

Christian Unity 2

In the last issue we defined Christian Unity as that quality of organic spiritual life which all who are in Christ Jesus possess. It is a mutual participating in the Body of Christ as His members. Christian Fellowship, on the other hand, 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. There can be no fellowship without unity, but there can be unity without fellowship. When we are, therefore, urged as in Ephesians 4:3 to "keep the unity of the Spirit," it must be understood that we are to attend to that manifestation of spiritual unity that we know as fellowship.

Its Scope

Unity exists because God has made it. Man can neither make, break or restore it. We have no choice as to how wide the circle of our fellowship must reach. It must reach as wide as the Body of Christ.

At this point we must not confuse the local church "body" with the Body of Christ. The former is legion and may be spurious, counterfeit, adulterous and false. But the latter is one, is pure, holy and true. There can only be one Church when we use the term synonymously with body, as in Colossians 1:18, "And he is the head of the body, the church: the firstborn from the dead." There are many imperfect and partial representations and expressions of the body of Christ in local churches, but the Lord has only one Body.

The Lord has put us in real, vital spiritual union with Himself, and with all others who are in Him. How wicked it is when we refuse to fellowship with some other members of His Body on the basis of denominational affiliation, local church membership, racial bias, petty grievances or minor doctrinal differences. Hyper-separationists ought to take heed to the fact that the scriptures never tell us to separate or come out from among other believers.

And let us not be deceived by that old saw, "My unity is with the universal church. I cannot get along with any of these local churches, so I just belong to the 'Lord's Church'." If one cannot fellowship a limited number of believers in a local church, how absurd for him to imagine that he can fellowship all the Body of Christ! Any unity that we have with the entire Body of Christ must certainly be first demonstrated in a local manifestation of that Body.

It is perfectly legitimate that believers should meet in different church buildings. The cause of Christ would be no better if all the denominations in one city met in one place and hung one sign out in the street. This would be merely external union, and true spiritual unity would be mocked, not promoted. Let people keep their different meeting houses. Let them mark out their peculiar distinctives by their denominational names. These *need necessarily* be no hindrance to true spiritual unity. Indeed, our fellowship with some Christians can only be enjoyed *and* be practically beneficial if a respectable distance is kept and our peculiar and distinctive emphases be carefully noted. This *need* not interfere with true spiritual unity and a real cooperation in the work of the ministry. Why should the laborers in one field throw rocks at those in another? Or upon what sensible grounds does the sower despise the labors of the waterer? Reapers must come to acknowledge their debt to both, regardless of the methods and differences of all three. It is the Lord Who gives the increase.

Since there is only one Body, there is only one Head. The mind of Christ is intrinsic in every true believer (1 Corinthians 2:16). Therefore, every member of Christ's Body will have the same general objectives, intentions and will: the glory of God, the salvation of souls, and the exaltation of Christ. The Body has only one Heart. It loves righteousness, hates sin, loves truth, hates lies, loves mercy, hates oppression, loves sincerity, hates hypocrisy, loves humility, hates pride and pomposity, loves generosity, hates greed and selfishness. In these we have perfect unity. And the extent to which our fellowship is shadowed will be equal to the degree in which our hearts have been darkened in these areas.

All who have minds and hearts united in Christ have spiritual unity and can enjoy spiritual fellowship. But we cannot read the hearts and minds of others. We can only deduce from their behaviour the attitude of their minds and hearts. It is perfectly legitimate to conclude that a man who indulges in sin continuously, with no appreciable struggle to be free from it, loves that sin and has no intention of obeying Christ. We are not "judging and setting at naught our brother" when we make such conclusions. We are only "knowing a tree by its fruits." While we cannot say infallibly who is in Christ and who is not, we *must* base the limitations of the scope of our unity upon those who at least *behave* as believers. We say this in full realization that multitudes are excellent hypocrites, and maintain a fair outward show of Christian virtues while being strangers to Christ. We also acknowledge that many true Christians behave at times childishly, carnally, immaturely, worldly, and even devilishly. We might hope they are Christians in such digression and attempt to restore them. But the longer they persist in disobedience, the fainter grows our hope of their salvation. At any rate, our fellowship will be confined to those who at least walk as believers.

Its Limits

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you" (2 Corinthians 6:14-17).

Our unity is as wide as the entire Body of Christ; it encompasses all believers. Therefore, our duty to establish and maintain fellowship includes all true believers in Christ. But it goes no further. We can have no spiritual fellowship with unbelievers because God has made not unity there.

Any unity which anyone has outside of Christ cannot be spiritual and must be either natural, fleshy or demonic. We all, including Christians, have a sort of unity with other members of our immediate family, even when they are not also Christians. We have much in common. We share the same parents with our brothers and sisters, the same genetic heritage, much of the same culture, and to a great extent, the same values and tastes. But this is purely natural, and although it is altogether legitimate (not something to be feared or despised), it is not spiritual, it is not where our innermost being lives.

