

## **THE BASIS OF CHRISTIAN UNITY**

We live in an ecumenical age. Unity has become the topic of the day. Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of Christendom. In response to many divisions and schisms in the churches there is now an urgent appeal for greater unity among Christians, particularly among those of Reformed persuasion. Appeals for unity have been voiced at international conferences (ICRC), ecclesiastical assemblies, Reformation rallies, unity symposiums, church union gatherings, etc. When we hear these appeals for unity, and note a desire to strive for unity among Christians we could consider this to be a good development.

We must, however, judge this striving for unity by the Word of God. Many of the incentives to unity proposed today cannot stand the scrutiny of Scripture. For that reason there is the need to test the spirits of this striving age and compare them with what the Word tells us should form the basis of Christian unity.

In a booklet entitled 'The Basis of Christian Unity', Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones has some important and relevant things to say to the church in our day. He states that unity must never be isolated or regarded in and of itself and it must never be the foremost consideration. This is stated so clearly in Acts 2:42 where fellowship follows doctrine; "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (KJV). That is a precise order in which things are placed; also in John 17 and Ephesians 4.

The present tendency to discount and to depreciate doctrine in the interest of unity is simply a denial and violation of plain New Testament teaching. We must never start with the church or with an institution, but rather with the truth, which alone creates unity. Failure to realize this point was the main trouble with the Jews at the time when our Lord was in this world. The fatal assumption was that because they were Jews they would be guaranteed salvation. They believed that membership of the nation meant that they were truly children of God. The same mistake of starting with the institution rather than with the truth was also made before the Great Reformation. Luther refused to be bound by that mighty institution, the Roman Catholic Church, with her century long 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. Everything must be judged by the Word of truth.

The starting point in considering the question of unity must always be regeneration and belief of the truth. Nothing else produces unity, and it is impossible apart from this. An appearance or a facade based on anything else is clearly a fraud and a lie. People are not "one" nor in a state of unity when they disagree about the fundamentals of faith. To give the impression that they are "one" simply because of a common outward organization is misleading. To do anything which supports or encourages such an impression or appearance of (a) unity is dishonest and sinful. Truth and untruth cannot be reconciled, and the difference between them cannot be patched over. Error is always to be exposed and denounced for truth's sake.

Furthermore, unity must neither be thought of primarily in numerical terms. Nothing is as opposed to the biblical teaching as the modern idea that numbers and a powerful organization are the things that count. Such thinking is the very opposite of the great biblical doctrine of the "remnant".

Finally, Dr. Lloyd-Jones states that the ultimate question facing us these days is whether our faith is in men and their power to organize, or in the truth of God in Christ Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Are we primarily concerned about the size of the Church or the purity of the Church? Such purity must of course be in evidence both in doctrine and in life-style. God's Word must remain the norm for our ecumenical thinking and acting. We must know what we believe and tenaciously hold on to the truth. If we compromise that truth in our desire for Christian unity then what remains is neither truth nor unity.

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones is not the only one who has expressed concern about "the present tendency to discount and to depreciate doctrine in the interest of unity." Francis Schaeffer warned nearly thirty years ago in *The God Who Is There* that "the church is following the irrationality of secular philosophy... Many are discarding doctrine in favor of personal experience. Others are willing to disregard crucial biblical distinctives in order to achieve external unity among all professing Christians." (a)

J.F. MacArthur expressed similar sentiments. He writes: "True unity is rooted in truth. Jesus prayed: 'Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth... For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one.' (John 17:17-21, emphasis added). The unity for which He prayed is preceded by and grows out of sanctification in the truth. Fellowship that ignores or glosses over the crucial doctrines of the faith is not Christian unity; it is ungodly compromise.

Anyone today who is bold enough to suggest that someone else's ideas or doctrines are unsound or unbiblical is dismissed at once as contentious, divisive, unloving, or unchristian. It is all right to espouse any view you wish, but it is not all right to criticize another persons views - no matter how patently unbiblical those views may be... Even to suggest that a sorting between lies and truth is necessary is viewed by many as perilously intolerant. There is a notion abroad that any dispute over doctrine is inherently evil. Concern for orthodoxy is regarded as incompatible with Christian unity. Doctrine itself is labeled divisive and those who make doctrine an issue are branded uncharitable. No one is permitted to criticize anyone else's beliefs, no matter how unbiblical those beliefs seem to be... In the name of unity, such matters of doctrine are expressly not supposed to be contested." (b)

The words penned by Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, Francis Schaeffer, and John F. MacArthur also have relevance for the Reformed churches. As Reformed churches we stand on the same confessional basis, yet it is apparent that also within the Reformed churches there is increasingly more tolerance to deviations from the Reformed confession of Scripture. And we know that when tolerance is valued over truth, the cause of truth always suffers. "A lasting union can only be achieved if it is built on a solid confessional basis. This requires a statement of unequivocal allegiance to Scripture, the confessions, and a stated willingness to abide by a common Reformed church order." ©

