

Latimer's Curate

Listen up everyone, I've got something I want to get off my chest that's been bugging me for some time. So here goes: Unity... it's a much heralded concept, but what does it mean? United around what, exactly? The idea that we should all desire 'unity' may be very noble, but it is actually wrong-headed thinking when we make it the focus of our aspirations. You see, if unity is our focus then we will compromise what we believe (our theology) and what we do (our mission) in order to stay together in some unholy alliance, sacrificing to an idol of self-congratulatory achievement on this altar of 'unity', and that won't do at all! Unity in and of itself can become an idol when we don't give due credit to what God has already said in his word.

It's not as if the church hasn't been here before. Right at the start the church faced a serious challenge to its unity; with Jewish Christians on one side wanting to uphold the teachings of Moses in the Law by insisting that you cannot be saved unless you come under the law of circumcision, and gentile Christians on the other insisting that God was doing a 'new thing' as evidenced by giving them his Holy Spirit. So what was the solution achieved at the Jerusalem council? They agreed that this 'new thing' that God was doing was not a new thing after all but something that had been foretold in the scriptures. And that's the key, what was happening can be clearly revealed as having been God's plan all along. The council had begun to realise that true unity comes through reading scriptures through the lens of Jesus Christ, and not through some anthropological lens of human understanding and reason. You can read all about it in Acts 15. Can you see where I'm going with this?

There are many within our church who seem not have learned from the lessons of the Jerusalem Council, seeing unity as a goal that must be achieved at all costs but at the same time ignoring what the scriptures have to say. Some attempt to see our unity defined around some Eucharistic theology, as if our identity as Christians depends on who we share communion with or

how often we might have it. This is nonsense as sharing communion while harbouring deep resentment for our neighbour is easily, and dare I say frequently, done. Others might see our unity built around people or things. Like, for instance, the cacophony of protest that has raged around the old cathedral in Christchurch, as if it is the cathedral that unites us!

So what does unite us? Well as I've indicated, a clear understanding of the scriptures is vitally important. But just understanding the scriptures may not help us if we fail to love our neighbour as ourselves. The apostle Paul says in his letter to the Philippians that we should be 'like-minded'. He encourages us to not be selfish or vain, but to have the interests of others at heart. And he sums this up in one word, humility, using Christ as the supreme example of what it means to be truly humble (have a look at Phil. 2:1-11 and see how you measure up). In this context being like-minded is to think about things the same way Jesus does. Fortunately this is not as difficult as we might imagine as God has given us his Holy Spirit, which dwells within each of us, to guide our thoughts and actions. But when we divorce God's Spirit from the scriptures and act according to our own human reasoning disunity raises its ugly head in the church. We begin to place more importance on our own preferences or the cultural mores of the day rather than on what is good for the wellbeing of the church and for the good of the gospel. It seems to me that in times of disunity the Holy Spirit will always point us back to the scriptures to find our way through to a common mind, just as God did at the Jerusalem Council.

Over the next few years we will face the greatest challenge to our unity that this church has ever encountered. If true unity can be achieved, it will only be because we have humbled ourselves before our God and acted according to his will and not our own. For our part we must simply put our trust in God's sovereign mercies, and be humble enough to submit our own wills and thoughts to the authority of scripture as the Holy Spirit illuminates our understanding.