

7.

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

GOD'S POINT OF VIEW

In order to live and work in harmony with the thoughts of God, we must first see things from His point of view. But just what is this point of view? It is this: when God looks down from heaven, He does not see thousands of different "bodies of Christ." He only sees His one body. The Bible states specifically that: "There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you 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" Eph (4:4-6). There is really only one church. This is God's viewpoint.

While we, from our earthly vantage point, may see the many divisions, "churches," denominations, sects, etc. which divide this body, in reality it is really only one. No doubt God realizes that these different segments exist. He must be aware of them. Yet, when He looks upon the earth He sees only one church, one bride. Therefore, in order to work in harmony with Him, we must adopt His viewpoint. We must begin to see the church as one also.

You may notice as you walk with God that, although He is aware of divisions within His body, He visits every part. He loves each and every member. He ministers to

every group, church, denomination and sect. His loving care, His abundant grace, His power to deliver and heal, His work of sanctification is available to all without exception.

Virtually every group of real believers, no matter what their doctrinal stance, tradition, custom, practice or emphasis, experiences the presence of God to some degree or other. Therefore, we can perceive that our Lord visits and ministers Himself to any gathering of Christians who are open to Him and ready to receive from Him. He is not bound by their divisions. He is not stopped by their doctrinal walls. He is not impeded by their peculiar practices. Instead His love compels Him to minister to them using whatever openings are available to Him.

No doubt these divisions grieve Him. It is very likely that He would like things to be different. It is certain that such factions are contrary to His expressed will. Yet, in His lowly way, Jesus visits and ministers Himself to every single part of the body of Christ.

Now let us contemplate this very carefully. Since our Lord behaves in this way, how should we conduct ourselves? Are we better than He? Are we more holy than His Holy Spirit? Can we divide ourselves from others because they are divisive? Are we allowed to be more discriminating in deciding to whom we will minister or with whom we will have fellowship than He is? Certainly the answer to this must be "No." Therefore, we must adopt God's heavenly perspective when we move forward to work together with Him in constructing His bride, His church.

Others may have their divisions, yet we need have none. Some may have their walls and barriers, yet for us they need not exist. Many may isolate themselves from the rest of the body, criticizing the others and feeling superior because of their teachings, leadership or practices; yet for those who are intimate with Christ, these things need not impede us from loving them and serving them.

In these days, it is impossible for us to break down all the different walls of separation which exist in the body of Christ. We cannot eliminate all divisions. The problem is

too great and widespread. Yet there is one place where we can eliminate all such barriers. There is one place where all division can cease to exist – in our own hearts. Being filled with and motivated by God’s love, we can adopt His own viewpoint. We can overlook these man-made impediments and then, whenever and wherever we can, minister Jesus Christ to any and all of His people.

We, God’s people are free. We are free to love all. We are free to receive all, embrace all, serve all and even meet with any and all. Our attitude towards every member of the body of Christ and even all the different gatherings of His people can be the same as God’s. We can love them and minister Christ to them.

ONLY ONE LIMITATION

The only limitation to this manifestation of unity comes when we begin to co-labor with others in building His house. We have been clearly exhorted to only build according to the heavenly vision. Therefore, we are not free to launch ourselves into any and every construction scheme which we encounter. It is not wise to involve ourselves in human works and efforts. We cannot help others build up something which will not satisfy God’s desires.

Yet, while we may not be able to join with many different Christian groups to build what they are building, we can still love and serve them. While we may discern that their construction is not eternal and therefore we cannot invest our time in co-laboring with them in this effort, it is still possible to overlook this impediment and minister the Spirit of Jesus Christ whenever and wherever possible. In many cases, it is possible to find ways, just as God does, to share His eternal life with them.

Perhaps by our working in this way, when the outward shell of human endeavor is burned away by Jesus’ presence at His coming, something precious and eternal will remain. We may be able, through the wisdom and power of God, to have built up something solid and lasting in spite of their earthly constructions.

