

# **Determinative Elements in the Growth of the Church in the Context of Religious Pluralism**

**Samuel Bâlc**

Associate Professor PhD  
Theological Baptist Institute Bucharest, Romania  
samybâlc@gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the things that can be observed, looking at the beginnings of the Church, is that it grew in spite of the religious pluralism in which they operate. Even though the Church has been assaulted by all kinds of extraneous teachings, has not had political support, or has even gone through various persecutions, it has continued to grow and provide the world with a testimony worth following. In the present context, when the Church is increasingly fragmented because of all sorts of disputes and totally inadequate preoccupations unrelated to its mandate, you cannot help wondering what can lead again to a healthy growth of the Church even in a context in which religious pluralism is increasingly accentuated. Unlike those who have adopted and applied in the Church all sorts of worldly models and practices, believing that in this way they would be more relevant to the world and the Church will increase significantly, this article will highlight that, the same way as it was in the beginning, today the Church can grow in a healthy way. To the extent that each of these elements will be valued: holiness, unity, worship and edification, the Church will be able to grow and fulfill the mandate it has received.

**KEYWORDS:** holiness, unity, worship, edification, Church

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A first determining factor in the growth of the Church in the context of religious pluralism is:

## 1. Holiness

“The church,” said Deheleanu (1948, 83-84) “is holy because her Founder is holy, He sanctified the Church through His blood, and because her teaching is holy as well.”

Speaking of the holiness of the Church, Stăniloae is intimately connected with her unity. Thus, Stăniloae said:

The more the Church is united with Christ and therefore with itself, the more holy it is. [...] This means that the holiness of the Church, as well as its unity, has its source in the Holy Christ present in it. Where there is a direct and intimate relationship with Christ and with Him with other believers, there is holiness (Stăniloae, 1978, 270).

The basic meaning of the word “holy” is “to set aside”, or “consecrate”. This means transferring the person or certain things from the field of the profane, and putting them aside for God, thus becoming holy. Contrary to general opinion, holiness means more than doing good things and not doing bad things; it rather means to be totally dedicated to God and separate from everything that is sinful.

Peter declares that the Church is “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people whom God has earned to be His” (1 Peter 2:9). But the New Testament term also places a strong emphasis on another element, namely the ethical one.

The holy ones must thus prove the holiness and the love or character of their God, to whom they are consecrated.

Peter, applying to the Church the urge that God has addressed Israel: “*For I am the Lord your God; you are sanctified and sanctified,*

for I am holy “(Lev 11:44), thus urging Christians:” *As the One who called you is holy, be sanctified in all of your conduct. For it is written: Be holy, for I am holy*“(1 Peter 1: 15-16). Peter does not talk about an abstract concept of holiness. Rather, he advises the believers that in contrast to their past wickedness, their behavior should now be characterized by careful listening and careful conduct.

The prayer for holiness and for the perfect love of God was a persistent request for the Church of Christ throughout history. In this sense, Wesley declared, *“The supreme and final purpose of God’s plan of salvation is to regenerate the hearts of men to His image.”* (Dieter, 1999, 15)

The work of regenerating the heart is made, according to Wesley’s understanding, by the Holy Ghost, and it marks the beginning of sanctification. *“Through regeneration begins the formation of Christ’s life in us, the call to holiness and divine love becoming the irresistible motivation of the new life under the power and inspiration of the Spirit, which brought our adoption as children of God.”* (Dieter, 1999, 17)

The restoration in love of God’s image in the heart, although it is a turning point in search of holiness, yet it does not represent the final step in the saving and sanctifying grace of God or the establishment of a permanent state of grace in Wesley’s conception.

Wesley thus did not allow any discontinuity in the search for holiness by the Christian but understood sanctification as a continuous process. The life of holiness originates from the regenerated life created when being born again and continues through the work of the Holy Spirit to the extent that the believer obeys God’s will.

