

Too ecumenical??? 1 Corinthians 11.17-22

Rod Hill writes: Not a lot of people know this, but in 1974 I was confirmed, by the Bishop of East Bridgford (a Suffragan in the diocese of Southwell, as it was then). I still have the little book that we were presented with on that occasion. It was simply the fact that the Boys Brigade was at the local Anglican Church rather than the Methodist Church that led me, from my Methodist upbringings to be confirmed in the Church of England. That experience has very much shaped my approach to worship and ministry.

Some of you will know that I started my working life as a teacher in the United Church of Zambia school at Kafue, to the south of the capital, Lusaka. Over the decades since then I have kept in touch with the school and the adjacent clinic and have supported its work financially through a small charity. (Sadly, the support for the charity has dwindled to the point where we will have to close shortly, which is a great shame).

Just three years after returning from Zambia I began my training as a Methodist minister, having transferred back into the Methodist Church whilst at University. However, the 'powers that be' felt that I had enough ecumenical experience but not enough Methodist experiences, so they sent me to Wesley College, Bristol. At the time that was the only solely Methodist training institution in the country!

Working together with colleagues from different Christian traditions has been a real blessing during my time as a minister. In my first appointment we found it easiest to get on with our Roman Catholic friends and shared a

town-wide mission with them. We exchanged pulpits but, of course I was not allowed to take the bread in the Roman Catholic mass and the priest didn't receive in our communion service. I'll never forget his comment to me on that issue – "It's one of the painful things that we just have to learn to live with", he said.

In Wimbledon we had a really good clergy group that met for Bible Study each year during Lent and pre-advent and it was a really good time of deep sharing of faith and fellowship. There too we preached in each other's churches and experienced the breadth of tradition from Pentecostal at one end to really high Anglo-Catholic at the other.

In Sheffield I was the Methodist minister in an Anglican/Methodist Ecumenical Partnership with one church embracing the two traditions. Rather than try to find the lowest common denominator we always worked to the highest common factor, trying to pool the very best of our traditions. It worked really well and the church is still a vibrant and growing congregation.

In each of those ecumenical situations our approach to the Eucharist/Holy Communion/Lord's Supper has been a point of tension but one with which we were able to live and often to flourish.

In this chapter Paul isn't trying to discuss the theological differences around Holy Communion or around Ordination (which is what usually underpins our differences about the Eucharist). No, he is challenging their attitude towards the poor, who are amongst their number.

One of my most salutary experiences of ecumenism was around the ecumenical Bible Studies for Lent that we shared in one place in

London. For one of my colleagues it was obvious that the Bible studies should take place in people's homes, with really good cake and really good coffee. (He ministered in a quite affluent part of Wimbledon.) To another colleague, it was equally obvious that the Bible studies should take place in Church because people in the two up two down terraces where he ministered didn't have enough space in their living rooms to host a group, let alone provide good cake and coffee – no, for him, tea & biscuits in church was what was needed.

When you are eating, says Paul, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers and get drunk. Do you despise the Church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?

Our theological differences around the Eucharist are not the point at issue here. Rather our attitude to the poor who are amongst us.

“So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹ for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. ²² Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?”

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