

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Christian unity for the first generation of Christians was a relatively simple matter. Jesus himself was the focus, through his teaching and his way of life. But Jesus was well aware that there needed to be some provision for the time when he was no longer physically present and so like any good leader he took care to provide for a succession. Matthew's Gospel tells how he chose a small group of men to be leaders of his church:

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles...

Matthew 10:1

Note what he gave them: authority, the authority of Jesus himself. The Acts of the Apostles records how these twelve men lead the church after Jesus' ascension, preaching, teaching, baptizing, healing – doing whatever was necessary to ensure that the Good News was preached to the whole world and the church remained united.

As the church grew beyond a group of disciples who knew Jesus personally, it grew in diversity. By the second generation of Christians there were congregations scattered all round the Mediterranean, many days journey from Jerusalem. The list of churches on the contents page of any New Testament is witness to the number of cities, mainly in what we now know as Greece and Turkey, where churches had been established:

- Corinth
- Thessalonica
- Ephesus
- Galatia
- Philippi
- Colossi

The Book of Acts records that the Apostles had to work hard to ensure that these diverse congregations maintained the same essential beliefs and that untruths were quickly contradicted. The other record of their efforts lies in their letters, some of which have been preserved in the New Testament. Today's' reading from Corinthians is a prime example. Paul parodies the Corinthians quarrels:

"I belong to Paul," or
"I belong to Apollos," or
"I belong to Cephas," or
"I belong to Christ."

1 Corinthians 1:12-13

And then rebukes them:

Has Christ been divided?
Was Paul crucified for you?
Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 1 Corinthians 1:13-14

These letters reveal that there were congregations that were going astray in terms of what they believed and how they lived and they had to be rebuked and corrected.

But the apostles themselves needed to do some succession planning of their own and so they appointed the next generation of leaders known as episkopoi, literally overseers but now called bishops. We know the names of some of them such as Timothy and Titus. And of course each generation of bishop ordained the next generation to ensure continued leadership.

But the other legacy of the apostles were their letters and the gospels themselves. The church decided that they should form a New Testament of scripture, an authoritative guide to what the church should believe and the way it should behave.

So although there was considerable geographical diversity in the early church, diversity in what could be taught and believed was not unlimited. There was a boundary and churches which went beyond that boundary could no longer be regarded as mainstream Christian. What they believed was heresy.

In the early church there were many groups that were in effect expelled from the church. Let me give you three examples:

- The Aryans believed that Jesus was not God and was adopted by God after his birth;
- The Docetists believed that although Jesus was God he only seemed to be human and therefore he did not really suffer on the cross;

- The Marcionites believed that the God of the Jews was quite different from the God of Jesus and therefore wanted to remove the entire Old Testament from the bible.

It is possible to read the creeds, which were put together in the fifth century, as way of drawing the boundaries of orthodox Christianity. They define what beliefs are acceptable within the Christian church. So, both Arianism and Docetism are very firmly contradicted by the Athanasian Creed which asserts

We believe and declare
that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,
is both divine and human.

The Nicene Creed begins with a very simple statement that

We believe in one god, the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,

We say those words just in case anyone should suppose that because we believe in the Holy Trinity we believe in three Gods. We do not. But they also remind us that some early Christians believed that the world was not made by God but by some other supernatural being. The consequence of that was that they believed the spiritual was being more valuable than the material. Some eastern religions may still believe that but the Christian Church does not.

There can be no doubt that many of these unorthodox beliefs are still led by some individual Christians. And some are still held by churches which acknowledge Jesus Christ but are not recognized as orthodox or mainstream Christian. So Jehovah's Witness and Unitarians are beyond the pale because they do not accept the divinity of Christ while Mormons are out because they have added a new prophet and new prophetic writing.

For the most part, the history of the Christian Church for the first fifteen hundred years is one of parts breaking away and eventually disappearing. But there remained one mainstream church.