According to Scripture, although sanctification is, first of all, the work of God in the believer, it is not a process in which the believer remains passive, but one in which the Christian must always be proactive. As John Murray points out:

The work of God in us is not suspended because we work, nor is our work suspended because God works. As we cannot even say that the relationship is strictly a cooperation, as if God has done His part, and we have done ours. [...] God works in us, and we also work. But the relationship is that *because God is working, we work* (Murray 1955, 184-185).

Although the New Testament often describes sanctification as a life process, there is also an important sense in which Scripture describes sanctification as an act of God that is definitive. It is also called positional holiness. One of the passages describing sanctification in the definitive sense is 1 Cor. 1: 2, where Paul addresses the faithful of Corinth as *“unto those who were sanctified in Christ Jesus.”*

Sanctification, therefore, as emphasized by Anthony Hoekema, should be understood as both definitive and progressive. In its definitive meaning, it means that the work of the Spirit by which He causes us to die to sin, to be resurrected with Christ and to be made new beings.

In its progressive sense, it must be understood as the work of the Spirit by which He renews us and constantly transforms us in the likeness of Christ, helps us to continue to grow in grace and to continue to perfect our holiness. We could understand the definitive sanctification as the beginning of the process, and the progressive sanctification as the continual maturing of the new person who was created through definitive sanctification (Hoekema 1999, 80).

Speaking of the question “Who are the saints today, Stanley M. Horton said:

There is a progressive aspect of sanctification, through which we grow in grace (2 Peter 1: 4-8, 3:18). But there is also an instantaneous aspect of sanctification, by which, when we are born again, we are separated from the world to follow Jesus and are sanctified in this sense. Unfortunately, some institutionalized churches have placed certain men and

women on a pedestal and called them saints. But the New Testament calls all believers holy, even those who are far from being perfect. If we are Christians, we are consecrated and dedicated to following Jesus. All are holy if they are heading in the right direction, although some may have just started off their journey. It is sad that the holy word was compromised for us by those who use it as a title for their heroes (Horton 1970, 71).

Living a holy life is thus possible through the work of God in the life of the believer, a particularly important role in this process of sanctification is that of the Holy Spirit. Zenas Bicket, however, draws attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in the process of sanctification, stating:

First of all, in order for a man to be deemed holy, it is necessary for him to have a real trust in the Holy Spirit; that one must give up the wrong concepts of sanctification. Some Christians behave as if they believe that holiness is the expected result of Christ's simple proclamation over a sufficiently long period of time. [...] Other Christians believe, as it seems, that sanctification is accomplished through an increasing effort to become godly through their own power. But just as the growth of a plant is the result of life within it, not of effort, likewise the holiness is the result of the inner living presence of the Holy Spirit.

Another misconception about sanctification is that the Christian makes the effort and then asks God to bless this effort. But the Holy Spirit must do either the whole work or nothing; He will not divide his work with man. If he does not accept the righteousness of Christ and the solicitation of the Spirit, man will find that everything is against him (Bicket 1968, 4-5).

Sanctification is, therefore, part of the initial experience of salvation, but at the same time, it is a process of purification that lasts a lifetime.

By living a holy life, the Christian can thus have the guarantee that he can enjoy the glory with God.

According to those affirmed in connection with the sanctification of the Church, one can conclude by saying: No saint shows his holiness making it a barrier in his communion with other believers. On the contrary, as his holiness grows similarly his opening to others grows. The Church is holy because its Founder is holy, He sanctified the Church through His blood and for that holy is its teaching. In the context of today's religious pluralism, the Church will grow to the extent that the faithful will live in holiness. Another determining factor in the growth of the Church is:

## 2. Unity

There is a single Church in its inseparable sense because God cannot contradict himself (See Ephesians 4: 4-6). As Congar points out: *"The unity of the Church is a communication and an extension of the very unity of God."* (Chițescu, Todoran and Petruța, 1958, 784) *But the united church, as Bulgakov (Orthodoxy, p. 111) noted, is the one in which the revealed truth has remained unchanged.*

The unity of the Church is, therefore, a unity of life, on the basis of which every believer feels one/united with the others, living in the same mysterious body of the Lord, having the same faith, the same spiritual gifts.

