

# Maintaining Unity in Disagreement

*A sermon on John 17:20-26 by Nathan Nettleton, 29 May 2022*

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## Message

Living out the unity we have in Christ, is more difficult and more important when we are at odds with one another.

## Sermon

This week is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, an observance that grew out of the ecumenical movement – the movement which seeks to reunite the various splintered branches of the Christian Church. Although it is celebrated internationally, it is in January in the northern hemisphere and now, between the feasts of Ascension and Pentecost, in the southern hemisphere.

The seventeenth chapter of John's gospel, part of which we heard read tonight, has always been an important text for the ecumenical movement, and for this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It contains the prayer Jesus prayed with and for his followers at the last supper, the night before his execution, and one of the themes of the prayer – especially prominent in the bit we heard tonight – is a prayer for the unity of the Church:

“I ask that they – not only these here but also those who will later join them – may all be one... As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.”

Of course, in the context in which Jesus originally prayed this prayer, it had nothing to do with what we would now call ecumenism, because the Church as an institution did not yet exist, and it was not until centuries later that it split into the rival factions we now call denominations. So in its original context, it was much more about the various individuals maintaining their unity with one another as Jesus departed and they had to begin sorting out what it meant to be a community of his followers without him there to sort everything out for them.

I'm sure a big part of that was Jesus realising that once he himself was no longer the visible leader, rivalries and disagreements were inevitable. There had already been a number of instances of the disciples jockeying for position, even while he'd still be with them, so it was impossible to even imagine that it wouldn't happen again once there was a need for new leaders.

Similarly, disagreements about other things were inevitable too, not just leadership. The gospels show us over and over that the disciples were always struggling to understand what it meant to follow Jesus. Once he was no longer on hand to clear up every misunderstanding, those misunderstandings were bound to end up in disagreements and disputes. So it is in anticipation of all that that Jesus prays:

“I ask that they – not only these here but also those who will later join them – may all be one... As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one.”

From this point on, I'm not really going to focus much on this passage. Instead I want to go with its theme of seeking to maintain unity in the midst of disagreement and explore some of the challenges that poses in the here and now. And I'm going to do that by unpacking some of my own current struggles with it. I'm hoping that what is going on for me will ring some bells for you and so perhaps help you to think about how you too are called to be an answer to Jesus's prayer for Christian unity.

For me, in this past week, the challenge came to me not only through this prayer from Jesus, but in the form of two letters I received from people you know; Alison Sampson and Jude Waldron. They hadn't cooked anything up together, they were just both responding to things I've been doing and saying, and they were graciously but very firmly challenging me to take a good hard look at myself. And while I could quibble over a detail or two, they were right. In the midst of a major disagreement taking place in the Baptist Union, I was losing perspective and losing my capacity to be gracious, loving, peaceable, and a force for unity. And while neither of them spelled it out in these terms, I needed to repent.

One of the reasons that this is so difficult for me is that it is not about the right's or wrongs of my position in the argument. Alison and Jude are not on the other side of the disagreement telling me that my arguments are wrong. They share many of my concerns about the proposals that the Union's leadership have put on the table. So what they are pointing at is not out there in the rights or wrongs of the arguments, it's in here, in me, in my attitudes and my behaviours.

In my not so humble opinion, I still think I'm right on the wrongness of some major parts of what the Baptist Union is proposing about its reshaping of the relationship between itself and its member churches. But as I have learned before, and am needing to face up to again, one can be absolutely right and still quite wrong at the same time. Being right does not ever justify behaving in ways that are hostile, arrogant, belligerent and divisive, and I've been guilty of all of those things recently.

Some of you will want to defend me, and that's very nice of you, but even if my behaviour was not at the top end of the scale on any of those things, it wasn't very Jesus-y and I need to repent and change. Even if there were all sorts of mitigating factors, beyond my control, that unfairly brought out the worst in me, I still have to take a good hard look at what that "worst in me" was, and why it was still lurking inside me waiting for its moment. That "worst in me" is something that Jesus wants me to release my grip on so that he can touch and heal it.

A big part of where this goes wrong for me, and this is where Jesus's prayer is most relevant to it, is that I slide into failing to sufficiently distinguish between the ideas or practices that I am opposing, and the people who are proposing them. So in my endeavours to oppose an idea, I end up treating the people as though they were my opponents and even my enemies. Which is actually dumb in this context because none of the key players are people who I think are malicious or deceitful or untrustworthy. They are good people doing their jobs as best they can. I think there are some things that they are failing to understand or failing to see the importance of, but I don't think that is deliberate, and maybe if I hadn't behaved in ways that made them feel under attack, there might have been a better chance of them comprehending what I was trying to say.

