William Orange Lecture
William Temple and the Practice of Church Unity

Introduction – William Temple and the Ecumenical Movement

Good afternoon, I consider it a great privilege this afternoon to be giving the William Orange Memorial Lecture on the subject of another William… William Temple. William Orange, as you probably know, was the vicar of Sumner parish from 1930 to 1945, a defining period for evangelicalism in this country in which the Evangelical Unions were begun on New Zealand University Campuses and defining stands were made for the centrality of the Bible and the significance of the atonement. The Evangelical groups on the university campuses have continued to equip and train young men and women in the biblical faith and have continued to work in partnership with the evangelical churches to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to New Zealanders who are lost and perishing. The years 1930-1945, the years that William Orange was at Sumner and the EU’s began, overlap almost entirely with the period that William Temple was an archbishop in the Church of England, 1929-1944. Now, one of the pressing issues of the day was the unity of the church… in particular, the question of reunion between churches. It was a question that those who were beginning the EU’s in New Zealand had to confront, it was a question that parish members and clergy, like William Orange had to face. And it was a question that we today still have to deal with.

Now, in the early twentieth century, there was probably no more ubiquitous character in the movement for Christian unity than Archbishop William Temple. Only months before he died, *The Church Times* described the goal of Christian reunion and the ecumenical movement as ‘nearest to the Archbishop’s heart’.

Soon after his death, Cyril Garbett, Temple’s successor as Archbishop of York, claimed that Temple probably did more than any one man had ever previously done for Christian unity. Today we are going to look at what William Temple thought

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about church unity and what he did to promote it and then I will offer an assessment of his efforts and some application for us today.

But first, who was William Temple? William Temple is the only son of an Archbishop of Canterbury to himself become Archbishop of Canterbury. I had thought to call my lecture ‘Second Temple Anglicanism’ on account of this, but I refrained. Nevertheless, this is important for understanding his context. William was born in the bishop’s palace in Exeter in 1881 and as his father, Frederick, received preferment, he moved with the family to Fulham Palace, home of the bishop of London, and then Lambeth and Canterbury Palaces, the homes of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In other words, Temple’s childhood was coloured purple. He mixed almost exclusively with ecclesiastical establishment and aristocracy. He went to school at Rugby and then went up to study at Balliol College, Oxford where he fell in love with the philosophy of the Balliol’s master, Edward Caird. When he graduated he took a fellowship at Queen’s College, Oxford, where he taught philosophy. From there he became headmaster of the exclusive Repton School in 1910. We should note that through these early years of the twentieth century, and in something of a contrast to his own background, Temple developed a lifelong interest in the working class and socialism. He became president of the Workers’ Education Association in 1908 and a card carrying member of the Labour Party in 1918. After short stints as a parish clergyman, working full time for a political lobby group and a cannon of Westminster, in 1921, at just 39 years of age, Temple was consecrated bishop of Manchester. In 1929 he was made Archbishop of York and in 1942 he became Archbishop of Canterbury. The fact that the conservative Winston Churchill had made the socialist William Temple led George Bernard Shaw to describe the appointment as ‘a realized impossibility’.


fact that Temple’s outspoken political allegiances ought to have held him back, is testament to his extraordinary gifts and leadership. Indeed, in Matthew Grimley’s recent historical assessment, Temple is proclaimed as ‘the pre-eminent Anglican leader of the inter-war period, and indeed of the whole twentieth century’.\(^5\) Historian Kenneth Hylson-Smith goes even further, declaring him ‘One of the most outstanding churchmen not only of the twentieth but of any century.’\(^6\) Suffice to say, Temple is a highly significant figure for us to be thinking about.

As we mentioned before, one of the passions of Temple’s life was church unity. His indefatigable efforts have led to a seemingly indelible association between his name and the ecumenical movement. What is surprising is, considering the stature of Temple, there has been relatively little scholarly analysis on his effort to apply his theology in the practice of church unity. This lecture focuses on this lacuna. We will see that Temple’s theology and practice were heavily influenced by his philosophical presuppositions. We will also see that while, Temple was motivated by deep convictions, paradoxically, in some aspects, those very convictions were detrimental to his ultimate goal. As such, he dealt with a number of circumstances more pragmatically than has been recognised. We will attempt to account for complexity of Temple’s context and the multifaceted approaches he took in the various situations which he faced. Hopefully, through this study, the shortcomings of Temple’s approach will be seen and some application to our present situation will be possible.