Where is Christ, Staniloae (1978, 256) said, it is unity, for where Christ is, there is the love that wants to embrace all of them in themselves and present them to the Father. The unity can only be gained through the rooting in Christ, which is the Word of God that has become accessible to us by the incarnation, to bring us all into His unity.

Continuing this idea, Stăniloae (1978, 258) underlined:

The unity between the Church and Christ and within the Church is sustained by the unity between the Son and the Father. The church lives in the ocean of love between the three of the Holy Trinity. Just as the three Persons in their loving unity cannot separate, so neither can the Church of God, nor its faithful members in the depth of their being separate.

According to these statements, it can be said that if members of the Church do not know each other, they cannot be united among themselves consciously and cannot develop this unity.

All chosen are so united in Christ (cf. Eph. 1: 22-23) that they depend on the one Head and grow together in one body, being closely bound and forming a well-conjoined community (cf. 4:16) like the members of a body (Romans 12: 5, 1 Corinthians 10:17, 12:12, 27). They are truly made one because they live together in one faith, hope and love and in the same Spirit of God.

The unity of the Church is therefore important because it provides a good testimony to those outside, and at the same time because it can contribute to the growth of the Church. A particularly important role in the growth of the Church also has:

### **3. Worship**

The ultimate goal of man's existence is to glorify God, His glory being the supreme ideal of faith. This truth is equally valid for both the individual and the Church. The Scripture repeatedly indicates that this is the primary purpose of the Church (Romans 15: 6; Ephesians 1: 5-6, 12, 14; 3:21; 2 Thess. 1:12; 1 Peter 4:11). Glorification, worship is the active response that man gives to God and declares His merit. To worship a person, or to a thing means

to assign them supreme value or to declare the supreme value of that person or that thing.

In this sense, Ralph P. Martin (1974, 10) wrote: *“To worship God is to assign His supreme value, for He is the only one worthy to receive this worship.”*

In Israel, when worship began to deteriorate, both society and the things that they loved were affected to the same extent. The solution was a new motivation of the heart to make the form of worship relevant. It is known that the human being is, in general, a sensible nature, having a feeling that often gives impulse to the inner joy of singing. Many people, whether or not they have a religious belief, often “sing” as a result of their inner condition and an inner sense of sadness or joy. Because of this human vocation, over the centuries art has developed poetry, the hymnographic art that embraced various stylizations expressing a wide range of moods, aspirations, etc.

Within these human manifestations, religious hymns were often created as a reaction to the unknown or as a reaction to different states of fear, hymns which are given some artistic and mythological value. Also, in some peoples, the singing has been consecrated even more, considering that it is possible to obtain some divine favors.

Christian hymns, although they also have some spiritual background and are caused by some inner feelings, yet behind them is always the Revelation, that is, the force of argumentation and the exposition of divine truths. Church singing did not come as a response to any sentimental needs, nor to meet the need for novelty or curiosity, but it was always characterized by a precise truth.

It can be said that the blessed effect of church music and singing has penetrated the innermost part of the human being, giving to the soul a special refreshing and exhilarating feeling that bring feelings of reverence, worship and glory to God the Father, for His infinite love, manifested through the sacrifice of His Son and manifested

through the power of the Holy Spirit, in the hearts of the redeemed and saved. At the same time, it can be noticed that when the Church departs from the expression of theology in singing, worship, the spiritual life of believers also degrades.

In worship, a special place is held by prayer. The prayer was defined by the Fathers of the Church as “*speaking to God.*” (Hristotom, Homilies 5 to Genesis), “*conversation with God.*” (Gregory of Nyssa, Word 1 of prayer), “*the raising of mind to God, or appropriate demanding/approaching of God.*” (Damascus, Dogmatics 3, 24), “*raising our minds to God.*” (Learning book).

Whatever it is defined, prayer is the essential, fundamental, act of religious human life, the means of putting man in direct contact with God by raising the thought, the heart, and the human will to Him.

As for the evangelicals, although they have no written prayers to teach and then address to God, it can be seen that when praying the Father and both the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, so Holy Trinity is invoked.

