

An Address  
at Westminster College, Cambridge  
on 21 January 2010  
at a Service of Prayer for Christian Unity

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we take it as a great kindness that you at Westminster College have asked the Orthodox Institute to join with you in this service: a great kindness but also a something of a challenge, for the Orthodox Church sees itself as the one, true, holy and apostolic Church, and our Bishops insist that inter-communion should be the reward of unity and not a means to achieve it. Hence we are in the painful position of being obliged to deny communion to other Christians.

Yet we, like you, cannot evade the obligation to join with Christ in his prayer for us to the Father that 'they may all be one, even as Thou, Father, art in me and I in Thee' (John 19.21).

And yet that prayer must be made in the context of my second text: Christ's warning as to the radically divisive nature of his call to us:

Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's foes will be those of his own household.  
(Matthew 10. 34-36)

That will be as true in the Christian household as in any other – and in the Cambridge Theological Federation. We must not conceal our divisions for the sake of a bland but false gospel of 'niceness' or persuade ourselves that our differences are insignificant.

Yet knowing that Christians in the past have thought such differences so important as to kill one another over them, we must all of us in the Federation and in the Churches to which we belong take note of my third text: not this time from scripture but from Oliver Cromwell in 1650 writing to the General

Assembly of the Church of Scotland: 'In the bowels of Christ, I beseech you think it *possible* that you may be mistaken'.

But can we be critical of ourselves and forbearing with one another, in the faith that there is some underlying unity already present which we may ask God to perfect?

In the last century, Sergius Bulgakov, an Orthodox priest but a leader of the ecumenical movement, identified four indicators 'of the actual unity of the apparently divided Church'<sup>1</sup>.

First, Bulgakov saw fundamental unity in the fact that 'the Name of the Lord is hallowed and called on by all Christians'. Their gathering, their *ecclesia*, is therefore validated by Christ's promise that 'where two or three are gathered together in my Name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matthew 18.20).

Second, Bulgakov insists that 'the holy Gospels are the common property of the entire Christian world'. 'When the Eternal Book is studied not only by the mind but also with the heart, when the soul "bows down over the Gospels", then the sacrament of the Word, born in that soul, is celebrated.' [p. 105]

Third, Bulgakov emphasises that, despite any dogmatic differences, in their spiritual life, 'in their love of the Lord and their striving toward him, all Christians are one'. [p. 106]

Last, Bulgakov, whilst acknowledging crucial divisions in our respective understandings of the Eucharist, reminds us it is the sacrament of Baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that makes a Christian. The Orthodox (except for some fanatic and heterodox monks) do not re-baptise Christians who 'come over' into Orthodoxy. And since baptism is the entrance to redeemed life in Christ, it follows that groups so baptised must be part of Christ's Church.

It is only by meeting and by working together that we can discover for ourselves this underlying unity. That is the great development since Bulgakov's day and the Cambridge Theological Federation is one fruit of it. The structural unification that Bulgakov's contemporaries hoped might be an end result has not been so much in evidence, save in certain unions among the Protestants, in your own United Reformed Church, in the Australian Uniting Church and in the Church of South India. Maybe we should have thought more carefully about the terms of Christ's prayer for our unity: it is to be a unity like that between

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<sup>1</sup> Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944), 'By Jacob's Well', in *A Bulgakov Anthology* ed. James Pane and Nicolas Zernov (London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 100-113.

the Father and Son, a meeting of equals in a harmony of love and will, but not an elimination of personhood, of distinction. (I for one, though I hope to see all my Christian friends in the Orthodox Church, blench to think of a unity in worship that might mean I would never again hear the great Wesley hymns, the spirituals or the massed gospel choirs, or even my own small contributions to the Anglican book of *Common Worship!*). It is meeting and working together that made possible the deep friendship and understanding between, for example, the Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius IV of Antioch, and the great missionary expositor of the faith admired through all the Christian denominations, Lesslie Newbigin, bishop in the united Church of South India, yet a faithful member of the Kirk, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, and later Moderator of the United Reformed Church. Ignatius has told me that for him the World Council of Churches was never the same after Lesslie ceased to be Associate General Secretary.