**Historical Context**

As we begin, however, we must remember that William Temple’s work for church unity was not conducted in a vacuum; numerous antecedents significantly shaped his thought and provided the background for his efforts. As such, it is necessary to provide some historical context.

From the sixteenth century, the Church of England had, to various degrees, offered a religious home for a variety of theological outlooks and churchmanship. The eighteenth-century

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Evangelical Awakening and the nineteenth-century Oxford and Broad Church Movements, however, resulted in clear cut alignments and antagonisms which expressed themselves in ‘parties’ within the Church of England. A good example of this entrenched party spirit can be seen at the beginning twentieth century in George Balleine’s book, *A History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England*. The antagonism between different parties could be extreme and at points they appeared diametrically opposed. For example, on a number of occasions the *English Churchman* described ‘two distinct religions being taught in the Church of England’. It is important point to remember, however, that the ‘parties’ within the Church of England were not confined to that church. For example, Evangelicalism was not only prominent in the Church of England but encompassed Methodists as well as sections of Presbyterians and other dissenting churches. This meant Evangelical Anglicans often felt a closer affinity with evangelicals in those other bodies than they did with fellow Anglicans of other parties.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the church faced a significant challenge from novel scientific theory and biblical criticism. With *The Origin of Species* and *Essays and Reviews* published only months apart, the debates engendered by both inevitably overlapped. While such publications were generally considered scandalous by the parties of the church at their reception, their ideas permeated into the traditional parties, liberalising them. Such shifting paradigms are obvious in the 1889 publication of *Lux Mundi*, where the liberalism of the post-Tractarian


contributors, according to Gouldstone, make the ‘Broad Church’ Frederick Temple, himself a contributor to Essays and Reviews, appear conservative. The driving force behind Lux Mundi, Charles Gore, and his colleagues embraced the methods of biblical criticism, the theory of evolution, and the idealist, Hegelian philosophy that would be so formative for William Temple. As such, the traditional Anglican party lines became more complicated and divided. So, taking the reception of Balleine’s book as an example, the English Churchman protested that the title was inappropriate because the book only expressed ‘the opinions of the modern school of so-called Neo-Evangelicalism’. 

Through the second half of the nineteenth century, English university education was undergoing ‘a complete transformation’. At the beginning of the century there was only Oxford and Cambridge which were virtually Church of England seminaries. All students had to sign the 39 Articles and more than half of Cambridge and Oxford graduates became clergymen. By the end of the century, numerous other universities had sprung up founded upon secular ideology and they were focused on the burgeoning fields of science and the humanities. Even in the ancient universities, where change is slow, religious tests were abolished fellowships and college headships were no longer bound to holy orders. These changes, coupled with the increasing academic hostility to Christianity, meant there were fewer vested interests in being denominationally exclusive and more appeal in offering a united Christian witness. The result was the birth of non-denominational Christian groups such as the CICCU and OICCU, which

12 Gouldstone, *Rise and Decline*, 106.


14 *English Churchman* 4/Jun/1908:373.


17 Gouldstone, *Rise and Decline*, xiii.
soon spurned the wider inter-university SCM. Such developments were crucial in the development of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement. Temple became associated with the SCM in 1907 and the organisation’s ecumenical influence on him, along with numerous others, has been widely recognised. Moreover, Temple readily acknowledged the place of the SCM in the early ecumenical movement, claiming, in 1915, that ‘Members of the [Student Christian] Movement ought to know that without their movement there never could have been held the Edinburgh Conference, which was the greatest event in the life of the Church for a generation.’

Temple often spoke of the significant place of the 1910 International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh for the ecumenical movement. Most nineteenth-century missionaries had been sent out by denominational societies, although there were exceptions, such as the London Missionary Society. The reality was, however, that the growing success of the missionary enterprise resulted in a plurality of denominational divisions in the mission field which was in turn perceived to hinder Christian witness. Edinburgh 1910 instilled the notion that for effective evangelisation of the non-Christian world, the church needed to present a united front. This proved to be a highly significant moment for the rise of the ecumenical movement.

