

Reformation and Sectarianism: Still an Issue (4/4)

Dr. Justo L. González



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info@aeth.org

Reformation and Sectarianism: Still an Issue

(4 of 4)

This morning we were speaking of the holiness of the church. As we all know, this is a mark of the church that is affirmed by all the great ancient creeds. The Apostles' Creed says "I believe in the holy catholic church," and the Nicene says "we believe in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." As you will remember, we were discussing the holiness of the church, and making sure that we understand that it is holy, not because its members are pure or sinless, but rather because, by the power of the *Holy Spirit* it is united to its *holy* Head, Jesus Christ.

Yet, in those two ancient creeds, and in a long Christian tradition, the affirmation that the church is holy is accompanied by the parallel affirmation that the church is catholic.

As we all know many Protestant churches have cited this differently by which they affirm belief in the "holy universal church." This is particularly true of Protestant churches in predominantly Roman Catholic areas, such as Latin America. Those of us who grew up in those churches learned to say "I believe in the holy church." The reason for this is obvious: in the circles in

which we moved, the word "catholic" meant *Roman* Catholic. It would indeed have been a very strange thing for us as Methodists to say that we believed in that other church across the street that was constantly attacking us as heretics! Therefore, rather than employing the traditional word "catholic," we said "universal."

This was explained to us by saying that the word "catholic" meant "universal," and therefore we were doing nothing but simply employing a different translation — one that was better in our context.

But the truth is that, as always, something is lost in translation. It is true that in a sense the two words have the same meaning. But when one looks more at their connotations, one finds that those two words, rather than being-synonymous, express contrasting ideas.

This is made clear if we take into consideration the meaning of each of the two words. The word "catholic" is a combination of two Greek roots. The first, *kata*, is the same preposition that the Greek New Testament employs in the titles of each of the four Gospels. Thus, the first

of our four Gospels bears the title *To euangelion to kata Matthaion* — The Gospel *according to Matthew* — and the other three are *kata Markon*, *kata Laan*, and *kata airmen*. In short, the first root of the word "catholic" means "according to."

The second root is the word *hólos*, which means "the whole" or "all." Thus, if we say that a picture is "holographic," we mean that it is made three-dimensional by projecting different angles of it in order to produce a total sense of depth. What English translations of the Bible call a "holocaust," is a sacrifice that is completely burnt. When we say that somebody or something presents a "*holistic* picture," we mean a view that brings together all the parts of something in such a way that all the parts are interconnected, and that each single part can only be properly understood in relation to the rest. Thus, it is clear that etymologically the word "catholic" means "according to the whole."

In order to signal the difference between the word "Catholic" as it refers to the Roman Catholic Church, and this other, original meaning of the word, during the rest of this hour I'll pronounce the latter as "cath'holic."

If we then look at the word "universal," we shall find that it also comes from two roots — in this case Latin roots. The first is obvious, for it means "one," and is the same word from which Spanish-speaking people derive the number "uno." It is also the same root from which English derives the words "unity" and "uniform." The second root may be less familiar. It comes from the Latin *versus*, which is the past participle of *verter*, a verb that means "to turn into," or "to turn at" — as in "the Tennessee Titans *versus* the Kansas City Chiefs." It also has a sense of "direction."

Thus, a "convergence" signals a movement toward a meeting point, and a "diversion" is something that draws in a different direction. It also means to pour, as water into a vessel. For those of you who are Spanish-speaking, it is from this root that we derive the verb *verter* to pour. For this reason, a "version" is something poured into a particular language or a particular context. . Bringing all of this together, it is clear then that the words "universality" and "catholicity" do not have quite the same meaning.

Thus, while what "cath'olic" stresses, one in which all the various parts come together to form

a whole without losing their own particularity, "universal" stresses uniformity, running in the same direction, or all being poured into a single mold. While "universality" tends to suppress diversity, "cath'olicity" embraces it. If some king managed to conquer the whole world, his rule would be universal, but not cath'olic.

