

WORSHIP —DOES IT UNITE OR DIVIDE US?

A paper read at the Annual General Meeting May 2002

“Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives”. (Ephesians 4.3)

As the Holy Spirit inspires us in our prayers and brings us together in the church, it should be that worship, the worship of God, unites us. But does it?

I work both as a parish minister and a very part-time ecumenical theologian and the overwhelming impression is that worship is a cause of division. Take any of its component elements and see not the strengthening of bonds of peace but the driving apart of people. When we sing in praise to God, we have the strongest of opinions. Certain hymn writers, the words and music of particular historical periods, the emotion and rhythm of music all contribute to a diversity within which have arisen many high walls preventing crossover. I remember being in a Syrian Orthodox Church where the bishop was proud to tell us that they sang no hymns there written after the fourth century. One might go into many Christian fellowships nearer to home where the pride will be of singing nothing, or next to nothing, written more than twenty or thirty years ago. Then again the explosion of hymn and song writing in recent decades has been, in some places in this country, a resource to be kept well at a distance. The use of instruments in the accompanying of praise has been controversial in the Reformation churches and continues to cause debate that is heated and divisive. Likewise understandings of who should sing, and how they should sing, whether we look to the debates over the introduction of polyphony in the Western Church or the varying opinions over performance and participation in today's world, feed the rather dismal impression. As Christians we simply are a very long way from singing from the same hymnbook.

Or what about the reading and preaching of the Word? What are our Scriptures and who should read them? This question has challenged

believers from the earliest times, and equally the problem or challenge of interpretation. The science of hermeneutics may have advanced considerably up to our own day, but the divisions within the church at large are no less real. Denominations or individual congregations will be appraised on the basis of their handling of the Bible and on such hermeneutical keys as are adopted in its use. This is acutely the case *within* the Protestant fold but of course has weighty implications in respect of the differences held between Protestantism and Roman and Orthodox churches. Revelation, from which we draw “one faith, one Lord, one baptism” (Ephesians 4.5) is deeply problematic simply amongst Christians, and then begin further questions, as to how our worship of the triune God lies alongside the devotion to be found in other religious faiths.

We have come thus far in exploring divisions arising in worship barely mentioning the sacraments and yet here is another source of contention. I shall be returning at the end to discussions over the meaning of unity through baptism but sacramental theology in general has had a long history of controversy. Here especially we can be reminded that doctrine and worship are intimately linked – the formulation *lex credendi, lex orandi* dates from an early period of debate – but the continuing difficulty ecumenically is that the dividing walls stand, however much in practice they may be scaled or breached. It is clear that ecclesiology, the understanding of the church, is fundamental to our approaches to the sacraments, with the identity and calling of ordained ministers very much part of the issue. Therefore, alas, the problems before us have multiplied rather than diminished in line with ways of thinking about church. And yet the fact that the mystery of faith, crucial however our sacramental thinking proceeds – and we should remember that the range of diversity is not simply between those who have seven sacraments and those who have two, but includes those who would have none at all – [the fact that this mystery of faith] is above all focused eucharistically shows forth again and again the painful irony. At the very point that the “body” should be one, in human understanding and true sharing, receiving in fullness out of the grace of God, we are divided.

The final delineation of how worship divides rather than unites relates to the practice of prayer – that is, if I may artificially distinguish prayer from that which is sung, preached or sacramentally offered. Anyone attentive to the Biblical tradition might suppose that Christians can and ought to pray together but neither history nor contemporary experience bears this out to be straightforward. Differing understandings and feelings of in what form we should pray, with whom we should pray, to whom we should pray have not only endorsed but even reinforced divides. We are all well aware of how enemy sides have offered their opposing prayers in times of conflict, whether secular or religious (though we may be more troubled in our working out of how God has answered!) but likewise what we might call, in all their different manifestations, the “holy huddles”, perhaps less dramatically but no less harmfully it seems to me, work against the crossing of barriers humanly imposed and may confront God with particularist agendas. Ecumenism, a dirty word in some circles, may not be without its own problems but the will for common prayer can be patently lacking. There will always be diversities of style and culture within prayer yet it can be so extraordinarily difficult for us to pray together.

