

Christian Unity

A Response to Professor Donald Macleod's Paper

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The Ecumenical Movement is perhaps one of the greatest challenges faced by evangelicals in the twentieth century. Their initial reaction was to cry that the unity of which the Scriptures speak is a spiritual phenomenon, a "vertical" rather than a "horizontal" unity. It is one of the "givens" of the Christian faith. It does not need to be created by any movement, for it already exists. The true church, the body of Christ, is already one.

The corollary of this thinking was, unfortunately, complacency. Many saw the Ecumenical Movement as on the wrong tracks anyway, ignored or gave a superficial answer to the question of Christian unity raised by the Movement and got on with the important work of evangelism, thereby extending the membership of the true Church.

For many today the Ecumenical Movement is a spent force. But the problem of Christian unity still remains. Professor Donald Macleod in his paper, "The Basis of Christian Unity" rightly begins by making the point that the unity of the Church though spiritual is not purely so. It must have practical expression, for believers are not an idea but "flesh and blood". He further maintains that doctrinal agreement is not the basis of Christian unity. The real foundation of this is our common membership of the body of Christ.

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This gives us cause for reflection. It is not sufficient to say that the true Church is an invisible entity and that this removes all responsibility from us in the matter. Christ prayed for the unity of His people so that the world would recognize by this that God had sent Him. It is a demonstrable unity, capable of challenging and converting the world. If, for no other reason than this, it is to be a "flesh and blood" unity.

It also provides us with a problem. If it is to be a real visible unity and if the basis of it is our oneness in Christ, how may we discern a Christian and a Christian Church? Professor Macleod's answer to the first query is that a Christian is one who professes faith in Christ. In responding to the second, he proposes the Reformers' answer in the "marks" of the Church. These are five in number: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments according to the will of Christ, ecclesiastical discipline which includes not only censures but a biblical polity or church government, the performance of public worship "more or less purely" and distribution in the form of a ministry of compassion.

There is an important distinction between accepting a person into a Christian fellowship and recognizing a body as a Christian church. The paper points out the speed with which those who professed faith were received into the New Testament Church, for example, Lydia, the Philippian gaoler, the household of Cornelius and even Simon Magus. Certainly we must avoid a hyper-judgmental stance of "inquisitorial minuteness". But it may be material to our

*Evangel editor,
Harry Uprichard,
writes the first of a
series of responses to
Professor Donald
Macleod's
challenging paper on
Christian Unity.*



discussion to note that today many, who come to us professing faith, come from a background of superficial "Decisionism" or entrenched self-righteousness and a reasonable caution in acceptance combined with a reasonable examination of the genesis of the profession seems to be in order.

However, the question of the recognition of a Christian Church is a different matter. Here Professor Macleod treads the well-worn ground of the Reformers' "marks" and enlivens the exposition of these with some important emphases. He makes the point that the preaching of the Word is more than doctrinal but includes doctrine as integral.

Mere possession of a confessional basis does not ensure that a Christian body is characterized by the preaching of the Word. It must actively preach the same. The "fundamentals" of the Christian faith, the substance of the preaching of the Word, can be compiled from an overview of basic Old and New Testament doctrines. A sense of balance or proportion is necessary. There are doctrines of primary and of secondary importance. The paper lists eighteen such "fundamentals" and goes on to emphasise the broad areas of agreement within the various branches of the Christian Church and the inflated or distorted sense of difference produced through imbalance in or ignorance of these "fundamentals". The Christian creeds come to the rescue. They serve as confessions by which churches proclaim their understanding of what the Scriptures teach. They are standards of orthodoxy and symbols of union.

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The implications of this thinking are far-reaching. For one thing, it explodes the myth that the only options open to us in discussing Christian unity are either a narrow hidebound confessional attitude of heresy hunting on the one hand or, on the other, a broad ill-defined stance of Christian friends who put much more store on living a good life than on being overly precise as to what they believe. For far too long these have been regarded as the only alternatives and the dialogue has continued stiffly on these presuppositions. We must

learn that this is not the way forward. If there is such a thing as the tenor of Scripture and if the creeds can help us on our way to rediscovering this, then we must pursue the matter diligently. The way in which the paper elucidates how reaction to Socinianism, Pelagianism, Arminianism and Roman Catholic dogma animated the quest in the past should relieve us from thinking that its pursuit will be arid in the present or in the future. If more ecumenical discussion was concentrated on magnifying those features held in common by us and of translating them into *active* preaching of the Word, the cause of Christian unity would be much better served.

This thinking also provides both the parameters and the spirit within which the debate must continue. A sense of balance is the keynote here. Working from the fundamentals as represented in Old and New Testaments, we should use the response of church history to reestablish the primacy of these basics. Further, there should be a far greater appreciation of the inter-relationships within these fundamentals, as, for example, between those issues raised in the Christological debates leading up to Chalcedon and those raised at the Reformation. This is what prompts Professor Macleod's assertion, "There are fundamentals beneath justification. The person of Christ is fundamental. Justification by faith is the meeting-point of many doctrines, a rallying centre of theology; but it is not the foundation". This is not saying that justification by faith is not fundamental. It is number 8 in the paper's list of fundamental doctrines. It is saying that there is a relationship between justification by faith and the person of Christ, a relationship which must be recognized if we are to perceive the underlying unity behind the fundamentals, the tenor of Scripture, the "normative" nature of the Word to be preached.

