

Christian Unity

Intro:

A guy in San Francisco was driving to work. He drives across the bridge and notices this guy standing by the railings looking really upset. He thinks "Good grief it's a jumper. I've got to try and stop him!" So he stops his car walks across and says to the guy, "Hi buddy, is everything ok?" The jumper looks really crazed and swings one leg over the railing and says, "I can't go on. Life's hopeless. I'm going to end it all!"

The commuter wants to help the jumper but doesn't know what to say. He finally says, "There's gotta be hope, there's always hope. Don't you believe in God?"

The jumper says, "Sure I believe in God."

The commuter asks, "Are you a Christian or a Jew or a Hindu, or what?"

The jumper replied, "A Christian."

The commuter says, "Small world! Me too. Protestant or Catholic or Greek Orthodox?"

He said, "Protestant."

The commuter says, "Me too! What denomination?"

He said, "Baptist."

"Incredible," the commuter says, "Me too! *Northern Baptist* or *Southern Baptist*?"

He said, "Northern Baptist."

The commuter says, "Me too! Northern *Conservative Baptist* or Northern *Liberal Baptist*?"

He said, "Northern *Conservative Baptist*."

The commuter says, "Me too! Northern *Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist* or Northern *Conservative Reformed Baptist*?"

He said, "Northern *Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist*."

The commuter says, "Me Too! Northern *Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879* or Northern *Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912*?"

He said, "Northern *Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912*."

The commuter screams, "DIE HERETIC!" and pushes him off the bridge¹.

Why is that story amusing? Isn't it because there is an element of truth in it?

Let me tell you a true story this time. A story I heard when visiting an Apostolic church in Northern France.

I was talking to a man who was, if I remember correctly, the pastor's son and very involved in that church. In passing he told me that he had got married fairly recently. I asked whether his wife had also grown up in this church. He went a bit quiet and said well there's a bit of a problem with the relationship with my wife's parents. I said, "Yeah, what kind of a problem?" He said, "Well they don't recognise this church as a true Christian church." I said, "Ah, I see. This is a Catholic /Protestant thing is it?" "No", he said, "they're not Catholics."

"Well, I said, "are they from the Lutheran or Reformed traditions?" No he said they're Pentecostals."

I said, "Pentecostals - but you're a Pentecostal too! The apostolic church is a Pentecostal denomination! You both have your origin in the Welsh revival of 1904/5. The Pentecostal denomination was founded in 1909 and the Apostolic denomination was birthed in a breakaway movement in 1916. In terms of theology you've massive amounts in common!" He said, "Well, that may be true. But my wife's Pentecostal parents don't recognize this church as a true Christian church and they refused to attend our wedding as it was held here."

I was shocked and stunned. Here were two small, struggling churches. Both with a Pentecostal theology and spirituality. But such was their deep sense of difference and division, that even for their own daughter's wedding, a couple from one church would not attend the other.

I want to just leave that to one side now and ask you to imagine a scenario.

Suppose you discover that in 24 hours you will be dead. Who do you pray for and what do you pray for? Self, family, friends first and foremost certainly, rightly and properly too. But after, what about those in whose life God has made you instrumental in salvation, discipleship, spiritual growth? What do you pray for them?

Life-long Holy Spirit anointing, powerful spiritual gifts, a significant ministry, health wealth, protection, joy peace? What do you pray for them?

Jesus and Unity:

It is interesting to consider what Jesus prays for when he is in that very situation. In the Garden of Gethsemane, about to be arrested, tortured and crucified, he prays what is known as his high priestly prayer. He begins by praying for himself. He then prays for his disciples. Finally, he looks down through human history and prays for everyone who will ever believe the apostolic gospel message.

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,

that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one:

I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

[John 17:20-23, NIV]

Colour Key: Prayer for Unity

Quality of Unity

Reason for Unity

So what does Jesus pray for us? The first thing that we note is that he prays for nothing that we might have thought about praying for. This is a very deep and mystical prayer - perhaps some of the deepest mystical theology in scripture. The bottom line is, however, that Jesus in the only time he specifically prays for the universal Church down through history, prays 3 times in 3 verses for its unity.

