

Chapter 7

Disunity in the Church

“I will build my church”

I could not believe what I was reading. There in my local newspaper was an item announcing that a church close to my home in south east London was to hold a special celebration of Holy Communion to celebrate the successful relationship over twenty five years of two homosexual men! It was to be on the following Saturday afternoon. I was horrified. I believe that to practice homosexuality is sin. The Bible says so. It is no greater or lesser sin than any other. All sin separates us from God. My anger was that this church was to celebrate sin around the table of the Lord.

I immediately got on the phone to the bishop who I knew was responsible for the oversight of the church. I asked him, even pleaded with him to intervene and to put a stop to the service. His words stung me as he told me that “as Christians we sometimes have to accept the lesser of two evils.” I had not learned so much about grace at that time and replied with a distinct lack of grace as I put the phone down on him in anger. “Surely, Bishop, as Christians we should not accept evil in any form!”

It went ahead. A celebration of what the bishop himself acknowledged to be evil! A communion service! Nothing I did could put a stop to the service so I decided that I would attend, not to celebrate, but to bring something of God’s truth. I felt decidedly uncomfortable as the man leading this church started telling us how wonderful it is that in an age when so many marriages fail that these two men had sustained a successful relationship for such a long period. There was certainly none of the word of God in his speech. Unplanned, two of my friends had also attended the service. After the leader came down from his pulpit we attempted to bring something of the word of God to the congregation. Interrupting the meeting we stood and said “Now hear the word of God!” It was not long before we were thrown out of the church. I believe it is quite obvious that God did not rebuke me for trying to bring something of God’s word into that blasphemous situation.

At that time I was the pastor at Charlton and Blackheath Christian Fellowship, the church that I still attend, and a few weeks later as I was preaching one Sunday morning I made reference to that church and to the above service. I do not remember my exact words but I know that I was speaking against it. I do not often hear the voice of God audibly but at that time I did. It was very clear and it was in the form of a rebuke that I never want to hear again. **“How dare you!”** I was speechless. I had to stop preaching. **“How dare you speak against My Church!”** It was so clear. The congregation were not aware what was going on, but I stopped preaching and stood silent listening to God. I believe I may have groaned or wept a little. ‘There are those in that church that are mine! They may not be well taught. They may be deceived but they are mine. How dare you speak against My Church!’ Whether aloud or silently I do not remember, but I repented there and then before I was able to continue preaching. I cannot remember much about the rest of that service.

It was a life changing experience. Over the next week the Lord spoke with me more on the issue. Not in the same audible, angry voice. In summary he said that if I thought I was so strong and the others so weak then I ought to befriend them and encourage them in the word. Those in the church who were saved had no good spiritual food, they had remained as spiritual babies, but they were saved.

I do not want to hear God's voice in that way again. Now I attempt to never speak against another church or congregation or denomination however weak they may appear on the outside. Consequently, as every born again believer is a member of the church, I now also try to never speak against an individual member of the body of Christ. I fail, but I try. I continue to speak against false doctrine but I try never to speak about another church or ministry. It has become a strong part of me and an integral part of my teaching of church leaders.

When I share this story with others, they too begin to see how much we, as leaders in the church, talk against our brothers. As the light of the Holy Spirit shines it begins to convict many of the times, the many times, that we do not speak well of one another. Even pastors and leaders who have been together as members of the same pastors fellowship for many years begin to see that what they thought was unity was at best togetherness and that even their togetherness was not as 'together' as they thought. They begin to realise that they have not even begun to dwell 'together in unity'.

Brokenness is sometimes necessary before healing and restoration can come. Leaders begin to acknowledge that they have been jealous of one another. (It is not just leaders. I believe that every member of the body of Christ is guilty in some measure). They are jealous because another pastor has a bigger sanctuary or a larger congregation. In Africa a sound system is something to be coveted and this is often confessed as a cause of jealousy. Most leaders have been jealous at some time of another man's ministry. "Why should he have a regular spot on the radio? I could do a better job than him." "I know he has a better choir but I know that the choir master is having an affair with the leading soprano!"

A superior attitude may not be listed as one of the seven deadly sins, but it is deadly in that it destroys unity. "Of course, we have a proper understanding of the ministry of the Holy Spirit - not like the church down the road!" "Well obviously they do not understand how to baptise!" "Our worship leader is really anointed. I could not stand to be in that church where they sing the same songs week after week." We may not speak the words, but the thoughts are in our hearts and that is the same as if they were spoken.

What about the many words we speak about one another. When I went to the church above to take something of God's word, He did not rebuke me. As soon as I opened my mouth to speak against them I was rebuked strongly. How it grieves the heart of God when we bring division into the church by speaking against one another and gossiping and back biting.

If you knew you had just twenty four hours to live and you have just one more opportunity to pray, what would you pray? I have often asked this question. I get many differing replies. Top of the list is to ask for more time so that we can live longer. Another major answer is to ask God to look after members of the family.

Many replies are for God to meet needs for others that are as yet unmet. Another favourite is that particular unsaved people would be saved.

