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## Fire and Ice Sermon Series

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### Extracts and Anecdotes on Unity Among Christians

Iain H. Murray

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#### *The Holy Spirit and Christian Unity*

‘That they all may be one . . . that the world may believe that Thou didst send me’ [John 17:21]. This shows clearly that the Unity of believers amongst themselves was meant to be such as would have an outstanding, visible manifestation--such as the vast outlying world might be able to recognise, and should be constrained to own as the work of God. Thus, the grand impression upon the world at large, that the mission of Christ is divine, is to be produced by the manifested, undeniable *Unity of His disciples* in spiritual life, love and holiness. It is not a merely formal, mechanical unity of ecclesiastical machinery. For as that may, and to a large extent does, exist in both the Western and Eastern churches, with little of the Spirit of Christ, yea much, much with which the Spirit of Christ cannot dwell, so, instead of convincing the world *beyond its own pale* of the divinity of the gospel, it generates infidelity to a large extent within its own bosom. But the Spirit of Christ, illuminating, transforming, and reigning in the hearts of the genuine disciples of Christ, drawing them to each other as members of one family, and prompting them to loving co-operation for the good of the world--this is what, when sufficiently glowing and extended, shall force conviction upon the world that Christianity is divine. Doubtless, the more that differences among Christians disappear--the more they can agree even in minor matters--the impression upon the world may be expected to be greater. But it is not altogether *dependent* upon this; for living and loving oneness in Christ is sometimes more touchingly seen even amidst and in spite of minor differences, than where no such differences exist to try the strength of their deeper unity. Yet till this living brotherhood in Christ shall show itself strong enough to destroy the sectarianism, selfishness, carnality and apathy that eat out the heart of Christianity in all the visible sections of it, in vain shall we expect the world to be overawed by it. It is when ‘the Spirit shall be poured upon us from on high,’ as a Spirit of truth and love, and upon all part of the Christian territory alike, melting down differences and heart-burnings, kindling astonishment and shame at past unfruitfulness, drawing forth longings of

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catholic affection, and yearnings over a world lying in wickedness, embodying themselves in palpable forms and active measures--it is then that we may expect the effect here announced to be produced, and then it will be irresistible.

*David Brown in The Four Gospels, Banner of Truth Trust, pp. 453-54*

*Disunity among Christians: Observations on the toleration of the persecution of Anabaptists by the Zwinglians*

As the unbending laws of historical veracity forbid the writer to suppress such things, he ventures to admonish his pious readers to extract profit from the reflections which are suggested by these sad proofs of human blindness and imperfection.

1. How slow are we all to imitate our great Exemplar, who in the most trying moments cried out, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'!
2. How dangerous is a spirit of contention, of opposition, of vengeance! And how often--were it in our power--should we be disposed to call down fire from heaven, as Elias did!
3. How watchful over the growth of bad tempers ought we to be in the very beginnings of all religious controversies!
4. Then in the progress of them, how does it become us to pause often and examine ourselves, lest we should suppose we are doing God service, when in reality we are impelled only by heat, animosity and a desire of victory.
5. Lastly, when there really happens to exist in our motives some little good, are we not extremely apt to magnify it, till the fancied picture completely veils from our eyes that large admixture of evil, which on the whole miserably predominates. And is not this a fruitful source of deception?

*Joseph Milner in The History of the Church of Christ, vol. 5, London, 1819. p. 513.*

*Presbyterian and Baptist co-operation: examples from The Life of Archibald Alexander (1854)*

## I

The Rev. Amos Thompson, who had long resided in Loudon County, Virginia, was a man of gigantic frame. His bodily strength was prodigious, several proofs of which I had from himself. He came to the northern part of Virginia, before the Revolutionary War; and before his arrival, the Baptists were the only dissenters in that part of the country. Old Father Thomas, one of their leading preachers, had been threatened with personal violence by a set of profane and lawless men. if he should ever show his face in a certain pulpit, where he had preached for some time. The old man took a journey of twenty or thirty miles, to obtain the presence

