

## Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, on Unity

We must be very studious of union and communion among ourselves, and of the unity and peace of the churches that we oversee. We must be sensible how needful this is to the prosperity of the whole, the strengthening of our common cause, the good of the particular members of our flock, and the further enlargement of the kingdom of Christ. And, therefore, ministers must smart when the Church is wounded, and be so far from being the leaders in divisions, that they should take it as a principal part of their work to prevent and heal them. Day and night should they bend their studies to find out means to close such breaches. They must not only hearken to motions for unity, but propound them and prosecute them; not only entertain an offered peace, but even follow it when it flies from them. They must, therefore, keep close to the ancient simplicity of the Christian faith, and the foundation and center of catholic unity. They must abhor the arrogancy of them that frame new engines to rack and tear the Church of Christ under pretense of obviating errors and maintaining the truth. The Scripture sufficiency must be maintained, and nothing beyond it imposed on others; and if papists, or others, call to us for the standard and rule of our religion, it is the Bible that we must show them, rather than any confessions of churches, or writings of men. We must learn to distinguish between certainties and uncertainties, necessities and unnecessaries, catholic verities and private opinions; and to lay the stress of the Church's peace upon the former, not upon the latter. We must avoid the common confusion of speaking of those who make no difference between verbal and real errors, and hate that madness formerly among theologians, who tear their brethren as heretics, before they understand them. And we must learn to see the true state of controversies, and reduce them to the very point where the difference lies, and not make them seem greater than they are. Instead of quarrelling with our brethren, we must combine against the adversaries; and all ministers must associate and hold communion, and correspondence, and constant meetings to these ends; and smaller differences of judgment are not to interrupt them. They must do as much of the work of God, in unity and concord, as they can, which is the use of synods; not to rule over one another, and make laws, but to avoid misunderstandings, and consult for mutual edification, and maintain love and communion, and go on unanimously in the work that God has already commanded us. Had the ministers of the gospel been men of peace, and of catholic, rather than factious spirits, the Church of Christ had not been in the case it now is. The nations of Lutherans and Calvinists abroad, and the differing parties here at home, would not have been plotting the subversion of one another, nor remain at that distance, and in that uncharitable bitterness, nor strengthen the common enemy, and hinder the building and prosperity of the Church as they have done.

### We are sadly guilty of undervaluing the unity and peace of the whole Church.

Though I scarcely meet with anyone who will not speak for unity and peace, or, at least, that will expressly speak against it, yet is it not common to meet with those who are studious to promote it; but too commonly do we find men averse to it, and jealous of it, if not themselves the instruments of division. The Papists have so long abused the name of the catholic Church, that, in opposition to

them, many either put it out of their creeds, or only retain the name while they understand not, or consider not the nature of the thing; or think it is enough to believe that there is such a body, though they behave not themselves as members of it. If the Papists will idolize the Church, shall we therefore deny it, disregard it, or divide it? It is a great and a common sin throughout the Christian world, to take up religion in a way of faction; and instead of a love and tender care of the universal Church, to confine that love and respect to a party. Not but that we must prefer, in our estimation and communion, the purer parts before the impure, and refuse to participate with any in their sins; yet the most infirm and diseased part should be compassionated and assisted to the utmost of our power; and communion must be held as far as is lawful, and nowhere avoided, but upon the urgency of necessity; as we must love those of our neighborhood that have the plague or leprosy, and afford them all the relief we can, and acknowledge all our just relations to them, and communicate to them, though we may not have local communion with them; and in other diseases which are not so infectious, we may be the more with them for their help, by how much the more they need it.

Of the multitude that say they are of the catholic Church, it is rare to meet with men of a catholic spirit. Men have not a universal consideration of, and respect to, the whole Church, but look upon their own party as if it were the whole. If there be some called Lutherans, some Calvinists, some subordinate divisions among these, and so of other parties among us, most of them will pray hard for the prosperity of their party, and rejoice and give thanks when it goes well with them; but if any other party suffer, they little regard it, as if it were no loss at all to the Church. If it be the smallest parcel that possesses not many nations, no, nor cities on earth, they are ready to carry it, as if they were the whole Church, and as if it went well with the Church when it goes well with them. We cry down the Pope as Antichrist, for including the Church in the Romish pale, and no doubt but it is abominable schism: but, alas! how many do imitate them too far, while they reprove them! And as the Papists foist the word Roman into their creed, and turn the catholic Church into the Roman Catholic church, as if there were no other catholics, and the Church were of no larger extent, so is it with many others as to their several parties. Some will have it to be the Lutheran catholic church, and some the Reformed catholic church; some the Anabaptist catholic church, and so of some others. And if they differ not among themselves, they are little troubled at differing from others, though it be from almost all the Christian world. The peace of their party they take for the peace of the Church. No wonder, therefore, if they carry it no further.

