the same time holy and always in need of being purified (*sancta simul et semper purificanda*), and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal.” In *Unitatis Redintegratio* §6, the Council states that the Church is called “to continual reformation” (*ad hanc perennem reformationem*). Furthermore, several other paragraphs of *Lumen Gentium* makes clear that purification, renewal, and reformation of the Church is the work of the Holy Spirit: “The Spirit guides the Church into the fullness of truth. . . . By the power of the gospel, He makes the Church grow, perpetually renews her [*Ecclesiae eamque perpetuo renovat*], and leads her to perfect unity with her Spouse.”⁷⁴ In *Lumen Gentium* §7, the Church is subject to her Head, Christ, “In order that we may be unceasingly renewed in Him [*Ut autem in illo incessanter renovemur*] . . . so that she may grow and reach all the fulfillment of God.” It is said about the Church in *Lumen Gentium* §9, “That moved by the Holy Spirit she may never cease to renew herself [*seipsam renovare non desinat*] until through the cross she arrives at the light which knows no setting.” Finally, *Lumen Gentium* §12 states that the gifts of the Spirit among Christ’s faithful “renders them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which help the renewal and upbuilding of the Church [*pro renovation et aedificatione ecclesiae*].”

The Second Vatican Council focused not only on the dynamics of the hermeneutics of reform and renewal in the life of the Church but also on the development in her understanding of the truth. This is evident in the Vatican II decree on ecumenism,

All [Catholics] are led to examine their own faithfulness to Christ’s will for the Church and accordingly to undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform. . . . Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. . . . Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies . . . in the way that Church teaching has been formulated—to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself—these can and should be set right at the opportune moment.⁷⁵

Elsewhere in the Dogmatic Constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, we read,

For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words [of divine revelation] which have been handed down. . . . For as the centuries

73. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, [114].

74. *Lumen Gentium* §4.

75. *Unitatis Redintegratio* §§4, 6.

succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.⁷⁶

Consequently, pace, Vanhoozer, and others, the Catholic tradition does not assimilate or reduce Christology to ecclesiology, as if to suggest that the Church was now the subject rather than Christ. Christ precedes the Church as its head; the Church mediates the light of the nations that is Christ. Kasper explains:

What the captivity letters [of St. Paul] mainly express is the superordination of Jesus Christ as Head over the Church. Therefore, the Church cannot be identified with Jesus Christ, and it cannot tout court be called the Christ living-on. It depends on what is respectively the subject in such a statement and what is the predicate object; not the Church is Christ, but Christ is present in the Church as his body; he lives and works in it.⁷⁷

Elsewhere Kasper adds, “It is not the Church, it is Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). . . . The Church is not itself the light of the nations. The light of the nations is Jesus Christ, whose human face reflects the image of the living God.”⁷⁸ This Christological consciousness is at the core of the ecclesiology in *Lumen Gentium* §1 from Vatican II.

Kuyperian Ecclesiastical Epistemology

In volume 1 of his 1970 work, *De Kerk*, Berkouwer argues that Abraham Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology deals with the perennial problem of the relationship between truth and its human expression. Berkouwer writes about that challenge in his 1957 study, *Nieuwe Perspectieven in de Controvers: Rome-Reformatie*, “This is the problem of variable, historically defined thought forms in different eras when all kinds of philosophical notions have played a definite role. What is the relationship between unchanging truth and theological formulations and doctrinal choices?”⁷⁹ Similarly, but more explicitly focused on ecclesial unity and diversity, Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology attempts to make intelligible the distinction between unity and uniformity, and ecclesial diversity or pluriformity, without falling into either epistemic (confessional) relativism or ecclesial relativism.

76. VaticanII, *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, §§8-9 Online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

77. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 191 [127].

78. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 111 [68].

79. Berkouwer, *Nieuwe Perspectieven in De Controvers: Rome-Reformatie*, Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 20, No. 1 (Amsterdam: N.V. Noord-Hollandsche UitgeversMaatschappij, 1957), 20.

