

Christian Unity

3. True Christian Unity

The third of three addresses given by the Rev William Macleod at the Salisbury Conference in June 2005.

An American bishop referring to the debate over the appointment of the first openly homosexual bishop is quoted as saying “If you must make a choice between heresy and schism always choose heresy”. That is typical of our age. Truth does not matter. We must not go down that road. Truth is vital.

But we must also guard against the opposite extreme. Carl MacIntyre was an example of that danger. He was constantly involved in dividing over sometimes minor matters. He stressed separation to the exclusion of unity and so ended up as an old man in his nineties worshipping with a handful in his own living room.

We have looked at the errors of the Ecumenical Movement. In this section I would like to look positively at Christian unity. It is something vital to be aimed at and treasured. Essentially there is only one church of Christ – the invisible church, purchased with blood (Acts 2:28). We must start here. All who are elect will belong to it. All who are born again do belong to it. It contains all those who believe in Christ and follow Him, all who have His Spirit in their hearts. At present part of the church is on earth and part in heaven. One day all will be gathered together in heaven. When He makes up His jewels not one will be lost. And there will be only one church in heaven. There is no room for denominations, parties or cliques there.

Scripture teaching on the unity of the church

John 17

Jesus prays in John 17: “Holy Father keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one as we are” (Jn.17:11). This is a prayer to the Father to keep the church united and the pattern for that union is the Trinity. It is not merely an organisational unity that is requested but a deep unity in the truth and in God. “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (Jn.17:21). Here the idea is that the unconverted elect be brought in – those who “shall believe on me through their word”. The unity is of the most intimate kind: “I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me” (Jn.17:23).

Christ prays for unity. We must strive to unite but it is a unity in God, in the truth and in holiness. It begins with loving God which involves getting to know Him and “this is life eternal” (Jn.17:3). Further there must be a receiving and treasuring of His words, i.e. the Bible: “For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them” (v.8). Basic to the unity is keeping all His commandments and loving one another.

Ephesians 4

Paul encourages the Ephesians in the strongest terms that they are to be “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph.4:3). This is something we must all work at and it requires energy. “Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: that we henceforth be no longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine ... but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head even Christ” (Eph.4:13-15). The great aim of the church should be unity, but not any kind of unity but rather unity in the truth (in doctrine) and in holiness (in godly Spirit-filled lives). We will return to this passage.

It is amazing to note the problems the early Christians had with unity in the New Testament church. They were experiencing a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It was like later times of revival. While we rightly long for revival, we foolishly think that it would sort out all our church problems. Also the early church had the benefit of apostles and prophets who had supernatural

revelation granted to them to guide the church and to keep them right. Yet, for example in Corinth with its riches of spiritual gifts, there were those who said, “I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ” (1Cor.1:12). They were obviously a deeply divided congregation. The Apostle has to argue with them: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were ye baptised in the name of Paul?” Similarly the church at Galatia had the Judaising party – Jews who would not eat with Gentiles and demanded that before these converted Gentiles be fully accepted into the church that they would have to be circumcised. Even Peter was led astray for a time by them and had to be rebuked by Paul. In the Epistle to the Ephesians there are constant exhortations to unity. If there was no problem, Paul would not be dealing at length with this subject. He says to the Philippians “I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord” (Phil.4:2). The unity of the church is something that needs constant attention and can never be taken for granted. It is one favourite attacking point of the devil who “as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour” (1Pet.5:8).

What causes divisions?

1. Pride

Nothing is so destructive to the unity of the church as pride. Paul exhorts the Ephesian Christians to “meekness and lowliness” (Eph.4:2). Where each one is pushing for supremacy there is bound to be tension and falling out. Remember when the sons of Zebedee came with their mother requesting from Jesus top places in His kingdom. Although Jesus did not grant the request, and indeed said it was not in His power to give it, yet the rest of the disciples were very angry with James and John for attempting to get the supremacy. Jesus must teach them that the one who takes the lowest place will be exalted to the highest seat. John in his third epistle speaks of a certain Diotrophus “who loveth to have the pre-eminence” (3Jn.9). This was a source of disharmony.