One merit of working together as we do in the Federation is the opportunity to correct those misunderstandings and sometimes gross parodies of what others believe which have added to the animus of Christians when they view one another from a distance. But it is not a contribution to Christian unity to sink our real differences under some anodyne 'niceness' for fear of rocking the boat. Differing beliefs have radically different effects on human understanding and behaviour. I have just returned from a Christmas in Hong Kong spent in the company of two grandchildren, Natasha who is three and Matthew who is one and a half – and that experience led me to express doubts to a colleague as to the truth of some understandings of 'Original Sin'. Did not any notion of 'total depravity' sit ill with Christ's appreciation of what we presume were unbaptised children?: 'Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.' (Mark 10.14-15) My colleague referred me to a passage in St John Chrysostom where he suggests that children are not born essentially evil but acquire sin through contact with a fallen world. Whether or not you think Calvin or St John Chrysostom is right will affect your attitude to the sexual act, to the upbringing of your children, to the apparent existence of goodness in non-believers, to where you stand as regards the priority of faith or works, or whether you believe with the Orthodox that salvation is a 'synergy', a cooperative effort for our good between God and ourselves. One potential blessing of working in the Federation is the chance to explore the different understandings among Christians, being prepared to think that we ourselves, 'in the bowels of Christ', may possibly be mistaken.

There is, however, a false unity, what I would even call a demonic *parody* of unity, that can afflict ecumenical ventures in a way that would horrify Lesslie Newbigin and which brings the Church into disrepute in the popular consciousness. It is a unity of toleration built round the so-called 'assured conclusions' of one brand of western liberal biblical scholarship. It does not beat the drum nor bang the Spong; but it subscribes covertly to a post-Enlightenment elevation of rationality and to fundamentally sceptical presuppositions. It may endeavour to put a holy gloss on the moral and social preoccupations of our day. But it involves submission to those preoccupations, and to the controlling myths and plausibility structures of our time, and it is what Newbigin would identify as subjection to a pagan society with false gods. A unity that tolerates what I was taught as a boy, the view that the accounts of resurrection we have just heard from Luke are merely a mythic expression of the disciples' sense that their experience of Jesus had in some way survived his death, is not a Christian unity. If Christ did not rise, we are not only (as Paul puts it [1Corinthians 15.17-19] 'of all people the most to be pitied'; if we think Christ did not rise, we are not even Christian.

The effects of such tolerance on popular perceptions of Christians was brought home to me by an excruciating incident some years back in Australia, when the then Moderator of the Uniting Church left her husband and four children for a lesbian relationship, yet wished to remain as Moderator. The television interview that Christians in Australia were dreading began not with questioning of her decision in the light of traditional Christian morality but with a more direct attack on the Church she represented: 'Tell me, Mrs X: what would you say to the popular charge, that "The Uniting Church believes nothing but falls for everything"?'

This was a sister church to that of which Lesslie Newbigin was Moderator and I find it impossible to believe that such a charge was just. It is, however, an indication of the danger of too great a tolerance of diverse views in the interests of unity. How can that Church, or how can we in the Cambridge Theological Federation, believe we have sufficient in common for unity to be good, holy, and worth maintaining? There seems to me one simple if hypothetical test, and it comes not from theology but from my own field, the field of literature.

In an essay that was, I believe, written in the 1920s by 'Q' – Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Professor of English at Cambridge and one of the founders of the Cambridge English Faculty – the question was raised as to how we were to cope with the ever-mounting plethora of books in the world. The time must

surely come when we would have to determine what should survive and what should be destroyed. But how were we to choose?

The half-humorous solution was proposed, that only those books should be kept for which one person could be found who was prepared to die to ensure their survival. I remember the other Professor in my department, when I told him of this test, asking if I would die so that the works of Shakespeare might live and being astonished at my unhesitating reply: 'Yes. No question' – but then I remember that his speciality was Jane Austen . . . I think I might do it also for Beethoven, maybe for Mozart - but there an end.

So, as a hypothetical question: would you give up your life so that knowledge of Jesus Christ, of his life, his words, his work should not be destroyed? Your death would guarantee survival of that knowledge for the human race to the end of time: your refusal would mean obliteration even of the memory of Christ. I suspect that the vast majority of us who work in the Cambridge Theological Federation would answer 'Yes. No question'. And if that is remotely true, we have already a unity against which our genuine differences have only minor significance. If that is remotely true, we have a unity on which to build, a unity 'against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail'.

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