- Jesus prays that a Trinitarian kind of unity might exist between all Christians (v21).
- Jesus prays that all Christians would be mystically united with the Trinity (v21).
- Jesus links these two with the success of the Christian mission, inferring that unity creates an environment where faith is possible, a plausibility structure for faith (v21).
- Jesus states that he has given these believers the glory God gave him (exaltation, praise and honour; but expressed in humble service - the 'upside down' Kingdom of God where the humble are the heroes, the lowly, the leaders) (v22).
- Jesus states the reason that he has given this glory to his followers is that they might be one in a Trinitarian kind of unity (v22)
- united to him, united to the Father in/through Christ (v23).
- Jesus prays again that all Christians might be brought to perfect unity (23).
- Jesus links this with the world's ability to believe in Christ's divine nature and in the Father's love for man; which is of the same nature as his love for the Son (v23).

Why is unity so much a focus for Jesus as he prays for the future of the Church?

(i) *Unity - The Essential Nature of the Church*

Perhaps one reason is that unity is the essential nature of the Church. Galatians 3:28 states clearly that we are one in Christ. That divisions caused by race, gender, social position have no validity in the Church. Unity is what we ARE. And our unity is to be like that of the trinity.

But what is the unity like which exists within the trinity? Perhaps in considering an icon painted by Andrei Rublev around 1410 we can get a glimpse of it. The icon is a depiction of that mysterious event recounted in Genesis 18, where scripture tells us that, "*The Lord appeared to Abraham ... Abraham looked up and saw three men*". So straightaway we know that something weird is going on. Abraham also addresses them in the singular. It is all very strange. Traditionally many theologians have understood this to be a pre-incarnate manifestation of the trinity. Where Father, Son and Spirit manifest themselves to Abraham in some angelic way.



Rublev has followed this understanding and shown us Father, Son and Spirit dressed as angelic travellers, sitting at table. If we start on the right with the Spirit, we see that his eyes are fixed on Jesus in the middle, this draws our gaze likewise around to the Son. If we look at the Son, we find that his gaze moves us on to the Father. The inclination of the Father's body sweeps our gaze back to the Spirit.

If we look closer we notice that whilst the Spirit is gazing at the Son, the angle of his body indicates that he is facing the Father. Similarly with Jesus - his gaze is fixed on the Father, but his body is turned towards the Spirit. The Father too has the same bi-directional focus of attention - gazing at the Son but his body is facing towards the Spirit.

So the totality of this is an eternal endless circular movement of loving attention, circulating between Father Son and Spirit.

The Eastern Orthodox theologians invented a new word as they tried to describe the relations which exist within the trinity. The Greek word was perichoresis² (Circumincession in Latin). Literally perichoresis means mutual interpenetration and inter-dwelling but without mixing or confusion.

Orthodox theologians made this more comprehensible by using the analogy of a dance. 'Peri' means around and 'Choreo' has to do with movement, it shares the same root as 'Choreography'. Thus it contains the idea of movement around together. There is therefore an idea which resembles something of a dance in the heart of Trinitarian theology. That Father, Son and Spirit express their love in a celebratory, joyful, creative dance. Each person within the trinity responding to the others in harmony and love.

Perichoretic theology therefore presents the trinity in terms of a God who dances. Father, Son and Spirit circling and moving in joyful unity, each expressing their diversity and unity in a joyful creative dance. This is the kind of unity that Jesus is praying might exist between Christians.

The amazing, even scandalous claim of the Christian religion is that we are invited into fellowship with this trinity. Jesus prayed, "*may they also be in us*". As you look at the Rublev icon we are invited to take our place at the table in intimate fellowship with Father Son and Spirit.

(ii) *Unity - The Goal of the Church*

We also see expressed clearly in this prayer of Jesus that unity is the goal of the Church. Unity with God, unity with each other. We have no future but unity. The Bridegroom is not coming back to Earth to marry a dismembered bride!

(iii) *Unity - Christ's Gift to the Church*

We must note also that organic, intrinsic, spiritual unity is a gift, part of the salvation 'package' which we receive at conversion. Along with the gift of justification and righteousness we also become part of the body of Christ and that body is one.

