

Church - Christian Unity

What is the basis of unity in the church? Should the quest for unity be our top priority?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said this: "Unity must never be isolated or regarded as something in and of itself. It is equally clear that the question of unity must not be put first." That statement may surprise some Christians, but this position is completely Biblical.

In 1962, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones addressed a British ministerial fellowship on the matter of Christian unity. At the time, the question of unity and how to achieve it was a burning issue in Britain. There were calls from various quarters for unity on many different bases, and by many different methods.

In America and other parts of the world today, there are also calls for church unity on many different grounds, including those promoted by spokesmen for the Purpose-Driven Church movement and the Emergent Church movement.

In his speech to the assembly of British ministers, Dr. Lloyd-Jones enumerated nine principles that summarize the Biblical position on the question of church unity, the priority we should give it, and how it must be achieved. The essence of his message was this: The definition of unity, the priority we give it, and the way we go about promoting it, must all be firmly grounded in the Word of God, and nothing else. Today and in subsequent articles, we shall quote Martyn Lloyd-Jones' 1962 address at length, with some additional comments related to the state of the 21st-century Evangelical church. Dr. Lloyd-Jones began his discussion with these points:

1. Unity must never be isolated or regarded as something in and of itself.

2. It is equally clear that the question of unity must never be put first. We must never start with it, but always remember the order stated so clearly in Acts 2:42, where fellowship follows doctrine: "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." That, as we have seen, is precisely the order in which they are placed in both John 17 and Ephesians. The present tendency to discount and to depreciate doctrine in the interests of unity is simply a denial and a violation of plain New Testament teaching.¹

The passage in John 17 to which Dr. Lloyd-Jones refers is Jesus' high priestly prayer before He went to the cross. Here, Jesus places doctrine first:

I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. Now they have known that all things which You have given Me are from You. For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me. I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours....

I have given them Your Word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your Word is truth. (John 17:6-9, 14-17)

Is the basis of unity to be found in the visible church? Dr. Lloyd-Jones addressed this question next, and that is the topic of our [next installment](#) in this series.

References:

1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "The Basis of Christian Unity," in Knowing the Times: Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions 1942-1977 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 159-160.

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There is only one basis for true Christian unity: regeneration of the soul and belief of the truth.

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