

Advancing
Christian Unity



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Advancing Christian Unity

Anthony Burgess

Edited by
Matthew Vogan



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Advancing Christian Unity

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Table of Contents

Preface	vii
1. The Blessing of Unity among Ministers	1
2. The Pattern for Unity among Ministers	11
3. The Nature of Christian Unity	25
4. The Necessity of Christian Unity	35
5. The Reasons for the Lack of Christian Unity ..	51
6. The Characteristics of Christian Unity	59
7. The Rules for Christian Unity	65
8. The Expansion of Christian Unity	83
9. The Value of Christian Unity	95
10. The Perfection of Christian Unity	105

Preface

Living in a Western culture that is ever polarizing in its values, ideas, and political views, we get used to division. The sheer multitude of diverse voices seems to promote the absence of unity. Divisive rhetoric is the norm in a cacophony of opinions. Christian values are frequently attacked with uncompromising hatred. Reconciliation and harmony seem both unthinkable and unattainable. The fault lines sometimes run so deep that they resemble a kind of civil war.

The church can also be a battleground of polarizing notions and methods. Certain trends in church organization and worship have become predominant and are at times dismissive of all else. Distancing ourselves from the wisdom of the past is commonly regarded as a virtue. Various doctrines that have been long regarded as inviolable are being reinterpreted or challenged. In responding to those views, believers may well assert and defend the truth, but the discernment to do so in love

and with a genuine desire to gain others to the truth often lags behind.

This maelstrom of political, social, and ecclesiastical antagonism is not unlike the culture within which Anthony Burgess (d. 1664) ministered. His calling was to serve God in a generation that was literally experiencing civil war. During the civil war, royalist soldiers focused their fury on Puritan ministers, ransacking their houses and forcing them out. Along with thirty other Puritan ministers, Burgess took refuge in Coventry. He preached to the parliamentary garrison where there was a service every morning.

Burgess became involved in a project to unite the whole of the British Isles in the same doctrinal standards and church order. This was the result of the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), which bound the nations together in a religious, political, and military alliance. One vital and far-reaching result of that covenant was the Westminster Assembly. Its purpose was to discuss and affirm the key documents that would bind the nations ecclesiastically. Burgess preached before Parliament on six occasions, applying God's Word faithfully to that body and urging it to use its authority to help the work of Reformation.

During his time in London he engaged in the important defense of vital doctrines such as justification, original sin, and the moral law. Rejection of the moral law as a rule of life for believers was gathering

momentum and was a key concern for the Westminster Assembly. Burgess was not only a sound teacher and formidable disputant; his sermons breathe the air of deep spiritual experience. He published more than a dozen volumes of careful biblical exposition and instruction. His most famous volume, *Spiritual Refining: The Anatomy of True and False Conversion*, has been called an “unequaled anatomy of experimental religion.” Extending to more than a thousand pages, it covers many subjects of direct importance to the work of grace in the soul.

Burgess also preached 145 sermons on John chapter 17 alone.¹ He describes the whole prayer of Christ as a land flowing with milk and honey because of the abundant consolation it provides. The sermons were published in 1656, almost ten years after the Westminster Assembly had concluded its work. The ideal of uniting Christians and ministers seemed to have failed, in particular due to differences over questions of how the church should be governed. Yet we still draw inestimable benefit from the documents of the Westminster Assembly, especially the Confession of Faith and catechisms. They have been prized in the many parts of the world they

1. Anthony Burgess, *CXLV Expository Sermons upon the Whole 17th Chapter of the Gospel according to St John, or Christ's Prayer before His Passion Explicated and Both Practically and Polemically Improved* (London, 1656; forthcoming in 2 volumes in modern typeface by Reformation Heritage Books, 2019).

have reached. Burgess, for one, had not lost his desire for unity; this is reflected in his exposition of Christ's prayer for the unity of His people.

The following chapters include the sermons he preached on the verses of John 17 that deal with unity, here presented in a lightly edited and updated form. The exposition emphasizes both the spiritual and visible unity that should exist within the church. Burgess speaks of how union and communion with Christ and His people are "the life and comfort of believers." Careful consideration of the unity "which ought to be amongst believers" introduces various other important matters. Burgess deals especially with the means to preserve unity and the causes of divisions.