So there is a sense in which we don't have to work to create unity, rather our work is to express it. It is like our righteousness. We are righteous, but at present our righteousness is not clearly seen. It is obscured by the stain of sin. But righteousness is our true nature, our true calling and our true destiny. Similarly unity is our true nature, calling and destiny.

If I could summarise where we are now. We have noted that disunity rather than unity often best describes the Christian church. We have noted that in Jesus' final prayer for the church down through history his prayer emphasis is for unity, unity, unity. We have noted that unity is the church's essential nature, its future and its goal and unity is Christ's gift to his Church.

Crucially we also see that Jesus links the Church's success in mission to its ability to live out its unity. We might wonder why is this?

At heart unity is an expression of the Church's health. When we become Christians we are indissolubly linked to Christ –

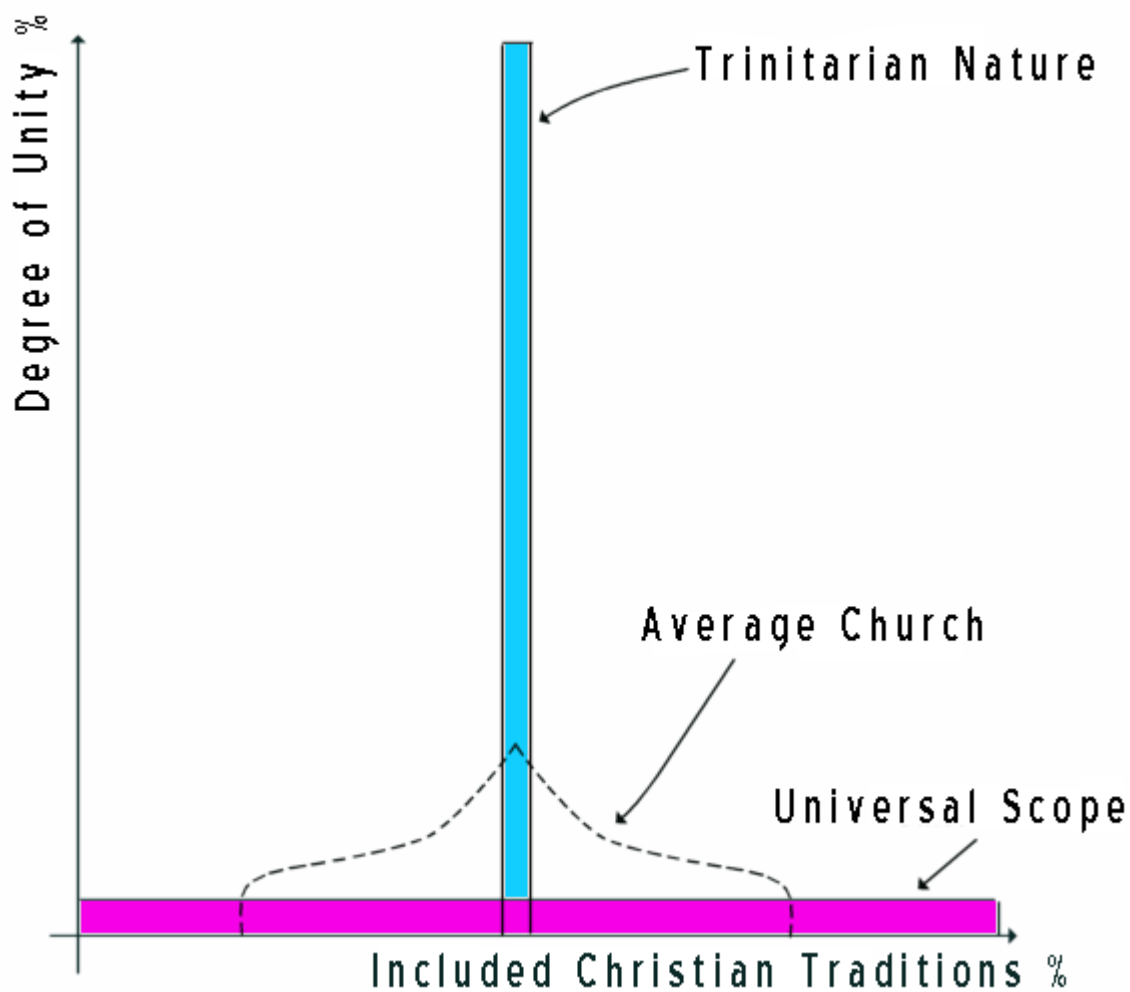
“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8vv35, 38-39 NIV)

