

## Unity

Before we speak about church unity we have to consider exactly what we mean by ‘church’ and ‘unity’. Neither of these is straightforward, so we need to consider them in turn.

The English word ‘church’ is derived from *kuriakon* (‘Lord’s body’). The New Testament Greek word *ekklesia* (Latin *ecclesia* from which we get the English ‘ecclesiastical’) is made up from two words *ek* (or *ex*) *kaleo* (meaning ‘out’ and ‘call’) and literally means ‘assembly’, ‘meeting’ or ‘congregation’ (Coenen, 1975:291). In New Testament times *ekklesia* meant assembly of the citizens of a Greek city state called out from their homes for the discussion of public business. The translators of the Septuagint (LXX), which was a Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, used *ekklesia* to render the Hebrew word *qahal*, which in the Old Testament was used for the ‘congregation’ or ‘community of Israel’ (Lambert, 1996).

The Lord Jesus used the name *ekklesia* to describe the Christian society (Mt 16:18: the authenticity of this is questioned by liberal scholars on the basis that it is used too early) but it does not seem to be any different in meaning from the more regular term ‘kingdom’ (see also Matthew 18:17). Jesus appears to be envisaging local congregations operating in the same way as synagogues. In Acts *ekklesia* means ‘local church’ (e.g. Jerusalem, Antioch) and ‘universal church’ (Acts 9:31) with many local churches forming the one body. This usage continues in the New Testament letters to mean local churches (e.g. Corinth, Rome) and even Christian households or small groups of believers (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15, cf. Mt. 18:20), and the universal church of God (1 Cor. 10:32; 1 Cor. 12:28). The church is variously described as a pure bride (Eph. 5:25-27), the body of which Christ is the head (Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18, 24; 1 Cor. 12:12-31), a city (Hebrews 12:23) and a family (1 Tim. 3:15) in which believers are brothers.

A working definition of the church is offered by Bewes and Hicks (1984):

‘The church of Christ is the whole company of redeemed people. Christ is present and active in the church, and uses it for his work in the world.’

Such a definition would receive wide assent. The historic creeds (the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed) have sections about the church which is general taken to be ‘one, holy, catholic (meaning universal) and apostolic’. The Church of Jesus Christ has a historic dimension (throughout the centuries). It is called to be holy and its members are described as ‘saints’ (1 Peter 1:15). Its ministry and mission are worldwide, meaning that it is both catholic (universal) and apostolic. It is also called to be ‘one’ – which is expressed in the word ‘unity’.

Even in New Testament times the church had several dimensions. There were local congregations (e.g. at Corinth, Ephesus, Rome and the seven local churches listed in Revelation 2 and 3), there were councils at Jerusalem, suggesting that there was a wider unity of the church beyond the local situation. Paul recognised this when he spoke of persecuting ‘the church’ (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6). When believers had died it was recognised that they were still

part of the church (in heaven) and because only God sees the heart it was soon clear that there was a true invisible church as well as the visible company of believers.

So the church is Church of Jesus Christ (historical). This includes those who have died and are part of the church eternal (triumphant) and continues with those who are still alive (militant). The mission and ministry of the church are worldwide. Although there are visible congregations of believers, only God truly differentiates those who are his and so the church has an 'invisible' quality. The church is the company of all believers (universal), which are called to be holy and 'one in Christ' – but what does one in Christ mean?

Two thousand years of church history are not easily reduced to a few paragraphs and there are obvious limitations with this summary. In the period of the Early Church, there were church councils representing the whole church. These are sometimes called the 'Ecumenical Councils' from the Greek word meaning inhabited world (*oikoumene*). There is little agreement among Christians on the number of ecumenical councils (Heinze, 1978:327). Some churches (Coptic, Armenian and Syrian) accept only the first three (Nicea 325, Constantinople 381, Ephesus 431). The Eastern Orthodox Church and many Protestants accept the first seven (including Chalcedon 451, Constantinople 553, Constantinople 680-81, Nicea 787), though Luther accepted only the first four. An eighth council (Constantinople 869-70) included representatives from Eastern and Western clergy.