2. Intolerance of others

Intolerance of others often causes division. Paul exhorts to “longsuffering and forbearance” (Eph.4:2). We all have our faults. We must learn to be patient, bear with the folly and idiosyncrasies of others and not walk out of churches or church leaders meetings when others offend us. People often irritate us by their mannerisms and peculiarities and failings. Yes and they may sin against us also, but we must forgive till seventy times seven times. We must strive after gentleness which is a fruit of the Spirit. No church on earth is perfect and no individual Christian is either.

3. Party spirit or group loyalty

Sometimes party spirit arises in a church. There is something that unites a certain group within the fellowship e.g. race, culture, language, age, similar interests or job. Because of that similarity of interest or occupation or culture these people meet together more often and feel more at home with one another. They have more in common. That is natural. But care must be exercised to be open to others within the church. Similarly if there is a large family group in the church there is a temptation to show more loyalty to the group than to the church. Something like this had obviously happened in Corinth.

4. Heresy

Heresy is of its very nature extremely divisive. Paul warns the Romans: “Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them” (Rom.16:17). I have heard of Christians who stand against false teaching being described as schismatics. They are condemned for breaking the unity of the church. However it is those who introduce the false teaching who are the real schismatics and are dividing the church. Unbiblical teaching or practices cause division. Luther was condemned by the Roman Catholics of his day as one who caused schism, but the real schismatics were those who introduced false doctrines such as justification by works.

5. Sinful conduct

Sinful conduct can cause division in the church. Paul had to address this issue in 1Corinthians 5. A man in the church was involved in immorality with his stepmother and the response to this

wicked act divided the church. Some said he must be disciplined. Others argued that the church must be loving,. God forgives and so should we. Some perhaps argued that keeping the law (Ten Commandments) is no longer important. Christ has kept the law for us and we are no longer under the law but under grace. Where sin abound grace super-abounds. Paul however demands immediate action and the handing over of this man to “Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1Cor.5:5). The evil leaven must be purged out of the congregation whatever the cost or it will spread with disastrous consequences.

6. Things indifferent

Certain matters are treated in the New Testament as things indifferent. Paul deals with some of these in Romans 14. One person eats meat but another is vegetarian. The vegetarian was afraid that the meat had been offered to idols. He has a very sensitive conscience. Paul argues that it is best for conscience’s sake not to ask if it had been offered to idols and simply to regard the earth and all that is in it, as belonging to the Lord. One individual keeps an Old Testament festival day and another does not. That again is left to the individual. One drinks wine but another fears to do so lest he become an alcoholic or encourage others in that direction. We must not divide over things which are left to each man’s conscience.

7. Majoring on minor matters.

Majoring on minor matters has been the cause of many a church division. Some things are fundamental, e.g. the substitutionary atonement, justification by faith alone, the divinity of Christ and the authority and infallibility of Scripture. One cannot have a proper Christian church and deny these matters. However there are other points which are less fundamental and on which differing views may be accommodated within the same church. If I demand that my particular interpretation of every verse of Scripture must be followed then I will have to leave every church and form my own church. We already noted that Carl Macintyre was guilty of this. For example he demanded that all had to accept his view of the millennium or he would separate over it.

It would be a worthwhile exercise to sit down and ask ourselves what are the matters which divide us from our fellow-Christians in other churches. Is it fundamental matters or is it minor matters? Is it simply personalities or is it Gospel truth? Is it simply a matter of history, quarrels of the past, or essentials of the present?

Why strive for unity?

One of the most helpful passages on this has already been referred to. It is Ephesians 4:3-16. We must look at it carefully.

