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# Revival and the Unity of the Churches

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*The theme of the 1990 Carey Ministers' Conference was 'In Search of Revival'. As well as theological and historical papers, this one was concerned with a survey of the contemporary scene in Britain.*

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The link between unity and the outpouring of God's Spirit was expressed by Jewish pilgrims as they sang Psalm 133 on their way to the corporate worship festivals in Jerusalem:

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! ... For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life for evermore.

Both Scripture and Church History will need briefly to be reviewed in order to assess our contemporary situation properly and consider what practical response is appropriate.

## **The Teaching of Scripture**

This must be foundational or we will be in danger of misinterpreting past events and present problems. Both the doctrinal and the biblical-theological perspectives will be useful.

**The Doctrine of the Church** provides three relevant aspects:

**The unity** of the church. All the Biblical metaphors for the universal church reflect this unity, one Flock, one Body, one Temple etc. We must notice, however, that unity is never regarded as an end in itself but as one facet of the holiness of the church. Our Lord's much misunderstood prayer in John 17 seeks the protection and sanctification of his people and their unity as a consequence of that. 'Protect them by the power of your name...so that they may be one' (Jn 17:11). Like all features of holiness, unity is one aspect of the already/not yet tension in which the church exists today, a unity created by the Spirit (Eph 4:3) but to be completed only when the Kingdom is consummated (Eph 4:13).

**The revival** of the church. Revival is an experience of the life and power of God in uncommon measure in the church. The OT terms indicate that it is primarily the 'life' which is renewed rather than its particular functions. The church, however, really exists as a genuine church even when not in a state of revival, as is seen by the use of the same word *ekklesia* to denote the church at Laodicea in Revelation 3 as that used to denote the church at Antioch in Acts 13.

In the church, **revival is related to unity**. The church is to seek Christ for his own sake and for the manifestation of his sanctifying, unifying presence in the life of his church. The duty is ours but the power comes only from him. This is another example of the sovereignty/responsibility antinomy apparent at other points in the application of salvation.

An alternative perspective is provided by accounts of the church's life during the epoch of Biblical revelation. Three aspects are relevant here:

**OT Israel** saw times of lethargy and times of revival. Nehemiah 8 records the celebration of the re-built walls demonstrating that united work and prayer had resulted in spiritual renewal. Their praise issued in unity by sending food to those who had nothing prepared so that they too might share their joy.

The **Messianic promises** include prophecy about the renewal of Israel's spiritual life, including their unity, by using the concept of 'gathering', as in Jeremiah 31:8 and Ezekiel 36:24. One feature of the promised *SHALOM* will be freedom from the discord of division.

The **post-Pentecost NT church** provides the touching detail of Acts 2:44, 'All the believers were together and had everything in common'. Any threats to the unity of the church, such as those rebuked in 1 Corinthians, are seen as a sin against Christ as the Head of the church.

## **The Experience of Church History**

**Unity has sometimes been a pre-cursor to revival.**

A Call to Prayer was issued from the Northampton Association of churches in 1784. It soon spread to include Christians of different denominations in England, Wales and Scotland. Paul Cook's account of 'The Forgotten Revival' says: 'This was the cry God heard when in the 1790's he began again to visit his people'.<sup>1</sup>

**Unity has sometimes been a fruit of revival.**

In 1742 'a spark of grace set the kingdom on a blaze' in Cambuslang. Fawcett records, 'Numbers who had gone into a course of separation and division from their own ministers, and from the communion of the presbyterian church, established by law in Scotland, returned to their own pastors, and to communion with the national church, acknowledging that God was in the midst of her of a truth.'<sup>2</sup>

**Lack of unity has sometimes been a hindrance to revival.**

Sprague has concluded, 'The want of brotherly love operates to prevent a revival of religion, still farther, as it prevents that union of Christian energy, in connection with which God ordinarily dispenses his gracious influences. It prevents a union of counsel...and his people will do little else than defeat each other's purposes.'<sup>3</sup>

**Lack of unity has sometimes been no hindrance to revival.**

In 1959 Dr Lloyd-Jones gave AN HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SURVEY of revival in which he pointed out, 'Whatever the state of the church, God can send revival. As a sheer matter of fact, that is what God did in the eighteenth century. There was the Church under the blight of Deism and Rationalism...and among the Nonconformists there was a deadness resulting from Arianism. In the midst of such conditions God did this amazing and astonishing thing.'<sup>4</sup>