Berkouwer is drawing mainly from Kuyper's *Principles of Sacred Theology*.⁸⁰ Says Berkouwer, "Kuyper was dealing with a real problem, and he definitely touched on present-day problems when he asked whether varying interpretation as such already breaks fellowship with respect to the reality to which varying understanding is directed."⁸¹ In *Gemene Gratie*, Kuyper states, "The objective truth remains one, but its appropriation, application, and confession must differ, even as the color of the light differs according to the glass in which it is refracted."⁸² To show the ongoing relevance of Kuyper's ecclesiastical epistemology, Berkouwer compares Abraham Kuyper and the Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, "Neither Kuyper nor [Karl] Rahner postulates that truth is not one, but they touch each other with respect to the limited, and therefore varied, understanding of truth." Still, Berkouwer is right, "From the nature of the case, there are profound problems here, both for Rahner in connection with the old tradition of the infallible confession of the Church and for Kuyper in connection with pluriformity in confessions."⁸³ Regarding Rome, Kuyper says, "However much Rome has insisted upon uniformity, it has never been able to establish it, and in the end, she has adopted the system of giving to each expression of the multiformity a place in the organic harmony of her great hierarchy."⁸⁴

Kuyper is both right and wrong in his claim about Rome. He is right that Rome insists on the unity of meaning and truth, according to Vatican I (1869-70), *Dei Filius*, Chapter 4, Faith and Reason:

Hence also that *meaning* of the sacred dogma is *perpetually to be retained* which our Holy Mother Church has once declared, and there must never be a deviation from that meaning on the specious ground and title of a more profound understanding "Therefore, let there be growth and abundant progress in understanding, knowledge, and wisdom, in each and all, in individuals and in the whole Church, at all times and in the progress of ages, but only within the proper limits, i.e., *within the same dogma, the same meaning, the same judgment*."⁸⁵

80. See Kuyper, *Principles*, particularly §104, Development of Multifformity [Pluriformity], 658-68. The Dutch original of *Principles* is a three-volume work (1894), *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*. The English translation contains the first fifty-three pages of volume 1 of the original, Introduction, and the entirety of vol. 2, Systematics. Berkouwer also occasionally draws from vol. 3, *Gemene Gratie* (Kampen: J.H. Kok), particularly 232-38. Until recently, available in English translation from the volumes on *Gemene Gratie* are selections; see *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, "Common Grace," 165-201. Now the entire three- volumes are available in English translation by the Acton Institute.

81. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 69-70, [60-61].

82. *Gemene Gratie*, vol. 3, 237; my translation.

83. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 69-70, 74 [58, 60-61].

84. Kuyper, *Principles*, 170, "Organically connected multifformity."

85. Vincent of Lérins, *The Commonitories*, 306. See also, Denzinger, §3020; emphasis mine. The permanence of meaning and truth is taught in the constitution: "... is sensus perpetuo est retinendus... nec umquam ab eo sensu, altior intelligentiae specie et nomine, recedendum... in eodem scilicet dogmate, eodem sensu, eademque sententia" (§3020); also, "ne sensus tribuendus sit alius" (§2043).

Canon 3: “If anyone says that, as science progresses, at times a sense *is to be given* to dogmas proposed by the Church *different from the one* that the Church has understood and understands, let him be anathema.”⁸⁶ But Kuyper is wrong when he claims that Roman ecclesiastical epistemology has never been able to show a commensurable pluralism. Commensurable pluralism can (a) account for the need for new dogmatic formulations; (b) explain why propositions of dogmas and doctrines are unchangeable, irreformable, or definitive; and (c) justify the distinction between proposition and sentences, content and context, form and content, and message and the medium.

In other words, commensurable pluralism can show that new doctrinal formulations mediate the universality and material identity—a dogmatic conceptual hard core—of the permanent meanings and truths of Christian dogmas such as that of the Trinity, incarnation, and atonement, according to the same meaning and same judgment (*eodem sensu eademque sententia*). If the latter, then the new linguistic formulation or expression can vary as long as they mediate the same meaning and same judgment of truth. As Bernard Lonergan puts it, “The meaning of the dogma is not apart from a verbal formulation, for it is a meaning declared by the church. However, the permanence attaches to the meaning and not to the formula. To retain the same formula and give it a new meaning is precisely what the third canon [of Vatican I] excludes (Denzinger §3043).”⁸⁷

It is precisely Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology, not Rome’s, which is unable to account for commensurable pluralism. Here is my argument about the weakness of Kuyper’s epistemology.

