

Friends,

The two attached sermons are for discussion as part of the workshop on Preaching and Ecumenism next Thursday in Tampa.

The first one is a classic of the ecumenical movement, delivered by the Archbishop William Temple at the World Conference on Faith and Order in 1937. It lifts up a number of traditional Christian unity motifs.

The second (not a classic!) is one I delivered at Ecumenical Advocacy Days in 2006. It draws more on the Life and Work side of ecumenism, but relates this to our unity in Christ. It also “preaches against” a biblical text (not a text often used in ecumenical circles), while Archbishop Temple’s sermon is based on a classic passage from Ephesians 4.

I look forward to our conversation!

Michael Kinnamon  
General Secretary  
National Council of Churches

WILLIAM TEMPLE

## Sermon at the Opening Service

*Second World Conference on Faith and Order, Edinburgh, 1937*

*Archbishop of Canterbury and recognized theologian, Temple was one of the great Christian leaders of the century. He was a prominent figure in the early development of Faith and Order, Life and Work, the International Missionary Council, and plans for the WCC. • The Second World Conference on Faith and Order, Edinburgh 1937, ed. Leonard Hodgson, London, SCM, 1938, pp.15-23.*

*Ephesians iv, 13. Till we all attain unto the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of the Christ.*

The unity of the Church, on which our faith and hope is set, is grounded in the unity of God and the uniqueness of His redeeming act in Jesus Christ. The "one body and one spirit" correspond to the "one God and Father of all." The unity of the Church of God is a perpetual fact; our task is not to create it but to exhibit it. Where Christ is in men's hearts, there is the Church: where His Spirit is active, there is His Body. The Church is not an association of men, each of whom has chosen Christ as his Lord; it is a fellowship of men, each of whom Christ has united with Himself. The Christian faith and life are not a discovery or invention of men; they are not an emergent phase of the historical process; they are the gift of God. That is true not only of their historical origin, but quite equally of the rebirth to that faith and life of each individual Christian. Our unity in dependence for our faith upon the unique act of the one God is a perpetual and unalterable fact. If we are Christians, that is due to the activity of the Holy Spirit;

and because He is one, those in whom He is active are one fellowship in Him — “the fellowship of the Holy Ghost.”

But there is no human heart possessed wholly and utterly by the Holy Spirit; and most of us, “who have the first-fruits of the Spirit,” are still governed also by self-will. Our surrender is not absolute; our allegiance is not complete. Consequently the historical form and outward manifestation of the Church is never worthy of its true nature. What marks it as the Church is the activity within it of the Holy Spirit — the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. But in the Church as an actual society in history this is not the only power at work; the various forms of human selfishness, blindness and sloth are also characteristic of those who by the activity of the Spirit are united to Christ. It is as though a lantern were covered with a dark veil. It is truly a lantern, because the light burns in it; yet the world sees the light but dimly and may be more conscious of the veil that hides it than of the flame which is its source. So the world may see the sin of Christians more clearly than the holiness of the Church, and the divisions which that sin has caused more clearly than the unity which endures in spite of them.

When that happens, and in whatever degree it happens, the witness of the Church is weakened. How can it call men to worship of the one God if it is calling to rival shrines? How can it claim to bridge the divisions in human society — divisions between Greek and barbarian, bond and free, between black and white, Aryan and non-Aryan, employer and employed — if when men are drawn into it they find that another division has been added to the old ones — a division of Catholic from Evangelical, or Episcopalian from Presbyterian or Independent? A Church divided in its manifestation to the world cannot render its due service to God or to man, and for the impotence which our sin has brought upon the Church through divisions in its outward aspect we should be covered with shame and driven to repentance.