Summarizing what has been said about the glorification of God, the words of Ronald Allen and Gordon Borrer are particularly suggestive in this regard:

Worship is not that unsubstantiated muttering which, from time to time, covers pipe organ’s prelude; we celebrate God when we allow prelude to tune our hearts with the glory of God through music.

Worship does not mean to mourn some prayers or to sing solemnly a few hymns without thinking a little or with no heart; we celebrate God when we are all joined together in fervent prayers and passionate songs. Worship is not those words that elevate our own importance, or we bore others with banal clichés when someone is asked to testify; we celebrate God when we praise His Name for the good of His people.

Worship does not take place when thoughtless thoughts are expressed, when there are many elements or when a purpose is to be reached in different ways; we celebrate God when all parts of the service fit together and act for a common purpose.

Worship is not generosity of disgust or compulsory service; we celebrate God when we give with joy and serve Him with all our heart.

Worship does not happen on musical accords played at random and false, nor when music becomes just a show of someone; we celebrate God when we rejoice and participate in the music brought to his glory.

Worship is not the manifestation of patience during preaching; we celebrate God when we listen to His Word with pleasure and seek to conform more and more to the image of our Savior.

Worship is not poorly preached sermon and utterly ignorant; we celebrate God when our words honor His Word through the Holy Spirit.

[...] The worship service is thus a celebration of God (Allen and Borrer 2000, 19-20).

Concluding, it can be said that at every moment, worship reminds man and recaptures the Trinitarian dimension of God that is offered as a model of love and communion for the relationships between men to attract them more and more into the communion of love with Him. No matter how attractive the models of the world are, the only worship that contributes to the healthy growth of the Church is that which glorifies God. A determining element in the growth of the Church, in the context of religious pluralism, is also:

#### **4. Edification**

Another determining factor in the growth of the Church is edifying believers. Paul has repeatedly spoken about the building/edifying

of the body. “To edify” simply means “to build”, “to construct”. Edification is, therefore, the process of building the Church, a process by which the Church grows and strengthens itself. For example, in Ephesians 4:12, he shows that God gave various gifts to the Church “for the perfecting of the saints for the ministry of service, for the edification of the body of Christ.”

Believers must become mature people in Christ, of whom “all the body, firmly and firmly bound, by whatsoever gives each, receives its growth, according to the work of each part in its measure, and is made in love” (v. 16).

The edification potential is the criterion on which all Christian activities, including their speech, must be evaluated. “*No immoral word shall come out of your mouth; but a good one for the building, as it is necessary, to give grace to those who hear it.*” (v. 29)

Moreover, in the course of analyzing some controversial spiritual gifts, Paul challenges the matter of edification, for example, in Corinthians 14: 4-5, as follows:

Whoever speaks in another language edifies oneself; but who prophesies, edifies the Church spiritually. I would like you all to speak in other languages, but especially to prophesy. Whoever prophesies is greater than who speaks in other languages; except if he interprets these tongues in order for the Church to be edified. Galatians 5:25

The importance of the edification of others while performing certain gifts is mentioned again, in various ways, in verses 12, 17 and 26. The last of these references summarizes the whole issue: “All to be done for the edification of the soul.” It is noticed that edification is a mutual edification made by all members of the body.

There are many ways in which members of the Church must be edified. One of them is fellowship. Christians need to encourage one another and be compassionate to one another, carrying each

other's burdens. On some occasions, this may involve correcting and rebuking the other, which must be done with love. In some serious cases, even excommunication may be needed, as happened with the immoral man mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5: 1-2. However, the main purpose of such disciplinary action is not to discard the group of a wrong member, but to bring such a person to a rightful life and thus to fellowship with the other members.

This fellowship among members of the Church is possible through the work of the Holy Spirit. Also, the growth of the spiritual man, the spiritual development of the baptized, is made under the influence of the Holy Spirit (Ff. 3: 14-21). Set in Christ, the cornerstone (Ephesians 2: 20-21), the Church lives, manifests and expands by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2: 1-21; 10: 44-48; 1 Thess. 1: 5-8).

