

## **Unity is not Union, and Union does not guarantee Unity** by Rev. Tom Aicken

We hear a lot of talk these days about unity and the need for a spirit of unity to create it. Should we not try to get along with one another, and does this not seem a reasonable way to achieve this peace and harmony? The problem, though, with this spirit of unity which is presently so much in demand is that it is about accommodating oneself to an ever-changing culture, thus compromising moral principles and having to comply with government regulations which may be both unjust and tyrannical. Such a spirit of unity may sound friendly, and even spiritual, but it stands opposed to truth, denies freedom and closes the door to every kind of much needed reform. Why is that so? Well, on the one hand, because it believes that man is basically good such thinking accepts the status quo with blind optimism, and, on the other hand, not realizing that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked it is prepared to sink, still very naively, as low as one's own corrupt society is willing to fall.

For those very reasons the Bible does not promote a spirit of unity, but calls instead for believers "to keep the unity of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3) – that is, the kind of unity which comes only of the Holy Spirit – and this is a unity the world knows nothing about. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17), the One who unites believers in standing for truth, and as a result the unity of the Spirit is a unity that defends the truth, defends the freedom of the individual to do what is right and good whether other people want it or not, and is willing to fight for reform which brings benefit to all. In a fallen world, the unity of the Spirit (not the spirit of unity) is what is desperately needed to preserve society and to honour the Lord, our Creator, in whom we live and move and have our being.

This unity of the Spirit is a spiritual unity, but one with clear, visible expression in that it constrains us to love the Lord our God with all our being and to love our neighbour as ourselves. It stands out like a cool and very welcome breeze after a long and uncomfortably hot day. It is also a unity that only Christians can experience and will ever pursue, for only they are led of the Spirit (Rom. 8:14). And it is a unity, moreover, that demonstrates our fellowship together in Christ, yet a unity, too, that is at the same time a powerful testimony of Christ to a watching world, a testimony that identifies believers as those belonging to Christ

and often draws even unbelievers to Him. What did Jesus say? “By this all will know that you are My disciples” – how? – “if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Who among men will not be deeply affected by witnessing that?

Even many Christians, however, do not understand this unity as they should, or appreciate the value of it, and here I want to address two of the most common errors that are made.

The first error, the more obvious one, is rightly called a party spirit – instead of keeping the unity of the Spirit, there are believers who blatantly pursue a party spirit – and sometimes whole churches are caught up in doing that. This was a serious problem in the Corinthian church, for example, a problem which Paul sought to correct in his first letter to those believers, as we find in 1 Cor. 1:10-13. Some among them claimed to be followers of Paul, others of Apollos, still others of Cephas (Peter), and others, too, of Christ. These teachers all preached the same things, mind you, so it was not a matter of false doctrine creeping in, but of pride and prejudice that distorted the view of their followers as to what was most important. The Bible says that we are to give preference to one another (Rom. 12:10), but sometimes we may give the wrong kind of preference to some and even do that to the exclusion of others. That kind of party spirit breeds division and contention within the assembly of believers, and so prevents our keeping the unity of the Spirit which is so vital both to our own personal growth and to our fellowship with others in the body of Christ.

Writing a number of Christians scattered abroad, James bluntly asked, “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?” He went on to address them as murderers and adulterers, not that they ever committed such acts openly, of course, but did so in their hearts, so that even their praying was to ask amiss, to continue in these hidden but still sinful and very worldly ways. James concludes, “Do you think that the Scripture says in vain, ‘The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously’” (See Jas. 4:1-5). Is it any wonder then, beloved, that we are instructed to keep the unity of the Spirit, to bear with one another in love (Eph. 4:2), and shall we not be grateful that we have the Holy Spirit who helps us to do so (Rom. 8:26)?

The second error, not as immediately apparent but no less real, is in thinking that unity implies union. While the Bible calls churches to organize with a plurality of

elders (Acts 14:23; 20:17), and to do all things decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40), it does not require churches to federate or sister federations to come together in organic union. Distinct federations of churches did not even come into existence until well after the canon of Holy Scripture was closed. Loving each other is one thing, and working together surely demonstrates that, but it does not logically follow that two or more federations of churches must then become one entity to verify the bond between them or to make it real.

We show that we are Christ's disciples by loving one another, as our Lord Himself has told us, not by our joining forces in a denominational union and insisting that that is an essential feature of the fellowship we have together. Let us not read into what the Lord Jesus has told us or demand more than what His plain words convey. In John 17, where He prays, "that they may be one," this is a spiritual unity He is pleading for, a partnership in gospel ministry which is plainly visible to all, a great blessing and witness in itself, but it does not demand the formation of churches in organic union with each other or push for our working toward that.

It is interesting and surely worth noting that Christian groups (whether churches or para-church organizations), in spite of the good work they do, often go unnoticed by the world about them – even Christians may too often take them for granted – and why is that? It is because those established bodies are simply expected to do the work that they do; their mission does not stand out in anyone's eyes as something exceptional. Oh, but if two or more unrelated churches or charities work together – say, exchanging missionaries for much needed work on the foreign field – suddenly, people take note of it; it catches their attention and leaves them with a very favourable impression of the operating principles they have employed. Why is that? It is because they see brothers reaching across the aisle to help one another. What stands out in their minds is the love and partnership they see, something that tends to be glossed over when those same activities are performed by one organized group on its own. If we want to show our unity with other Christians, this is one way to do it.

Regardless of the number of church federations throughout the world today – and it is vast, to be sure – it should be noted that the Church, the covenant community that God has called and equipped to serve Him, is already one body (Eph. 4:4). The Lord Jesus has broken down the middle wall of separation between Jew and

Gentile, creating in Himself one new man from the two and reconciling both unto God through the cross (Eph. 2:14-18). Jesus Himself then is our peace, as He is specifically called, He is our peace both with God and with one another, and it is in this bond of peace – not something artificially constructed by men for their own convenience – that we are instructed to keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3). This is the Church we confess as “a holy catholic (universal) church” in the Apostles’ Creed, and to throw undue light on federations, as if our true unity lies in their organic union, is to diminish the value of the fellowship we have together in Christ and the Spirit of God is pleased to preserve with believers everywhere.

Unity is not union, therefore, and we should see at the same time that union does not guarantee unity. Again, of the many practical lessons we may learn from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, this is one that is driven home with particular clarity (1:10-13). The problem of the divisions and contentions in the church at Corinth sprang, not from their lacking a formal union with each other – they had that – but from their failing to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and no measure of further organic union with anybody else would ever correct that. I am not suggesting that such a union with other like-minded believers would be wrong. In a fallen world any church separating from one misguided group and realigning with people who are better informed and more faithful in serving the Lord is in itself a good thing to do. I am simply saying that even the most logical and best intended unions with other federations is neither necessary nor a guarantee of their working together without conflict. We are sinners, after all, and every church is only one generation away from apostasy.

It may seem as if I have a rather low view of churches coming together in organic union, but that is not the case. The first Jerusalem council in 50 A.D. is a good example of one such union operating beneficially in biblical times. The Protestant Reformation and subsequent history show very clearly how breaking away from an established church and joining forces with other like-minded assemblies can be very profitable. My argument, rather, is that an arrangement for the organic union of church federations is more practical than principal, that it may have some logistical advantages but is not required, nor does it prove anything, and that it must never be supposed that the joining and receiving of such churches will not have its own inherent problems.

