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Unity in Truth and Love

If we fail to display the unity that is the fruit of love, the world will not know that we are Jesus’ disciples. If we pursue unity at the expense of truth, we are dispensing with apostolic priorities. How shall we get this matter right—not only as a theological question, but in practice? Taken together, the following ten observations may encourage us to ‘make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace’.

1. As important as it is, unity, unlike holiness, is not an ultimate goal. One cannot imagine a biblical writer encouraging us to turn aside from holiness, but many biblical texts warn us against certain kinds of unity. Jehoshaphat was an otherwise excellent king who made hopelessly foolish alliances with wicked rulers. Every time there is discipline in the church over a moral issue or division over central doctrinal matters, unity is threatened—and rightly so: ‘For what does righteousness and wickedness have in common? What fellowship does light have with darkness?’

2. Nevertheless, the unity of believers is designed to reflect the unity of the Father and the Son—in short, the unity of the Godhead. The love of the Father for the Son, and the love of the Son for the Father, is to be the adhesion that holds believers together as one. This intra-Trinitarian love of God is more than a model (though it is not less): the love of the Father for the Son fires the divine resolve that all will honour the Son, and the love of the Son for the Father ensures he always does what the Father gives him to do—and hence Gethsemane and the cross. In other words, this intra-Trinitarian love issues in the cross and resurrection, and thus in the gospel which redeems and transforms broken, guilty people, re-shaping them into a community of the blood-bought, who are called upon to reflect the character of their God and Saviour.

3. This unity brings together not only Jews and Gentiles, but men and women everywhere. As all are commanded to repent, so also this gospel saves men and women drawn from every tribe and language and people and nation. I cannot resist an aside. People sometimes ask what language will be spoken in heaven. The usual answers are full of whimsy: Chinese, because there are so many who already know the language; English, because otherwise the Americans won’t have anyone else to talk to; and more of the same. But when we speak of many ‘tribes’ and ‘peoples’ in heaven, we expect continuity in their distinctiveness. There will be Kikuyus and Bantus in heaven. We do not ask, ‘What colour of skin will people have in their resurrection existence?’ Rather, we anticipate the full diversity. On the same reasoning, why not also diversity of ‘language’ too? And if it takes me a million years or so to learn Mandarin, who cares? This unity sweeps in an incredibly rich array of human beings, and it is grounded in the gospel as the gospel itself is grounded in the relationships within the Godhead.

4. Jesus’ prayer for unity in John 17 has been more deeply and fruitfully answered than many people think. Very often people appeal for unity with an emotive appeal: ‘We must have more unity, for otherwise the prayer of Jesus will not be answered and Jesus himself will be frustrated.’ Often they want an organisational unity at all costs. But I have found brothers and sisters in Christ, instantly forging surprisingly deep links with them, in Kyrgyzstan and Malaysia, in Brazil and Hong Kong, in Australia and Spain, in the UK and the US, in Papua New Guinea and Kenya, in countless other places, and among a wide diversity of denominations and ethnicities—and my experience, far from being unique, is merely typical. Of course, Jesus’ prayer will not be perfectly fulfilled until the consummation, but it is unthinkable to suppose that the Father does not wonderfully answer his dear Son now—and experience confirms this theological conclusion.

5. Vital Christian unity is not based on what mathematicians call the LCD—the lowest common denominator. On such a construal Christians achieve a measure of unity by agreeing not to talk about anything over which they might differ. The result is that the bigger the catchment of ‘united’ Christians, the less they have to talk about. By contrast, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and especially Philippians, urge believers to ‘think the same thing’. This does not mean putting up with differences; that’s called forbearance, and of course forbearance is often needed. But Paul wants something more: he wants the believers to whom he is writing to bring their different opinions to the test of revelation, to the touchstone of the gospel, to submission to the Lordship of King Jesus. That takes time, energy, humility, a willingness to be corrected, gentleness in personal interactions, and sometimes confrontation. But the result can be gloriously rich and fulfilling.

6. This unity is not achieved by cloning, but by celebrating the diversity of gifts which God, by his Spirit, has poured out on the church. The body of Christ is not one big eyeball or nothing but a toenail: it is made up of many parts, and they are to function together in mutually helpful ways, recognising that while there are different gifts (and no one has them all), there is only one universally mandated ‘most excellent way’—the way of love.