There is one body

Many churches can be compared to many different bodies but the Apostle tells us that there is only one body. If we are true Christians we are part of the invisible church of Christ and so we belong together. This thought is developed in 1 Corinthians 12. The church is a body and the individual Christians are members of that body. The hand needs the foot and the ear needs the eye and so each one of us needs the others. If one part suffers all suffer. For example if the foot is broken the whole body suffers pain, discomfort and disability. If one part is honoured, for example, the voice in producing exquisite music, then the whole body is honoured. The ear is not jealous of the eye and so individual Christians must not be jealous of the abilities that the others have. It is Christ’s body and we all belong to one another and to Him.

One Spirit

A person becomes a Christian and a true member of the body of Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit who applies the redemption purchased by Christ to that individual. The Spirit begins by convicting of sin and so showing the individual his or her need of the Saviour. The Spirit regenerates the individual and comes to dwell in the Christian’s heart. There the Spirit enlightens the mind, works faith and repentance, sanctifies, produces the fruit of the Spirit and assures of adoption. Surely being indwelt by the same Spirit, being led of the same Spirit, every Christian should recognise his or her fellow Christian and feel a real bond to him or her. The Spirit unites the church to Christ and so to one another.

One Calling

What is a Christian? It is someone called out of world to follow Christ and eventually to spend eternity in heaven. All mankind are called by the Gospel but some are effectually called. Those who are effectually called are not called to different denominations or churches. Rather all receive the one calling to follow Christ on the road to heaven and to be members of His visible church on earth. Surely as we are all heeding the one calling to fight under the one Captain we should all be united?

One Hope of your calling.

There is only one destination before God's people in eternity. There are not different heavens for the different denominations. Although while on earth, the church, sadly because of sin, is divided, there will be no divisions in heaven. Our great hope is that we have been called to be with Christ in the same heaven as all the other children of God. So we should as much as possible serve our beloved Saviour here on earth loving and respecting our fellow-pilgrims who are also on the road to heaven.

One Lord

At one time we served many different lords and masters. Self was a great master, money was another and pleasure another. When we became Christians we turned from idols to serve the living God. We accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Christ warns us that we must be single-minded in His service and that we cannot serve God and mammon. Since we all serve the same Master should we not be united in His service rather than working against one another.

One Faith

When the Apostle speaks of "one faith" he is using the term objectively. There is only one true faith, one Gospel, one way of salvation and one set of beliefs. There is only one path to heaven. Pluralism asserts that there are many different roads leading up the mountain to God, but this is totally contrary to the teaching of Scripture. Jesus said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me" (Jn14:6). He is the way and the only way. Because there is only one faith, should that not unite us?

One Baptism

Baptism has often been a cause of division among God's people on earth. Some will baptise children and others believe that only professing adults should be baptised. Some believe that sprinkling with water is enough while others demand full immersion of the individual. But although there are differences in administrations there is in essence only one baptism. A person is baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, professing their faith in Christ as their Saviour and vowing commitment to Him as their Lord. Baptism in the name of Christ should unite us.

One God and Father of all

There are many different gods whom men worship but there is only one real God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Ruler of the universe and the Judge of all mankind. He is the Father of all. This is not referring to a universal fatherhood over humanity but rather that He is the Father of all His people. While in a sense God is Father of all men as their Creator, He is only the father of true Christians in the riches of the term "Father". "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal.3:26). Whatever denomination you belong to there is only one God not many different ones, and one Father and therefore only one family. God is above all, working through all and indwelling all His people.

Surely there is plenty here to make us work for Christian unity. "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (v3). Remember, essentially there is only one body, one invisible church made up of true Christians, one Spirit who indwells all Christians giving them real unity with one another, one hope of heaven, one faith and one baptism. There is only one God and not lots of different ones according to our theology. There is only one Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and He assures us that "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them (Mt.18:20). There we have an expression of the true church. We must not be like children tossed about by every wind or fashion of doctrine by the cunning craftiness of men "whereby the lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (Eph.4:14-15).

