

Strange Unity

Our usual approach to 'Christian Unity' would be laughable if it were not so tragic. I was faced with a classic example of it just over a year ago. We had been invited to a Christian function, at which bread and wine were to be shared. In what could only be construed as a genuine and sincere attempt to include all believing Christians, the notes said: "Communicant members of all Christian Churches are welcome to receive Communion."

I was presented with an invitation to take part, provided that I was a 'communicant member' of a 'Christian Church'. So what is a 'communicant member'? Presumably someone who 'takes communion' in whatever Christian fellowship they find themselves. The language was already rather alienating, though the use of the word 'communion' seems to be spreading, even into nonconformist circles where it has been steadfastly resisted for generations.

In this context, my dictionary defines 'Communion' as follows:—"a. The Eucharist. b. The consecrated elements of the Eucharist. [from Latin *communio*, mutual participation]" So, sadly, we had already slipped away from the simple sharing of bread and wine into something where 'consecration' was thought to be needed.

In the setting in which we were, that 'consecration' could only be performed by specialised people who had been given supposed priestly authority to do something special with the bread and wine – none of which would have been recognised, thought necessary or even relevant by anyone outside that setting. Sadly also, the word 'communion' seems long ago to have slipped its mooring from 'mutual participation' and been set adrift into a dangerous sea of the same false priestliness. Far from being able to participate mutually, those who 'took communion' at this function were limited to receiving the 'elements' of the 'Eucharist' which had been 'consecrated' by the 'priests'. What a mess!

Before leaving this line of thought, it is perhaps worth asking ourselves whether there may be some significance in the increasing adoption of the term 'communion' to mean the sharing of bread and wine in remembrance of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Has the virus of false priestliness spread out, reducing the mutual participation to a routine in which believers have become almost passive recipients, instead of being themselves 'a royal priesthood'?

But that was not my prime concern. For all the messy confusion and wrong messages, it seemed that I was probably being invited to take part if I was someone who shared bread and wine as a member of a Christian church.

I have no problem with sharing bread and wine with fellow believers, as we remember together the death (and burial, resurrection and ascension) of the Lord Jesus. It is something I love to do and it is often very meaningful and precious.

But here's the real question:— Am I a member of a Christian church? Some of the fellowships where we have lived may have membership records, but you will not find my name there. Why? Because it is not necessary or relevant. Even the denomination in which I was brought up, though it keeps records of events such as baptisms and confirmations, apparently has no record of membership as such, so I am not there either!

Ask a slightly different question and I can answer very positively: Am I a member of the Christian Church? Yes, by the grace of God to me in the Lord Jesus Christ, I most

certainly am. How did I become a member? By becoming a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, being joined to his life and becoming a sharer in all that he has done. I am a member of his 'body'.

But don't I need to become a member of a local church? I protest! By being part of the body of Christ, I am **already** a member of that body in the locality where I find myself. What else do I need to join if I am already joined to him, as are all those who are his?

The clamour for 'joining a church' has more sinister roots. Many would agree in theory that all believers are already members of the body of Christ, but would still say that it is necessary (or at the very least, advisable) to **become** a member of a local church. By 'local church', they actually mean a named local group that calls itself a church or fellowship, which may or may not be linked to a wider grouping or denomination. Almost by definition, such a group is distinct from other groups and would not claim to be the local expression of the body of Christ.

Ask what they mean by becoming a member, and many local 'churches' would agree that all those who are in Christ are free to take part in the bread and wine and in most of their other activities. The one 'privilege' which membership seems to bring is the right to vote in their business meetings, and therefore help to decide the policy and direction of that particular group. But this is not membership of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, but of a local club which calls itself a 'church'!

This, you may say, is mere wordplay. On the contrary, I contend that the careless way in which we have used and (mis)understood the word 'Church' has contributed greatly to our lack of understanding of the reality of the Church itself. I agree that there is a mixture of cause and effect here – our misunderstanding of Church has also greatly affected our misuse of the word.

It is time (and well overdue) for all believers to seek out the reality of fellowship on the basis of belonging to the Body of Christ, not the basis of loyalty to a particular named (or un-named!) group.

Nor on the basis of an amalgamation of such groups! Much so-called 'Christian Unity' is an organisational attempt to remove barriers and work together and, as a first step, it is not too bad for those with loyalties to different groups to bury the differences and seek to follow common aims.

Such initiatives, however, will only progress a little way along the road to real unity.

It will not be long before the separate loyalties will put the brakes on. At that point, some supposedly wise comments will be made about 'how good it is that we can celebrate our differences' and 'we are all different, so we need to worship God in our different ways'. Instead of seeing that diversity enriches most when it is **within** the single fellowship of the Body, the old barriers stay up and the Body as a whole misses out on the growth that could result from 'the proper working of each individual part' (***Ephesians 4:16***).

Another missed opportunity. Another generation goes by and the world still can't see the hidden glory of the Church!

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