We do not escape from sin by denying the consequences of our sin, and we cannot heal the breaches in the Church's outward unity by regarding them as unimportant. To those who made the breaches, the matters involved seemed worthy to die for; it may well be that in the heat of conflict, such as tormented the sixteenth century, men so zealously upheld what seemed to them neglected truths that they became blind to supplementary truths which were dear to their opponents. It is seldom that in any human contention all the truth is on one side. We may look back with a calmer wisdom and see how here or there a division which occurred could have been avoided by a more conciliatory temper and a more synthetic habit of mind. But it does not follow that we should now take all the divisions as they stand and merely agree to co-operate while still maintaining separate organisations. For in practice those separate organisations are bound to become competitors, however much we wish to co-operate; and the separation will hinder the free interchange of thought and experience which should be a chief means of the process whereby the Body of Christ “builds itself up in love.”

So we come to the second great evil of our divisions. The first is that they obscure our witness to the one Gospel; the second is that through the division each party to it loses some spiritual treasure, and none perfectly represents the balance of truth, so that this balance of truth is not presented to the world at all. God be thanked — we have left behind the habit of supposing that our own tradition is perfectly true and the whole of truth, and are looking to see what parts of the “unsearchable riches of Christ” we have missed while others have them; and so we are learning increasingly one from

another. This mutual appreciation is the way alike of humility and of charity; and it is leading us to perpetually fuller fellowship.

In part our progress is due to the pressure of the needs of the world. It is not the task of the Church to solve political problems or to devise contrivances for mitigating the effects of human sin. But it is the Church's task to proclaim that the most oppressive evils under which the world groans are the fruit of sin; that only by eradication of that sin can these other evils be averted and that the only Redeemer from sin is Jesus Christ, “Very God of Very God begotten; Not made, being of one substance with the Father; Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was made Man.” To Him, the Conqueror of death and sin, — to Him, the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world — we call the world that its sins may be removed, that its divisions may be healed, and that it may find fellowship in Him.

That proclamation, that invitation, we are bound as a Church to make. And the world answers: “Have you found that fellowship yourselves? Why do your voices sound so various? When we pass from words to action, to what are you calling us? Is it to one family, gathered round one Holy Table, where your Lord is Himself the host who welcomes all His guests? You know that it is not so. When we answer your united call, we have to choose for ourselves to which Table we will go, for you are yourselves divided in your act of deepest fellowship, and by your own traditions hinder us from a unity which we are ready to enjoy.”

What is our answer to that retort? Is it not true that Christians who have lately been converted in heathen lands, and even the ordinary lay-folk who are rather detached from our denominational preoccupations, are more ready to come together in face of the resurgence of paganism than are the leaders of ecclesiastical organisations, intent upon the maintenance of their tradition and upon keeping their organisation in being and in working order? If it is true that in its deepest nature the Church is always one, it is also true that to-day it is the so-called “churches” rather than any forces of the secular world which prevent that unity from being manifest and effective.

Here is matter for deep penitence. I speak as a member of one of those churches which still maintain barriers against completeness of union at the Table of the Lord. I believe from my heart that we of that tradition are trustees for an element of truth concerning the nature of the Church which requires that exclusiveness as a consequence, until this element of truth be incorporated with others into a fuller and worthier conception of the Church than any of us hold to-day. But I know that our division at this point is the greatest of all scandals in the face of the world; I know that we can only consent to it or maintain it without the guilt of unfaithfulness to the unity of the Gospel and of God Himself, if it is a source to us of spiritual pain, and if we are striving to the utmost to remove the occasions which now bind us, as we think, to that perpetuation of disunion. It should be horrible to us to speak or think of any fellow-Christians as “not in communion with us.” God grant that we may feel the pain of it, and under that impulse strive the more earnestly to remove all that now hinders us from receiving together the One Body of the One Lord, that in Him we may become One Body — the organ and vehicle of the One Spirit....