But if we are indissolubly linked to Christ, we are also de facto indissolubly linked to everyone one else who has responded positively to Christ. Thus we get the theology of the Universal Church. The Universal Church is a spiritual reality. There exists a spiritual bond which links all believers, everywhere, at all time. Thus the spiritual reality of the Church is beyond time, beyond geography.

When we seek to live out unity, we are expressing the quintessence of our true nature. We are seeking to live out what we really are – one in Christ. This is why it is so important, this is why it has tremendous consequences on our success in mission.

Now let's look at how the subject of unity has been approached historically.

Unity Graph



(a) When the universal scope of Christian unity has been taken seriously, i.e. ALL Christian traditions being considered to be part of the body of Christ, this unity has been expressed only as some vague sense of spiritual oneness. It certainly hasn't had much impact or bearing on the life and mission of those who hold this view. If you like this vision of unity sees it as broad but shallow.

(b) When the Trinitarian nature of Christian unity has been taken seriously i.e. that it calls for a perichoretic intermingling of lives in love, this unity has then only been extended to a very narrow group of 'Christians like us'. Thus unity has been presented as deep but narrow.

I would propose that the average church falls somewhere between these two extremes, i.e. expressing a limited degree of unity over a fairly narrow range of traditions similar to their own.

My own experience is very much like that of the average church shown here. I was a good 'ol evangelical boy. I had come to faith in Christ through the evangelical movement and naturally assumed that that was how everybody came to saving faith in Christ.

Our churches insularity was such that if suddenly, overnight every single other Christian church on the face of planet earth had disappeared, functionally it would have had almost zero impact in the life of our church.

The only significant links we had with any other church was with the Pentecostal church in our same village. Other than that, nothing.

It led to some quite bizarre behaviour. You could actually stand at the entrance to our church and spit to the Roman Catholic church, just the other side of a narrow alleyway. On any Sunday morning around 300 evangelicals and 300 Roman Catholics would arrive for church at the same time and yet not a single "hello", "good morning" or even nod of recognition would be exchanged. Those two churches could have been on different continents and had more contact with each other.

That was my pretty much the extent of my experience before I came to Bible college. When I got to Bible college, I found myself in the same class as Anglicans, Methodists, Brethren, Baptists, Pentecostals, Charismatics. I discovered that some of these guys are going for it with God. Some of them even have a lot to teach me about the Christian life. They may have talked about their faith in different ways from me, they may have prioritised the different aspects of being a Christian differently to me, but I still saw in them the family resemblance. That made me start to think about how I viewed the Christian Church.

God proceeded to do a 'number' on me all through my Bible college experience. I'd be reading a book, find it amazing and inspirational then discover it was written by an Anglican, or a Catholic or an Orthodox Christian. Another key thing was the Christian Spirituality course in the third year that opened up to me some of the incredible treasures of the different Christian traditions.

God also brought some significant people across my path. One summer's evening I'm sitting on my front doorstep in Burton, reading Thomas a Kempis' "The Imitation of Christ" and this old lady walks up the garden path. She apologises for interrupting me but she'd noticed I had a stained glass Celtic cross in the window and she thought it was beautiful and wondered where I had bought it?

We started talking and it turned out she was Russian by birth, her parents had fled the revolution and she had grown up in French-speaking Egypt. She had then been educated in France by nuns and had come to a living faith in Christ through their ministry. She had converted to Catholicism at the age of 18, had married an Englishman and after a life of globe trotting had ended up living in Burton. She had been touched by the Charismatic renewal in the Catholic church and was deeply involved in her local Catholic church.