But there is a big challenge for me to know what to do now. I think many of you can probably relate to this challenge, or at least I hope a fair few of you can because otherwise I'm just preaching this sermon for myself, and that's not my job. The challenge, of course, is to work out how I need to change and whether I can do it sufficiently to be able to stay engaged in this debate, but in ways which are not just trying to win at all costs and instead are gracious and loving and both express and promote unity across the divide.

The most difficult thing for me to admit is that I probably can't. I probably need to step aside and walk away from this debate.

Now let me make it very clear, in as much as this is a sermon for others and not just for myself, I'm certainly not saying that being unable to change sufficiently to continue the fight and therefore needing to step aside from it is an inevitable thing that you should all generalise to your own situations. Far from it. It is just about me, at this point, in this fight. But in case it helps you to understand not only my situation, but perhaps other situations that you are facing or may someday face, let me unpack a little of why I'm thinking that for me now.

Some of it is because I have probably trampled too far over that line already. I've burnt the bridges, and this debate will probably be over before I'd have time to rebuild them enough that I could be heard as something other than a hostile assailant. Sometimes I have to recognise that I may have forfeited the right to stay in the fight.

But there are deeper dimensions to it too that are even more personal. I'm carrying some wounds from previous battles, and some of those get triggered for me in a new battle. The struggle six years ago about the inexplicable closure of the Whitley residential college involved some of the same people, and so sometimes in this debate, I am reacting out of the pain of what happened in that one. Maybe I need to recognise that if the current conflict is opening up those wounds, then trying to stay in it is as stupid as a boxer trying to get back in the ring on a broken leg. It's just self-defeating and self-destructive, and it will make my worst worse, not better.

And thirdly, I don't even hold any real hope that this fight is winnable. Even if I had been able to stay gracious and peaceable and treated this as solely a contest of ideas instead of a fight with people, I'm not sure that it would have ever been winnable. The issues at stake might seem like deep foundational aspects of Baptist identity to me, and things that have become etched deeply into my soul and I would have hoped into the soul of our churches, but it has been increasingly apparent during these months that the majority of pastors and congregations across our Union don't see them as important enough to even try to understand them, let alone fight for them or even just vote for them.

I need to acknowledge here that the Baptist Union leaders, and Daniel Bullock in particular, have made very real and genuine efforts to hear and respond to what people like me have been saying. Alison itemised some of this in her letter, and she opened my eyes to the fact that a lot more credit needs to be given for these endeavours than I had been able to see. Numerous responses and concessions have been made and offered. I think that most of them end up missing the point, but I don't think that is because anyone is being calculating and tricky. I think it is because the point hasn't been understood. And I don't hold any real hope that it is going to be.

Now, it is often the right thing to do to keep fighting for what is right, even if it is a lost cause. Jesus didn't step aside when he saw that the alternative meant ending up apparently defeated on a cross. So again, please don't generalise what I'm saying about me in this context and conclude that I'm saying we should all always step aside if we don't think we can win. Staying around to face a humiliating defeat is very often the most Jesus-y thing we can do.

But I think that decision has to be made on a case-by-case basis. There were other times when Jesus withdrew from the crowds and the conflicts and disappeared off someplace else.

For me, in this situation, at this time, I think I'm going to have to walk away from the debate. If it is not only a lost cause, but persisting with it will leave me more hurt, more cynical, more hostile, and more fractious, then I can't kid myself that I am being faithful to Jesus in that.

Jesus's prayer was not that we might always win, or even that we might always fight courageously to the bitter end for what we believe is right. His prayer was that we would all be one; that as the Father was in Jesus and as Jesus was in the Father, we might also be in them, that we may be one, as Jesus and the father are one. Us in Christ and Christ in us, that we may become completely one.

If I personally am to be faithful to that prayer, at some point I need to be pragmatic enough to ask how my energies and gifts are best expended in the service of it. There may again be times when persisting in a lost cause is the right answer to that question, but I no longer think this is one of them. If I am recognising that to do so would mean that the debate consumes me and embitters me and only deepens the divides that threaten the unity of Christ's body, then those energies and gifts would be being squandered, not faithfully expended.

Fighting this fight is not the only way that the values I have been championing could be advanced. Surely there must be constructive ways. Surely I can step aside and let what is happening happen, and find more constructive and gracious ways to plant and nurture seeds of hope that will have a chance of yielding a harvest that is fragrant with unity. It would take another sermon to begin exploring what that might look like, so I'm going to have to leave it hanging for now.

Once again, can I emphasise that in unpacking my own personal current struggle in the context of a sermon, I'm not suggesting that my questions and my answers do or should translate directly into your situations and your questions, whatever they may be. Rather, I just hope that you can treat my story as just that, a story, a story which will perhaps connect at some points with your story and thus invite further reflection on the journeys we are all on.

My hope and my prayer is that those journeys might all ultimately be journeys deeper into the mysteries of the prayer Jesus prayed:

"I ask that they may all be one... As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... that they may be one, as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one."