In this world movement of churches towards fuller unity and more potent witness we have our own allotted task. In what spirit do we approach it? How shall we seek to express in this enterprise the graces of faith, of hope and of love? Of these love is the greatest, but in part at least it is rooted in faith and sustained by hope. Love, for

us who are assembled here, means chiefly two things — an ardent longing for closer fellowship, and a readiness both to share our own spiritual treasures and to participate in those of others. Ten years ago our main concern was to state our several traditions in such a way that others should understand them truly; and that must still be our aim. But the divisions which we seek to overcome are due to the fact that our traditions are just what they are and none other; division cannot be healed by the reiterated statement of them. We are here as representatives of our churches; true, but unless our churches are ready to learn one from another as well as to teach one another, the divisions will remain. Therefore our loyalty to our own churches, which have sent us here, will not best be expressed in a rigid insistence by each upon his own tradition. Our churches sent us here to confer about our differences with a view to overcoming them. As representatives of those churches each of us must be as ready to learn from others where his own tradition is erroneous or defective as to show to others its truth and strength. We meet as fellow-pupils in a school of mutual discipleship. The churches desire, through us, to learn from one another. That is the humility of love as it must be active among us here.

It will be sustained by hope. Hope springs from the experience of the last ten years. But even were it otherwise, hope should be strong in us because the goal which we seek is set before us by God Himself. The hope which arises from that knowledge is altogether independent of empirical signs of its fulfilment. Even if our cause were suffering defeat on every side, we should still serve it because that is God's call to us, and we should still know that through our loyal service He was accomplishing His purpose even though we could not see the evidence of this. But in His mercy He gives us not only the supreme ground of hope, which is His call, but also the manifest tokens of His working in the churches that are spread throughout the world.

Let us never forget that, though the purpose of our meeting is to consider the causes of our divisions, yet what makes possible our meeting is our unity. We could not seek union if we did not already possess unity. Those who have nothing in common do not deplore their estrangement. It is because we are one in allegiance to one Lord that we seek and hope for the way of manifesting that unity in our witness to Him before the world.

Thus our hope is based upon our common faith. This faith is not only the assent of our minds to doctrinal propositions; it is the commitment of our whole selves into the hands of a faithful Creator and merciful Redeemer. If the word be thus understood we are already one in faith, but also, alas! — and this perhaps is the more relevant to our purpose — one in the weakness and incompleteness of our faith. We are one in faith, because to commit ourselves to Him is the deepest desire of our hearts; we are one in the weakness of our faith, because in all of us that desire is overlaid with prejudice and pride and obstinacy and self-contentment. "Lord, we believe; help Thou our unbelief."

Meanwhile our witness is enfeebled: the true proportion and balance of truth is hidden from the world because we cannot unite in presenting the parts enshrined in our several traditions. We still wait in hope and faith for the movement of the Spirit which shall bring us all to a perfect man — the "one man in Christ Jesus" grown to full maturity — who shall be the measure of the stature of the fulness of the Christ.

Our faith must be more than the trust which leads us to rely on Him; it must be the deeper faith which leads us to wait for Him. It is not we who can heal the wounds in His Body. We confer and deliberate, and that is right. But it is not by contrivance or adjustment that we can unite the Church of God. It is only by coming closer to Him

that we can come nearer to one another. And we cannot by ourselves come closer to Him. If we have any fellowship with Him, it is not by our aspiration but by His self-giving; if our fellowship with Him, and in Him with one another, is to be deepened, it will not be by our effort but by His constricting power. "The love of Christ constraineth us." To that we come back. Because He died for all, all are one in His death. Not by skill in argument, not even by mutual love that spans like a bridge the gulf between us — for the gulf though bridged is not closed by any love of ours — but by the filling of our hearts with His love and the nurture of our minds with His truth, the hope may be fulfilled. It is not by understanding one another, but by more fully understanding Him, that we are led towards our goal. We can help each other here, and learn one from another how to understand Him better. But it is towards Him that our eyes must be directed. Our discussion of our differences is a necessary preliminary; but it is preliminary and no more. Only when God has drawn us closer to Himself shall we be truly united together; and then our task will be, not to consummate our endeavour but to register His achievement.

“A Different Vision of Human Community”  
Ecumenical Advocacy Days  
March 12, 2006  
I John 3: 11-18

I John! Why did it have to be I John?! The organizers have done a splendid job of putting together these Advocacy Days, but why did they have to choose I John as our focus text?!

