
Book Review

One in the Truth?

Robert Amess
Kingsway Publications
160pp, £4.95

The reviewer labours under some difficulties. First and foremost he is writing for a theological journal, which he would not consider to be his forte anyway, a review of a work which states plainly 'This book is not a theological textbook' (p 19). Secondly, he has to be prepared, if necessary, to be critical of an author with whom he has enjoyed much fellowship and whom he values highly in the love of Christ. Thirdly, he writes remembering that he is in fellowship with a body which pleads for separation from 'mixed denominations' and this book does not make that plea. There is no difficulty, however, in understanding the burden of the author, there is no difficulty in appreciating the Christ-like love which emanates from every chapter, there is no difficulty in realising that this author is not motivated by emotion but by the truth as revealed in the Word of God; he takes his Bible seriously.

In the book's ten chapters Robert Amess directs his readers to what he considers to be the fundamental issues at stake, that those who profess to be in Christ are guilty of serious sin if, because of disagreement on other issues, they exclude from their fellowship any who are Christ's and who honour His Word and truth. He sees, and has experienced, an increasing spirit of

contentiousness in evangelical circles which he judges to be an evil cancer destroying the effective witness of gospel churches. 'Evangelicalism today is not marked by mutual trust and affection, but rather by distrust, recrimination and animosity.' So writes the author in the opening chapter, p 11. It sounds rather blunt, very sweeping. But read him, he does not use words idly. There will be those whose view of the 'Regulative Principle' will lead them to other conclusions. This has not been overlooked (chapter 9, **Misunderstandings**, p 139), though it is an unfortunate blemish that the word which should be 'regulative' has been printed as 'regulation'.

The first chapter, **All One in Christ Jesus?**, opens with the question 'Why should a book on Evangelical Unity be regarded as controversial?' and suggests that part of the answer is that separation is of the climate of today. The five sections that follow — 'This book is not about separation but Evangelical unity', '...is not about Evangelical compromise', '...is not about Evangelical uniformity', '...is not a theological textbook' and '...is not written by an authority on these matters', indicate the burden, the heart, the direction and the boundaries of the work. The biblical foundation upon which Mr Amess proceeds is clearly seen in the short chapter 2, **Unity between Whom?** Here more than a brief 'Jesus is Lord' is required, there is no comfort for those who say the Apostles' Creed 'with their fingers crossed

behind their backs'! Donald MacLeod's eighteen fundamental truths are quoted with approbation. This doctrinal and scriptural emphasis undergirds the whole work.

It is in chapter 3, **Christian Unity in the New Testament**, that the biblical ground for unity is examined. This is conducted under seven heads: 'One body', 'One Spirit', 'One hope', 'One Lord', 'One faith', 'One baptism', 'One God and Father of all'. It is interesting that the late E J Poole-Connor should be quoted by the author: 'Recently E J Poole-Connor has been extensively quoted to endorse a "separatist" position. But his book "Evangelical Unity" argues a different case'. Mr Amess refers to him several times; the most telling quote appears on p 31, it is a quote of a quote from D M Panton: 'No divergence of doctrine or ritual or practice can destroy a union which is based on life; nor is it possible to be unchurched by intellectual error when our organic union is fathoms deeper than intellectual. Unity in doctrine is impossible, unity in taste and sentiment is impossible; unity in attainment and experience is impossible; but unity in life is not only possible: it is a fact.' I certainly endorse the spirit of the author in his approach to 'One baptism' although I would hesitate to suggest that the phrase refers to the outward act of water baptism itself (and I am a convinced baptist!). The section dealing with One God and Father has good emphasis on the necessity of a covenant and doctrinal basis in a local church. 'Evangelical unity is not a denial of church discipline. In fact it can only really be accomplished among those where it is exercised.' He continues, 'It is a salutary

discovery that the New Testament speaks more of the sin of schism than ever it does of the errors of compromise', and at that point goes on to declare that second degree separation is based on the flimsiest of scriptural exegesis.