In some ways, Anglican ecumenical ecclesiology had been developing for some time in nineteenth-century America. In 1870, William Reed Huntington in his *The Church-Idea: An*

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*Essay Towards Unity* proposed what would later become known as the Lambeth Quadrilateral. There were four essential aspects that Anglicans held to be essential in a united church. They were the Bible, the Nicene Creed, the two Sacraments and the historic Episcopate. The 1886 General Convention in Chicago adopted this position and it was further adopted by the Lambeth Conference two years later. The Conference said the four elements were held to be ‘a basis on which approach may be, by God’s blessing, made toward Home Reunion’.  

This political, educational and ecclesiastical background is foundational in providing the context in which Temple did his ecumenical thinking. These factors shaped his thinking and action just as his work shaped the ecclesiastical scene of his day. Temple used tools, such as the Lambeth Quadrilateral which had previously been endorsed, and built upon them to advance Anglican identity and wider church unity. He also faced problems, such as Anglican partisanship, that were deeply entrenched but which he sought to overcome. The extent to which Temple was able to progress his ideal of church unity must be evaluated against the background of his context.

**Temple’s Philosophy and Theology of Church Unity**

It has been an easy criticism of the ecumenical movement that it was motivated by sociological factors and, in particular, increasing secularisation. Wilson offered the critique that the ecumenical movement was a reflection of the weakness of religion in an increasingly secularised society and that church reunion involved compromise, a sign of further weakness.  

The increasing secularisation of England was once considered to have been a continuous phenomenon from Victorian times up to the present day. For example, Hylson-Smith argued the decline began in the 1880s and increased rapidly after World War I. More recent historiography has turned this theory on its head, most notably in the work of Callum Brown, who demonstrated the strength of Christianity in England until the 1960s when it began to decline rapidly.  

As such, the rise of the ecumenical movement cannot be attributed to sociological factors alone, but

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was largely a theological movement. This fact warrants some focused attention on Temple’s theology and philosophy of church unity.

For William Temple philosophy and theology were intimately related. He was shaped by the post-Hegelian idealism of his youth which impacted on his approach to the question of church unity in several ways. One aspect of great significance was his propensity towards and ability in dialectic. He described dialectic as ‘the attempt to reach truth by putting of different points of view over against each other and trying to do justice to them all’. In this sense, the fact that two positions were apparently irreconcilable was not a problem; indeed, it was the stimulus to working out the truth. As Temple stated:

Contradiction is at once its enemy and its stimulus. It finds incoherence in its apprehension at any given time and reorganizes its content to remove that incoherence. Contradiction is what it cannot think; and yet contradiction is what makes us think.

Theologically, the greatest influence on William Temple’s understanding of church unity was his ecclesiology, and most importantly, his beliefs about the church’s inherent nature. Two important factors regarding the nature of the church shaped how Temple understood this subject. First, he was convinced that, among followers of Christ, there was necessarily a spiritual unity that was derivative of all believers’ incorporation into the body of Christ through faith. Second, the essential unity of the church was enriched, rather than hindered by, the diversity of its members. These fundamentally diverse features complemented each other. He wrote that although the unity of the church is a unity of faith, it was not necessary that one faith should always be formulated in the same way. It was not just that the church could accommodate all possible diversities, its nature required them. He focused not only on the importance of theological and ethnic diversity


but also on diversity of temperament and social antecedent.\textsuperscript{30} He believed that finding unity among such diversity was of far greater value than the unity among those who shared natural affinities.\textsuperscript{31} In a speech at the 1937 Edinburgh conference, he said: ‘Many of our different views are not antagonistic but mutually complementary.’\textsuperscript{32} He believed that the fellowship of Christianity lifted people above their divisions, while still allowing those peculiarities to be cherished.\textsuperscript{33}

Temple believed that the body of Christ was the primary paradigm from which the church’s unity should be understood. This metaphor was the basis for his understanding of both the unity and complementarity of the church. The image of the body of Christ was also foundational for Temple’s understanding of the nature of schism. He understood schism to be within the church, the body of Christ, and hence it did not imply separation from it. Moreover, he asserted that there was no guilt for the division in those who had merely received their tradition either from their forefathers or through conversion into it.\textsuperscript{34} This conclusion was important in shaping Temple’s approach to those of different Christian traditions. All parties or denominations could approach one another on an equal footing, each as true and precious members of the body of Christ.