Burgess deals realistically and honestly with the divisions that exist among Christ's people, as well as the reasons for them. He does not accept that lack of unity is inevitable but instead boldly calls it what it is according to Scripture: sin. We have become used to a cultural context where the church is treated as a free-market economy, where fresh start-ups arise and compete against one another for a greater share of the market. The church is often run and marketed using business methodologies. Where this situation is accepted as positive, the question of unity is irrelevant unless it can be used for competitive advantage.

There is also a tendency in our generation to belittle the problem of outward divisions so long as there is a

degree of amicable association. Perhaps we are inclined to run to the opposite extreme from the Roman Catholic embrace of a false ecumenical movement by claiming that if true Christians are spiritually one in Christ, then visible unity is not important.

But if being spiritually one in Christ is all that matters, why do the Scriptures speak so often against division? Why indeed does the Lord Jesus Christ pray so earnestly for unity among His people in John 17 if being spiritually united is all that matters? There is a real unity of the church in its invisible or spiritual aspect. This is “the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all” (Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.1). It is a number which no man can know and whose members are only ultimately known by God.

Yet the church is also manifested in this world in a visible way—in its order and government, for instance. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the visible church “consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God.” Christ has entrusted it with “the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world” (25.3–4).

The visible church involves visible office-bearers

administering the visible ordinances appointed by Christ to those who have a visible profession of the true religion, as distinguished from the rest of the world. It is the means used to gather the invisible church. When Scripture uses the word for church, it may refer to the visible aspect, the invisible aspect, or to both (although one of them is usually foremost). The context in which the word is found makes the interpretation clear. For instance, Paul speaks of having “persecuted the church of God, and wasted it” (Gal. 1:13; cf. Acts 8:3). This is evidently the visible church, since the invisible church cannot be wasted or persecuted.

Although in our own day many people have little time for the unity of the church and do not worry about questions of schism, unity and division remain vitally important matters. The spectacle of competing denominations has become a fact of life to many, rather than a scandal. They shun the kind of hyper-separatism that regards any unity as conspiracy by publicized common causes based on a generalized minimalist set of convictions.

Yet, if a minimalist set of relations between denominations can exist while denominations remain separate, there is an implicit statement that the visible unity of the church is either not real or not important and that the reasons for separation do not matter. Too many of us “are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph” (Amos 6:6). There seem to be very few saying, “My brethren,

these things ought not so to be" (James 3:10). The Puritan Samuel Hudson writes, "Division is the Devil's music, but that which makes the Devil laugh should make us cry."

The goal and aim of the Westminster Assembly was very different. It contrasts markedly with the indifference to unity often displayed by those who aim to stand within the Puritan and Reformed tradition today. As James Walker records, the Congregationalists at the Westminster Assembly proposed a friendly coexistence and occasional communion with the Presbyterians which, while separate in government, would, they claimed, be "no plain and total separation, we shall be working substantially towards the same end." This was resolutely declined with the following explanation:

So might the Donatists and Novatians have pled, and indeed almost all the separatists who have figured in the Church's history. Such separation was unknown in the apostles' time, unless it were used by false teachers: all who professed Christianity then held communion together as one Church. If you can join with us occasionally in acts of worship, you ought to act with us in joint communion, not in separated congregations. God's way of revealing truth to such as are otherwise minded, is not by setting men at a distance from each other. That you should be a distinct Christian organization, taking members from our

Churches who may have scruples of conscience, is schism undoubted in the body of Christ.

The Westminster divines were therefore opposed to the now popular notion that church differences and competing distinctions are a good thing, and diversity is strength. They considered carefully the New Testament's firm emphasis on uniformity (1 Cor. 11:1, 16; 14:29, 33–35, 40; 16:1–2), as it exhorts us to “walk by the same rule” (Phil. 3:16) and to “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27). “I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me” (Jer. 32:39).

The Scottish theologians who were contemporaries of the English Puritans worked through these issues carefully. They sought to understand and apply the scriptural teaching on unity and schism with accuracy. Men like James Durham stressed that unity was an absolute priority and duty, and that schism was a serious sin. Yet they acknowledged that separation is sometimes a duty where sinning is the price of maintaining unity. Such questions may be vexed and complex to work through in practice, but there must always be love for the unity of the church and genuine grief when it cannot be attained.

