

The Unity Of the Church

T. B. Larimore, a gospel preacher whose Christ-like spirit was recognized by all who knew him, explained the family unity of Christ's church with Psalm 133:1: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!" Some things are good but not pleasant. An operation to remove a cancerous growth is lifesaving, which is good, but it is not pleasant for the patient. Some things are pleasant but not good. Play is pleasant and enjoyable on special occasions, but continual play would be bad. Brother Larimore observed that we find few things in this world that are both good and pleasant, actually beneficial to us and at the same time enjoyable to experience. He showed that both of these qualities are found in unity in Christ, in brothers dwelling together in one accord.¹ Who would disagree with him?

¹T. B. Larimore, "Unity," in *Biographies and Sermons*, ed. F. D. Srygley (n.p., n.d.; reprint, Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1961), 35–36.

According to the New Testament, unity in Christ is not only good and pleasant to us; but, even more important, it is good and pleasing to God. Just before Jesus was betrayed into the hands of lawless men on the darkest night of the world, He prayed for the unity of those who would believe on Him in the future. He prayed to His Father, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20, 21).

If you were scheduled to be executed tomorrow, and you knelt to pray tonight, for what would you pray? Would you pray for small, unimportant plans? Would you not pray for the hopes that are the dearest and most important in the world to you? Do we not see how Christ valued unity as we read His prayer for unity the night before He was crucified? The unity of the believers had to be the dearest and most important longing in the heart of Jesus, or He would not have prayed for it on the night before His death.

When Paul wrote to the terribly divided church at Corinth, a church beset by many problems and weaknesses, he first gave them a forceful call to unity: "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). At the time that Paul wrote to the Corinthians, A.D. 54 to 56, denominations did not exist. The only church that existed was the Lord's church, and Paul, by the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit, told God's church at Corinth to dwell together in unity. He not only pleaded for this unity, but he pleaded for it in the very name of Jesus Christ.

Let us look at the unity of the church in greater detail. The two passages already quoted make it obvious that Christ's church is to have a beautiful unity, but what kind of unity is it to have? What is the nature of that unity? Understanding the unity Christ prayed for should help us understand more about the church itself.

UNITY IN BECOMING PART OF A BODY

First, let us try to understand the God-given unity of the body of Christ as one people. The New Testament speaks of a unity that is natural and basic to being in Christ. This unity occurs by the grace of God when one enters Christ's body. Anyone who has genuinely become a member of the body of Christ has received this unity.

The New Testament world was divided into two main communities: Jewish and Gentile. The division between these two groups was as wide as any division which might exist between two races today. Yet Paul affirmed that Jew and Gentile had become *one* in Christ:

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one (Ephesians 2:14).

. . . that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, . . . (Ephesians 2:15, 16).

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

Christ, through His death on the cross, has made into one all people who come into Christ, regardless of background or race. Jews and Gentiles, two distinct races, were recreated into a new race and were called Christians. Christ did not make Jews into Gentiles or Gentiles into Jews. He did not raise the Gentile up to the position of privilege occupied by the Jew; neither did He bring the Jew down to the position of the Gentile. He raised both Jew and Gentile to a heavenly position in Christ which was far greater than any privilege or position ever promised to or possessed by either. The Jew was to forget that he was a Jew, and the Gentile was to forget that he was a Gentile.

The same is true in the church today. Each person is to think only of what he is in Christ. Christ is Savior and Lord to all Christians. In this divine oneness, all national, racial, social, and family differences are removed.

Through Christ, people are reconciled to—or brought together with—God (Colossians 1:20). Then, through that reconciliation, Christians are brought together with one another and “are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). Before two can be united with each other, they must be united with God.

History contains examples of peoples, like the Normans and the Saxons, who were continually at war with each other. Hostility and hatred perpetu-

ally characterized them. Through the centuries, however, the peoples mixed and married, until eventually these two communities of people had merged into one. The separate nations, as unique communities, ceased to exist. The wars ended, of course, because the division between them no longer existed. The intermingling of the two communities produced one new community of people who loved and respected each other.²

In a similar way, all human divisions and barriers are broken down in Christ; one new body of people is created by God's marvelous grace. In His body, people do not see Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, rich man or poor man, male or female, white or black. Christians only see that they "are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28b).

To understand the unity in Christ, then, we must first know about the unity which Christians are given when they enter His body. It is appropriate, and even necessary, to tell new Christians when they enter the body of Christ that they are now one with all other members of His body. The church must think and act in agreement with this truth. No ranks, no barriers, no divisions, and no tribes matter in Christ's body. All the members have become one with Christ and one with each other.

UNITY IN TEACHING

Second, unity in teaching is found in Christ. Unity is given by the Spirit when people enter the body of Christ, but this unity is kept by each

²R. C. Bell, *Studies in Ephesians* (Austin, Tex.: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1971), 25.

member's obedience to the teachings of the Scriptures.

Christians are bound together by a unity of teaching and belief. Christ's body is not a collection of people guided by unproven beliefs about God and guesses about life. Members of His body are united by God's divine revelation of truth.