It is vital to recognise other Christians as true Christians and their gatherings for worship as true churches. Differences will exist, for example over baptism, but we ought to be united on essentials such as the substitutionary atonement, the deity of Christ and inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. A valuable old adage states: "In things essential unity, in things indifferent liberty, in all things charity". We do not have to be organisationally one to express unity and to endeavour to maintain it. For example Emmanuel Church, Salisbury invited me a Presbyterian to come and minister to their conference and the minister of Emmanuel has preached in my pulpit. Thus, although we belong to different churches, by this, we give expression of the unity of the church. The Roman Catholic Church makes much of its unity yet some of them will only accept a Tridentine mass (celebrated in Latin), others are Charismatics and others are modernist liberals. They also have their different orders, Franciscans, Dominicans Jesuits etc. In large denominations like the Church of England or the Church of Scotland there are amalgams of all sorts. There are evangelicals in these churches who would doubt the salvation of some of the ministers of other congregations. It is possible to have organisations with deep divisions among them and on other side it is possible to have different denominations but with a bond of unity between them.

The evil of Separatism

Separatism is quite different from separation and is an evil to be avoided and opposed. An example from the Scottish scene is Norman Macleod of Assynt. He did some theological training at Aberdeen but then dropped out of the course. He specialised in criticising ministers and churches and doubting the salvation of professing Christians. He encouraged his followers to stay away from the churches and eventually set up his own. Looking for the perfect setting and trying to keep his people from worldly influence he persuaded his followers to go with him first to Canada, then on to Australia and eventually to New Zealand. His teaching and attitude led to a huge amount of pride and self-righteousness and a blindness to their own faults.

But separatism is not just a danger in extreme cases such as this. It is often to be found in a measure among those committed to Reformed doctrine, Reformed worship and church discipline. There is sometimes the tendency to recognise no church but the one that will dot all our 'i's and cross all our 't's. There is nothing easier than to find a fault in others. The mote in our brother's eye looks enormous while the beam in own eye does not give us a thought. Some will have nothing to do with fellow-Christians even when they are Reformed and obviously evangelical because they fail to pronounce their shibboleths. In this there is a pride, the feeling that they are almost perfect, and a despising of other Christians and churches. Again it is easy to condemn others as separatist but we must search our own hearts.

There is a duty laid upon us by the Scripture's teaching on the unity of the church to recognise fellow-Christians even when it is impossible for us due to some difference in practice to belong to the same denomination. There is an obligation upon us to fellowship together at Lord's table remembering that it is the Lord's table and not the table of any particular denomination. We must keep on reminding ourselves that we are only a little part of the church of Christ on earth. There may well be a duty upon us to stay separate in order to witness to a certain truth, or to protest against a false practice or a lack of discipline. Yet we must recognise and love and co-operate with others where we can do so without the truth suffering.

Promoting church unity in the local Church

It goes without saying that we are to do all we can to promote unity within the local church. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (Jn.13:35). We cannot love each other too much and if we love each other we must show that love. It is very easy to offend one another. Sometimes we cause offence without realising it. In these situations it is important to be open and frank with one another and to try to put the best interpretation on each other's actions. Humility and loving devotion to serve one another is very important. We must be willing to forgive one another and to overlook personality faults and even sins against us. "Above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins" (1Pet.4:8). If only we were noted locally as a loving group. It was said of the early

Christians, "See how they love one another" and this in itself must have drawn the curiosity and interest of many to go and see what these Christians believed and taught. "We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren" (1Jn.3:14).