She ended up helping my wife and I develop our conversational French for the year whilst we prepared to go to France. But this wonderful old lady, full of the Spirit of God, also enabled me to learn an amazing amount about both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions.

God did this kind of thing to me again and again. As a good 'ol evangelical boy I had had all my theological ducks lined up. I was sorted, everything neatly categorised and making sense. Whilst I was at Bible college God took great delight in kicking my theological ducks all over the

place. Stretching my boundaries, making me examine the barriers that I had built to show who was in and who was out of the kingdom of God.

Building these kinds of divisional barriers is something we all do. In a sense it is vital that we understand what makes someone a Christian - if we don't how can we know that we are saved, or identify who needs to be evangelised? My problem was that I had defined the Christian faith too narrowly.

If we look back at the graph of Christian unity that I showed earlier, I was one of those who had adopted very narrow criteria for what it means to be a Christian. How should I have defined what it means to be saved?

Defining a Christian:

How do you become a Christian? There are many different biblical texts that we could cite which speak of how people are saved. Most mention belief in Jesus, some mention repentance, some mention baptism, some highlight a life-response to the teaching of Jesus³. One of the most famous and most concise texts is found in Romans 10:9.

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

[Romans 10:9, NIV.]

So what does this verse actually mean? If we examine it phrase by phrase we find that the following elements are present;

- an expressed belief,
- in the lordship of Jesus,
- a heart conviction,
- that he died and rose again

What is the significance of these elements? At its most basic form we are told that a saving response to Christ is a life-expressed, heart conviction of his messianic / divine identity, and of his saving work in dying and being raised from the dead, thus enabling the creation of a Kingdom.

In other words salvation is centred in a genuine faith response to the person and work of Christ. A faith response which recognises his Lordship - his rule and reign over the universal Kingdom of God - almost certainly linked to an understanding of his divinity, and which focuses on his death and resurrection as the unique salvific event for the whole of humanity.

Now that doesn't include very much theology does it? No Trinitarian doctrine - a "Binity" at best. No explanation about 'how' one is saved by this belief. No doctrine of the incarnation. No eschatological doctrine. No ecclesiological doctrine. In fact this 'recipe for salvation' doesn't include very much at all.

Can you really be saved knowing that little about the Christian faith? Well there's a very famous biblical test case for a minimal salvific response - the thief on the cross.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence?"

We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

[Luke 23:39-43, NIV]

What does this man believe? Well he believes to some extent in his own guilt - at least in the eyes of the law. He believes that Jesus is the Messiah, that he will somehow establish his kingdom. In other words he makes an oral confession of a heartfelt belief that Jesus is Lord and

that God will somehow raise him from the dead. If you like he confesses prophetically what St Paul confesses retrospectively.

But is that enough to save him? Jesus says that it is.

Note that this is not a model for discipleship. This man knows almost nothing about the theology of the Christian faith. He has no relationship with a church fellowship. He has benefited from no church sacrament. He is not baptised. He has never celebrated Holy Communion or Eucharist. He has no understanding of the trinity, atonement, soteriology etc. No doubt his understanding about what it means to be a follower of Christ is completely hazy; or just plain wrong. But Jesus says he's saved.

And if he is saved, he is part of the body of Christ, and Christ's prayer is that all the members of his body live in the most profound unity.

If I really believe this I am required to accept the reality of a profound unity that exists between me and those whose theology and practise may be very different to my own. I'm also expected to express this unity in meaningful interrelationship.

The Christian Church does not have a good record on this. The last figure I saw showed something like 30,000 different Christian denominations. I've known congregations that split over the choice of the colour of a new church carpet. Show me an evangelical church that hasn't experienced a split over the past 30 years and I'll show you a miracle. Schism's our best subject.

Given the sad reality that even individual congregations struggle to be one, how can we possibly relate positively to Christians outside our congregation, denomination and even tradition - Christians with whom we will have many differences of opinion and practise?

Peter Meiderlin is an otherwise unknown 17th century, German divine. All that we know about him is that he was employed for some time as the organist and music meister in a church in Germany. He lived during the terrible time of the "Thirty Years' War" in Europe (1618-1648), a war begun in response to the Reformation and which sought to carry out a form of 'religious cleansing'.

