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Gospel Unity Statement

Introduction

The FIEC was founded in 1922 with the purpose of expressing visible unity between churches on a non-sectarian basis. The FIEC has therefore always been a fellowship of churches which rejoices in our unity in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. While we may differ with one another on a number of matters not essential to salvation, we strive to maintain the unity we enjoy together in Christ. We also seek to express Christian fellowship with other Gospel churches and para-church groups outside FIEC. Our commitment to the Gospel means that we are unable to express Christian fellowship with those who cannot affirm the fundamental truths of the faith.

God's Purpose of Unity

From the very beginning of creation God's purpose was that the entire human race would be united in fellowship under his good rule of love and blessing. Tragically ever since Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden of Eden, sinful humanity has been characterised not only by alienation from God but also by broken relationships, suspicion and division from one another. However God, in his great grace, purposed to save a people for himself out of the broken community of this sinful world, and to build a new humanity united as a single body.

The ultimate fulfilment of this vision is the single people united in worship before the throne of God in glory (Rev 7v9). This unity of God's people is effected through the saving work of Christ on the Cross. Through him both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God:

> *"...His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross... For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."* (Eph 2v15-18 NIV)

The whole church is to be built up "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ." (Eph 4v13 NIV). This is part of God's cosmic purpose "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." (Eph 1v10); indeed all things are to be reconciled in him:

> *"For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."* (Col 1v19-20 NIV)

Christian unity is therefore at the heart of the purposes of God.

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Unity in the Gospel

Christian unity is established through the Gospel. It is through this message that we are saved and united to Christ (1Cor 15v1-2, Rom 1v16, Eph 1v13). When the Lord Jesus prays for unity, it is amongst those who receive the Gospel (John 17v20). Some say that we are united as believers by our experience of the Holy Spirit. This is true, but it would be wrong to set the Holy Spirit in opposition to the Gospel. We receive the Spirit through the Gospel (Gal 3v2, Eph 1v13). It is the Spirit who gives us new birth (John 3v5-8), but he brings this new life through the Word (Jam 1v18, 1Pet 1v23). If we have a real experience of the Holy Spirit, then we will find that he deepens our understanding and appreciation of Christ, and his Word (1Cor 2v9-16). When we work and cooperate together, it is in the cause of the Gospel (Phil 1v27).

This truth finds practical expression within FIEC by the prominence that we give to the essential truths of the faith. If we are to find common cause with other believers, it will be partnership on the basis of a shared commitment to the Gospel. This will be expressed by a shared doctrinal basis.

Rejection of False Teachers

Whilst we long to enjoy unity with all who profess the name of Christ, the New Testament warns repeatedly of false teachers and false prophets coming into the church. Whilst such false teachers profess to know Christ as Lord, and appear as brothers, they are in reality wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt 7v15, Acts 20v29-31). In twisting or distorting the Gospel they rob us of our message for the lost, and instead of building up believers in the truth lead them astray to spiritual ruin (Col 2v18-19, Rev 2v20-23). Elders are charged with the primary responsibility of guarding the flock against such malign influences, and we are commanded to reject them and remain separate from them (Rom 16v17, Gal 1v8-9, 5v12, Phil 3v2, 2Pet 2, 2John 9-10, Jude). These New Testament teachings require us to stand apart from those who would deny the core truths of the gospel, whether implicitly or expressly.

It is important to understand the pastoral motivation of Jesus and the apostles in warning against false teachers. Matters of spiritual life and death are at stake if these false brothers are accepted and their deviant doctrines embraced. We are therefore obligated by love to stand apart from them, both for the sake of the church and its witness to Christ, and also for the sake of such false teachers themselves, as we would long for them to come to repentance and true saving faith.

Summary of Implications for the FIEC

Jesus prayed for the unity of his people, and this is an essential element of our witness (John 17v23). We are urged to maintain spiritual unity, in the face of differences of belief and practice which are not essential to the Gospel. Our commitment to unity extends not only within FIEC, but to all who are united to Christ in a variety of church and para-church groups. We look forward to the day when all of God's people will be united before him in glory.

This spiritual unity is to be expressed amongst all who confess the truth of the Gospel. It is through the Gospel that we are saved, and built up in the faith. Jesus' prayer for unity was for those who would believe in him through the message preached by the apostles (John 17v20). Our Doctrinal Basis affirms that true fellowship between churches exists only where they are faithful to the gospel. The gospel of salvation by grace is so precious to us that we desire to stand together with all who believe and preach it. For the same reason, we cannot express Christian fellowship with those who reject it. The New Testament warns us repeatedly to guard the church against the influence of false teachers who deny the truth. Therefore we cannot join in partnership in evangelism or activities of Christian fellowship with those who are unable to affirm the essential doctrines of the faith as expressed in the FIEC Doctrinal Basis and similar statements.

We are unable to affiliate formally to groups such as Churches Together which exist to express unity between churches naming Jesus as Lord, but without concern as to whether they hold to the core doctrines of the gospel as expressed in our Doctrinal Basis.

There are many opportunities for us to find common cause with others (both inside and outside the professing church), if these do not compromise our distinctive testimony to the Gospel. For example we may be able to speak together on moral issues, in defence of our religious liberties, or to work together in acts of practical charity and compassion. Such activities are at the discretion of local church leaders.