

THE PROBLEM OF DIVISIONS

"Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God." Rm 15:7

Christians today have many of the same problems experienced by the early church. As we have seen, one of these problems is the problem of division. Today we see the church divided in many ways. There are factions, sects, and divisions in abundance. Yet we find the scriptures and the Spirit of God requiring us to live in unity. In order to have unity with so many divided organizations, what should our attitude be? How should we view those groups of Christians which are functioning improperly and divisively? The answer to these questions is of great importance for us if we are to experience the church in a full way.

First of all, we must realize that the church will never be entirely free from sin until the day that Jesus Christ returns. Although we as Christians abhor sin and must flee from sin, still we are involved with members of the church who do sin. In order for the church on earth to be without sin it must also be without human beings. How much we need the blood of Jesus Christ and His cleansing. All of us sin and come short of the glory of God even when we have been trying to follow the Lord. The Bible tells us that if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves (I Jn 1:8). Therefore, the fact that there is sin in the church and that members of the church practice sin, does not disqualify it from being the church. It only reveals that the church is not yet perfected.

This fact is well illustrated in the book of Revelation in John's letters to the seven churches. There were some, in several of these churches, who were practicing grievous sins. We even read in one instance about Jezebel engaging in fornication with members of the church. Yet Jesus Christ addresses them as "the church" in their respective cities. Sin, in and of itself, does not disqualify members of Christ's body from being the church.

How then does this apply to our situation today? We see from the scriptures that division is sin and that sin is wrong. It is sin for us as Christians to practice division. Yet our world today is full of Christians who are both divided and practicing division every day. Even though this is so, the meetings of such believers must be considered by us to be genuine church meetings, as long as the presence of God is there. The fact that they are divided from the rest of Christ's body in and of itself does not disqualify them from being a part of the church of God. This only means that they are a part of the church of God which is divided and practicing division. Though the body of Christ is hacked up and divided into many separate parts, it has not ceased to be the body of Christ.

When attempting to correct this situation and overcome this problem we must

be careful not to further promote division. We must accept every meeting of real Christians as being genuinely the church. Of course this fact is qualified practically by another principle which we have discussed earlier in the book, and that is the necessity of having the living presence of the Holy Spirit in church meetings. Yet positionally, when born again Christians are gathered together in the name of the Lord, this is the church.

We must not say in our hearts, "Because this group over here is 'a division' I will not fellowship with them and encourage their division." As we have already discussed, this is to make the same mistake that the Corinthians made of saying, "I am of Christ." Such individuals are in fact saying, "Since I am more enlightened about what God wants than they, I will not associate or meet with them. They have laid another foundation and I haven't. Therefore they are not part of the church, yet I am." Scripturally, this teaching does not hold water.

In the very same chapter of I Corinthians where we read about the four arguing, disagreeing factions, we find Paul specifically addressing all of them as "the church in Corinth." He recognized all these divisions or denominations as part of the church. Although they may have considered themselves to be separate and distinct from each other, still God, speaking through the Apostle Paul, saw them only as members of His church. Childish, fleshly and divided though they were, nevertheless they were still members of His body.

We should be careful to note here that participating in church meetings which have another foundation and are divided from the rest of the church of God is different from associating with a divisive person. A divisive person is someone who is causing division and stirring up strife and contention among the brethren. Such an individual no doubt has some impure motives and goals of his own apart from Christ which he is trying to fulfill. The heart of such a problem lies in these goals and motives. From this kind of person we are to disassociate ourselves completely.

On the other hand, there are many groups of Christians which are standing apart in some way from the rest of the body of Christ, yet are doing so ignorantly—imagining that they are doing the right thing—and thinking that they are serving God properly. Unfortunately, we cannot divorce ourselves from all such Christians who are misled, mistaken and misallied. If we would, then we must leave the church altogether. It should not be Christians' stands or opinions which cause us to avoid them but the attitude of their hearts.

We must receive Christians on the same basis that Christ has received them; because they believed in Him and have taken Him to be their Saviour. They have fled to Him for refuge, as to one of the cities of refuge; and have called upon His name in their day of trouble. This means that they are His and are part of His body. We must always remember the principle of the one body—the body of Christ on the earth today is one!

To live in the church in unity today requires that we as Christians have a great deal of love, a great deal of forbearance, and a great deal of longsuffering with respect to brethren who are not mature in the Lord (Eph 4:2, Col 3:13). Though they may not be wise in the Lord, may be very young and may not know the way, still they are His. We must not cut them off simply because they are misguided or mistaken about something. In order to maintain unity, we must accept and receive all kinds of brethren who are involved in many things which are not of God. (This again is different from an individual Christian, whose heart is turned away from God and is given to practicing some sin.) Our obligation is through patience, endurance and love to lead these ones on

into the presence of Christ, and maturity. We must help them to have a more pure walk with Him. If we merely cut them off, we have lost this opportunity.

From the foregoing discussion it should be evident that it is not wrong to fellowship, associate or meet with those who are involved in denominations or divisions. Most of these people don't know any better or are merely seeking somewhere to worship God and have fellowship according to the exhortation of the scriptures. Many of them may be deceived or blinded in some areas, and are walking before God in the best way they know. We must not condemn them for doing this, but love them, care for them and do our best to teach them His way more properly.

Yes, in order to have unity in the church of God today, we need to receive and have unity with all kinds of Christians. There are Christians who sin, Christians who are fleshly, Christians who are babes in Christ, Christians of every stripe and denomination. We need to receive them all, not upon our basis of being so wonderfully right as we might think we are, but on Christ's basis—the fact that He has received them.

It is interesting to note that in the meetings of many sects which some would consider to be terrible divisions, the presence of the Holy Spirit is strongly manifested. How can this be? Does God honor division? No, God certainly does not honor division! He is honoring the fact that their hearts are open to Him, that they love Him, and that they are meeting around Him. In each one of us, God has to overlook some sin. His blood has to cover many shortcomings and offences in order for Him to come and fellowship with us at all. We all need the blood of Jesus Christ. Since the church of God is washed in the blood of Jesus Christ, He is able to come to meet and fellowship with all of its members. Their basis may be wrong and their stand divisive, yet He Himself will come and meet with them and minister to their needs.

What then does this say to us as members of His body? How can we keep ourselves apart from something to which He has joined Himself. If He attends a meeting and His presence is there, how can we stay away? This is the same childish behavior that many groups accuse the others of having. This is the same infantile mind which won't see beyond outward appearances and look into the heart. May God grant us mercy that we could drop these foolish ways and see the church of God as He sees it today.

All Christian meetings are meetings of the church if they have Jesus Christ. Let us enlarge our view to see the church in this way. Let us realize that all Christians are members of the body and are part of the church. Sin does not disqualify them, another foundation does not exclude them, and error does not keep them from being part of the real church of God today.