

Analytic Ecclesiology: The Paradox of the Unity of the Church

Devina Benlin Oswan 

Indonesian Evangelical Church, Bandung, Indonesia
devina.oswan@hokimtong.org

Abstract: Analytic Ecclesiology is a new branch within the enterprise of Analytic Theology. The “analytic” part of the name refers to the analytic method employed to explicate the core claims of Christian theology using the tools of analytic philosophy. In the case of Ecclesiology, the concept of ecclesiastical unity demands clarification. The question is not why or how a collection of individuals is united but in what sense they are one. The Scriptural answer to the former is that Christ is the head of the Church. It is the latter that Analytic Ecclesiology is committed to answering. Joshua Cockayne’s work, which focuses on the social ontology and group agency of the Church, has shed some light on the issue. He invites philosophers and theologians in the analytic tradition to think about Ecclesiology analytically. That is my aim in this paper. I hope to expand the discussion on Analytic Ecclesiology, not by building on Cockayne’s work, but rather by taking a step back and arguing that the issue of the unity of the Church must be discussed from the perspective of identity rather than, contra Cockayne, from the perspective of group agency. To achieve this, I shall first assess Cockayne’s account and offer my criticism. Then, drawing insights from Peter Unger’s article “Problem of the Many,” I discuss the paradox of the unity of the Church and conclude that relative identity theory best solves the paradox of the unity of the Church.

Research Highlights:

- This research sees the disunity of the Church as a logical paradox (akin to the threeness-oneness problem of the Trinity) and employs an analytic method to solve the problem accordingly.
- This research observes the parallel between some theories on mereology and ecclesiastical doctrines and practices.
- This research argues against ecclesiastical trends such as ecumenical movement and intergenerational worship as they promote conformity instead of real unity.

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no branch of theology is less well-known in Indonesia than Analytic Theology. It thus stands to reason that Analytic Ecclesiology—a sub-branch of Analytic Theology that receives the least attention—would be foreign or even ill-received. After all, the “analytic” part of the name refers to the analytic method employed to explicate abstract, somewhat vague, core claims of the Christian tradition with more clarity using the tools of analytic philosophy.¹ The worry is that in attempting to—using the word of Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson—“find “the right” metaphysics,” analytic theologians would incorporate foreign ideas into Christian theology.² The enterprise is bound to end in a “Babylonian captivity for theology.”³ It is so much worse for Analytic Ecclesiology, as it seems to have no practical value regarding managing the Church, how the Sacrament must be observed, etc. At least the other sub-branches—e.g., Analytic Christology—help us understand some theological difficulties—e.g., the dual nature of Christ—with more clarity using the analytic method. Ecclesiology, in general, does not seem to be ridden with an equally difficult theological puzzle. Hence, Analytic Ecclesiology appears to be a pointless endeavor.

This condition, however, could not be further away from the truth. Like any topic in Christian theology, Ecclesiology faces a challenge that strikes at the heart of Christian life: Do I belong to the right Church? To phrase the challenge using the language of the Apostle’s Creed: is there really one “holy catholic Church”? If it is, why are there a lot of denominations, and which one is the true “holy, catholic Church”? Note that the question is not *why* or *how* a collection of different

denominations, each composed of diverse and divided individuals spread across time and space, is united, but rather *in what sense* there is only one “holy, catholic Church.” The Scripture’s answer to the former question is that Christ is the head of the Church, and The Holy Spirit unites all the members as one body. It is the latter question that Analytic Ecclesiology is committed to answering. I shall call this problem “the Paradox of the Unity of the Church” (hereafter PUC).

METHOD

My aim in this paper is to solve PUC by employing the tools of analytic philosophy, specifically the literature on the metaphysical problem of the many. To achieve this, I shall begin by briefly laying out Joshua Cockayne’s work on Analytic Ecclesiology and argue that the constraints he sets up for his model give rise to PUC. Secondly, I shall introduce Peter Unger’s “Problem of the Many” as a groundwork for formulating PUC. Then, I briefly survey some solutions to Unger’s “Problem of the Many” and the objection to each. Finally, I conclude that, among those solutions, relative identity theory best solves PUC.

Due to practical constraints, this paper cannot provide a comprehensive review of both Cockayne’s ecclesiological model and Peter Unger’s “Problem of the Many,” along with its many solutions. I shall only limit my discussion to the relevant aspects. It is also important to note that I do not claim that Cockayne’s model is false. My argument is simply that his understanding of the Church gives rise to PUC, and his preferred framework—the framework of group agency—does not solve this paradox.

¹Oliver D. Crisp, “Analytic Theology as Systematic Theology,” *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 160–162, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0012>.

²Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21.

