

Sermon by
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Towards An Ecology of Unity: a Truly Col or ful Church

Mis sion and Unity in the Twenty-First Cen tury

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Lord, give me your grace, to speak in the name of the Fa-ther and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, my broth ers and sis ters, it is such a joy to be here with you this morn ing. And be fore I go any fur ther, I think the stand ing ova tion we gave to Cynthia and Eli Wil son in di-cates how pro foundly we were moved, we all were, by that stun ning and so beau ti fully sung prayer. And my prayer as I come to you this morn ing to share in this col or ful act of wor-ship, is that God's church may be one in the Spirit and serv-ing Him in ef fec tive mis sion.

Bishop Bill, thank you for in vit ing me to join you—and my wife Eileen—at this con ven tion of yours. It's a de light for us to be here with you and to join other repre sen ta tives of God's church here on earth. While I pre sided, and Bill has mentioned this, over the Lambeth Conference of 1998, which brought to gether nearly 800 bish ops of the world wide Anglican Communion, it was such a privi lege to have Bishop Bill Oden and Mar i lyn, his wife, with us. And Bill made a very im por tant con tri but ion to our de lib er a tions. And at the Angli can Con sul ta tive Coun cil in Dun dee last Sep tem ber, we were de light ed to have Bishop Bill Grove and Mary Lou with us as well. And all four have be come very good and firm friends. Now, my ti tle says ev ery thing I want to put be fore you this morn ing: "To wards An Ecol ogy of Unity: a Truly Col or ful Church—Mis sion and Unity in the 21st Cen tury." It's a ti tle which, I trust, like the per son speak ing to you this morn ing, is for ward look ing, hope ful and thank ful to God for the way he has blessed us as churches.

But the ti tle calls us to ask as we en ter the 21st cen tury, "What sort of church is God call ing us to be in or der to be faith ful to him in our world to day?"

In 1780, Charles Wesley pub lished his *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the Peo ple Called Meth od ists*. And the open ing hymn of sec tion 5 is still used in Eng land at the be gin ning of the an nual Meth od ist Con fer ence. And here are some of the words:

And are we yet alive,
 And see each other's face?
 What trou bles have we seen,
 What con flicts have we passed!

Fighting within and fears with out,

Since we as sem bled last.

Well those were troubled days for my church, the Church of Eng land, as well as for the fledg ling body which in time be came known as the Meth od ist Church. You know, the Methodists were deter mined to bring joy and life to the church; the in sti tu tional church seemed de ter mined to keep them out. Yet there's a church near Cam bridge in Eng land which has a very ex tra or di nary plaque in side the church. It commemorates an incumbent at the time of the Wesley broth ers, and the plaque reads like this: "Erected to the mem ory of the Rev. Blankety-blank who served as vicar among us for 30 years, with out the slight est trace of en thu si asm."

Now that's not the kind of me mo rial I'd like to leave be hind me. So you ask the question: what does it mean, he worked for 30 years with out the slight est trace of en thu si asm? Well, you see, the "en thu si asts" were the Meth od ists. And he kept them out of his par ish. Alas! Re li gion has that ef fect on some peo ple. In stead of lib er at ing, it im pris ons. In stead of bring ing joy, it desiccates. But Wesley's hymn res o nates with us, too, does n't it?

What con flicts have we passed!

Fightings with out and fears within,

Since we as sem bled last.

No doubt, in this great con fer ence of yours, as we had in the Lambeth Con fer ence, you have had to re sist the temp ta tion for main te nance to dom i nate mis sion and safety first to come before the kingdom of God. No doubt you have weighty and bur den some mat ters on your mind. You will have dif fi cult de ci sions to make. And I'm sure you will make them in con for mity, as far as you and I can dis cern it, with God's will in Christ, keep ing our eyes and our minds fixed on him. But that does n't make our de ci sions any eas ier, or any less chal leng ing. You see, along the way some peo ple get hurt or dis ap pointed and at the worst feel marginalized or ig nored. How do we han dle such pre cious gifts as peo ple? And it is surely a test of our au then tic ity of faith ex pressed in our communion to gether.

So as we stand on the verge of the 21st cen tury, and we look at the church and world in which we are set, some times

we are tempted to a certain degree of pessimism. The Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, writing in his monumental work *The Autumn of the Medieval Age*, reminds us that, “Every age yearns for a more beautiful world. The deeper the despair and depression about the confusing present, more intense the yearning.”

Well, if that were true of the medieval period and the dawn of the Renaissance, it’s also true of us as we face the challenges of a new millennium. Ours is a world which is increasingly confusing and challenging, a world where old certainties seem to have been displaced by new relativities. Where corporate religion, with its authoritative command of truth and reality, has no longer the impact or even much of the way of a visible place in our societies.