The first principle of Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology is epistemic perspectivalism, namely, that “our knowledge of the truth is always imperfect and inadequate.”⁸⁸ In other words, perspectivalism recognizes “subjectivity in the understanding of truth.” The acceptance of perspectivalism is a result of recognizing that “absolute or objective truth, which Kuyper affirmed,” cannot “appear in unity of form and content.”⁸⁹ Like Kuyper, Herman Bavinck also holds “no one claims that content and expression, essence and form, are in complete correspondence and coincide. The dogma that the church confesses and the dogmatician develops is not identical with the absolute truth of God [himself].”⁹⁰ Kuyper makes clear his rejection of the claim that “truth, which of necessity must be absolute, was also bound to maintain this absolute character in the unity of form and expression.”⁹¹ In Kuyper’s view, “the truth of God was too rich and the great salvation in Christ too abundantly

86. The italicized words are the ones cited in the text.

87. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S. J., *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 323.

88. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 69 [58].

89. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 69 [58].

90. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol 1, Inleiding Principia (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1895), 7, translated by John Vriend as *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 32-33.

91. Kuyper, *Principles*, 664.

precious, by reason of the Divine character exhibited in both, for them to be able to reach their full expression in one human form.” Of course, Kuyper understood “that theology as such could not dismiss the problem of *how this multiformity was to be brought into harmony with the unity of the body of Christ*.”⁹²

Berkouwer explains Kuyper’s view regarding the distinction between truth and its formulations: “Even though ‘objective’ truth is one, the ‘subjective’ application and confession must differ.” He continues, “Revelation . . . is not an ‘objective truth’ suspended above human life. Consequently, Kuyper characterizes opposition to pluriformity as a form of dualism that does not allow the gospel to penetrate the fabric of life. . . . All of this is concentrated in Kuyper’s conception of the [epistemic] distance between ‘absolute’ truth and what we men assimilate of it in our subjective perception.”⁹³ Clearly, for Kuyper, it is not that divine truth recedes behind various perspectives; truth itself is not plural, but our understanding of truth is. Says Berkouwer, according to Kuyper, “Certainly, revelation is one, and truth in Christ is one; but when Christ is formed in believers, the law of development and subjectivity comes into operation along the way of a meaningful pluriformity.”⁹⁴

Berkouwer insists with some justification that a concern for perspectival pluriformity, and its basis in the inadequacy of expressions, such as in Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology, should not be mistakenly understood as relativism or subjectivism about truth, or ecclesial relativism. Still, insists Berkouwer, there are profound problems “for Kuyper in connection with pluriformity in confessions.”⁹⁵ For one must make clear that inadequacy of expression does not mean inexpressibility of truth, even divine truth.

Regarding this point, Berkouwer explains: “Kuyper’s anti-dualism in itself is irrefutable; revelation is fully intended to be understood and known, to enter into human conceptions, experiences, feelings, knowledge, and understanding. This ‘entrance into’ does not cast shadows on revelation; nevertheless, the Church must be aware of the incompleteness in all her speaking and confessing.”⁹⁶ In other words, Kuyper’s antidualism does not imply that the inadequacy of expression means, according to Kuyper, inexpressibility of divine truth. Still, Kuyper’s distinction between truth and its formulations rests upon a more particular epistemological presupposition; namely, that all formulations of the truth are inadequate. Such formulations can never be adequate because they can never be exhaustive expressions of the truth. In other words, Berkouwer adds, “The issue is not about challenging revealed truth, but about recognizing the ‘limitation’ or ‘incompleteness’ of our knowledge . . . that is only

92. Kuyper, *Principles*, 664, emphasis added.

93. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 69 [57-58].

94. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 70 [61].

95. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 70 [61].

96. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 74 [61].

sketched even in the most worthwhile formulation.”⁹⁷ There is always more to say about the reality of faith. In short, “This has everything to do with inexhaustibility of the truth of the gospel.”⁹⁸

This is unquestionably true, but Berkouwer leaves unanswered the question, how, say, the formulations of Nicaea or Chalcedon consist of statements that describe reality entirely truthfully, even if inadequately. In other words, his attempts, in light of Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology, to legitimize ecclesial diversity must answer the question in what sense dogmatic formulations or creedal statements are determinately true (that is, actually corresponding to reality, bearing some determinative relation to truth itself) but also how “every formula in which the faith is expressed can in principle be surpassed while still retaining its truth.”⁹⁹ To answer this question, one must show that it does not follow from the true claim that doctrinal statements are historically conditioned and limited, indeed, inadequate, that this must result in their not being wholly true. As Karl Rahner correctly states, “They are an *‘adequatio intellectus et rei,’* insofar as they state absolutely nothing which is false.”¹⁰⁰ So, the new linguistic formulation or expression can vary as long as they mediate the same judgment about objective reality. What is more, adds Rahner, “A more complete and more perfect statement does not falsify the one it supersedes.”¹⁰¹ All of this requires treatment that I cannot give here but have given elsewhere.¹⁰²

For now, let me just note that Kuyper fails to show a relationship between language and reality with respect to truth. This is a fundamental flaw in Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology since the relationship between dogmatic formulations and reality determines the truth status of the dogma. Consider, for example, the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Is what they assert and hence make judgments about—for example, the Trinity and the person and natures (human and divine) of Christ—true to reality? In other words, do they have truth-conveying status, meaning thereby that what is asserted in them is ontologically true? And, what about linguistically articulated doctrine; judgments expressive of propositional truth; supporting the conclusive and abiding assertions of revelation and doctrine; and logically sustaining the affirmations of Christian belief, their universality, continuity, and material identity? Divine truth may be expressed incompletely and inadequately, but neither falsely nor indeterminately. Just because we do not know everything that

97. Berkouwer, “Vragen Rondom De Belijdenis,” *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 63 (1963): 6, 10, 22, 25-26, 35-36 [my translation].

98. Berkouwer, “Vragen Rondom De Belijdenis,” 5.

99. Karl Rahner, “*Mysterium Ecclesiae*,” in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Margaret Kohl, vol. 23 (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 151.

100. Rahner, “The Development of Dogma,” in *Theological Investigations*, trans. Cornelius Ernst, vol. 1 (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1961), 44.

101. Rahner, “*Mysterium Ecclesiae*,” 151.

102. Eduardo J. Echeverria, *Revelation, History, and Truth: A Hermeneutics of Dogma* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018).

there is to know about a particular divine truth, it does not follow that what we do know is not determinately true in these doctrinal formulations.

Regarding Berkouwer's second point that justifying ecclesial diversity does not justify ecclesiastical relativism or pluralism, he writes,

Yet the decisive question arises precisely at this point. Must the so greatly varied subjectivity inevitably lead to the pluriformity of the Church (in the sense of many concrete churches)? Convinced that this question must be answered in the negative, we want to point out that a different conclusion can be derived from the variations in subjectivity and the plural assimilation of new, modern information than the conclusion that Kuyper drew from history: precisely when plurality becomes more visible than ever before, the call to unity and fellowship gains more force!¹⁰³

In other words, Berkouwer explains,

The stress on inadequacy and incompleteness does not legitimize the Church's pluriformity [in the sense of ecclesiological relativism], but rejects it because of the necessity of unity. In New Testament times, when the 'spread' of subjectivity had also become a reality, it was subjected to the discipline of unity in Christ. Imperfection is recognized, but it is taken up in the call—in antithesis to the individualizing of our knowledge—to understand the love of Christ “with all the saints” (Eph 3:17). There is simply no road from the incompleteness that has its place within the framework of love (1 Cor 13; Eph 3:17) to a pluriformity whose form is division, disunity, and contradiction.¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, ecclesiological relativism also has implications for the teaching authority of the Church. According to the then-Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Then no Church could claim to possess definitively binding teaching authority, and in this way institutional relativism [ecclesiological relativism] will lead to doctrinal relativism.” In other words, “If belief in ‘the body’ of the Church is taken away,” he adds, “the Church's concrete claims regarding the content of faith disappear along with her bodiliness.”¹⁰⁵ Ratzinger's conclusion is now obvious in view of the fragmented churches in our culture who are no longer able to hold the universal validity of the Christian faith.