As Paul discussed the unity of the church of Christ, he urged Christians to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. He named seven "one's" which form the basic teaching for keeping unity in Christ's body. He said, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). The body of which Paul wrote is the spiritual body of Christ, the church (Ephesians 1:22, 23). The Spirit is the third member of the Godhead who gave us the revelation of the Scriptures. The one hope is the eternal hope put in the heart of every Christian through the gospel (Colossians 1:23). The one Lord is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the One who died for our sins and was raised for our justification. The one faith is the belief in Christ and His Word which comes from the testimony of the Scriptures (Romans 10:17). The one baptism is the baptism which Christ commanded in the Great Commission and which will be in effect until the end of the Christian Age (Matthew 28:19, 20). The one God is the eternal God who created and provides for the earth, the only true and living God. Concerning the seven "one's," R. C. Bell said, "These unalterable, final facts demand either acceptance or repudiation. No other reaction is possible; a man

who rejects even one of them is not to consider himself a Christian at all."³

Union is one thing, but unity is another. Union can be achieved by force, but unity can only be found in devotion. Union can be created by tying two people together with ropes, but unity can only come when hearts are tied together with faith and love. People of divided minds and wills can experience a type of union, but people can only dwell together in one accord through speaking the same truths and being one in mind and judgment.

Paul not only pleaded for unity in 1 Corinthians 1:10, but he told exactly the kind of unity for which he was pleading—a unity of agreement, without divisions, complete in mind and judgment. This kind of unity is brought about by submission to Christ's will. In Acts 2, on the day the church was established, each person submitted to the message of the Spirit delivered by inspired men. This submission resulted in unity based on a shared belief in God's teaching: "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:42–44). Paul wrote to the brethren in Philippi, ". . . let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained" (Philippians 3:16).

UNITY IN DAILY LIVING

Third, unity is to be seen in the day-to-day living of the body of Christ. The unity which is given by the Holy Spirit when people enter Christ is kept not

³Ibid., 24.

only by each member's obedience to the plain teachings of the Scriptures, but also by each member's following a practical, commonsense approach to living together in one accord in Christ.

Paul encouraged the Philippian brethren to live together in love and harmony. He said, "Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose" (Philippians 2:2). He further said, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord" (Philippians 4:2). These verses necessarily demand that each member of Christ's body live by the teachings of the Bible. In order to keep unity, Christians sometimes have to keep their opinions and wishes to themselves.

The church is never to demand that a brother do anything that would go against his own conscience. Paul said,

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way (Romans 14:13).

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me" (Romans 15:1-3).

Practical unity often requires give-and-take. The selfish man will never know unity with others. He will always live in a little kingdom which is bounded

on all four sides by his selfish demands. He cannot come out of that kingdom for genuine fellowship with others, and no one else can enter it for genuine fellowship with him.

This practical unity in Christ grows out of a careful attempt on the part of each member of Christ's body to think of his brother or sister with love and grace. The Christian is to be less demanding about his own opinions and wishes. He is to do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind, he is to regard others as more important than himself (Philippians 2:3). He is not to look out for his own interests; he is to look out for the interests of others (Philippians 2:4). As he so lives, he is uniquely exhibiting the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5-8).

CONCLUSION

Christ's body, therefore, is to be known for its unity. This unity has a threefold nature. Christians are united as one body, as believers of one teaching, and as people who treat each other thoughtfully in daily living. Unity comes by God's grace when new Christians enter into His body. It is kept and experienced through the body's complete commitment to the teachings of the Scriptures. Unity is enjoyed by the church because each member is concerned about the spiritual life of fellow Christians.

God seeks to bring all the clanging discord in His world into harmony in Christ: "For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on

earth or things in heaven” (Colossians 1:19, 20). Christ, through His gospel, calls us to this unity in His body. God planned it (Ephesians 3:6), Christ prayed for unity and provided the possibility for it (John 17:21; Ephesians 2:16), Paul pleaded for unity (1 Corinthians 1:10), and the Spirit produces it (Ephesians 4:1–6).

Should we not accept this unity by receiving it and living in it?

STUDY QUESTIONS

(answers on page 270)

1. In what way is unity in Christ both pleasant and good?
2. What was Christ’s special prayer for His church on the night before His crucifixion? (See John 17:21–24.)
3. Discuss the plea for unity given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:10.
4. Explain the unity which Christ’s church has as a body.
5. When is the unity of the church given to one who is entering the church?
6. Define the unity of the church in teaching. What is the difference between having unity as a body and having unity in teaching?
7. How are unity and submission to the will of Christ related?
8. What is the difference between having unity in teaching and having unity in daily living?
9. What are some steps Christians must sometimes take in order to keep practical unity in the church?

WORD HELPS

conscience—the internal moral witness found in humans; sometimes thought of as an inner voice which tells us right from wrong. The conscience needs to be educated by the Word of God.

Euodia and Syntyche—two Christian women who were disputing with each other (Philippians 4:2). Paul urged them to live in peace with each other.