At the time the logic was 'one country, one religion'. Therefore all over central Europe Catholics killed Protestants and Protestants killed Catholics in order to establish their religion as the national religion. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed, whole regions were decimated, and all in the name of Christ. (Sadly, this has been the recipe for every World War that this planet has so far known - give the Devil his due).

In the height of this terrible time Peter Meiderlin published a tract, under the pseudonym of Rupertus Meldinius, in which called for peaceful toleration between the warring Christian factions. His tract contained a sentence which has since become very famous,

In a word, I'll say it: if we preserve unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and charity in both, our affairs will be in the best position.

Peter Meiderlin was ignored at the time but his little tract continued to circulate within the Christian world. Nearly 4 centuries after his death his little phrase has come to be a watchword for all those who seek to improve relations between Christians of different traditions. He was nicknamed "the pacificator" or peacemaker.

I think that in our dilemma of trying to decide how we should relate to Christians with whom we may have serious disagreements, Peter Meiderlin's dictum is very helpful. So what does it actually mean?

In essentials - unity.

It rightly recognises that there are certain core aspects of Christian belief that are non-negotiable and must be held by anyone who would call themselves a follower of Christ. However, as we've seen from Romans 10:9 and from the example of the thief on the cross, these essentials are very, very basic. A few key beliefs about the person and work of Christ. That he is the Lord, and that his death and resurrection is the key salvific event for all humanity.

In non-essentials - liberty.

Meiderlin's dictum recognises also that there is a hierarchy of truth. That some truths are more important than others. Where non-essential truths are concerned he states that Christians are to grant each other liberty of conscience over such matters. If we limit the essentials to those few core statement about the person and work of Christ, then every other Christian doctrine has to be relegated to the level of non-essential. That doesn't mean unimportant, or of little consequence. Such secondary truths may have major implications for how someone lives out their Christian faith. But it does mean that you can be saved without believing them.

In all things - charity.

Charity is here used in its older meaning of love. A meaning preserved in such expressions as "thinking charitably about someone". Meiderlin's point is that it is love for our brothers and sisters in Christ which needs to be the over-riding concern.

Actually closer inspection reveals that all Meiderlin has done is to expertly summarise St Paul's approach in Romans 14. St Paul has to tackle thorny, divisive theological issues for the early Church. Should Christians should eat food sacrificed to idols, or recognise Jewish holy days?

St Paul's advice is that;

- these are matters of individual conscience,
- that each person should do as his conscience dictates,
- that Christians should grant liberty to each other to have their own opinion on debatable matters,
- that each should keep his opinions to himself,
- and that concern for others and for the unity of the fellowship are to be the most important considerations.

Meiderlin just summarised this teaching in a very elegant and beautiful way. I would commend Peter Meiderlin's dictum to you. If you only take away one thing from this session, let it be this phrase.

In essentials - unity. In non-essentials - liberty. In all things - charity.

Application for Mission:

So if we accept that Christ's prayer for unity is significant and expresses God's heart for his Church; if we accept that our definition of who is a part of that Church needs to be very wide given that it takes so little to make a saving response to Christ, how does this affect our mission praxis?

If I can share my own example. I arrive fresh out of Bible college in the Auxois valley in deepest Burgundy. I have come to the conclusion that Christ wants unity between his followers that is both Trinitarian in nature and universal in scope and I arrive in my village with the goal to try to enable French men and women come to a saving knowledge of Christ and to live that out in authentic discipleship. What is my approach?

I do some background research and quickly discover that I have come to a valley rich in Christian history. I find that in my very valley a young girl was martyred for her Christian faith. She was very pretty and caught the eye of a powerful political figure. He asked her marry him but she refused because he wasn't a Christian. He was outraged and humiliated by her refusal, so he had her arrested. He went away on a business trip and left her in prison. On his return he asked her if she would reconsider whether she would marry him or not. She still refused, saying she could only marry someone who shared her Christian faith. He then had her tortured. She still refused. Finally he lost patience and had her killed.