On the matter of truth and its doctrinal formulations, Kuyper was already criticized by his contemporary Catholic theologian Theodore Bensch. Bensch argued that Kuyper never made clear how mutually contradictory creedal statements

103. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 75 [62].

104. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 75 [62].

105. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “*Deus Locutus Est Nobis In Filio*: Some reflections on Subjectivity, Christology, and the Church,” in *Proclaiming the Truth of Jesus Christ*. Papers from the Vallombrosa Meeting (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2000), 13-30.

could nevertheless be the formulations of the same revealed truth, according to the same meaning and same judgment, rather than formulas of verbal compromise.¹⁰⁶ Berkouwer summarily states Bendsdorp's objection,

Bendsdorp asked how flatly contradictory confessions can both be 'forms' of one revealed truth. How can there be harmony in the contradictions? Kuyper replied that he did not mean to say that in the doctrine of the Lord's supper, for instance, both transubstantiation and consubstantiation are true. But there is a certain 'harmony' in the sense that "the mystical fellowship with Christ is partaken of in the sacrament; however, the way that that fellowship comes about cannot be expressed by us in an adequate form." The differing formulations are attempts to understand the same mystical reality.¹⁰⁷

But Kuyper's response to Bendsdorp bypasses the question of the propositional truth status of conflicting claims, treating such claims of the various traditions as objectifications of the same basic experience. This sounds more like the experiential expressivism of modernism rather than orthodoxy. In other words, how do the formulations of Nicaea or Chalcedon consist of statements that describe reality entirely truthfully, even if inadequately? In his attempts to legitimize ecclesial diversity, Kuyper's ecclesiastical epistemology must answer the question in what sense dogmatic formulations or creedal statements are determinately true (actually corresponding to reality, bearing some determinative relation to truth itself), but also how every formula in which the faith is expressed can in principle be surpassed while still retaining material identity of propositional truth. To answer this question, one must show that it does not follow from the true claim that doctrinal statements are historically conditioned and limited, indeed, inadequate, that this must result in their not being wholly true. How then, exactly, is a single and unitary revelation homogeneously expressed, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment, given the undeniable fact of time-conditioning, indeed, of historicity?

In this connection, given Kuyper's failure to answer this fundamental question, we can understand why Bendsdorp criticized Kuyper of ultrasubjectivism. I agree with Berkouwer that "it would be erroneous to interpret this concern [for plurality and pluralism] as relativism or subjectivism." He adds, "Rather, in the plurality it is necessary to grope for that which truly binds and unites."¹⁰⁸ Berkouwer then elaborates,

That harmony [between various dogmatic formulations] had always been presumed, virtually self-evidently, to be an implication of the mystery of the truth "*eodem sensu eademque sententia*." Now, however, attention is captivated primarily by the historical-factual process that does not transcend the times, but is entangled with them in all sorts of ways. It cannot be denied

106. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 70-71, but missing from the English translation.

107. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 70-71.

108. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 73 [60].

that one encounters the undeniable fact of the situated setting of the various pronouncements made by the Church in any given era.¹⁰⁹

How then, exactly, is a single and unitary revelation homogeneously expressed, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment, given the undeniable fact “of time-conditioning, one can even say: of historicity.” Berkouwer comments, “All the problems of more recent interpretation of dogma are connected very closely to this search for continuity. . . . Thus, the question of the nature of continuity has to be faced.”¹¹⁰

Because Kuyper does not directly address the question of the nature of continuity, he leaves himself open to the charge of holding a contradicting pluralism or a confessional relativism, meaning thereby a pluriformity that tolerates contradictions between confessions, leading to indifference and relativism in the question of truth. Still, to be fair to Kuyper, his ecclesiastical epistemology must not be understood as a plea for ecclesiological relativism, meaning thereby that there are many concrete churches, or even that Kuyper was oblivious to disunity and division in the Church as the fruit of sin. Kuyper knew the difference between division and diversity.