It is important to understand this background in order to appreciate the principles undergirding what Anthony Burgess says on the subject. Burgess gives practical counsel in this area in demonstrating the spirit that

Christians ought to have toward one another. He will not allow us simply to show regret and concern while doing nothing about the divisions of the church. We are under the strongest obligations not only to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Ps. 122:6) but also to be peacemakers. Blessed are the peacemakers who join their prayers with that of the great Head of the church: “That they all may be one” (John 17:21).

—Matthew Vogan

CHAPTER 1

The Blessing of Unity among Ministers

Christ prays “that they may be one, as we are” (John 17:11). Some say that this relates to the way in which God keeps the disciples, as if it specifies the thing that would keep them. If they agree in love among themselves, they are sure to be preserved. We understand this instead as a distinct blessing. As Christ prayed for the disciples to have sound faith before, so now He prays for their union and love.

We may consider the disciples in a twofold way: first, as *believers and disciples*, along with others, given by God to Christ. The unity of believers among themselves in this way is a precious blessing. Second, as *preachers*. They may be considered as men in office, as those who were appointed to preach the gospel, and so our Savior prays for their unity in relation to this.

It is of infinite consequence that the ministers of the gospel should agree among themselves, for when

ministers are divided the people must be divided. If the pilots in a ship disagree, the ship must necessarily sink. Knowing the devices of Satan to set apostle against apostle and pastor against pastor, our Savior therefore prays for unity among ministers in their ministerial office and employment.

It is a remarkable expression. He does not pray that they may be united, but that they may “be one,” and that they may “be one” according to the highest example of all unity, the Father and the Son. Luther thinks that being “one” refers to one spiritual body, but we rather take it as their office and ministerial employment. The apostle, arguing against church divisions because of one minister being thought superior to another, says, “he that planteth and he that watereth are one” (1 Cor. 3:8). They all have the same objective and all have one general employment: the conversion of souls to God.

Unity among Ministers Is a Special Blessing

It is a special blessing when the ministers of the gospel agree as one. Nothing is so terrible to the church’s adversaries as the unity of pastors. This was the reason (some say) why our Savior chose apostles who were mostly related to each other. It was so that their love would be preserved more inviolably. Our Savior also gave the disciples this counsel: “Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another” (Mark 9:50). “Have salt,” that is, season the world and one another with grace. But lest

this salt would sting and smart too much, He adds, “and have peace one with another.” Peace and love are of such great concern that He leaves peace with them as a legacy: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you” (John 14:27). He gives them a “new commandment”—to love one another (John 13:34). Indeed, He makes this a sign of their discipleship—not if they cast out devils or work miracles, but if they love one another.

What Unity Should Ministers Have?

1. Unity of Faith

They should believe the same doctrine, which is therefore called “one faith” (Eph. 4:5). There is no other foundation but one, the Lord Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). This must be the foundation of all other unity. Although Roman Catholics make unity a mark of the true church, we say that unity without true doctrine is a mere faction, a conspiracy. Muslims have unity, Jews have unity, but because they do not have the true doctrine, it is not true peace and concord. True doctrine is the soul, the fountain, and the root of all.

2. Unity of Confession

A second unity is found in the same confession and acknowledgment of faith. This should be in the same words. It is very desirable not only to hold the same doctrinal points but to use the same words also. New words bring in new doctrines. Thus, the apostle, in pressing

unity, exhorts them not only to be “in the same mind and in the same judgment” but to “speak the same thing” (1 Cor. 1:10). Timothy is exhorted to “hold fast the form of sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13). Even though they were only words and a form, yet he must hold them fast. This made the early church so tenacious about the Greek word for “same substance” (to refer to Father, Son, and Spirit), because by that word all heretical opinions about the Trinity (such as those stemming from the Greek word for “similar substance”) were excluded.

It is a remarkable expression that God is said to speak “by the mouth of his holy prophets” (Luke 1:70). Although there were many prophets, it says “mouth,” not “mouths,” as if they all had but one mouth, and spoke the same thing. There ought, therefore, to be only one mouth for all the ministers of the gospel in confessing what they believe. We should be able to know what all teach by what one teaches.

3. Unity of Affection

There must be unity of affection and hearts. When the church first began to increase, their unity of affection was greatly commended. They “continued with one accord” (Acts 1:14; see also Acts 2:1, 46). “The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul” (Acts 4:32). Though they were a multitude, they had only one heart and soul.