This is why the early church often referred to "the cath'olic witness to the gospel." Today many fret over the differences among the four Gospels. I well remember when I was witnessing to some of my fellow students and a classmate who was an atheist came into the room with a New Testament marked in various places. He read different stories about the feeding of the multitudes. He then closed the book and said, "Tell me, how many people, with how many loaves, and how many fish did Jesus feed? How many baskets were left? I was left wishing there were only one gospel! I then discovered in my father's library a book called *A Harmony of the Gospels*. I opened the book with great expectation, only to discover that the so-called harmony didn't harmonize anything! On the contrary, it made the differences even more stark. At that point, I wished that the church had decided to keep only one gospel and discard the rest.

Why did the church include in its canon four different Gospels? Didn't they know that they were different? It took me some time to come to the realization that, rather than including four Gospels because they did not know that they were different, the early church included them precisely because they were different. At the time when the church slowly put together the four Gospels, a number of views were emerging that the church at large considered unacceptable. Some of these views denied that Jesus was a true human being. Some said that he did not have a real body but, only the appearance of one. Some said that he was not born, but simply appeared as a grown man. Some claimed that he rejected the Old Testament as well as its god, its traditions, and its principles.

By the second century, some of these groups had produced their own version of the life and teachings of Jesus, each supporting its own particular understanding. Since these groups did not agree among themselves, these various gospels each claimed that it was the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, the church had four different books that were older than the various particular

Gospels appearing in the second century and later. Apparently some were most used and better known in one region, and some in another. For instance, we know that the Gospel of Luke was particularly widespread in the area around Antioch, from where it seems to have sprung. At the same time, the Gospel of John was commonly read in the churches of Asia Minor, where it apparently had its origin. We must remember that these were times before the printing press, and that for a book to pass from one church to another it had to be copied by hand, which took some time. Slowly, however, churches from one area began sharing stories with others from other areas. Even though the specifics in each of these various stories were different, they all agreed on the essentials some particular groups were denying: Jesus was a man of flesh and blood, and not a phantasmagoric spirit. Although he clashed with the religious authorities of Judaism, he was a faithful Jew who affirmed and followed the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures. He truly died, and he truly arose from the dead.

Obviously the differences among these various accepted versions of the gospel of Jesus Christ caused some difficulties. Just as back when I was in high school I wished there had been only one gospel, there were some in the early church who had the same feelings. At some point late

in the second century one such Christian, by the name of Tatian, decided to solve the problem by conjoining the four into one. His work is called the *Diatessaron*, which simply means "by the four" — that is, the four canonical evangelists. This had some success in some sections of the church, particularly in Syria, Tatian's homeland. But eventually it was abandoned, in part because, in order to harmonize the four Gospels, Tatian had to leave out sections of all of them.

If trying to harmonize the four Gospels line by line did not work, there was an ancient solution. This was simply to add all four of them. Thus, if in one passage Jesus feeds 5,000, and in another 10,000, and in one case there *are* seven baskets left, and in another 12, this simply means that there were several different occasions in which Jesus fed a multitude. And he must have preached once on the mount and once again a similar sermon on the plain. He gave his disciples two different texts for the Lord's prayer. And so on. This was the practice, in the third century, of Origen of Alexandria. And when the contradictions were too stark, Origen simply wiggled off the hook by interpreting the conflicting passages allegorically, and giving them different meanings.

All of this leads us to ask: Did the early church not see the differences among the various gospels? The answer, surprisingly enough, is not only that they did know that they were different, but even more that this is precisely the reason why they were all included in a single canon.

Allow me to illustrate this by means of an example taken from our courts of law. If at a trial there is only one witness, the veracity of that testimony may be questioned. If there are several witnesses, and all agree on every single detail, it is obvious that there has been collusion, and their testimony will be practically worthless. But if there are several witnesses who do not agree on every detail, and even disagree on some, but all agree on the essentials of the case, their testimony will be unimpeachable.

