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**true Unity starts, daily, with  
the ‘failure’ of the Cross**

a sermon for St James' Cowley during the  
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2008

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The Principal of Wyclif College says he believes in Christian Unity. “Catholicity (all-embracingness) lies at the heart of Evangelicalism”, he writes<sup>1</sup>. I don’t think he’s quite understood the meaning of the word, because what he means by that is that the true Church is wherever Evangelical doctrines are held to, and there are Evangelicals in every denomination. So the one true catholic Church is those right-believing Evangelical Christians throughout all the churches.

And what of those Christians, like myself, who can’t with integrity sign up to the creeds the Evangelical Alliance lays down? Well, I don’t think we count, really.

Is this Christian Unity as Christ wills, or as man decrees?

The official line of the Roman Catholic Church, as I understand it, is that the Pope is the only ultimate focus of unity of the Church on earth. Christian Unity will be a reality when every Christian formally accepts that. And what of those Christians, like myself, who think that maybe if the unity of the very Godhead requires expression in three Persons, maybe this is a bit hopeful? I don’t think we count really, except perhaps as pilgrims whose baptism, though real, hasn’t yet been confirmed.

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<sup>1</sup> p.109 of ‘Anglican and Evangelical?’ by Richard Turnbull, Continuum 2007.

Is this Christian Unity as Christ wills, or as man decrees? They can't both be right – *can* they?

And what of the Orthodox Church? Last Christmas we were treated to the unholy spectacle of priests of the Greek and Armenian branches (of the Orthodox Church) actually coming to blows in Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity – fighting about *who* should clean the church and *where* with their brooms, leaving seven in hospital. A scene worthy of Monty Python's *Life of Brian*.

I can hear Paul urging those Corinthians : “Now I *appeal* to you, brothers (the sisters aren't usually consulted!) – by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – be in *agreement*”.

Friends, let's not get too sentimental about Christian unity. Let's not fool ourselves. Being united is something the Christian Church, despite its call to a ministry of reconciliation, could never achieve this side of the Kingdom. Any minister knows it's the devil's own job (did I really *say* that?) to stop even single congregations pulling each other to pieces.

In fact, of course, the 'devil's own job' is to do exactly the opposite – think of the devil as a sort of scriptwriter for 'East Enders', Christian style. Got to keep that plot running on half-truths and deception, gossip and recrimination. It often amazes me how incapable we Christians are of building disciplined strategies against it, curbing our tongues, seeking consensus and then humbly sticking with it.

Protestantism down the ages has been all too happy to let the slightest theological disagreement lead to schism, division, and yet another church.

And what of the United Reformed Church? Formed to try to reverse that divisive trend, born out of the uniting of (now) four denominations, with the hope of more mergers to come, committed for the last 35 years to planting no new churches except those we plant jointly with other denominations – what of *us*?

We're a 'bottom-up' church, not 'top-down'. Our understanding of the word 'Evangelical' is that, sure, the Bible is our supreme authority, but nobody – *nobody* – can tell *you* what the Bible means, let alone impose it on you. We have to work it out *together*. Therefore authority is vested in church councils which all members are obliged to attend, at which they are obliged to speak their truth in love, seek consensus and then humbly stick by it, honouring especially those whose opinions didn't win through. That's the hard path to unity.

Brilliant in theory. Does it work in practice? Sometimes. OK – why doesn't it work *all* the time? At least three reasons :

1. Because for many reasons people don't speak their truth. People lacking confidence prefer to keep their thoughts to themselves and then grumble afterwards. It's human nature – *unredeemed* human nature.

2. Because for many reasons people don't speak with respect and love. People with too much confidence that they hold the truth try to dominate and close down debate, get their way. It's human nature – *unredeemed* human nature.
3. Because too many people aren't really interested in truth, anyway, because of the inevitable conflict it brings : they just want a quiet life. It's human nature – *unredeemed* human nature.

Seems like we need a 'shot of redemption', as Paul Simon once sang.

This side of the Kingdom redeemed human nature still awaits the working-out of its redemption. My plea to you this morning is to recognise that Christians *will never agree over matters of doctrine* (belief). In fact, any dream that it could is dangerous – it will lead to Christians excluding one another.

BUT that absolutely does *not* mean at all that the struggle for that unity isn't vital to Christian witness. As a first step (*n.b.* first step, not final goal) we must find ways of binding our church institutions together so that we have no choice but to work out our future together, and no longer have the luxury of working in separate 'sects of the like-minded'.

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Many years ago, the then Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan was given a short TV

series to explore ‘What is a Christian?’ He went through all the creeds and all the rituals and rules that humans have created to pin down who is a Christian and who isn’t. None of them worked. In the end, he came down to that basic affirmation that all of us use at baptism : “Jesus is Lord”.

“Jesus is Lord” is not a doctrinal creed. What that statement *means*, what Lordship *means*, who Jesus *is*, could fill a library of books, but it seems to me that that simple affirmation is the beginning of spiritual unity.

I’ve a nasty feeling that, for instance, if I got into a conversation with some of the African Pentecostal groups now worshipping in Cowley about what they thought was happening on the Cross, what Christian priorities are, how we should worship *etc* we would have very little in common (quite apart from the *cultural* differences!). But I can tell in the eyes of those I’ve met that for them, ‘Jesus is Lord’, and with all their heart they want, as *I* want, to live that out.

But that confession ‘Jesus is Lord’, however deep and rich it is for us, can only ever be the *starting* point on our journey with all those others who share it. From the moment we confess it, we need others to help us find out what it might *mean*. We must learn to listen respectfully to *all* those others (not just those in our churchy world), biting our tongue on those occasions when some of them tell us we’re not really Christians, humbly but boldly speaking our truth

in love, working alongside each other whenever and however we can and dismantling any man-made barriers that stop that happening.

Unity that depends on agreement is a brittle, exclusive thing. Only Christian unity that brings us together in *disagreement* and makes it creative can become a dynamic force for reconciliation in this world.

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Jesus's crucifixion means many things to many people, but it seems to me that if nothing else it suggests that the hope of unity – unity of *all* things, not just the Church – begins with a recognition and acceptance of brokenness and division, and an embracing of this apparent failure in humility, love, obedience and hope.

In short, Unity begins – daily – at the foot of the cross.

*Dick Wolff*  
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