There are three main fragmentations in ancient Christendom. The first occurred in the fifth and sixth centuries when the Nestorian Church of Persia and the five Monophysite churches of Armenia, Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia and India divided from the main body of Christianity. Nestorius ran into a dispute as to whether the Virgin Mary was *Theotokos* (God-bearing), *anthropotokos* (man-bearing) or *Christotokos* (Christ-bearing). 'The strong point of Nestorianism is its attempt to do justice to the manhood of Christ, its weak point is that it places the two natures alongside each other with little more than a moral and sympathetic union between them' (Toon, 1978a:700). The Council of Chalcedon proclaimed Christ as 'truly God and truly man'. 'At the same time the council was careful to point out that part of the uniqueness of Christ was the he was one in person and substance, not divided into two persons' (Giacumakis, 1978). Monophysitism does not accept this but asserts that in Christ there is one nature and not two.

The second fragmentation (Great Schism) occurred in 1054 when the Eastern Orthodox Church (Greek) and the Western Roman Church (Latin) divided. Economic, political, cultural and linguistic issues became focused on the supremacy of the Pope and the *Filioque* clause. Eastern Christians were prepared to honour the Pope but not accord him absolute power. The *Filioque* clause from what is commonly called the Nicene Creed states that the Holy Spirit 'proceeds from the Father *and the Son*'. After the Crusades the split between East and West became final (not least because of Western atrocities in the East). The Orthodox Church accepts seven sacraments and a number of lesser blessings. Icons are an important feature of Orthodox worship. Orthodoxy claims that these are not idols but symbols and that veneration is not directed at the object but to the person depicted. The influx of people from national churches of Eastern European states will mean that Orthodoxy and relationship with people from an Orthodox background will become a greater and greater issue in the coming years.

The third fragmentation came with the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Against a background of immense political change, there had been a growing number of movements which the Roman Catholic Church defined as heretical (Waldenses, Lollards, Hussites, Anabaptists) but the great dispute centred on Martin Luther (1483-1546) who opposed the sale of indulgences at Wittenberg, Germany. Luther drafted Ninety-Five theses for debate among theologians, maintaining that the church had departed from its apostolic foundations and should reform by teaching salvation by grace through faith in Christ (*sola fide*) and not works of righteousness. Luther's ideas spread and the teaching of justification through faith in Christ spread. Luther also began to teach the authority of the Bible against the authority of the church, the priesthood of the believer and two rather than seven sacraments. After his confrontation with the Emperor at the *Diet of Worms* (1521) the rupture was complete (Linder, 1978:830). By 1550, the Lutheran Church had become the dominant church in Germany and much of Scandinavia.

In Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) was touched by the Lutheran Reformation. The movement spread through the Swiss cantons reaching John Calvin (1509-1564) in Geneva. Churches that followed the theology and church government taught by Calvin in the sixteenth century expressed their doctrine in various 'Reformed' confessions. Through John Knox (1514-1572), Calvinism triumphed in Scotland with Presbyterian polity and Calvinistic theology.

Meanwhile, in England, the work of John Wycliffe (1329-1384) had been supplemented by the imported Lutheran and Calvinistic ideas. A dispute over his marriage caused King Henry VIII to sever connections with Rome in 1534, the sovereign taking the title of 'Supreme Head of the Church'. 'Under Elizabeth I, the Church of England (or Anglican Church) became non-Roman but not entirely Protestant' (Linder, 1978:831), developing a *via media* (middle way) between Roman Catholicism and Protestant Calvinism. The doctrinal development of the early Anglicans crystallised in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662), *the Books of Homilies*, and the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. Later, the Church of England (part of the Anglican Communion) more or less defined its own position through the Lambeth Quadrilateral (1888) in which Scripture, the two Creeds, the dominical Sacraments, and the Historic Episcopate were laid down as the basis of reunion for churches (Saward 1978, 43).

With the rise of the Church of England came a number of parliamentary measures to ensure uniformity and Acts of Uniformity were passed in 1549, 1552, 1559 and 1662. *The Act of 1662* commanded the universal adoption of the *Prayer Book*, Episcopal ordination and a declaration of loyalty. Independents, Congregationalists, Puritans and Baptists were ejected and this gave birth to English nonconformity (Sellers, 1978:995). Congregationalists wanted a church organised on Presbyterian rather than Episcopal lines. They regarded 'ordination' as being in the hands of the whole congregation rather than elders or bishops (Kirby, 1978:252). Puritans had desired to purify the church of all ceremonies, vestment and customs inherited from the medieval church (Toon, 1978b:815).