The general agreement from the responses is that people would pray for the thing which is the most important in their life at that time; life, family, needs, salvation.

Jesus had eaten the Feast of the Passover with His disciples just before going to the Garden of Gethsemane where He would be arrested, taken to be tried and crucified. He washed the disciple's feet and had many words of encouragement for them. Then He prayed the last recorded prayer before the events of His passion began to unfold. His prayer is recorded in John 17. I believe it is fair to say that in His last prayer before His passion He would pray the thing that was most important to Him, the thing closest to His heart. These, then, are extracts from that most important prayer:

*'Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom you have given Me,
that they may be one as we are.'* (verse 11)

*I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me
through their word; **that they all may be one**, as you, Father are in Me
and I in you* (verse 20-21)

***'That they may be one just as We are one: I in them and You in Me'**
(verse 22-23)*

He was facing the greatest pain that any man has ever faced, death by crucifixion, together with a temporary but total separation from Father God. The physical pain is beyond our imagination but the anguish of the pain of the separation from His Father called Him to cry out "Why have You forsaken Me?" Jesus was preparing to face all that and yet He prayed three times for the church "**That they may be one**" With the immense suffering He knew was before Him, this has to be a major desire of His heart, of the heart of God. His desire for unity transcended all other thoughts even at the time of His agony.

And the church has ignored Him! It is divided. Worse, it is fragmented. It holds jealousy and unforgiveness in its heart. It is competitive. It speaks against itself. It fights, sometimes even murders to get its own way. I have known pastors rejoice at the fall of a pastor from another church in the hope that he would get some of his members.

Many new ministries start because a man disagrees with the leadership and instead of sitting and dealing with the problem sets off to start a new ministry with 'the truth'. Some simply want to be the big boss and the only way to do it is to start their own ministry and give themselves a big title. Often pride will stop one brother from speaking to another. Whatever the reason the cause is the same – self and selfishness. Instead of '*looking for the interests of others*' (Philippians 2:4) we want our own way even at the expense of others and especially at the expense of the unity of the church and the Gospel.

Jesus said, "A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand and if a house is divided against itself that house cannot stand." As I read some of the articles in some

Christian magazines and listen to reports on Christian radio I could be forgiven for thinking that revival has hit the church and it cannot get better than this until we get to heaven. Yet what we have is nothing near to the unity Jesus prayed for. The churches that claim to model New Testament church fall far short of the church in the Book of Acts.

A favourite question I ask is “How many churches are there?” I see people with puzzled looks on their faces. They have no idea. The best answer that they can find is “Many!” or “It is impossible to count.” Forgive me if I misquote again. This time Matthew 16:18. I will again put it right afterwards. Jesus said:

“I will build my churches and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against them!”

I sometimes see a few wise nods, but the majority cry out to me “No, not ‘churches’ but ‘church’”. He said I will build my (one) church.” Of course! So let me ask the question again. Then I get a different answer. “There is only one church.” Jesus said ‘I will build my church’. It is not the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church, the Pentecostal Church, the Anglican Church, the Gospel Lighthouse Church or any other church. Jesus is not a polygamist. When He comes back He is not coming back for many brides, for many churches, but only one church, one bride.

*“I will build my **church** and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it!”*

For myself, I visit many churches each year. They are a real mixture. Some are quiet and spend time in quiet reflection; some are very noisy and demonstrative; some have a liturgical type service; they often have different views on baptism, on the work of the Holy Spirit, on whether the rapture will be before or after the tribulation. I enjoy being with them all, because when I am there I am with my brothers and sisters in the Lord. Denominations are a problem for men. But not for Jesus. He likes variety. We are all different and have different personalities.

At the time of creation, for example, when God created trees He made many different types. Some are very tall and majestic. Some are short and squat. Some are laden with flowers of beautiful fragrance. Some bring forth delicious, juicy fruits and others thorns. The wood of some is good for furniture while some wood is better for construction. Some leaves and barks can be used in medicines while others are poisonous. Now we have a problem! With so much variety how can we be sure which one is truly to be called ‘tree’? Surely they cannot all be acceptable to bear the name. After all, some do not bring forth the same fruit as others. This one would be uncomfortable if I made a chair from it. Another would make me ill if I ate from it. What a ridiculous argument, you may say. God has no problem with a variety of trees!

Yet this ‘ridiculous argument’ is exactly the one we use about the church. There are many different types of church and we argue that ‘our’ church or ‘our’ denomination is the best one or the right one or the one with the truth. Such arrogance! If I ask the same question as with the trees, “Which one is the church?” Surely not all can carry

the name church! We recognise all trees as trees and each variety has its purpose, but we fail to recognise that all churches are churches and all have their purpose.

In 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27 we read as follows:

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free--and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.

And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honourable, on these we bestow greater honour; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honour to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another and if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

This passage has been taught probably to most Christians to show that we need all the people in our congregation for it to be complete. We need all the individual gifts of the Spirit operating so that our ministry is complete. It has been taught as 'body ministry' and applied to our own congregation, denomination or ministry.

Jesus says that He is building just one church and He needs not just the variety of individual members, but the variety of ALL the denominations, all the congregations, all the ministries to make His one body, the Body of Christ – His Church – complete.