It is true that we must be very careful not to become involved in and bogged down by human organizations, yet it is also true that by God's wisdom we can minister Christ in almost any situation. We must never lose our vision of God's house and become encumbered by worldly religious works. It is essential that we always discern every situation and be careful to only build with God's materials in His way. Yet, just as Jesus finds ways to minister Himself to others in the midst of various faulty constructions, so we too can work together with Him to love and serve His body.

When we see the sin of others, when we perceive that the divisions which exist are contrary to God's will, we do not need to run and hide. Neither do we have an obligation to exclude these "sinners" from our sphere of love and service. There is no necessity for us to avoid all contact with them because we are afraid of being contaminated by these divisions. This is a merely natural, fleshly reaction.

Jesus' ministry gives us an example to follow. We read that He ministered frequently in the synagogues of His day (Mt 4:23, 9:35). Yet these gatherings were not biblical. Nowhere in the Bible did God instruct the Jews to build and meet in synagogues. These were a merely human, religious invention. So, did Jesus avoid them? Did He turn up His nose and think, "I will not involve myself in this unscriptural, ungodly, human work"? No. Instead, He went there to minister Himself to the people on a regular basis (Lk 4:16).

It is true that this synagogue system did not change due to His ministry. It is certain that the majority were not transformed by His words. There were undoubtedly many times when Jesus was not well received. Occasionally, they even tried to kill Him. Yet He persistently went because He knew that there were some present who were hungry for Him. Jesus loved these people and He used every opportunity to minister Himself to them.

Jesus did not become the leader of some synagogue. He did not try to "work within the system" to bring about change. He did not become encumbered with human

works and religious practices. Yet He did use whatever opening presented itself (Lk 4:16-21) to serve them with the bread of life. We, His people, are also free to live and work in the same way as He did.

HOW THE BODY IS DIVIDED

The church of God is one. There is an inherent spiritual unity in the whole church which includes every believer from the time Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins until today. Although this is so, the church is actually divided in several ways.

Firstly, the church is divided into two categories: those in the church who have died and gone to be with the Lord, and those in the church who still remain upon the earth. The physical reality of death divides the church into these two categories.

But even the part of the church which “remains” here on earth, is divided up into separate parts. What we are speaking about here is not the problem of division, but the facts of physical limitations. One of these limitations is the fact of geography.

So, secondly, the body of Christ is divided up geographically. People live in different countries, in different cities and in various villages. Since it is the nature of men to gather themselves together in communities, the church is also divided physically in the same way. Thus, the one true church is separated into the church in each community. Obviously then it is impossible for these believers in these disparate locations to associate together, meet together and serve one another on a daily basis.

Therefore, we see that the one church of God is divided up into local units. For example, the Bible speaks of the church in this city or in that city. These are not really separate churches, but simply the part of the one true church which is living in some particular place or other.

Such geographical separation in no way implies that the Christians who live in these different cities should be divided from others in other places spiritually. All this

indicates is that there is an earthly, practical dividing up of the church by communities.

The fact that this physical separation should not involve any spiritual separation is shown plainly by the Bible's teaching about hospitality. The scriptures teach us that we are to entertain strangers. We are to open our homes and our hearts to brethren who are passing through our city (Rom 12:13, I Tim 3:2, Tit 1:8, I Pet 4:9).

These verses show us that we should have the same love, the same openness and the same spiritual unity with every Christian regardless of where they live. Thus it is plain to see that real unity extends beyond the physical division of the church by localities. Although the church is geographically divided, the unity of the Spirit still prevails.

LIMITATIONS OF PRACTICALITY

Thirdly, within any given city, there may be many thousands of Christians. Depending on the size of the city and the number of Christians, it would probably be impossible for them to know one another. It is even more impossible for them to meet together and have fellowship on a daily basis. For this reason, in practice the church of God is further divided. The members of the one church may frequently gather with a smaller group or groups when they meet for worship, prayer, etc.

However, these Christians are still members of the one church in their city which is only a smaller part of the one true church. Again we must realize that this division of the church in regard to church meetings is only physical and must never lead to spiritual disunity.

