

outreach

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*providing
leadership
information and
Biblical teaching
Matthew 28:19-20*

representing



The Quest for Unity

“In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity”

It’s a no-brainer to acknowledge that disunity is disruptive—of family, of nations, political parties, and not least of religions: Shi’a and Sunni, Orthodox and Reformed, Roman Catholic and Protestant.

Division is the default position of human nature in all spheres of life. Yet, as said Jesus: ‘...*Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation*’ (Luke 11:17). In his final hours, indeed, his focus was on unity (John 17).

The twentieth century saw the formation (1948) of the *World Council of Churches*, a body seeking to draw together the varied strands of Christian belief. Virtually every denomination is represented—but still division persists. That’s human nature.

Unity in Diversity

What *is* unity? Certainly not conformity—with a belief system dictated and enforced from a central source. Politically that leads to oppression, gulags, secret police, isolation. And too often to rebellion. The ‘Arab Spring’ is a present example. There are, too, parallels in Christianity—we call them *denominations* and *cults*.

By contrast, a nation can be at peace with itself, united—even if on a war footing. Yet it is diverse, embracing a variety of opinion.

However, should it become culturally divided, lose its national identity and overarching vision then it fragments. Inevitably—human nature again—the dream shatters.

Historically, the Christian church echoes the pattern. ‘Empire-building’ fuelled by ego, doctrine, human nature, suspicion, inward-looking self-protection (all expressions of fallen human nature!) welded the first century founding independent church assemblies into denominations large and small—calcified institutional structures.

Plan A

We might ask—*what was the Architect’s plan for the House of God he was building?* As we have seen, he didn’t like disunity, either in the realm of the material or the spiritual. So how did Jesus view unity? The record of the half-century following his resurrection—our New Testament—gives us clues.

Towards the end of the first Christian century we are presented—by the apostle John (Revelation 2-3)—with the pattern of separate assemblies each clustered around a city. Clearly they were not part of an organized unitary body subscribing to a set doctrinal catechism, for Jesus had to correct each on different counts (*see* Revelation 2-3).

Writing to the brethren in Rome (*ch* 16) Paul acknowledges the existence of a number of separate assemblies all in fraternal and amicable communication with one another. To the Ephesian assemblies (*ch* 4) he urged ‘the unity of the Spirit’:
cont’d p.4

Letter from England

Traditionally, January is a time of new beginnings, a time for 'new year resolutions'. Gym memberships are renewed, tobacco laid aside (usually briefly!), diets embarked on.

I believe there's one vital change that Christians ought to consider. Our lead article touches on it. But how can it, how can unity, be achieved? Can we even define unity?

Within the Church of God family there is a high level of conformity in our interpretation of the Scriptures. Yet we experience division, with literally hundreds of 'denominations' and a few groups so self-protective that they deny fellowship to other brethren. So we must ask, *why?*

It's clear from the New Testament that the infant first century church was far from doctrinally one. Yet they worked together in service to a shared Master. And we have to a degree learned from that, for there is indeed little doctrinal difference now beyond the very few who embrace variant calendars or 'sacred names'.

But minor differences in doctrine ought not to be a cause for isolation, for 'passing by on the other side'. Is it, rather, fear of contamination, fear of 'sheep-stealing'? Is it leadership egotism and empire-building? Or perhaps a desire to protect the income? Is it grass-roots lack of forgiveness for past hurt—or is it leadership example? Could it be a lingering hero worship?

One could enquire how many sheep are stranded in the wilderness simply because restricted by the headquarters' uber-shepherds from seeking out a nearby 'foreign shepherd'? How many are deterred from commitment by observing the lack of co-operation between various 'churches of God'?

The challenge is for everyone—from the serving leadership up to all the brethren—to self-examine their personal role in disturbing the unity Jesus prayed for. Open ourselves to the challenge of engaging with all the brethren no matter what label they wear.

We could begin by sharing Sabbath services, sharing festival sites.

James

The Shroud of Mystery

The authenticity of the famed 'Shroud of Turin' frequently arises. Is it indeed the very burial cloth of Jesus Christ? Is the image in the cloth his image?

The *Vatican* refuses to confirm one way or another, while continuing to encourage it as a place of pilgrimage. *Scientists* either scoff or they produce supposed evidence for a first century origin. We must look elsewhere for confirmation., and the Scripture record is a good starting point.

