
'For you are all one in Christ Jesus'

(Galatians 3:28)

Ian Hamilton

Paul's letter to the Galatians is a sustained polemic against false teachers who added Moses to Christ and works to faith. Christ was not enough, and faith in Christ was not enough. This was no minor theological dispute; the gospel of Christ was being 'perverted' (1:7), the eternal good of sinners was being imperilled, and the cross of Christ was being eclipsed (2:21). This is why Paul speaks so solemnly and so calculatingly in 1:8–9. He is not speaking out of pique, as the reiterated asseveration in verse 9 makes abundantly clear. Paul's response to this 'damnable error' is detailed and decisive. It reaches something of a climax in 3:26ff. Here we see that all our spiritual privileges, all of them, depend on nothing but our connection with Jesus Christ, a connection that is formed entirely and only by faith. This leads to Paul's monumental statement, 'you are all one in Christ Jesus'—not 'You will be one in Christ Jesus, some day', but 'You are, now, present tense, believe it or not, in spite of all your differences, Jew and Gentile etc., take it in, all one in Christ Jesus'. It sounds so good, so unspeakably spiritual, but can it possibly be true? Doesn't the fragmented nature of Christ's church mock it? Don't our disputes and divisions deny it? Herman Bavinck, the great Dutch theologian wrote, 'We cannot be humble enough as Christians about the disruptions that have existed in the Church of Christ throughout all ages; it is a sin against God, in conflict with the prayer of Christ, and caused by the darkness of our mind and the lack of love in our hearts'. These are strong words, but who would want to deny their truth? Certainly not me! The history of the Christian church is a history of divisions, dissensions, and disputes—and the Reformed churches fare no better. And yet Paul can write to the Galatian churches, 'You are all one in Christ Jesus'. Let us be clear, Paul is not writing as a naïve idealist. The New Testament church had its divisions, its dissensions, its disputes. The New Testament church was not an ecclesiastical paradise. Yet, 'You are all one in Christ Jesus'. How can this possibly be true? Simply because it is! It is because the church is an 'organism' and not a 'mechanism'—'It is not a mechanism in which the parts precede the whole, but an organism in which the whole is prior to the parts'.¹ To quote Ted Donnelly, the church is not a clock, with many different parts, it is a seed with all its life in organic union—everything and everyone is there!² The Church is the Body (singular) of Christ; the church is the Bride (there is only one) of Christ; the church is the Temple (and there is but one) of the living God; there is 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all'. 'You are all one in Christ Jesus'!

I would like to tease this out and see how truly united true believers truly are:

1. We were all in Christ Jesus in God's electing love (compare Eph. 1:4). In God's electing love he saw us all as sinners, guilty, vile, judgement deserving sinners. This is the common identity of every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. We have the same point of origin. Beyond all our denominational distinctives, we are what we are by the electing grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are all debtors to mercy alone.

2. We were all in Christ Jesus when he paid the ransom price for our sin (compare Matt. 1:21.) ‘His people’! The Lord has but one people, one, indissoluble unity. This is the text that is engraved on John Murray’s headstone. Our Lord Jesus laid down his life for his ‘sheep’, his one flock. He has a people given to him by his Father, of whom he will lose not one (John 6:39)—in John 17 he speaks six times about ‘those you have given to me’. The cross makes all Christians one.
3. We are all one in Christ Jesus because we share the same salvation. We are all saved uniquely, because God treats us uniquely; there are no (or ought to be no) Christian clones. But we have all been regenerated, called, justified, sanctified, united to Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, bound for the same glory! We have all believed and repented. We are ‘all one in Christ Jesus’.
4. We are all one in Christ Jesus in our submission to the Holy Scriptures—there is one Bible for everyone! We are given the same promises and have the same duties. There are not Holy Scriptures for this evangelical group and that evangelical group. There is but one Bible and it is for all!
5. We are all one in Christ Jesus in Christian living. You cannot live the Christian life in solitary confinement, isolated from other believers. It is ‘together with all the saints’ that we grasp ‘how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ’ (Eph. 3:18). It is ‘From him (that) the whole body ... grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work’ (Eph. 4:16). When we pray, our Lord has taught us to say, ‘Our Father’. Who are the ‘Our’? Your group? My group? Your denomination? Mine? No! The ‘Our’ is the whole family of the Father—the weird and the wacky as well as the sober and correct! So, ‘love one another as I have loved you’! Does that not humble you, deeply? How did he love us?—partially? selectively? grudgingly? deservedly? It was ‘while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly’!
6. We will be all one in Christ Jesus in glory (compare Rev. 7:9). Are we not to be now what we will be then? This doesn’t mean you turn a blind eye to sin or to things that grieve the Lord (we are always to speak the truth, but always in love! And no less must we be open to receiving rebuke, unless we imagine that, unlike the rest of the church, we don’t see through a glass darkly!).

These are foundational principles. But what does all this mean for us in the practise of daily Christian life?