This then is the limitation of practicality. Even though in the same city, it might be impossible for all believers to meet together in one room or auditorium, yet the principle of unity remains the same. Although certainly these believers might meet in separate homes or other locations, their commitment of service and love must be to all and not merely to a distinct group with whom they have more frequent association.

FREEDOM TO MEET WITH ALL

Here we must also give our consideration to another common error. It is often taught and practiced that where we meet with other believers is some kind of absolute. It is a kind of a holy place to which we must be committed. If we meet with group "X" for example, then we should not meet with group "Y."

But such thinking was never and is not in the heart of God our Father. In the book of Acts we read that the believers met "daily from house to house" (Acts 2:46). This means that one day some gathered in one house and the next day in another. But surely there was some overlap here. Certainly each and every gathering was not a distinct and separate entity. No doubt some who met in one home also met in other homes with different believers depending on the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Let us consider this fact. Perhaps brother "Joe" meets on Tuesday night with a group in someone's house. Does this mean that he cannot meet on Wednesday with another group in another house? Certainly not! Brother Joe is a member of the body of Christ. He is free to meet with any and all believers in the entire world. He has the liberty to congregate with different believers every night if he so chooses. No brother or sister is under any biblical constraint whatsoever to confine themselves to only meeting with a particular group. If and when they do, this constitutes division on their part.

OUR HEART ATTITUDE

Even though the body of Christ is "divided" by geographical and practical constraints, there remains the question of our heart attitude. To maintain a biblical position, we must also maintain a heart of love for all of God's children. We can never become exclusive in our attitude or actions. Our love must be the same for all, whether we meet frequently with them or not.

This is to be our stance. We must love all, receive all, serve all, embrace all and minister to all. In order to be pleasing to God our hearts must come to, and remain in, this disposition. We need to receive and retain our Father's heavenly point of view. In His sight, it is all one body (Eph 4:4). Our obligation is to live, act and move in this reality.

It actually makes no difference if others agree with us. It may be that they do not even like us. Things may arrive at a point where other believers actually fight against us or even wish to kill us (Mt 10:21,22). But our heart attitude must remain that of love and forgiveness. Our Lord's instructions are even to love our enemies. This must also apply to brothers or sisters who become our enemies also.

To have spiritual unity means that the bond of brotherly love is never broken. Please allow me to further clarify this with an illustration. Perhaps two believers live in the same city, yet do not know each other. One may be meeting with the Christians with whom he is acquainted, and the other with those whom he knows.

Yet if they were ever to meet each other, there should be love, oneness and unity between them. They should accept and love one another just as much as those they already know. This is only possible if they do not have any heart attitude which is divisive or anything else which would disrupt the genuine unity of the body of Christ. This is genuine spiritual unity. It is something which is inherent in every Christian and possible for each one of us to experience. Although oneness is firstly spiritual, it has a very real, tangible, earthly expression – brotherly love.

THE CHURCH IN CORINTH

In the book of First Corinthians we read about a group of people, the church in Corinth, who evidently did not have this experience of unity. The church in that city was divided up into several factions or camps. Paul wrote a portion of his epistle to the Corinthians for the purpose of rebuking them and exhorting them to be one in the Lord. How this passage reminds us of the situation among so

many Christians today. We read in I Corinthians, chapter 1, starting with verse 10: "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? or were you baptized in the name of Paul (I Cor 1:10-13)?"

How easily these verses could have been written to the church in almost any city today! Such division is the common situation among Christians of our time. In fact, many Christians are taught that it is proper for them to be divided in this way. How pitifully short this falls of scriptural Christianity.

Each group says, "We are of this persuasion," or "We are of that persuasion": "I am a Charismatic," "I am a Pentecostal," "I am for baptism by a certain method," or "I follow a certain leader." And so this is how we find much of the Church of God today – divided, arguing and disagreeing one with another. One group of Christians perhaps is suspicious of the other's motives, teachings or methods. The next group may be jealous of the other one because they have more members or a fancier building. All these things only divide the church of God.