Startled by the report of an empty tomb, Peter and John

...started for the tomb. They ran side by side, until the other disciple ran faster than Peter and got there first. He bent over and saw the strips of linen cloth lying inside the tomb, but he did not go in. When Simon Peter got there, he went into the tomb and saw the strips of cloth. He also saw the piece of cloth that had been used to cover Jesus' face. It was rolled up and in a place by itself. The disciple who got there first then went into the tomb

(John 20: 3-7).

The record states that the face-covering (Gk *soudarion*) was separate from the main covering. (a 'winding sheet') Envisage a head wrapped in a bandage. The Shroud of Turin, you may know, is a sheet, with the facial imprint squarely in the centre.

Resurrection Evidence

But there is more to this episode. So shocking was the sight that greeted him having entered the sepulchre that Peter '*...when he saw it, believed*' (v.7). His former doubts passed *Why?*

Consider. There lay the grave-clothes *formed in body shape* in the burial niche. (Imagine a mummy.) Separate from them was the face covering '*..in a place by itself*'. Recall that the long binding strips were packed with spices—a hundred pounds or so!—and wrapped among the bindings (John 19: 39-40).

In other words, the grave-clothes had retained the body shape of Jesus (*myrrh* is a form of glue or resin) as Jesus *passed through* them. What more proof did they need of a resurrection. And not a mere physical resurrection as Lazarus who had to be freed from the grave-clothes (*ch 11*), for Jesus body had disappeared, had become spirit.

That Shroud, no matter when woven or how imprinted simply draws attention to the most exciting act of history—the resurrection from the dead of our Lord and Saviour.

Ω

Insight from Paul

The apostle Paul's letters shed a bright light on our walk with God

Power and control is a preoccupation with our world in every field of endeavour. We are familiar with Power Blocs. A Government is 'in power'. Some nations exert economic power. Men and women strive to gain power in their field of endeavour.

But the apostle Paul had a different perspective. It's a view he learned at the feet of Jesus—for it wasn't always so with him. Saul was a man of power, an ambitious man.. Empowered by the High Priest to persecute Christians, he exercised murderous power over the believers.

Over time Paul learned 'the power of weakness'. Indeed following his conversion to the faith of Jesus it was over a decade in exile in Antioch before he was considered by the Lord to be fit for full-time service—and to be renamed Paul, 'the Little'.

He wasn't ashamed to bare his weakness, notably to the Corinthian brethren. '*...I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling*' he wrote to them (! Corinthians 2:3). '*...I will not boast about myself*', he said, '*except about my weaknesses*' (II Corinthians 12:5). Topsy-turvy thinking, would be the verdict of power-hungry men—in and out of the church!

Yet he and his companions '*...turned the world upside down*' (Acts 17: 6). He was used by Jesus to explain His teachings and to found church after church throughout the known world. How? How could someone whose health was poor, whose sight was weak, whose preaching wasn't '*...with human wisdom*'—not artful rhetoric—accomplish so much?

His meteoric rise within the church began when he abased himself before Jesus, when he expressed his readiness to do what was asked of him by the Lord. When he stopped glorying in his learning and his achievements as a leading Pharisee (the dominant power within Judaism). There's a lesson here for today's church.

During the training of the Twelve, Jesus had call to rebuke them for seeking power, citing the world's approach to leadership: '*...the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them*' (Matthew 20:20-28). His response? '*...it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister [Gk. diakonos] And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant [Gk doulos—slave]*' (v.26).

It is the attitude Paul expresses throughout his minis-

try, perhaps summed up in I Corinthians 13. How, then, his success?

Spirit Power

Jesus told Paul: '*... My power is strongest when you are weak*' (II Corinthians 12:9). And it is this power—the power of the Spirit—that motivated the apostle. That power is stronger than any human powers or abilities '*...Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men* (I Corinthians 1:25).

The Father by-passes most of those with high birth or great abilities: '*...God chose the foolish things of this world to put the wise to shame. He chose the weak things of this world to put the powerful to shame. What the world thinks is worthless, useless, and nothing at all is what God has used to destroy what the world considers important* (vv.26-28).

The apostle may have been an exception, but he subdued his background, became 'weak' in the service of his Master and Saviour. However, everyone invited by the Father to take part in His programme has access to that same Spirit, that same power. And is part of that same mission.

