

Christian Unity 1

Nothing is quite so distressing, so grievous and so frustrating to a genuine warm-hearted Christian as disrupted unity. Not only is his heart grieved at the loss of fellowship with his brother, but his total inability to restore the broken unity is almost more than he can bear. We are, of course, speaking of those cases when scriptural means of reconciliation have all been pursued and have produced no fruit.

I have been provoked, partly by the modern emphasis on ecumenicity and partly because of events in my personal life and ministry, to make an in-depth study of Christian Unity. The fruit of this study was presented in part at one of the GATE Minister's Retreats, and in some Bible Conferences since then. This, and the next few Gateposts, will carry a series on this subject. We trust the Lord will make it beneficial to our readers and to their churches, and that God will be truly glorified in the true unity of His Church.

The two principle passages in the scriptures having to do with the unity of Christ's Church is John 17:20-23 and Ephesians 4:1-6. We will state them both:

"Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, *art* in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me."

"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. *There is* one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all."

Some opening observations from John 17:20-23 will help our thoughts to be guided in the right direction. Let us be reminded that this is part of Christ's Priestly intercession on our behalf. Such intercession must be regarded as effectually received by the Father and granted. If we hold that Christ's prayers for us are not always heard, then it is of no comfort at all to be told, "If any man sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Shall we not, then, be assured that if God is going to favorably hear the petition of the Son on our behalf for our sins, that He will surely be heard as He asks for our unity? Such being true, then we can know that all who believe on Jesus Christ in the true evangelical sense *have* unity.

We then can throw out all this ecumenical nonsense about mending or restoring the divided Body of Christ. The Roman soldiers who broke the bones of the two thieves on either side of Jesus unwittingly fulfilled the Passover law concerning Christ, "Neither shall ye break a bone thereof" (Exodus 12:46), and the prophecy of the Psalmist, "He keepeth all his bones: not one of them is broken" (Psalm 34:20).

The unity with which we have to do is a unity that *is*. It is a unity that has been made by God by virtue of our mutual union with Christ: "That they also may be one in us." There is no true spiritual unity outside of Christ and there is no really broken unity in Him. Therefore, we are not called to either make a unity which does not already exist or to restore one that is truly broken. We are simply commanded to *keep* one which God has made and which God has preserved. Herein perhaps is the root of some of our frustrations and wasted efforts. We try to make a union where God has made none. We try to restore what God has divided. Such efforts will either meet with futility and frustration, or a polluted and corrupted church. It is the merciful grace of God which gives us the former rather than the latter.

It may be good at this point to make a distinction between unity and fellowship. Otherwise, the two will be confused and we will think clearly about neither of them. Unity is a quality of organic spiritual life that God has given to all that believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a mutual participating in the body of Christ as His members. Fellowship is a social manifestation of that unity between members of that body in cooperation in the ministry. While there can be no truly broken unity among the members of Christ's Body, there can be and often is, broken fellowship. I cannot change my relationship to my blood family. I am a member of it, and we have a unity that exists by nature of our birth into that family, but our fellowship is often broken. When my body is sick, some members do not function in harmony with the rest of the body. Nevertheless the unity of my body is unchanged. There can be unity without fellowship, but there can be no fellowship without unity.

We can neither make, break or restore unity, but we can break and restore fellowship. When we are therefore admonished to "keep the unity of the spirit," we are being urged to attend to that manifestation of spiritual unity which we call fellowship. Fellowship is the part of Christian Unity which, though given by God in the nature of unity, is our responsibility to maintain. Except for the redemption that is in Christ, unity has no practical contemporary benefit apart from realized experimental fellowship. Henceforth, as we speak of "disrupted" or broken unity, it will be understood that we are referring to that manifestation of unity which we call fellowship.

Character of Christian Unity

Since Christian Unity is something that God makes, not man, it is not external and mechanical. Misunderstanding this, and realizing the vital importance of some sort of unity, men have gone about creating their own forms of synthetic unity. These defective, man-made forms of unity do sometimes work efficiently and effectively to achieve the ends of the men who devise them. But they fall far short of the spiritual life intended in the holy Scriptures. We will examine a few examples.

Hierarchical. A man-made dynasty or order. The oldest and one of the most effective forms of unity is that which is maintained by the Roman Catholic Church. Until recently it maintained a bold, solidly unified front. Only when the present rebellious generation began to demand change and innovation did this unity begin to be breached.