Something like this was taking place when the church gathered the books that now form the New Testament. As I have already mentioned, there were all sorts of strange interpretations of the life of Jesus. Many of them turned him into a ghostly figure whose body was mere appearance. If he seemed to eat, it was not because he needed sustenance, but rather in order

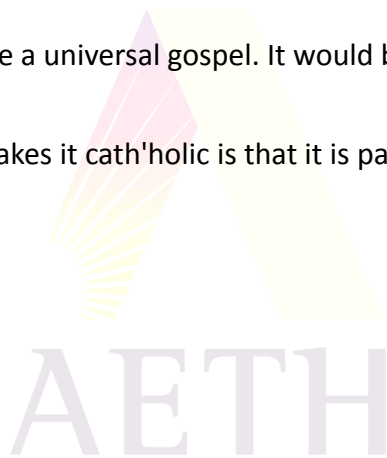
to show or teach something. He could not have been born as a child, which is a very messy process. Rather, he must have appeared as an adult at the beginning of his ministry. There were also many who claimed that there was a radical discontinuity between the teachings of Jesus and the faith of Israel. According to them, the god of the Old Testament is one of law, wrath and vengeance, while the God of Jesus is one of love and forgiveness. Each of these various teachers had his own gospel. Marcion, who rejected the entire Old Testament as the word of a lesser divine being, simply took the Gospel of Luke and expunged from it all references to the Old Testament. Others had their own particular gospels, often claiming to be grounded in a secret tradition secretly bequeathed by Jesus to one of his disciples. Such is the case, for instance, of the Gospel of Judas, which created such a stir in the newspapers not so long ago.

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Over against these particular Gospels, the church put together the four we now have being, fully aware that they were different, and proposing them precisely because they were different. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John might not agree on everything. But they certainly agreed that Jesus was a full human being, that he was born, grew, wept, died, and rose again. They also agreed that, in spite of his repeated clashes with religious authorities, Jesus was a faithful Jew,

and repeatedly quoted from Jewish Scripture. Thus, as in the trial I have just mentioned, the multiplicity of witnesses proved the main points in question. And, as in the case of the trial, their difference was further proof of their reliability.

Returning then to what I was saying earlier about the difference between catholicity and universality, one could say that if we had only the Gospel of Matthew, and it was accepted throughout the world, it would be a universal gospel. It would be an orthodox gospel. But it would not be cath'olic. What makes it cath'olic is that it is part of a multiple witness to Jesus Christ.



Again, having only one Gospel would be simpler. Cath'holicity is more difficult. It is a messy matter.

Back to the question, of cath'holicity and universality: Just as these two are not the same, so also their opposites are different. The opposite of "universal" is "local." A local church can never be universal. But that same local church can be cath'olic if it reflects a variety of perspectives

and is in communion with other churches that reflect various aspects of that variety.

The opposite of cath'holicity is sectarianism. No church is cath'holistic if it insists that it is the only church. It is sectarian. The very word "sect" implies that it is a part that claims to be the whole— which shows that what makes a church sectarian has nothing to do with its size or is being present throughout the world. What makes it sectarian is taking the part for the whole, believing and acting as if it were the whole, no matter how widespread it is.

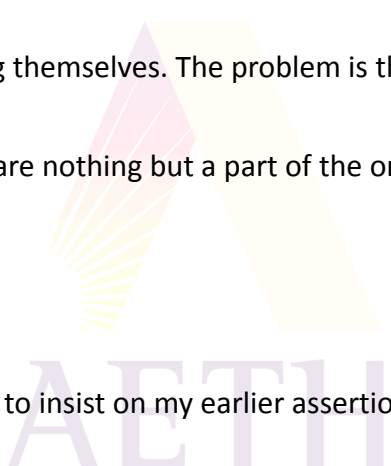
We know that at first various gospels were more widely used than others. Apparently in Antioch it was Luke, in Ephesus it was John, in Rome it was Mark, and so on. We know that when the early church gathered they read what Justin calls "the memoirs of the apostles." Although there is very little attesting to that, we may well imagine what would have happened repeatedly as Christians from one region visited churches in another. "That is not the story I hear when the gospel is read in my church." "Jesus did not say, 'the poor in spirit'; he simply said 'the poor'." "I never heard about the Magi before; it was the shepherds who went to Bethlehem."

