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Christians can bemoan the divided state of the church - or they can do something about it. Practical suggestions for ordinary believers to promote unity.

Live a miracle

For a movement that has been written off, the church is a remarkably durable force. Two thousand years of history is longer than any ruling dynasty, any nation-state and any political ideology. And the movement continues despite constant rumours of its imminent demise. The church's talent for outlasting its detractors results from its ability to adapt. There is no single description or definition that covers every fellowship, meeting, denomination, organisation or alliance that comprises the church because change is built into the nature of God's "called out" community.

Do I surprise you by naming as an asset a characteristic that is generally viewed as a disadvantage? The church is criticised for being divided, for having multiple denominations and sects and for lacking consistency. But this is not a political party or a campaign group where success depends on consolidated effort. Effort is not consistent with the nature of the true church. The church is born of grace and love rather than human endeavour, which proceeds from law.

The church looks for inspiration to Jesus of Nazareth and worships him as Son of God. But Jesus said very little about the church. Three or four brief comments comprise his entire contribution to the doctrine of the church and one of them is among the more controversial texts in the gospels.

- The church is a gathering of believers in Jesus' name. Not necessarily a large assembly but larger than just husband and wife.
- The church has leaders whose decisions are subject to the endorsement of the rest of the group (who are thereby credited with the ability to make wise judgements).
- The church is built upon a strong foundation, which is either Peter himself or Peter's confession of Christ, depending which view you subscribe to.
- The church is united in love.

The very scarcity of defining statements from its founder is a key reason for the success of the church. Untrammelled by restrictive rules, structures and definitions this movement has been able to adapt itself to different times, cultures and circumstances and has survived vicious oppression and fierce efforts to suppress, restrict and confine it. The living church has the defining characteristics of life itself – it grows, changes, reproduces itself and responds to its environment.

For all that, I don't approve of denominationalism, or the principles that create and maintain divisions. The existence of thousands of separate organisations, each claiming to be "*the church*", is an evil. However, the evil is not in their variety and distinctiveness but their institutionalism. Living things are subject to continuous alteration, but institutions fight to prevent change. The sign of life's variety is not just that you are different from me. Vibrant life is demonstrated when you and I are different from the people we used to be. We grow, change, develop, learn and adapt and thereby ensure that we continue to be fit for our place in the world. So does the true church grow and change. On the other hand, movements become denominations because they *stop* changing. The word *denomination* comes from the Latin *nomen* meaning name; when a movement stands still long enough to have recognisable and fixed characteristics we give it a *nomen* and it becomes a *denomination*. Denominationalism is in opposition to love. Love does not "seek its own" in an attempt to establish the priority of its territory over that of the loved one; it brings the loved one into its territory and says "what's mine is yours". When we seek to relate lovingly to all believers our denominations become irrelevant and dispensable.

Unfortunately, openness, love and mutual acceptance have not been the common experience of every believer. Non-believers frequently cite the divisions within Christianity as reasons for not accepting what we say - and it is hard to prove them wrong. We have been divided. We have persecuted one another. We have held arrogantly to the view that “we” were right and “they” were wrong. This calls for repentance and an appeal to God to instil his humble spirit within us... the Spirit that caused Jesus to be “despised and rejected”¹. If we pass this off as an issue for leaders, or a regrettable remnant from history that is beyond our control or responsibility then nothing will change. The church will change when each “member of the body”² determines that the issue is for him or her. As individuals we need to repudiate the pride, the exclusivity and the stubborn attitudes that have dogged the church and allow our precious dogmas to be tested in the proving grounds of life. I was once meditating on the text “except a corn of wheat fall into the ground it remains alone...” and realised that many of my past arguments in defence of the truth were protecting the seed rather than planting it. I was building “granaries of truth” when God wanted that seed to be cast on the ground to be broken down, destroyed and reborn. We will “reach unity in the faith”³ when we have kept the “unity of the spirit”⁴; the Spirit of Christ; the Spirit of humility; the spirit that submits to those who would disagree, argue and oppose; the Spirit of God, the only true judge.