In dealing with **Biblical Separation**, chapter 4, the author is quite clear that there can be no indifference to such doctrinal deviations as do occur in 'mainline' denominations. His deep concern is to define *biblical* separation. This he seeks to do from the basis of 1 John: the test of obedience 1:3-6 and 5:1-4; the test of love 2:7-11; and of doctrine 2:18, along with 2:19-29; 4:1-6; 5:1-12. In dealing with obedience the matter of the difference between church fellowship and personal fellowship is handled with a helpful quote from Poole-Connor. Once again the evangelical integrity of Robert Amess is plain '...it would seem to me an impossibility for a man to be identified with or a member of a denomination whose doctrinal position is in clear contradiction to the gospel. Sadly, even that is not as clearly understood by some as it should be.' The second test reminds us that '...obedience is not a contradiction of love... love is a command... If you are disobedient about love then you fail the previous test on obedience...' The test of love is explored under six points before going on to the third test, that of doctrine. 'If a fellowship, however inadequate or divergent on secondary matters, seeks to enthrone him, (the Lord Jesus) then they are not to be avoided. But if a church... leaves the Lord Jesus outside — then it must be avoided like the plague. The test is the Lord Jesus Christ himself'. 'Here

(says the author) is the infallible test: "What do you think of Christ?" That question for Mr Amess is no empty remark. It means for him 'pre-existent deity, virgin birth, sinless life, sacrificial atoning death, bodily resurrection, physical ascension, visible personal return and eternal reign'; any who prevaricate here are 'against Christ'. This for the author is *the* basis for unity, therefore it is also *the* test to which, blatant sin apart, no other test can biblically be added.

'In it to win it', 'Guilt by association', 'Second degree separation', Chapter 5 introduces **Some Present-Day Clichés**. Obviously the author, being the pastor of a church affiliated to the Baptist Union, has a real interest in these phrases. It must be said that he is not merely defensive of his own position and seeks to examine the matter biblically and with the feeling of one who has had to work his way through hard experience. 'It is strange that I have found it easier to be consistent for the truth as I understand it within denominationalism than I have within separatist circles. In the former there has often been warm friendship and constructive support at best, and benign indifference at worst. In the latter, at best the peace and joy that comes from being with brethren of like mind and experience, and at worst downright coldness and hostility'. The reviewer finds that a very sad commentary on present day evangelicalism; unfortunately it is all too often the result of our tendency to 'label' and 'pigeon-hole' other believers. Mr Amess gives consideration to 2 Corinthians 6:14-17; pursues his argument and comes to the conclusion that no man

should put himself in a position where he is to be hindered from preaching the pure Gospel of Christ. Further, that for a family to join a church that is 'dead', the Gospel just not being there, merely because it is a local church, is plainly wrong. Christ and His Gospel become the criteria. Evincing arguments from the letters to the seven churches of Asia, he is at pains to point out that, with all their shortcomings and in some cases, sin (even Laodicea!), they were still churches, there is no command to other believers to withdraw from them. Dealing with the cliché itself, his conclusion is that there is no command to go into denominations to win them, there is only a command to go into the world to preach the Gospel. If a man is ministering in a church where the Gospel is loved and where he has absolute freedom to declare the whole counsel of God, the cliché does not apply.

'Guilt by association' is likewise not 'dismissed at a stroke'. The author's own experience comes much to the fore here; not everybody would necessarily agree with the conclusions he reached during the various situations he had to face. But then, the book is about that precise point. What is clear in Mr Amess' mind is, that where a man stands clearly on and for the Gospel, he stands before God alone. 'In that regard I am not my brother's keeper. If, for instance, a minister of the FIEC denies his Statement of Faith, this does not make all the other ministers guilty. However, they do have a responsibility to remonstrate... to win him back... or to discipline him...' 'It is ridiculous and offensive to say that I am guilty because I have associated with a man I have never heard, would

not recognise by sight, who would never be allowed in my pulpit, and whose views if I ever heard them would be an anathema to me.'

'Second degree separation' is introduced by quoting Dr Peter Masters and stating that under such a definition second degree separation is undoubtedly right. The four reasons Dr Masters adduces for that position are also given and approved. The author then goes on to deal with the problem as it has impinged upon evangelicalism to its hurt. He quotes clause 4 of the statement made by those ministers who met at Rugby in 1984 (p 84) and graciously explains his problem, believing that it has the tendency to cause further division. The problem about this section is that what is generally understood by the term 'second degree separation' is not precisely defined and therefore the argument against it is not as clearly put as it might have been.