How rare is it to meet with a man that smarts or bleeds with the Church's wounds, or sensibly takes them to heart as his own, or that ever had solicitous thoughts of a cure! No; but almost every party thinks that the happiness of the rest consists in turning to them; and because they be not of their mind, they cry, Down with them! and are glad to hear of their fall, as thinking that is the way to the Church's rising, that is, their own. How few are there who understand the true state of controversies between the several parties; or that ever well discerned how many of them are but verbal, and how many are real! And if those that understand it do, in order to right information and accommodation, disclose it to others, it is taken as an extenuation of their error, and as a carnal compliance with them in their sin. Few men grow zealous for peace till they grow old, or have much experience of men's spirits and principles, and see better the true state of the Church, and the several differences, than they did before. And then they begin to write their Irenicons, and many such are extant at this day. As a young man in the heat of his lust and passion was judged to be no fit auditor of moral philosophy, so we find that those same young men who may be zealous for peace and unity, when they are grown more experienced, are zealous for their factions against these in their youthful heat. And therefore, such peace-makers as these before-mentioned do seldom do much greater good than to quiet their own consciences in the discharge of so great a duty, and to moderate some few, and save them from further guilt, and to leave behind them, when they are dead, a witness against a

willful, self-conceited, unpeaceable world. Nay, commonly it brings a man under suspicion either of favoring some heresy or abating his zeal, if he do but attempt a pacificatory work. As if there were no zeal necessary for the great fundamental verities of the Church's unity and peace, but only for parties, and some particular truths. And a great advantage the devil has got this way, by employing his own agents, the unhappy Socinians, in writing so many treatises for catholic and arch-catholic unity and peace, which they did for their own ends; by which means the enemy of peace has brought it to pass, that whoever makes motion for peace, is presently under suspicion of being one that has need of it for an indulgence to his own errors. A fearful case, that heresy should be credited, as if none were such friends to unity and peace as they; and that so great and necessary a duty, upon which the Church's welfare doth so depend, should be brought into such suspicion or disgrace. Brethren, I speak not all this without apparent reason. We have as sad divisions among us in England, considering the piety of the persons, and the smallness of the matter of our discord, as most nations under heaven have known. The most that keeps us at odds is but the right form and order of Church government. Is the distance so great, that Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Independent might not be well agreed? Were they but heartily willing and forward for peace, they might. I know they might. I have spoken with some moderate men of all the parties, and I perceive, by their concessions, it were an easy work. Were men's hearts but sensible of the Church's case, and unfeignedly touched with love to one another, and did they but heartily set themselves to seek it, the settling of a safe and happy peace were an easy work. If we could not in every point agree, we might easily narrow our differences, and hold communion upon our agreement in the main; determining on the safest way for managing our few and small disagreements, without the danger or trouble of the Church. But is this much done? It is not done. To the shame of all our faces be it spoken, it is not done. Let each party flatter themselves now as they please, it will be recorded to the shame of the ministry of England while the gospel shall abide in the world.

And oh what heinous aggravations do accompany this sin! Never men, since the apostles' days, I think, did make greater profession of godliness. The most of them are bound by solemn oaths and covenants, for unity and reformation: they all confess the worth of peace, and most of them will preach for it, and talk for it, while yet they sit still and neglect it, as if it were not worth the looking after. They will read and preach on those texts that command us to follow peace with all men,' and as much as in us lieth, to live peaceably with them,' and yet they are so far from following it, and doing all they possibly can for it, that many snarl at it, and malign and censure any that endeavor to promote it; as if all zeal for peace did proceed from an abatement of our zeal for holiness; and as if holiness and peace were so fallen out, that there were no reconciling them: when yet it has been found, by long experience, that concord is a sure friend to piety, and piety always moves to concord; while, on the other hand, errors and heresies are bred by discord, as discord is bred and fed by them. We have seen, to our sorrow, that where the servants of God should have lived together as one -- of one heart, and one soul, and one lip -- and should have promoted each other's faith and holiness, and admonished and assisted each other against sin, and rejoiced together in the hope of future glory, we have, on the contrary, lived in mutual jealousies, and drowned holy love in bitter contentions, and studied to disgrace and undermine one another, and to increase our own parties by right or wrong. We, that were wont to glory of our love to the brethren as a mark of our sincerity in the faith, have now turned it into the love of a party only; and those that are against that party have more of our spleen and envy and malice, than our love. I know this is not so with all, nor prevalently with any true believer; but yet it is so common, that it may cause us to question the sincerity of many that are thought by themselves and others to be most sincere. And it is not ourselves only that are scorched in this flame, but we have drawn our people into it, and cherished them in it, so that most of the godly in the nation are fallen into parties, and have turned much of