³This term is coined by Oliver D. Crisp in “Robert Jenson On the Pre-Existence of Christ,” *Modern Theology* 23, no. 1 (2007): 27–45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2007.00351.x>.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Group Agency and Identity

Cockayne's article "Analytic Ecclesiology: The Social Ontology of the Church," perhaps the first monograph on Analytic Ecclesiology, attempts to explicate the concept of the unity of the Church by drawing some insight from recent philosophical literature on social ontology and group agency. He begins by laying out what he calls "a minimalist theology of the nature of the Church and its relation to its members," which is a list of six theological claims:⁴

- (E1) The Church is constituted by individual Christian disciples.
- (E2) These individual Christian disciples, at times, coalesce into gathered collectives.
- (E3) The gathered collectives and individuals who partly constitute the Church are not united in practice, theology, or belief.
- (E4) Such disunity arises, at least partly, because of the sin of those who constitute the Church.
- (E5) The Holy Spirit unites the actions of the constituent parts of the Church to respond to God in worship, through Christ.
- (E6) Christ has authority and headship over the Church.

Cockayne then proceeds to the discussion of the ontology of social groups and surveys three realist theories on group ontology: *Authorization theory*, *animation theory*, and *Functionalist theory*. Cockayne rejects the first two and, while criticizing Functionalist theory for its overemphasis on individuals' contribution to the agency of the Church, proposes

a modification for the functionalist model, which he calls Modified Functionalist Model (MFM). This model affirms that Christ (or The Holy Spirit) is the primary agent of the Church while still maintaining the contribution of individual Christians within the group, and as such "allows us to describe the Church as sinful and can explain how human individuals, and not the persons of the Trinity, are the agents of sin."⁵

In his more recent work "We Believe in The Holy Spirit ... The Holy Catholic Church", Cockayne concludes, "The church's unity comes not from any human social endeavor but from the work of the one Spirit" after laboriously explaining how the Holy Spirit unites the individual constituents of the Church in *action*, such as in decision-making.⁶ The same thought is also apparent in (E5).

The first and foremost thing to be noted about his account is how Cockayne seems to think the *actions* of human individuals are the most crucial point to consider in talking about the social ontology of the Church. Instead of focusing on group *agency*, it is my contention that group identity must take precedence (or, in a much simpler but less appropriate term) the *being* of the individuals who constitute the Church must take precedence over the *doing*).

Of course, that the Spirit unites us in action, be it in worship or decision-making is true. However, is not the holy Church to use the word of T.F. Torrance, "the fruit of the Holy Spirit," because the Church, as Torrance puts it, "is the result of [the Spirit's] sanctifying activity in mankind"?⁷ And what is the primary "sanctifying activity" of the Spirit but to transform the *identity* of those in Christ, more so than to direct their *action* in a certain way?

⁴Joshua Cockayne, "Analytic Ecclesiology: The Social Ontology of the Church," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 7 (June 2019): 103, <https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.2019-7.091400021404>.

⁵Cockayne, "Analytic Ecclesiology," 119.

⁶Joshua Cockayne, "We Believe in The Holy Spirit ... The Holy Catholic Church," in *The Third Person of the*

Trinity: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 161–178.

⁷T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 252.

Add this to the fact that the relevant Scriptural data seems to point to the conclusion that the primary cause of the unity of the Church is not their *worship*—as (E5) seems to imply—or any actions of the members, but their *transformed identity*. According to 2 Corinthians 3:18, the Spirit transforms Christians into the image of Christ. The diverse members of the Church are one in that they have “put on the new self” (Gal. 3:26-29; Col. 3:9-11). In other words, they share the same new identity in Christ through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. That He then unites them in activities such as worship, and decision-making is the result. In other words, the unity of action is the *consequence* and not the *condition* for the unity of the body of Christ.

Hence, I propose an amendment to (E5).

(E5*) The constituent parts of the Church are one because the Holy Spirit transforms their identity in Christ.⁸

As for the original (E5), we could include this claim in (E2):

(E2*) These individual Christian disciples at times coalesce into gathered collectives where each collective is united in worship by the power of The Holy Spirit.

Taken together (E5*) and (E2*) imply that while there are numerous communities of worship (that is, the collectives individual Christian disciples coalesce into), all their members (that is, the individual Christian

disciples) share the property *having a transformed identity in Christ*. Now the amended constraints include both the cause as well as the consequence of the unity of the Church, that is, the transformed identity in Christ and worship, respectively.

What about (E3)? (E3) seems to imply that both the individuals and the collective constituent of the Church stand to the Church in what analytic philosophers name *mereological relation* or *parthood relation*. To say that x stands in a parthood relation to y is to say that x is a part that makes up the whole that is y . Indeed, underlying the framework of social ontology is the assumption that individuals and the collectives of those individuals coalesce into a stand in a mereological relation to a particular social group.

While it is natural to think that each Christian makes up the whole of the Church, is this the right way to think about the collectives? When some individual Christians gather into a community of worship, they are often called—and perhaps rightly so—“a church.” Hence the reason this community of worship is named, for example, “Indonesian Evangelical Church,” “Abdiel Christian Church,” or even “Roman Catholic Church” and “Eastern Orthodox Church,” etc. However, if (E3) is true, then it is not the case that there are such things. This is because parthood relation—unlike, say, identity relation—is anti-symmetry.

$$\forall x\forall y((Pxy \wedge Pyx) \rightarrow x=y)^9$$

According to this axiom, if x stands in parthood relation to y and y stands in parthood

⁸ One might worry that this claim would be too subjective as it focuses on the experience of the Christian disciple. What if, for example, a particular member of a false church claims to have experienced a transformation of identity? To answer this worry, I wish to clarify that (E5*) is an *ontological* statement rather than an *epistemological* statement. In other words, one’s knowledge about her transformed identity is irrelevant to (E5*). Instead, (E5*) concerns the *actuality* of the transformed identity, that is, whether the Holy Spirit *actually* transformed her identity in Christ.