## **Our Contemporary Situation**

**1 Genuine Christians are found in a variety of churches and denominations.**

It is regeneration which brings a sinner into the body of Christ and such a work

of God can, and does take place in sinners who may be in touch with evangelical churches, non-evangelical churches, churches with a sound ministry but an ill-taught congregation, or even in touch with no church at all. Sometimes we give the impression that genuine Christians exist only in our own kind of churches. The Evangelical Alliance often speaks of there being 1 million evangelicals in the UK; but the total church membership of churches in the BEC is around 68,000, ie under 7%. One lasting impression I brought back from the Lausanne Congress in Manila was the reminder that separated evangelical churches like those of the BEC represent only a small fragment of the actual body of Christ. It is that body which commands our attention in respect of unity and revival; the whole of the body — not merely that part of it represented by the denominational constituency to which we belong. We may point to the confused inconsistency of those Christians in comprehensive denominations but it has pleased our sovereign God to grant them new life. Christ died for all of them. Spurgeon's comment on Psalm 133 is relevant here, 'Christian affection knows no limits of parish, nation, sect or age. Is the man a believer in Christ? Then he is in the body and I must yield him an abiding love'. So also is the spirit of Sprague:

It may be asked whether a spirit of brotherly love may not exist between Christians whose views on points not fundamental may differ? I answer, yes undoubtedly; it may and ought to exist among all who trust in a common Saviour. We may exercise this spirit even towards those whom we regard as holding errors, either of faith or practice, provided we can discover in them the faintest outline of the image of Christ. They may adopt opinions in which we cannot harmonize, and measures in which we cannot co-operate, and the consequence of this may be a loss of good influence to the cause of Christ; nevertheless we may still recognize them as Christians, and cordially co-operate with them, wherever our views and theirs may be in harmony. The right spirit among Christians would lead them to make as little of their points of difference, and as much of their common ground, as they can; and where they must separate, to do it with kindness and good will, not with bitterness and railing.<sup>5</sup>

## **2 Many Christians are content where they are.**

In an ideal world every regenerate soul would belong to a gospel church and be motivated by Scripture principles in deciding where and how to relate to other local churches. In reality, most Christians are in churches where they were converted, or where they find a congenial atmosphere. It is not only lack of teaching about the doctrine of the church, it is the whole subjectivist mind-set (which does not make decisions on principles but on feelings) which has afflicted our generation of Christian believers. There are other Christians who take a more principled approach but their principles are not the same as ours. They believe that loyalty to the church in which they were brought up is a way of showing gratitude for what they have received, or that they should remain 'in it to win it' until they are expelled for loyalty to the gospel, or that since they are granted sufficient freedom to preach the gospel they are under no pressure to separate from their denomination. In Britain, most of our brothers and sisters are found in churches linked to groups outside our own constituency and in which we have no realistic influence. There is little sign of a major re-alignment of British churches where a clearer line can

be drawn between those who are born-again and those who are not.

### **3 Spurious unity is being actively promoted.**

The 20th century ecumenical movement has witnessed to the worthy goal of the visible unity of the people of God. Its gross error has been its constant failure to define who the genuine people of God are. Until it is clear whether a person is a Christian, or whether a church is a Christian church, in the biblical understanding of these terms, then all attempts to unite those people and those churches must inevitably be unsatisfactory. Such is the case with the minimal Doctrinal Basis of the BCC which comprises institutional churches in which sacramental or liberal concepts of salvation enjoy the same validity as evangelical views. In many, of course, the unbiblical views now predominate.

September 1990 will see the birth of the new ecumenical bodies in Britain which have emerged from the Inter-Church Process.<sup>6</sup> Replacing the British Council of Churches will be one body each in England, Scotland and Wales together with an overall body covering Britain and Ireland. These will differ from the former organisations in three respects:

- a) There will be stronger emphasis on grass roots involvement, expecting each participating church to confer with others at local and regional as well as at national level before any major decision is made.
- b) The Roman Catholic Church will be in full membership from the outset.
- c) Mission, and co-operating in joint 'evangelism', will be the major catalyst for unity at a time when numerical decline stares most of the churches in the face.

