

Is Doctrinal Unity Possible?

Introduction. This final article will explore the need of doctrinal unity. For generations, Christians have approached our denominational neighbors with the intent of sharing the gospel with them. As we have surveyed the division that is characteristic of sectarianism, we have told them of a better way. We refer to the unity that is in Christ, manifest by the Spirit and guided by the inspired message (Ephesians 4:1-6). But is doctrinal unity possible among us?

I. ***Early Efforts At Unity***

- A. In early America, men from differing denominations gave up creeds and united on slogans such as "Where the Bible speaks, we will speak; where it is silent, we will be silent" and "We will call Bible things by Bible names and do Bible things in Bible ways." These "slogans" are scriptural concepts (1 Peter 4:11; 1 Corinthians 2:13).
- B. With these ideas, men such as Barton W. Stone, James O'Kelley, Abner Jones, Elias Smith, Alexander and Thomas Campbell, Benjamin Franklin, Walter Scott and others started a movement called the "Restoration Movement" because it sought to return to the New Testament.
- C. It was true that many positions of error were held in the infancy of this movement. Awakened to find themselves in sectarianism, these men responded by rejecting their creeds and examining the scriptures. These men studied themselves out of error. As discussions ensued, the Bible itself served as a divine standard of faith and practice. One by one, erroneous teachings fell, replaced by a new appreciation for truth and the unity that resulted from preaching the pure gospel.
- D. All across America, the message was preached and written through periodicals until many thousands obeyed the gospel. Beyond their own enrichment and fellowship in Christ, they left us a great heritage. From total bondage in a sectarian system, these men decided to "walk in the old paths" (Jeremiah 6:16).

II. ***The New Testament Church Began With Jesus Christ***

- A. Of course, the Christians of the early 1800's were not the first to work for the "unity of the Spirit" (Ephesians 4:1-7). Jesus Christ first laid the charge to His disciples and all who would follow after them to preserve unity (John 17:20-21).
- B. However, unity is maintained and is therefore possible only by the preaching of the word (John 8:32; 17:17; Matthew 28:18-20).
- C. The apostles were faithful to their ministry.

1. There was a single message in New Testament times (1 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Peter 4:11; 2 John 9-11; Romans 16:17).
 2. There are other scriptures which address the unanimity of truth (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 5:11, 17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Jude 3).
- D. All these scriptures (and more) assert that truth is:
1. Discernible (Matthew 5:6; John 7:17; 1 John 2:20-21).
 2. Knowable (John 8:32).
 3. Identifiable (Romans 16:17; 1 John 4:5-6).
 4. Duplicatable (Matthew 28:18-20).
 5. Teachable (2 Timothy 2:2).

III. ***The Truth Resulted In The Lord's Church Being Established***

- A. It was promised by prophecy and by Christ (Isaiah 2:2-3; Daniel 2:44-45; Joel 2:28-32; Matthew 16:18; Mark 9:1). This became a reality in Acts 2 with the Jewish nation and in Acts 10 with the Gentiles.
- B. Though fallible Christians comprised the church, the gospel made provision for growth and maturity (Ephesians 4:11-16). Those "perfected in Christ" are promised eternal life (2 Peter 1:3-11).
- C. This "perfection" is not based on sinlessness, but on forgiveness in the blood of Christ (1 John 1:1-3, 7). The Christian who is forgiven is righteous (Romans 4:1-8).
- D. At no time, nor in any scripture, does God suggest that He will approve those who practice what is sinful, defend it as righteous and encourage others to participate with them in it (2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Ephesians 5:11; 1 Peter 1:15; 2:9-12; 1 John 1:5).
 1. The fact that error and division appeared in the first century church does not mitigate against the unity of the Spirit. Those who sinned and did not repent were removed from fellowship (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; Romans 16:17).
 2. Those who were willing to fellowship sinners were stained by the same sin (Romans 1:32; 2 John 9-11).
 3. Division was condemned and unity in truth was commanded (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; John 8:32; 2 John 9-11; Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Corinthians 4:17). So long as Christians abided in the doctrine of Christ, they all agreed in what they spoke.
- E. Christians are united as they understand and receive truth through expressed commands, examples and necessary inferences. It is possible to have the church of Christ as a reality in the world today (Luke 8:11), preaching the same gospel (Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Timothy 2:2), with saints reaching spiritual maturity and maintaining the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:1-6).

IV. ***Is This Now Possible?***

- A. There are now many brethren who deny that doctrinal unity is possible. It is maintained that unity is achieved as we believe in Christ and receive those who differ from us in doctrinal matters, even doctrinal matters which are perceived to be sinful.
- B. Let it be clearly understood that this unity in diversity is not:
 - 1. Unity in "the faith" (Jude 3).
 - 2. Unity in matters of judgment (1 Corinthians 4:3).
 - 3. Unity in authorized liberties (Romans 14:1-23; 1 Corinthians 8:9).
- C. Unity in diversity is unity in error. It leads to the toleration of doctrinal differences and allows permissiveness toward error. This will leave a clear trail of apostasy and divided churches.
- D. There has been a clear procedure in unity and diversity:
 - 1. Cite the rule.
 - 2. Make an exception to the rule.
 - 3. Make the exception the rule.
 - 4. For instance, Jesus taught God's will on divorce and remarriage (Matthew 5; Matthew 19). Furthermore, no Christian has perfect knowledge on this issue because it lacks clarity. Therefore, we can fellowship different doctrinal positions on remarriage.

V. ***Doctrinal Unity Is Possible***

- A. Some may say that "error exists in every congregation" because babes in Christ and the rebellious coexist with mature Christians.
 - 1. Please understand that "unity in diversity" not only accepts the idea of different views within a congregation but is willing to have on-going fellowship with those who practice something that is sinful, defend it as righteous and encourage others to participate.
 - 2. When I give encouragement to the man who teaches contrary to the doctrine of Christ, I become a partaker with him in his evil works (Romans 16:17-18; 2 John 9-11).
 - a) I know it is hard for us to refuse friends of long standing that go off after error and accept the doctrines and commandments of men rather than abiding in the doctrine of Christ.
 - b) We allow our sympathy, affection or esteem to cause us to refuse to draw the line of fellowship when error is being taught. When we do, we cannot have the approval of God.
 - 3. The Bible, on the other hand, recognizes that congregations will contain those who differ, but the commitment to truth will pressure error to depart. Those in error will grow and repent or truth will bring out their sin for discipline (Titus 3:10-11).
 - 4. Even while recognizing the need to be longsuffering and patient (1 Thessalonians 5:14; Jude 20-23), there will be no open-ended

fellowship with error among faithful churches. It is disheartening that we must now discuss which sins to fellowship and which sins to not fellowship!

Conclusion. Care must always be exercised to properly discern between righteousness and sin. Having discerned the difference, Christians then must stand for truth and not compromise. Remember, though, there is a great difference in believing the truth and standing for the truth (Ezekiel 22:30-31). Brethren have "went out" from us, and we must "reprove" them (1 John 2:19; Ephesians 5:11). We pray that it does not "wax worse and worse" (2 Timothy 3:13).

Adapted By Kyle Campbell