MISSION: UNITY AND DIVERSITY

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Category: Mission

The Nicene Creed includes the following line:

> *We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.*

The wording may be slightly archaic, and some Protestants struggle at the use of the word "catholic", but this phrase captures an important Biblical principle: there is one Christian Church. Across time and geography, the Christian Church, the bride of Christ, is a single united body. One of the huge privileges of my work is that I have had the huge privilege of sharing in the lives of Christians from all sorts of parts of the world and I've experienced the unity of the Church in remarkable ways.

Of course the Church is not one because we are such a wonderful bunch of people, the unity of the Church is inherited from the One God whom we serve and follow.

> *3Â Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.Â 4Â For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future.5Â There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism,Â 6Â and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all. (Ephesians 4:3-6 NLT)*

The Church is united, but it is also incredibly diverse. Andrew Walls wrote a wonderful article which explores how Christianity would appear to a time-travelling sociologist who visited Christians in different places and at different points in time. At first glance there would be very little in common between the scholars who argued over the finer points of the Nicene Creed and a group of Christians worshipping in Lagos today.

The Christian Church is rather strange, it is a picture of unity and diversity. Which brings us back to the theme of the Trinity and to the sketch at the top of this post. The Church is united because there is one God. But the Church is varied because the Triune God is a God of variety. When the Spirit first empowered the disciples to speak to the crowds in Jerusalem, he enabled people to hear in their own languages. God does not force us all into one mould; the Church has space for all languages and cultures.

We'll get onto the relevance of unity and diversity for mission in the next post, but I need to make one more comment in passing.

Sadly, down through the centuries, Christians have spent a lot of time, energy and blood trying to divide the indivisible body of Christ. We've been so intent on drawing lines to say who is in and who is out, that we've often overlooked the amazing unity which is the inheritance of the Church. The Church is united, but we often determined to live as though this were not true; this must pain the

Lord who prayed that we would be one. (John 17:23)

Paul says that we have to "make every effort to keep ourselves united". We have to take this seriously, if we divide the Church, we are effectively saying that there is more than one Lord, more than one God. That isn't on!