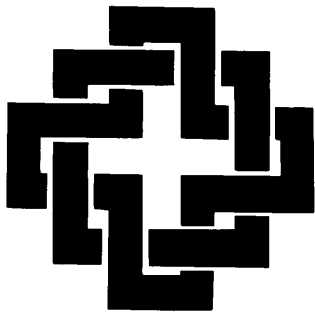


Maranatha

Christian Unity



by Dennis Wrigley

We are called to be One

We live in a world torn apart by violence, hatred and mistrust. In a divided world disunity amongst Christians is surely an obscenity. In His prayer to the Father Jesus clearly prayed that we should be one. The urgency of this prayer needs to be recognised today for surely Jesus weeps over the divisions within and between the Churches.

How can we effectively proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation to a divided world if we as Christians are divided? It is clearly the will of God that we should be one and by failing to work for unity with other Christians we are being disobedient. Our divisions are offensive to God and they undermine the effectiveness of our witness. We pay a heavy price for our divisions - Brother Roger of Taizé declares ***"now, at the end of the twentieth century, we Christians are confronted with the result of our divisions - mutual impoverishment"***.

The teaching of the New Testament could not be clearer. In Ephesians 4.3 we are urged to *"be eager to preserve that unity which the Spirit can give, a unity in which you are bound together in a perfect relationship to one another"*.

Anything which separates us from one another is not of God - *"our union with Christ makes us one body, and we are individually living parts of one another"*. (Romans 12.5)

A world crying out for peace, love and reconciliation is not going to be healed by Christians who are forever criticising one another and seeing faults in one another's traditions. We are called to be children in one family and the world will never believe the Gospel of reconciliation if Christians are not reconciled with each other.

The Priority of Unity

Paul declares *"we must then concentrate all our efforts on the things which produce right relationships between one another and which build us into a real fellowship"*. (Romans 14.19) Paul writes *"make my joy complete by being in perfect harmony of mind, by joining in a common love for God and each other"*. (Phil 2.2)

If we strive for unity in human terms we will fail. If we allow God to create unity it will happen - *"only Christ can enable men to live in a right relationship with each other. It is this unifying power of His which must dictate your every decision, for you were meant to be one united body"*. (Col. 3.15)

Truth and Love

The only unity which is valid in the church today is that which is based upon truth and love rather than compromise and reluctant co-operation. Jesus declares *"you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free"*. (John 8.32). Equally He says *"by this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one to another"*. (John 13.35)

In the unity of truth and love lies our unity with God and each other. Christ has come to destroy the walls of division, to sweep away the man-made barricades, but the greatest wall of division is between man and God. The moment we experience closeness to God we are drawn close to one another - this is the story of the early church - *"the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and of one soul"*. (Acts 4.32). That is as it should be today.

A Shared Experience

In the Maranatha Community our unity is based upon a shared experience of the presence of Christ and upon our common affirmation of the basic truths of the Gospel. We come together from different traditions and churches and discover that God pours out His love and truth in ways which many of us would not have thought possible. He is clearly ready to pour out so much upon us through one another. The emphatic words of the New Testament cannot be ignored and our prayer must be *"may the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"*. (Romans 15.5,6)

Disunity - A Disease and Obstacle

George Carey the former Archbishop of Canterbury said *"we must see disunity as one of the most terrible*

diseases of the body. *Let us see disunity as it really is - the ugly blasphemy which mocks the Cross of Christ and insults his name. Yet, in truth, it is even more than that because our disunity confounds the gospel of unity that we preach*".

"How dare we go to others with the message of reconciliation when Christian churches still huddle in their dug-outs and fight their 400 year wars?"