We do know that this raised some questions when a Gospel was read in a church that was not used to it. This was clearly the case with the Gospel of John, which differed most widely from the other three. Even as late as the second half of the second century, some still objected to it.

In the end, the very process of formation of the New Testament is a clear example of what cath'olicity means. It certainly does not mean what some call "latitudinarianism," in which opinions do not matter and everything goes. It is for this reason that the church rejected books such as the Gospel of John, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of Truth of Valentinus. What they taught was simply unacceptable, and by claiming that they were the only gospel and rejecting all the others they proved themselves to be sectarian. But on the other hand, even while rejecting opinions and doctrines that are contrary to the faith of the church, cath'olicity does mean accepting different perspectives on a single point. When the church in Asia Minor decided to read in worship the Gospel of Luke, that was so common in Syria, it was affirming that, in spite of all their different traditions and perspectives, they were all part of the same cath'olic church. But above all, note that none of the four Gospels claims to **the** gospel of Jesus Christ. They are the gospel *according to* Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Behind these four

books, and behind all their differences stands the one True Gospel, Jesus Christ himself.

All of this relates both to the Reformation and to Latino/Latina ministry today. As to the Reformation, one of its results was the growth of sectarianism. As we look at the development of Protestantism over the centuries since the Reformation, there is no denying that sects have multiplied. The problem, however, is not that they are groups that disagree among themselves. Even the Gospels disagree among themselves. The problem is that many take themselves as the whole, when in fact at best they are nothing but a part of the one, holy, cath'olic church.



Before we go on, however, I wish to insist on my earlier assertion, that what makes a church cath'olic is not universality, and that what makes it sectarian is not its size nor its disagreeing with others. What makes a church cath'olic is including a variety of voices and perspectives each enriching all the others. And what makes a church sectarian is not its size or its being local, but rather its claiming that it is the whole when in fact it is just a part.

On this basis, we can say that the Reformation led to sectarianism not only among Protestants,

but also in the way Catholicism defined itself. The Council of Trent, which gathered in response to the Reformation and gave shape to the Roman Catholic Church for four centuries. It understood its task as making certain that uniformity prevailed under the leadership of Rome. Its decision that the mass was to be celebrated in Latin is just one of many examples of the centralizing thrust of the Council of Trent and of the church that emerged from it. The Council sought to deal with every point of doctrine and to dot every, making it clear that whoever did not accept every detail of its doctrine was a heretic and had no part in the church of Jesus Christ.

Wesley had an understanding of catholicity similar to what I am trying to describe. It is not necessary to prove this point. But just in case, we may remember his sermon, "The Catholic Spirit." There he makes it clear that it is not a matter of giving up one's opinions and convictions. Wisely, he observed that "although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to be say that any opinion is not true is the same thing as not to hold it) yet can no man be assured that all his all opinions taken together are true." He also makes it clear that differences of opinion, no matter how cherished those

opinions may be, are no reason for rejecting the other. He says, for instance:

I believe the episcopal form of church government to be scriptural and apostolical. If you think the presbyterian or independent is better, think so still, and act accordingly. I believe infants ought to be baptized, and that this may be done either by dipping or sprinkling. If you are otherwise persuaded, Follow your own persuasion. It appears to me that forms of prayer are of excellent use, particularly in the great congregation. If you judge extemporary prayer to be of more use, act suitably to your own judgment. ... Let all these smaller points stand aside. Let them never come into sight. "If thine heart is as my heart," If thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: "give me thine hand."

