

## THE NATURE OF THE UNITY OF THE LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL CHURCH IN EVANGELIZATION AND CHURCH GROWTH REPORT

*Chairman: John Reid*  
*Secretary: R. Colenian*

*Nature of church unity.* The church, witnessing to the triumph of God's sovereign grace, comprises a community of the redeemed. In union with Christ every person is related through the Spirit to every other member of his body. Each member is vital to the whole. Clearly the church is one, for Christ cannot be divided against himself.

This unity embraces Christ's world mission. Here was the focal point of his own life and work. There are diversities of gifts, but every part of the body participates in his ministry to the world, sharing the common mandate to "make disciples."

As long as we speak of this in theoretical terms, no one takes offense. Problems become apparent when visibility is given to our unity, both in structure and ministry. This is particularly apparent when viewing the multiplicity of conflicting para-church organizations and forms of ministry.

However, it was stressed that unity is not to be confused with uniformity. Merely having different groupings and procedures does not discredit the unity of the Spirit. God seems to like variety (even in heaven there are twelve kinds of fruits). Let us recognize this diversity and be grateful. Our differences can complement the church and serve to make us all more aware of our interdependence within the body.

The point made was that visible unity is not determined by organizational affiliation but by our inner life in the Spirit. Disunity may exist on any level of corporate life. Still, as an ideal we should seek to maximize the reality of true spiritual unity in the larger expressions of Christian commitment. With this in mind, perhaps we should re-examine our para-church structures, asking whether they frustrate the manifestation of visible unity, body life and evangelism.

*The local community in united outreach.* Unity of the church finally has its most dynamic focus within a given community, of which the local congregation is the primary base for fellowship, teaching the Word, administering the sacraments, and for evangelistic outreach. Here the love displayed for one another, the exercise of spiritual gifts, and the building up of the body in the stature of Christ creates a compelling witness to the watching world. For this reason, any blemish to this appeal constitutes a serious barrier to communication of the Gospel.

An obvious infraction of this rule, noted by several in the seminar, is to admit into full fellowship persons who evidence no personal conversion. This practice only dilutes the witness of the church and confuses the unbeliever.

The absence of genuine commitment to the work of evangelism was also posed as a real hindrance to unity. Many members of the local church do not understand their priesthood, nor have any personal involvement in fulfilling the Great Commission. Where this is true, the unifying obedience to Christ's command is missing.

What is said here applies to believers from every congregation of the community. The members of the body of Christ need to express their unity across artificial structures of denominations demonstrating in the marketplace of their own world that they are one. Ways can be found by which this can be done, such as public rallies, cooperative efforts in Scripture distribution, joint prayer meetings, singing in the streets, sharing groups in homes and together facing burning social issues.

Probably the greatest need and opportunity for such a united voice comes in the area of evangelism, for it is here that the church confronts the basic problem of lost men. What more practical expression of love can we give to the world? Little wonder that when evangelism becomes a controlling passion, people from widely different confessions and traditions find themselves working together. A number in the seminar cited examples in their own experience where some evangelistic program became the focus around which the community of God's people were unified.

*Schism within the church.* What about those who find no unifying attraction within a church and leave? Obviously this is a recurring problem. Considerable attention was directed to it by this seminar.

Schism occurs where there is a visible separation from the body fellowship. It demonstrates to the world a basic disharmony within the church and therefore reflects upon her witness. Everyone was agreed that schism should be avoided if at all possible.

Only apostasy was recognized as justification for such drastic action. Where such teaching is suspected, the church should make every effort to correct the erring member. If the matter cannot be resolved, then the body has the obligation to put out the heretic.

The question was raised: What if the majority of the fellowship have sympathy with the false doctrine? At this point, schism may be the only course left for those who remain faithful to this truth. However, let it be clear that the issue is of fundamental substance. Even in this event, others of the same conviction may remain within the apostate para-church in order to continue their witness in evangelism.

Members of the seminar were mindful of their own limited knowledge, particularly in ascertaining the position of divergent parts of the church fellowship. We affirmed that love is the first step toward experiencing greater unity in Christ. For this we prayed that God would give us wisdom tempered with humility in the bonds of Christ, our Lord.