

*'That they all may  
be one'*



## DIVISION FOR UNITY - Thomas Traherne

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God;  
for any false prophets have gone out into the world (1 John 4:1)*

We live in an age of multitudinous spiritualities peddled with various degrees of insistency and vying with one another to take over the market. Christians are not immune even within their own ranks. How can we know the Spirit of truth from the spirit of error? The writer of the first letter of John gives us the definitive answer:

*He who is in you (the Holy Spirit) is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4).  
By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has  
come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God.*

The sureness and soundness of the incarnational, trinitarian faith into which we have been baptised, provided we do not wilfully fall away, is our safeguard. Therein we have received the Holy Spirit, who leads us into all truth (as Jesus promised) and whose anointing teaches us everything (1 John 2:27)

Still we do not sit back on **his** laurels. We are in the arena, called to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). Sometimes the struggle can be so intense that we seem almost torn apart in the pull of the contrary forces. Reunification, in ourselves, the Church and the world, can only come about through the forging together again of the shattered and broken parts. This is supremely the work of the Spirit who sustained even Jesus himself in the extremity of disintegration he endured for us on Calvary (Hebrews 9:14). Since we are truly called with St. Paul to share in Christ's sufferings and reproduce the pattern of his death (Philippians 3:10) we can expect there to be some conflict for us as well.

It would seem, then, that where reunification is being slowly and painstakingly worked for, division too comes inevitably into play. The Christian must endure this tension without succumbing and certainly should not come out on the divisive side. Thomas Traherne, Church of England priest and poet writing over three hundred years ago, seems to have had insight into these things, living as he did in an age of acute religious conflict and upheaval. In the Church's Year Book (*Bodleian Ms.*) he describes the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. The cloven tongues of fire came down severally on the heads of the waiting disciples in the upper room precisely in order to loosen *their* tongues to share with others the graces and blessings poured upon them:

*He came in tongues to give them utterance to distribute the benefit which they themselves enjoy, and to communicate his gifts.*

Though the flames were diversified, spread out, divided, Traherne goes on to explain that '*this division of tongues was intended for union*'. From initial diversification must come a more profound unity. By imparting the good news of salvation, albeit in different languages and ways, Christians nevertheless attain to a deep fellowship with one another. By sharing their very selves they are united in the Holy Spirit who wills to draw opposites together in unity:

*By communicating ourselves we are united to others, give others the benefit of ourselves, and enjoy ourselves by being enjoyed.*

*By communicating ourselves we fill others, by filling others we live in them, by living in them we feel in them, see and enjoy whatever they have and are.*

*So dwelling in each other the Holy Ghost dwelleth in both, enjoying both and making both a benefit to the other.*

*And thereby he attaineth the end which his nature desireth, and for which he cometh, which is to unite two, that he might be glorified in either, for the sake of either.*

And yet close to this promised unity into which we are invited is the opposite pull, the divided tongues that refuse reconciliation. Traherne describes what he terms contention as '*the most pernicious thing in the whole world*'. He goes on to contrast the unifying purpose of the cloven tongues of fire with the sin of Christian disunity, drawing us away as it does from the joys of fellowship:

*Since therefore this division of tongues is not for contention, but communication, mixture and union, how infinitely are they to blame who use their tongues for*

*dissipation and division, or alienation and schism; for all coldness is in destructive separation.*

Like St. James in his epistle (1:26 and 3:2-5), and with Traherne here, we recognise only too well our proneness to sin through the unkind word and our harsh judgmentalism. We who have received the Spirit so often lend our support, despite ourselves, to the opposing spirits of separation and disharmony. How can we get back and return to the Unity? Traherne himself prays to the Holy Spirit. Since he is the Spirit of Unity he is all-powerful to draw us back even from the farthest limits of separation:

*Be always, I beseech thee, O Holy Spirit, near unto me, without me and within me, to bless all thy blessings to me, and to keep all evil from me . . . .*

*Be with me even in my failings, when my foot slippeth, to hold me up; in my errors to bring me back, in my sins to correct me, in my afflictions to support me, in all to sanctify me, and make me ever a willing person in the day of thy power.*

Pentecost was not for the apostles alone but for us, for everyone. Yet there are conditions for receiving the blessings. As well as the repentance and acknowledgement of sin which Traherne expresses in his prayer we also need a **will** for unity, both within ourselves and with one another. After all the Spirit came when Christ's followers were all gathered together in one place, not scattered abroad in opposing camps. (Acts 2:1).

Conscious though we may be of our divisions, we can still make the following prayer of Traherne's to the Father our own, seeking the Pentecostal blessing with him:

*O qualify us for his coming by giving us with the apostles unity in ourselves, unity in thy Church, unity with thee, that as unity tied God and man together, so it may unite thy Holy Spirit to us, and make him delight to dwell within us.*

Yes, as Jesus promised, the Spirit does choose to come to us so that we might dwell together as one in him. Yet, paradoxically, he alone can give us the very unity and concord that we need to prepare us to receive him. Quoting Traherne again:

*. . . if we be centred all in one place, in unity, verity and concord, in one faith and one Church, he shall fill us with his gifts and give us utterance of them in our lives and conversation.*

but:

*...as unity is the best preparation, so division is the greatest opposition to (the) Holy Dove's coming upon us.*

Everything therefore is grace, God first and last. That alone can resolve the paradox. The ultimate gift, through the unifying Spirit, is oneness with God's very self. Traherne invites us to claim with him the promise found in *2 Peter 1:4*:

*O give thyself unto me, for without thee no gift alone can satisfy. And because thou thyself art the gift, O give me what thou art, that I may give thee what I am, and be made a partaker of the divine nature.*

Before that consummation there **will** be many testings, many false spirits to deceive us and tear us apart, stretching us as we have seen almost to breaking point. Yet the cloven tongues **are** for unity and the all-Holy Spirit will unfailingly, by his very nature, draw us back with himself into the divine Unity from which he came forth.