There was one exception to this. From the third century the Roman Empire became too large to govern effectively and so it split into two. Church organization followed suit and divided into the eastern Mediterranean and the western Mediterranean church. The western part spoke Latin, had its centre in Rome and became known as the Catholic Church; the eastern part spoke Greek, had its centre on Byzantium and became known as the Orthodox Church. They developed different liturgical practices and different modes of church government: the Catholic church was highly centralized with a lot of authority given to the Bishop of Rome; the orthodox church was decentralized with each bishop having his own authority.

But each church recognized the authority and legitimacy of the other and for the most part they ministered in separate geographical areas. But in 1054 that changed. The Roman church decided to change the creed. To the words

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father

They added the words 'and the Son.' The Eastern church objected on two grounds. They believe that the change was wrong in that it made the Holy Spirit subject to the son and therefore made him seem less important. But they also believed that the Bishop of Rome had no right to make the decision because the eastern church had not been consulted. As a consequence the two halves of the church broke off communion. They no longer recognized each other as being the true church. Each regarded the other as heresy. This was the first and greatest schism in the Christian Church. From that date it was no longer possible for the Christians church to make any decision which was regarded as authoritative by the whole church. That remains the case.

The next major schism began in the fifteenth century in western Europe. Many Christians and Church leaders began to feel dissatisfied with the growing corruption of the church and with what the church was teaching and practising. There is no unanimity about what were the concerns of the Protestant reformers but the key issues were:

- That the authority of the bible should be reasserted. In particular it was a greater authority than that of the Bishops; some said it was the only authority. As a consequence it was necessary that it be

available in the language that people actually spoke, rather than Latin.

- That what puts us right with God is our faith, our basic attitude of trust, and not the good deeds or rituals that we carry out. This is because a right relationship with God will lead us to live good lives but living good lives will not necessarily lead us to a right relationship with God
- That the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist should not be seen as magical rites which confer benefits regardless of faith.

These concerns were brought fully into the public arena by Martin Luther exactly five hundred years ago in 1517. They could have led to reform of the Catholic Church; the demands of Luther and his sympathizers could have led to nothing and faded away. But by then the church in each nation was closely associated with government, king or prince; and both Germany and Switzerland were divided into small states; and some of the leaders of those states decided that in order to make the Reformers' demands happen they would take a radical step: they would cast off the authority of the Pope. They Brexited! Every prince in Germany, every ruler in Europe made a decision, either to stay with the Catholic Church or to leave. By and large the rulers of northern Europe decided to leave but the rulers of the south decided to stay.

Amongst the rulers of northern Europe who opted to break with Rome was Henry VIII of England.

One of the ironies of his decision was that he was not much motivated by the Reformers' demands. Indeed his title 'Defender of the Faith' had been conferred on him by the Pope because of his outspoken defence of the Catholic Church. But for political reasons Henry VIII needed a son and heir and he believed he could achieve that through divorce and remarriage. The only way he could achieve that was by denying the authority of the Pope.

And so the Church of England took on an existence independent of Rome but not at heart Protestant. But within the Church of England there were many clergy, bishops and lay people who were Protestant and so the church assumed a rather ambiguous existence where some of its members wanted to emphasize its common beliefs with the Catholic Church and others wanted to

emphasize those beliefs shared with the Protestant Reformers. That was how it was in the sixteenth century and that is how it remains.

As a result the Church of England did not go very far along the Protestant road: it translated the Bible and the liturgy into English; it allowed its clergy to marry. But the services were still liturgical and sacramental. And it was still governed by Bishops. And so there followed other splits because some wanted to go further: the Presbyterians were governed by clergy but not bishops; the Congregationalists were governed by no-one but the leaders of each congregation; and the Baptists would baptize only those able to profess their faith for themselves which certainly excluded baptism for babies.

I do not imagine that any of those who broke away from the church did so easily. I am sure they did so very reluctantly. But they came to the conclusion that being loyal to what they believed was true was more important than preserving unity. Conversely there will have been many others who were unhappy with the church and wanted change – but drew back from actually leaving and establishing their own church.

The last great division in England was the separation of the Methodists. Methodism began as a great renewal movement in the Church of England. Methodists preached with great enthusiasm all over the country; they formed support groups known as Methodist Societies; and they all went to their parish church on Sunday.