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of Amos Thompson at the aforesaid place. Thompson, being fearless and fond of adventure, at once agreed to go and preach for him. When they arrived, a great multitude had assembled, some to hear the preacher, and some to see the sport, for the ruffians had sworn that they would beat old Thomas. While Mr Thompson was at prayer, a company armed with bludgeons entered the house, and took their position just before the pulpit; but when they saw the brawny arm and undaunted appearance of the preacher, they became alarmed, and permitted the service to go on to its conclusion. At the close of his discourse, Mr Thompson addressed himself directly to these men, and expostulated with them on the unlawfulness of their proceedings. He concluded by saying, that although he was a preacher, and a man of peace, he held it to be right, when attacked, to defend himself, which he was ready and able to do. When the meeting was ended, he went out of the house and inquired for the captain of the band. Being led to the spot where they were collected, he approached this man, and asked him to go aside with him. A stout, bold-looking man walked off with him towards the wood, on entering which he appeared to be panic-struck, stopped, and raised his club. Thompson said, 'Fie, man, what can you do with that?' and in a moment wrested it out of his hand, adding that he intended no violence, but that if so disposed, he could hurl him to the earth in a moment. The ruffian was completely overawed, and was glad to escape from so powerful an antagonist. Father Thomas received no further molestation.

## II

Mr Yarborough took occasion to inform us that there was a Baptist preacher in his employment as a millwright, who would be at the house as soon as his work was finished. Accordingly about the dusk of the evening, an old man in coarse garb, with leathern apron, and laden with tools, entered the house and took his seat on the stairs. Neither Mr Grigsby nor I had ever been acquainted with uneducated preachers, and we were struck with astonishment that this carpenter should pretend to preach. When we retired, Mr Shelburne, such was his name, was put into the same room with us. I felt an avidity to question him respecting his call to the ministry, taking it for granted that the old man was ignorant. I therefore began by asking him what he considered a call to the ministry. Mr Shelburne perceived the drift of my question, and instead of giving a general answer proceeded to a narrative of his own experience, and to state the circumstances which led him to suppose that God had called him to be a preacher....

When the old millwright had finished his narrative, I felt much more inclined to doubt my own call to the ministry than that of James Shelburne. Much of the night was spent in this conversation, while my companion was enjoying his usual

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repose. We talked freely about the doctrines of religion, and were mutually gratified at finding how exactly our views tallied. From this night James Shelburne became an object of my high regard, and he gave abundant testimony of his esteem for me. Whenever I visited that part of the country, he was wont to ride many miles to hear me preach, and was pleased to declare that he had never heard any of the ministers of his own denomination with whose opinions he could so fully agree as with mine. I had the opportunity of hearing him preach several times, and was pleased not only with the soundness of his doctrine, but the unaffected simplicity of his manner.

*Dissension and grieving the Holy Spirit*

In the spring of 1816, Asahel Nettleton commenced his labours in Bridgewater. This is a parish in the town of New Milford, in the south-western part of Litchfield County. Here was a small church destitute of a pastor. The state of religion was very low. Unhappy dissensions existed in the church, and great stupidity prevailed among the people at large. Soon after he commenced his labours, there seemed to be a solemn attention to the Word preached, but no cases of deep conviction of sin. He soon became convinced that there could be but little hope of a revival of religion, until a better state of feeling prevailed in the church. He endeavoured to impress upon the minds of the brethren the importance of settling their difficulties, and of uniting their prayers and their efforts for the promotion of Christ's kingdom. But his exhortations seemed to have but little effect, and perceiving that they had no proper sense of their dependence on God, but were placing undue reliance on him, he thought it best to withdraw. Accordingly, without the knowledge of any but the family in which he boarded, he suddenly left the place. The next day was the annual State Fast. The people assembled, expecting to hear him preach; when, to their astonishment, they found the pulpit vacant. The disappointment was great; but it produced the intended effect. The members of the church were deeply affected. They spent the day in prayer and mutual confession of sin. All their difficulties were healed, and brotherly love was restored. It was with them a day of deep repentance and humiliation before God. [Such was to be the first step in what was to prove a memorable revival.]

*From The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton, B. Tyler and A. Bonar, Banner of Truth Trust, 1996, pp. 88-89.*

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