

Christian Unity 3

“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 . . .

“And he gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we 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 4:1-3, 11-14).

In the two previous articles we took up first the true nature of unity and then the scope and limitations of Christian Unity. We now want to examine the causes of disunity of the *faith* unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

It must be evident that each and every one of these ministers are sent to speak and make known truth. The apostle introduces the message of the Lord. The prophet declares the word of God. The evangelist is a herald of the gospel of Christ. Pastors and teachers expound and exhort believers in the truth of the Holy Scripture. Therefore, if Christians are to be established, if they are not to be blown about by every wind of doctrine, if they are not to be deceived and misled by every religious huckster, every ambitious charlatan, every ignorant zealot which comes along, then they must be firmly anchored in sound Bible truth. And this truth must not be cold, empty objective facts. It must be a truth spoken in love vibrant and alive with the Spirit of God. An intellectual content without godly compassion and emotional fervor is vulnerable to the next diverse intellectual proposition which comes along. It is no better than empty emotionalism without theological content.

Failure of unity can therefore be traced to three primary causes and one secondary cause. The first is a failure of truth taught. Church splits, a proliferation of new denominations, “undenominational” churches, sects and cults can be blamed on a de-emphasis on Christian doctrine over the past several decades. The truths which captured the hearts and loyalty of Bible believing Christians have been regarded as archaic, stern, too intellectual and impractical. They have been abandoned to simplistic, man-oriented cliches which have no theological cohesiveness, let alone consistent Bible support. Instead of churches meeting for the purpose of worship and instruction in the word, they meet to plan and implement better methods of promoting outreach, growth and “religious experience.” Outreach and growth methods are not drawn from the principles of the Scriptures, but from the innovations and fleshy motivations of the commercial world. Religious experience may have its roots, not only in Christ, but in humanism and demonism. Little wonder that those who would follow Christ are tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine. With no rudder, no power, no compass and no course, the ship drifts in any direction the wind happens to be blowing.

The second primary cause of broken fellowship is truth not “spoken in love” (Ephesians 4:15). It is entirely possible that objective truth be received in the mind without there being any subjective experience in the heart. In such a case, especially with an intellectually capable teacher, truth will be presented in such a way that it ministers, not life, but death. When we minister, we impart not only the truth we speak, but the spirit in which we speak it. Small wonder, then, when proud preachers punching away at other preachers produce nothing but more proud preachers who will not hesitate to punch away at the original proud preachers. Let us take heed to ourselves. There is something drastically wrong with me if my concept of the gospel does not bring me low in the dust, does not fill my heart with gratitude, does not overwhelm me with the greatness of God and make my heart tender and compassionate toward perishing men. Truth spoken in love will not convert the unbelieving world: Witness Christ being crucified and Stephen being stoned. But it will prevent the alienation of fellow believers.

Something must be said also of personal discipline and training along this line. There are those who truly love when they speak, but are unable to communicate that love to their hearers. As a result, misunderstanding develop. The enemy takes occasion to accuse, and often splits and separations develop. We must be watchful lest we fail to communicate not only the words of Christ but the spirit of our Lord.

The third primary cause is failure of reception of truth taught. Even when sound doctrine is faithfully and lovingly taught, it is not always received. When the fault cannot be laid at the feet of the teacher, it can be nothing but the refusal of truth on the part of the hearer. Regretfully, such unteachable, unhearing persons always curse any assembly of believers.

This brings up the secondary cause of disrupted fellowship: Failure to exercise proper church discipline. If a person in a Christian fellowship has no ear nor heart to be taught and instructed in the word of God, he certainly has some interest in being there, and that interest will prove to be no small liability to the congregation. He will sooner or later be a factor in, if not the leader or figurehead of a split. His continued presence in his unspiritual and ignorant state is no asset. Nor can our compassion for him justify negligence in discipline. If we would help him, he must be reproved, and if he will not repent, he must be excluded and shunned. If we are not willing to undertake this, then it is no use for us to talk about maintained fellowship any longer. It will not be possible without church discipline.