In the Low Countries, Anabaptists became known as Mennonites, while the Baptists and Quakers originally grew out of similar and related principles. The Baptist movement (with its emphasis on personal faith and believer's baptism) grew steadily in the seventeenth century forming its

first church at Spitalfields, London, in 1612. At first they were General (or Arminian) Baptists but within the next 20 years Particular (or Calvinist) Baptist Churches came into being. At first the mode of baptism was affusion but from the 1640s onwards immersion became general (Clipsham, 1978:103).

In the eighteenth century, an evangelical movement (Methodism) arose within the Church of England led and directed by John Wesley (1703-1791). Wesley, though he considered himself a loyal churchman, conducted an itinerant ministry invading other men's parishes ('the world is my parish'), marshalled an army of travelling preachers, arranged a connexion of societies under his control, and ultimately, in frustration with the Episcopal hierarchy, conducted irregular ordinations first for America and later for Scotland and England. Wesley was belligerently Arminian and stressed the need for inward assurance and personal or scriptural holiness (a view which later mutated into 'perfectionism'). After Wesley's death, it was clear that the movement could not be contained within the established church. The Wesleyan societies maintained their connexion through the annual conference that Wesley had established and despite many nineteenth century splits (principally concerned with methods of church government and strong personalities) the Methodist family was largely reunited to form the Methodist Church in 1932 (the Wesley Reform Union and the Free Methodists remained separate). A schism from a part of the Methodist family was led by William Booth (1829-1912), who had been a minister, and this became the Salvation Army, a movement that retains its ethos as a Christian mission to those with social needs and Arminian and holiness theology. In the late nineteenth century, British and American holiness movements intertwined with some Pentecostal churches but some new Holiness Churches that are not properly described as 'Pentecostal' continue (e.g. The Church of the Nazarene).

A nineteenth century development was the Plymouth Brethren movement which, though it began in Dublin, were so named because their first congregation was formed in Plymouth (1831). A small group of men met together to study the Bible and their studies confirmed their belief that they could observe the Lord's Supper without a clergyman. They broke bread simply and trusted the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Numbers grew rapidly and the movement was greatly influenced by the teaching of J. N. Darby (1800-1882). A dispute over the autonomy of the local congregation arose causing a schism in the movement between the Open Brethren and the Exclusive Brethren. Open Brethren are Arminian in theology and emphasise eschatology. They practice believer's baptism and a fenced-table at the weekly Breaking of Bread. The Open Brethren normally call their buildings Gospel Halls though, more recently, some style themselves 'Evangelical Churches'. A split in 1889 gave rise to a stricter group who took the name of a magazine, *Needed Truth*. The Exclusive Brethren (who are still often called Plymouth Brethren) became increasingly 'separatist' and, despite many internal factions, none of the groups under this umbrella have anything to do with any other group.

Although it is possible that it might have Brethren origins, an 'Evangelical Church' is more likely to belong to the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, founded in 1922 by E. J. Poole-Connor (1872-1962). Its Declaration of Faith is broad enough to embrace Calvinists, conservative Methodists and other traditions (Sellers, 1978:372). Although questions of church

organisation and administration of the sacraments are avoided the movement appears to be largely Calvinist, congregational in church order and believer's Baptist.

From its origins in the American holiness tradition, Pentecostalism became an international movement emphasising an experience of 'Baptism in the Spirit' and charismatic gifts (e.g. speaking in tongues). The most familiar churches in Britain are the Elim Church (with its foursquare gospel – Jesus: Saviour; Healer; Baptiser in the Holy Spirit - baptism in the Spirit is confirmed by any spiritual gift; Coming King), the Assemblies of God (Presbyterian in church government; baptism in the Spirit is evidenced only by speaking in tongues) and the Church of God in Christ (the most influential black-led Pentecostal Church). Worldwide variations in Pentecostalism are too numerous to mention but less influential in Britain than the neo-pentecostals.

