

Church - Christian Unity

Is the visible church the basis of Christian unity?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Scripture shows us that making membership or participation in a visible body the basis of Christian unity is a dangerous thing, as Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones demonstrated in his 1962 speech.

In 1962, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones addressed a British ministerial fellowship on the matter of Christian unity. At the time, the question of unity and how to achieve it was a burning issue in Britain. There were calls from various quarters for unity on many different bases, and by many different methods. In our [last article](#), we began a series of questions and answers on the subject of Christian unity, based on his speech.

Today, spokesmen for various movements around the globe are calling for unity on various un-Biblical foundations. Among these are the spokesmen for the Purpose-Driven Church and Emergent Church movements in Evangelical circles, and the Federal Vision and New Perspective movements among Reformed churches. A common theme in all of these movements is the teaching that membership or participation in the visible church is the basis of Christian unity — a teaching that these movements, tellingly, hold in common with Roman Catholicism.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones faced the same false teaching in his time. In his 1962 speech, he addressed it with his customary forthrightness and Biblical logic in his third point:

3. We must never start with the visible church or with an institution, but rather with the truth which alone creates unity. Failure to realize this point was surely the main trouble with the Jews at the time when our Lord was in this world. It

is dealt with in the preaching of John the Baptist, who said, "Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Luke 3:8). Our Lord teaches the same thing in John 8:32-34. The Jews had objected to His saying "the truth shall make you free," their argument being that they were Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man. He draws attention to their rejection of His Word and their attempts to kill Him, and concludes: "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham.... Ye do the deeds of your father.... Ye are of your father the devil" (John 8:39, 41, 44). Their fatal assumption was that the fact that they were Jews guaranteed of necessity their salvation, that membership of the nation meant that they were truly children of God. As John the Baptist indicated, the notion was entirely mechanical; God could produce such people out of stones.

The apostle Paul also deals with this confusion when he says in writing to the Romans: "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God" (Romans 2:28, 29). He repeats this in the words, "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel" (Romans 9:6). This is further enforced by the statement, "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7). And also, "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29).

The same mistake of starting with the visible institution rather than with truth was also made at the time of the Reformation. What Luther was enabled to

see, and what accounted for his courageous stand, was this selfsame point. He refused to be bound by that mighty institution, the Roman Catholic Church, with her long centuries of history. Having been liberated by the truth of justification by faith he saw clearly that truth must always come first. It must come before institution and traditions, and everything – every institution, even the church – must be judged by the Word of truth. The invisible church is more important than the visible church, and loyalty to the former may involve either expulsion or separation from the latter, and the formation of a new visible church.¹

Thus far we have seen that unity in and of itself should not be our primary goal, or regarded as an end in itself. And, we have seen that true unity is not to be found in the visible church itself. Truth is the basis of unity. What, then, is the truth that produces unity? What happens when the church tries to create a unity on any other basis? We shall take up these questions in our [next installment](#).

References:

1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "The Basis of Christian Unity," in Knowing the Times: Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions 1942-1977 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 160-161.

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