Another worry would be that (E5*) seems to disregard what is commonly known as the *mark of the true church*—that is, the classic identification of a true church as one that faithfully preaches the Word, administers the Sacraments, and in some circles, exercises church disciplines. My answer would be that these three criteria are the mark of the *true church*, not the mark of the *true constituent of the church* (or the individual that constitutes the church).

⁹A.J. Cotnoir and Achille C. Varzi, *Mereology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 23.

relation to x , then x is identical to y . Simply stated, “no two things can be proper parts to each other.”¹⁰ But, following this to its logical conclusion would lead us to the *proper parthood axiom*:

$$PPxy: \equiv Pxy \wedge \neg x=y^{11}$$

This axiom states that something is a proper part of a thing if it is not identical to the thing itself.¹² Applying this to our case, if a collective of individual Christians stands in parthood relation to the Church, then *strictly speaking*, this collective is not a “church.” This means that there is no such thing as “Indonesian Evangelical Church,” “Abdiel Christian Church,” or even “Roman Catholic Church” and “Eastern Orthodox Church,” only “Indonesian Evangelical Denomination,” “Abdiel Christian Denomination,” “Roman Catholic Denomination” and “Eastern Orthodox Denomination.” This is the puzzle of PUC.

Of course, theologians who engage with the philosophy of language might say this is just a semantic issue. The word “the Church”—as in the one “holy, catholic Church” stated in the Apostle’s Creed—has a different meaning from the word “church” as used in “Indonesian Evangelical Church.” In other words, we use the word “church” equivocally in our everyday situation, and there is no problem with that. The name “Indonesian Evangelical Church” does not assert that a particular community of Indonesian Evangelical Christian worshippers is identical to the composite entity, the one “holy, catholic Church.” So, what does the name “Indonesian Evangelical Church” mean? In everyday usage, these two claims are a good enough analysis of the name “Indonesian Evangelical Church”:

- (1) There is a composite entity named “Indonesian Evangelical Church,” which is *strictly speaking* not a church because,

- (2) This entity stands in a proper parthood relation with the one “holy, catholic Church.”

The problem with this analysis and mereological analysis of the Church, in general, is that (E3) claims that the constituent part of the Church is disunited. In what sense, then, are they united? Since mereological relation does not seem to solve this problem, it is best to remain neutral about the specific type of relationship obtained between the gathered collectives and the one “holy, catholic Church.”

- (E3*) The gathered collectives which stand in R -relation to the Church and the individuals that constitute the Church are not united in practice, theology, or belief.

I take it as a task within the constraint of this paper to define R -relation. By solving PUC, we will figure out the relationship between a collective of individual Christians and the Church.

With the constraints already set up, I shall attempt to provide an analytic account of the Church that satisfies these four *desiderata*:

Desideratum 1: It answers the question of *in what sense* (not *why* or *how*) the diverse collectives made up of individual Christians are the same one “holy, catholic Church.”

Desideratum 2: It is consistent with (E1), (E2*), (E3*), (E4), (E5*), and (E6).

Desideratum 3: It allows for names along the line of “Indonesian Evangelical Church” to be *literally* true while at the same time acknowledging that there is

¹⁰Cotnoir and Varzi, *Mereology*, 23.

¹¹Cotnoir and Varzi, *Mereology*, 23

¹²Cotnoir and Varzi, *Mereology*, 24

only one “holy, catholic Church.”

Aside from these three desiderata, I would add one that concerns the practical application of a particular ecclesiological account:

Desideratum 4: It does not lead to unbiblical practical implications.¹³

Once these *desiderata* are stated, it begs the question of why social ontology, specifically group agency—which is grounded on the idea of mereological relation—must be the framework by which we explicate the concept of Church unity.

Hence, we are now faced with two questions. First, what is the more suitable groundwork on which we explicate the concept of the unity of the Church? Second, is there a view within the framework that best solves PUC? This shall be our discussion in the next part.

The Cloud and the Church

In 1980, Peter Unger published an article titled “Problem of the Many.”¹⁴ Readers familiar with his work would note that this article deals more specifically with vague predicates than with social ontology.¹⁵ Hence, one might be justified to question the suitability of this framework to be implemented to our problem and whether it would offer a better solution to solve PUC than the framework of group agency that Cockayne proposes.

Be that as it may, I wish not to do an in-depth analysis of Unger’s puzzle itself. Instead, I shall focus on the solutions proposed to answer the problem, particularly the relative identity solution. This solution, as we shall explore more thoroughly in the next part, treats the puzzle as a problem about how we understood the identity of a composite entity, instead of simply about the vagueness of language.¹⁶

Unger invites his readers to imagine a cloud in the sky. The cloud is composed of myriads of water droplets. Upon a closer inspection, however, one would notice that the cloud has no clear boundary because “there are thousands of water droplets that are neither determinately part of the cloud nor determinately outside it.”¹⁷ The question is, then, how many clouds are there? Is it really just one cloud? But if it is, what do we say about the water droplets that are located relatively farther away from the other water droplets in the center of the cloud? Do they make up another cloud? Or is there such thing as a cloud?