7. What I have written so far has repeatedly sidled up to a point of superlative importance, without quite articulating it. Now I must make it clear. Christian unity is first of all the unity enjoyed by genuine Christians. It flows from the cross, from the gift of the Spirit, from regeneration; we were all baptised in one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free, Asian or Caucasian or African, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

8. Inevitably that imposes upon us the test of the gospel itself. If people are claiming to be Christians, but are in fact preaching another Jesus and a different gospel, then they are ‘false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ’. Our current infatuation with the widespread cultural commitment to refuse to say anyone is wrong makes us uncomfortable with such plain speech. Paul’s own assessment is more robust: he says we should not be surprised by false apostles and deceitful workers because Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.
In fact, discernment in this arena demands that we cultivate the ability to hierarchise our beliefs, and focus attention on the most central matters. That is what Paul does: he can overlook slights and even questionable motives, and he urges Timothy and Titus to learn how to correct gently those who are snookered by a Richard Dawkins, who dismisses the entire Christian revelation with spectacular scorn. They are far more likely to be taken in by a trusted voice that speaks fluently about science, than to be exposed and in some cases excommunicated. Finally, many biblical texts tell us how to foster loving unity within the constraints of truth. For instance, Christians are to speak the truth in love, not in pompous arrogance. While we are to speak truthfully, we are never to nurture bitterness, but to refuse to let the sun go down on our wrath. ‘Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.’ In sum, the gospel is not only to be articulated and defended, but to be lived out in the unity of the church’s life.

True, a little more space was devoted to demon-possession than is typical of Western commentators; there was more emphasis on confessional matters and a little less on the individual. But faithful reading of Scripture is not so open-ended that it becomes impossible to say that no reading is wrong. Second, Scripture itself encourages us to be gentle and encouraging with fledgling believers, whose understanding is still very immature. They are heading in the right direction and need to be taught and encouraged. By contrast, teachers in the church who are now heading away from central confessionalism are to be exposed and in some cases excommunicated.

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1 John 13:34-35
e.g., Gal 2:14-18; 2 Cor 13:1ff.
Eph 4:3
2 Chron 17–20
e.g., Acts 5; 1 Cor 5
e.g., 1 John
2 Cor 8:14
John 17:20-26
John 3:35; 5:20; 17:24-26
John 14:31
John 17
John 5:20-23
John 14:31
Eph 2
Acts 17:30
Rev 5:9; cf. 7:9
e.g., Gal 2:11–14
1 Cor 12
1 Cor 13
1 Cor 12:13
1 Cor 11:4 — in this case a gospel of triumphalism, not unlike the ‘health, wealth, and prosperity’ gospel widely circulated today
1 Cor 11:13
1 Cor 11:14-15
Eph 1
1 Cor 15:3
1 Cor 2:2
Isa 53:5; 1 Pet 2:24; Gal 3:13; 1 Pet 3:18
e.g., Jude 22–23
e.g., 1 John 3:19
1 Cor 1 Ti 1:18-20
Eph 4:15
Eph 4:25
Eph 4:26
Eph 4:3-31-32

Unity in Truth and Love

World Mission

Ever since its beginnings UCCF: The Christian Unions has had a heart for world mission. Whilst we strive to see British campuses won for Christ, we have always been aware of the need for the whole world to hear the wonderful news about Jesus Christ...

We have always been aware of the need for the whole world to hear the wonderful news about Jesus Christ, which is why we are so excited about an initiative that took place in the North West in November.

The World Mission Tour took place over six nights in Salford, Manchester, Lancaster, Liverpool and Preston, with students from all over the North West coming together to learn about God’s heart for the nations. The aim was: to enthuse students about God’s plan for the gospel to be taken to all nations; to encourage them to grow as global Christians; and to call them to prayer and action. At each event the speaker was Dick Dowsett, who has served with OMF for nearly forty years and was a UCCF staff worker prior to that.

AB was delighted to be able to take a trip up North to drop in on the third event, held at The University of Lancaster. Dick spoke clearly and passionately about world mission; testimonies about summer mission teams and from international students were shared, and the students prayed for the mission on their campuses here in the UK, and on others across the world. There are many reasons why the World Mission Tour is such an important event. Dick spoke about the importance of being a disciple-maker, to learn on the job, to catch the vision and to learn to respect Christian internationals in the context of the CU. It’s a wonderful training ground. My first experience of cross-cultural partnership was co-leading a Bible study with a Ghanaian when I was at university; it was very formative for me. I’m not interested in sending somebody abroad who walks past the world on their campus, I’m not going to send somebody to Japan if they can’t be bothered with the Japanese that are in their classroom or their halls.

Do pray with us that in all our CUs God would raise up students who will take the good news to the nations, and who will share the gospel the many international students who come to the UK.

RACHEL TURNER, MEDIA PRODUCER

What the Punters said:

‘It’s great to see the number of people here tonight and it would be amazing to see the impact of an evening like this evening down through the years.’ Scott Thompson, President University of Manchester

‘There are people in every CU who feel that God is calling them to be involved in mission, either overseas or here with international students. I like meeting with students because they’re searching, asking demanding questions, and they’re at that time in their lives where they’re exploring what God wants of them.’ Ian Morris, Interserve

I’m excited that people have been challenged from God’s Word that it’s really important to do cross-cultural mission and that we don’t have to go abroad to do it, but we can do it with international students here at Manchester. I hope to see people really catching that vision and making friends with international students.’ Jo Van, International Sec.

University of Manchester CU