

# Taking Christian Unity Seriously



by J.I. Packer



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

# Taking Christian Unity Seriously

by  
*J.I. Packer*

*published by*



Anglican Network  
in Canada

## Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

J.I.PACKER  
Editor

*The Rev. Dr. J.I. Packer is Board of Governors Professor of Theology and Director of the Anglican Studies Programme at Regent College and Assistant Minister at St. John's Church, Shaughnessy, Vancouver.*

### **Taking Christian Unity Seriously**

Published by  
Anglican Network in Canada  
Box 1013,  
Burlington, ON, Canada, L7R 4L8  
Web: [www.anglicannetwork.ca](http://www.anglicannetwork.ca)  
Email: [info@anglicannetwork.ca](mailto:info@anglicannetwork.ca)  
ISBN: 978-0-9781653-6-9

Copyright © 2007 by James I. Packer.

No part of this publication may be copied, photocopied, reproduced, translated or reduced to any electronic medium or machine-readable form, in whole or in part, without specific permission of the copyright owner.

Printed in Canada.

# Taking Christian Unity Seriously

*J.I.Packer*

None of us, I suppose, would have chosen to live through the current ongoing agony of the Anglican Communion. And no adult Anglican, I imagine, who was around thirty years ago, ever dreamed that Anglicanism worldwide would ever be in the state it is in today.

There is no secret about what has happened.

## **Anglican Agony about Homosexuality**

In the 1960s homosexual behaviour was decriminalized in most of the Western world. From this move sprang homosexual politics, whereby gays pressed for a goal beyond bare tolerance—equal respect and equal rights with heterosexuals in all societies. One branch of homosexual politics was the mounting of pressure on churches for recognition of gays and gay behaviour as spiritually healthy, of gay unions as a mode of holiness equivalent to marriage, of the fitness of practising gays for leadership, and of the wrongness of making overt homosexuality a reason to hold them back from it. Homosexuals in all walks of life were encouraged to “come out” so as to strengthen the case for gay equality, and “gay pride” days began to be held in big cities. In Anglican as in other churches, the cry went up for ordaining practising gays and opening all ecclesiastical offices to them.

The 1998 Lambeth Conference took a stand with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, plus two millennia of Christian history, by explicitly affirming that homosexual behaviour was contrary to Christianity and could not be approved. But in 2002, in the synod of the diocese of New Westminster, Canada, the bishop accepted a request from a majority of those present to begin the public blessing of same-sex couples, at which nearly a hundred delegates declared their communion with the bishop and synod broken and showed that they meant it by walking out. This was painful, but they saw the bishop’s commitment as flying in the face of definitive

biblical prohibitions and of the gospel's equally definitive demand for repentance from previous sins, including homosexual behaviour (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11), and the maiming of the gospel that the bishop's decision involved left them, as they saw it, with no choice. Their walkout was like a pebble thrown into a pond; the ripples spread, and soon the entire Anglican Communion was involved at diocesan and provincial level. It became apparent that in what might be called the Anglican Old West (Britain, North America, Australasia) the gay case, viewed as a plea for justice, had already gained a good deal of traction, while to the younger provinces of Asia and Africa homosexual behaviour is absolute anathema, just as it is among those, Muslims particularly, with whom they labour to share the gospel knowledge of Christ. This internal Anglican upheaval reflects and highlights the depth of the cleavage between liberal theology in its manifold manifestations and the historic biblical orthodoxy to which the Anglican Communion is publicly committed, both confessionally and constitutionally. The Communion now faces a possibility of division, and accusations of having disrupted its unity are made from all sides.

### **Our Agenda**

That is the lead-in to our present discussion. We shall explore together not the debate that homosexual politics has triggered, but the questions about Christian unity that it has raised. Anglicanism is now divided: who broke its unity? In any case, was the international brotherhood of Anglican provinces in full communion with each other an instance of true Christian unity? What is the unity that, in obedience to apostolic teaching and for the fulfillment of Jesus's own prayer, we should now aim to realize and maintain and cherish? We will seek clarity on these and related questions.

