

No Real Existence

Some years ago, I was feeling very concerned about Christian disunity. Something that has troubled me for many years, and which I remain convinced is deeply and painfully etched on our Father's heart. Especially since I started looking carefully at the Lord Jesus' words in **John 17:20-21**, where he says *"I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in me through their word; that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me."*

That was Jesus praying for you and me, not for the Twelve (eleven by then!) nor even for the great numbers of followers he already had. He was asking that we should be **that** united – as united as the Father is with the Son – with the result that the world may believe. And the opposite is also true: If the world cannot see that we are united, then they have every right NOT to believe that Jesus was sent by the Father, the one true God.

There we all were, in our own little separate boxes, following our own little separate programmes, talking unity but living division. Prepared to go a little way to express our oneness with Christian brothers and sisters, but not ready to lose our precious little individual corporate identities.

"Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God" wrote Bob Pierce, founder of the World Vision international humanitarian organisation, and I have echoed that prayer many times since I first read a book with the same title back in the 1960s. For Bob and for World Vision, it was and is the dire physical situation of impoverished people – especially children – throughout the world.

But, as I was beginning to see with greater clarity, God's heart is profoundly broken by the man-made divisions that we have erected between our different groups. We all have our excuses (we call them 'good reasons') why we cannot possibly abandon our particular loyalties. Of course, other people are very welcome to leave their groups and come and join ours, but the other way round? No way!

And then, as I was reading, I came across **1 Corinthians 8:4**. If you look it up, you will see that Paul is writing about food offered to idols and whether Christian believers should eat it. How on earth did this verse cast any light on my growing grief about Christian disunity?

"Why look at idolatry?" you ask, "that's got nothing to do with Christian unity – and no-one offers food to idols these days! Maybe in other places, but certainly not in this country!" Bear with me for a few moments.

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Several years before this, back in the late 1960s and early 70s, I had been privileged to spend some time in India. India's Hindu temples have no lack of statues and images of the vast pantheon of Hindu gods, and of course there are many worshippers who make devotional food offerings to these images.

One day, I talked with a Hindu man who was prepared to enter into two-way discussion with me about his religion and my faith in Jesus. It was an interesting and challenging session, certainly for me and hopefully for him also. One of my top questions was about idols and I asked him how he could possibly worship something that was simply a physical, man-made object. Running round in the back of my mind were verses from the Old Testament such as *"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they cannot walk; they cannot make a sound with their throat. Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them."*¹ How could this intelligent man really treat an image or a statue as if it were really a powerful supernatural being?

I expected him to start making excuses, but his answer was incredibly useful to me and helped me to begin to see idolatry from the viewpoint of an idol-worshipper. "Of course", he said, "I know that an image or a statue is only a piece of man-made artistry. It cannot possibly be a god in itself. But, by directing my external devotion to the image, I am better able to channel my inner devotion to my god."

¹ **Psalm 115:4-8**

That really opened my eyes to his understanding but, needless to say, it did not encourage me to follow his example, and particularly not to have any interest in any of the Hindu gods! The tangible presence of evil around many places and objects of devotion to the Hindu pantheon had already left me in no doubt that what Paul writes is 100% true: *“What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? But that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons.”*¹ That gives a very clear picture of the real direction of idol-worship. It provides an open door for Satan.

But now I had begun to see why idolatry, which to me had always seemed so obviously stupid and illogical, could be represented as a perfectly acceptable channel through which to try to approach ‘God’.

And, gradually over the following years, the Bible’s depiction of idolatry has become clearer to me.

One of the earliest examples: The Israelites, having been delivered 3 months earlier from 400 years of slavery in Egypt – by the very evident power of the one true and invisible God – found themselves in the wilderness at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses, their charismatic 80-year-old leader, had gone up the mountain and had not been seen for days. Aaron, Moses’ elder brother, was easily persuaded by the people to make a golden image, which he represented like this: *“This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.”* He even arranged a feast day in honour of this image and called it *“a feast to the LORD”*, using the personal name of God which had been revealed to Moses at the burning bush!