The unity maintained by a hierarchy is one which is forced by intimidation and fear. The Church claims to hold power to give or withhold eternal life. With its pronouncements people are saved or damned. It professes to be, through an infallible Pope, the one voice of God on earth; and who is going to disagree with God?

Of course, this type of submission is possible only when men are kept in the darkness of ignorance and superstition. It cannot survive when the Bible is opened and the gospel is preached. There are elements of this type of ignorance and superstition in some other defective orders of unity, but it is found in its purest form in the Roman Church.

Credal. Doctrinal profession. A unity which is predicated upon dogma alone. This is the chief defect in those churches properly called "Reformed" which owe their existence to the Reformers and the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. Originally these were Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian and various Reformed churches. These now, for the most part being apostate, are succeeded by a host of splits and new denominations who have gone back, picked up the excellent theology and creeds of the Reformation and unified themselves around those doctrines.

Before I am misunderstood, let me clearly state that I am in no way advocating a creedless unity. A unity of anything without clearly defined doctrine in crucial areas is an empty one. If we abolish doctrine in order to establish unity, that unity has no reason to exist having been obliterated by the means of its establishment. We shall have nothing redemptive to say to a lost world. Indeed, as we shall demonstrate further, false doctrine is one thing that the scriptures declare that a Christian fellowship cannot tolerate. It is one of the solid reasons for separation. Also, ignorance of true doctrine is one of the causes of imperfect fellowship in Christ. Sound doctrinal teaching, plenty of it, a steady diet of it, is absolutely essential for the establishment of Christians. "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ." (Ephesians 4:14-15).

There can be no true unity without doctrine, but doctrine alone cannot serve as the basis for spiritual unity. In the first place, men can and do outwardly subscribe to creeds and confessions which they do not believe. A person who does not believe the truth believes a lie, and quite often will willingly profess a lie. Requiring a person to sign a statement of faith no more makes him a Christian than changing the labels on a bottle changes the contents. In the second place, men may fervently intellectually believe doctrines of grace but have no grace in their hearts. They can adopt the stated beliefs of their fathers and be devoid of the father's heart. I am confident that this is the cause of so much cold barrenness among many reformed churches today. In the third place, when we make all our doctrine a test of fellowship, we rule out many true spiritual brothers with whom we could otherwise have true spiritual unity. I do not know of any two men who agree on every point of doctrine. On essentials of the character of God, the person of Christ, the inspiration of the scriptures and the way of salvation, there can be no compromise. We must have unity. But on many doctrinal non-essentials we can walk with a brother who disagrees with us, *providing* one does not continually make an issue of those points of disagreement.

I have used the reformed churches as the best example of a defective unity based upon doctrine alone, but there are many other examples which have worse deficiencies. Those denominations, for example, which have followed John Wesley's perfectionism. These range all the way from Methodists to Pentecostals, and their interpretations of perfectionism all vary somewhat, but they are unified around the idea that they have gained some state of sinlessness.

A significant fact of the matter is, that when a group of people unify around a doctrine alone, it is always some man's statement or interpretation of that doctrine. And although the man may have been a good and useful servant of the Lord and has preached much sound doctrine, it is not usually his truth that survives him, but his error. The nature of the case demands this. No one is going to rally around a man's teachings which are being taught by all the rest of Christianity. Sound truth which has stood the test of Church history does not set a man apart from his peers. No, rather it is his *sensational* teachings, his variant message that makes him notable, draws a following and makes him remembered. These are usually the weakest part of his ministry and the part (often the only part) that survives him in his followers. Thus Calvin is remembered for his double predestination, Wesley for his Christian Perfection, Finney for his revivalism, Campbell for his Baptismal Regeneration. The churches which maintain a unity on credalism alone may have a disciplined fellowship, but they have no true spiritual unity.

Rebellion. The allegiance of the "persecuted." Many Protestant churches fall into this category. The Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation who were not afforded the dignity of the name "Protestant" (and properly so, because they were never a part of the Roman Church) and some present day Baptists have their unity largely in this area. These are those who have either come out or been forced out by established religions and have never gotten over it. They have never been able to forget that they have been mistreated. The bitterness in their heart is constantly fueled by preaching and teaching that reminds them that they are "not like other men." Sad to say, this fellowship is often more a fellowship of hatred than one of love. The unifying factor is not so much that they love the Lord and love each other, but that they all resent and hate the same people or the same organizations.

