Unity in Holiness

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Introduction

The purpose of this conference is to clarify the true nature of genuine Christian unity between born-again Christian people. However, if we are to achieve such a clarity of purpose we need to pay attention also to those counterfeits which are being so persistently purveyed at the present time. It is for this reason that the plan of this paper will be in three sections. First of all, I shall survey the unity which already exists with a special eye on developments in the Roman communion. Secondly, I shall concentrate on those matters which sorely divide us, not only from Rome and Anglo-Catholicism but also from other Protestant believers. My third section will be an attempt to see what the Scriptures have to say about God's imperative of holiness with a consideration of what He may be saying to us personally. We shall therefore move from the areas of controversy to that of personal commitment and aspiration.

However before we embark on this rather daunting journey we need to recognize that the Church Society is increasingly committed to seeking a true union between bible-believing Christians. We totally reject the present trend in unity schemes which are based almost without exception on Roman Catholic premises. We believe with Article XIX, that:

> The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

Our concern therefore is to seek to discover how unity in holiness can be apprehended in congregations of different ecclesiastical form where the pure Word of God is preached. We shall find this unity primarily amongst Evangelical churches of many hues. Nevertheless, because the Church of England is currently engaged in reunion proposals with the Roman communion we shall need to spend time in teasing out what is legitimate and what is not scriptural in the life and practice of that church.

The Unity Which Exists

We turn first to the unity in holiness which exists already. Under this heading there will be three sections: moral holiness, personal devotion and the desire for God.

1. Moral holiness

When we consider issues concerning moral holiness, we have to recognize that as members of the Church of England we are indeed in a parlous position. Whatever may be said of individual congregations it is perfectly clear that the Established Church of this land is not only 'very far gone from original righteousness' but by and large desperately corrupt. One only has to think about the total failure of our bishops to condemn homosexual practice as a possible option for Christian people to see how far the rot has spread. It is therefore of great interest to discover the remarkable unanimity on this issue between ourselves and people like the Scottish Roman Catholic bishops who have boldly and uncompromisingly set forth the Christian and Scriptural position on this issue in their excellent leaflet on A.I.D.S. In the same publication there is an equally plain and godly statement about sexual promiscuity generally. The one man—one woman life-long relationship is re-asserted. It is not surprising that some Church Society members of General Synod are seeking to have this leaflet distributed to all members of that body as an example of what the Church of England *should* be doing. And of course on these matters of sexual ethics we are entirely at one also with almost all evangelical congregations (though it has to be noted that there are not a few so-called evangelical Christians who are propagating practising homosexuality as a permissible Christian option).

Similarly, on issues such as justice for the poor, Christians who believe in the inspiration of the book of Amos (for example) are united in the condemnation of the acquisitive lifestyle now prevalent in our society. We are agreed that a totally 'laisser-faire' economic policy must lead to the poor becoming poorer and the rich becoming richer. We reject such a tendency and have a passionate concern for the disadvantaged. On such matters we can join hands with Christians of many different denominations. However at the same time we recognize with sadness that there are some Protestant congregations which seem to be using a Bible which excludes the Old Testament—with the dangerous result that individualist self-interest is left in the field as the only law in the business world of the nation. There is today a serious dichotomy between the personal life of the Christian with its generosity in charitable objects and a business life which does not allow its actions to be informed by the strictures of the Old Testament and of Jesus against the heaping up of riches without considering who is disadvantaged by our own gain.

It seems clear to me therefore that we can make common cause with many different kinds of Christians in the struggle to ensure that 'justice (may) roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5:24).

2. Personal devotion

If there is one way in which holiness may be developed, this is clearly in the increasing intimacy between a man and his God—the realm of personal devotion. The closer we are to God, the more consonant with His nature will become our moral life. Here we discover a quite remarkable amount of convergence between men and women of a wide variety of ecclesiastical background.

Take for example the hymnody of the church. There is an identification of aspiration in, for example, the mediaeval Bernard of Clairvaux's 'Jesu the very thought of thee', the counter-reformation Francis Xavier's 'My God I love thee; not because' and Richard Baxter's: 'Lord it belongs not to my care'. All have a like desire: that they may love the Lord better, know him more and enjoy him hereafter—for 'the chief end of man' (they would alike say) 'is to glorify God and enjoy Him for ever'. It is at the level of personal devotion that we are most truly united in spirit. To take another example there is high identification of motive in the hymn 'Jesu grant me this I pray ever in thy heart to stay' with the Moody and Sankey 'Draw me nearer, nearer, nearer blessed Lord, to thy precious wounded side'.