### **The Call to Christian Unity**

Our starting-point will be a long, hard look at two key New Testament passages on unity. The first, from the gospels, is John 17:20-23, where Jesus prays for the unity of all his disciples. Here it is.

- (20) I do not ask for these only [the eleven faithful disciples, for whom Christ has been praying thus far in the chapter], but also for those who will believe in me through their word,  
(21) that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me,

and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (22) The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, (23) I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

“That they may be one even as we are one.” In the earlier days of the ecumenical movement, great play was made with this passage as a mandate for seeking church union. What Jesus has in view, however, is clearly not any form of an all-embracing ecclesiastical organisation. He is speaking, rather, of a fourfold togetherness that may be spelled out as follows:

First, it is a togetherness of *discerning thought*, a matter of solidarity in perception of, and belief in, what is real and true. The “glory” that the Father gave to the Son and the Son gave to his disciples (v.22) is surely God’s self-display (“glory” in Scripture often means this) in the revelation of “grace and truth” that Jesus declared and embodied (Jn. 1:14-18), the revelation that through the gospel the Holy Spirit leads the spiritually benighted into knowing and fellowshiping with God. Jesus referred to this when, earlier in his prayer, speaking of the faithful eleven he said: “I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them” (v.8). As, according to Jesus, the Father and the Son think together in the unity of their trinitarian life, the Father planning all the Son’s course of action and the Son identifying with all that the Father intends for him (see Jn. 5:19-23, 8:26-29, 12:49-50), so Christians are to identify with the thoughts and teachings of both the Father and the Son, as these are recorded for us in Scripture. That will mean that Christians think together and see eye to eye with each other regarding God’s nature, will and work, so that a shared orthodoxy (right belief, as the word literally means) will take form and be firmly held among them.

Second, it is a togetherness of *spiritual life*: togetherness, that is, in what Jesus called “eternal life” and in a meditative moment in his prayer defined as knowing “you the only true God, and Jesus Christ” —me!—“whom you have sent” (v.3). This means, first, recognition of the reality of God and the Lord Jesus; second, it means responding to the impact of the Father and the Son mediated through the apostolic word, just as living things in this world respond to physical

stimulation; third, it means the inner change that Jesus described to Nicodemus as being born again of water and the Spirit (Jn. 3:3-7), whereby Jesus dying for sins and drawing us to himself becomes the central focus of our life (3:14-21); fourth, it means the imparting by God of energy to stand against the world and the devil and to spread the gospel message (17:14-16, 20). This supernatural Christlikeness results from Christ himself being in us, united to each one in a way that sustains the divine life in the human soul and binds us all to each other through the binding of each one to him.

Third, it is a togetherness of *active love*: love that is motivated and animated by knowledge of the redemptive, life-transforming love of God to us ( vss. 23, 26). Our love will labour to honour and exalt in every appropriate way everyone who is its object: God, by thankful praise, faithfulness to the revealed word, and proclaiming the gospel of grace; and our neighbours, by rendering them service and relieving their need in all its forms. It will be holy love, maintaining God's moral standards in all that it does. It will indeed be supernatural love, springing from heart-allegiance to the Lord Jesus, whose saving union with believers—"I in them" (v.23)—is the necessary means whereby this love comes to be.

Fourth, it is a togetherness in *missional ministry*. When the incarnate Son was on earth, the Father and he, the sender and the sent, were, as we would put it nowadays, on mission together, engaged in a work of redemption that would issue in a ministry of grace and salvation to the world. The Son's post-resurrection commissioning of his disciples—"As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you" (Jn. 20:21)—involves all Christians in the mission, one way or another, for as long as we are in this world. We are called to be one, united and cooperating, in actively spreading the gospel, in and under Christ as mission leader.