In Word and Sacrament, in music and the spoken word, both our experience of worship nowadays and seen in historical perspective yields a picture of brokenness and unresolved tensions. Worship engages us deeply but we cannot always – barely at all? – see how worship brings us together. Worship I take as the conscious offering of praise to God but of course it is intimately linked with the life before and after, the spirit in which we come to worship, the mindset and actions which follow on. Therefore an account of internal Christian divisions over ethics could extend the point I am making, but I shall hold back from developing that now. Suffice it to say that so often, it seems, we are not disposed for unity; one could say, making almost *no* effort to “make fast with bonds of peace the unity that the Spirit gives”. The trouble is all around us, between generations and yet not exclusively so; between denominations and yet not exclusively so; between interpretations and yet not exclusively so. But as I find there myself obliged to qualify how the divisions are drawn, therein actually lie seeds of hope. For even the

hardest lines being drawn cannot resist what appropriately might be named as “crossing”.

There is evidence in our own day, and historically, not only of divisions being sustained but also of a hunger and thirst for a communion in faith, which is an encouragement when so much appears to be bleak and almost beyond redemption. We could retrace my ground in general terms, observing how music and Bible study and sacramental moments and common prayer have been powerful forces for dissolving hostilities and misunderstandings. Communion in faith – with diversities, the latter being something essential to distinguish from outright divisions – then has been an exciting, even fiery discovery; the breath of fresh air. Babel tendencies have been countered by the renewing presence of the Spirit: we can learn how to love one another! Or, the miserable reality of divisiveness experienced, past and present, can be overshadowed by the grace which may bring something else to birth, i.e. the body of Christ! The Christian faith has the potential to be the creative force which scripturally is proclaimed. The revelation of God in the coming of Jesus Christ, witnessed to in the power of the Spirit, draws us into a gospel for all who have known the pain and strife engendered through our tendencies to separate and draw apart from one another and from God, a gospel then that can bring us into a perfect communion or unity with one another and with God. And in the sharing of this gospel, worship rightly directed has a key part to play.

In what remains of my time – and in a very inadequate fashion – I would like to explore how specifically within worship, its study, its practice, unity or communion can be fostered. I have already implied as much but I should state categorically that the desire is not for uniformity. Neither the handing down of the gospel nor the correct notion that the unity and holiness and catholicity and apostolicity of the church confessed in the Nicene Creed is local as well as universal – and therefore culturally varied at the very least – suggests that unity is a defined programme. Rather it is a living process, a “way”, an entry into the “fullness of life” where “faith, hope and love” are the gifts which will endure for ever. Thus unity is experienced in the here and now but its perfect realisation lies beyond us.

It should be clear therefore that the promise of unity lies first on the broad canvas, whereby Christ came as the “new Adam”, the new humanity. Worship “rightly directed”, the second time I have used that phrase, feeds on that revelation. It must be anchored in that newness of life, not in the humanity which turns in on itself and so tends to a separation with God and between ourselves. There is a test then on music and on silence, on the Word read and proclaimed, on the sacraments administered, on the prayer offered. To be more precise there is a hermeneutical test, which is to say that it matters how these things interpret and are interpreted. Now, although this leaves us very far from rushing to final answers, it makes serious demands upon us not only to understand ourselves and our “texts” (which comprise not only the written word but all sorts of signs and symbols) but also to understand one another – and all this before God. Our problem has been that we have put much effort into getting things right ourselves without seriously attending to others – and yet as the crossing of boundaries again and again confirms, the Holy Spirit is not active just in me or in my church. A recent project of the Faith and Order Commission therefore has attempted some work on the area of so-called “ecumenical hermeneutics”. Whereas it is eminently possible, as I have described in just bare outlines, for one community or even one individual to make sweeping judgements on the appropriateness or not of an aspect of worship, ecumenical hermeneutics forbids us from being so narrow-minded. It is not to say that there is no right way of doing things, only that given that it is possible for there to be diversities, can we help one another to be truly faithful and hopeful and loving within our practice? Can we rejoice that others share in the same faith, hope and love, even when differently celebrated?