This reasoning earths the quest for Christian unity in practical realism. Many believe that the affirmation "Jesus is Lord" represents basic Christian confession. It would be naive to suppose, however, that it evinces all that is meant by "the preaching of the Word" or even that in itself it provides a satisfactory basis for Christian unity. This lower common denominator approach has been tried and found wanting. It does not answer the questions posed by the diversity within Christendom. The paper extends the basic confession to embrace a number of identifiable fundamentals which are all inter-related. It recognises also that there are other important but secondary issues. As such, it presents a truer "Word consciousness" both for the preaching of the Word and as a practical basis of Christian unity. This "Word consciousness" is seen at its clearest in the paper's observation on the place of Pentecostalism within any proposed union. It largely falls on the issue of special revelation. It goes beyond the authority of Scripture, which is fundamental. The preaching of the *Word* is a true mark of the Church.

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The second mark of the Church is the right administration of the sacraments. The "principled" use of unfermented grape juice does indeed constitute a problem but, perhaps, one not beyond the bounds of reasonable resolution. The judgement in respect of the celebrant that the New Testament standard is the general one of decency and order seems wise. Professor

Macleod is undoubtedly correct in emphasising the nature of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as being the deepest and most divisive issue. Indeed, his insistence later that he is majoring on fundamentals, the essence of Christian unity, is constantly relevant. We see it also as he discusses baptism and church order.

Problems over the nature of the Lord's Supper arise from the sacramental ecclesiology of Roman Catholic teaching. The massive influence of this dogma is said to be evident in the recent Report, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry published by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, in the doctrine of Martin Luther and in the teaching of John Calvin.

This is no overstatement of the facts and is central to all ecumenical discussion. The understanding of what the Lord's Supper is outcrops frequently in the importance attached to the sacrament in these discussions. One often wonders does this importance relate to an incorrect appreciation or overrated estimate of the sacrament as, in and of itself, conferring grace. That this outlook persists far beyond Roman Catholic thinking testifies to the truth of what this paper contends. A common view of the essential meaning of the sacrament is necessary for the advance of the cause of Christian unity, for it affects the whole understanding of salvation and the nature of the Christian life. Confusion or imprecision at this point courts disaster at so many others.

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The clear assertion of Professor Macleod even amid the various shades within conservative evangelical opinion gives crisp and helpful guidance. "The question of the Lord's presence in the Sacrament is not raised by the New Testament material itself. Once it is raised, however, we have to say two things, both of them negative: first, that the *body* of Christ is not present in any sense; and, secondly, that the Lord is not present at the Lord's Supper in any *unique* sense. He indwells His people always. He is present with those gathered in His name always. He is present to faith always. He is present in baptism, in preaching and in prayer as really as He is in Holy Communion." The contention, too, that this is not mere Zwinglianism but a judicious criticism of Calvin's stance indicates a true reforming spirit, *semper reformans et reformanda*. It is a clear pointer forward in the debate.

The essence of baptism is equally important. Baptismal regeneration still colours much thinking on the matter. But again with characteristic realism the paper contends that even if we clarified the nature of baptism and reached some agreement regarding its mode, the question of the subjects to be baptised would still constitute a practical barrier to union.

The W.C.C. Report, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry tends to minimise the differences over infant and believers' baptism. It advocates one baptism with the two aspects and cites the instance of some churches uniting with both infant-baptist and believer-baptist traditions. The answer is not so simple. As the paper implies, these varied points of view represent diverse ways of looking at "a divine institution". It seems wiser to be realistic about the situation

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and to plead for "mutual respect, frequent consultation, co-operation in witness and fellowship in prayer" rather than project an idealism and union which is unsatisfactory. The plea for Baptists to analyse views on re-baptism and paedo-baptists to cease indiscriminate practice finds an echo in the advice given in the W.C.C. Report.

If we are to move forward in the subject of the sacraments in general and of baptism in particular, this thoroughgoing and clear understanding of their nature, for which the paper calls, must be in evidence. One glaring omission from most ecumenical sacramental dialogue is the complete absence of consideration of covenant theology. It is surely in the world of promisory oaths and bonded seals, so much a part of biblical revelation, that we can find a clearer grasp of sacramental meaning? Yet this is rarely if ever mentioned.

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Professor Macleod's suggestion that in church polity ministry rather than office should be emphasised is helpful and his three-fold division of ministry as tables, oversight and word provides a fresh and challenging overview. But the lack of recognition of even the *possibility* of equating the office of presbyter and bishop, the maintenance of a three tiered ministry in hierarchical structure of bishop, presbyter and deacon, insistence on the primacy of episcopacy and "lineal" apostolic succession still prove a real obstacle to union in ministry. Even allowing the fluidity of New Testament offices and an imaginative approach in terms of ministry rather than office, this intransigence persists. It means that there is no real mutual recognition in spirit or theology even if there is some co-operation in practice. Again, it is a matter of understanding and agreement about essence.

However, in spite of the sometimes gloomy prospect on the ground, this paper, as a whole, offers great hope and challenge. It can be used to develop a truly biblical and evangelical ecumenism. It inspires confidence not merely because of its reasoned and reasonable spirit but because of the way it catches the tenor of Scripture on the matter and evinces judicious opinion on this through a knowledgeable grasp of the effects of this teaching in the history of the Church. Above all, it says some vital and important things about Christian unity. Christian unity is spiritual but none the less real for that. The preaching of the Word is more than doctrine but includes doctrine as integral. The right administration of the sacraments is a true mark of the Church but interpreting the essence of these is necessary, though it may prove divisive. The polity of the Church is in the nature of ministry rather than office. Worship must be in truth, in Spirit and in order. Distribution must be in evidence. On the subject of Christian unity these things are well worth saying and in this paper they are excellently said.