This, then, is the Christian unity—unity, that is, of Christians—for which Jesus prayed: a common loyalty to himself first and foremost, expressed in clear-headed adherence to his teaching, whole-hearted appreciation of his gift of eternal life, holy love as a style of living and a primary commitment to the missional task of spreading the gospel world-wide. It is a unity that in principle Jesus had already created between himself and the faithful eleven, as vss. 6-19 show, and that is now to extend to all believers in every generation. It is encountering this unity in action that will convince the world that, so far

from being a revolutionary eccentric whom the authorities did well to get rid of, Jesus Christ was truly sent by God to bring us to God, and that God loves us Christians just as he loves the Christ, his own Son, who has given us new life in himself (vs. 23). We note that no form of church organization is mentioned, and we infer that organization will only be relevant to Christian unity insofar as it expresses and furthers the oneness in Christ that we have described.

## **Dimensions of Christian Unity**

Alongside all this we now set Paul's words in Ephesians 4:1-6.

(1) I therefore...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, (2) with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, (3) eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (4) There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

“Maintain the unity of the Spirit:” this is Paul's concern here, and in the passage quoted and the verses that follow he does two things. First, logically, he reminds us of the realities that contribute to, and together constitute, that unity. Second, ranging wide, he indicates how we are to work to maintain it. We look now at both these matters.

First, what is the unity of the Spirit? It is a given reality that results from the involvement of many people not only with the Holy Spirit but also, through the Spirit, with the incarnate Son who is currently, by the Father's appointment, the church's and the world's rightful Lord, and with the Father himself, the eternal Father of the eternal Son who has become our adoptive Father through Christ (see Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 4:4-7; 1 Jn. 3:1-2). Christ himself put the Holy Spirit's ministry in focus when he said: “He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn. 16:14), and Christ and his glory are central in every aspect of the Spirit's post-Pentecost ministry, whether it be illuminating our minds to understand the person, place, and saving performance of Christ, or generating faith in Christ and uniting us to him in his risen life, or transforming us individually into the moral image of Christ, or bonding the church together in



its growth towards corporate maturity in Christ. Should the revealed doctrine of Christ be diminished or distorted, or personal faith, repentance and discipleship be dissolved into conformist “churchianity,” or mutual loving service give way to soulless organized routines or to bitter animosity in conflict and division, or interest in the spiritual advance of individuals and of the church as a whole be lost, the unity of the Spirit would be radically damaged, and Christ himself be deeply dishonoured.

Within the trinitarian frame (one Spirit—one Lord—one Father) Paul mentions four specific realities of unity, each of which casts its own light on the glory of Christ, in and through whom Christians are one.

There is one *faith*. This is basic. Faith is our response of heart, mind, and strength to God’s self-presentation to us in grace and mercy. In the broadest sense, it may be said that faith is a belief of, and response to, everything about God that the Bible tells us. But in the narrower, sharp-edged sense in which the New Testament usually speaks of it, faith focuses precisely on two things: on Jesus Christ himself, the living Lord and Saviour, who once called himself the truth, meaning the ultimate reality that all must face (Jn. 14:6); and on the truths that the Bible as a whole, and the apostles in particular, set forth regarding him. Faith’s double response is then embrace of the truths about Christ and personal trust in him, trust that leads to a break with one’s former way of living, a life-commitment of discipleship to him, and an anchoring of all one’s deepest hopes in him—which is the next point. Before we move to it, however, we should remind ourselves again that it is through the Holy Spirit’s work of illuminating our hearts and minds and interpreting biblical teaching to us that we realize those realities and so are led to faith. There would be no unity of the Spirit without this ministry from the Spirit, making us Christians.