Fellowships of this sort make a great ado about their "democratic" forms of church government. They all insist on having their say and saying it loudly. They make up the greater numbers of churches in the country because they are always fighting and splitting among themselves. This is because the unifying factor among them, rebellion against their former associates, is still there, and they will soon rebel against each other. Needless to say, unity based on this sort of thing will not last long. It will split and splinter until there is nothing left. "If ye bite and devour, take heed that ye be not consumed of one another."

Misplaced Loyalty. Unity is sometimes maintained by a constant harping on loyalty. Loyalty is our duty toward a lawful government, a sovereign ruler, or to a person or organization to which we have pledged fidelity. Therefore, we are to be loyal to Christ, our King and Saviour, to the saints of God who are our brothers and sisters in Christ and who make up the church of the Living God. Misplaced loyalty is usually demanded to a denomination, a local church or a man.

Different local churches who unite themselves together in order to do work which none of them could do effectively and efficiently alone are to be commended. Such cooperation need not interfere with either the autonomy of churches or the individual priesthood of believers. But in order to grow and become more powerful, denominations have a way of offering various incentives, such as position, power and influence, in order to reward loyalty to the denomination. They also threaten such punishment as may be in their power within the denomination's structure as the consequences of poor cooperation. How destructive such a practice! The denomination succeeds in the loyalty it sought, but it rapidly becomes apostate. Men wink at corruption, they compromise truth, and churches lose God-fearing, Gospel-preaching ministers and replace them with denominational bell-hops, godless bootlickers who will do whatever is necessary to climb the political ladder to ecclesiastical recognition and power.

"Independent" churches who disdain denominational affiliation have another form of misplaced loyalty. They often demand loyalty to the local church. Incentive for this loyalty is often supplied by continuously pointing out that "our church is so much better, so much more sound, more evangelistic, etc.," than all other churches. This is achieved by constant favorable comparisons with others. In order to maintain this illusion, members must be shielded, insulated and isolated from the ministry of other churches. A unity is thus achieved within that local church at the cost of robbing it of the ministry of the entire body of Christ. Such a membership can never "grow up into Christ." Their minds thus poisoned, they must ever view members of other churches with distrust, suspicion or pity.

Sometimes the loyalty demanded is not to the denomination or to the local church, but to a man, usually a pastor. What has been said as necessary to gain loyalty to the denomination or to the church must now be necessary to gain loyalty to the man. He must be touted as the greatest, the one and only, lone Elijah in the midst of the 800 prophets of Baal. This Protestant pope must cultivate the illusion that he is the infallible voice of God, the "living word of God" to his people if he is to have their unquestioned, blind loyalty. If the people who are committed to the two former examples of misplaced loyalty are to be pitied, so much the more, these. They have not the safeguards of a denomination or a church to check the heresies and errors of a mortal man. Their eyes are fixed on one single body of flesh which they mistake as their manifestation of God. Not only can they know nothing of spiritual unity; they can know little of spiritual life.

Militant Legalism. A unity of this sort is built by self-styled defenders of the faith. Commonly called Fighting Fundamentalists, they gather themselves together around the things, people, and organizations they are commonly against. Since they would have nothing to preach if they had nothing to cry out against, their principle preoccupation is nit-picking and criticizing other Christians. Of course, they spend a fair amount of time decrying Communism, Socialism, and various moral issues, but the real issue which keep them united is their legalistic separation from other Christians. A leading fundamentalist recently bemoaned failure among his own movement. "There is something inherently a part of the separatist fundamentalist that compels him to do battle all the time. If he can't find an enemy to fight, he will fight a friend." (Truman Dollar).

It is sad, indeed, when we note that recent movements devoted to implement political reform have united evangelical Christians and religious groups who have absolutely nothing in common on a doctrinal and spiritual plane. They unite purely on a social and political action emphasis. There can be no spiritual unity among such.

The unity of which the scriptures speak is not union. Men make no unity of the Spirit. When men join men and organizations of men, when they put people and things together, you have something of a union, but not necessarily unity. Let us settle this: Unity of the Spirit is something which men are responsible to keep, but cannot make. Unity is not joining things together; that is only union.

Nor is unity uniformity. In a number of the examples above given of defective forms of unity, a degree of uniformity is demanded. Making everyone alike not only does not implement unity, it in fact makes it impossible, for in true unity there must be diversity. We have already observed the unity of a human body, yet no two members are alike. It is a sick church indeed, when everyone looks alike, speaks alike, acts alike, and competes with one another in doing exactly the same thing.