Temple was clear that the functions of the church were secondary in importance to its nature. The church’s primary task was to be itself and not to do anything at all. He wrote, ‘All that it does is

\begin{itemize}
  \item W. Temple, \textit{Needs and Claims of the Church of Christ} (London: SPCK, 1917), 4-5.
  \item Temple, \textit{Issues of Faith}, 16.
  \item Temple, \textit{Christian Unity}, 7-8.
\end{itemize}
secondary and expressive of what it is.\textsuperscript{35} Nevertheless, this ‘secondary and expressive’ function proved to be a major factor in Temple’s thinking about church unity.\textsuperscript{36} Temple often spoke of the disunity in the church as obscuring, weakening or even paralysing its witness.\textsuperscript{37} As such, he said ‘if the Church is to perform the task which is divinely allotted to it, it must be a united Church’.\textsuperscript{38} More than this, he believed that, for ‘full effect’ the church must be ‘visibly united’.\textsuperscript{39} In other words, the different Christian denominations of the world needed to join together into a single organic and organisation structure in order for the church to fulfil its task of witnessing to the world.

In summary then, the factors that motivated Temple to pursue church unity were first, his post-Hegelian philosophy which believed all things could ultimately be synthesised. Second, his ecclesiology that there was an underlying spiritual unity between all Christians and that this unity is enriched by differences because these differences ultimately complement one another. (I call this thinking theological complementarianism). And finally, that for the church to fulfil its function of witnessing to the world effectively, it needed to be a united church.

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\textsuperscript{35} W. Temple, \textit{The Church and Its Teaching Today} (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 13.
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\textsuperscript{36} He often contrasted this with what he believed was a common perception that church unity was being pursued merely for increased administrative efficiency. He said that, although the wasted resources and hampering of practical activities resulting from disunion were disastrous and would be important enough to pursue unity, of more importance was expressing to the world the church’s nature. (Temple, ‘Theological Background’, 107, 116; W. Temple, ‘Editorial Notes’, \textit{Pilgrim} I 2 (January 1921): 125-133 (133)).
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\textsuperscript{38} Temple, \textit{His Church}, 15.
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\textsuperscript{39} Temple, \textit{Thoughts in War-Time}, 46.
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Anglican Church Unity: Bridge and Barrier

In Temple’s mind, there was no church that embodied his ecclesiological principles better than the Anglican Church. Temple believed that his denomination had a unique place in the universal church and, in many respects, was the role model for the reunion movement. Temple’s central churchmanship, however, tended to promote his complementarian ecclesiology and downplay the substantial theological differences that deeply divided the Anglican Church. While Temple experienced a measure of success in gaining official recognition for his position—most notably in the 1930 Lambeth Conference Resolutions and the 1938 Report of the Doctrine Commission—the 1927–1928 Prayer Book crisis demonstrated widespread opposition to Temple’s complementarianism. The purpose of the Prayer Book revision was to foster unity, but in many ways it exacerbated divisions. Temple’s Anglican understanding and complementarian ecclesiology were challenged by his own struggle to exercise authority over those who repudiated his appeal to moderation and toleration.

Temple felt his complementarian ecclesiology was an important aspect of Anglicanism. In 1928, in the midst of the crisis caused by the rejection of the Prayer Book, Temple wrote his most systematic polemic for his understanding of Anglican theology: The Genius of the Church of England. In this pamphlet Temple attempted to show the historical, theological and social basis for Anglicanism. He argued that it was the very lack of theological dogmatism that was the compelling feature of Anglicanism, stating: ‘Nowhere was the Reformation accomplished with so little assertion of abstract principles as in England.’ Furthermore, he went on to claim that it had been ‘a deliberate policy’ of the Church of England to combine strong elements of both Catholic and Evangelical traditions. In his opinion, the Church of England had been reticent to answer questions about doctrine because, as a body, ‘it has steadily believed that those who give different answers nonetheless can, and ought to worship and work together in one body’. In many ways, Temple helped popularise this position into the mainstream.