There is one *hope*; and when God through the gospel calls us to the feet of Christ in faith and repentance, this hope becomes ours. Paul elsewhere speaks of “Christ Jesus our hope” (1 Tim. 1:1); what does he mean? To answer this question, we must note, first, that we humans are a hoping species. All of us live very much in our personal hopes for the future, and few things so unite people as a shared hope; the history of political revolts and revolutions illustrates this abundantly. And we must note, second, that just as Christianity is a religion based

on achievement, namely Christ's achievement of salvation for us, so Christianity is a religion oriented to hope, a faith that looks forward to what more God has promised to do. Jesus Christ will return; he will then perfect his people through their bodily resurrection, and in a re-created cosmos he will have them with him for ever in a joy surpassing anything this life can offer. Writing to the Philippians, Paul personalizes this. "To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain...to...be with Christ...is far better" (1:21, 23). "I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection... one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:8-10, 13-14). To share this hope, and live in the power of it, and speak of it often, has a wonderfully unifying effect in Christian circles. Here is a further aspect of the unity of the Spirit that would not be, did not the Spirit himself give us inklings and foretastes of our future with Christ, and so make us into hoppers of Paul's kind.

There is one *baptism*. In the New Testament, the rite of baptism has multiple meanings. It is certainly a badge of one's identity as a disciple of Christ and a pledge of loyalty to him. It is certainly a sign of the washing away of sins through the blood of Christ, and an assurance to believers that their sins have indeed been cancelled. And the symbolism of going under water and then coming out, or up, from under signifies the reality of dying with Christ to one's past life and rising in him and with him into a life that is wholly new. (This applies irrespective of how much water one goes under and whether one receives the rite as an adult or as an infant.)

Since each Christian is baptized separately, what does Paul mean when he says there is *one* baptism? Is he just affirming the truth that baptism has the same meaning for everyone who receives it? His flow of thought in context indicates that he is saying more than that. Thinking of baptism in a Christ-centred and Spirit-centred way, he is reminding us that we should see every administration of baptism as Jesus Christ reaching out to embrace the candidate, and as a token of the truth that "in one Spirit we [believers] were all baptized into one body...and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). Which bring us to the fourth and last of the specifics of unity that Paul is listing here.

There is one *body*. Paul's favourite conception of the organic, Spirit-given and Spirit-driven life of the church of Christ is that it is his body, an image that bulks large in Ephesians (see 1:22-23, 3:6, 5:23-30). The point of the picture is that as the functioning of the human body is a marvellous exhibition of unity in diversity and diversity in unity—diverse body parts in a complex yet coordinated variety of movement, all under the control and direction of a single governing mind—so it should be, Paul urges, in the church. For the church is a great diversity of people with very diverse abilities and skills whom Christ, the church's head and Lord, wills should behave, and moves to behave, in a cooperative and complementary way for the upbuilding of the church as such and of all who belong to it.

In this common life of mutual service, just as in faith, hope and baptism, as we have seen, the acting of the Holy Spirit is fundamental. For it is he who, as he indwells us, gives us our gifts for ministry, and who acts to animate and moderate our use of them in mutual love, so that order rather than disorder prevails and edification rather than hurt and damage results. Paul dwells on this in the verses of Ephesians 4 that follow, sharing his vision that we all might “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood [Greek, ‘to a full-grown man;’ so ESV margin], to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:13, 15-16). When the Spirit's leading into loving mutual service is followed, as evidently it was at Thessalonica, the church is healthy and strong (see I Thess. 4:1-12, 5:8-24); but when it is not followed, as at Corinth, the Spirit's gifting is abused, and permanent immaturity and damage threaten (see I Cor. 3:1-4, 10-18, chs. 12-14, 16:13). Keeping in mind the God-given unity and destiny of the universal church will make us work hard to preserve and display its unity at the local level for the glory of Christ, who is its head, its hope and its life.

## **Principles of Christian Unity**

In light of the two passages that we have studied, we can now formulate some key principles regarding Christian unity, for the guidance of our own future thinking.

*(1) Christian unity is both a present gift and a future goal.*

Christian unity is something distinct from both church union and Christian fellowship. Simply and basically, it is the state of being united to, alive in, and governed by, Jesus Christ our living Lord, in company with all other Christians, past and present, those now with Christ in the heavenly Jerusalem of Hebrews 12:22 and those on earth with us today. As each Christian is in Christ and is one with him, so all Christians are one with each other in and through him. "Christian" here means, quite specifically, a believer who is born again, knows Christ, is indwelt by the Spirit, and seeks to live in love to the glory of the triune God. Christian unity is the active, acknowledged togetherness of all Christian people, sharing their supernatural life in their Saviour's love and loving each other across all boundaries of race, colour, social standing and denominational churchly identity. From this standpoint Christian unity is a divine gift and a foretaste of heaven, and is entirely the fruit of God's grace.