There is no need for us to wait until a remote judgement day to start rebuilding the church. However, we need to dispense with the methods that have created our multiple denominations. We need to give up our arrogant claims to have found the perfect way to run the church or dictate its doctrines. Many, probably most, new movements in the church begin with the intention to be open to all. A lively spirit permeates the early days of these movements until they achieve a level of success and their following reaches what marketing experts call “critical mass”. Then they develop self-awareness and start focussing on their structure and organisation, forgetting the spontaneity that characterised the earlier days. Among the leadership that emerges, some begin to dominate and take steps to strengthen the movement and ensure its permanence. The movement may have already become a recognisable denomination and it may also have lost its original openness and willingness to change and learn. Breakaway movements frequently develop at that point, especially when power struggles arise among the movement’s leaders; so the cycle begins again.

To break this cycle we each need to settle our own heart on the direction in which God is leading. God’s chosen destination was never that one denomination, sect or national church would become THE church to which others would turn in the end. He only created one church and nothing smaller is worthy of the name. If we have a problem in recognising the shape and character of that church, we just need to keep our gaze on him. This is an individual challenge that each of us needs to take to heart. The destiny of the church is in the hands of each individual who has committed to Jesus.

But, I hear you say, “Who am I? - Such great things must be in the hands of our leaders?” I disagree. Leaders have often been the problem rather than the solution and so they will always be unless you take responsibility. Democracy is not the issue. Whatever form of government exists - in whichever part of the world or whatever kind of organisation – it only remains in control while its followers, citizens, subjects or members consent to it. Every type of rule, be it monarchy, democracy, aristocracy or despotism, has been at some time overthrown by revolution. I am not advocating revolution in the church. I am just calling for recognition that the unity of the church, and its ultimate perfection, is our personal responsibility – yours and mine. Leaders are important, but their vision is subject to your judgement⁵. Every believer has a vital role in bringing the church into its fullness. Think about this for a moment. You love God and want to see his kingdom created on earth. Your influence does not seem great in human terms, because you are just a single member in a worldwide movement of millions. On the other hand, your leaders – whether they are called elder, bishop, presbyter or superintendent – seem to have much greater influence. The trouble is

¹ Isaiah 53.3

² I Corinthians 12.12-27

³ Ephesians 4.13

⁴ Ephesians 4.4

⁵ I Corinthians 14.29

that their greater influence brings greater temptations. They could be motivated to fight for their personal position rather than take actions to promote fellowship and unity. They could give way to dangerous ambitions. They could shut their ears to the leading of the Spirit. You are the check that can prevent them from making such errors. The church may be made up of millions of people, but each one of them is an individual: a single person like you and me with the ability to make choices, to talk directly with the God of heaven, to speak up for what we believe.

This is a message of limited anarchy. The way to unity is not to dispense with leaders in all circumstances but to see all leadership as transitional. Useful forms of leadership are parenting, judging and crisis management. The parent leads by example, with remarkably little formal teaching, and draws the child towards adulthood and independence; successful parents let go. The judge uses wisdom to decide between opposing arguments, but does not go round looking for problems to solve. The crisis leader steps in to deal with emergencies, directing the efforts of others who are skilled in different aspects of the challenge to be overcome; when the crisis is over the role is finished. The parent who holds on is called “possessive”; the judge who goes looking for problems is called “interfering”; the crisis leader who seeks to make his role permanent is called a despot. The leadership model for the church is eldership, a relative term that holds the implication of temporariness. This is not to condemn those who hold full-time roles in Christian service. A group of believers has as much right as any secular organisation to appoint people to look after tasks it wishes to be implemented – but let’s not confuse a commission to serve with an appointment to command. By constantly letting go our leaders will free the church to blossom into adulthood.

The church will fulfil its destiny and become united in Christ when each believer takes responsibility for creating that unity around him or her. We need to base our Christian lives on the understanding that there is only one church. Throughout the world and, more particularly, in your locality, everybody who loves Jesus and has been reborn by his Spirit is part of the same spiritual entity. You may attend a meeting that sings, prays and preaches in particular ways that contrast with others in the same area; but you are not in different churches. Your local church is the sum of all called-out believers who live in your area and you need to create relationships with all of them. This is not a matter of organised mergers, but open-hearted acceptance. Open your hearts and homes to everyone who acknowledges Jesus as Lord and Christ and let his Holy Spirit begin to make you one.