There are, of course, wonderful passages in this letter, including one of my favorite lines in all of scripture: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (4:18). And the particular text chosen for these Ecumenical Advocacy Days contains one of the Bible’s most devastating questions: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” (3:17). But the overall tone of this letter reflects a mindset that we must reject in the name of the gospel!

That’s a pretty radical thing for a preacher to say, so follow with me while I explain.

I John was written by the leader of a fearful, insecure community that understood itself to be threatened by external enemies and internal dissenters. If we read between the lines of the Gospel according to John, we can tell that this community was originally part of the synagogue; but at some point they were expelled, which is why in the gospel “the Jews” are enemy number one.

In this letter, however, there is a new enemy: those who have left the community, apparently over theological disagreement. And this attack from within has enraged the writer of our epistle. Listen to these verses from chapter two: “Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come... They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us” (2:18-19). These separatists, we are told, are “liars,” “false prophets,” “under the power of the evil one,” “opponents of God.”

As you know, this letter is renowned for its emphasis on love! “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God...” (4: 7). Indeed, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (4:16). But it is love only for those within the community, love for “our kind.” Those on the outside belong to the world; and, says the author to his readers, “the world hates you” (3:13). Therefore, “do not love the world” (2:15).

The mindset of this letter is radically dualistic: They are the children of the devil; we are the children of God (3:10). They are murderers like Cain; we are righteous like his brother (3:12-15). Any of this sound familiar? Their deeds, born of hatred, are evil; our deeds, done in love, are good. Therefore, protect yourself from them and cling to one another.

There is no talk in I John of welcoming the stranger or forgiving the sinner or loving the enemy. You remember how Jesus, according to Matthew and Luke, asks “What’s the big deal about loving those who love you? Everybody does that!” But the author of this letter apparently didn’t have Matthew or Luke on his reading list. And there is no Golden Rule in

I John. The implied message here is “Love your brothers and sisters, but do unto those others before they do it unto you.”

Does any of this sound familiar?

To be honest, I can understand why a small, marginalized community – the community of I John – would feel threatened by foes within and without, why its members would be tempted to think in terms of us and them. Such a way of thinking, however, even if understandable, is still hazardous to one’s spiritual health; and when this mindset is coupled with political, economic, and military power, it is hazardous to the health of the world!

Friends, we gather this weekend in Washington, not simply with strategies or programs that differ from the current administration, but with a different vision of life in human community.

This vision, if I’m not mistaken, far from splitting the world, insists that all life is interrelated. This means, among other things, that security is never won through unilateral defense but through attentiveness to the injustice that afflicts other children of God – and everyone is a child of God! That’s why support for the Millennium Development Goals or the Jubilee Campaign for debt relief or the campaign for a living wage would contribute more to our security than new weapons systems ever could. Dr. King, as usual, had it just right: “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is a nation approaching spiritual death” – because its priorities are fundamentally askew.

I realize, of course, that none of this makes any sense if you live by the logic of I John. According to that logic, “they” hate “us.” So how can a willingness to risk living in diverse, interdependent community possibly make us more secure?! But isn’t it the vision of the prophets that justice is the basis of lasting security (see Isaiah 32 and Micah 4)? Isn’t it the vision of the apostle that the well-being of one depends on the well-being of all (see I Corinthians 12)? Isn’t this the gospel?!

This vision of interrelatedness certainly applies to the church. Like the author of I John, I deplore division in the body of Christ! I long for us to accept our gift of unity in Christ and to demonstrate a love for one another that will speak volumes to the world about the God who first loved us. But true community is never formed over against others. “Gated community” is an oxymoron. The gospel calls us (empowers us) to see God’s image in those who are not in our image, to realize that God’s love binds us to people who do not look or think as we do – and thereby to bear witness to the One who loves not only us but even us.