Unger and many metaphysicians after him have presented the problem in the form of a set of propositions. As we are dealing with the Church instead of a cloud, I shall present PUC patterned after Unger’s argument on the problem of the many. Like Unger’s problem of the many, PUC could be formulated in a set of seven premises that seems to be true,

¹³A reviewer brought to my attention a paper written in Spanish proposing a similar solution to the one I am offering in this paper. See Alejandro Zafeiropoulos, “Credo in Unam Sanctam...: Una eclesiología ecuménica a través de la relación metafísica de constitución,” *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* 4, no. 1 (2020): 88–106, <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v4i1.23543>. While Zafeiropoulos’s work seems to aim more toward developing the analytic account, I wish to put equal focus on how each different account plays out in actual ecclesiastical practice that may or may not be biblical and argues that the solution I present seems to better fulfill this desideratum than the rival accounts. That being said, it must be noted that this paper is by no means

a response to Zafeiropoulos, as it was substantially complete by the time I had access to his work.

¹⁴Peter Unger, “The Problem of the Many,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (1980): 411–467, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1980.tb00416.x>.

¹⁵Unger, “The Problem of the Many,” 412–413.

¹⁶To state it differently, the relative identity solution does not perceive the problem as a problem within the realm of the philosophy of language, but of metaphysics.

¹⁷Brian Weatherson, “The Problem of the Many,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2016, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/problem-of-many>.

either doctrinally or logically, but would result in contradiction when taken together:¹⁸

(PUC0) There exists an n number of churches (where $n > 0$).

(PUC0) is simply an existential statement based solely on our everyday observation. It is not biblically or theologically motivated. While one might think this proposition is redundant, it guarantees that our intuition of the existence of a composite entity called “church” is true.

(PUC1) There is only one “holy, catholic Church.”

(PUC2) The Church is composed of a set of individual Christian disciples.

These propositions are supported by Scriptural testimony and the Creed. (PUC2) is a rephrasing of (E2) while (PUC1) is implied by (E6)

(PUC3) For each set of individual Christian disciples c_k , there is an object o_k that the Christian disciples in c_k compose.

This proposition is analytically true.¹⁹ One may call an object o_k a denomination, a fellowship, a congregation, a cell group, and so on. I shall discuss the nature of this object in the discussion of relative identity strategy.

(PUC4) If the individual Christian disciples in c_i compose o_i , and the individual

Christian disciples in c_j compose o_j , and the sets of individual Christian disciples c_i and c_j are not identical, then the objects o_i and o_j are not identical.

(PUC5) If any of these sets c_i is such that its members compose a church, then for any other set c_j , if its members compose an object o_j , then o_j is a church.

(PUC6) If o_i is a church, and o_j is a church, and o_i is not identical with o_j , then there are two churches.

Propositions (4) and (6) echo a principle known as the “Leibniz’s Law”—that is, x and y are identical iff for every property F , object x has F iff object y has F .²⁰ Proposition (5) simply claims that every object composed of individual Christian disciples is a church.²¹

One of the seven premises must be false because (PUC6) is inconsistent with (PUC1). A solution to the paradox must involve the rejection of one of these seven premises. Which premise, then, is false?

Solving PUC

Now that we have laid out the groundwork for thinking about PUC, I shall map out some different views proposed to solve the problem of the many. Then, I attempt to apply each solution to PUC and assess its merit based on

¹⁸I use Weatherson’s formulation of Unger’s argument in Weatherson, “The Problem of the Many.”

¹⁹This proposition is derived from what philosophers of mereology called the *axiom of unrestricted fusion*. Also known as Mereological universalism, this principle states that “for any set S of disjoint objects, there is an object that the member of S composes.” See Michael C. Rea, “In Defense of Mereological Universalism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58, no. 2 (June 1998): 347, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2653513>. Of course, one could reject this principle and adopt brutalism. The brutal answer (no pun intended) would be to say that it is just a brute fact that a set of individual Christian disciples compose an object and some other sets do not. However, this solution

seems unsatisfactory at best and arbitrary at worst. I can say that it is just a brute fact that the set of individual Christian disciples I belong to composes an object—be it a denomination, a cell group, etc—but yours do not.

²⁰The abbreviation “iff” is the shortened version of “if and only if”, the conjunctive term in biconditional statements, usually used by those in the analytic tradition.

²¹Readers familiar with the literature on the problem of the many as well as the philosophy of language would, as I have mentioned in the previous part, would appeal to the equivocation fallacy I mentioned in the previous section. I shall deal with this problem in the discussion on supervenientism.

both theological and practical considerations, the latter by demonstrating how these views would play out in the Church. I do not wish to delve deeply into the first three views but rather focus on the last view, called relative identity theory. I argue that it provides the solution to PUC, both metaphysically, doctrinally, and practically.