From another standpoint, however, Christian unity is a goal not fully reached at this time, by reason of differences of belief and behaviour among those who profess faith. Persons in the churches who depart from historic Christian and biblical standards in either department, and teach and lead others to do the same, obstruct, disfigure and actually disrupt Christian unity, no matter how sincere they may be in thinking they are in the van of theological wisdom and spiritual progress. We cannot read hearts, and are not therefore able to tell whether those who lapse this way are Christians in the real sense or not, but we can and must say that their lapses create barriers to our acknowledging of Christian unity with them, for that is indeed the case. Full unity with merely partial believers is not possible.

*(2) Christian unity is bounded by revealed truth.*

This principle pursues the point just made. What God thinks and says is for Christians the absolute standard of truth. God spoke freely to reveal his mind about the realities of redemption and of redeemed life throughout the entire history of his redemptive work, from the days of Genesis to the days of Christ and his apostles some two millennia ago. That revelation is recorded and embodied in the canonical Scriptures, which the Holy Spirit inspired so as to give the world in every age an accurate knowledge and understanding of what God had said and done. What was thus revealed and recorded now stands

over against every human idea and cultural consensus to measure how far they are true or false by the yardstick of God's word. All who re-categorize Holy Scripture as well-meant and religiously insightful but factually unreliable human tradition, and assume the right to pass judgment on its truth and wisdom rather than letting it pass judgment on them, undermine Christian unity rather than advance it, and create huge confusion and vast spiritual uncertainty in the process. Little as controversy should be encouraged or enjoyed, those who would uphold the cause of Christian unity have to make clear the falsity of this intellectual method and its results, and must go on making it clear until (please God) this aberration becomes a thing of the past.

(3) *Expressing Christian unity in human life requires a substantial sharing of Christian hope and a principled practice of Christian love.*

One dimension of biblical Christian unity is its two-world outlook on life and its emphasis on the prospect of future glory—peace, joy, and supreme well-being—with Christ in the heavenly city that God has promised and prepared and that now waits to be revealed when Christ comes again. This future hope is part of the truth in which Christians unite, and looking forward to it together is itself a bond of union. The New Testament sees Christians as aliens and exiles in this world. Yes, we serve God here and enjoy countless blessings as we do so, but all the time we are on our way (*in via*) through basically hostile territory to unimaginable peace and joy in closeness to our Saviour in a world beyond (*in patria*), a world that is our real home. One of the defects of Christianity as it is often set forth today is that this two-world perspective is absent and the focus is entirely on the present order of things, in which nothing is perfect and which we must all leave behind in due course. The yawning gulf between those who cherish end those who obstruct Christian unity becomes very clear when Christian hope comes up for discussion and the prospect of changing this world is set forth in glorious technicolour, while the prospect of heaven's joy is dismissed as mere escapism. C.S.Lewis was wiser when he pointed out somewhere that it is regularly the most heavenly-minded people who are of most earthly use.

Christian love for one another, as an expression of our unity in Christ, must be practised responsibly, in light of what God has told us in Scripture and shown us in Christ about his ideal standards

for human living. Failure to do this will disrupt Christian unity yet again. The idea that loving people—one's children, spouse, friends; disadvantaged and abused groups—means giving them everything they ask for and tolerating whatever they choose to do, is a sad, sub-Christian mistake. Love gives, certainly, but giving that does not observe the limits of behaviour acceptable to God and that does not, however indirectly, give encouragement and help towards self-control, emotional maturity, courage, humility, patience, truthfulness and trustworthiness, purity and holiness, and Christlikeness generally, is not Christian love in action. Moral insensitivity and indifference cancels Christian love, not expresses it. It is not loving, in the Christian sense, to confirm anyone, let alone fellow-Christians, in wrong ways, and it is certainly not the way to acknowledge our Christian unity with anyone. Christian love is unconditional in the sense of accepting, respecting and showing goodwill to people just as they are, but it is not unconcerned or undiscerning about being beneficent as distinct from merely indulgent. True Christian love holds to Christian standards all the way.