Evangelicals seem set to play a larger part in these bodies than in the BCC. Evangelical Baptists were conspicuous in their support for BU involvement and so far only 13 churches have withdrawn from the Union and 65 churches have publicly dissociated themselves from the Union's commitment to the proposals. This is out of a total of 1,950 churches. Most, but not all, evangelicals in the Church of England seem ready to embrace the new ecumenical bodies. Their commitment to being firstly Anglican and only secondarily evangelical was seen in their enthusiastic welcome to the Archbishop of Canterbury's call to the 1989 Anglican Evangelical Assembly to make ecclesiology their priority. Added to this is the growing acceptance among many that shared experience of charismatic worship is the genuine mark of Christian unity, irrespective of denominational or doctrinal differences.

### **4 Spurious revival is being claimed.**

A glance at the terminology is illuminating. There are still some in Britain who persist in the American use of the word 'revival' to describe an evangelistic campaign organised by men which can be advertised to 'begin here next Sunday'. There are also charismatics who see the re-awakening of interest in the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit as a sign of revival. Claims are made for unusual growth of churches in Nigeria and Korea to which the term 'revival' is applied. There are other charismatic Christians, however, who are ready to recognise that the present level of their effectiveness falls short of the revival for which they still pray. It is also interesting to see the way in which the term 'renewal' is being used. In many Anglican churches 'renewal' means 'charismatic', but distinguishes these churches

from the charismatics who have formed 'restoration fellowships', as the separatist house churches are now being described. There are a number of formerly moribund Anglican churches which have begun to preach the genuine gospel, to hold prayer meetings and to rejoice in seeing evidences of new birth. Younger ministers have taken a more progressive line on liturgy, clerical dress and sung praise. In some cases these men are openly charismatic but not in all cases. When one looks at what these churches were it does not seem inappropriate to use the term 'renewed' for them.

## 5 What constitutes 'unity' is variously understood.

So much depends on the concept of the church under discussion.

a) Those who see the church as essentially the locally **gathered congregation** will be primarily concerned about the internal relationships of church members with each other. There is so much need for this to be fostered and so many threats to it today that it is understandable that some pastors do not look beyond this sphere.

b) Where the church is viewed in its **institutional** model then there will be an overriding concern for the preserving of outward forms of unity. This can take the form of resisting dissent (or change!) as a threat to 'denominational unity', as with those discouraging evangelical opposition to the BU's joining the Inter-Church Process. The older and more useful a form of church association becomes then the greater is the danger posed by 'rocking the boat', even among us!

c) For some evangelicals the concept of the '**church invisible**' still dominates their policies. They seem indifferent to the denominational labels of their fellows so long as they can co-operate in Christian work. This means they are often content with personal fellowship, seeing a more structured concept of church unity as an unrealisable goal in this life. Denominational diversity is then seen as a positive enrichment of the whole body.

d) The '**para-church**' model is pre-occupied with evangelical activities. For those Christians unity is more pragmatic; working together wherever possible, sometimes saying that as long as evangelicals can set the agenda then we should be ready to accept anyone who is ready to identify with us. It is interesting to see the Evangelical Alliance now attempting to draw back from the role of being 'a major para-church society, following our own agendas.'<sup>7</sup>

e) There are evangelicals who see the church as **both local and universal**. Unity, therefore, must have more than one application. It will be important within local churches, among local churches in a given locality (whether belonging to the same denomination or not), within a national association and even on the international scale. This raises significant questions about the degree of doctrinal unanimity called for at these different levels. It has been pointed out that the 1689 Confession was itself an exercise in Christian unity in providing a focus for Baptist unity and as an indication of doctrinal affinity with the Westminster Divines. Among the questions now facing us is how we can best express our concern for the unity of the whole body of Christ in Britain whilst retaining our conscientious commitment to our own doctrinal standards.

## **An Appropriate Practical Response**

### **1 We must be concerned about promoting Christian unity at every level.**

Obedience honours the Holy Spirit. Some kind of reformation generally precedes revival. Too often the image of the evangelical has been a negative one — we are perceived as being against ecumenism. But we are not. It is *spurious* ecumenism which we are against. We are under obligation to serve the declared purposes of the Head of the church to seek its life and its overall good. We will remember that genuine Christian unity is only one feature of the holiness of our own lives and of the churches we serve. Other dimensions of that holiness will also be encouraged, eg doctrinal purity, humility, patience, sympathy and sensitivity. This we must do in our congregations, in our local neighbourhoods and in our church associations. No doubt there are converted ministers near where we live. Have we done anything to build bridges to them?<sup>8</sup> We should be those initiating projects of common good for the people of God. We ought to spend more time considering what we should be doing which is right than complaining about what others are doing which is wrong. Some projects may be practical, like founding a home for the elderly, others showing civic responsibility, like a CARE core group, others more conventional, like a pastors' fraternal.

