

Contemporary Religious Questions

Q: “IF DENOMINATIONALISM IS A DISGRACE, HOW CAN BELIEVERS BE UNITED?”

A: Those who believe in Christ are fractured into hundreds of churches. As many brands of Christianity exist as there are brands of toothpaste!

We believe that this denominationalism is disgraceful first because believers in Christ are torn apart by ill will and strife feeding upon religious division. Second, it is disgraceful because it keeps men from accepting Christianity. An African tribe was visited by three missionaries, each teaching a different doctrine. After some months, no converts had been won. The three missionaries called on the chief of the tribe to find out what was wrong. The chief heard their complaints and then replied, “You would teach us of Jesus, but you all teach different things. First, get together and decide just what this Jesus teaches. Then perhaps we will hear you and do what you say.” Many have refused to follow Christ because of the religious division among those who claim to follow Him. Someone said, “The price we have paid for a divided Christendom is an unbelieving world.”

The main reason why denominationalism is a disgrace is that it is contrary to God’s will. Jesus prayed: “I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, . . . that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me” (John 17:20, 21). Paul wrote: “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Even if we agree that denominationalism is a

disgrace, the question remains: *How can believers in Christ be united?* Let us contrast two approaches to unity.

THE APPROACH USED BY MEN

Men have sought to promote unity in one of two ways. One way has been through the concept of *unity through cooperation*. Men holding different doctrines, being part of different denominations, have agreed to disagree. They will emphasize the points all hold in common while ignoring the points on which they differ.

Sometimes people with this attitude gather in informal prayer groups and Bible study groups. They ignore that they differ on many points and simply discuss the doctrines which all believe. Or they may form an interdenominational church in which will be found people with varying opinions about baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church government, etc.

The same approach on a larger scale can be seen in the cooperative efforts of some churches. Churches forget their differences in order to carry out projects in which all are interested. Or denominations come together in Councils of Churches. In these councils, each church continues to hold onto its own beliefs, while all cooperate together in social action, or works of benevolence and evangelism.

Is anything wrong with this approach? It has a definite appeal: We all value tolerating people with other beliefs and cooperating with others. It even appears to manifest Christian attitudes.

The problem is that it is a solution that does not really solve anything. It does not produce real unity. Taking this approach is like sweeping the problem under the rug. It may be out of sight,

but it is still there. Although we pretend that our division does not matter, *we are* still divided, and the evils of denominationalism still exist.

More important, this approach is wrong because it does not result in the kind of unity described in the Bible. Our Lord prayed that believers might be one “as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee” (John 17:21). How close are the Father and the Son? Think of how they are one in purpose, plan, and power. Is that the kind of oneness achieved through the cooperation of denominational groups? Of course not! Paul urged the Corinthians to agree, to be united in the same mind and the same judgment (1 Corinthians 1:10). When six different churches—wearing different names, teaching different methods of salvation, and worshiping differently—agree to cooperate, do they all agree? Are they of the same mind and the same judgment? No, they are not!

Biblical unity is real unity. It is a unity of doctrine and practice. Not by any stretch of the imagination could efforts at unity through cooperation result in that kind of unity.

The second way men have used to overcome religious division is organic unity as a result of church mergers. This can be thought of as *unity through compromise*, since the churches involved in the union must compromise in order to decide what form the united church will take.

Is anything wrong with this approach? It answers the objection that could be lodged against the concept of “unity through cooperation”—it does produce real unity. The new church is truly united. Still, two objections can be offered to this method.

One, unity through compromise is unlikely to result in more unity, in that it is unlikely to result in fewer churches. In Canada, three churches went together to form the “United Church.” When we lived in Canada in the early 1960s, the United Church was probably the largest Protestant denomination. But there also existed in Canada the same three churches separate from the United Church. When the merger occurred, dissident congregations and individuals chose to stay out of the United Church and remain in their former denominations. I suppose the aim of the merger was to produce one church where there had been three. The actual result was that where there had been three churches,

there are now four: the same three, *plus* the new denomination, the United Church. That merger resulted in more division, not less.