*(4) Practising Christian unity in congregational life requires patient effort and active sharing at all levels.*

In local congregations, where the reality of corporate life in Christ should be on show and visible to all, the New Testament makes clear that four things at least are called for.

First, *the pursuit of peace*. In our sin-twisted world we all sometimes appear to others as opinionated, stubborn and just plain silly, and sometimes we really are all three, and in every community, family, church, club or whatever, it takes work to stay together in goodwill. It should not surprise us, then, to find that New Testament churches, while bubbling with excitement at the gospel that had brought them into being, were racked with internal relational problems. Paul has to beg them over and over to practice love, peace, mutual forbearance and harmony, as a discipline of union with each other in Christ. (See Rom. 12:9-10, 16, 15:5-6; 2 Cor. 13:11; Eph. 4:1-3; Phil. 1:27, 2:2, 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:13.) Human nature does not change, and affectionate harmony remains a fundamental demand of life together in Christ: a demand that can only be met through self-control and resolute effort.

Second, *the practising of fellowship*. Christians who worship together can easily fall short here, not recognizing how we need each

other's active help and support for full spiritual health. Fellowship (Greek, *koinonia*) is the New Testament word for helping each other by sharing. Fellowship means that I give you what God has given me, passing it on as my gift of care and help to you, and you respond in kind, as your gift of care and help to me, so that the bond and benefit that we now have in common is more than either of us had when we started. This give-and-take is the fellowship that comes from the Holy Spirit which, following Paul in 2 Corinthians 13:14, we pray that we may constantly enjoy, along with the grace that comes from the Lord Jesus and the love that comes from God the Father himself. By such fellowshiping we significantly pastor each other, and are significantly pastored, in the church all the time. Regular worshippers who see church life simply as a comfort zone where steady routine and ongoing bonhomie make them feel good week by week can wholly miss this quality of life together. In that case, despite their loyalty to the church as an institution, they have not yet started to express true Christian unity—unity in Christ with all Christ's people—at all. They are, sadly, a drag on the church's real life.

Third, *mutual help between churches*. Congregations that see each other as united together in Christ should be ready for mutual assistance, though how this plays out will depend on local needs. Because Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were impoverished, Paul took up a collection for them in the mainly Gentile churches that he founded, and he made a big issue of their giving from what they had as an expression of both unity in Christ and gratitude for Christ. (See Rom. 15:25-28; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9; Acts 24:17.) Such patterns of partnership and help express unity, advance the gospel and glorify God. (This is what the Anglican diocesan system is meant to facilitate, though it does not always achieve success and credibility in its endeavours.)

Fourth, *an open communion table*. Sharing the Supper is the one act of regular worship together that the Lord Jesus explicitly required of his disciples (1 Cor. 11:23-25). Visitors to a congregation who are in good standing in their home churches should be welcomed to express Christian unity with their hosts in this way, just as Paul and his party en route to Jerusalem were welcomed to the Breaking of Bread by the church at Troas (Acts 20:7-12). As is often and rightly said, it is the Lord's Table, not ours, and we should show hospitality there to all whose base congregations, with which we share unity in Christ, have judged as fit for eucharistic fellowship. We can respect the jealousy

for God's truth and glory that leads some to "fence the tables" against those not of their own denominational stripe, but this obscures unity in Christ rather than expressing it. Modern Anglicanism takes the right line here.