The crossing of hard-drawn lines, whether those lines have been drawn with supposed authority or at the other extreme through plain neglect and blindness in regard of God’s outpouring of grace, is a Christian calling. It has a considerable agenda merely amongst the churches, whose Babel-like constructions have again and again in effect turned away from the miracle of Pentecost, but it does not stop there. The quest for unity through worship will inevitably have to connect with the whole range

of ways in which people “live and move and have their being”. One implication of what I have been saying is that it simply is not good enough simply to want people to come and do what we do. Rather the task would be to find that space where our believing and our worship comes together – together in the turning to God. Is it not like stepping into a river, catching on to its flow; a place of refreshment, of drinking deep, and being not those who direct but who are directed?

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As something of a postscript, I should like before ending to describe one more programme of study being carried out within the Faith and Order Commission. I suppose I offer this both to reiterate how tangled we get and yet also how we cannot, dare not, not come alongside one another. The study may not soon find a conclusion but as we sit together and pray together, something of that refreshment and renewal talked about beckons.

The project sets out to reflect on how we might be sharers in one common baptism. There is therefore a doctrinal task – the elucidation of the significance of Christian baptism – and a liturgical agenda, which is a consideration of baptismal practice. We may be (we are!) busied about this within our own denomination but in openness to the guiding of the Holy Spirit, the work of necessity is ecumenical. Therefore representatives of the various traditions come together to share insights on the meaning of baptism and to face up to differences. In the ecumenical context the picture is very complicated, covering questions such as on the relation between faith and the baptismal rite, how (and whether) the rite itself is administered, what is implied or expected before and after the rite. One consultation follows another; participants in one are not in accord with those who take part in the next stage of debate; there is disagreement as to what are the fundamental questions. In one sense it is desperately complicated, and this long before any church’s authoritative pronouncement is sought. One might be forgiven for the feeling “why bother?” – except that we cannot, say within the Church of Scotland, administer baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity

and in terms of entry into the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church, and with awareness of what all we think matters in terms of our baptismal life, i.e. as Christians, without being attentive to how others see us (“Outside Verdict”! It’s scandalous if we weren’t interested in this before! Likewise “Church without Walls”! *It is simply wrong to imagine we are about doing our “own” thing*). Our responsibility is to be truthful, the excitement of it is the vision. Having been involved in the study work, I would report the experience to be a mixture of revelation and growth alongside sorrow that history has set up so many interrelated obstacles to the realisation of unity. But we have to do such work because of the reality of the churches’ divisions, which are grim despite all that we have in common, namely the desire to build up the “body of Christ” (Ephesians 4.12).

To conclude, we need to see how precisely the diversity, and even the divisions, are rooted within a highly significant degree of unity. The unity is anchored in our response to the Shepherd of our souls, in that which is of “the faith”. There must be humility in any dogmatic summing-up – as Thomas Aquinas wrote, “the assent of faith does not end with the formula but with the reality”; or Hilary of Poitiers, “I possess reality although I do not understand it” – but as we nevertheless (inevitably) give expression to the transcendent, interpret and translate within our patterns of worship, communion is vital i.e. the heart of the matter. There is a potentially confusing but important notion which might help us here, namely, the thought of the “undivided church”. This is not the church of the past, though it is sometimes made out to be. It is the church that has a future, a creative power in the Spirit.

Revd Dr Peter H. Donald
Crown Church, Inverness