One might say that Kuyper’s ecclesiastical epistemology, in its most favorable light, is after a commensurable pluralism—to use a term coined by the American dogmatic theologian Thomas Guarino—allowing for legitimate pluralism and authentic diversity within a fundamental unity of meaning and truth. But neither Kuyper nor Berkouwer succeeded in giving coherent expression to a commensurable pluralism.¹¹¹ Still, Berkouwer is correct that “the rise of a stronger sense of plurality coincides with new openness for the ecumenical problematic.”¹¹² In my judgment, Vatican Council II was successful precisely where Kuyper and Berkouwer failed despite the fact that Berkouwer recognized the hermeneutics of the ecumenical significance of Vatican II almost a half-century ago.

Vatican II and Lérinian Ecclesiastical Epistemology

The then-Pope Benedict XVI, in his now-famous 2005 Christmas address to the Roman Curia, called the hermeneutics of Vatican II “the ‘hermeneutic of reform,’ of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us. She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God.”¹¹³ This hermeneutics of creative

109. Berkouwer, *Nabetrachting op het Concilie* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1968), 52.

110. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 236-37 [190-91].

111. In respect of Berkouwer, I argue this point in my book, Eduardo Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism: Disputed Questions*, vol. 24, *Studies in Reformed Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

112. Berkouwer, *De Kerk*, vol. 1, 73 [60].

113. Pope Benedict XVI, Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia offering them his Christmas greetings. <http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/>

retrieval, in short, of *ressourcement*, is at the heart of the Second Vatican Council's Lérinian hermeneutics.

The ecclesiastical epistemology implied by the Lérinian hermeneutics of Vatican II helps us to address the issue of how to distinguish unity from uniformity, division from diversity, and conflicting from complementary formulations of the truths of faith. Turning now to Kasper, who stands in the line of this hermeneutics, he (like Berkouwer) recognizes the ecumenical significance of the distinction between unchanging truth and theological formulations and doctrinal choices.¹¹⁴ He explains,

The dogmatic decisions always take place in a specific historical situation, they use historical human language and ways of expression and are insofar historically conditioned. It pertains also to the historicity that dogmas can subsequently be deepened and complemented, obviously always in the same sense and the same meaning [*"eodem sensu eademque sententia"*]. In other words, there is growth and progress in understanding the faith. However, within all this historical conditionality they express something that is valid and binding for all times.¹¹⁵

Hence, Kasper is drawing here a distinction between truth and its formulations in dogma, between the propositional truths of faith and their expression in sentences, form and content, content and context, such as was suggested by John XXIII in his opening address to Vatican II, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*: "The deposit or the truths of faith, contained in our sacred teaching, are one thing, while the mode in which they are enunciated, keeping the same meaning and the same judgment [*'eodem sensu eademque sententia'*], is another thing."¹¹⁶ As I explained earlier, the subordinate clause in this passage from *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* is part of a larger passage from Vatican I, *Dei Filius*,¹¹⁷ and this passage is itself from the *Commonitorium* of Vincent of Lérins: "Therefore, let there be growth and abundant progress in understanding, knowledge, and wisdom, in each and all, in individuals and in the whole Church, at all times and in the progress of ages, but only with the proper limits, i.e., *within the same dogma, the same meaning, the same judgment.*"

The Council's Lérinian ecclesiastical epistemology implicitly distinguishes between propositions and sentences. Propositions—contents of thought that are true or false, expressible in various languages, but more than mere words, expressing

december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html.

114. Walter Kasper, "The Continuing Challenge of the Second Vatican Council: The Hermeneutics of the Conciliar Statements," in *Theology and Church*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 166-76.

115. Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, 376 [264].