The Implications of our oneness in Christ

1. Our oneness is in Christ. We are ‘all one in Christ Jesus’. The fundamental error of the ecumenical movement is that it never asked the great question, What is a Christian? The Bible makes it abundantly clear that Christ is the Vine, we are the branches! He is the Head, we are the members! It is your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ that brings you in to union with him. Christian unity has therefore a fundamental demarcation. Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, by Christ alone, is not a Reformed distinctive, it is a biblical fundamental!
2. Our oneness means that people will know that you belong to Christ when you love the people of Christ (compare John 13:34–35). Do you not think we would speak differently to one another and about one another if we really believed that Christ was in us? Now Christian love is neither supine nor blind; it never turns a blind eye

to sin, but it does remember that 'love covers a multitude of sins'. Whatever else Christian love is, it is seeking, sacrificially, the good of all God's people (of course not only God's people), whoever they are.

3. Our oneness will mean that we resist the 'Elijah complex'—'I alone am left'. It can so easily creep up on us. We think we are the last bastions of orthodoxy. Being one in Christ means you will cultivate wide horizons, you will see the Christian life through a wide-angled lens, the widest you can find! Some Christians have extravagant practices. But if the Father has chosen them, and the Son has died for them, and the Spirit has sanctified them, you and I are to embrace them. Too often we give the impression, not that we are 'holier than thou', but that we are 'holier than God'. Look how Paul can describe the Corinthians with their 'extravagant ways' (compare 1 Cor. 1:2,4,9). He was not slow to rebuke them, but look how generously he describes them! When Jesus' disciples said, 'Teacher ... we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us', Jesus' response was withering, 'Do not stop him' (Mark 9:38–41). He wasn't one of 'them', but he was one of Christ's!
4. Our oneness will surely mean us seeking to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace, resisting the temptation to make theological mountains out of molehills; learning to disagree in love, not allowing an unbelieving world to gloat over the tragic and God-dishonouring sight of Christians publicly advertising their differences. This is, of course, easier said than done. There may well be times, as there have been in the past, when Christian disagreements cannot but be public. The honour of Christ may well demand it. But, too often it is not Christ's honour but human pride that is the driving force in Christian disputes. Pride is a subtle, surreptitious disease. It clothes itself so easily with piety. We would do well to remember the wise words of a Puritan divine, 'On earth, the Lord washes our hearts; in heaven he will wash our brains'. We don't know everything. So let us beware of acting in ways that may 'destroy your brother for whom Christ died' (Rom. 14:15).

Let me finish with quotes from three outstanding Reformed theologians, two Englishmen, and one Scotsman (we always leave the best to last). Listen first to Thomas Brooks: 'Labour mightily for a healing spirit. Away with all discriminating names whatever that may hinder the applying of balm to heal your wounds ... Discord and division become no Christian. For wolves to worry lambs is no wonder, but for one lamb to worry another, this is unnatural and monstrous'. Listen to Thomas Watson, 'There is but one God, and they that serve him should be one. There is nothing that would render the true religion more lovely, or make more proselytes to it, than to see the possessors of it tied together with the heart-strings of love'. Finally, listen to John Murray, 'the lack of unity among the churches of Christ which profess the faith in its purity is a patent violation of the unity of the body of Christ, and of that unity which the prayer of our Lord requires us to promote. We cannot escape from the implications for us by resorting to the notion of the invisible church. The body of Christ is not an invisible entity, and the prayer of Jesus was directed to the end that the world might believe. The unity prayed for was one that would bear witness to the world, and

therefore belonged to the realm of the observable. The implications for visible confession and witness are unavoidable' (2.335)

I've barely scratched the surface. You know that, I know that, and the BEC knows that. It will always be a struggle to practise as well as confess the unity of Christ's church, but it will be a good struggle. As a recent editorial in the *Free Church Monthly* commented, 'The very existence of the BEC is a strong reminder to us that we cannot live in isolation from other believers'. The BEC is far from perfect, but with your support it can be a force for truly Christian good in our nation. We need one another; we belong to one another. Our Lord Jesus lived and died and rose again to make us one. Let us resolve by his grace to be what we are, and 'seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace', that the world might know that He came from the Father. He died to make us one—we should seek by his grace to live as one!

References

- 1 Berkhof p. 449.
- 2 Some of the material that follows is gleaned from Professor Donnelly's superb address on this verse at the Aberystwyth Conference in 2001. I would warmly commend all four addresses and urge you to get the tapes, if you haven't already done so!

This article is the substance of an address given in Glasgow at a meeting commemorating the 50th anniversary the BEC.

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myself, but I also recommend the book to young ministers and church officers as an aid to teach them how to pray both in private and in public. There is something of a poverty in the latter in many churches and this book is a great help in teaching people how to lead others in prayer. Banner have republished this little classic in an attractive leather bound edition that while a little expensive is one of those books that will go with you for life.

Let me say a word about this issue. Readers may think that the issue has a Congregationalist feel to it, since two of the articles deal with some aspect of Congregationalism. Mike Plant looks at the role of confessions in Congregationalism and Douglas Vickers looks at the Savoy Confession's doctrine of God. The latter is easily adaptable to those who adhere either to the Westminster or 1689 confessions and the former will stimulate everyone to think of what subscription to any statement of faith involves. But please do not think that these articles mean that *Foundations* has taken to banging the Congregational drum. This is just the way things worked out for this issue. But I would encourage Presbyterians, Baptists and others to send me articles that deal with aspects of their own traditions so that all of us are better informed and that there is some debate within our readership on these issues. Having said that I think (as a Baptist) that the Congregational tradition is one that should be better known. It is tragedy to see what has happened to the once significant

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