Many Christians have unconverted mates. They must, and do, have a great deal in common. If the marriage is in any degree satisfactory, they must share some common interests and activities and mutual friends. The scriptures give no warrant for a Christian to separate from an unconverted spouse, but rather to seek his conversion. Although they have nothing in common on a spiritual plane, they may have a satisfactory unity in a natural and fleshy realm. This is much less than ideal, and would be avoided to a great extent if we were more prayerful about our mates. Nevertheless, it is tolerable, while not spiritual unity.

People, some of whom may be Christians, sometimes experience a sort of spiritual unity in an association of mixed people such as a PTA or a fraternity, a lodge or society. A pride in being a member of an exclusive organization is fed, a zeal for a common cause set forward by the group is fired; the excitement of imagined power in sheer numbers, or the comfort of the crowd, stirs a loyalty and oneness with all others of the same affiliation. But such a unity is at the best fleshy, psychological, and at the worst, demonic. There is indeed a "spirit" about the whole thing, but it is not the Holy Spirit.

This is not to say that we should hold ourselves aloof from involvement in legitimate social needs of the community in which we live. Christians should certainly discharge their responsibilities as loyal citizens of the state which is their civil protector, and their social obligations to fellow members of the community. But let us not mistake or substitute such for true spiritual unity. Beware lest we be as the deacon who complained to his church that he had "better fellowship with his lodge brothers than with his Christian brothers." Little did he know how he indicted himself out of his own mouth! He betrayed where his life and real interests lay.

We have no true spiritual unity with unbelievers. We are to live peaceably with them as far as possible, but we are not to be yoked together with them. The ox and the ass simply do not plow together. Not only is their "fellowship" unnecessary for spiritual unity; it is a hindrance. Separation from such is a *condition* of God's reception and His fellowship. "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."

The Problem of Professed Believers

Our main concern is the difficulties encountered in maintaining fellowship with those who profess to be Christians. Amos asks the rhetorical question, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). The answer is an obvious "No." Yet we must acknowledge that no two people agree perfectly in everything. Based upon that bare and absolute criterion, none can walk together. Therefore, we must not take it in the absolute sense. Although I do not agree with my brother in everything, there must at least be enough agreement for us to walk together; and we must be willing to accommodate ourselves to each other's disagreements. There must be an overriding love which motivates us to want to walk together in order for us to make those accommodations. My wife and I take regular walks together, even though she is much shorter and takes shorter steps than I. The joy of each other's companionship is well worth the inconvenience of adjusting our pace.

Christian unity can tolerate an enormous amount of diversity of opinion about non-essentials, *providing* someone does not want to continually make an issue of the differences. There are some godly Arminians with whom I can work because we have agreed to not jab at each other over our minor theological verbalizations. But on the other hand, there are some of my Calvinistic friends with whom I cannot walk simply because they insist on making a major issue of every minor difference.

Nevertheless, we must recognize that we will not be able to walk with all professed believers. Paul tells Timothy that in a "great house" all the vessels are not "honourable." The outward professing church always has, and always will, include "dishonourable vessels" as Hymenaeus and Philetus. Paul tells us "their word will eat as doth a canker" (2 Timothy 2:17-21), and that we should "purge ourselves from these that we should be vessels unto honour."

Some who profess Christianity are obviously not brothers, since they betray their fraudulence by heretical teachings. Men who advocate a Christ that is not the eternal incarnate God, whose blood has no power to purchase, and a Bible that is not the very word of God, are not Christians in the evangelical sense (2 Peter 2:1-2). We should make no bones about putting as much distance between them and ourselves as possible. Nothing is to be gained by any sort of fellowship with such, and much to be lost. Another sort of professor whose genuineness is of serious doubt is the immoral and dissolute (1 Corinthians 5:7-13). Paul warns us to purge out such "leaven," to keep *no company* with one who calls himself a brother and is a fornicator, or covetous, an idolater, railer, drunkard, effeminate, extortioner. Such do not enter the kingdom of heaven. While they are behaving in such fashion, the Bible gives us no reason to accept them as brothers. If we do accept them as brothers, we not only slander Christianity itself, but we corrupt it. We will become like them. The leaven will pollute us and we will soon find ourselves behaving like them. Local churches' failure to exercise proper discipline in this area is the precise cause of their becoming corrupt and weak in moral standards. In the name of "Christian love" and tolerance we have polluted the temple of the living God which is the Church. This is not the unity we need. It is a false unity with the devil, which destroys us. Unrepentant church members must be rebuked, shunned, put to shame if we would seek their salvation. Get away from them. Have nothing to do with them; and put them away from among you.

The scriptures do not enjoin us to expend our time and energies in a vain attempt to establish and maintain fellowship where it is obviously impossible. "A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is

subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself (Titus 3:10-11). There can be no fellowship with obstinate persons . . . those who *will not* be corrected. Paul tells us that if a person insists upon being ignorant, then let him alone in his ignorance (1 Corinthians 14:38). The cause of a person's unwillingness to be instructed, to receive sound doctrine, to yield from his unreasonable and heretical position is not a matter of intelligence, inability to comprehend truth: it is a moral problem. He is subverted, overtaken and corrupted with some sin which he is practicing and has no intention of forsaking. The error which he stubbornly defends either excuses the sin outright, or is a legalistic drum he beats to compensate for his lawlessness in another area. This man does not primarily have a doctrine problem, but a sin problem, and until he repents and forsakes it, there can be no spiritual fellowship with him or for him.