Obviously, Aaron and the people would all know that it was not this newly-made golden calf that had actually brought them out of Egypt 3 months earlier. After all, he had only just made it, and from their own golden jewellery which he had melted down! The people had demanded that he should make them a god who would ‘go before’ them. They wanted a symbol, something to follow, perhaps something to focus on in the same way as my Hindu acquaintance. Aaron fell into the trap. He made the image, the people worshipped it and gave sacrifices to it. Read the whole story in **Exodus 32**.

A vital and often repeated command from the LORD was to have nothing to do with any imagery as a vehicle for worship. That was one reason that he had not allowed himself to be seen by anyone. Moses reminded the people in **Deuteronomy 4:12, 15-16** : *“the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form – only a voice. . . . So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth. And not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.”* So, a clear command not to worship anything man-made and not even the sun, moon and stars which God himself had created.

It is a short step from this ‘representative’ idolatry, where an image is supposed to focus attention on the ‘god’ to be worshipped, to animism, which is ‘a belief that objects, places and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence’ (*Wikipedia*). Some people believe that animism is probably the most basic form of human religion. It certainly turns up in many cultures which we call ‘primitive’ and strong hints of it show in some modern popular philosophies. Perhaps there is even a remnant of it in our tendency to humanise non-human objects or events. As I write this paragraph, there have been three violent storms over the UK in the last week. They were all given names . . .

Back in my time in India, I gradually grew accustomed to seeing graphic representations of Hindu gods in every possible situation. Perhaps the most mundane was the proliferation of advertising calendars issued by all sorts of companies, which would have these pictures emblazoned in vivid colours, maybe to convince the customer of the religious orthodoxy of the firm’s proprietor and also to encourage their veneration of whichever ‘deity’ it might be on this particular calendar. It was not

¹ **1 Corinthians 10:19,20**

unusual to see several such calendars on the walls of a single household. (Just search for 'Hindu Calendar Art' on the internet to see examples.)

More disturbing still was to see the way that nominally 'Christian' firms would also produce their own calendars in the same style and possibly for the same reasons. Invariably they would depict a very western, fair-haired 'Jesus', often with a superimposed 'sacred heart', a favourite symbol of Roman Catholicism.

So, all of these images, whether on paper or sculpted in metal or stone, are created to promote devotion to a 'god-figure' of some sort and inevitably end up as objects of veneration themselves. Some religious people also show their devotion by bowing to such images and/or 'making the sign of the cross' when they see them.

And yet Paul still says "*we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world*"¹ !! Anyone who has lived in a country like India that is full of idol images might disagree strongly – "of course there are, they are all around us!" A margin note in my Bible said (as do some other translations) "*we know that an idol has no real existence*", and as I read that, I began to understand . . .

The ornately fashioned statue, the hyper-realistic painting, the iconic image – of course they do have a real existence. They are physically 'there'. You can pick them up and touch them. Even electronic versions of them have some reality of existence, even if it is not strictly physical.

But **what they represent does not exist**. There is no 'god' behind any of the representations, and not behind the supposedly 'Christian' imagery, either. On the one hand, they are of no consequence because there is nothing there but, on the other hand, they pose an enormous risk because they provide a path towards spiritual evil. The devotees open themselves up to dark spiritual forces as they 'worship'.

Read Paul's warnings to young believers living in a society where idol-worship was commonplace and the meat that was sold cheaply in the market place might well be cheap because it had already been offered in an idol's temple: **1 Corinthians 10:13-31**. He treads that same fine line between being clear that 'an idol has no real existence' and jeopardising someone's conscience because they might still regard the idol as being real – PLUS the fact that, in reality, those offering the meat to the idol were in fact in slavery to evil forces. A very difficult and delicate situation!

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So, I was beginning to see something of the reality behind my agonising over Christian disunity.

These divisions, these labels, these boxes in which we place ourselves and other believers, **have no real existence**. Like physical idols, you can see them and touch them. But, also like idols, **there is nothing behind them**. In God's scheme of things, they do not feature at all.