Some people are far too ready to resign, to walk out and leave a church. It is a very serious matter to leave a local congregation of which you are a member. This should only be done as a last result and on some major matter of principle, of doctrine or practice, otherwise it is schism. Some people wander round churches staying just a few weeks here and a few months there and a year or two somewhere else. That is to treat the church of Christ with contempt. If you move into a new area one of your first duties is to find the church whose constitution, worship, practice and preaching is most in conformity with the Scriptures and then stick with it unless some heresy arises or there is some serious undermining of Scriptural practice. Hurt feelings and awkward personalities is no sound reason for leaving a church. Further, we can hold firmly to certain opposing positions on nonessential or minor matters and yet belong to same church eg the use of alcohol, "Thee" or "You" in prayer, or the Christian's use of leisure activities. Some things are secondary and although we may hold strongly to a certain view on the matter and make our beliefs known about it yet it would be wrong to leave a church over such things.

Sometimes church leaders are afraid to exercise church discipline because of the offence it will cause. However, despite the threat to the unity of the church, the elders must be faithful in the discipline heretics and those involved in openly scandalous sins. It may create enormous upheaval at the time, and cause the fall out of friends and even lead to a division, yet it is best in the long run. God assures us, "Them that honour me I will honour" (1Sam.2:30) and discipline is an essential mark of the true church. Where it is neglected out of respect of persons that church is on the path to apostacy.

Love one another within the local church. Beware of allowing party spirit and pride to divide. Listen to others while firmly holding to the truth as you understand it. At the same time realise that no church is perfect. Do not be blind to your own faults and ignorance.

Positive ways of promoting church unity between churches

Love the truth

Love the truth and stand unashamedly for it. Church unity should never be at the expense of truth. The truth unites. Early church councils were concerned to state the truth in such a way as that their could be no ambiguity. They struggled to find words that the heretic could not accept. Errors were carefully condemned to allow no hiding place. Similarly the Reformation confessions are very detailed. Rejoice in the truth and proclaim and publish it. It is a modern evil to argue that the truth has to be downplayed in the interests of unity. Love the truth in its fulness and do not hide any of it and call others to union with you in the defence and proclamation of the truth.

Distinguish between the essential doctrines and matters not so fundamental

It is vital to distinguish between the essential doctrines and matters not so fundamental. Doctrines such as justification by faith alone and the substitutionary atonement are not negotiable and distinguish between those who are true Christians and those who are not. Some things are vital to salvation. Other matters are important but yet we are able to recognise as Christians those who hold opposing views. Matters such as the mode or subjects of baptism, church government, and Psalm singing mean that we may have to belong to separate churches yet we can still have much fellowship across the denominational divide. These things are matters of our church order and practice yet we have a duty to recognise those of opposing views as fellow-Christians.

Share meetings

One of the best ways of expressing our true unity is by sharing speakers. It is good from time to time when we hold special meeting, for example conferences or anniversaries, to invite speakers from other churches. This reminds our people that we are part of a much larger body and that in essentials we agree. Ministers and others should value the opportunity to speak in other churches because of the way in which it is an expression of the unity of the church.

Worship in other churches

I know of some Christians who will never worship in any church but their own. This is not good. We may feel our church is just about perfect and no other church matches up to it, but yet these others are churches of Christ and if we find ourselves too far from our own church, for example when we are on holiday, we should worship in the best local church we can find. If the word of God is read, and the Gospel of grace is preached and sincere prayers are offered to the Most High surely it is far better for us to assemble with God's people remembering His promise to be present, rather than stay in our own homes worshipping privately. By worshipping in other churches we express our belief in the unity of the church.

Co-operate in standing for the truth

Where I live in Portree there is another church which is very strict in its beliefs and practices. However when there was a local problem with the desecration of the Lord's Day and shops beginning to open on the Sabbath the minister of that church requested me to join him in protesting to the managers of the businesses concerned. I was glad to do this and welcomed the opportunity to express the unity of the true church of Christ. Another example would be in supporting such organisations as the Christian Institute who do an excellent work in fighting nationally and locally to retain moral standards and our Christian heritage.

Co-operate in Christian publishing

There are many things that an individual church or small denomination cannot do. This provides the opportunity for working with other churches and in this way expressing our Christian unity. It is possible to work with others to support organisations which do a good specialist work, for example Bible societies. Nowadays Christian publishing because of modern technology is more accessible to small groups than in the past but there are obvious advantages in pooling resources.

