

Review of *A Visible Unity: Cecil Robeck and the Work of Ecumenism*

A Visible Unity: Cecil Robeck and the Work of Ecumenism. By Josiah Baker. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2024; xii + 264 pages.

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Josiah Baker's *A Visible Unity: Cecil Robeck and the Work of Ecumenism* is a remarkable and timely study in systematic theology on the relation of ecumenical methodology to ecclesiological convergence. Focused on the life and work of Pentecostal theologian and ecumenist, Cecil M. Robeck (affectionately known as Mel), Baker's study is as much a theological inquiry as it is a tribute to the personal and communal dimensions of Christian unity. At a time when people see ecumenism as either stagnating or relegated to the margins of theological discourse, Baker's book reminds us that the search for unity is not only an institutional concern but a deeply personal and lived reality. His study makes an essential contribution by framing ecclesiological convergence not as an abstract goal but as something that occurs through concrete practices of reconciliation, dialogue, and shared spiritual experience.

Baker, a scholar of ecumenical theology with a background in Pentecostal and systematic theology, has been actively engaged in various theological dialogues, contributing to discussions on Christian unity from both an academic and a practical perspective. His work reflects an ongoing commitment to bridging confessional divides, making his insights particularly valuable in today's ecumenical landscape. This book builds upon his previous research and engagement with the North American Academy of Ecumenists, the Society for Pentecostal Studies, and other theological forums where he has developed and refined his perspectives on ecclesial reconciliation.

As articulated by the author in the Introduction, there were four primary motivations for writing the book. First and foremost, Baker seeks to honor the legacy of Cecil M. Robeck, a pivotal Pentecostal figure in the ecumenical movement, by documenting his contributions and elevating his influence in the field. Second, Baker aims to inform readers about contemporary shifts in ecumenism, challenging parochial

understandings by presenting a historically and globally nuanced perspective. Third, he critiques prevailing assumptions in ecumenical scholarship, advocating for a more inclusive and methodologically sound approach to theological discourse. Finally, and most importantly, he aspires to deepen the reader's love for the church, emphasizing that true ecumenism is not merely theoretical but demands active engagement in the work of unity.

As an active participant in contemporary ecumenical dialogue, I found "A Visible Unity" to be a refreshing and profoundly insightful engagement with some of the most pressing challenges of our time. Baker does not merely rehearse traditional ecumenical rhetoric; rather, he brings to the fore an often-overlooked dimension of the movement: the lived reality of those who work tirelessly for unity, even when the structures of division seem immovable. Through the lens of Robeck's career, Baker highlights how personal commitment, spiritual encounter, and historical consciousness all shape the larger ecumenical project.

Baker's book situates itself within the evolving landscape of ecumenical studies, paying particular attention to the role of Pentecostalism, one of the fastest-growing Christian movements, in shaping contemporary discussions on unity. His choice to center Cecil Robeck is significant—not only because Robeck has been a key figure in various ecumenical initiatives, but also because his work exemplifies the ways in which Pentecostal traditions, long considered peripheral to the ecumenical movement, are now actively contributing to its development.

One of Baker's most compelling arguments is that the best pursuit of ecclesial unity is not through abstract theological consensus but through the sharing of concrete practices. This is a crucial methodological shift. Too often, ecumenism is framed in terms of doctrinal negotiation, as though unity were primarily an intellectual achievement rather than a lived reality. Baker, following Robeck, suggests otherwise: the path toward visible unity is found in the ways churches pray together, serve together, and engage in common witness. He persuasively argues that theological divisions, while real and important, need not preclude meaningful collaboration and shared spiritual life.

This focus on *praxis* is deeply resonant. While working within ecumenical settings, I have seen firsthand how shared practices—whether in liturgy, social justice initiatives, or theological dialogue—can foster a profound sense of common belonging. Baker captures this dynamic beautifully, showing how ecumenism flourishes not in conference rooms but in relationships of trust, mutual service, and spiritual solidarity.