Another person with whom fellowship is impossible is the contentious. You had as well embrace a porcupine as to take this fellow to your bosom. At the worst, Paul tells us that contentious people go to hell (Romans 2:8). "But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath . . ." At best, they do nothing but foment unprofitable strife. "But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain" (Titus 3:9). It is indeed necessary for us to earnestly contend for the faith, to rebuke and soundly convince the gainsayers, to expose corrupting error everywhere it appears. But that is not the contentions in view here. These people have no heart for sound truth, only a verbal brawl. Vital truths of redemption are not the issues here, else they would be classified with reprobates, heretics and apostates. These theological pugilists draw their battle lines through the puerile pap of genealogies (hopes in historical religious succession), legalistic nit-picking, and prophetic end-time speculations. Avoid them. Ignore their taunts and baitings, no matter how illogical, unscriptural and foolish they are. Their arguments can easily be refuted, but you will have wasted your time in doing so, have changed nothing, and instead of restoring fellowship, have alienated yourselves so much the more.

Divisive persons not only cannot be fellowshiped; no fellowship is possible where they are included. "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good works and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple" (Romans 16:17-18). Division itself is not evil. It is absolutely necessary. No one is more divisive than Christ, and nothing more divisive than His doctrine. There must ever be lines drawn between light and darkness, good and evil, holy and profane, life and death, truth and lies. Division over essentials of the Christian faith must never be compromised. Who, then, are we to mark (note) and avoid? Those who cause divisions over established doctrine. You can be sure that when someone comes along with something new, he has a lie which he hopes to sell. A doctrine with no history is a false doctrine. These men have no interest in serving Christ: They only want to use a religious framework to build their own personal empire. They serve themselves. They should be purged out of the fellowship as soon as possible, because they will certainly with their "fair speeches" deceive some simple persons who are not anchored in time-proved truth.

Unteachable persons have no ear for wholesome truth and can never be brought into the unity of the Spirit Who is the Spirit of truth. "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself" (1 Timothy 6:3-5). This man's trouble is clearly spelled out. His obstacle to learning is not prior knowledge, but ignorance. He is ignorant because he is too proud to admit his ignorance and subject himself to a teacher. Indeed, he is so proud that he will fight anyone or anything which threatens what little he thinks he knows. He is too insecure in his ignorance to risk exposure of his creed to the test of scripture. So he dotes on questions and strifes of words and manages to generate more envy, strife, railings, and debates. He will not learn, so leave him alone and get away from him. True spiritual unity can only be found among learners, those who eagerly and meekly receive the milk and meat of the word.

Apostates, those who turn back from Christianity, can not be restored. "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:4-6). It is not always easy to quickly identify an apostate. Sometimes a genuine child of God will behave like one for a short season. We are to make sure before we write someone off. "And of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh." Thus Jude tells us that some fallen brothers can and must be restored. The apostate is at home in his backsliding. He is again in his element, a dog returned to his vomit and a washed sow to her mire (2 Peter 2:17-22). He has not ceased to profess Christianity. He yet speaks "great swelling words of vanity" and "allures through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness . . .," but he is a "well without water to whom the mist of darkness is reserved forever." We are clearly told that we are not to waste our time attempting to have unity with apostates.

There is one other class of persons whom we must eliminate from the scope of Christian Unity. The implacable, those who refuse to be reconciled, must be left to themselves. We shall not know who the implacable are until all possible efforts to reconcile them have been exhausted. In this respect, church discipline and Christian Unity are inseparable. We refer to Matthew 18:15-16. If a brother has trespassed against another, the offended is to take his grievance to the offender alone. No one else should be counseled until this is done. If the offender will repent and make amends, the affair is over and unity has been maintained. But if he will not, or if his offence is public or against the entire church, then two or three brothers should go to him. Again, if he repents, the matter is settled. But if he will not, then the plurality of witnesses will prevent any misrepresentation of what was said. He then is to be brought to account before the entire church. If he will not hear them, he is to be accounted as "an heathen man and a publican . . . one who has no part in the fellowship of the Body of Christ.

The fact that the afore-enumerated persons can be lawfully excluded (and indeed, must be), does nothing to ease the sorrow and pain over their loss. A Christian loves God supremely and his brother as himself. When you love someone you expose your heart; and

when you expose your heart, someone is going to walk on it. That is one of the hazards of Christian fellowship. As much as we shrink from it, the fact remains that all who begin with us do not continue with us. The Saviour watched multitudes depart from Him and walk with Him no more. He did not rejoice, clap His hands and shout, "Good riddance." He wept over them. If we share His life, we shall do the same. But we shall also have no more power to retain them than He did.

- C. M.