



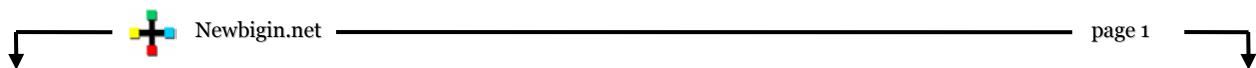
Pluralism in the Church

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Plurality of beliefs is a fact in society, but in the Church it can be painful. There is, indeed, a virtuous sense for the word. Modern science is pluralist in the sense that the work of scientists is not controlled from a single centre. Scientists (once they have proved their competence by a long apprenticeship into the tradition) are free to decide in which direction to pursue their research. But these researches are pursued by people who believe that there is a reality to be, explored about which one can be right or wrong. Differences in respect of, say, the structure of the atom are not explained by referring to the different cultural backgrounds of different physicists. When differences appear, they are a matter for vigorous argument until they are resolved.

There is, however, another kind of pluralism, which one might call agnostic pluralism, where different beliefs about reality are simply accepted and allowed to coexist. This is sometimes called "relativism" but that is not a good name for it, since all knowing involves a relation between a knowing subject and a known object. It is really the abandonment of the quest for reality. It is widespread in contemporary western society to follow the failure of the Enlightenment quest for a universally accepted "objective" knowledge which would be independent of all cultural, psychological or other "subjective" elements.

As Nietzsche foresaw, the operation of Descartes' "critical principle" which has dominated the "modern" era, has by logical necessity destroyed itself and removed the possibility of certain knowledge. The "post-modernists" have been those who have most explicitly drawn this conclusion, but the belief that ultimate truth is knowable, and that everyone is entitled to an opinion, has become one of the unquestioned assumptions of our culture. It is, of course, a self-contradictory belief, since one cannot assert that ultimate reality is unknowable without knowing what ultimate reality is. But this belief is overwhelmingly pervasive, and because the Church has lived so long in a cozy domestication with the "modern" worldview, it is inevitable that the same assumption seeps into the life of the Church. "Tolerance" becomes the supreme virtue and "doctrine" becomes a slightly suspect word.

The Church is called to be a pluralist society in the virtuous sense of the word. It is to be a society where, in freedom, believers seek to know and live the truth which has been given in Jesus Christ. This involves struggle, which can be painful. The Church cannot abandon this struggle for the sake of a comfortable tolerance without betraying its calling. But at the same time, and for the same fidelity to the Gospel, we have to seek to maintain unity. We recognise that, in principle, there must be limits to tolerance. There are, or there may be, issues which threaten the very basis of the Church. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches judged that apartheid was such an issue and suspended from membership churches which affirmed it.

How then do we hold the tension between the requirement of confessional integrity and the requirement of unity?

Perhaps this agonising question is being forced upon us at present because civil society is tearing itself apart on the issues of abortion and homosexuality. Civil society, as we know it now, has no agreed norms, no accepted criteria by which these issues could – in principle – be settled. The Church is in a different situation. We accept the norm which has constituted us as a Church, namely God's redeeming and revealing action in the events which have their centre in Jesus Christ. Both sides in these conflicts appeal to Scripture, and yet this does not bring agreement.

In listening to the debate one has the strong impression that positions are taken up on other grounds, and biblical texts are merely sought for support.

Scripture cannot function as norm if we only turn to it when we have to defend a moral judgement which has, in truth, arisen from currents of thought operating in civil society. As I understand it, Scripture can only function as norm if we are allowing it to shape all our thinking, allowing Scripture to be the framework of all our living, the lenses through which we seek to understand the world and our place in it.

This has become difficult for us because the main thrust of biblical scholarship during the past decades has been in the direction of critical analysis. Valuable as this has been, its failure as a total strategy has now become apparent. Analysis is valuable only as one step in the effort to understand. One does not understand the whole simply by identifying and isolating the parts.

Everything depends on whether we take as our fundamental assumption the truth of the biblical picture of human nature and destiny and, from this standpoint, exercise our analytical and critical powers in our study of each of its parts; or whether on the other hand, we take for granted the reigning assumptions of our society about human nature and destiny (for example, an evolutionary model) and on this basis exercise our analytical and critical powers.

The recovery of a coherent and intellectually sustainable doctrine of Scriptural authority will, of necessity, be a slow process. But it is only through this process that the Church will be able to find the right way, in specific situations, between the requirement of unity and the requirement of fidelity to the truth.

There is no way in which tension and conflict can be avoided. We probably need to be much more ready for painful conflict than we have been in an age when tolerance has been regarded as the supreme virtue. But the pain is bearable if both sides can recognise in each other a total commitment to Christ, and a total willingness to be directed by what God has done and shown us in Jesus Christ. The tension is bearable only if *Christ* means more to us than any of the *causes* to which we have committed ourselves.

It is, I think, necessary to say this rather sharply because we have in recent years seen so much of a kind of theology which can only tear the Church apart. I am referring to such well-known developments as liberation theology, feminist theology, green theology and Black theology. All of these draw attention to issues about which Christians must be vitally concerned. They challenge the too-comfortable domestication of the Church within the reigning

establishment. But one has always to ask: "Where does my ultimate loyalty lie? Where is the bottom line?" We cannot help being exposed to propaganda on these issues which value the Church only in so far as it is an ally in a particular cause. If, in these contexts, one begins to talk (for instance) about evangelism, as though it really mattered supremely whether or not a person knows Jesus as Lord and Saviour, one is met with incomprehension. Jesus is not the supreme issue in these new single-issue theologies. It has to be said that if this kind of thinking permeates the Church, the tension it causes will block both unity and integrity and bring us all great pain.

No one can lay down general rules to determine whether and when faithfulness to Christ requires separation. We can only pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in such a terrible dilemma. But that guidance will be given to the community which lives, thinks, perceives and acts from within the biblical story of God's purpose for all humanity and all creation, not only at moments of crisis but at all times.

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