Unity of the Spirit is spiritual, mystical, yet it is intensely practical and functional. It springs from a common life in the one Holy Spirit imparted to all the members of one living body made up of men widely diverse in their gifts. There is a sameness in the unity.

There is a sameness in the unity that is objective so far as each individual believer is concerned. It is apart from man, and he has nothing to do with it. This sameness is totally of God. There is one Body, the Body of Christ of which we are all members. There is one Holy Spirit of whose life we are all partakers . . . one common life. There is one hope of eternal life, the resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ. There is one faith, the gift of God to believe on Christ unto salvation. One baptism into the body of Christ, which is conversion. One God Who is the Father of all who trust in Christ. This never varies, for it has the one Eternal Immutable God for its Author. We all come to God by the same route and arrive at the same place.

But there is a great diversity on the believer's side. In this we are subjective; God has made the differences in our very nature. We live and partake of these real differences, and they become essential to our very ministry. Ephesians 4:11 speaks of multiple ministries, as does Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:5, 14-20. And within these widely varied ministries, there are widely diverse gifts in which these ministries are implemented.

Necessity of This Unity

The fact that the Lord commands it is warrant enough for us to keep this unity, but let us also consider its prominent place. The book of Ephesians divides naturally between chapters 3 and 4. The first three chapters are given to declaring what God has done. It is a glorious treatise on the great salvation sovereignty and freely given in Christ Jesus. Chapters 4 through 6 give us the

responsibility of our walk in view of that great salvation. "I . . . beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called." The first aspect of this worthy walk to which our attention is called is that we should endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit. I submit therefore that this must be a quality and over-riding primary concern in all our walk and in everything we do if we are to walk worthy of our calling.

Apart from this mandate to keep the unity of the spirit are some practical motivations that ought to provoke serious considerations. We should strive to keep this unity because of:

The Oneness. If we are all part of one Body, is there not one Head, Jesus Christ, which orders and controls the individual members? It is inconceivable, then, that Christ should give conflicting instructions to the members of His Own Body. If I am out of fellowship with my brother, then at least one of us is wrong. I cannot rule out the possibility that it is me. If so, I need to repent. If it is my brother, then I need to let him know exactly where he is wrong and seek his repentance. This is elemental.

There is one Holy Spirit, one spiritual life of which we all partake. If one of us manifests a different spirit, then that spirit cannot be the Holy Spirit. Ought not that person then be delivered from that delusion?

There is only one hope of eternal life. That hope is based upon the person, merit and work of Jesus Christ. Any other hope of any kind is heresy and cannot be permitted among Christian fellowship.

There is one faith. Allowances may be given for ignorance, childishness, misunderstanding and lack of spiritual maturity. But fellowship in Christ speaks of a mutual faith given by God. Such faith trusts the Lord. We cannot trust in false doctrine and be of the same body.

There is only one baptism, one conversion. If a person has more than one conversion, he is converted to something besides Christ and can no longer fellowship with those who have no life but Christ.

One God and Father of us all demands that His children love one another and walk together in Christian fellowship and service. Can we do less than that and expect that He be pleased with our walk? I think not.

The Diversity. It is the nature of the body that all its members be different. No two members of the natural body are alike, not even the two eyes, the two ears, and the several teeth. In a functional unity, this is absolutely necessary. The hand needs not another hand so often as it needs a wrist, the arm not another arm so badly as it needs joints. "From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:16). There is no member of the Body of Christ which any other member can say he has no need of. The measure in which he cuts himself off from other Christians is the measure in which he himself will be crippled. There is no such thing as a one-man ministry and no church can isolate itself from other churches without suffering great loss.

The Craftiness of the Enemy. "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (Ephesians 4:14). The best insurance against a counterfeit is to know the real. If we would not be led astray by false doctrine, then we must be established in true doctrine. False doctrine divides the people of God; true doctrine unites them. It may sound high and spiritual to say, "Just get with Jesus and forget about doctrine, but it is impossible. You cannot separate the Lord from truth. We begin our Christian life as children, but we are urged to become established in Christian unity that we cease to be children tossed to and fro by every sensational idea that comes along.

Christian Unity. The Oneness demands it. The Diversity demands it. The Warfare mandates it. It is necessary for our growth and maturity. It is essential that the perfected saints may do the work of the ministry.

- C. M.