The other objection to compromise as the way to unity is this: When denominations merge on this basis to form “one big church,” there is nothing to ensure that that “one big church” will be pleasing to God. Compromise is always based upon the opinions and traditions of men. Representatives of one denomination say, for example, “We will compromise with you on the organization of the church, *if* you will accept our form of worship.” Compromise is not the best way to arrive at truth. And truth is more important than unity. Jesus said, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Believing in and practicing error, even in the name of unity, can never result in our pleasing God.

If we compromise and begin to be unified on the basis of what *we* think, we may indeed be united in “one big church.” But if that “one big church” does not please God, what have we gained? In the Middle Ages, Christianity consisted almost entirely of “one big church.” That was unity. But did the “one big church” please God? Few of us would agree that it did.

Therefore, church mergers are not the solution to the problem of division. Even if they result in one church, if that church does not teach and worship according to the truth, those who join it are not better off. In seeking unity, we need to be concerned *first* about pleasing God by obeying the truth, and *second* about being one.

The first way to achieve unity suggested by men might be thought of as an “umbrella approach.” The idea is to put all denominations or “Christians” under the same “umbrella,” or overall organization, and then all will be one. But it does not work that way.

The second way to achieve unity suggested by men might be thought of as a “mixture approach.” It is like pouring several liquids together to form a new product. The product, while it is one, may not be the proper mixture. Just as combining a number of drugs will not necessarily result in a medicine that will help you, neither will combining the doctrines of several denominations necessarily result in a mixture that will help you be pleasing to God.

THE BIBLICAL APPROACH

Second, contrast with man's approach the biblical approach to unity. We can list five characteristics of biblical unity.

Biblical unity is unity based upon God's Word. In the context of Jesus' prayer for unity, He emphasized the importance of the Word. Jesus said the apostles had been given the Word (John 17:6, 14), they had kept that Word (John 17:6), they would be sanctified by that Word and that Word was the truth (John 17:17, 19), and the world would believe in Jesus through that Word when the apostles preached it (John 17:20). Obviously, Jesus intended for His followers to be one *within the context of hearing and preaching and obeying God's Word.*

Why must we obey the Word of God if we are all to be one?

It is necessary because we can never be one until we all accept the same authority. What is the ultimate authority in religion? Church traditions? Or the Bible? According to the Bible, it alone is our authoritative guide in religion. It alone is inspired by God and furnishes us completely unto every good work (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). It contains the "perfect law, the law of liberty" (James 1:25) and the "faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). By God's Word, we are born again when we obey the truth (1 Peter 1:22), and by it we will be judged (John 12:48). The Bible is *the* authority in religion. Until we can agree on that, we can never be one.

Biblical unity is unity in Christ. In John 17:21, Jesus said, "That they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be *in Us*; . . ." (Emphasis mine.) Our unity with one another is a unity with God and Christ. John makes this plain in 1 John 1:7: "But if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin." The aim of unity is to be one with one another, or to "have fellowship with one another." How and when is that achieved? It is achieved by "walking in the light," and it is achieved when we have our sins forgiven. John is saying that when our vertical relationship is right and we are right with God, then our horizontal relationship will be right and we will have fellowship with, or be one with, one an-

other.

In other words, we will be united to one another when we are all joined to Christ. When the spokes of a wheel are all joined properly to the hub of the wheel, they have a perfect relationship with one another. Even so, when we are all properly a part of Jesus, the Author of our faith, then we will be properly related to one another.

Biblical unity is unity as a part of the church. If unity is in Christ, we should not be surprised to learn that unity is in His church, for the church is the body of Christ, "the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:23). If the church is the fullness of Christ, then we cannot be in Christ without being in the church. Thus, if we would be one, we must not only be in Christ; we must also be in the church which is His body.

The church is one. Jesus promised to build only one church (Matthew 16:18). Consequently, there is only one church (Ephesians 4:4). God has reconciled both Jews and Greeks "in one body to God through the cross" (Ephesians 2:16), with the result that today there is just one church—one flock and one shepherd (John 10:16). Those who are in the church are members of, or parts of, the body, and though "there are many members," yet there is but "one body" (1 Corinthians 12:2). The oneness Christ desires His followers to experience is oneness in the one church of Jesus Christ.

