

Twisted Unity

Apparently, Samuel Johnson made the famous pronouncement that 'patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel' on the evening of April 7, 1775. Reporting this, Boswell doesn't provide any context for how the remark arose, so we don't really know for sure what was on Johnson's mind at the time. However, he assures us that Johnson was not condemning patriotism in general, only false patriotism.

Until today, I had no idea that this comment would have any parallel in the life of the Church, but an incident of 'dejà vu' made it suddenly click into place. Let me take you back just over a year . . .

At that time, a decision was due to be made in a certain church fellowship about the appointment of someone to a post of significant responsibility for an initial one-year period. Some were keen on the appointment, others were more doubtful, and a special meeting was to be held to take a vote on the matter.

On the Sunday two days before the meeting, the speaker in the morning made much of the subject of unity, how it was important that Christians were united despite their differences.

On the night of the special meeting, 'Breaking of Bread' was included in the course of the evening, again with a strong emphasis on unity.

After fairly prolonged discussion, the vote was duly taken and the result was close. Some who had said earlier that they were not in favour seemed to have been persuaded and voted for the appointment. It was, after all, only for a year and could be brought to an end after that time – "Let's see how we go."

The temporary appointment was made. It seems that the appeal to 'unity' may have had its effect . . .

Fast forward to today, Sunday, again two days before a special meeting, this time to confirm the continuation of the same appointment. The speaker in the morning meeting again emphasised 'Unity', though of course (as before) no direct link was made to the upcoming meeting!

Dejà Vu? Certainly felt like it to me!

In our present cynical age, patriotism is not held in such automatic high regard as it was in Johnson's day. His comment would have been shocking in the extreme, simply because to question patriotism was unthinkable. To Johnson and his world around him, patriotism was an unquestionably good thing. He was not criticising patriotism, just the misuse of an appeal to it.

In Christian circles, 'Christian Unity' still holds much of the same degree of unquestionable correctness. Despite our often inconsistent actions, we all believe in Christian unity – 'of course we do!' It would be hard to find anyone at all who is active in almost any branch of Christian activity who would not emphatically agree with the need for Christian unity in as many ways as possible . . .

. . . just as it would have been near impossible to find a non-patriot in Johnson's time!

Right here lies the emotional blackmail employed by the scoundrel, whether in Johnson's time or ours.

Because 'Unity' (or 'Patriotism') is such an incontrovertibly good thing, if I present my case and wrap it in the 'flag' of Christian unity, it makes it very hard for anyone to disagree with my viewpoint without laying themselves open to a charge of disunity, especially if I hold a position of responsibility in the Church. Anyone thinking of disagreeing is intimidated by the thought that they might be endangering the unity of the fellowship, and will therefore be manipulated into going along with my view, even if they do not agree with it.

This is not real unity. We know that really, don't we? Even those of us who may have used such trickery in the past have to admit before the Lord that that is what it is – trickery, a very man-made device to get our own ends.

God doesn't work that way and, if we insist on using such methods in 'God's work', we will find sooner or later that he has disowned it and it will amount to nothing or even less than nothing, a negative effect on the Kingdom of God rather than the positive one which had been our original motivation. Gold, silver, precious stones – or wood, hay and stubble? (**1 Corinthians 3:11-15**)

It has been wisely said that 'manipulation is witchcraft'. We would run a mile to avoid any semblance of 'the dark arts' in our Christian life and witness, but how easily do we allow this sort of thing in our dealings with others, exercising subtle but ungodly pressure to promote our own agenda?

Paul wrote: ". . . my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." (**1 Corinthians 2:4,5**)

Dave Taylor May 2010

Further copies can be downloaded from www.justonecandle.uk