Arguing, bickering and dissension of this nature among the members in the body of Christ is evidence of spiritual infancy and carnality. Let us read again in I Corinthians, this time in chapter 3, beginning with verse 1: "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ."

"I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, 'I am of

Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not carnal" (I Cor 3:1-4)?

The problem among Christians today, in every city, is not that there are many different meetings. This is a matter of necessity. The problem is that each one of these meetings takes on a separate identity. Each one of these groups begins to adhere to a certain doctrine, leader, practice or way which differentiates it from other meetings of genuine Christians in that city.

Each one builds some kind of wall or barrier to keep "their sheep" separate from all the rest. For every group the point of separation may be a different thing. However, the result is the same – the dividing up of the church in every city into smaller sects or factions which have little or nothing to do with each other. This situation is not of God. It is what Paul labels as carnal and infantile. Such division destroys the proper functioning of the body of Christ and hinders God's work on the earth.

Allow me to be so bold as to ask a question. Is there any real difference between saying "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Christ," and saying "I follow the teachings of Luther," "I am a Baptist," "I am for a certain arrangement of the presbytery," or "I am of the Church of Christ"? How closely the situation today parallels that in the city of Corinth. Yet how strongly we as men justify what we are doing in spite of the plain teaching found in the scriptures.

Granted, this is all done for good reasons, humanly speaking. Some are trying to protect what they consider to be "the faith." Others may be attempting to save a certain truth that they have discovered from impurity. Still others might be endeavoring to protect their members from wrong teaching. Yet the result of all these well-intentioned reasons is to disobey the scriptures and divide the church of God.

It might be instructive for us to remember here that Paul wrote his epistle to "the church which is in Corinth." This city was full of religious divisions. There were several different, disagreeing factions. Yet in spite of these divi-

sions, Paul recognized that this was really only one church which in fact was a smaller part of the one true church which exists today.

As we have been seeing, the church in each city consists of every true born-again believer in that city. Furthermore, all Christian meetings are really just meetings of that one church. Therefore, we should strive to live in this reality. Our meetings with other Christians should not be something which are separate and distinct from the meetings of the rest of the Christians in the city in which we live.

By this I mean that we should never have some kind of closed, separate membership. We should never insist that anyone meet only with us, forbidding them to participate in other Christian meetings with other believers. Our walls should be down and our doors open. Our hearts should be open likewise to each and every Christian with whom we may come into contact. This is genuine unity.

THE BASIS OF UNITY

Christian unity is not based upon mutual agreement on doctrines. For example, there no doubt will be many who do not agree with what I am teaching in this book. But our obligation to love one another transcends such disagreement. Our love for others is based on the fact that we have a commitment to Jesus Christ and to all those who belong to Him.

True unity is not the same as unanimity. The honest truth is that we will never all agree with each other doctrinally. There will always be differences of opinion. Not all have the same revelation. Some lack spiritual understanding. Others have not grown spiritually enough to receive certain truths. The writer of Hebrews, for example, had many things he wished to teach the believers but they were too infantile to receive them (Heb 5:11-13). Still others are stubborn, opinionated or just plain wrong about many things. Therefore, doctrinal agreement can never be the basis for our unity.

True unity is also not uniformity. It is true that we are exhorted to “be in the same mind” and to “speak the same things” (I Cor 1:10). However, this goal cannot be achieved by insisting that everyone agree with us. This ideal can only be reached through the work of the Holy Spirit in each individual. If we insist that those with whom we have spiritual relationships speak, act and think only along certain predetermined lines, we may achieve an appearance of uniformity, but will never have the true unity which Jesus desires.

We are instructed by God to maintain the “unity of the Spirit” until we all arrive at the “unity of the faith” (Eph 4:3,13). So we see that the unity of common understanding will only come with growth, maturity and perhaps even the second coming of Christ. But in the meantime we are exhorted to maintain a spiritual unity – the unity of the Spirit – with every member of the body of Christ.