3. Desire for God

Above all it is clear that men and women of all denominations have a common desire for God. In the words of the Quaker J.G. Whittier:

> We faintly hear, we dimly see
> In differing phrase we pray;
> But dim or clear, we own in Thee
> The Light, the Truth, the Way.

Certainly we cannot deny that immense longing for God which is expressed by men of every kind of Christian background as they long for God in words like those of Psalm 42:

> My soul thirsts for God, for the living God
> When shall I come and behold the face of God? (v.2)

To sum up our first section: there is a good deal of already existent unity between Christians of disparate backgrounds and for this we give thanks to the sovereign Lord who 'moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform'.

Sore Divisions in our Understanding of Holiness

We now turn to the more painful subject of the different and often contradictory understandings of holiness amongst a variety of Christian people. We shall consider this subject under three

headings: the self-justifying struggle, the danger of an ill-defined approach to the numinous, and, thirdly, the blind alleys which lead away from a Scriptural faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1. The self-justifying struggle

I need only allude with brevity to this sad heresy as it is a commonplace amongst us that in much of the Church of England and endemically in the Roman communion there is an appalling misunderstanding of the clear-cut difference which exists in Scripture between justification and sanctification. There is no doubt whatever that there are millions of so-called Christians who believe that they will only be accepted by God if they work their way to heaven, people for whom their religious life is hag-ridden by lack of assurance and by heretical teaching on these basic doctrines of the Scriptural faith and in particular by a failure to grasp the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Let me quote from the recently reprinted *Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyal*:

> The safest and most suitable form of penance seems to be that which causes pain in the flesh but does not penetrate to the bones . . . So the best way seems to be to scourge oneself with thin cords which hurt superficially.[1]

But let us *also* remember that there are unfortunately not a few in the evangelical constituency who, having been taught exhaustively the duty of obeying commandments, misunderstand the way of freedom and lose the assurance of heaven and dare not expect the final welcome of a holy God whose Son has paid the price in His Blood.

2. The Approach to the Numinous

A second serious division lies in the area of personal devotion and especially in the field of meditation and contemplation. In one sense the massive revival of interest in contemplative prayer in recent years is good news. We are learning afresh to adore God even now on earth as a foretaste of that worship of heaven where they 'fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever' (Revelation 4:9 & 10). But there are extreme dangers down that road, sowed carefully by the evil one. For example the whole idea of being 'lost in God' can lead to a desire for Nirvana—to be lost in God which is a very far cry from that personal relationship with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ which is the very heart and essence of true Christian prayer. To put it differently, we can long for eternal life rather than the resurrection of the body. We need to be aware that much mystical prayer is little more than a Christianized

Buddhism which totally lacks the scriptural content upon which alone true Christian prayer can be based.

3. The Blind Alleys which lead away from Scriptural Holiness

We turn now to some of those blind alleys down which all too many are tempted to travel—ways of thought, practice and prayer which take us a million miles away from truly scriptural holiness. Once again our survey must be selective and brief. It would be very easy to point out many elements in the Roman Catholic doctrine of grace which hopelessly confuse the seeker who is uninstructed in the New Testament. For example, there is the whole idea of grace as some kind of substance infused into the Christian soul as a response to the effort, the entreaty or the sacramental partaking of the believer.

Again there is the whole appalling story of indulgences and also the sad distinction between venial and mortal sin.

Again there is the whole idea of the mediation of the saints—reaffirmed by the Pope most recently last month in relation to Mary.

There is the tragic denial of the believing Christian's assurance of salvation based on a doctrine of holiness which is essential merit-gaining and fails to trust in the Blood of Christ alone. But it has to be said that the more subtle threat to a proper understanding of sanctification is to be found amongst Protestants. Let us take two kinds of teaching prevalent today. First of all we are all aware of the pernicious 'holiness' teaching which has re-appeared all down the history of the Christian church and against which J.C. Ryle's *Holiness* was written; that is, the doctrine that holiness may be received by faith in a moment and that one may therefore be sinless in this life by a miracle of God's grace. This teaching takes abundant forms and inevitably it has surfaced in the charismatic movement as well as in certain forms of the holiness movement.