### **Christian Unity and Anglican Unity**

At the time of the Reformation, the establishing of the 39 Articles alongside the ecumenical creeds (the Apostles', the Nicene-Constantinopolitan, and the Athanasian) as a domestic rule of faith, and the provision of a carefully and biblically reformed *Book of Common Prayer*, were seen as securing for the Church of England unity in Christ with all the other churches of the magisterial Reformation, and this was acknowledged as a fact by all parties for the next 300 years. Muddying the waters somewhat for the next hundred years (mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century) was the novel Anglo-Catholic insistence that unity in Christ is incomplete without an episcopate in the apostolic succession, such as Rome claims to have; but this idea, though loudly trumpeted, never became part of the Anglican standard of teaching. (Officially, Anglicanism stops short at valuing episcopacy as a God-honoured pastoral institution for leadership and oversight, and as a visible link with the Christian past that it would be pointless and misleading to throw away.) The younger Anglican provinces, the fruit of devoted Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic missionary work, have grown up and come of age within the main stream of historically defined Anglican doctrine, and it is this doctrine that remains the constitutional standard for Anglicans everywhere right up to today. Here, then, is Anglicanism's formal frame of Christian unity.

But the past half-century has seen the emergence, and in North America especially, both sides of the forty-ninth parallel, the dominance, of a type of theology, calling itself *liberal*, that does not acknowledge biblical authority, or the Trinity, or the incarnation, or the atonement, or the resurrection, reign and coming return of Christ, or personal salvation in and through Christ, or the calling of the church to holiness and evangelism, in a way that squares with historic reformed Anglican belief. It minimizes the uniqueness of the gospel, and pursues assimilation to other world faiths of a pantheistic or panentheistic sort: Hinduism, Sikhism and some forms of Buddhism, for starters.



This revisionism, which was (and still, it seems, is) riding high in North American Anglican seminaries, effectively disrupted the solid-looking Christian unity of the Anglican Communion more than a generation ago. Now it expresses itself by, in general, baptizing the world into the church, as you might put it, and, in particular, re-classifying same-sex unions as no longer a breach of the order of creation, and off limits as such, but as a mode of holiness which the church ought to bless. For non-revisionist Anglicans, this is a sanctifying of sin which maims the gospel by eliminating one area of necessary repentance (see I Cor. 6:9-11), thus putting souls in danger. It is pastoral compassion, rather than homophobia, that has prompted the sense of shock at this, and the firmness of opposition to it, that has marked so many thoughtful people in the ACC once they realized what was going on.

What the outcome of ongoing pan-Anglican consultations about this matter will be does not appear, and at the time of writing it is unclear how the ACC will align itself at its 2007 General Synod. What is clear and certain, however, is that Christian unity starts with the authority of Scripture and the truth about Jesus Christ, as the Bible teaches it and as the Anglican foundation documents define it; that the re-imagining of God and the gospel by North America's Anglican revisionists shatters that unity; and that only a re-embracing of biblical doctrine as transcultural truth and of biblical behaviour standards as abidingly authoritative will restore it. It is in these terms, therefore, that we must pray and work to rebuild Christian unity within Anglicanism in our time.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

*Christ, have mercy upon us.*

Lord, have mercy upon us.

*Amen.*

## Questions For Study and Discussion

1. In your opinion, are church people sufficiently aware of the importance of Christian unity? If not, why not?
2. How would you relate Christian unity to Christian orthodoxy, church union, and Christian fellowship?
3. How can we promote Christian unity in our own congregation?
4. How can we further Christian unity in our own diocese?
5. Do you agree that blessing same-sex unions is a breach of Christian unity? If so, how would you answer those who deny this? If not, how would you respond to those who regard the breach as real?
6. What do you think are the most important elements in one's personal practice of Christian unity?

*For information about ordering additional copies of this publication or others in **The Anglican Agenda Series** (quantity discounts available), please contact:*

**Anglican Network in Canada**

Box 1013,  
Burlington, ON, Canada, L7R 4L8

Web: [www.anglicannetwork.ca](http://www.anglicannetwork.ca)

Email: [anglicanagenda@anglicanessentials.ca](mailto:anglicanagenda@anglicanessentials.ca)