### **2 We must be concerned about every evidence of disunity among the people of God.**

All sin grieves the Spirit, sins of omission as well as sins of commission. We are not responsible for the sins of others but we are for our own. Do we spend any of our self-examination time reflecting on this? Do we take trouble to seek to understand those Christians who differ most from us? Are we more likely to believe lurid reports of what Gerald Coates gets up to than if the same things were suggested of Errol Hulse? It is easy to justify the priority of concern for churches similar to our own and to build an empire of our close friends. Even the existence of separate conferences serving distinct communities of evangelicals can cut us off from others. Who has the wisdom, the spiritual authority and the courage to rebuke those who are causing needless divisions among evangelicals?

### **3 We must not allow disunity to hinder our prayers for revival.**

Even the sins of the church cannot hinder God from his sovereign work. Daniel was well aware of the sins of God's people but in chapter 9 he readily identified himself with them and pleaded with God for mercy. No right thinking Christian can be complacent about the state of the church in our nation, nor with the state of evangelical churches in our own constituency. Whilst striving to keep what unity we have we must also be striving to obtain that renewed life and blessing which will bring us all low before a fresh revelation of God's majesty. Someone once likened our churches to little puddles separated by the barren ground around us. When the rain pours down the puddles will be joined by the rising flood. Meanwhile there is something we can be doing. Can it really be true that we hold no responsibility for the confusion and fragmentation which has afflicted evangelical churches in this country, over both the subject of unity and of revival?

### **4 We must encourage everyone genuinely concerned for revival.**

This will be one mark of love for our fellow Christians wherever they are to be

found. Their differences from us on other issues, however important, cannot negate our duty to strengthen their hands in prayer. Can we begin, however, by our private prayers for them? Is it not much easier to relate to someone when we have been pleading with God for their spiritual good? Yes, it is true that we must also encourage them in obedience to Scripture, even if that means pointing out the inconsistency of their church associations. But to have the opportunity to do that we need a better personal relationship than often exists between us. What better way could there be of our gaining the confidence of those from whom we differ in Christ than by sharing our sincere concern for the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit upon their ministry?

#### **5 We must not despair when our efforts seem to bear little fruit.**

Seeking greater Christian unity, improving evangelical relationships across denominational boundaries, fighting false ecumenicity with a positive alternative and yet still calling on God to revive his sick body with glorious life — this is a wearisome task. No wonder so many of us faint by the wayside. No wonder those sincere commitments to prayer get eroded by other priorities. The devil may be speaking the truth when he points out how little we have to show for all our years of faithful endeavour. Our prayers will need to include confession of our own sins but only unbelief imagines that the situation is beyond God. That is the great strength of the Reformed perspective, both on unity and on revival. In 1959 Dr Lloyd-Jones warned those of us who had recently come to see the importance of the Doctrines of Grace from writing off those who had not. His words retain their relevance today:

If you say that God cannot give revival unless first of all we have had a reformation, you are speaking like an Arminian, you are saying that God cannot do this until we ourselves have first done something. That is to put a limit on God... It is to deny the fundamental tenet of the Reformed position.<sup>9</sup>

## **References**

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- 3 W B Sprague, *LECTURES ON REVIVALS*, Banner of Truth, 1959, p 79
- 4 D M Lloyd-Jones, *HOW SHALL THEY HEAR!*, Puritan Conference Papers 1959, p 49
- 5 Sprague, op cit pp 81-2
- 6 *CHURCHES TOGETHER IN PILGRIMAGE*, BCC and CTS, 1989, p 108
- 7 Clive Calver, *IDEA*, Evangelical Alliance, Jan-Feb '90, p 2
- 8 Jim Faucett, *REFORMATION TODAY* 112, November-December 1989, p 7
- 9 Lloyd-Jones, op cit p 49

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