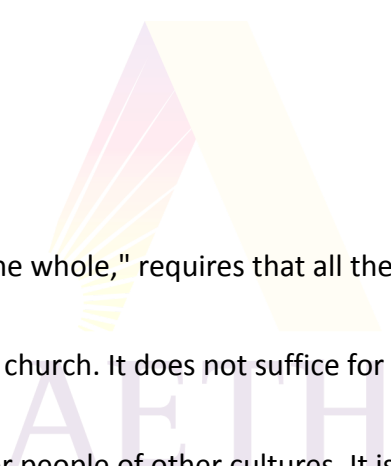
Wesley never claimed that Methodism was the only form of Christianity, nor that those who hold to other forms are further away from God and God's will that we are. As a sign of our commitment to this views we belong to a vast number of ecumenical bodies, from the World Council of Churches to the National Council of Churches, and to local interchurch organizations.

Lest we congratulate ourselves, let us remember that Sectarianism is always there, and makes its way into our thinking and acting in surreptitious ways. Thus, too often we speak only of the Methodist Church, which has made us who we are. We have ample reason to love the seriousness with which it approaches organizational and structural matters. But neither this nor anything else excuses us when we forget that we are part of the larger body of Christ. When we do so we act against the faith we declare on "the holy, catholic." I could say much more about

this. However, since we are supposed to be speaking not only about the Reformation, but also about the National Plan for Hispanic Latino/a Ministry, allow me to take the time remaining to spell out how all I have said about the nature of cath'holicity should impact the manner in which we understand and implement that plan.

As I ask that question, I would suggest a twofold answer. In the first place, within United Methodism itself we must make clear that we understand the National Plan as a two-way master. Certainly, it is a plan to make the ministry of the United Methodist Church more accessible to the Latino population. As such, it includes the creation of new congregations and the revitalization of older churches. It includes developing leaders, ordained as well as lay, who will enable and expand the ministry of those congregations in their communities. It includes producing the materials necessary to support those congregations in their own study, growth, and discernment. In all these matters and in several others, as its own report to the General Conference shows, the National Plan has been quite successful, even though given the size of the task there is still much to be done.

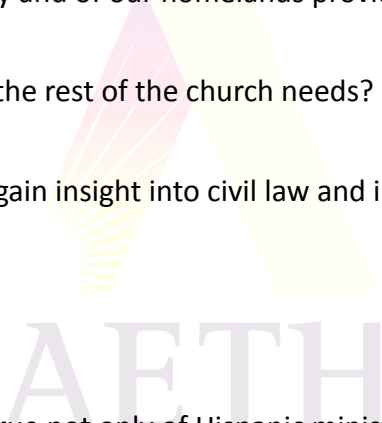
If what I have been saying about cath'holicity is true, it follows that it does not suffice for the United Methodist Church to develop a Latino constituency, or to train leaders, or to provide services, or to practice advocacy for immigrants and other marginalized people. All of this is absolutely necessary. All of these we must continue doing, and in all of these we must expand and improve our efforts, I have no desire to minimize any of these. The cath'holicity of the church certainly requires that people be brought into it from all sorts of cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds.



Catholicity, being "according to the whole," requires that all the various perspectives be brought to the very center of the church. It does not suffice for the church of one culture to provide services and resources for people of other cultures. It is also necessary for it to learn from Christian experience in other cultures and social settings, and to be enriched by it.