Without the Holy Spirit, the Church is meant for failure. Thus, Christians live in the Spirit and walk through the Spirit, He is the one who gives the martyr strength, the power to stand against the world and to challenge the powers of evil, but also the cohesion force of the community.

Another way the Church is edified is through learning, preaching. Since the Church has the task of teaching others the truth of God, as it is revealed in Holy Scripture, it has an indirect obligation to grow in the understanding of that revelation. As Karl Barth (1956, 97) remarked: "*Preaching is a means of instruction that has been used by the Church since its inception.*"

At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus announced that he was especially anointed to preach the Gospel; then He urged His disciples to continue His work of spreading the Gospel. So the Gospel is undoubtedly at the root of all the things that the Church does. In Ephesians 4: 12-16, Paul points out that:

God has given the Church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, to build the body of Christ, until we all reach the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, in the state of a great man, at the height of the stature of the fullness of Christ; Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Clearly, this means edifying the members of the Church so that they can be mature and able to resist the heresies around them. The Church, therefore, has the duty to train its members, to develop the characteristics of the Christian life in them, and to teach them to collaborate with one another in the service of Christ.

The purpose of divine services within the Church is to contribute to the edification of the Church as a Body and its members individually. The work of edifying the members of the Church must be done not only by preaching the word of God, but also by living it, thus offering an example.

Edification is, therefore, the encouragement and spiritual training that each other gives to Christians. When they edify one another in Christ, they fulfill the command of God to encourage the brethren in the faith. The unity of the believers, which derives from their mutual encouragement, is the testimony they bring to the world (Getz 1994, 110). Speaking about the importance of the Church building, Gene A. Getz emphasized the following:

The local church must be kept in the center of attention as the main means by which education must take place.

Believers must be given basic knowledge of the Word of God.

Believers must be provided with an in-depth knowledge of the Word of God.

Believers must be given opportunities to develop capacities that go beyond intellectual knowledge.

Believers must be presented with all the experiences that will help them to go beyond the level of intellectual knowledge- vital experiences related to the teaching of the Word, vital experiences of establishing relationships with each other and with God, and vital experiences related to the confession of Christ both individually and collectively.

All believers must be prepared for Christian ministry.

Believers must be helped to develop a quality family life.

The 21st century church must develop contemporary forms and structures for the application of the principles and purposes outlined above (Getz 1992, 254-255).

The edification of the Church must thus counterbalance what the world has with its attractions and fortify the Christian not to fall (Rotaru 2012, 5). Moreover, it can be said that there cannot be a true edification of the Church without the action of the Holy Trinity. Without proper church edification, there cannot be a healthy growth of the Church.

## **Conclusions**

When it comes to the Church, it must be remembered that this does not mean a building, although it uses buildings. The Church means people born again, who chose to serve God with their whole being. Therefore, attention should be directed to people not to buildings.

In the context of contemporary religious pluralism in which Christianity is treated as one of the many existing religions, it is

important to look into history and adopt those biblical patterns and practices that will ensure both the proper functioning of the Church and its growth.

Churches in which authentic spiritual life is replaced by all sorts of programs and activities to satisfy personal pleasures, even if they seem to be successful, in fact, do nothing but deceive those who seek spiritual fulfillment.

The real growth of the Church is not possible without living in holiness, in unity. The Church in which worship does not honor God and does not provide edification for the faithful, even if it has appealing programs, multiple activities, and maximum visibility, will never be able to grow sustainably.

It is, therefore, necessary for the Church to return to the fundamental values highlighted in Holy Scripture and to fulfill its purpose, which will implicitly lead to the growth of the Church.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Greek verb is at the perfect time, describing a finished action with a continuous result. See also Acts. 20:32, 26:18; Rom. 6: 2; 1 Cor. 6:11;
- <sup>2</sup> For the Hindus, for example, music was also a magical value to influence the phenomena of nature and the will of men, originating in different deities. This wide range of attitudes to religious singing signifies both the importance that has been given to it and the relative confusion of what religious chanting is and may be.

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