Mereological Nihilism

The first solution, introduced by Unger himself in a rather wittily titled paper, “I Do Not Exist,”²² says that there are no composite objects such as clouds, tables, or chairs. Only what philosophers call “mereological simples,” arranged in such a way, exist. Mereological nihilists deny the existence of a cloud and claim that what actually exists is *water droplets-arranged-cloudwise*. Some mereological nihilists, such as Unger himself, argue even further that mereological simples are elementary particles without parts. Hence, not even water droplets exist, only *quarks-arranged-water dropletwise*.

How do we apply mereological nihilism to PUC? First, since our intuition about a composite entity called “church” is false, then the term “church” should be understood as what fictionalists call a “useful fiction”—that is, a terminology or statement that is not literally true (in the sense that it has no ontological commitment) but is useful to describe the reality. Take (E6), for example:

(E6) Christ has authority and headship over the Church.

This is not *literally* true. According to mereological nihilists, the more accurate statement would be:

(E6') Christ has authority and headship over *Christian disciples-arranged-churchwise*.

What do we say about this solution? First, it is important to note that as (PUC0) is not theologically motivated, the real problem of mereological nihilism is not so much theological as it is metaphysical. Consider again (E6'). If Unger is right, then not even Christian disciples exist. Why? Hinted by the title of his work, it is because you and I, as human beings, do not exist. Humans, like chairs and clouds, are objects composed of elementary particles. Hence, depending on one's metaphysics of human persons, the ontologically accurate statement for (E6) would be:

(E6'') Christ has authority and headship over *elemental components-arranged-Christian discipleswise-arranged-churchwise*.²³

But it is still not literally true since the entity referred to as “Christ”, depending on one's theology, is a composite object that is fully human and fully divine. Let us suppose that the proponent of divine simplicity is true that God's divine nature is not composed of parts. An ontologically accurate version of (E6) is:

(E6''') *The divine nature and elemental component-arranged-Christwise* have authority and headship over *elemental component-arranged-Christian discipleswise-arranged-churchwise*.

I am hoping that by now I have sufficiently demonstrated the absurdity of this position. Why would one trade the intuition that composite objects exist for a profoundly counter-intuitive metaphysical claim? After all, our intuition about the existence of clouds, chairs,

²²Peter Unger, “I Do Not Exist,” in *Perception and Identity*, ed. G.F. Macdonald (London: Macmillan, 1979), 235–251.

²³My use of this neutral term is to accommodate substance dualists' claim that a soul (or a spirit) is a fundamental component of a human person that is mereologically simple.

and in our case, a church, is stronger than any philosophical position would ever be. Unger himself, in his recent article, rejects this view.²⁴ Denying the existence of oneself (as well as a composite entity called “Christ” or “church”) is too great a price to pay to affirm mereological nihilism.

It is interesting to note that, despite the counterintuitive nature of this view, there is a prevalent ecclesiastical idea—or, a pattern of behavior, to be precise—that has some semblance to this view. There is a popular saying that the Church is not the building but the people. While this statement is true, taken to the extreme, it would result in the idea that an individual need not be affiliated with a church to be a Christian. During the pandemic, we might observe the rise of such behavior. People do not find the need to attend Sunday service in a particular church, much less to become a member. I do not claim that the practitioners of such an idea are the adherents of mereological nihilism (after all, most are presumably unfamiliar with analytic philosophy). I am simply pointing out the devastating consequence a view resembling mereological nihilism would lead to.

Overpopulation and Partial Identity

As the name denotes, this solution claims that there is more than one composite object. Since there are many fusions of water droplets, there are many clouds.²⁵ Applied to our case, (PUC1) is false. It is not the case that there is only one “holy, catholic Church.”

There are two problems with this solution. First, this solution is as counterintuitive as the first one.²⁶ Our observation shows that there

is only one cloud. However, according to this solution, since we cannot determine which set of water droplets composes that cloud, each set must compose a cloud. Therefore, we cannot trust our intuition that only one cloud exists. The second, more relevant problem to our discussion is that this solution would result in an unbiblical and creedal unfaithful ecclesiology. (PUC1) is clearly supported by the Scripture and the Creed.

The proponent of the overpopulation solution might modify their view into what is commonly known as partial identity theory. Popularized by David Lewis, this view claims that identity must be understood as a degree.²⁷ *Strictly speaking* there are millions of clouds. However, since a set of water droplets is *almost* identical to the others, they are *almost* the same cloud. Hence, the statement “there is only one cloud” is true because it is a good enough approximation of the reality the way the statement “the gravitational acceleration of the earth is 9,8 m/s²” is true even though the precise gravitational acceleration of the Earth may vary from 9.80665 m/s² to 9.78033 m/s². Applying this to our case, the proposition below is an acceptable everyday way to speak about (PUC1):

(PUC’) There is only one “holy, catholic Church”, and all churches is *almost* identical with it.

Space does not allow me to discuss the philosophical objection against this view. I will now explain how Lewis’s partial identity theory might help solve PUC, while also note the problem with adopting this solution.