Thus, unity is not something to be sought outside the church. Nor is it to be sought within the denominations. Nor does it consist of a union of different churches. Believers become one in Christ when they become part of the one church of the New Testament.

Biblical unity is a unity of essentials. The New Testament teaches that we are to be "of the same mind." Yet there is room within Christianity, within the boundaries set by the Bible, for differences of opinion in methods.

Churches of the first century were agreed on doctrine. Yet some differences existed among them in method. For instance, although all worshiped on the Lord's Day, they would not have all met at the same time on the Lord's Day. Too, they may have used different methods to advance the Lord's work. Some might have felt it was best to preach in the marketplace, while others might have believed that it was best to

preach in rented halls.

In addition, some questions, such as whether to eat meat offered to idols, had to be answered differently according to the circumstances. Therefore, you might have found Christians in one congregation eating such meat and Christians in another congregation not eating it.

Through the ages there have continued to be some differences among Christians—differences about the “how” of carrying on the Lord’s work, about matters of priority and procedure, and about controversial questions on which the Bible does not speak plainly. What should Christians do when they differ? They should accept the idea of unity without complete uniformity. In matters of opinion, we need to allow others the liberty to differ with us.

However, there was unity among New Testament Christians in matters of faith. Christians could differ on questions of opinion, but they were all agreed on the essentials of Christianity: on what is required to become a Christian, to work and worship as a Christian in the Lord’s church, and to live the Christian life.

Biblical unity is a unity maintained by correct attitudes. Once we have been united with Christ through our obedience to Him, and have become a part of His church, one thing yet remains to be done: Our unity must be maintained by proper attitudes.

Biblical unity can be lost. In New Testament times, believers were all truly one. They believed and taught the same things and were in the same one church. Yet they needed to be exhorted to avoid division and preserve unity. Why? Because their real unity was in danger of being lost by strife.

Paul exhorted the Christians at Ephesus: “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2, 3). He asked the Philippians to “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 urged the Colossians, “And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity” (Colossians 3:14). We need the same message.

All who are in Christ’s church are organi-

cally one. These passages say that, being one, we ought to act as if we are one. It is important to be one according to the Word of God. But it is just as important to cultivate those attitudes which will lead us to be one in concern, sympathy, and compassion—attitudes like lowliness and meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, affection, unselfishness, humility, the mind of Christ! Above all, we should strive for love, for love “binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:14; RSV).

CONCLUSION

Biblical unity is not merely cooperation between unlike bodies, nor does it result from the compromise of men’s ideas.

Rather, biblical unity is: (1) *unity based upon the Word of God . . .* (2) *found in Christ . . .* (3) *as a part of the church . . .* (4) *and is a unity of essentials . . .* (5) *maintained by correct attitudes.*

What can you contribute to unity? Looking at it from any direction, *you need to become a Christian through faith and obedience by being baptized into Christ for the remission of your sins.*

You need to be baptized to accept the authority of Christ and His Word (Matthew 28:18-20).

You need to be baptized, after believing in Jesus, to get into Christ (Galatians 3:26-28).

You need to be baptized to get into the one church in which Christians are united (1 Corinthians 12:13).

You need to be baptized because baptism is certainly one of the essentials of Christianity. Baptism is required by Christ (Mark 16:15, 16) and is necessary to have the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). It is one of the seven “one’s” of Ephesians 4.

When you are baptized, after believing in Christ and repenting of your sins, you will be united with Christ and with all who follow Him. That is the first step you can take to promote Christian unity. Then you can maintain unity in the church by learning to love your brethren. And you can encourage others to become a part of the united body of Christ.

Someone said, “United we stand, divided we fall.” It is time we all realize the importance of unity. And it is time we begin to seek unity in a biblical way. When we are biblically united, we *will* stand. Divided, we *will* fall. Coy Roper

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