

Unity and the Shape of the Church

Jim Stewart's talk at St James on 12th October 2011

The heart of what I want to say can be captured in two bullet points, but once I have shown them to you, there will in fact be a whole lot more to say!

- It is excellent when churches work together in mission and outreach

But

- **The New Testament vision of Christian unity demands that we do not describe ourselves as united until it is our normal practice to worship together, Sunday by Sunday, around the Lord's table**

We do all sorts of things together as Christians across Tunbridge Wells. There are things that we cannot do alone. There are things we don't want to do alone. It is great that we have the opportunity to work together in the name of Christ.

Unfortunately when we have done our work we then retreat behind our own walls. We may say that we love one another, but when it comes to it we don't love one another enough to be able to worship together around the Lord's table week by week.

There are some doctrinal reasons why we don't agree to meet together week by week. There are fundamental differences about whether we should have communion at all. There are disagreements about how often we should have communion. And there are disagreements about what we think we are doing when we celebrate communion. We don't experience a love which overcomes such differences.

Then there are some disagreements which are not doctrinal. One prefers one style of worship to another. There has to be certain music, a certain shape to the room, certain clothes and language used, and unless we can have these we cannot worship together.

The doctrinal issues come from a serious attempt to be faithful to the Bible. We know that we are not infallible, but we need in all good conscience to settle these issues in order to be able to move forward together in common worship.

The other issues should really be put aside very quickly. They are not worthy of serious consideration. Christians cannot seriously put such preferences ahead of the unity of the Church of God.

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The idea for this evening came from a moment of criticism. I was talking with Cliff after he had spoken at one of our ecumenical services and told him that I profoundly disagreed with what he had said. Cliff's sermon had been delivered in his characteristically clear and generous style. It was much appreciated by many who were present and the outline was circulated afterwards through Cliff's email network. I hasten to add that this was not at his initiative, but a response to a request from Douglas Wren.

I profoundly disagreed with much of what Cliff was saying, but let me start by setting out some points for which I was most grateful. They may not be the same points that others found most helpful but they do set out something of the spirit and direction of my thinking.

It was really good to have someone set out an agenda of sorts for the ecumenical work that we all find ourselves engaged with. It is tempting sometimes to simply go along with what seems good to all. But we are Christians and we must always be checking out what seems good to us both against the Scriptures and within a careful discernment of the leading of the Holy Spirit.

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There were two particular things that worried me about the talk. One was the way that a phrase was being used about 'the church of Tunbridge Wells' and the other was the way in which existing theological differences were being played down.

Cliff offered a vision of Christians working together across the town. This working together would be built on relationships. It would not require any prior agreement about the details of what we believe and it would not pre-suppose any particular structures. Working together in this way we would be 'the Church of Tunbridge Wells'.

While all of this feels good it is I believe a profound misreading of what the New Testament would teach us about the unity of the Church of Christ. It misses the real challenge of the call to unity which is everywhere expected in the New Testament. It allows us to be content with the existing direction in which things are going. I believe there are real questions that need to be raised about our sense of direction.

Let me pause once again before developing this challenge. In the interest of fellowship I want to add a further point. First I am absolutely sure that Cliff is completely committed to shaping the Church in keeping with the New Testament. My disagreement is not that I hold to the Bible and he doesn't. That would be absurd! My disagreement is about what we learn from the pages of the New Testament. I must establish my account of what I believe it is saying. Secondly, Cliff is not alone in using this phrase, 'the Church of Tunbridge Wells' in just this sense. With Cliff's agreement I am using him as a means of questioning the approach that he holds with many others.

But let me deal first with the question of the content of what we believe and the need for agreement. The New Testament is hugely concerned with tackling all the issues which might divide the fellowship of the people of God.

In looking now to the New Testament I want to focus on the Acts of the Apostles and the letters rather than on the much used passage from John 17. In passing however it is worth observing that the appeal to unity there which is built on the relationships within the Trinity has given rise to some very important reflection on the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit which in turn give rise to an expectation that the unity of the Church will need more than our loose talk of relationship to do it justice. The relationship between the Father and Son is different from the relationship between the Father and the Spirit. There is an order to the relationship between the Son and the Spirit which enables us to tell them apart and avoid the danger of confusing them. Our faith in God as trinity is foundational and distinctive and must always guard against the danger of collapsing back into a singular conception of the deity. A church where relationship is key will be an ordered church.