I would like to suggest a different way of reading the above passage to help us understand how we can work with Him to build His Church.

For as the Body of Christ is one and has many congregations, ministries and denominations, but all the members of that one Body, being many, are one Body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized

into one Body--whether Baptists or Anglicans, whether Pentecostals or Methodists --and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

For in fact the Body is not one denomination but many. If the Catholic should say, "Because I am not a Protestant, I am not of the Body," is it therefore not of the Body? And if the Methodist should say, "Because I am not a Lutheran, I am not of the Body," is it therefore not of the Body? If the whole Body were Brethren, where would be the Wesleyan? If the whole were Assemblies, where would be the House Church? But now God has set the denominations, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.

And if they were all one denomination, where would the Body be? But now indeed there are many denominations, yet one body. And the Orthodox cannot say to the Evangelical, "I have no need of you"; nor again the Salvation Army to the Presbyterian, "I have no need of you."

*No, much rather, those denominations of the Body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those ministries of the Body which we think to be less honourable, on these we bestow greater honour; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the Body, having given greater honour to that part which lacks it, **that there should be no schism in the Body, but that the denominations should have the same care for one another** and if one denomination suffers, all the denominations suffer with it; or if one denomination is honoured, all the denominations rejoice with it.*

Now you are the Body of Christ, and congregations, denominations and ministries individually.

What has happened to the prayer of Jesus "That they may be one"? We have lost sight of the fact that Jesus said He is building His Church and we are now all building our churches. We are building our denominations. It has become more important that people support our ministry or belong to our denomination. We are moving further from unity. We talk about "My church", "My denomination" and "My ministry" and that is what they have become. They have become 'ours', but are they genuinely His?

Jesus has no problem with the variety of denominations and churches. He does, however, have a problem with 'denominationalism' He likes variety but He hates the pride and superiority that we have when we presume 'ours' to be the best. Our denominational membership cards will not take us into heaven. There will not be different sections in heaven for the different denominations. We divide the body of Christ when we say that unless you are a member of our denomination you cannot take the bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus. We should tear up our membership cards if they serve to bring division. What counts is a new creation. If a man is born again He is your brother. If a woman is trusting Jesus alone for her salvation she is your sister. Enough of this sin of division.

I have been to many leaders meetings at which many events are 'advertised', and to which others are invited to support with their members, but many times we want

others to come to our meetings but discourage our members from going to meetings in other churches. Even as I plan to hold leaders seminars in various places there is often a great discussion as to where the meetings should take place. "If we hold it here then leaders from this church will not come." "We have booked a school hall so that no-one will think the meetings belong to this denomination." I have to spend money hiring a hall when there are churches with much more suitable facilities that could be used free of charge.

Often in a budget there is an item for equipment hire. If I query it I am told that it belongs to a certain church and they will hire it to us for use in the open air meetings. It belongs to the 'church' and it is for the use of the 'church' and yet I have to pay to hire it. I have been known to refuse and have hired it from a local shop. At least they are honest about their function!

Are we building His church or ours? Are we building our own kingdom or the kingdom of God?

Midsummer's Day, 21st June 1989. What a day to hold a transport strike! Underground trains, buses, and British Rail workers were all on strike in London, virtually bringing the city to a halt. We were one of about 3,000 churches in London who worked together for over a year as a result of Billy Graham accepting an invitation to hold a London-wide Crusade. The South London Venue was at Crystal Palace and we had booked a coach to take the many people that had accepted our invitation to come to the meetings. Now the coach that was to take us was held up in traffic and could not come. Similarly most of the people we had invited were also disrupted by the strike and eventually only eight turned up.

We had no choice but to take them in cars and we struggled through the blocked streets to the meetings. We arrived just in time for the collection and found seats so far from the platform that Billy Graham seemed almost a speck on the horizon! Our eight guests were still settling down when the appeal came. "I want you to get up out of your seats..." I was low in faith. These eight had not been given a chance to hear the Gospel, and to be honest, I did not think that his message had been strong that evening. (That was probably because I was listening for others instead of leaving the worrying to the Holy Spirit). To my amazement all eight, who did not know each other, got up out of their seats and gave their lives to Jesus.

Without doubt, there is an anointing on the life of Billy Graham and he has maintained his integrity for over 50 years as a very public figure. I wonder how much of his 'success' is his ability to unite the churches to work together. In an archive report entitled 'Billy Graham - his impact on Britain' in Christianity and Renewal Magazine I found the following:

'Believers previously hostile or suspicious of one another united under the Billy Graham crusade banner. Richard Bewes says, "I recall looking at the list of denominations involved in his 1989 visit and thinking 'no one but Billy could bring together such a diverse group.'"

Over 3,000 churches were united for one year for Billy Graham and 34,408 people recorded a decision to give their lives to Jesus.

Imagine the impact if churches, leaders and believers *previously hostile or suspicious of one another united under the banner of Jesus to build His Church*. What an impact. The blessings of unity would most certainly be commanded.

It is time for the church to put away its childish differences and grow up into maturity.