Co-operate in relief work

The world today is a much smaller place. Through the medium of television the needs of parts of the world where disasters have occurred are brought forcefully to our people. We have a Christian duty to respond. Here again we need to co-operate with others in relief work and thank God for societies dedicated to that task. Similarly there are opportunities in social work and education

Co-operate in missions

Where possible there are obvious advantages in co-operating in missions work and evangelism. Some problems arise here if the churches sponsoring the mission do not share in the same views on for example baptism or church government. If we are involved in setting up new churches we would want them to fully express the truth as we understand it. Thus we would have to join with similarly minded churches in church planting and mission work.

Training for ministry

Training for ministry is very important. Much can and should be done through the local church. Often a mistake is made in removing the candidate for the ministry from the church to a distant college where he is trained in an arid academic theology and often indeed in blatant heresy. Yet there is here too a place for specialists and so churches can combine so that their best men are involved in training the students

Seek help of other churches

No single church has all the answers or all the wisdom. Sometimes situations arise where the leaders are baffled or struggling to cope. Here they should seek the help of sister churches and their respected church leaders. In New Testament times when a difficulty arose the Jerusalem Council was called and the dispute was heard before that large gathering of elders ministers and apostles. The findings were then sent round the churches to be implemented.

Pray for other churches

One of the best ways of expressing the unity of the church is in our prayer-meetings. We have a duty to pray for other churches. Recognising that we belong together in Christ we must bear one another's burdens. Praying for each other helps us to have a right perspective on the matters which divide us. We look forward prayerfully to the coming of the kingdom on earth and also to the to the coming again of the bridegroom and the ushering in of the eternal kingdom. The New Jerusalem is described as a perfect cube (Rev.21) intimately united and in complete harmony.

A Call to Separation and Unity

In 1966 Dr D Martyn Lloyd-Jones in a now famous meeting opening the National Assembly of Evangelicals held under the auspices of the Evangelical Alliance in the Central Hall London said the following: "Something entirely new has come about affecting all the major denominations of the world". He was referring to the ecumenical urge to unite into one world church. In his Appeal he sets before his hearers a vision which we should share: "Surely the Holy Spirit will only bless His own Word, and if those of us who believe it, would only come together, stand together as churchmen, contending together, working together, doing everything together, bearing our witness together, I believe we would then have the right to expect the Spirit of God to come upon us in mighty revival and re-awakening... We may be small in numbers but since when has the doctrine of the remnant become unpopular amongst evangelicals? ... We are not interested in numbers. We are interested in truth and in the living God. 'If God be for us who can be against us?'"

His appeal fell on many deaf ears. John Stott and the Anglican Evangelicals strongly resented it as their loyalty appeared to be first of all to their own denomination – Anglicans first and then evangelicals. Preparations by that stage must already have been well under way for the Keele Congress of Anglican Evangelicals which met six months later and to which was invited liberal Anglo-Catholic Archbishop Ramsay to open proceedings. It set a new agenda for them. They would be an evangelical wing of the national church. Sadly since then the Church of England has drifted further and further from the truth and robust evangelical voices amongst them are almost completely a thing of the past.

Let us today heed the call not merely of Dr Lloyd-Jones but of God Himself "Come out from among them and be ye separate ... and I will receive you and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (2Cor.6:17-18), and "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not her plagues" (Rev.18:4), but also, "Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (Phil.2:2), "holding forth the word of life" (v16) "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) "speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (Eph.4:15). "Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the Lamb's wife" (Rev.21:9). There is only one bride and He says of her: "Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirsah, comely as Jerusalem... fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners" (Song of Sol.4:6,10). Oh the need we have of reformation and of revival but remember God reigns and one day his church will be a perfect unity and without spot even to His all-seeing eyes!

Rev William Macleod (June 2005)