²⁴To quote Unger, “Many years ago, I blush to recall, I published some arguments against the existence of all sorts of commonly supposed entities ... including even the one who’s me. By contrast, now I’m trying to develop, in a book I’ve been long writing, a humanly realistic philosophy, wherein my existence, and yours, has the status of a quite undeniable philosophic datum.” Peter Unger, “The Mental Problems of the Many,” in *Oxford Studies in*

Metaphysics, vol. 1, ed. Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 195–222.

²⁵Weatherson, “The Problem of the Many.”

²⁶Weatherson, “The Problem of the Many.”

²⁷David K. Lewis, “Many, But Almost One,” in *Causality and Mind: Essays on the Philosophy of d. M. Armstrong*, ed. Keith Campbell, John Bacon, and Lloyd Reinhardt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23–38.

The appeal of this solution is that it addresses and resolves the tension between (E3) and (E6). The head of the church is Christ who is sinless and holy. The Church, likewise, is holy. However, not only is the Church disunited, but each church is also overwhelmed by problems caused by the sin of its members. Theologians who accept the partial identity solution to PUC might solve this problem by claiming that all we have in this world is an approximation—or, to use a more biblically precise terminology in Colossians 2:17, a “mere shadow”—of that one “holy, catholic Church.” After all, none of us would claim that our church is holy and united. What, then, is the real “holy, catholic Church”? Depending on one’s ecclesiology and eschatology, one could say that the real “holy, catholic Church” is the New Jerusalem, the bride of the lamb that “adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). All the churches in the world are almost identical to that one “holy, catholic Church” that is to come in that both are constituted by the same members. The only difference is that the latter is perfected.

While this solution might be attractive, neither the Scripture nor the Creed is talking with respect to the one “holy, catholic Church” about a future reality which has not yet been. 1 Peter 2:9 seems to imply that we are already holy before we proclaim the Gospel. It is true that sin causes the disunity within the church. But the fact that each member of the Church has a transformed identity in Christ and is undergoing progressive sanctification is adequate for the claim that the Church is holy and catholic *now*, rather than some time in the future.

Supervaluationism

The third solution, perhaps the most popular among metaphysicians, is simply to say that the term “cloud” (and any term denoting a

composite object with no clear boundary) has no determinate referent.²⁸ According to supervaluation theory, the statement “there is only one cloud” is determinately true, but it is indeterminate which one among the many fusions of water droplets the term “cloud” refers to.

Hence, according to supervaluationism, (PUC5) is false. Each set of individual Christian disciples composes an object, as (PUC3) claims. Let us call this object “denomination.” According to supervaluation theory, only one among the many denominations is the true referent of the term “holy, catholic Church,” but it is not determinate which one. Is it “Indonesian Evangelical *Denomination*”? Or the Reformed denomination in general? Or perhaps the Catholic denomination? It does not matter, says supervaluationists.

Let me clarify that even though the supervaluation theory is an attractive solution to solve Unger’s Problem of the Many, this solution does not apply to our problem. The reason is that PUC, unlike the Problem of the Many, is not simply an intellectual, much less a linguistic problem, but is a doctrinal and pastoral one. Adopting the supervaluation theory would lead to a disastrous conclusion for Christians, namely *Ecclesiastical Supervaluationism*: either a particular denomination is the holy, Catholic church or not.

However, since neither of these disjunctions is determinate, Christians would constantly worry that they might not belong to the one “holy, catholic Church.” Thus, the only logical action would be to say that their denomination is the one. In this case, however, it also means that it is determinately true that another denomination is not the holy, catholic Church. Adopting the supervaluation theory would only lead to a pastorally catastrophic consequence.

²⁸Vann McGee and Brian P. McLaughlin, “The Lessons of the Many,” *Philosophical Topics* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 138, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics200028120>.

It is perhaps not surprising that this ecclesiological position has been present, and the result has been disastrous. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Catholic Church “is the sole Church of Christ, which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic.”²⁹ The Orthodox ecclesiology is not less exclusive. Patriarch of Constantinople, Joachim II declares, “Our desire is that all heretics shall come to the bosom of the Orthodox Church of Christ which alone is able to give them salvation ...”³⁰ Such exclusive attitude is, I think, presented a poor testimony to the unbelievers. Fortunately, such a phenomenon is less prominent within the Protestant stream.

Of course, the Catholic and Orthodox Church are free to adopt this position. However, if we consider the amended (EC5*)—a claim with a strong Scriptural basis—it is not one’s denomination but one’s transformed identity in Christ that determines whether one belongs to the holy, catholic Church.

Relative Identity

Let me begin with a short reflection on the above views. First, while some solutions seem metaphysically counterintuitive and theologically untenable, each has an ecclesiastical counterpart view that is apparent in the Church. I have demonstrated why they not only offer a satisfactory solution to PUC intellectually, but they also fail to be Scripturally

faithful as well as ecclesiastically beneficial. Mereological nihilism fails to satisfy *desiderata* 1 and 4. Overpopulation and Partial Identity solution fails to satisfy *desideratum* 2 (and 3, to some extent). Supervaluationism fails to satisfy *desiderata* 3 and 4. Hence, I shall present the fourth alternative to the problem of the many called relative identity theory (hereafter RI), and then apply this theory to PUC.