In the 1970s and 80s, the term 'house church movement' was used to describe a new kind of church growth, which in its formative days arranged meetings in homes. Influenced by Pentecostal or charismatic renewal, members were people who felt that the traditional church did not adequately reflect the New Testament church. Leaders of such churches were not so likely to have been ordained but rather had known a specific experience of the Holy Spirit. Groups developed independent and grew, spreading around Britain. Some of the new churches formed a loose network with similar 'house churches' which came to be known as 'streams'. Important theological differences concerned apostolic leadership and 'shepherding' (where members were under the close authority of a leader). Notable leaders in various streams have included Gerald Coates (Pioneer), Roger Forster (Ichthus), Bryn and Ceri Jones (Covenant Life) and Terry Virgo (New Frontiers). House churches that have outgrown homes and meet in schools or community centres have become more like denominational churches in organisation, communication, leadership and training, while many of the more traditional churches have adopted small groups and cell structures. Today, house churches from the 1970s and 80s and similar movements from the 1990s tend to be called 'the emerging church'.

Until relatively recently the unchanging character of the Roman Catholic Church would have made it easier to describe (Carson, 1978:853) but developments in the last century gave rise to various groups within the church, Traditional Catholics, New Catholics (largely a more open movement with origins in the early twentieth century) and Catholic Pentecostals. There is no guarantee that even Catholic Priests are going to think the same about important matters (Louden and Francis, 2003).

Christians do not agree about so many things. A brief history of the church and its many divisions reveals that unity is an immense challenge. Conversations with Nestorians and Monophysites would concern the very nature of Christ. Conversations with the Orthodox churches would concern the Trinity, the use of icons and the number of sacraments. Conversations between Roman Catholics would concern justification by faith, the sacraments and the papacy.

In England, the Church of England is the largest 'Protestant' church. Following the influence of John Wesley and George Whitefield, the church was influenced by the Evangelical Revival, with

its emphasis on justification by faith, personal conversion and the Bible (Simpson, 1978:343). However, Anglicanism also embraces the more Catholic spirituality and theology of the nineteenth century Oxford Movement, from which some leading Anglicans seceded to Roman Catholicism (notably John Henry Newman, 1801-1890). From the latter half of the nineteenth century until the present day, all the major denominations have also been influenced by Modernism, now more commonly known as liberalism. Therefore, in today's Church of England there are several identifiable strands; 'evangelical' (including those who hold more Reformed views and some who hold the holiness views of Keswick), 'Anglo-Catholic' and 'liberal' (or broad church). Additionally each of these groups has been influenced by the charismatic movement (Francis, 2005).

Outside of the Church of England, churches and individual Christians have different emphases. The main evangelical divisions centre on the doctrines of grace, the sacraments, church order, ministry and 'charismatic issues'.

#### Calvinists and Arminians

Contemporary Calvinism (not necessarily what Calvin taught in detail) is summed up with the acronym TULIP – total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, perseverance of the saints. Arminians, who take their name from the Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), believe in conditional election, unlimited atonement, resistible grace and the possibility of falling from salvation.

#### Baptism

Baptists and those of similar views believe that baptism is only rightly administered on profession of faith. Baptists generally concede that it is not the amount of water but the profession of faith that really matters though Baptists almost universally practice immersion. Other churches practice baptism of infants, normally by sprinkling or affusion (pouring). Presbyterian Churches have normally linked infant baptism with a strong covenantal theology but other churches have regarded baptism simply as a sign of the universal grace of God.

#### The Lord's Supper

Protestants normally reject any notion of transubstantiation but some Protestants accept views of consubstantiation or hold high views of consecration. Some churches insist that only an ordained minister may preside, others have it as their normal practice but do not make it a rule, while still others have little or no notion of ordination. Some churches exclude those who have not been immersed, confirmed, made members or received into fellowship, while others admit all who love the Lord (on self-examination).

#### Church order and ministry

Some Protestants are Episcopal (Church of England), others are Presbyterian or congregational and still others are connexional or federated (Methodists, Church of the Nazarene, Assemblies of God, FIEC).