40 Temple, ‘Genius’, 89.


42 Temple, ‘Genius’, 90.
The unique role in the reunion movement, which Temple believed that the Church of England had, gave him added impetus to foster unity in the Anglican Church. One of Temple’s main concerns was the prevalence of partisanship within the church. He wanted the different schools, while not compromising their own convictions, to cherish and enjoy the emphases of other schools. A good example of this was seen in Temple’s primary charge in Manchester. He argued that the English church had a ‘unique vocation’ because of the two traditions, Catholic and Evangelical, united within her. The importance of this was because elsewhere these traditions were ‘almost always held in separation from each other’. The two traditions encapsulated in the Church of England emphasized two separate, yet vitally important and complementary aspects of Christian life. The Catholics brought order, which was essential to the church, and they particularly highlighted orders in ministry and sacramental worship. On the other hand, the Evangelicals focused on the freedom and real responsibility of the individual. When held in isolation, both of these positions could pose dangers to Christianity: Catholics, through lack of sympathy and legalism: Evangelicals, through disintegration and uniting in bodies of only likeminded people. As such, Temple argued that, while it was desirable for there to be parties in the church, partisanship was detrimental because ‘the whole Church needs us all’.  

While there was, historically, diversity of opinion in certain areas of theology within the Church of England, these had in one sense been fostered and established within a single polity and liturgical framework. The parties within the Church of England did not have to overcome the difference between Episcopalian and non-Episcopalian governance or credo-baptism and infant baptism. A different theology of episcopacy between Evangelical and Catholic Anglicans is far easier to reconcile within a single organisation than the difference between those who oppose

43 Temple, *His Church*, 34.

44 Temple, *His Church*, 40.

45 Temple, *His Church*, 41.

46 Temple, *His Church*, 44.

47 Temple, *His Church*, 48-49.
and those who support episcopacy itself. It was the inflated impression of the diversity within Anglicanism that led Temple to see his church as the ideal to which others should aspire and this led him to minimise the significant differences between Anglican and Non-Anglican and to promote schemes of reunion almost entirely along Anglican lines. The concept that the breadth of the Church of England embodied a realistic prelude to a truly ecumenical church was probably both overly optimistic and slightly naïve about the differences within Anglicanism compared with those between denominations.

Nevertheless, in Temple’s roles as chairman of the Church of England Doctrine Commission and of the Committee on Unity at the 1930 Lambeth Conference, Temple had the opportunity to ‘institutionalise’ his beliefs about Anglicanism. He had success in shaping the 1930 Lambeth Conference definition of Anglicanism in Resolutions 48 and 49, which is still quoted as a ‘useful’ definition.\(^48\) Avis has suggested that Temple’s drafting of the statement describing liberality as a ‘special character’ of Anglicanism became a defining mark of Anglican identity receiving ‘the imprimatur of the whole Anglican Communion’ at the 1930 Lambeth Conference.\(^49\) In these formal ways, Temple was able to validate a theological movement which was historically a recent addition to the options for understanding Anglicanism. This did not mean that Temple’s version of Anglicanism was universal. In fact, the *Prayer Book* crisis of the 1920s demonstrated the extent and depth of opposition to it.

In the early 1920s, Temple saw the revision process as a further opportunity to advance his complementarian understanding of Anglicanism. He wrote that the *Prayer Book* debates offered people a chance to rethink their convictions about the Church of England’s distinctive character.\(^50\) Temple was heavily involved in the ‘Grey Book’ of services and prayers and wrote a preface for it. This book was an outworking of Temple’s version of Anglicanism and his first

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\(^{49}\) Avis, ‘What is Anglicanism?’, 412.

\(^{50}\) Temple, ‘Vocation and Destiny’, 191.
reason for commending it was that the authors had been ‘drawn from all “parties” in the Church’. 51

Ultimately the Prayer Book measure was rejected twice in the House of Commons in 1927-8. This rejection was described by the English Churchman as ‘almost as much of a defeat for the Bishop of Manchester [Temple] as for the aged Primate’. 52 Elsewhere it was said to be ‘a blow to the forces of religious unity and moral authority’, and it left the bishops in quite an awkward position. 53 If the bishops were going to endorse an ‘illegal’ Prayer Book, what moral authority did they have to enforce its bounds?