According to the classical view of identity, identity is an absolute relation that obeys Leibniz’s Law that mention earlier. Peter Geach, however, rejects absolute identity and endorses these claims in his paper “Identity”:³¹

- (RI1) The statement “*x* is identical to *y*” is incomplete and must be understood as “*x* is the same *F* as *y*.”
- (RI2) It is possible that *x* is the same *F* as *y* but is not the same *G* as *y*.

While it should be noted that while RI is proposed independently of some particular Christian doctrines, it has been a popular view among theologians as well as philosophers of religion to solve the Oneness-Threeness problem of the Trinity.³²

Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea introduced a solution popularly known as “Constitution Trinitarianism”³³ which embraces (RI2)

²⁹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 811.

³⁰ In Chrēstos Androustos, *The Basis for Union* (Constantinople, 1905), 36.

³¹P. T. Geach, “Identity,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 21, no. 1 (September 1967): 3–12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20124493>.

³² See, for example, Peter van Inwagen, “And yet there are not three Gods, but one God,” in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 241–278. Also, H. E. Baber, “The Trinity: Relative Identity Redux,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 32, no. 2 (2015): 161–171, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil201541336>.

³³Traditionally, there are two mainstream strategies to explain how one being can be three persons. The first, Latin Trinitarianism, starts from the claim that God is one, then explains how the one God can be three Persons. The second, Social Trinitarianism, emphasizes the plurality of the divine Persons, then explains how the three Persons can be one. See, Jeffrey E. Brower and Michael C. Rea, “Material Constitution and the Trinity,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 22, no. 1 (2005): 57–76, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil200522134>. Also, Michael C. Rea, “The Trinity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 403–429.

without (RI1).³⁴ The analogy he uses is a lump of marble that is both a pillar and a statue. The persistence condition of the lump, the pillar, and the statue is different. If we deface it, the statue no longer exists but the pillar and the lump remain. If it loses its structural integrity, the pillar no longer exists but the statue and the lump remain. However, intuitively, there is only one object there. Hence, a lump which is both a statue and a pillar satisfy the condition of the claim that it is possible that x is the same F as y but is not the same G as y . Rea argues that the Trinity could be understood this way: The Father and The Son and The Holy Spirit are the same God and yet not the same Person.

Likewise, we might think that two set of water droplet is the same cloud but are different fusions of water droplets. Applying this to our case, we reject (PUC6) and modify it according to the claim that it is possible for x to be the same F as y but is not the same G as y :

(PUC6*) If o_i is a church, and o_j is a church, and o_i is not identical with o_j , then it is possible that o_i and o_j is *the same "holy, catholic Church"* but are *not the same* ____.

The problem is, what is the relevant G to fill in the blank? Now many would be inclined to say it is "denomination." However, in accordance with (E2*), the relevant G is probably "a community of worship" for a practical reason I shall discuss below. Hence, the amended (6) would be:

(PUC6*) If o_i is a church, and o_j is a church, and o_i is not identical with o_j , then it is possible that o_i and o_j is *the same "holy, catholic Church"* but are *not the same community of worship*.

We have therefore figured out that the R -relation obtains between a collective of individual Christians—the community of worship—with the one "holy, catholic Church" is relative identity relation. Hence, the complete amendment of (E3*) is:

(E3*) The gathered collectives which stand in *relative identity relation* to the Church as well as the individuals that constitute the Church are not united in practice, theology, or belief.

RI strategy thus satisfies *desiderata* 1 and 2. One of the strongest reasons to adopt RI strategy is, as stated above, RI strategy is one way to explain how the three persons can be one God. This solution is superior from its rivals in that it is built under the assumption that the unity of the Church should reflect the unity of the Persons of the Trinity. In other word, our ecclesiology is grounded on the doctrine of the Trinity.

How is this commitment applied in practical ecclesiology? Firstly, referring to a denomination, a congregation, a fellowship, a cell group—or even, as Our Lord said, "two or three gathered together in My name"—as "church" is *literally* true even without equivocation.³⁵ Just as I can say that it is *literally* true that The Father is God and The Son is

³⁴Admittedly, Rea's Constitution Model is not without its problems. See, for example, Brian Leftow, "The Trinity Is Unconstitutional," *Religious Studies* 54, no. 3 (2018): 361–365, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412518000215>. However, Rea's model is superior among other RI strategies for at least two reasons: (1) it does not commit one to (RI1)—that is, the denial of absolute identity—a price that perhaps is too great for some to pay, and (2) as Rea has argued in "Relative Identity and the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Philosophia Christi* 5, no. 2 (2003): 431–446, other RI strategies risk collapsing into either polytheism or modalism.

Rea's model avoids this by offering an appropriate supplemental story about the metaphysics underlying RI relations: the numerical sameness without identity. While other RI strategies may show that the doctrine is logically coherent, Rea's version—complete with a material constitution analogy (i.e., the Lump-Statue-Pillar analogy)—not only shows that it is coherent but also make sense of the doctrine.