116. John XXIII, "Gaudet Mater Ecclesia," Allocution on the Occasion of the Solemn Inauguration of the Second Ecumenical Council (October 11, 1962), no. 14. I am following Joseph Komonchak's translation that is superior to both the Abbott and Flannery translations. <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/john-xxiii-opening-speech.pdf>.

117. Denzinger, *Dei Filius*, §3020.

possible, and if true, actual states of affairs—do not vary as the language in which they are expressed varies. Furthermore, a proposition is true if what it says corresponds to the way objective reality is; otherwise, it is false. Of course, human beings speak in sentences to communicate propositions, but they are not the same thing as propositions. Propositions are nonlinguistic entities. That is, the same proposition, or the same meaning, is the message having many and varied expressions in different languages or in the same language. Moreover, the truth of a proposition is closely connected with its meaning. Bernard Lonergan rightly explains that “meaning of its nature is related to what is meant, and what is meant may or may not correspond to what is in fact so.” He continues, “If it corresponds, the meaning is true. If it does not correspond, the meaning is false.” Lonergan then correctly notes the implication of denying the correspondence view of truth, which is a realist view of truth, namely, that a proposition is true if what it says corresponds to what is, in fact, the case; otherwise, it is false:

To deny correspondence is to deny a relation between meaning and meant. To deny the correspondence view of truth is to deny that, when the meaning is true, the meant is what is so. Either denial is destructive of the [Catholic] dogmas. . . . If one denies that, when the meaning is true, then the meant is what is so, one rejects propositional truth. If the rejection is universal, then it is the self-destructive proposition that there are no true propositions. If the rejection is limited to the dogmas, then it is just a roundabout way of saying that all the dogmas are false.¹¹⁸

Significantly, normative Catholicism has supported the realism of Lérinian hermeneutics of dogma on this very point from Vatican I through Vatican II, including post-conciliar interpretations of doctrine. Hence, because of its realism in respect of truth, Lérinian hermeneutics is antihistoricist or antirelativist.

Vincent already saw this clearly in the early fifth century: doctrine can develop, but cannot change its fundamental meaning and truth, that is, the realistic meaning and truth embedded in the dogmas, creeds, and confessions themselves. In short, the Lérinian legacy of Vatican II is that of commensurable pluralism—allowing for legitimate pluralism and authentic diversity within a fundamental unity of truth. Commensurable pluralism is, arguably, presupposed, even if not fully worked out, in postconciliar interpretations of dogma and (or) doctrine. Commensurable pluralism can (a) account for the need for new dogmatic formulations; (b) explain why propositions of dogmas or doctrines are unchangeable, irreformable, or definitive; and (c) justify the distinction between propositions and sentences, content and

118. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., “The Dehellenization of Dogma,” in *A Second Collection*, William F. J. Ryan, S. J. and Bernard J. Tyrrell, S. J., eds. 11-32 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 14-15, 16, respectively.

context, form and content, and message and the medium. Commensurable pluralism is consistent with receptive ecumenism. Receptive ecumenism urges us to consider that the practice of ecumenism involves an exchange of gifts. The latter is able to account for the gifts of other Christian traditions that contribute to the unity and Catholicity of the Church by bringing about a fuller realization of the truth.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

In sum, I have given an answer to the fundamental ecclesiological question regarding ecclesial unity and diversity, and hence Catholicity, within the one Church of Jesus Christ. I have sought to be faithful to the Church's teaching regarding the unicity and inner unity of the Church, distinguishing between unity and uniformity, division and diversity, and complementary and contradictory differences in ecclesiological epistemology. I have brought into ecumenical conversation the ecclesiology of Catholic and Reformed theologians, Kasper and Berkouwer. I have given a critical analysis of Kuyper's ecclesiastical epistemology, Berkouwer's account of it, shown its weaknesses, and argued that the Lérinian ecclesiastical epistemology shows its strength precisely where Kuyper's ecclesiastical epistemology is at its weakest, namely, in developing a commensurable pluralism or, in Kuyper's terms, an "organically connected multififormity."¹²⁰

119. Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, On the Missionary Activity of the Church, §6, online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html. See also, *Lumen Gentium* §13.

120. Kuyper, *Principles*, 170.