The Church does not consist of all the various denominations and group labels, carefully glued together. Most attempts at 'Christian unity' are based on trying to get all the groups to work together, to do as many things as possible together, to present a 'united front' to the puzzled world around.

In reality, the Church simply IS. From God's viewpoint, all the believers in a village, town, city or area are already one, because they have all been born again into his family. Imagine the father of a large family, whose adult children all live in the same community but who belong to many different clubs and societies in that community. If he wants the family to get together, does he need to get all the clubs and societies to join forces and meet together? Of course not! He simply calls all his offspring to forget their club allegiances and meet as **family**. A problem only arises if they regard their club memberships as more important than their family relationships. Yes, they are actually still one family, but if their club loyalties are more important to them, they remain effectively disunited by their refusal to respond to their father.

Understanding Christian disunity in this way does not eliminate the problem. Far from it! But it does take the focus away from trying to engineer organisational 'unity' and directs it towards seeing the true

¹ 1 Corinthians 8:4

unity which we already have and the total irrelevance of the various names and labels which we hide behind.

So, how can we move forward? We need to face the fact that the cost may be high, especially personally. Each individual believer, and especially each one in any form of leadership in any of the many groups, will need to recognise that the group loyalties that we have adopted need to be abandoned. Yes, **abandoned**, not just played down or temporarily shelved. These party loyalties are the dividing factors which keep us from effectiveness as the Body of Christ.

It is so tempting to think that **our** group will be OK; it can continue; all the others need to dissolve and join with us. But where is our loyalty? To our group, or to our Father?

Many of us want to see the Body of Christ built up, and we may think that we are doing that by building up 'our' part of it, our group – whether it has a name or not. In reality, such 'building up' can often be divisive, just as the named loyalty groups in first-century Corinth were. Paul had no time for them, even including the group that adopted his own name and teachings as their rallying point. See **1 Corinthians 1:11-15** and the whole of **1 Corinthians 3**.

So, how can we really start to see the Church being built up, starting from where we actually are?

1. **Concentrate on spiritual life and growth.** The Church is made up of those who are **in Christ**, who have been born again into a new life in relationship with God the Father through the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in whom the Holy Spirit is at work. These essentials need to be emphasised and reinforced, and we need to see continual spiritual progress as the normal situation in our lives. There is always more!
2. **Open out to all fellow-believers**, no matter what their own background and/or allegiances. Yes, it is vital that we abandon our own petty allegiances, but we can't demand that everyone else simultaneously abandons theirs before we will openly share with them as brothers and sisters in Christ. There really is "*neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" (**Galatians 3:28**) Someone who joins with us from another background, even temporarily, is **just as much** our brother or sister in Christ as someone whom we have been friends with for many years. Again, it is that ongoing and living relationship with God through Jesus that is the vital factor.
3. **Refuse any exclusive approach.** This is the other side of the coin to the last point, but it needs emphasis and explanation. It will mean the total denial of loyalty to 'our' group, a genuine recognition that, in God's eyes, our group has no real existence and the only 'group' that does truly exist is the family of those who have been born again into new life in Jesus.

Will our separate groups vanish instantaneously? I doubt it, but if we all begin to realise that the Church is the only thing that we are part of which has any real existence, and as we grow in our understanding of our Father's plan and purpose for that Church, I am convinced that the boundaries which have divided us will become increasingly invisible. We won't need 'organisational unity' because the organisations will have ceased to be relevant. In time, they will probably cease to exist.

Does this all seem like some sort of impossible dream? Why? What is so wonderful about our group loyalty that it is more important than seeing more of the fulfilment of God's plan for the Church?

Some years ago, I was sharing with a group of Christians about the desperate need for us to abandon our petty party loyalties and begin to learn to function together as believers, united by being in Christ. One voice, from an older man whom many respected, said "It will never happen, David".

My response now is the same as it was then: It has to happen.

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