

WIDER UNITY

22nd January 2017

Mayfield Salisbury

We have heard from the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians his words of pleading for an end to divisions among them, and for their perfect joining together ‘in the same mind and in the same judgment.’

Of one thing we may be certain; that the congregation in the city of Corinth had divisions and disagreements. There are few traditions in Christianity established for longer than the tradition of division and disagreement.

When, therefore, the emphasis on unity became strongly present in the churches during the last century, it seemed to be asking for something that went against how things were and how they had been since, at least, the days of Saint Paul’s writing to the Corinthian church.

The first secretary of the British Council of Churches was Dr Archie Craig, who was also the first chaplain to the University of Glasgow, and Moderator of the General Assembly. Dr Craig advocated the importance of church people speaking to one another, almost irrespective of what it was that they said when they spoke. He told of how the phrase ‘speaking the truth in love’ marked the distinction between those who put their

emphasis on the word 'truth' and those who stressed the word 'love'. The idea was that people devoted to doctrinal purity would say that you must speak the TRUTH in love, whereas those more inclined to a liberal openness would say, instead, that you must speak the truth in LOVE. He said that his wife, observing the distinction, had said that you could do neither - stressing either word - if you did not speak at all.

But speaking may not be straightforward, especially if it is not accompanied by listening. A conversation ceases to be a conversation when John stops listening to Mary and uses the time in which she is speaking to prepare whatever it is that he is going to say next.

This is Christian Unity week, and a story comes to mind, accurate, I am assured. The association of churches of the Presbyterian and Reformed sort was originally called the Pan Presbyterian Alliance, which during a meeting in Edinburgh had a trip to the Borders and visited Abbotsford, Walter Scott's house. The company went to the river and ignored a sign restricting the number allowed on a footbridge, which they then took over. A groundsman shouted at them to get off the bridge, and one of them replied that they were PanPresbyterians, to which the groundsman responded with 'You may be Pan Presbyterians or Pot Methodists, but if you all stay on that bridge you'll all end up as Baptists.' These were the days.

Now opinions have varied on how Christian Unity is to be defined, from the merging of the big churches in one system, to a culture of friendship and mutual tolerance, which is in practice the understanding most favoured at the present time.

It seems to me that in this as in other issues there may be a choice between the inclusive and the exclusive approach; and I connect that distinction with two sayings attributed to Jesus, which appear to contradict one another, one being more exclusive and the other more inclusive. In St Matthew's Gospel, chapter 12, verse 30, we read that Jesus said, 'He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathered not with me scattered abroad.'

It is a saying that I have often heard quoted. It suggests a clear distinction between the Jesus followers who are properly signed up, regular, committed, and those who are not.

But it was some years after I had been hearing that verse that I heard one which appeared to be suggesting the opposite perspective. In St Mark's Gospel, chapter 9, verses 38 to 41, Jesus is challenged with the news that someone is healing people in his name, without being a follower; and Jesus said, 'Forbid him not, for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us on our side.'

Do these sayings not seem to be like two bookends, saying opposite things? One says that those who are not for him are to be regarded as against him. The other says that if they are not against him, they should be regarded as being on his side. I wonder why the more exclusive is quoted more frequently than the more inclusive, if I am right in suggesting that that is so. Possibly the convinced dogmatist is more likely to speak out and influence the attitudes of others than the more liberal person of an inclusivist bent who is less keen to lay down the law.

Attempting then the more inclusive approach to Christian Unity,

I wish to suggest three areas of unity which are worth supporting and promoting, and none of which is the same as the unity of the church. The first is the unity of those who respond to Jesus.

Few books have made a greater impact on me in the last forty years than John V Taylor's *The Go-Between God*, in which among many other valuable things Bishop Taylor writes of the impact and influence of Christ more widely than through the membership and thought patterns of the church.

Taylor was in East Africa at the time of the death of Mahatma Gandhi, and saw posters in the Indian shops of Gandhi, seated as a sadhu, with, in many of the posters, a picture of Christ on the cross above and behind. Why this of all possible manifestations of God? Why a picture of an 'adopted foreigner...at the moment of his humiliation and death.

The company of people drawn by Christ and influenced by Christ must not be identified with the lists of members of the churches; and our prayers must be for openness and modesty in regard to the role of the churches in the spread of the Good News.

Bishop Taylor wrote, 'Christ is not the property of us Christians, and if we rejoice when the Holy Spirit opens men's eyes to his glory, we must at that moment remember how often the church has blinded them, and pray that we not be once more a stumbling block.'

Then there is the unity of interfaith dialogue and shared experience, a theme, I know, which has had a prominent place in the life of this congregation. There is much nonsense in talk of not offending other religions. When Glasgow Council decided

to make no reference to Christmas on their seasonal cards and said they were concerned not to give offence to other religions, the prominent councillor, Bashir Maan, a devout Muslim, said that he loved getting Christmas cards and his house was full of them at Christmas time.

Perhaps the unity to which I am most drawn is the wholeness of communities, not least because of the importance of the parish and the parish church in our history and tradition. John Taylor writes that the Holy Spirit speaks to the man in the street as well as the man in the pew. 'The test of any religion's vitality at a particular time is to ask not only how strongly its traditional convictions and patterns of life are still maintained, but also how positively it is responding, with a clear yes or no, to the changing influences and tensions which are affecting the society with which it is involved.'

Wider, inclusive unity, then, may be more important than the unification of churches.