But on to the Acts and the letters. From the very beginning the early Church worked hard to maintain its unity. The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 has an importance that must never be underestimated. The apostles seem never to have considered the possibility that they might move forward separately in some sort of 'impaired communion' – let the Anglican Communion take note. It never occurred to them that they might simply be separate but related. The issue needed to be thrashed out and a decision made.

They made their decision based on the testimony about what had been happening in various spheres. Gentiles were unmistakably demonstrating that they had received the Spirit. But their decision was not based solely on testimony. It was also rooted in Scripture. When James quoted from Amos he was not proof texting, or adding mere rhetorical flourish. He was pointing to a depth in the purposes of God which could guide them for their day too.

The Church moved forward into Acts 16 and beyond, agreed about core beliefs and practice. Later their decisions that day were further reviewed. We no longer – any of us – abide by the stipulations about diet that they agreed (or if we do it is probably not for theological reasons). That raises the stakes about Christian unity! It involves thrashing out the issues with one another, agreeing about points of doctrine and practice, and being one church. Christian unity is about one church not a federation or loose alliance of churches.

It is Paul's first letter to Corinth which is however the heart of my case. First, as we look at chapter 15 we see an embryonic creed. We should note that Paul has already received this as a 'tradition' and he passes it on as a 'tradition' (At this point the NIV is remarkably muddled). Even before the later Ecumenical Councils which argued against the great heresies of the Early Church, here, within just about 20 years of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we already have creedal statements which are already part of the life blood of the church. Cliff, I think we need to be agreed about basic creedal issues.

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Now let me move on from the need to agree about creedal issues to that phrase, 'the church of Tunbridge Wells'. If only we could use the phrase! It would be wonderful! But we simply cannot use it in any meaningful way without losing sight of the task that remains to be engaged with.

1 Corinthians is a very carefully constructed letter. The famous chapter on love is deliberately placed in the middle of a discussion about worship. On either side there is discussion about the variety of gifts and then the ways in which they should be exercised. The whole discussion is introduced by Paul's assessment of their communion services.

When you come together as a church he wrote in 1 Corinthians 11.18, describing the communion: As they gather round the Lord's table they are constituted as a church.

The Corinthian church is variously estimated by scholars to have had between 30 and 70 members. It would have had only one gathering. It was very clear who was part of the church – you only had to look around you. We see this same point even more clearly in Romans. In Rome the church was bigger. Several different groups have been identified. But it was when these groups came together at the Eucharist that Paul identified them as 'the Church'.

It is not when we are agreed in various acts of service to our neighbours that unity is seen. It is when we are gathered together around one Lord's Table. It is not when we agree some evangelistic strategy but when we worship together following Jesus' command to do this in remembrance of him.

This, of course, is not satisfied if we meet together on an occasional basis. Paul in Romans or 1 Corinthians is picturing the normal state of the church. For Paul we could be the church of Tunbridge Wells when, and only when, we meet together for communion as the body of Christ in this place.

As the church grew to numbers Paul could scarcely have imagined they needed to develop ways in which the unity of the church could be maintained in very different circumstances. There are more Christians today in Tunbridge Wells than in Paul's Corinth and Rome combined! Application develops over time but the principles and direction of the New Testament needs to be the on-going guide as we walk with the Holy Spirit in the 21st Century.

At the height of the Ecumenical Movement which sought to bring churches together the Lima text was published. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was an attempt to summarise where we had got to and chart the challenges which lay ahead.

There was a similar expectation in that document that the normal pattern for united Christians was that they should be gathered round the same Lord's Table every week. At that point we can start to describe ourselves as the church of Tunbridge Wells and not before.

- The sharing in one bread and the common cup in a given place demonstrates and effects the oneness of the sharers with Christ and with their fellow sharers in all times and places.
- It is in the eucharist that the community of God's people is fully manifested.
- Eucharistic celebrations always have to do with the whole Church, and the whole Church is involved in each local eucharistic celebration. (BEM 1982 para 19)

The challenge is that if we really do love one another, we will find ourselves gathered around one table.