It is this dualistic mindset, seen so clearly in I John, that leads to racial profiling and other forms of discrimination, including the fearful response to persons who are gay or lesbian. It is this mindset that leads to a willingness to care for “our own,” whoever they happen to be, while letting those others in Kenya or Eastern Congo or the lower Ninth Ward fall off our moral radar screens. It is this mindset that leads to a society of economic winners and losers with little recognition that “the neighbor” is anyone left by the side of the road.

And it is this dualistic mindset that leads persons, in the community of I John or contemporary America, to divide the world into those who are evil and those who are good. I am convinced, as I imagine you are, that evil is never more powerful than when we assume that it only resides elsewhere.

But of course, this cuts both ways. It is easy to point a finger at the President for the way he splits the world into opposing camps, urging us to recognize enemies that can only be destroyed as part of a divinely-ordained struggle between good and evil. Pointing at him alone, however, only repeats the problem. All of us want peace, and most of us (I suspect) decry this war. But, to be honest, most of us also want things that make for conflict, including a standard of living that contributes to the poverty of global neighbors.

If all we had were different strategies and programs, then we could indulge in the same rhetoric as the administration. But we gather here in Washington, not just with different strategies and programs, but with a different vision of life in human community; and this vision indicts the self-righteousness of the left no less than the arrogant dualism of the right.

I will admit that, in an era marked by crisis, I find the sharp-edged language of I John attractive and, in a sense, even appropriate. Take a stand against the war! Absolutely. Protest against policies that punish the poor and reward the rich! Absolutely. Protect the environment from those who seem incapable of thinking beyond their own immediate gain. Absolutely. Promote racial justice. Absolutely! Saying “yes” to our neighbors means saying an emphatic “no!” To all that excludes or diminishes them. But the vision we hold keeps us from saying that only others are guilty of hardness of heart and forces us to acknowledge our relationship with all of God’s children. There are many times when I wish God would be a bit more discriminating. But there it is: George Bush is my brother in Jesus Christ. That’s not the mindset of I John; but it is the mindset of the gospel.

Before ending, I want to say something positive about this text that our organizing committee chose for us to consider! And there is one very big plus: Love, according to the author of I John, is not just affection but action. If I say that I love George Bush, it doesn’t mean that I think sweet thoughts about him! It means that I act toward him the same way that I act toward you: I pray for him and, if he is in need, I respond. Love, as described in our text, is an act of the will. No one can “fall in love” on command, but we can choose to be for the other as Christ has been for us.

By the way, an example of another way of thinking came during the White House briefing last week when the President supported his faith-based initiative by saying that “Government can’t love.” No, the government can’t “fall in love” in the sense of affection; but those who govern can exercise love by acting on behalf of the vulnerable.

Remember our reading: “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (3:18). Or as my daughters might put it: Talk is cheap! How can you say you love if you, having the world’s goods, see a brother or sister in need yet refuse to help (3:17)?

But here, too, there is a problem. The author of I John writes of active love in terms of sacrifice, following the example of Jesus. Verse 16: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we [therefore] ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Yes,

sacrifice is a crucial Christian theme. The problem, however, is that historically certain groups – women, minorities – have been asked (expected) to sacrifice far more than people who look like me. Perhaps it is time for us to emphasize not the imitation of Jesus' death but the imitation of his life – welcoming strangers, forgiving sinners, loving enemies. In a culture so fixated on violence and death, surely it is time for us to lift up our vision of interdependent life – in this world, in all its fullness, for all God's children.

I John! Why did it have to be I John?! As I hope is obvious, I love the Bible and try to put it at the center of my life. But there are times when our love of scripture calls us to challenge parts of scripture in the name of its central theme – the gospel of God's universal love made flesh in Jesus Christ.

In the same way, I love the United States of America. But there are times when we are called to challenge the basic direction – the basic vision – of this country in the name of this same gospel. Now is such a time! We gather here in Washington, not just with different strategies and programs, but with a different vision of life in human community. This vision is the gift and promise of the one gracious God – to whom be the glory for ever and ever.

Michael Kinnamon