#### Charismatic issues

Some Protestants are cessationists (believing that there are no contemporary Charismata), some believe that all Christians receive the Baptism of the Spirit at conversion while others regard Baptism in the Spirit as a secondary Christian experience. Some Pentecostal Christians believe that speaking in tongues is the only evidence of Spirit-baptism.

Outside of the evangelical tradition, both in the traditional denominations, and the newer churches, how Christians come to theological, doctrinal and ethical decisions is the important issue. The main sources are Scripture, Reason, Tradition and Experience. Evangelicals give prime importance to the Bible. Liberals tend to give the most importance to reason. Catholics tend to give most importance to tradition. Pentecostals and others value the importance of Christian experience but the complex thing is that each group and individual holds these sources of authority with a unique emphasis.

How can Christians move towards unity?

It is clear that unity among Christians is an important biblical teaching, yet it is impossible to think that Christians will be united in every matter before the Lord's return. The key distinction has to be between the matters of primary and secondary importance. It is clear that profession of faith in Christ has been vital to the church from the beginning (Mt. 16:18). From the beginning 'believer' has been a synonym for 'Christian' (Acts 2:44; 4:32; 5:14; 1 Tim. 4:12). Christians have never existed in isolation but always as brethren in *koinonia* (fellowship). Unity of the church was expressed between Jerusalem and Antioch and expressed in the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9). Paul's vision of the church was a body of which Christ is the head, a body animated by one spirit, and having one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (Eph 4:4 ff; Col 1:18; 3:11). This unity was a unity among disciples, that they all may be one so that the world might believe (Jn. 17:21). The New Testament does not appear to give any formal prescription for church order.

The modern Ecumenical Movement seeks organisational and structural unity (while allowing considerable latitude for personal belief). As a strong, even dominant organisation structure is the Episcopalian model, unity tends to be focused in one particular form of church government, in short Bishops and orders. The modern Evangelical Movement looks for a different kind of unity, in truth and in mutual fellowship without the emphasis on organisational and structural unity but this is notoriously difficult to define. Evangelical statements of faith were extremely long in the Reformation period and tend to be extremely short today. David Bebbington (1993:3) identified 'a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism'. These are its emphases on *conversionism* (the belief that lives need to be changed), *activism* (the expression of the gospel in effort), *biblicism* (a particular regard for the Bible), and *crucicentrism* (a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross).

If unity is in truth it is necessary to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials. The Triune nature of God, the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ and the efficacy of his saving work are clearly essentials. The saving work of Christ includes his incarnation, crucifixion, bodily resurrection, ascension and future coming in glory. Particularly his saving work on the cross is expressed in the doctrine of the atonement. An evangelical emphasis, that does not exclude other insights, is that when Christ died upon the cross he took the punishment for sin in place of the

believer (penal substitution). It is through faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, his saving work upon the cross and the triumph of his resurrection that the believer is justified (made right with God). This unites evangelical believers.

There are things about which evangelical believers are not going to be able to agree. These may be confined to the non-essentials. Most Calvinists and Arminians are able to be united in the essential truths. Those who only baptise believers and paedo-baptists are able to be united in essential truths. Those who hold various forms of church government are able to be united in essential truths. Those who hold different views about ordination, the ministry of men and women, charismatic issues and worship styles are able to be united in essential truths.

Today's Christians are likely to have more in common with other Christians of like-mind across denominational divides than they are to have in common with fellow members of broad denominational churches. Between evangelical Christians and others contemporary areas of difference seem presently to arise in three areas. They all, in a sense, arise from different views about the authority of Scripture and its interpretation. In the evangelical world, controversy has broken out as to whether penal substitution is an essential element in the atonement. Evangelical Christians have, traditionally, upheld marriage, been cautious of divorce and rejected same-sex partnerships. Liberal churches appear to be moving to an acceptance of same-sex partnerships. Evangelical Christians have, traditionally, believed in the uniqueness of Christ and his saving work (Jn. 14:6) and rejected the idea that all major religions are equally valid ways to the one 'God'. We all need to consider very carefully what the primary issues are, what we must agree on, what we can disagree upon and what we must reject and, if necessary, disassociate from.

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