Personal Primary Defects

A *person* is always used to figurehead a schism. Our enemy is the devil, demons. We wrestle not with flesh and blood, but principalities and powers, wicked spirits in the heavens (Ephesians 6:12), but the devil always uses flesh and blood in which to do his work. We cannot just blame it on the devil and ignore the instrument he uses. God cursed the beast, the serpent, for his part in the Fall as well as the devil himself. We may not wrestle against flesh and blood, but we must certainly deal with it.

Nor can we blame divisions and offences on doctrine or other “issues.” The issue simply becomes a handy occasion for the division. “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark *them* which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them” (Romans 16:17). It is men, not doctrine, which cause division. They indeed use false doctrine, attack true doctrine as well as other men, but the problem is in the seditionist himself.

Two principal passages of scripture give us some valuable insight to the problems of the man who causes divisions. We would do well to make sure they are not in us. 1 Timothy 6:305: “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.” Titus 3:10-11: “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.”

The schismatic is proud. He has an inflated estimation of himself. Often he supposes himself to have a higher level of personal sanctification than others. This feeds and justifies a critical spirit that is intolerant of faults in others. He often imagines himself to have gifts and abilities he simply does not possess. He vainly supposes himself to be wise and knowledgeable above others. He often disdains proven and reliable methods of Biblical interpretation, relying on what he supposes is the Holy Spirit to interpret it for him. It is inevitable that this proud person who has so much to offer the church will soon surmise that he is not receiving the attention, credit, and appreciation he deserves.

It is an ironic fact that those who are most proud often have the least to be proud of. This proud man is also ignorant. The little he knows looms so big in his sparse field of learning that he can see nothing else. He knows so little that he is ready to fight at the drop of a hat over any challenge to it. Though he will not admit it, he is painfully aware of his shortcomings and therefore insecure. Having so little light by which to measure truth, he is distrustful of others and unwilling to submit his mind and heart to a teacher.

Titus gives us another reason why this person is unteachable. He is subverted. He has been turned away from following Christ by some overwhelming sin in his life. He is captivated by this sin, and unwilling to bring it to the light that it might be judged and put away. So instead, he tries to compensate for the guilt he feels by legalistic condemnation of other sins, or by adopting a theological position which justifies his sin. He is not going to listen to anything that moves him from this erroneous position. If he is still an heretic after the first and second admonition, he has no intention of changing. Let him alone. He is unteachable.

The divisive person is also covetous and usually lazy. He covets the means others have, envies them for having it, yet is too lazy to put forth the honest labor it requires to earn it. For such a man the modern religious lie that gain is godliness is made to order. He really believes it; and it is his sole motive in climbing the ladder of religious success. He wants to get to the top so that he can have all the worldly goodies which he thinks goes with it; and he does not mind how many souls he leaves in shipwreck or how many churches he leaves in shambles on his climb.

Development of the Schism

Long before the split, the wedge is being developed and sharpened. The enemy is preparing his instrument by which he will sow discord among the brethren. First to develop is an independent spirit. This man’s illusions of superiority and self-sufficiency make it possible for him to hold himself aloof from the whole body of Christ and feel no fear or loss. He ignores the Body and its unity, both in the local and in the universal sense. This is of little consequence and concern to him, because he is “such that serves not the Lord Jesus Christ, but his own belly” (Romans 16:18). He is self-centered and self-seeking. He is one of those who “seeks his own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s” (Philippians 2:21). He will indeed tell himself and others that he is serving the Lord, and that what he is doing is for the church, but it is his own ambitions and objectives which constantly obsess his mind, not the glory of Christ and the well-being of the church.

The potential seditionist now becomes dissatisfied. He is out of step with the rest of the church. He feels that he is not being noticed, heard, heeded, admired enough. Things are not turning to his advantage. He is not cashing in. His expectations are not being realized soon enough. He has not yet, nor does he intend to, take the place of a servant. He knows nothing of the spirit of Christ Who said “I am among you as one that serveth.” Far from the attitude of the faithful servant of Christ, who having done all that the Lord commanded, says, “We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do,” he considers himself a highly profitable servant and expects handsome wages immediately (Luke 17:10).