True unity also is not conformity. Many groups of believers pressure their members, either subtly or openly, to conform to a certain set of practices and rules. These may involve dress codes, a set of activities, an arrangement of authority figures or even a peculiar, distinctive manner of speaking, social interaction or even preaching.

Yet this too is not real unity. The natural man can be taught and conditioned to conform to many different standards. The army is a good example of this. There, everyone dresses, speaks and acts the same. In some Christian groups, these things are also in evidence. But this does nothing to enhance our spiritual growth or change us into the image of Christ. Neither does it constitute true unity. The unity for which God is looking is that we all are changed to be like the same Person, Jesus Christ.

JESUS' PRAYER

In John chapter 17 is recorded a special prayer. Here Jesus is interceding for those who had received and would receive Him. Part of His prayer is that those whom the Father has given Him would be one (Jn 17:20,21).

As a younger Christian I believed and taught that Jesus was pleading with His Father that all believers would get along. I imagined that He was asking for His church to be without sect or division. I supposed that Jesus was petitioning for the kind of "horizontal" unity which would produce a visible expression of the one body which God indeed does see.

However, after some years of walking with the Lord, I find that my understanding of Jesus' prayer has changed. If indeed Jesus was asking for a worldwide unity of all believers, then until today, the Father has not heard Him. If all believers getting along with each other and meeting together was His request, then for almost 2,000 years, Jesus' prayer has gone unanswered.

Perhaps some imagine that at last, now at the end of the age, suddenly something is going to happen to cause this great get-together of believers to occur. But the fact is that the situation will probably only get worse as the end approaches. At the end of this age, Christians will even begin to hate one another to the extent that they will turn each other in to the authorities to be killed (Mt 24:10). In this age, Christ's prayer will never be answered by an outward show of unity.

So how then are we to understand Jesus' prayer? What was it for which He was asking the Father? To begin we must see that Jesus is one with His Father. He said: "I and My Father are one" (Jn 10:30). The Son has always had (except for a brief moment on the cross) and still has the most intimate communion with the Father. They are in constant fellowship. The union which they have is so complete and intimate that men's minds become exhausted and their words fail when trying to describe it. The union and communion which Jesus and His Father have are beyond human comprehension.

Theirs is a complete, intimate and eternal unity. So absolute is this intimacy that Jesus insists that He who has seen Him has actually seen the Father (Jn 14:9). This unity is so thorough that when Jesus was on the earth, His words and works were simply an expression of His Father (Jn

14:10). Incredibly, Jesus was not even motivated by His human life which He received from Mary but was always living by the life of the Father (Jn 6:57). Jesus and the Father have complete unity of Spirit, heart and mind. All of their thoughts and feelings and actions are in harmony. There is no independence of mind, emotions or deeds in this relationship.

This is a relationship of eternal love. The Father loves the Son and has given Him everything (Jn 3:35; 10:17). All that the Father is and all that He has belong to the Son (Jn 13:3).

This intimacy between Father and Son is so extreme that we are taught that Jesus is the expression of, or the "image" of, the Father (Col 1:15). So exact is the manifestation of the Father through the Son that we are taught He is the "express image of His [the Father's] person" (Heb 1:3). The scriptures even go so far as to teach that the Son is a full and complete expression of all that the Father is. We read: "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col 2:9). And also: "For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell" (Col 1:19).

This little meditation is an attempt to help the reader understand for what Jesus was praying. He was not praying for us to get along with each other, as important as this might be. He was not asking the Father for all Christians to meet together under one banner or under one roof. He was interceding for something much superior. His prayer to the Father was a petition for something which is so great as to be almost unimaginable. Jesus was asking that we would be brought into this same intimate union and communion which He has with His Father.

That's right. Jesus' desire is that His followers could be brought by God to participate in this holy union and communion. He was asking that we too might enjoy the intimacy which He has with His Father. His petition was that this holy oneness which He and the Father have would be expanded to include His disciples also.

