

At What Cost Unity?

THE CURRENT painful discussions within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) about the peace, unity, and purity of the church raise the question of whether we are seeking institutional unity at any cost. That certainly seems to be the case. If so, this raises, of course, the additional question of whether such unity can be purchased at any cost or whether the paying of certain costs would in fact undo and dissolve the very goal that purports to be sought.

It was a privilege for my wife and me recently to attend a conference about such matters sponsored by the Presbytery of the James.¹ The Reverend Jack Haberer, a member of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church for the whole denomination, was the featured speaker. In all fairness, I must note that the stated topic of the conference was “How Can We Stay Together?” That is to say, peace and purity were never intended to be topics of discussion or concern. That left unity alone, and the message I heard throughout was that we must seek unity at any cost.

Indeed, Mr. Haberer stated clearly in his opening plenary that the unity of the church is a divine imperative. Despite the high value that dialogue is alleged to have, that kind of statement intends, of course, to end all discussion. Given a divine imperative, the implication is that we can do no other. The implication is that we must stay together. The implication is that we must agree. The implication is that any and all costs for church unity are fully justified. The implication is that any division within the church or any division of the church is at best disobedient and at worst schismatic and demonic.

Therein, however, lies a significant irony: the very emphasis upon church unity as a divine imperative threatens to make the continuing existence of the church under discussion illegitimate. Indeed, the insistence upon church unity as a divine imperative renders all denominationalism illegitimate. Some would readily admit and embrace that. Let us be clear, however, that if that were the case, if all denominationalism were by definition illegitimate, we should quit worrying about the unity of and within the Presbyterian Church, we should abandon this splinter group altogether, and we should seek the much larger unity of the whole church of Jesus Christ. Indeed, we could do no other. The demise of the Presbyterian Church would be a necessary cost to be paid for the greater good.

If, however, there is any remaining sense of legitimacy or appropriateness to denominationalism, to Protestantism, or to the Reformed heritage, any at all—and surely even those within the Presbyterian Church who emphasize unity as a divine imperative must place some such value on this branch of the church, or they would not be pushing so hard to maintain its unity and existence—if there is any remaining legitimacy to Presbyterianism at all, then we should not pretend that church unity is an absolute value. It may be a very high value. But if it were an absolute value, if it were a divine imperative, then denominationalism would be forbidden and all efforts to maintain the existence of the Presbyterian Church, let alone its unity,

¹The conference was held November 7–9, 2004, in Williamsburg, Virginia. This little reflection was written later that year. It was soon posted on the website of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church of Richmond, Virginia, perhaps early in 2005. A few years later, the *Layman* linked to it from their website.

would be inherently sinful. That is to say, absolute church unity and the Presbyterian Church are mutually exclusive. And we should admit that the current push for church unity taking place within the Presbyterian Church is simply about desperation for institutional survival (even though its rhetoric is working against that).

Instead of insisting that the unity of the church is a divine imperative—which, as I have just said, tends not toward the unity of Presbyterianism but toward its demise—perhaps we should understand the unity of the church as a divine gift. It is something wonderful which God gives to us. Yes, we should pray for it. We should seek it. We should receive it gladly when it comes. We should not stand in its way. We should not work against it. And yet, surely we must realize that the unity of the church is God’s work, God’s business, God’s accomplishment, and God’s gift to us. It is not something we can do ourselves. Let me put it this way: any church unity of which we are capable of accomplishing could not possibly satisfy the divine imperative for church unity if, in fact, there were one.

Even Jesus Christ prayed for the unity of the church, as recorded in John 17. We all know this. The point here is that he *prayed* for it! He did not command it. He did not demand it. He did not assume that his followers would be capable of it. In fact, the urgency of the prayer seems to assume that his followers would be lacking it. Jesus asked his Father to bestow unity upon us as a gift! Yes, of course, this means that church unity is in agreement with the heartfelt desire of our savior. But no, it does not mean that it is simply up to us to do it, to achieve it, to legislate it, to mandate it, or to accomplish it, especially not at the cost of abandoning the historic faith and teachings of the church.

Part of the irony of our current life together in the church is that those who push most loudly and insistently for the unity of the Presbyterian Church as a divine imperative to be sought at any cost may, in fact, be doing the most to undermine both the desired unity of the church and the church itself. Oddly enough, those, on the other hand, who are at least willing to contemplate the institutional disunity of the Presbyterian Church for the sake of the peace and purity of the church may, in fact, be doing the most to maintain both the unity and existence of the church.

Please understand: I am in favor of the unity of the church of Jesus Christ. And within that larger unity, I am in favor of maintaining the gifts that have been given to us in and through the Reformed heritage and true Presbyterianism. I am simply saying that in order to do so, in order to maintain the unity of the Presbyterian Church as a viable part of the larger church, it is inherently, dare I say, “imperative” that we not undermine the legitimacy of the existence of the Presbyterian Church in the very process of seeking to maintain it.

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