their ancient piety into vain opinions and disputes and envyings and animosities. Yea, whereas it was wont to be made the certain mark of a graceless wretch to deride the godly, how few are there now that stick at secretly deriding and slandering those that are not of their opinions! A pious Prelatical man can reverently scorn and slander a Presbyterian; and a Presbyterian an Independent; and an Independent both. And, what is the worst of all, the common ignorant people take notice of all this, and do not only deride us, but are hardened by us against religion; and when we go about to persuade them to be religious, they see so many parties, that they know not which to join; and think that it is as good to be of none at all, as of any, since they are uncertain which is the right; and thus thousands are grown into a contempt of all religion, by our divisions; and many poor carnal wretches begin to think themselves in the better case of the two, because they hold to their old formalities, when we hold to nothing. I know that some of these men are learned and reverend, and intend not such mischievous ends as these. The hardening of men in ignorance is not their design. But this is the thing effected. To intend well in doing ill is no rarity. Who can, in reverence to any man on earth, sit still and hold his tongue, while he sees people thus run to their own destruction, and the souls of men undone by the contentions of divines for their several parties and interests? The Lord that knows my heart, knows, (if I know it myself,) that as I am not of any one of these parties, so I speak not a word of this in a factious partiality for one party, or against another, as such, much less in spleen against any person; but if I durst in conscience, I would have silenced all this, for fear of giving them offense whom I must honor. But what am I but a servant of Christ? and what is my life worth, but to do him service? and whose favor can recompense me for the ruin of the Church? and who can be silent while souls are undone? Not I, for my part, while God is my Master, and his word my rule; his work my business; and the success of it, for the saving of souls, my end. Who can be reconciled to that which so lamentably crosses his Master's interest, and his main end in life? Nor yet would I have spoken any of this, had it been only in respect to my own charge, where, I bless God, the sore is but small, in comparison of what it is in many other places. But the knowledge of some neighboring congregations, and of others more remote, has drawn out these observations from me. We may talk of peace, indeed, as long as we live, but we shall never obtain it but by returning to the apostolical simplicity. The Papists' faith is too big for all men to agree upon, or even all their own, if they enforced it not with arguments drawn from the fire, the halter, and the strappado. And many Anti-papists do too much imitate them in the tedious length of their subscribed confessions, and the novelty of their impositions, when they go furthest from them in the quality of the things imposed. When we once return to the ancient simplicity of faith, then, and not till then, shall we return to the ancient love and peace. I would therefore recommend to all my brethren, as the most necessary thing to the Church's peace, that they unite in necessary truths, and bear with one another in things that may be borne with; and do not make a larger creed, and more necessities, than God has done. To this end, let me entreat you to attend to the following things:

- (1) Lay not too great a stress upon controverted opinions, which have godly men, and, especially, whole churches, on both sides.
- (2) Lay not too great a stress on those controversies that are ultimately resolvable into philosophical uncertainties, as are some unprofitable controversies about freewill, the manner of the Spirit's operations and the Divine decrees.
- (3) Lay not too great a stress on those controversies that are merely verbal, and which if they were anatomized, would appear to be no more. Of this sort are far more (I speak it confidently upon certain knowledge) that make a great noise in the world, and tear the Church, than almost any of the eager contenders that ever I spoke with do seem to discern, or are like to believe.

(4) Lay not too much stress on any point of faith which was disowned by or unknown to the whole Church of Christ, in any age, since the Scriptures were delivered to us.

(5) Much less should you lay great stress on those of which any of the more pure or judicious ages were wholly ignorant.

(6) And least of all should you lay much stress on any point which no one age since the apostles did ever receive, but all commonly held the contrary.

I know it is said that a man may subscribe the Scripture, and the ancient creeds, and yet maintain Socinianism, or other heresies. To which I answer, So he may another test which your own brains shall contrive: and while you make a snare to catch heretics, instead of a test for the Church's communion, you will miss your end; and the heretic, by the slipperiness of his conscience, will break through, and the tender Christian may possibly be ensnared. And by your new creed the Church is like to have new divisions, if you keep not close to the words of Scripture.

He that shall live to that happy time when God will heal his broken churches, will see all this that I am pleading for reduced to practice, and this moderation takes place of the new-dividing zeal, and the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture established; and all men's confessions and comments valued only as subservient helps, and not made the test of Church communion, any further than they are the same with Scripture. Till, however, the healing age come, we cannot expect that healing truths will be entertained, because there are not healing spirits in the leaders of the Church. But when the work is to be done, the workmen will be fitted for it; and blessed will be the agents of so glorious a work.