Temple experienced this first hand in his dealings with priests when he became Archbishop of York. For example, in his correspondence with Rev. P.W. Hill, rector of All Saints, Middlesbrough, Temple stated his requirement that ‘all practices disallowed by the Book of 1928 shall be discontinued in the Diocese so far as they exist’. 54 When Hill wrote to say that he could not comply with Temple’s request, he responded by stating that he could not officially visit the church or sanction any visits by his suffragan bishops or archdeacons. 55

The example of Temple’s 1929 interaction with Hill is highly significant in demonstrating how the interaction between Temple’s theory of church unity and its application could, at times, be paradoxical. Temple had long argued for comprehension and yet, when it came to governing his diocese at a pragmatic level, he insisted on conformity. How could Temple have it both ways? Did not Hill’s churchmanship have an important truth to be cherished by the wider church and particularly its representative, the bishop? It does seem, however, that over the course of the next


55 Hill/Temple, 27/Nov/1929; Temple/Hill, 4/Dec/1929 (Bp. C&P. XIII/5). There are numerous other examples of Temple trying to enforce the order of the 1928 Prayer Book in his first year at York, in the Bishopthorpe Papers.
decade his attitude to *Prayer Book* deviations softened markedly. Although Temple was still expressing hope in 1938 that the church could ‘unite upon toleration’ of the 1928 *Prayer Book*, at around the same time he was granting permission for parishes to ‘reserve the Blessed Sacrament continually’.56

**Home Reunion: ‘So Close and Yet So Far’**

William Temple was at the forefront of attempts to achieve ‘Home Reunion’ throughout his ministry. His complementarian theology, cherishing different ecclesiastical traditions and believing each had an important contribution to make, motivated him in this area. The period of Temple’s work for home reunion saw the relationship between Anglicans and Nonconformists grow much more amicable than it had been before the First World War, and Temple’s amiable personality was a significant reason for this. However, organic reunion proved elusive for a number of reasons. Temple’s personal convictions about episcopacy caused difficulties, especially regarding the process of reunion once episcopal order had been agreed. His position attempted to maintain unity within the Church of England by not compromising Anglo-Catholic principles and not to inhibit potential reunion with other episcopal churches. At the same time he sought to endorse Free Church ministries as spiritual and efficacious. It was a challenging line to maintain and, at times, caused offence on both sides. Similarly, Temple’s stance on reciprocal communion remained firm but his argument for not receiving communion from non-episcopally ordained ministers was somewhat contradicted by his argument for Eucharistic hospitality. Moreover, he substantially altered his thinking about preaching exchanges as an attempt to advance the cause of home reunion, but this itself caused difficulties. Again, the application and articulation of these positions at times were counterproductive. Another factor inhibiting definite advance towards reunion was the nature of representation in the negotiations between Anglicans and the Free Churches. The Church of England’s negotiating partner was not a unified Christian communion but a council of disparate communions. As such, any agreements were superficial at best.

56 Temple/Williams, 8/Apr/1938 (W.Temple 2:8); Temple/Wray, 30/May/1940 (Bp. C&P. XIII/5).
All of Temple’s efforts and negotiations towards home reunion ultimately failed to achieve his goal. Protestant reticence was further heightened in the 1940s as Anglicans began to associate more publicly with English Roman Catholics. Temple probably failed to appreciate the depth of antagonism that was felt on either side of the ‘bridge’. When Melbourn Aubrey, general secretary of the Baptist Union, expressed the feelings prevalent among his constituents regarding working together with Roman Catholics, Temple flippantly commented in a letter to Geoffrey Fisher: ‘How touchy these Baptists are’.  

There was also opposition within the Church of England from certain Anglo-Catholics. For example, when the Salvation Army were granted permission to conduct a service in St. Paul’s Cathedral by Temple and Fisher, The Church Times was indignant. Accepting these pressures and challenges, Temple’s enduring effort towards home reunion was remarkable. Although Temple was widely admired for his efforts at rapprochement with the Free Church, it was often his complementarian convictions that hindered his task.

Conclusion

On November 3, 1944, The Church Times reported, ‘After one of the shortest primacies the Church of England has lost one of the greatest of its primates’. William Temple’s unexpected death on October 29, 1944, left many feeling that the church had been robbed of one of its greatest leaders at the very moment he was most needed. ‘We are burying the hopes of the Church of England’, remarked Joseph McCulloch at the funeral service. Certainly, in terms of articulating and promoting a vision for church unity Temple had been at the forefront of a movement that had increased in popularity exponentially throughout the course of his ministry. But what conclusions should we draw about Temple’s efforts towards church unity and what might this mean for us here today?