Finally, let us not forget that there are millions of religious people worshipping piteously in our churches—men and women, clergy and ministers—who are not themselves born-again nor have they so much as heard of its necessity. We constantly need to remember that vast numbers of so-called Christians are *nothing of the kind*. They are only, as yet, sincere seekers after truth and not yet regenerate people in whom the Spirit of God dwells. And if there is to be any real unity, it can only be between those congregations where the necessity of new birth is accepted and taught. For herein is the dividing line between those who 'just as they are, without one plea' are yet moving homewards, and those who in ignorance and darkness, however intelligent they may be and however religious, are yet on their way to Hell and final separation from the God they never really knew.

God's Imperative of Holiness

1. Genuine ethical holiness

What is perfectly plain in the Scriptures is this: we are called to genuine ethical holiness at one and the same time that we recognize that

> Not the labours of my hands
> Can fulfil Thy laws demands.

We are called to be godly and to bear ever in mind the Ten Commandments and Jesus' commentary on them in chapters five and six of St. Matthew's gospel. For we are not going to be able to perceive the true way to unity or to God unless we are living in a way with which God is pleased. In John 7:17 we read, 'If any man's will is to do *his* will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God'. Again in John 8:31 we read, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free'. Again John 8:47 reminds us 'He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God'. How can we go on compromising with sin in our personal lives, brothers and sisters? Let us hear the call of God who is Holy and let us determine to 'bring forth fruits worthy of repentance' (Matthew 3:8).

2. The way of repentance

For the way of the Christian is the way of repentance. As J.C. Ryle so precisely defines it:

> When a professing Christian coolly tells me that he has got beyond such hymns as 'Just as I am', and that they are below his present experience, though they suited him when he first took up religion, I must think his soul is in a very unhealthy state!

For our experience must ever be that of the prophet Isaiah in his record of his call in chapter six (v.5) 'Woe is me! . . . For I am a man of unclean lips . . . for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!'

And may I speak personally to you, brothers and sisters in Christ: Are you really walking with the Lord? Are you really seeking for a scriptural holiness in your personal life, in your social life, and indeed in your business life? Friend, is there some sin in your life as yet unrepented of and even fostered and nourished? Friend, if such be the case, repent while there is time and come back to Him who is ever ready to forgive, to cleanse, and to renew. For as has been said by Cardinal Lavigerie:

> There is one thing, one thing of which you *must* be fully persuaded, and it is that for an apostle there is *no halfway* between total sanctity, at least faithfully and courageously desired and sought after, and absolute perversion.

and as St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:2:

> 'Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.[3]

3. The divine likeness

In St. John chapter 17 we read in verse 21: 'that they may all be one;' (and we note how that unity is defined) 'even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe . . .' For the desire of God is that we, you and I, should be in Him and He in us so that we are inextricably and palpably His here on earth as we are already in heaven. We are to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit because God's Spirit lives in us. We are to be consecrated, sanctified, holy. For let us be in no doubt as J.C. Ryle stated it so baldly

> Sound Protestant and evangelical doctrine is useless if it is not accompanied by a holy life. It is worse than useless: it does positive harm. It is despised by keen-sighted and shrewd men of the world, as an unreal and hollow thing, and brings religion into contempt. It is my impression that we want a thorough revival about scriptural holiness.[4]

So Ryle. And so it still is today. A godly separation from sin is required of us and of all Christians at this time.

Let us sum up in the words of dear William Cowper:

> There is a fountain fill'd with Blood
> Drawn from Emmanuel's veins
> And sinners plunged beneath that flood
> Lose all their guilty stains.
>
> The dying thief rejoiced to see
> That fountain in his day;
> And there may I, as vile as he,
> Wash all my sins away.
>
> Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious Blood
> Shall never lose its power,
> Till all the ransom'd Church of God
> Be saved to sin no more.

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NOTES

1 T. Corbishley, S.J., ed., *Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola* (Anthony Clarke, 1986) p.40.
2 J.C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Reprinted by Evangelical Press, 1985) p.xxi.
3 Chantard, *Soul of the Apostolate* (Tan Becks, Illinois 1974) p.76.
4 J.C. Ryle, *ibid.*, p.xvii.