However, in 1784 there was a shortage of priests in North America to administer the sacraments. The Bishop of London refused to send any priests there because the colonies were in rebellion. John Wesley, by then an old man, took a fateful decision. He thought the Bishop of London was wrong to put political concerns before pastoral need and so Wesley himself ordained two priests to administer the sacraments. Wesley was a priest but not a bishop; the Church of England believed that only Bishops had the authority to ordain priests. Wesley had therefore acted beyond his authority and the Church of England could not recognize his ordinations any more than it could recognize mine. From that moment Methodism was a separate church.

The history of the Christian Church in the last century has been one of both division and reconciliation. There has been division in the sense that there are more and more Christians ready to form their own congregations outside the established denominations. Obvious examples in Bradford are the Church on the Way, The Light Church and the Abundant Life Church.

But at the same time there has been a greater willingness of these diverse churches to live with each others differences. Churches Together in England contains forty five different churches as members. As yet they do not all recognize each other sacraments and they cannot share communion but they are willing to pray together, to worship together and to recognize each others ministries. In that sense the Christian Church is more united than it has been for five hundred years.

But the tensions, differences, questions remain:

- how far does authority lie with the bible and how far with the church?
- does authority in the church lie with its members, or with the clergy? Or with Bishops? Or with the Pope?
- where there is a tension between truth and unity, which takes precedence?

There are no easy answers. But perhaps the real hope is this: we all know there are no easy answers.

N Clews
22nd January 2017

Appendix 1: the Nicene Creed

WE BELIEVE in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his
kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver
of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the
Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We
believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one
baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the
dead, and the life of the world to come.
Amen.

Appendix 2: The Basis of Churches Together in England

This is CTE's statement of belief. Many Intermediate Bodies and Churches Together groupings also adopt it. See the pro forma constitution for a local Churches Together Group. churches Together in England unites in pilgrimage those Churches in England which, acknowledging God's revelation in Christ, confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures, and, in obedience to God's will and in the power of the Holy Spirit commit themselves:

to seek a deepening of their communion with Christ and with one another in the Church, which is his body; and

to fulfil their mission to proclaim the Gospel by common witness and service in the world

to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Currently

Appendix 3: Member Churches of Churches Together in England

Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of the British Isles + Ireland (2005)

Apostolic Pastoral Congress (2011)

Armenian Orthodox Church (2013)

Assemblies of God (2012)

Baptist Union of Great Britain (1990*)

Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (1990*)

Church of England (1990*)

Church of God of Prophecy (2005)

Church of Scotland (Presbytery of England) (date tbc)

Churches in Communities International (2010)

Congregational Federation (1990*)

Coptic Orthodox Church (2003)

Council of African and Caribbean Churches UK (1990*)

Council of Lutheran Churches (1990*)

Council of Oriental Orthodox Churches (temporarily defunct) (1990*)

Elim Pentecostal Church (2009)

Evangelical Lutheran Church of England (2011)

Evangelische Synode Deutscher Sprache in Großbritannien (2007)

Exarchate of Orthodox Parishes of the Russian Tradition (Ecumenical Patriarchate) (date tbc)

Free Church of England (2010)

Ground Level (2012)

Ichthus Christian Fellowship (date tbc)

Independent Methodist Churches (1990*)

Indian Orthodox Church (2013)

International Ministerial Council of Great Britain (1990*)

Ichthus Church Council (2016)

Joint Council of Churches for All Nations (1990*)

Mar Thoma Church in Europe (2009)

Methodist Church (1990*)

Moravian Church (1990*)

New Testament Assembly (1990*)

New Testament Church of God (2006)

Oecumenical Patriarchate (1990*)

Pioneer (2012)

Redeemed Christian Church of God (2007)

Religious Society of Friends (1990*)

Ruach Network of Churches (2014)

Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (1990*)

Salvation Army (1990*)

Seventh-day Adventist Church (observer) (2002)

Transatlantic Pacific Alliance of Churches (2005)

Unification Council of Cherubim + Seraphim Churches (Europe Chapter) (1990*)

United Kingdom World Evangelism Trust (2015)

United Reformed Church (1990*)

Wesleyan Holiness Church (1990*)