"Lasting union can only be achieved if there is a sincere and active commitment to true ecumenicity. True ecumenicity represents the desire for and pursuit of full ecclesiastical unity with all Reformed believers according to the prayer of Christ in John 17:22. The pursuit of true ecumenicity must be seen not as a option, but as a duty and obligation given by God Himself... The

ultimate key to lasting union is true obedience to the norms of Scripture and to the call of Christ. This is required of the church at all times, and therefore all believers must be persistent in serving the cause of unity in the truth and truth in unity.” (d)

Dr. Lloyd-Jones echoed these sentiments when he said: “God’s Word must remain the norm for our ecumenical thinking and acting. We must know what we believe and tenaciously hold on to the truth. If we compromise that truth in our desire for Christian unity then what remains is neither truth nor unity.” Therefore there is the constant need to test the spirits of the age and compare them with what the Word of God tells us should form the basis of Christian unity. There is the perpetual requirement for a return to discernment. We must “incline our hearts to understanding” and our minds to the unchanging Word of God; to the truth that endures forever. Let us then manifest our unity in Christ with a unanimous and faithful confession of the truth.

Ron Dykstra

a), b) Reckless Faith, John F. MacArthur

c), d) The Challenge of Church Union, Rev. J. De Jong, The Burlington Reformed Study Centre.

## **Welfare Reform’s Earlier Pioneers**

**By David W. Hall**

In the search for solutions in the area of welfare reform history can be an invaluable source. Some of the principles and practices of welfare from centuries earlier could help today. It seems therefore prudent to employ a rearview mirror to note what has successfully worked in other areas.

In this political issue, religious traditions may have some of the best wisdom around. Contrary to some modern caricatures, religious reformers were sensitive to the needs of the poor. A well-functioning diaconate was one of John Calvin’s contributions to Western civilization. Calvin’s relief ministry may have had as much influence in Europe as his theology did in other areas.

Calvin’s welfare program in Geneva was contoured to the theological emphases of the reformers, providing an earlier illustration that welfare practice was and is erected upon definite principles that were religious in nature.

Calvin was so interested in seeing the diaconate flourish that he not only left an inheritance for his family but also provided for the Boys School and “poor strangers” in his will. Calvin’s deacons cared for a large range of needs, not wholly dissimilar to the strata of welfare needs in our own society.

The Genevan deacons actively encouraged a productive work ethic. They provided interim subsidy and job-training as necessary; on occasion, they even provided the necessary tools or supplies so that an able-bodied person could engage in an honest vocation. They were discriminating as they ascertained the difference between the truly needy and the indigent. If necessary, they would also suspend subsidy. Over time, they developed procedures that protected the church’s resources from being pilfered, even requiring new visitors to declare a craft and list character witnesses to vouch

for their honesty. Within a generation of this welfare work, the diaconate of Geneva discovered the need to communicate the front-end goal that recipients were to return to work as soon as possible.

In 16<sup>th</sup> century Geneva deacons were frequently called upon to raise children in cases of abandonment. Special gifts were given to truly needy children. The diaconate also included a ministry to widows who often had dependent children and a variety of needs.

Still, however, it must be noted that although this faith-based poverty relief resembled many other contemporary welfare funds, it had its own theological peculiarities; moreover, these theological distinctives led to certain practical commitments. For example, there were no guaranteed food hand-outs. Furthermore, there were certain pre-requisites for receiving care, including the possibility that certain moral deficiencies would nullify the opportunity to be assisted by the deacons.

Calvin's deacons were not concerned only with spiritual or internal needs. On many occasions they hired medical doctors to take care of the ill. Their records indicate that the deacons oversaw medical care for the needy, reflecting that diaconal ministry was not limited only to inner spiritual concerns.

Despite the rigor with which the deacons distinguished between the deserving and undeserving poor, charity motivated them to err on the side of generosity. Still, however, there were times and instances when the deacons would not give assistance to supplicants because of attitudinal or moral blights. Charity did not justify subsidies that militated against personal industry and responsibility. If a recipient behaved immodestly or unchastely then he/she would not receive certain aid. Recipients of subsidy were expected to uphold Christian standards of morality; if not, the deacons might withhold support until immoral behaviour was jettisoned. The deacons definitely attempted to use relief as a means of discipline and encouragement....

In summary, the following Reformation era welfare reform principles should be considered today:

- 1) It was only for the truly disadvantaged.
- 2) Moral prerequisites accompanied assistance.
- 3) Private or religious charity, not state largesse, was the vehicle for aid.
- 4) Ordained officers managed and brought accountability.
- 5) Theological underpinnings were normal.
- 6) Productive work ethic was sought
- 7) Assistance was temporary.

As those who look to the past and to the inadequacies of the present, perhaps we should replicate some of these policies, too. We might advance if we learn from the past, rather than looking exclusively to the present. In fact, if we find ourselves advocating practices markedly different from those in Geneva five centuries ago, then we might ask if our departure from their proven and tested methods should not be suspect.

[Taken, with permission, from Christian Renewal].

Editors Note: Although the forgoing article was written in the context of Welfare Reform in one of the American States, it serves a secondary purpose by directing our attention to charity and the office of Deacon. PdB

## LOVE

[In connection with a discussion about lifestyle versus doctrine (a false dilemma) the attention of some Refnetters has turned to Christian love. One of the responses in the discussion is a good reminder for all of us.]

