

4.

THE ONE TRUE CHURCH

"There is one body, and one Spirit even as ye 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

The Church of God is one. There is an inherent spiritual unity in the whole Church of God which includes every believer from the time Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins until now. 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.

A further division of the Church which remains upon the earth can also be seen. The Church is divided up practically among various towns and cities throughout the whole world. This division is a product of geography. Since it is the nature of men to gather themselves together in communities, so the Church is also divided physically in the same way. Thus, the one true Church is separated into the church in each community. This earthly division is evidenced in the Apostle Paul's writings when he addresses his letters to the church in a certain city. However, such geographical separation in no way implies that the Christians who live in these different cities should be divided 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.

Within any given city, there may be many thousands of Christians. Perhaps many of these Christians do not even know one another. Even the most hard-headed Bible interpreter must admit that in most communities it is impossible for all of these believers to meet together on a daily basis. For this reason, the Church of God is further divided practically. The members of the church in every city are separated among many church meetings. 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 into many church meetings is only physical and must never lead to spiritual disunity.

In the Bible we can read about similar situations. The scriptures four times mention "the church in a house." We read about the church in Aquila and Priscilla's house (I Cor 16:19, Rom 16:3,5), the church in Nymphas' house (Col 4:15) and the church in the house of Archippus (Philemon 2). These verses show us plainly that the church in every city was further divided into smaller church meetings as a matter of practicality. Nevertheless, the context of these same passages (especially Romans 16) clearly indicates that those believers who were included in the greetings to "the church in a certain house" had much contact, fellowship and close association with all other Christians who lived in that particular city. They maintained a real, practical and spiritual unity with them. Any practical separation from other Christians, forced upon them by physical limitations, did not lead to spiritual division. How this example of a proper Christian attitude and perspective should speak to us today!

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.

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 beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye 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 which

Jesus Christ prayed would be unified.

Arguing, bickering and dissension of this nature among the members in the body of Christ is carnal and fleshly. Let us read again in I Corinthians, this time in chapter 3, beginning with verse 1: "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat; for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye 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 or thing 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 the Apostle 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 in saying "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Christ," than there is in saying "I am 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 trying to save a certain truth that they have discovered from impurity. Still others might be attempting to protect their members from wrong teaching. Yet the result of all these well-intentioned reasons is to disobey the scriptures and nullify the Word of God. Unity, God's desire and the fervent prayer of His son Jesus Christ, is thereby damaged. (By the way, there is room for holding onto truth in the church. And yes, we should protect each other from heretical teaching. But it must be done in a proper way. We must never violate the principle of unity.)

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. 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. Not only should we be open for them to come to fellowship and worship God with us, we should likewise be equally as open to meet, fellowship and worship God with them. This is genuine unity.

In God's eyes, there is actually only one church in every city. This fact is evidenced by the seven golden lampstands which we see standing before the throne in Revelation representing the seven churches—one for each city (Rev 1:20).^{*} Yet these churches are only smaller expressions of the one and only Church there is in the whole universe! Thank God that we are a part of it. May we seek Him that we might experience the evidence of this reality—true daily unity with each and every believer

with whom we come into contact.

NOTE: In the book of Revelation we are shown seven golden lampstands ("candlesticks" in the KJV is not correct) representing seven churches in seven cities. Nowhere in the scriptures is any smaller gathering of Christians so specially designated. This must be because of the fact that within every community both spiritual and practical unity are possible. (Between cities, however, such close communion is very limited.) The result of such intimate fellowship between all the believers in every city should be that the one true church would shine forth for all to see. No smaller group could ever be the totality of this expression because the God-ordained unity which in each city is both practical and possible is not seen.