And yet, has there ever been a time when there have been such great and visible hunger and thirst for the things of the spirit? The body, mind, and spirit sections of our bookshops in our great capitals or the World Wide Web has given new spiritualities and not a few heresies a new lease of life. New religions and new-age philosophies and spiritualities are burgeoning wherever we look. It is simply not the case that people are not yearning to know God’s truth.

But with these challenges, it’s very tempting to echo the words of St. Brendan the Navigator, the Irish saint, who was said to have crossed the Atlantic in a very small boat made of cowhide and wattle, who once said as he set off, “Oh, God, this sea is very big, and my boat is very small!” We can all connect to that kind of feeling.

But, to extend that nautical metaphor a little further, this is just the time when we need to take our bearings from the Word of God. And that’s why I chose Ephesians 2 for the reading this morning. And it is good to actually keep an eye on the section just before the reading, where Paul, who is so good at what we might say is describing the “human condition,” paints a pretty pessimistic view of the way that human beings have gone. It’s strong language, and Paul would not want to say that human beings were entirely bad or wrong or misguided. Rather, he recognizes the sense of distance and emptiness that we all can admit to having experienced at some point in our lives. Alone, drifting, and purposeless, one is reminded of Samuel Coleridge’s words:

“Oh Wedding Guest!

This soul has been

Alone, on a wide, wide sea,

So lonely ’twas that God himself

Scarce seemed there to be.”

And there are many people in our society for whom God is absent. And our job as a church is to make him close to hand. And that’s why in that reading, after Paul depicts a gloomy picture of human nature, you have that conjunction *but*: “but God, rich in mercy, because of his great love for us, he has brought us to life in Christ.” And so the mood of gloom is replaced by that of profound joy. “Joy,” I said, not

“complacency.” And I think we would agree with Dr. John Stott, who said that “Paul first plumbs the depths of pessimism about man, and then rises to the heights of optimism about God.”

And Paul was so right to be optimistic. Despite our shortcomings and failures as a church, as human beings, God is eternally generous. And so, Paul paints a picture of a God who is merciful and abounding in grace. It’s a wonderful, grand vision of God’s scheme for humanity through Jesus Christ. It is big and bold, challenging and yet comforting. It puts us in our place while not denigrating or belittling us. It is by God’s grace we are saved, and that alone.

And in the face of that vision of God, what are we to say? Does it mean to say we do nothing? Does it mean we have to be passive and let God get on with the work?

Of course not! Paul, I think, is underlining that although God’s gift has been given in Jesus Christ, we need to be conformed to Christ. We need to build a church that engages with our world on many of the issues that divide us.

And so if salvation is a gift of God, so is unity. And that brings me to ecology, because *ecology* is the term given to variety and diversity of living organisms living together and contributing one to another by mutual interdependence.

And this applies to churches also, my brothers and sisters. I abandoned a long time ago theology of unity that assumes it’s meant to be uniformity and sameness. Human nature cannot accept that. (*applause*) And—I’m glad you agree with me—(*laughter*) Diversity, you see, is part, an essential part, of the givenness of God’s creation. We are Black and White. We are different. And we all have something to add to God’s church. And that emphasis upon diversity is actually expressed so clearly in modern scholarship as scholars have looked at the New Testament. The diversity was there from the very beginning. In other words, later differences in church life were already implicit in the ecclesiology of the New Testament.

Of course, I’m not saying that we should give up the quest for full, visible unity. I’m saying that if we mean by that a vision of one, great organization with a uniformity of belief and liturgy, worshipping in exactly the same way, you might as well forget it because that hope is unachievable. And in all our great traditions, we have already accepted it implicitly, the importance of diversity. To take the example of the Anglican Communion—and I’m only qualified to speak from that tradition—we are very used to an enormous range of tastes in theological and liturgical expression. As Archbishop of Canterbury I’ve become used to moving from the celebration, say, of a very florid Eucharist in the Catholic tradition—smells and bells and so on—or to charismatic, low church worship with a great deal of freedom. In other words, high and hazy, low and lazy. Well, you know, I’ve learned over the years that this is actually no problem to me. I can move freely from one to the other because, in the Anglican tradition, we are held together by a common understanding

of faith and order which not only tolerates the diversity, but accepts we're part of the one family.

What I particularly dislike, though, is when one part of the family believes that they hold the truth and nobody else does.

But how may that kind of ecological unity help us in our quest to be recognizably in the eyes of the world "one church"?

I think it may encourage us to move in stages to whatever final form of unity God may have in store for us. In other words, let us be agnostic about the end of the quest. Let us embark on stages that will bring us to God's vision, and not one which we have already created because we can't see the end, but he can. And surely the first stage should be to discover the shape of apostolicity in one another. In modern times, one of the greatest achievements of theological conversations of ARCIC, and particularly the Niagara Report of the International Lutheran/Anglican Conversations, was the recognition that we are not only able to see Christ in one another, but on the grace so palpably given, to affirm that our churches are apostolic churches—standing in continuity with apostolic faith and faithful to the gospel. And, you know, to recognize that was and is an exceedingly positive affirmation.