I believe that one of the problems that is developing is a misunderstanding of the Law of God and it's relation to grace. When the Lord commanded us to love our enemies he only made clear that we, in doing so, keep the second table of the law. That I respect a man's life, so not kill him; that I respect his property and not steal from him or destroy his reputation etc.

So a man who loves God will necessarily hate evil and all anti-Christian activities, e.g. Stealing, lying, homosexuality and any activity forbidden by God's law. A man who loves and delights in God's law will hate and resent lawlessness. This makes love exclusive. There can be no activity or participation with love's antithesis. Therefore, if you suggest that we must love all men you are in reality trying to abolish the very love you attempt.

The statement: "Universal love is an impossibility" is true. A man cannot love Christ and those who espouse evil. We cannot serve two masters. To love all men in this way is to tolerate worldwide evil. I understand that those who think they can love all men do not tolerate worldwide evil, but it is a misunderstanding of the Law and its use, (poor doctrine!?) that brings them to say what they say and allows the evil activities to continue around us all.

If you love one another (John 13:18) is a clear reference to those within the household of faith. This is a love of esteeming another higher than oneself or of having things in common with each other. But the love of the enemy is not to be gushy, (imagine trying to have things in common with a thief) but to show him that he is safe with you in the confines of God's law: you wouldn't steal his wallet while he is sick or encroach on his land when he is away. But should he transgress any of God's Commandments you will not "be a silent by-stander". Lev 5:1; Prov. 29:24

"An unjust man is an abomination to the just: and he that is upright in the way is an abomination to the wicked" Prov 29:27

Dick M Barendregt

## DID CHRIST DIE FOR EVERYONE

Someone asked can you just say to anyone that God loves them? Or, to say it in other words: Jesus loves everyone: or, Christ died for everyone.

It seems like such an obvious question. Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:19 that God, in Christ has reconciled the world to Himself by not imputing their trespasses to them. In the first letter of John we can blatantly read: "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

From the reading of these two texts one could conclude that Christ has indeed died for everyone. That would also allow one to say to anyone "God loves you". Still in this way we are going in a wrong direction. We may not just use Bible texts without considering the contexts in which they are presented; or without considering the complete message of Gods Word.

We turn back to 2Cor 5: 19. We read: "God reconciles the world to Himself"... and now pay close attention, not imputing their trespasses (their sins) to them." Now we must ask the Scriptures when man hears that sins will not be imputed to him. Isn't it only when, in faith, he asks for forgiveness and redemption? Without that, we read a little further on in the same letter, everyone is disqualified: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith ... unless indeed you are disqualified. (2 Cor. 13:5)

Before we search in this text about what should be understood by world we will first have a look at 1John 2:2. It is after all a similar verse. This text too we will read against the background of its context: "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only but also for the whole world." Indeed, superficially, it appears that all people will be reconciled. But let us listen to John as he continues his letter, this time in chap 3:1. There it says: "See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know Him." We clearly see that, just like Paul, John declares: without true faith no one fairs well!

Now we should quickly deal with the question about the meaning of the expression that God is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. To do that we can learn from that same apostle, John, but this time from his gospel (chap 3: 16). We chose this text because here we can find , as it were, under one roof the love of God for the whole world as well as the condition of faith for salvation. This text reads as follows:" For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life".

Note! The love God has for the world is His love for His creation which He has beautiful produced. As the result of sin a curse has come upon it. But Christ's blood, in addition to purifying His people, also assures that this creation will once again become pure. De Korte Verklaring (The Short Commentary) has the following to say about this verse: "The world is one combined organic whole with man as head. Therefore it is not only man that needs reconciliation, but also the whole world will be restored to its original wonderful state according to Gods plan (Isaiah 65:17 and Rev. 21:1).That does not exclude the fact that many creatures, men and devils, will be condemned forever.

When an artist sees his finished work he will be filled with much love. In reality, even though the finished canvas really speaks to him he can not expect a word in reply. That is totally different when he lovingly casts his eye upon his wife. Then there is contact; then there is that relationship that gives joy in a proper marriage bond.

If during a bank robbery a worker is murdered the Lord is angered because of that terrible deed, even though the victim might be a atheist. Still, God's creature has been disdained. In reality the love of God, which has been revealed in Christ, is a love that seeks a relationship. He wants to deal with His children, His people, in love. He wants to be involved with them. What riches, what grace!

He has given His blood for His own (now pay attention) who He loved in the world (John 13:1), those whom the Father gave Him.

Although Christ's blood was sufficient for the reconciliation of the sins of the whole world, we may never say that a portion of His blood was wasted because there are so many who have not been willing to make use of it!! John interprets God's love for His people so nicely in the address of one of his letters: "The elder to the elect lady and her children. ... (2 John 1)

We may therefore not say to anyone, "God loves you". If we want to fulfill our calling, each in his own circumstances, by bringing our fellow citizens into contact to the Gospel, then we should speak accurately: "God also wants to give His love to you". For the Bible says: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28).