His unrest is aggravated by the obvious case of his own fruitlessness. Everything he does goes sour. He has been unable to mount a consistent harmonious ministry of any kind. To be sure, the true servant of the Lord will have rejection and opposition; but let us be warned that when one is unable to work with any of the Lord’s people, he has some deep problems.

Fruitlessness and lack of success might well be excused if it is the common experience among all Christians. And we must readily admit that *most* of the so-called success and fruit among evangelical Christianity today is spurious. But the Lord did declare the harvest always ripe, and this is yet the day of God’s mercy. Fruit may not be as plentiful as in some seasons, yet there must be fruit if there is true ministry. But this man’s frustrations are inflamed so much the more when he sees the fruits of other men’s labours and can find none for his own. His pride will not permit him to consider that there is something wrong with him. No, there must be

something wrong with them or they would be as barren as he. So he begins to find fault with the labours of others. "Evil surmisings." He imputes to them wrong motives, and picks at the imperfections and flaws in other men.

The wedge now widens. He now seeks and soon finds other malcontents. The devil will always see to it that there is a sufficient quantity of simple souls, ignorant emotionists, intellectual polemicists, or just ordinary soreheads with which to mount a rebellion. As Absalom sat in the gate and sympathized with everyone who had a grievance against the king, he now begins to listen to and agree with the railings and complainings and criticisms by others. He gains a following and soon there are "meetings" and "get-togethers." An alliance of discontent, resentment, hate and rebellion develops.

The hammer blows now begin to drive in the wedge. It must be recognized that many of those caught in this split are true Christians, yet they have been made to justify in their minds their discontent by focusing on the obvious faults and errors in the church's human leadership. These will always be plentiful. When at any time nay one wishes to flaw a Christian leader, he will have no difficulty at all in doing so. No one, other than the Pope and those of like spirit, claims to be without glaring faults. We err badly when we qualify our Christian leaders with a standard of faultlessness. But all this becomes obscured by the schismatic leader's constant harping on the errors of the leaders whom he opposes.

Having thus discredited the present leadership, and gained approval of his divisive activities, he now begins to set forth his own teachings. This is a critical point in which the beginnings of false doctrine are introduced, and it underscores again the absolute necessity of sound doctrine as an essential element in Christian Unity.

This new teacher wants to put as much distance as possible between himself and the person or persons he has attacked. He cannot, therefore, spend much time teaching the same sound doctrine they teach. That would give them too much grounds of agreement and harmony, and would undermine the loyalty of his new followers. So he *must* emphasize the minor points of disagreement. This inevitably demands that he major on minors; and ultimately minors become the majors. Sound doctrine then is seldom if ever heard. The truly major teachings of Christianity are neglected. When they are preached, they are so diluted with a disproportionate emphasis on minors that true doctrine becomes perverted. Paul emphatically warned of this potential among the Ephesian elders: Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking *perverse* things to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). Thus regeneration gets mixed with water baptism, communion with Christ gets reduced to grape juice and crackers, holiness gets associated with external legalism, justification dependent upon sanctification, tongues speaking confused with Holy Spirit life, and a host of other corruptions of pure doctrine which were brought about by nothing more than men seeking a personal following by accommodating major truths to conform to an emphasis they wished to give to a minor issue. Think about it. What denomination, what sect, what schism, what division among brethren did not develop this way?

Heresy, then, is one short step from this. Because water baptism (a particular form, mode or liturgy in it) is preached so much, it eventually becomes regeneration itself. The "Holy Eucharist" becomes the center of worship instead of Christ, and men come to believe that only by partaking of the "blessed" elements can they partake of Christ. Men become so enamoured with their external "righteousness" that they unwittingly begin to trust in them no less than the blind Pharisees denounced by the Saviour, and they "going about to establish their own righteousness have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:3). Tongues, charismatic gifts, signs and wonders are so preached that men seek them rather than God, and any demonic counterfeit is accepted and trusted for salvation.

It can thus be seen that heretical sects and cults can be traced to splits and schisms. These disruptions can be traced to proud, ignorant, self-willed men who seek to gain a following. The success of these schismatic people can be laid at the feet of a weak teaching and preaching ministry. If men are not to be misled and tossed about, they must be established in sound doctrine . . . and that must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.

- C. M.