The next step beyond that is, of course, to recognize one another's ministries as authentic and apostolic ministries. And here so often in church life we are torn between experience and our understanding of theology; between the theological and historic undergirding of ministries and the actual experiences of churches in place and time. Humility requires us to accept gladly evident signs of grace in the ministries of churches with which we are not yet in communion.

I wonder if I may share with you a personal story. Dr. Donald English was very good friend of mine—the former president of World Methodism, I know a friend to many of you here, one of the great leaders of British Methodism. Donald died, sadly, a few years ago. You know, it is simply impossible for me to think of him as a minister who is deficient in any respect. How can I say that he lacked the grace of ministerial orders because he was ordained a Methodist? That kind of conclusion—far from uncommon, I'm sure you share that—illustrates some of the questions of order that we have to attend to. While an experience informs our theology and some times shakes our theology when you actually see God at work in another tradition, it make us more aware of the theological questions we have to ask in order to get to the kind of unity that God wants us to be.

And so there is a staged approach that I believe is important for us as Christians, as churches, to work towards that unity which we know to be God's will. And this staged approach is behind the formal Anglican-Methodist talks recently started in the United Kingdom. And you will appreciate that this has a particular poignancy for us as British Christians because it was just about 30 years ago when our two churches were within a whisker, yes, a whisker, of

establishing full visible unity. It floundered on just a dozen or so votes in our General Synod. And for the last 30 years both churches have been bruised by getting so close, and now we're started out again on another courtship. And this time we're going about it a little more carefully, a staged approach in order to get us closer to that longed-for commitment and unity which we believe is essential for the mission of the church in our land. I welcome, Bill, your reference to the discussions between the Episcopal Church of the United States of America and The United Methodist Church in this country, and I want to encourage that dialogue.

However, the use of the word "ecological" in the context of unity introduces very naturally the concept of mission because ecology is about the well-being of the whole. Emil Brunner said so well many years ago that "the church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning." And when the church serves, it is most true to itself. When its first commitment is for the kingdom of God, it is most truly the church of Jesus Christ. And when we preach and live our Lord Jesus Christ, we are most truly his people.

And I've observed on many visits to the overseas church that, particularly in Africa, that the best demonstrations of unity have been in prophetic situations of witness where churches have stood together for the people and for the gospel. I think of South Africa, when Methodist and Catholic and Anglican, Pentecostal, and other churches have shared in bold and sometimes heroic acts of witness. I think of the Sudan at the present moment where many of the traditions I've named are working together in close collaboration. Or in Northern Ireland where those churches are also grappling with the elusive quest for peace. But, my brothers and sisters, sadly I've also noticed that when the common enemy we have been fighting has been defeated, the old divisions between the churches have returned. Not deliberately and probably more due to our preoccupation with churchy affairs, with our commitments for the management of our church life.

And I believe we must transcend our concern for the survival of the church, and to start to focus our concern upon the kingdom of God and its centrality to church and society. I want to encourage the famous Lund principle of "only do that separately which you can not do together." Let us start doing our evangelism together. Let us minister to young people together. Let us share social concern together. Let's do our theological exploration together.

And if your meeting is anything like the Lambeth Conference, my Methodist brothers and sisters, and I think it is, you are tackling the same social and personal issues that we discussed then and continue to discuss today: issues to do with personal freedom and its limits; sexuality and homosexuality; abortion and euthanasia; family life and the role of women and men in church and society. And surely there's scope here to do our work together and to share with one another and to share the answers as well as some of the questions.

And this unity we seek is not simply for the sake of unity, but in the service of the gospel. We desire that "all may be one," that the world may believe (John 17). We're not in the business of ecclesiastical joinery, but we are in the business of building the kingdom of God. And what is the character of that church that he is building? It'd surely want to be generous, graceful, merciful, that conforms even more deeply to the person of his Son.

Some years ago in Britain, we had a remarkable bishop, Bishop Jeffrey Paul, who began his installation address with these words. He said, "There's no way of belonging to Jesus Christ except by belonging gladly and irrevocably to that

glorious rag-bag of saints and fatheads who make up the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' church."

And my brothers and sisters, my fellow saints and fatheads, we are God's church. We are his people on earth. And God loves us. He loves his church and he will never give up his longing for us to be a united and effective tool of the kingdom of God. And neither should we surrender to despair or walk away from our churches because we have given up on God. Let us strive with all our heart and mind and soul to make our church heaven with life, filled with joy, and bright with color. May God bless your conference, your church. May you too heaven for life in the days to come. In the name of God. Amen.