The girl's name was Reine (Regina in English). The powerful political figure was Olybrius the Roman Proconsul and Prefect of Gaul. The incident happened in 251 AD.

So whilst my ancestors in Britain were still worshipping trees, people in my valley were being martyred for the Christian faith.

And if that were not enough, the very fact that I am a Christian is down to the French-trained missionary-monks who brought the faith to pagan Britain.

In a very real sense the French catholic church is the elder sister of the English church.

So in one sense I can be encouraged in that there is a deep Christian foundation in this area, something to build upon.

However, whilst the spiritual history of my valley is fantastic, the contemporary spiritual reality is that if the church in this valley is very different. In fact if the Christian church here was a person, he would be in hospital, in intensive care and they'd be calling the family in.

So what do I do? Do I say, "Your history's great but all that is irrelevant now"? Do I say, "You are a battered and bruised church, your spiritual fire's nearly out. The best thing that can happen is that you finally break down altogether and are snuffed out completely"? So that the field will be left clear for me to plant a new vibrant church here?

But if I look at scripture, what is God's response to bruised, barely smouldering things? Is our God a breaker of the bruised, an extinguisher of the smouldering? What is God's heart for those whose fire is almost out?

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.

[Isaiah 42:3a]

We could equally look at the book of Hosea where God's heart for his unfaithful people and his unwillingness to give them up is most powerfully and graphically expressed. Any review of Old Testament history would reveal God's incredible and unshakeable compassion and faithfulness to a consistently unfaithful people.

We could also look at Jesus' parable about the prodigal son which expresses the Father's intense and unshakeable love for his despicable and foolish son.

If these are true expressions of God's heart for his people, even when they are faithless and foolish, what should my response be to the fragile, failing Christian community in my valley?

So what do I do about this fragile, failing Christian community? Do I tell them that they need to be replaced with something new and vibrant? Or do I come alongside them and pray for them, look for opportunities to serve them and do all I can to help them rediscover the spiritual vibrancy that was once so amazing?

As you've probably guessed by now, this has indeed been my wife and my approach and for the past 10 years that is what we have tried to do. We became associate missionaries of the Servant of Servants Foundation. A foundation that exists primarily to promote the discovery and implementation of appropriate avenues of incarnational service to the state churches of Europe⁴.

So we come alongside the church that exists on the ground where we are in France. We start attending services. We live out our faith in this church. We offer ourselves in service to this church. We start off serving where they are comfortable for us to serve - we clean the church, we operate the sound system, my wife plays the keyboard, we produce the service sheets etc. After a few months they ask my wife to teach a catechism class. Then they ask my wife to lead the church choir. My wife offers to work in the parish office one day a week doing administration. I offer to create a parish website.

Gradually we win their trust and get invited to take more of a role in things. My wife ends up leading the liturgical music ministry. I get involved in leading a group for those re-beginning with church – the first evangelistic activity for about 40 years!

I will be honest with you, this is not an easy approach to mission. It involves difficulties, frustrations and misunderstandings. When you try to build a bridge you face two dangers. As you try to land your bridge on the far side you might be rejected. Or, as you reach out over the water, your own side might cut you off. Those who try to build bridges are in a very vulnerable position and often end up getting wet.

When we explained our sense of calling to our home church - the church who had sent us off to Bible college, a church which my father pastored for 12 years, the church in which my wife and I grew up were baptised in, married in, took our first steps in Christian ministry in - this church excommunicated us. For them our bridge was a bridge too far. They couldn't see the point of our bridge, nor accept its validity.

Those who take the kind of Kingdom approach to mission that we have are almost certainly to have more than their fair share of opposition. So why do it? Because some how I believe that in serving my Catholic brothers and sisters I'm living out an answer to Jesus' prayer. I believe that it makes God smile and that in some way it advances the cause of Christ.

Since my wife and I and my colleague David Bjork and his wife have been in the Dijon area we have been able to promote and seen introduced the ALPHA course in our diocese. The first time any adult evangelism has been done for a generation! The third course has just started with about 15 not-yet Christians. People are coming to faith in Christ and being disciplined, becoming good Christians and good Catholics.