The first thing we should note is that Temple’s philosophy and theology motivated him towards what I have described as a complementarian view of church unity. Especially his emphasis on


59 Carpenter, Cantuar, 487
‘The Body of Christ’. He was certainly not primarily motivated by increasing secularisation which some have argued was the chief motivation for ecumenism. But we ought to have serious reservations about Temple’s foundation and outcome in this regard. Post-Hegelian Dialectic as a cornerstone for church unity, at worst would result in the denial of error and the relativising of incompatible truth claims, and at best would make such vague and general agreements that they would be of little value. A complementarian theology of church endorses irreconcilable theology as mutually beneficial. In contrast the Apostle Paul’s objective is that ‘the body of Christ might be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God’.  

The only way this is possible is not by wholeheartedly endorsing disparate practices as mutually beneficial but by evaluating practices according to Scripture.

Secondly, Temple believed that complementarian ecclesiology represented authentic Anglicanism. This relatively novel position Temple championed became a very popular way of defining Anglicanism and still is. In fact it was primarily through Temple’s efforts that this understanding was ‘enshrined’ in significant Anglican documents. But Temple’s version of Anglicanism really only offers a complementary synthesis of the competing systems and traditions within Anglicanism by caricaturing them in a way that makes the traditions unrecognisable to their adherents. How many evangelicals would define themselves as focused on ‘the freedom and real responsibility of the individual’ as Temple did. Sheridan Gilley’s comment on this subject are apt,

There is a strain in this approach of the theological Humpty Dumpty: 'When I use a word, "Anglican" I mean just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less' — rather than what others, 'Catholics' and 'Evangelicals', might mean by it. But as Anglicans cannot agree on what is meant by Anglicanism, are they even circumspectly entitled to exalt Anglicanism 'as a Christian Archetype', and to ask other churches to look to the Anglican Communion as a model?

60 Eph 4:12-13

The reality of Temple’s ambition for the Church of England to show the world a united ‘Evangelical Catholicism’ was demonstrated to be phantasmal through the bitter disputes and accusations hurled by the parties at each other during controversies such as the Prayer Book revision.

Thirdly, we see in Temple, the tension between being a faithful Anglican and a sincere ecumenist. How could opposite and antagonistic systems complement one another? In all Temple’s efforts toward reunion, he ultimately pushed them along Anglican lines.

The inter-war period was marked by optimism regarding the reunion of Christendom. New frontiers were pursued with more vigour than ever before and Temple, in many ways, embodied the optimism of the movement. The complementarian Anglicanism that Temple cherished was perceived as providing the ideal bridge between differing communions from both the Protestant and Catholic traditions. Yet, apart from exceptions in India, there have been fewer attempts at organic unity with Anglicans than then seemed likely.62 Indeed, throughout Temple’s ministry, there was no ‘reunion’ between Anglicans and other communions. In the report prepared for the Edinburgh Conference in 1937, which outlined the ‘objective progress’ in church unity, the Church of England had a disappointingly small place. The only ‘concrete result’ was the establishment of intercommunion with the small group of Old Catholics.63 A decade after Temple’s death the only further advance from the 1937 report was the establishment of limited intercommunion with the Churches of Sweden and Finland but most of the ‘Official Conversations’ between other bodies had officially ceased without a tangible outcome.64

Christophe Dumont highlighted that in the forty-five years prior to 1954, ‘no less than thirty-four different mergers or reunions, resulting in fully organic union between hitherto separated Churches’, had taken place.65 In that period the Church of England had not achieved organic union with any other body and there was fierce controversy within it about the only Anglican Church in the world to achieve this goal in South India. Considering organic unity was the

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63 Douglas, Progress, 104.

64 Neill, ‘Plans of Union’ 496-505.
Church of England’s stated aim, coupled with the fact that Church of England officials, notably Temple and Bell, dominated international ecumenism in the period, this must be considered a disappointing outcome. Two factors that made reunion difficult for the Church of England were: first, the significant difference between episcopal and non-episcopal church polity; and second, the polarised breadth of the Church of England itself. It was common for parties to oppose an attempt at reunion in the direction of the opposite Anglican wing. In other words, the ecumenical endeavour only exposed further how Temple’s use of the Anglican Church as a paradigm for the movement as a whole was substantially inadequate.