³⁵However, it is false to say that I, as an individual, am the "holy, catholic Church." The statement, "I am a constituent part of the 'holy, catholic Church'" is literally true.

God, still The Father is not identical to The Son, it is also *literally* true that, say, the Reformed denomination is the one “holy catholic Church,” and the Catholic denomination is the one “holy catholic Church,” but the Reformed denomination is not identical to the Catholic denomination. Hence, the names “Indonesian Evangelical Church,” “Abdiel Christian Church,” “Roman Catholic Church,” “Eastern Orthodox Church,” etc., are all *literally* true. RI strategy thus satisfies *desideratum* 3.

Secondly, this model of the Church could offer an adequate explanation of the metaverse churches. While I am neutral on the question of whether this phenomenon is detrimental or beneficial to the Church as it is beyond the scope of this paper, the proponent of RI solution might say that the fact that a collective of Christian disciples does not physically attend a worship service does not change the fact that they are an actual community of worship with its own uniqueness—that is, they are worshipping in a metaverse. Drawing a parallel to the Trinity, the Son is a physical being (though not *merely* a physical being) as He retains His corporeal body after His ascension. The Holy Spirit, however, is not a physical being. Yet, The Son and The Holy Spirit are the same God but are not the same Person because each has His own uniqueness. In the same way, one could say that the physical churches and the VR churches are the same “holy, catholic Church” while being a different kinds of communities of worship.

Thirdly, there is a growing movement of ecumenism in both the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant camps. On the surface, this seems like a favorable state of affairs. However, when such a movement goes too far and attempts to remove all the differences to

merge thousands of denominations into one, it ceases to be about *unity* and becomes about *conformity*. Is it possible? Even if it is, is it necessary? Each tradition has its God-given uniqueness which must not be sacrificed in the name of “unity,” which is actually “conformity” in disguise. On the other hand, it is unwise and even unbiblical to compromise the integrity of a tradition and submit to an erroneous practice of other traditions. To name a few examples, why would a Protestant affirm Catholic Mariology as well as submit under the authority of the Catholic pope?

Fourthly, there is also a trend toward what is commonly known as “intergenerational worship” or “family worship.” Howard Vanderwell defines intergenerational worship as “worship in which people of every age are understood to be important.”³⁶ Likewise, Darwin Glassford, a minister of the Christian Reformed Church, claims that intergenerational worships implement the metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 by not neglecting or marginalizing even one member.³⁷ My question would be, does implementing 1 Corinthians 12 amount to merging all varieties of worship while at the same time diminishing the characteristics of each? I do not think so. Suppose the argument is that creating alternative worships based on age group means neglecting one or more groups. In that case, the solution is not intergenerational worship but providing alternative worship—such as children and youth worship—that has the same quality as adult worship. Is the presence of numerous alternative worships within one church objectively bad? I do not think so. As I have argued before, it is possible that a group of children and adults are the same church but not the same community of worship. This is why I opt

Thus, following the axiom of proper parthood mentioned above, I am not identical to the “holy, catholic Church.”

³⁶Howard Vanderwell, “A New Issue for a New Day,” in *The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together*, ed. Howard Vanderwell (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2008), 11.

³⁷Darwin Glassford, “Fostering an Intergenerational Culture,” in *The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together*, ed. Howard Vanderwell (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2008), 79.

for “community of worship” instead of “denomination.”

The assumption underlying both ecumenism and intergenerational worship seems to be that two or more things must be conformed to each other for it to be one. However, as we have seen, if we understood the Church the way we understood the Trinity, there seems to be no problem, both intellectually and practically, to say that the Church is one despite the apparent disunity. Our worship communities are not identical to each other as The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit are. Acknowledging this fact should consequently lead to accepting each other’s differences rather than disunity. One community of worship might be the polar opposite of another in its practice, theology, or belief. But, as our God is one, so is our “holy, catholic Church.”

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have introduced a way to understand the unity of the Church by solving PUC using RI strategy. In the first section, I have argued that social ontology is an inadequate framework for understanding the nature of the Church as it is grounded on the assumption that each collective of individual Christian disciples stands on parthood relation to the Church, which in turn would result in PUC. After formulating PUC in the second section, I have argued that RI solution satisfies all the relevant *desiderata* and presents an analytic model of the unity of the Church that is grounded on the doctrine of the Trinity using RI strategy.

It should be noted that the account I propose is not meant to be a rival model to Cockayne’s. Both are not mutually exclusive. Cockayne’s account explains how an agency emerges within a group, in this case, the Church, while mine specifically addresses the issue of how numerous different churches are the same one “holy, catholic Church.” I hope this paper will advance the field of Analytic Ecclesiology

and, most importantly, our understanding of the unity of the Church, especially concerning the doctrine of the Trinity.

As with any work on Analytic Theology, the main weakness of this study was the lack of exploration of the practical dimension. This would be a fruitful area for further work, within or outside the field of Analytic Ecclesiology.

AUTHOR’S DECLARATION

Author’s Contributions and Responsibilities

I am responsible for the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the research results. I have read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing Interests

I have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately affected them in writing this article.

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