

Unity without Uniformity: the decided, the debatable & the departed

A paper written to help us 'keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3) in light of the challenging variety of theological views in a church, and the real threat of heresy
October 2011

1. A History of Uniformity

Any church doing its job well in a world of immense variety will find itself challenged by a variety of theological views and opinions within it. Sometimes this debate will be great fun, sometimes it will lead to division, which is only fun if you like blood-sports.

You may be unaware that the Church of England (our denominational background) came into being with the publication of a prayer book in 1549, and an Act of Uniformity passed by Parliament to guarantee that everyone did the same thing in the entire realm! Catholics dissented, and 'non-conformists' non-conformed and not a few people got it in the neck for it.

So we are by nature as a denomination pretty good at demanding uniformity. We are very bad at delivering it, as the massive variety of worldwide 'Anglicanisms' show - some dress up, some down. Some stand, some sit. Some open books, others refuse. There are hymn-singers, and chorus-singers. Some insist on biblical sexuality, others enjoy any form of sexuality and celebrate it by ordaining its adherents to the teaching ministry.

What is unity in all this?

2. Our desire: Unity without Uniformity

At St John's we are committed to have unity in Christ around his word. We agree with the line of John Calvin's that 'Christ comes to us clothed in his scriptures'¹, and so we are gathered around Christ as we gather to understand the Scriptures as they explain him to us.

Our unity focuses upon our task of reading and understanding the word together, and Christ works in us by His Spirit as we do this.

Because our unity is worked out over the scriptures, the task of interpreting the bible will become very important to keeping unity. Let's be clear – our aim is unity in Christ through his word, and we expect this to be a complex unity without simple uniformity.

For what do we find when we turn to interpreting the bible?

3. Interpreting the bible: The decided, the debated, and the departed

What we find is a remarkable amount of *decided* interpretation, a whole lot of *debated* interpretations, and a list of interpretations which most agree have *departed* from a careful handling of the book.

The decided

There are a whole host of issues on which there is an obvious and single interpretation.

Take 'the humanity & divinity of Jesus' for example. When John wrote his gospel his aim was to help people decide that Jesus was the son of God.

'...these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' John 20:31

The point was not whether everyone agreed with each other on this. The point was whether they agreed with Jesus. Jesus had decided the matter for them. John himself had heard Jesus present himself as God in human flesh. Jesus was so clear on these things.

And so these are some of the things that Christians have always said are decided matters. You want another 'd' word for it? I'll give you two. This is our 'doctrine' and our 'dogma'. The decided.