All are called to serve. All are called to tap into that power no matter our station in life's lottery. Ministry—service—is for all of us. Ω

In Debt

Millions of our fellows are mired in debt—overburdened by unpayable mortgages, and maxed out credit cards. Not a bright future.

The nation, too, is up to the ears in debt, and we are now talking of 'trillions'. (We used to struggle to understand the enormity of 'billions'.). The United States, for example, owes *fifteen trillion* dollars—\$15,000,000,000,000.

The much smaller UK economy hovers around two trillion pounds in debt. And growing, for last year over £170 billion was borrowed over and above revenue from taxation (at around 2% interest, remember.) This year we are expected to add £168 billion .. That's *your* money. .Recall that in 1997 our national finances were in the black!

Times may be tough, and likely—for a few years—to become tougher. Now is a good time to assess your personal financial state. Request the articles:

**Trust Me—I'm God
Where Has My Money Gone?**

Why Hell Fire?

It has long been established as a Biblical fact that the human ‘soul’ (Gk *psuche*, Heb *nephesh*) will cease to exist when we die. The word refers to our life force, the life that pulsates in us as distinct from the physical body. It includes the mind, the will. On death we do not pass at once to heaven or to hell, but are ‘asleep’ until recalled from the grave

**Request the articles:
When Someone Dies
The Long Sleep**

It is a given within Christendom—and indeed in other belief systems—that the ultimately unrepentant, the wicked among mankind, will be cast into a ‘Lake of Fire’ (Gk. *Ge’henna*) and tormented throughout eternity. Indeed the presumed purpose of salvation is to avoid such a fate. Isn’t that why we evangelize?

The image is of Jesus Christ, mankind’s Judge, or his angels, forcing people into an ever-burning intense fire. (The Devil is considered to reign there with his demons.) It does nothing for the image we hold of God. But is this the Bible teaching?

Rubbish Dump

The origin of *Ge’henna* is quite clear. It is ‘the Valley of Hinnom’—the rubbish dump lying, anciently, just east of Jerusalem. The city’s rubbish was incinerated there, along with the bodies of serious criminals.

It became a centre of pagan worship at one stage of its history, and in Christian times became a symbol for the fate of Satan, his angels—and for wicked humans.

Like much else in Christian teaching, this is a distortion of the truth! Without doubt when we die each of us faces judgment to give account of our life. And indeed the wicked do end up in that Fire. Will they exist there for ever? The plain answer is *No*.

Turned to Ashes

Jesus confirms: ‘...[God] gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life’ (John 3:16). There’s a contrast here: *life without end*—or its opposite, to *perish*—life that ends. A complete cessation of life. But how? *cont’d next column*

Unity...cont’d

With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all

No Plan B

Paul addressed his words to a local church assembly, though, of course, they do apply universally. As Jesus said: ‘...If you have ears, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches’ (Revelation ch 2:7 etc). It is the blueprint for unity for the twenty-first century church of God.

Indeed Jesus has no ‘Plan B’. All else is faulty human reasoning. We share one Father, one Spirit in all, uniting us in one spiritual body. So why division, why do different denominations meet separately in the same street—even the same building at the same time? Why ignore the Saviour’s instructions?

Now is a time to share.. Share ministries, share resources, share services and festival gatherings. Cast aside suspicion and navel-gazing. Embrace one another as brethren sharing the same destiny. **Ω**

You may recall that Jesus himself spent three days and three nights in ‘hell’—the grave [Gk *hades*], and was then resurrected (Acts 2:27).

He continues to give us guidance: ‘...But I will forewarn you whom you shall fear: Fear him, which after he has killed has power to cast into hell [Gr *ge’henna* = ‘hell fire’]; yes, I say unto you, Fear him.’ Luke 12:5).

Those thus destroyed will have rejected Christ’s sacrifice for sin. and like Ananias and Sapphira they will have put the Holy Spirit to the test—and dropped dead (Acts 5: 1-11).

You may have read that too quickly! First comes *death*, and *then* the carcass is disposed of—by incineration (*cf* II Peter 3:10)..

The lurid picture of the ‘damned’ tormented by burning in a fiery furnace for ever by a ‘loving’ God is a fiendish concoction of the devil that has caused distress down the ages. And, sadly, used as a ‘big stick’ by some to scare us into repentance. **Ω**