Such a topic could not be handled without an examination of the problem of the reformed/non-reformed, charismatic/non-charismatic, mixed/separatist etc, and a short chapter is entitled **Evangelical Groupings**. Whilst the New Testament letters are directed toward some particular problem to rebuke, encourage, redirect, there is 'never ever the denial of brotherhood or the refusal of fellowship with those who are in Christ'. Whilst the author is at pains to defend the Christianity of, say, charismatics, even though he may not personally accept their premises, he is likewise faithful in his declaration of warmth, life and love amongst reformed churches. He makes a plea for unity and acceptance of one another on the

ground of 'Truth, Honesty, Trust and Love'. However, there is no 'papering over the cracks'. A clear challenge is presented to those evangelical Anglicans who are anxious to court Rome (pp 98/99). The chapter ends with a robust challenge as to the truth of some suppositions regarding the integrity of evangelical Anglicans, and of the attitudes of independents.

Chapter 7 concerning **Para-Church Events**, is handled with great sensitivity and is obviously the result of much pastoral experience in the field. The reviewer found himself greatly challenged by the clear presentation of the problems alongside the sincere, godly and pastoral approach of the author. The issues of 'Spring Harvest', 'Mission England', and 'Bible Colleges', with all the multifarious problems which follow, throw up situations which are often used as tests of orthodoxy. Strong criticism is made of those who make statements which border on the libellous, pp 110/111; but a plea is also made to those who organise multi-church missions to be sensitive to those who do hold other views.

Sectarianism is seen as a potential danger in the quest for separation. Some eighteen pages are given over to this issue together with a timely warning to those whose strong leadership seems to border on the near infallible. A quote from Poole-Connor on p 129 together with some strong comments on those whose 'rejection of others is sheer wickedness' reveals the author's deep concern. The reviewer found himself in disagreement with the author and his view of the Lord's Supper and the discipline of the local church, p 123.

If the local church is important and has a discipline, as the author acknowledges earlier, then surely the church has a scriptural responsibility to separate a believer from fellowship until repentance is evident.

A short, helpful chapter on **Mis-understandings** brings the book to **Where Do We Go From Here?** Mr Amess wisely does not take on the mantle of a prophet. We all undergo change, pp 145/146; if we refuse to we may be too closed to the work of the Spirit, p 147. The dangers of a perfectionist ecclesiology are pointed out and the benefits of a rigid approach to separation are seriously questioned by reference to an actual event, p 151. Finally, the Bedford Document is reproduced and its approach to inter-church unity commended. There is warm support and great encouragement for the work of the Evangelical Alliance and for the British Evangelical Council.

‘Every church leader should read this,’ writes Dr R T Kendall in the Forward. He is right. They should.

For those who read this journal the question will be asked, ‘Does the acceptance of the approach of Robert Amess make the BEC irrelevant?’ My answer to that is ‘No, it does not.’ The BEC was founded as a vehicle for those who wanted to pursue the aims of evangelical unity together, without the hindrance and compromise of the Ecumenical Movement. It is committed to a policy of evangelical unity and to the proclamation of the biblical Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Those objects are not in any way eroded by the thesis of this book. But this book does challenge us to re-examine our approach to these matters; there is a need for us to take

the Scriptures raised very seriously and question our own suppositions in the light of them. It is this reviewer’s opinion that we too often determine our position on these matters by studying history and then taking the Scripture into account, instead of studying Scripture and then taking history into account. By no means must we go ‘soft’ on the liberal Ecumenical Movement; by all means we must be ‘soft’ with true blood-bought children of our Lord and Master. The question of ‘denominations’ and church ‘groupings’ is raised by the nature of the work. That issue is one which could not be adequately handled in such a compass and perhaps needs dealing with as a separate, though related, matter.

Some sentences seem rather difficult to read even though the general sense could be understood; perhaps some grammarian or literary buff needs to look at the writings of a pastor; we tend to write as we speak! On pages 77 and 82 what should read as ‘seceded’ has been printed as ‘succeeded’; that together with the other error already mentioned (p 139) prompts the question as to whether the printer uses a proof-reader who understands the subject matter of the book being published.

Altogether a very warm, serious and challenging work. It may well prove to be an important book. If it sends us to our Bibles and to our knees it will have been worth the time and the cost.

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