Likewise, Cardinal Hume declared, *"there can be no doubt that a major obstacle to the effectiveness and well-being of the pilgrim people of God is disunity in its ranks. Throughout this century it has become clear that moved by the Spirit of God, Christians have experienced increasing frustration and impatience with divisions among themselves. Non-believers, too, readily take refuge in criticism of Christian disharmony. It is only by abandoning ourselves completely to the truth of the Gospel that all our Christian divisions can be overcome....our divisions must not hinder any longer the urgent need for Christians to preach together the Gospel of Jesus Christ"*.

An Imperative - Not an Option

Unity amongst Christians is not an option - it is an imperative, and in the measure that Christians draw together so the church will be renewed. If we tolerate our divisions as Christians we are in effect showing that we are part of the problem of the world and not the solution. Someone said recently *"a world which is falling apart needs a people coming together"* and in Maranatha we see the fruit of God's people coming together, enriching one another and building up the church.

Continual dialogue may even deepen division, but we have discovered in Maranatha that praying together always draws Christians closer to God and to one another. This is because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. In Maranatha we re-affirm our deep conviction that the visible unity and love of God's people is God's will. We thank God for all we have in common and we repent for the way in which we have contributed to the division of the Church.

If we are to understand the healing work of Jesus we must ensure that in the power of the Holy Spirit there is wholeness in the Church and amongst the people of God.

Drawn Together

In Maranatha we have learnt that the confirmation of the central truths of the Gospel and the Church inevitably draws us closer together whatever our tradition. A strengthening or rediscovery of our faith happens when we deepen our communion with God and one another. We learn that God has much to say to us through one another.

It is only when we ourselves experience the pain of the division amongst God's people that we are filled with any sense of urgency or that we can share in the sadness of God.

Reconciliation

The reconciling love of Christ is evident whenever bridges are built and barricades are torn down. When the world can say with honesty *"how these Christians love one another"* we will see a great upsurge of belief. Jesus is quite clear when he says that *"just as He and the Father are one so must all His followers be similarly united, for it is this that will make the world believe that you have sent me"*. (John 17.22)

Because we are human, all churches and traditions have faults and none is without blame. If we put ourselves in the position of claiming to be in the perfect church and to possess the perfect interpretation of the Gospel, we are perilously in danger of being guilty of arrogance and hypocrisy and thus a stumbling block to the Kingdom.

Long ago the Psalmist wrote *"how wonderful it is for God's people to live together in harmony! It is like precious oil poured on the head.."* (Psalm 133)

Pilgrims not Strangers

When leaders of Christian churches in Britain and Ireland met at the historic gathering at Swanwick they declared

"driven on by Gospel imperative to seek unity that the world may believe, we rejoice that we are

pilgrims together and strangers no longer. We now declare together our readiness to commit ourselves to each other under God. Our earnest desire is to become more fully, in His own time, the one Church of Christ, united in faith, communion, pastoral care and mission..... It is our conviction that, as a matter of policy at all levels and in all places, our Churches must now move from co-operation to clear commitment to each other, in search of the unity for which Christ prayed, and in common evangelism and service of the world."

We Must No Longer Delay

Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Brother Roger of Taizé have jointly stated ***"confronted with all that wounds humanity, we find the division between Christians unbearable... May we no longer delay reconciliation in that unique communion called the Church, irreplaceable leaven set in the midst of humanity."***

In the Maranatha Community we are being led into a deeper unity with God through a fuller understanding of the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Out of this unity springs the desire for closeness with other members of the Christian family. When we are truly One in Christ we receive His healing and His renewal.

We share with John Henry Newman in his prayer -

*O Lord Jesus Christ,
when you were about to suffer,
you prayed for your disciples to the end of time,
that they might all be one,
as you are in the Father,
and the Father in you.
Look down in pity on the many divisions among those
who profess your faith,
and heal the wounds which the pride of man and the
craft of Satan have inflicted on your people.
Break down the walls of separation which divide one
party and denomination of Christians from another.*

*Look with compassion
on the souls who have been born in one or another of
these various communions,
and bring them all into that one communion which you
set up in the beginning - the one, holy, catholic and
apostolic church.*

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