The book is structured around six key themes, each reflecting an aspect of Robeck's ecumenical engagement, each of these developed with both historical depth and theological nuance, making the book an invaluable resource for scholars, practitioners, and students of ecumenism alike:

1. *Pentecostal Ecclesiology in Ecumenical Contexts* – Baker explores how Robeck's work challenges assumptions about Pentecostalism's sectarian tendencies, arguing instead for its deep ecclesiological engagement with the broader Christian tradition.

2. *Race and Reconciliation in American Pentecostalism* – This particularly striking chapter examines the racial history of Pentecostalism, demonstrating how Robeck's work on racial reconciliation offers a model for addressing the wounds of division within the Body of Christ.
3. *Pentecostalism and the World Council of Churches (WCC)* – Here, Baker traces Robeck's role in engaging Pentecostal churches with conciliar ecumenism, offering insights into both the opportunities and challenges of such efforts.
4. *Bilateral Dialogues as a Mode of Discernment* – This section highlights how structured theological dialogues, particularly those between Pentecostals and other Christian traditions, function as sites of mutual discovery and deepening doctrine.
5. *Spiritual Ecumenism* – Drawing from both patristic sources and contemporary charismatic expressions, Baker explores how the shared experience of the Holy Spirit can serve as a bridge across ecclesial divides.
6. *Christian Forums and the Future of Ecumenism* – The book closes with a reflection on the role of Christian Forums, particularly the Global Christian Forum, as new models for broadening the ecumenical conversation beyond traditional institutional structures.

The themes discussed in *A Visible Unity* are especially relevant in the context of Ukraine and Eastern Europe, where historical tensions, geopolitical conflicts, and ongoing struggles for religious coexistence deeply shape ecumenical relations. The war in Ukraine and the broader challenges faced by Christian communities in the region have brought renewed urgency to the question of Christian unity. Baker's analysis provides valuable insights for churches navigating these divisions, emphasizing that the lived commitment to reconciliation and shared witness in difficult times forge unity, not mere institutional declarations.

One of these contributions is his challenge to traditional models of ecumenical engagement. By emphasizing the role of practices in shaping ecclesial identity, he invites us to reconsider the very nature of theological consensus. Rather than seeing unity as something to be achieved only at the level of doctrinal agreement, he proposes that Christians already being realize unity whenever they engage in common prayer, mission, and witness. This insight is particularly relevant in today's fragmented ecclesial landscape. As someone involved in ecumenical dialogues, I have often sensed that our greatest challenge is not theological disagreement but a failure to recognize the ways in which we are already united in Christ. Baker's work underscores this point with clarity and conviction, arguing that unity is not merely an eschatological hope but a present reality that can be more fully embodied through intentional practices of reconciliation.

While a groundbreaking work, the book does leave some questions open. For example, since Baker persuasively argues for the importance of practice-based unity, the book could have offered more concrete examples of how such practices can be implemented in contexts where deep-seated theological and institutional barriers remain. How, for instance, might a local Orthodox or Catholic parish and a Pentecostal

congregation meaningfully share common witness without erasing their distinctive identities?

Undoubtedly, Josiah Baker's *A Visible Unity* is a major contribution to contemporary ecumenical theology. It is both an intellectual and a deeply personal work, one that challenges us to rethink how we understand and pursue Christian unity. By centering the life and work of Cecil Robeck, Baker not only provides a historical and theological analysis of Pentecostal engagement with ecumenism but also advances a compelling vision for the future.

For anyone committed to the work of Christian unity—whether as a scholar, pastor, or ecumenical practitioner—this book is essential reading. It reminds us that ecumenism is not merely an institutional project but a call to embody Christ's prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21). In an age where divisions seem more entrenched than ever, *A Visible Unity* offers both a challenge and a hope: that the unity of the Church is not a distant ideal, but a lived reality we are called to participate in today.

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