I spent over 20 years in the unusual position of being an outsider inside the church. As the “Charismatic movement” developed from an initially open and vibrant move of the Holy Spirit into a collection of denominations I was one of many who were turned out of one of its sects. The obvious thing for my wife and I to do after that would have been to join one of the other fellowships in the town where we lived, but we sensed that God did not want us to do the obvious. In that Lincolnshire town there had been a history of deep divisions and mutual suspicion between the various denominations and we realised that the act of joining a particular group would separate us from the rest. Convinced that “the concept of One Church is not an impossible dream”⁶, we accepted God’s unusual calling to remain outside those organisations and become recognised locally as “unaffiliated Christians”. We were not aloof from the local churches and were keen to support anything that was done in the name of the whole church; nor did we condemn what they were doing or try to draw them into our separateness. Our stance was a heartfelt expression of our deepest beliefs about God’s called out community of faith – and it bore fruit. Over time, the divisions began to melt away until a mission organised by one denomination grew into a collaborative venture by all the local churches. We saw interdependence and openhearted acceptance at a level we had never seen before; and we knew that it was time to move on.

Surely, the next step for us must be to repeat the process in the next area. Not at all! If I have learned nothing else about the ways of God, time has certainly taught me to listen again before making assumptions about where God is leading. As a member of one of the first Christian rock bands, I imagined

⁶ I borrowed this phrase from a pamphlet written by George Tarleton and circulated around the “house church movement” during the late 1970’s

that evangelism would always be God's calling for me – but he moved me on. As a youthful leader in a free church that was blossoming into charismatic renewal I expected to continue in that exciting period of growth – but the Lord had other plans. We moved to a newly created village on the edge of the North Downs, in Kent, where we shared in the task of creating a church fellowship from scratch - another new experience. We realised from the start that our period in that village would be limited, but expected to repeat the act by planting a church in the place we next moved to – but that was not the way for us. Each step of our way took us through new challenges and new learning experiences, so we were prepared for something different after our next move, following our “unaffiliated” period. In the next area, we joined a traditional Anglican church - lively, talented, devout and enthusiastic – but traditional in basic structure and liturgy. It challenged our nonconformist prejudices and our principle of openness toward all who love God, whatever their traditions. And it still challenges us.

The church will never be fully complete until all of us are prepared to accept one another and live with difference. Exclusivity is a curse; an expression of pride that divides God's church. If we honestly wish to be united we must expect to be proved wrong. Some of my deeply held convictions may be unjustified prejudices. Some of the views I have argued against may turn out to be the truth. We will not find the truth by closing our ears to other views, nor by keeping ourselves separate in the hope that our piece of the truth will turn out to be the whole picture. By sharing our lives with other Christians – over cups of tea – across the supermarket aisle – in the High Street – at the school gate – in shared worship – we will not only discover how their beliefs and practises differ from ours, but how closely their practical experience of God in is in tune with ours. Faith follows commitment⁷ and your commitment to expressing Christianity in your locality will make the church become real... the product of your faith.

I have not asked you to leave your denomination. I have not called for the founding of new churches on supposedly “New Testament” principles. I have not suggested that you form a committee to plan the merging of local congregations. All these things have been tried and found wanting, but the most effective way of welding the church together has been carried on over centuries and treated as irrelevant. Don't wait for leaders to propose new programmes or missions, just get on with showing love to those around you. Invite them into your home, and don't try to persuade them to join your church or to change their beliefs. Talk about the ordinary things of life; share practical problems and blessings and, if you do talk about the faith, listen and share in humility. As you, and thousands of other Christians, act out the spirit of openness, acceptance and humility we will see the clouds of division melt in the warmth of God's love. When we love one another we will not be able to condemn one another and our disagreements will come down to their proper size and seem resolvable.

Am I expecting a miracle? Why not? It can come about in *your* heart, by means of *your* prayers and through *your* behaviour.

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⁷ Romans 10.9