¹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III, ii, 6

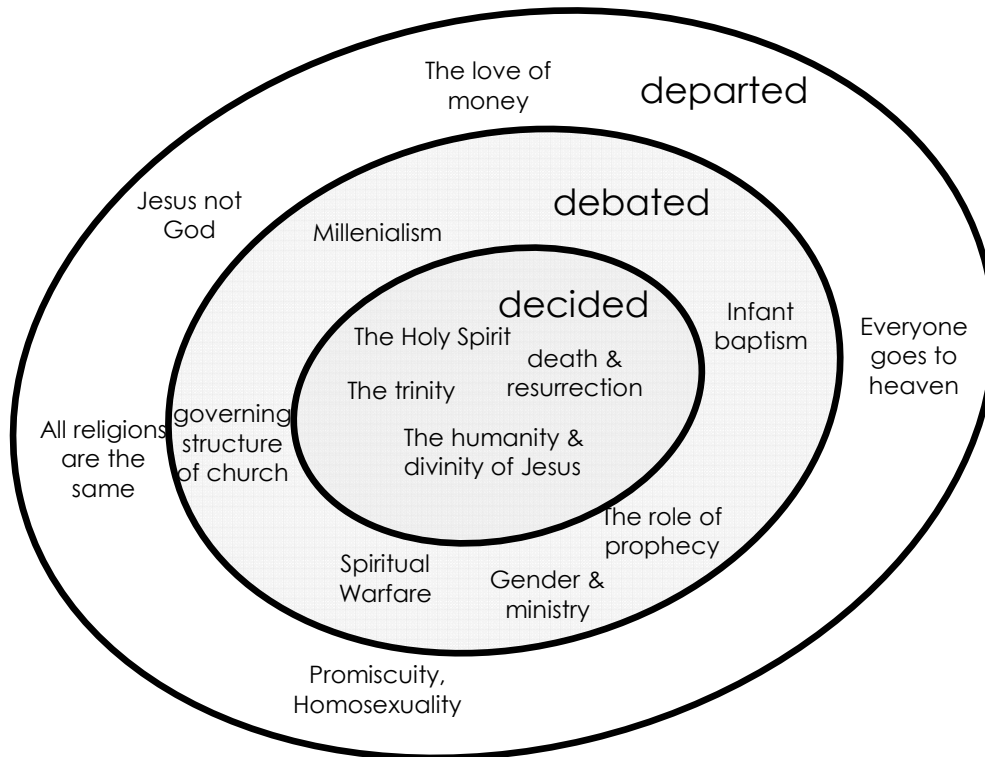
The debated

But there are a host of other matters of interpretation that Christians disagree on. These are the debated. These matters are so much less clear in scripture. Issues in this 'circle' include infant baptism, and the role of prophecy in the NT, the impact of gender on ministry, and the nature of spiritual warfare. The governance structure of a church is here, and matters such as millennialism. These things are important and spoken of in scripture, but are less clear and open to debate. This is OK. It is even good. The debated.

The departed

And then there interpretations which have clearly departed from scripture. They would be called false teaching, and usually sell out Jesus for some element of our culture. For example, a church that taught the love of money would be unthinkable. A church that taught that Jesus was not God would be...well, that would be the Jehovah's Witnesses. You can't be a Christian and declare all religions to be the same. Or the one that bites most in our culture – you can't be a church which licenses promiscuity, or declares homosexual practice for believers moral. All this is to have departed.

It looks like this:



As a church we want to affirm the decided absolutely, and deny the departed categorically. Our unity is preserved by saying a very clear 'Amen' to truths, and very loud 'No' to false teaching and heresy. But the hardest place to 'keep the unity of the Spirit' is in the middle circle – in the debatable. How do you do that as a church well?

4. On the debatable in our church: one preaching position and many personal opinions

We believe that the unity of churches in scripture is guarded by the preaching of the church. *The preaching of our church sets the culture of biblical debate in our church.*

So we are a church with one clear PREACHING position, and a variety of PERSONAL positions.

The preaching position of this church will be the position which determines our theology and pastoral practice. In order that you can feel confident about what interpretation of the scriptures decides matters finally in this church, when a debatable issue comes up, I will try and make it clear from the pulpit and in the ministry papers on the website what this church stands for. As the lead pastor this is my responsibility for the flock under my care.

When you are a 'disagreeable' member

However, if you are a member of this church and you think differently with your bible open and your conscience captive to God and not our culture, that's OK. You are a very valued and rightly 'disagreeable' member. (I hope you appreciate the pun here). We want to hear what you think – you are not called to be silent about your understanding. Quite the opposite. Speak at church and in small groups on the matter, we will hear you. You are simply called to remember that 'God is not a god of disorder, but of peace' (1 Corinthians 14:33) and hold these opinions with humility, patience and forbearance. Do all things in good order.

When you are a 'disagreeable' leader

If you are a teaching elder of a congregation or small group and have a position different from the preaching position – you will need to teach in a manner that not only helps people weigh up *your* view from scripture, but which gives them *equal and even greater access to the preached position of our church*. We want them to have access to *both*, with a clear sense of what is held by the pastoral leadership of the church, and the freedom we grant to our leaders under this.

All this is written, because we need a stronger unity than conformity. Churches like ours are built on acts of uniformity. People who worship expressively often feel simply 'out of uniform' and leave. People who hold different interpretations quickly pick up they are 'in the wrong' and depart.

We simply need captivity to scripture. And captivity to scripture will lead us to certainty on the decided matters, certainty on matters of departure from faithful interpretation, but it will leave us humble and listening on the matters in between.

May God give his church unity in the word, by His Spirit. May he defend us from false teaching, and grant us humility.

And above all, may he make us serious about meeting Christ by hearing and understanding his word.