With this sublime thought in mind let us read together: "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who

will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us" (Jn 17:20,21). This verse is not speaking about believers trying to get along with one another but of something much higher and holier. This is not a "horizontal" unity but a "vertical" one.

Then Jesus continues: "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one." And how is this oneness to be achieved? "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one [or in this oneness]" (Jn 17:21,22,23). You see Jesus is truly one with His Father. And He has loved His people so much that He is yearning for them also to enter into and participate in this holy oneness with Himself and His Father.

This indeed is good news. It is an important, if little understood, part of the gospel message. Jesus has invited those who believe in Him to be born again and then transformed to such an extent that they can participate in His union with His Father. This is the place of His bride in God's family.

What is the result of our becoming one with Jesus and His Father? It is that our lives become changed. Our nature and character become different. Just as Jesus was the "image" or full expression of the Father, so we can become, through this unity with Him, an actual expression of Himself. As we grow in Christ, we become more and more one with Him. His thoughts become our thoughts. His feelings, opinions, desires and purposes become ours also. When this process is complete we become a small expression of Jesus. Then we can affirm with Paul, that "it is no longer I who live, but Christ [who] lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

This modification of our character and nature then becomes a testimony to the world. When it is longer us doing the living but Jesus actually living, moving and expressing Himself through us, this is the proof that Jesus is real. When this oneness with God occurs, it is then "...that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me" (Jn 17:23). It is then that "...the world may believe that You sent Me" (Jn

17:21). Christians merely succeeding in getting along with each other will never convince the world. Every group or club has some sort of cohesiveness. But what will be the real evidence that Jesus is the Son of God and that He has all power in heaven and earth is when His followers enter into the kind of union and communion with Him that He has with His Father.

THE RESULT

One result of each believer becoming more one with Christ and the Father will be that they will grow into a unity with one another also. Our unity with Jesus will produce a unity with other brothers and sisters. Perhaps a bicycle wheel could be a good analogy to help us understand this. As the spokes of this wheel get closer to the axle they also get closer to each other. In the same way, as each one of us becomes more intimate with Jesus, we will automatically have more unity with each other also.

Yet this unity with one another is not, as we have already seen, some kind of unanimity, uniformity or conformity. It is a consequence of the work of God to bring each one of us into unity with Himself. It is not a result of insisting that believers try to get along with each other, being supervised by some kind of leadership or system, but a product of the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is true that unity is a part of God's desire for His children. It is also equally plain that this unity cannot be achieved with immature, childlike Christians. Our previous reading in I Corinthians gives us ample evidence of this fact. Infantile believers will never experience real unity. Their tendency toward self-centeredness will always work against genuine oneness. They will disagree about petty things, fight for some position of authority or other, envy each other, speak badly about one another, be easily hurt by one another and many other such things. Baby Christians will never succeed in being one. Their natural, fleshly tendencies will always prevail because they are still stronger than the inner, spiritual man.

The only solution which will bring us together is spiritual maturity. We all must seek to grow in Christ so that His love for His children becomes our love. We must mature spiritually so that our unity with Jesus and the Father translates into a unity with one another also. This way is perhaps prolonged and difficult but it is the only way that we will achieve true unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

True unity comes from intimacy with the Father. As we walk in communion with Him we sense His heart. We begin to understand His feelings and desires. We come to know His love for each and every one of His children. The result of such intimate communion will be that we will be able to have unity with others.

It is the responsibility of mature believers to demonstrate and maintain this unity. They are the ones who have "known Him who is from the beginning" (I Jn 2:13). They then must be the ones to lead the way in showing others how to love, forgive, support, believe and have unity with the rest of the church. It is by following the example of mature believers that the younger ones can succeed in living in love and unity. Such leadership in the area of love and unity is an essential part of the true church experience.

True unity is real proof of our spiritual maturity – if we are able to love the brethren. This love will not only be for those who agree with us and meet with us, but for all. This love will even be manifested toward those who disagree with us or even hate us. Intimacy with God, manifesting itself in Christian maturity, is the only factor which can produce true unity.