Finally, there are several inconsistencies between Temple’s theories of achieving church unity and the practical measures he pursued. It seems somewhat ironic that after his championing of efforts to have a prayer book that embodied his liberality – he then went about enforcing its bounds.

Nevertheless, while the lack of outcome towards organic unity may have been disappointing and, indeed, humbling for Temple, he pursued it regardless, since he felt theologically compelled to do so. As he stated in his sermon at Edinburgh:

> Even if our cause were suffering defeat on every side, we should still serve it because that is God’s call to us, and we should still know that through our loyal service He was accomplishing His purpose even though we could not see the evidence of this.66

William Temple, in many ways, exemplifies all that was good in the ecumenical movement, while at the same time his experience exposes the fundamental, structural and seemingly insurmountable problems of the movement that cannot be resolved.

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65 C.J. Dumont, *Approaches to Christian Unity: Doctrine and Prayer* trans. H. St. John (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1959), 3. Most of these mergers and reunions were of Protestant bodies that shared theology and polity already and, as such, were not ground breaking ecumenical achievements.

Now, what does all this mean for us? Temple was right when he said that our fundamental unity is in Christ and it is a spiritual unity. We do well to remember this. Evangelicals have historically been good at recognising this truth and working together with other Christians no matter what their denominational affiliation. William Orange was instrumental in setting up and ministering to the Intervarsity Fellowship groups that were set up here in New Zealand in the 1930s… of course he was, our unity is in Christ Jesus. You are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28)

And at the same time, Christian unity is not the gospel. In one of Temple’s more whimsical moments he claimed that the evangelistic witness of a united church would be ‘almost irresistible’ to the world. And so Temple tolerated incredibly diverse theology and practice – often contradictory and mutually exclusive positions, for the sake of unity. Now I suspect this kind of toleration is even more attractive now than it was eighty years ago – we live in an age where toleration is the overriding principle (ironically, the age is extremely intolerant of any whiff of non-acceptance of a differing point of view). We need to remember that Jesus not only brought a profound unity amongst all those who believe and follow him, he also divided his people from those who do not believe and follow him. Remember in Luke 12 Jesus says “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” What Jesus is talking about here is the dividing line between those who believe and follow him and those who don’t. And according to Jesus, there is a deep and godly division between those two groups. There is a time for Christians to divide.

Again, if I can go back to the experience of William Orange and his friends – they decided to separate from the Student Christian Movement over the issues of biblical authority and the atonement of Christ. They formed EU’s that did not water down those truths from their foundational statements. At the same time, however, the evangelicals remained in their denominations. Anglicans like William Orange or Presbyterians like ?? in Dunedin – because they knew that the foundational statements of their denominations, the 39 Articles or the Westminster Confession, were solid statements of reformed biblical truth. They believed that

authentic Anglicanism (or Presbyterianism) was not the liberal complementarianism that was being talked about by the authorities, like William Temple, but it was gospel centred, Christ honouring, biblically shaped patterns of worship and faith that had been established by the reformers. They could happily stay in a denomination which was orthodox in its constitution, even though it was, at times, frustrating to work alongside those who no longer abided by the constitution.

So perhaps these lessons from history might be helpful to us. There is a time to unite and a time to separate. We unite around gospel truth and work with those who are believing and following Jesus. We can remain working within structures that are founded and shaped by biblical truth and practice. But, there might come a point, when those foundations are so modified and corrupted that, for the sake of the kingdom, we need to separate. It will require discernment. It may be painful. And it will require humility. We are not guarding a unity that we have invented – our unity is not centred around us – what we like and our preferences. It is not aimed at elevating us. The unity is not centred around us. It is centred around Jesus and it aims at glorifying God by holding fast to the revelation he has given to us of himself in the Bible.

It is terrible when Christians divide for the wrong reasons… But it is a good thing when Christians are separate from others for the sake of the gospel. Even if it does upset people and even if it makes us unpopular. It is good because it shows the world that Jesus and his way of life comes first.

In looking at William Temple’s practice of church unity, and in looking at William Orange’s practice of church unity, we have errors and examples for us as we seek to manifest the God given unity we share with all those who live under the Lordship of Christ.