One thing you need to remember about bridges. Almost every time a bridge is successfully built, it is nearly always built on the foundation of previous failures.

Maybe you still have questions? Our approach is certainly not the 'normal' approach to mission. Neither is it the easiest. But the question I have to ask you to consider is the following - Is ours a valid approach to mission?

But it's not just about mission. Some of you will hopefully have realised that the approach to unity which I have presented today also has consequences for every other form of Christian ministry.

Wherever you end up after Bible college, chances are there will be other Christian groups present and active within your area. Each one of you will have to decide how you are going to relate to the different Christian traditions and groups that surround you?

If Jesus' prayer is to be taken seriously, then not only is how you relate to these other groups of Christians significant, it is also mission critical - it will affect your success in building the Kingdom of God.

How do you respond to this? If I can reprise the perichoretic image of the trinity that we touched on earlier. Who are you prepared to dance with?

Possible Learning Activities (if required):

- (a) Consider one expression of Christian life or mission and consider how it would look;
 - (i) firstly without any appreciation of Christian unity,
 - (ii) secondly, with a Trinitarian and universalist understanding of Christian unity.
- (b) If Jesus' contention that expressed unity makes evangelism more successful, what factors might cause this?
- (c) Consider the following verses that speak of unity and apply them to your own experience of Church and your vision of what the Church should be- 2 Chron 30:12; Ps 133, Rom 15:5; Eph 4:3,13; Col 3:14.

Suggested Further Reading:

Unfamiliar Paths, David E. Bjork, William Carey Library, Pasadena, 1997.

The story of how a Protestant, Evangelical, Church-planting missionary in France ended up serving Christ as an Evangelical within the Catholic church. David recounts his experiences, his struggles, his theological and sociological reflections which all led him to conclude that he could best contribute to the advancement of the Kingdom of Christ in France by engaging in co-operative ministry within the Catholic world.

As Pilgrims Progress, David E. Bjork and Stephen J. March, Aventine Press, San Diego, 2006.

A book calling Christians to unite around the essential core beliefs of the Christian faith. The authors propose a model for the origin and meaning of Christian diversity which can lead to a positive evaluation of many of the differences which exist. They also propose models and guidelines for practical relations between fellowships and individuals from the different Christian traditions.

A Generous Orthodoxy, Brian D. McLaren, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2004.

A contemporary call for Christians to unite around a Christ-centred orthodoxy which appreciates how Jesus can be embraced across the entire Christian horizon. In many ways an updating of much of the material in the following work by Chesterton.

Orthodoxy, G. K. Chesterton, John Lane, London, 1915.

An amazing book about his 'accidental' discovery of Christianity. He tried to develop his own belief system, using only his incredible mind and vast knowledge of human history and philosophy. *"I am the man who with the utmost daring discovered what had been discovered before ... I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered it was orthodoxy."*

Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis, Collins, Glasgow, 1952.

In this book Lewis tries to outline the core basics of Christian belief and practice, as agreed by the main strands of Christian tradition. A minimal, or mere, Christianity.

Who Can Be Saved, Terence L. Tiessen, IVP, Downers Grove, 2004.

A deeply considered biblical evaluation of the how men and women can find salvation in and through Jesus Christ. In considering how salvation might be possible to those who have never heard the gospel message, but who respond positively to general revelation, he raises many issues that also have application for relations between Christian traditions who see each other as 'flawed' representations of the authentic Christian faith.

¹ First told by the American, surrealist comedian Emo Phillips.

² John of Damascus (c675 - c750) summarises his position at the end of his treatment of the Trinity in his Exposition of the Orthodox Faith: The subsistences [i.e., the three Persons] dwell and are established firmly in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep to their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to each other. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or commingling or confusion. And there is one and the same motion: for there is one impulse and one motion of the three subsistences, which is not to be observed in any created nature (OF 1.14).

³ Mark 16:15, Luke 19:9, John 3:14-16, 5:24, 6:17, 11:25, 20:31; Acts 2:38, 16:30; Romans 10:9-13.

⁴ See <http://sosf.marchsite.com>