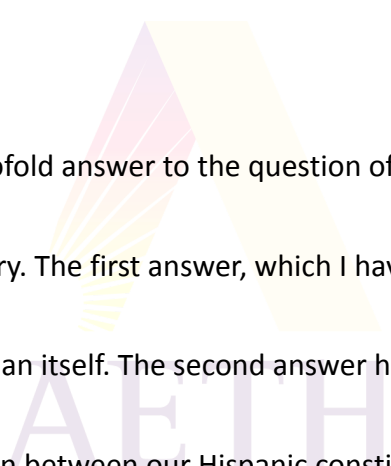
I fear that too often that is not the case. The United Methodist Church can certainly boast of having been the first major Protestant denomination to make Hispanic ministry an integral part of its mission, and to fund it. We cannot boast of the impact that the growing Latino

membership in our congregations is having on the church at large. The Latino membership in our denomination has much to offer to the church as a whole. And I do mean just having joint church suppers or services that make us feel good but do not change the way we are and the way we think. We must begin to hold some serious conversations at all levels of the church, from the local congregation to the national agencies and General Conference, as to how the experience of Hispanics and other minorities can enrich the entire connection. How does the experience of our extended family and of our homelands provide all with particular insights into the nature of Christian faith that the rest of the church needs? How does the experience of migration help the entire church gain insight into civil law and into the law of God?



And allow me to add that this is true not only of Hispanic ministries. One should also ask, for instance, what gifts does the African American church community bring to the church at large, helping it understand the gospel and its power more profoundly. And we must also be ready for the possibility that whatever we learn from such explorations will radically challenge some of our traditional understandings of the nature of the church and its ministry. It may also challenge some of our preconceived notions that are profoundly embedded into our Discipline, and which

we would do well to begin questioning. What this means in concrete terms is that as we develop our Hispanic constituency we must make certain that we also develop its ability to speak for itself. For instance, when we train Latino and Latina leaders for the church, are we training them simply so they can lead the Hispanic faith community, or are we also training them in such a way that they have the tools necessary to make an impact on the church at large?



I said earlier that there was a twofold answer to the question of the implications of a fuller understanding of Hispanic ministry. The first answer, which I have just outlined, has to do with the functioning of the National Plan itself. The second answer has to do with the manner in which we conceive the connection between our Hispanic constituency and the rest of the church. And let me hasten to add that I do not mean only the rest of the United Methodist Church. I mean the rest of the one holy cath'olic church.

Again, one way of being surreptitiously sectarian is by acting and thinking as if there were nobody here but us Methodists. As we support and develop a new congregation, are we only

helping it become part of Methodism, or do we also make sure that it understands itself as part of a larger church not just the United Methodist Church, but the entire church catholic?

When we have been supporting someone in the development of a new congregation, do we look only at how she or he has helped develop new United Methodists and how their work is reflected in our statistics, or do we also look at how that congregation relates to other Christians in the community — including Latino congregations of other denominations? Do we encourage our leaders and congregations to see themselves as a part of a larger presence of the church in the Hispanic community? Do we have this in mind as we develop those leaders? Do those in positions of leadership within the denomination value the relationships that Latino and Latina United Methodists have with people of other churches for the benefit of the community? Or do we evaluate them only on the basis of their participation in United Methodism?

I am convinced that if we take seriously what Wesley called "the catholic spirit," and the faith that we profess when we repeat the Apostles' Creed, these are questions that we must all

address. We must address them, no matter how disturbing they may be, or what changes they might bring about in our way of being church. I know that this may be overwhelming.

Therefore, allow me to end by reminding all of us that, just as it is not our purity that makes the church holy, it also is not our openness or cultural awareness that makes it cath'olic. What makes the church holy is his holy Head. What makes it cath'olic is the Holy Spirit of God, who is a cath'olic Spirit, who blows from wherever it wishes — including even the most remote parts of the earth — the Spirit who upon being poured out on the early church made possible for all to hear the gospel in their own tongue. Just as the holiness of the church is not up to us, so is its cath'olicity not up to us. The church is cath'olic, no matter whether we want it to be cath'olic or not. What is up to us is to make certain that the United Methodist Church seeks and develops ways in which it can better express the cath'olicity of the one holy church. As we do so, I invite you to recognize that the National Plan for Hispanic Latino/Latina Ministries is a gift of the cath'olic Spirit of God to help us do so.

May God bless the United Methodist Church. But even more, may God bless the one, holy, cath'olic church. Amen.