
Christian unity from a URC perspective

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words that divide

A Democratic congresswoman (Gabrielle Giffords) is gunned down in Arizona, along with a number of others including a nine-year-old girl, in the context of a highly polarised and vicious national debate about the health care system which has regularly strayed into the language of violence and hatred. (A debate which, I may add, probably leaves most of us in the UK completely bemused.) In Pakistan, a government minister who speaks out about the way the blasphemy laws (laws about what words can and cannot be said) are allowing minorities to be persecuted is assassinated. “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words’ll never hurt me” is a lie. Words divide, words stir feelings, which lead directly to actions. The letter of St James in the New Testament contains a whole section on the danger of words :

It takes only a spark to start a forest fire! The tongue is like a spark. It is an evil power that dirties the rest of the body and sets a person’s entire life on fire with flames that come from hell itself. All kinds of animals . . . can be tamed and have been tamed. But our tongues get out of control. They are restless and evil, and always spreading deadly poison.

James 3 : 5 - 8

Religious creeds are words. They are words that unite, of course, but they are also therefore words that divide. “If you can’t say every line of that creed you’re not one of us.” In the United Reformed Church we don’t say a creed every Sunday; we sing our faith in our hymns (which is why we have hymns and not praise songs). We acknowledge all the great creeds as historical statements of what Christian faith is, but in recent years we have (after much debate) agreed a new one – in inclusive language that doesn’t introduce unnecessary division between the sexes.

words that unite

Many years ago, former Archbishop Donald Coggan had a short TV series in which he attempted to find a creed that could genuinely unite all people who thought of themselves as Christian – a faith statement that every Christian could say with personal integrity. None of the big creeds did the job. He boiled it down to one classic faith statement : ‘Jesus is Lord’. (That was before inclusive language became a real issue in this country : ‘Lord’ is a disappointment

to some Christian feminists, but it's do-able because there's little doubt Jesus was male.)

What 'Lord' actually means is of course open to interpretation, but whatever *else* it might mean, if Jesus is Lord, he is not only the central figure in my *own* life, and following his leadership is what ultimately *defines* my life, it also means that his authority is higher than that of presidents and prime ministers. "Even the wind and waves obey him", as the gospel story tells us. If 'Jesus is Lord', we are not some little Jesus fan club worshipping behind closed doors – he is Lord, too, of a world that does not acknowledge him as such, and we have to relate to that world in the way he does. Lovingly, truthfully, self-sacrificially, seeking healing, peace and justice. Because that's how real 'lordship' is defined on the cross.

the reality of division

Within that affirmation 'Jesus is Lord' we can assume there are as many deeply personal creeds as there are individual Christians. Rather than presume unity and agreement, we should presume variety – even strong *disagreement*. The idea that Christians all agree with each other and like each other has caused immense harm down the centuries because it could never be true. It's romantic nonsense – but it's worse. It has created a brittle, dishonest culture in which people dare not (as Paul puts it) 'speak their truth in love' for fear of spoiling the party. And church authorities have used the command to be united to drive out those who have dissented from their version of Christianity. And in the days when the Church had great political power, it has used the force of the State to police its boundaries and burn heretics. (When a Reformed Church like ours declares that Church and State must be separate institutions, it effectively means the Church renounces force as a way of solving disputes).

'toleration'

In the end, centuries of religious divisiveness in this country has led us to a culture that sees all religion as a source of divisiveness, to be rejected and replaced – but with what has it been replaced? With a culture of lazy tolerance in which everyone is entitled to their opinion no matter how ignorant, stupid or even dangerous it is. As Rowan Williams has put it :

(tolerance as) . . . a bland acceptance of mutual ignorance and non-understanding, in the name of ‘not passing judgment’.

But that’s not what ‘toleration’ really is. ‘Toleration’ (in the sense of the ‘Act of Toleration’ that eventually enabled my Reformed faith ancestors to come out of hiding) simply means not dealing with differences of opinion by violence and repression. It certainly doesn’t mean ‘not arguing your case’ or not challenging falsehood and prejudice.

a gospel of reconciliation

The reason why Christian Unity is vitally important – and why the United Reformed Church still holds on to the dream of organic, institutional reunification of the Church despite the great restriction it puts on our own growth as a denomination (we haven’t planted a church in 38 years because we refuse to go it alone) – is because our gospel is a gospel of reconciliation.

Please don’t misunderstand me : I don’t mean the gospels say that reconciliation is a ‘jolly good idea’. I mean far more than that : reconciliation *is* the Gospel, and the Gospel *is* reconciliation. Reconciliation between people, and between people and God. The Way, the Truth and the Life is the Way to being reconciled, the truth that can reconcile us, and the life of unity with God and with one another that results from acknowledging – and living out – ‘Jesus is Lord’.

a ministry of reconciliation

I’ve been ordained as a minister nearly 30 years now, and as the years have flown by I have come to the conviction that there is only one real difference between my ministry and yours. It’s not faith or piety¹, it’s not theological learning (I’m sure there are some in this congregation with higher theological qualifications than me), it’s not leadership : it is the ministry of conflict resolution. The ministry of reconciliation. As local church minister of Word & Sacrament I have been called to stand in the middle of the ring to broker a genuine and honest reconciliation when there is disagreement, or to weave back into the fellowship those who for whatever reason have dishon-

¹ I was horrified to discover, before my ordination, that I was going to be asked to declare that my motive in seeking ordination was ‘zeal for the glory of God’. Does that mean that anyone with ‘zeal for the glory of God’ is called to be a minister of word and sacrament? Clearly not. My motive was a sense of calling to that particular ministry.

oured their Christian calling or been dishonoured by the Church. Part and parcel of that is working to ensure that people are in true communion with Jesus, our Lord – and through Jesus, with God Most High.

Ideally that means I'm never needed. But no church on earth (our reading from Acts notwithstanding – it was a glorious moment of holy unity, a glimpse of possibilities, but it didn't last) has ever maintained unity. As I said last time I preached here : the work of reconciliation starts, each new morning, all over again, at the foot of the cross. The starting-point reality is always brokenness, but unity is always possible. Always.

Even when we've crucified God himself. Not because we can effect reconciliation in every case, but because *God* can.

At Temple Cowley, the Sharing of the Peace before communion is both a sign of unity but also a work of unity. (In this sense, it is a sacramental act). Everyone is asked to greet everyone else : “A time to say ‘thank you’ to those we should thank, ‘sorry’ to those we owe an apology, ‘I forgive you’ to those who need our forgiveness, and if none of those is needed, simply ‘peace be with you’” Because in our tradition, the priest is not me – it is the reconciled People of God, gathered in worship. If the Christians around the table are not reconciled, there *is* no priest and there is no worthy sacrament.

I'm realistic. I do not anticipate that in my lifetime I am likely, as a URC minister, to be able to preside at a Roman Catholic mass. But I do dare to hope that the sacramental peace and reconciliation between the people of God, in all their different denominations, may become a reality. It is only that continual reconciliation between all those who declare that ‘Jesus is Lord’ that builds a single ‘holy, catholic and apostolic Church’. And it is only that unity of God's people which gives meaning to the ministry of those who call themselves priests.

