

Church - Christian Unity

Is church unity based on numbers?

By Paul M. Elliott

As he ended his 1962 speech, Martyn Lloyd-Jones stated something that he termed is "obvious" in the Word of God — that unity is not a matter of numbers but of spiritual life. "Indeed, finally it comes to this," he said. "Is our view of the church Roman Catholic (inclusivist, organizational, institutional, and hierarchical) or Reformed, emphasizing the universal priesthood of all believers and the need for keeping the church herself constantly under the judgment of the Word?"

In our current series of questions and answers we are discussing critical aspects of the issue of Christian unity — how to achieve and maintain it, and just as importantly, how not to do it. We are using Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' landmark 1962 speech to a British ministerial fellowship as our outline.

Stating the Obvious — But Is It Today?

Thus far, we have seen that unity is not the church's first concern; unity is not to be found in the visible church; unity is only to be found in regeneration by the Holy Spirit and unwavering belief in the fundamentals of the faith; it is sinful to attempt to forge "unity" on any other basis; and, unity does not come through dialogue or debate concerning the fundamentals.

As he concluded his address, Dr. Lloyd-Jones turned to the question of whether or not numerical strength is a true test of unity:

8. Unity must obviously never be thought of primarily in numerical terms, but always in terms of life. Nothing is so opposed to the Biblical teaching as the modern idea that numbers and powerful organization alone count. It is the very opposite of the great biblical doctrine of "the remnant," stated, for instance, so perfectly by Jonathan to his armour-bearer as they faced alone the hosts of the Philistines, in the words: "Come, and let us go over unto the garrison of these uncircumcised: it may be that the Lord will work for us: for there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few" (I Samuel. 14:6). Still more strikingly, perhaps, is it taught in the incident of Gideon and the Midianites, where we read of God reducing the army of Israel from 3,000 to 300 as a preliminary to victory (Judges 7).

God has done His greatest work throughout the centuries through remnants, often even through individuals. Why is it that we forget Micaiah the son of Imlah, and Jeremiah, and Amos, John the Baptist, the mere twelve disciples; and Martin Luther standing alone defying some twelve centuries of tradition and all the power of a mighty church? This is not to advocate smallness or exclusiveness as if they had some inherent merit; but it is to suggest that the modern slavish attitude to bigness and organization cuts right across a central biblical emphasis. Indeed it suggests ignorance of, and lack of faith in, the power of the Holy Spirit.

"The Greatest Need of the Hour"

Martyn Lloyd-Jones concluded with this challenge to his audience of Evangelical ministers:

9. The greatest need of the hour is a new baptism and outpouring of the Holy Spirit in renewal and revival. Nothing else throughout the centuries has ever

given the church true authority and made her, and her message, mighty. But what right have we to pray for this, or to expect that He will honour or bless anything but the truth that He Himself enabled the authors of the Old Testament and the New Testament to write? To ask Him to do so is not only near blasphemy but also the height of folly. Reformation and revival go together and cannot be separated. He is the Spirit of truth, and He will honour nothing but the truth. The ultimate question facing us these days is whether our faith is in men and their power to organize, or in the truth of God in Christ Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Let me put it another way: Are we primarily concerned about the size of the church or the purity of the church, both in doctrine and in life? Indeed, finally it comes to this: Is our view of the church Roman Catholic (inclusivist, organizational, institutional, and hierarchical) or Reformed, emphasizing the universal priesthood of all believers and the need for keeping the church herself constantly under the judgment of the Word?

Mixed Reaction

How was Dr. Lloyd-Jones' message received? Some heartily agreed with him. But among the vast majority of self-described Evangelicals, his message fell on deaf ears. Some even rebuked him publicly for taking such a stand. In our [final article](#) in this series, we shall examine that mixed reaction nearly fifty years ago, and some parallels in our time.

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), 163-164.

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Scripture shows that making membership or participation in a visible body the basis of Christian unity is dangerous.

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