

Is Doctrinal Unity Possible?

Introduction. For generations, Christians have approached our denominational neighbors with the intent of sharing the New Testament 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, manifested by the Spirit and guided by the inspired message. We are not the first to believe and work for doctrinal unity based upon faith in Jesus Christ and the finality of scripture as the supreme court of our faith and practice.

I. *Early Efforts At Unity*

- A. In early America, men from every walk of life and 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 that came to be called the "Restoration Movement" because it sought to return to the New Testament. Both written and oral debates ensued as every vestige of denominational error was measured and defeated through the discussions of scripture.
- C. It was true that many positions of error were held in the infancy of this movement. Awakening to sectarianism, these men responded by studying themselves out of error. As erroneous teachings fell, they were replaced by a new appreciation for truth and unity. They knew they were not forming another denomination among denominations.
- D. All across America, the message was preached and many thousands obeyed the gospel. Beyond their own enrichment and fellowship in Christ, they left us a heritage of "walking in the old paths" which still gives us strength (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 4:1-6). 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 Bible (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 Timothy 1:12).
 2. Other scriptures also 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).
 3. All these scriptures (and more) assert that truth is:
 - a) Discernible (Matthew 5:6; John 7:17; 1 John 2:20-21).
 - b) Knowable (John 8:32).
 - c) Identifiable (Romans 16:17; 1 John 4:5-6).
 - d) Duplicatable (Matthew 28:18-20).
 - e) Teachable (2 Timothy 2:2).

III. *The Truth Being Taught 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. That same church will result today when the seed, or the word of God, is sown (Luke 8:11).
- B. Though fallible Christians comprised the church, the gospel made provision for growth; the "perfection" of Christians (Ephesians 4:11-16; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 3:15; Colossians 1:28; 4:12; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 13:21; James 1:4; 3:2; 1 Peter 2:1-2; 5:10). 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 that 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 to be disciplined and removed from fellowship (Romans 16:17-18; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14).
 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; 4:17; Galatians 1:6-9; 2 John 9-11). So long as Christians abided in the doctrine of Christ, they were unified.

- E. Christians are united as they understand and receive truth through expressed commands and statements, apostolic examples and divine implications (necessary inferences). It is possible for the church of Christ to exist today, preaching the same gospel (Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Timothy 2:2), with saints reaching spiritual maturity and maintaining unity.

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 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; 10:23).
- C. Unity in diversity is unity in error. It is diversity in matters of "considerable doctrinal and moral import." It leads to the toleration of doctrinal differences and allows permissiveness toward error. This will leave a 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.
- E. Notice three illustrations:
 - 1. Illustration #1:
 - a) God expects us to understand His will (Matthew 7:21; John 8:32; Ephesians 3:4; 5:17; 1 John 2:3).
 - b) But no Christian has perfect knowledge.
 - c) Therefore, we can have fellowship in doctrinal disagreements.
 - 2. Illustration #2:
 - a) Jesus taught God's will on divorce and remarriage (Matthew 5; Matthew 19).
 - b) But no Christian has perfect knowledge on this issue ("lack of clarity").
 - c) Therefore, we can fellowship different doctrinal positions on remarriage.
 - 3. Illustration #3:
 - a) The New Testament prohibits fellowship with sinful beliefs and practices (Ephesians 5:11; 2 John 9-11).
 - b) But no Christian has perfect knowledge of sinful beliefs and practices.

- c) Therefore, we can fellowship those who engage in sinful beliefs and practices.

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

- A. It is contended by some that "error exists in every congregation" because babes in Christ, the untaught and the rebellious exist side by side with the mature Christians.
 - 1. 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 with them in it.
 - 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). It is an evil work to teach error and it is likewise an evil work to support, sustain, encourage or have fellowship with a teacher of error.
 - a) Sometimes it becomes 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 get the better of us and we refuse to draw the line of fellowship when truth has been violated and error is being taught. But when we do, we do not have the approval of God.
 - 3. The Bible, on the other hand, recognizes that congregations will contain those who differ, but that the commitment to truth will pressure error to depart.
 - a) Ephesians 4:11-16 instructs a church to bring members to perfection. Elders will "feed the church" (Acts 20:28) and preachers will "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:1-4). Error will not coexist in this environment. Those in error will grow and repent or truth will bring out their sin for discipline.
 - b) 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. No faithful church can practice an open-ended fellowship with sin.
 - c) Those who use Romans 14 to teach unity in diversity should recognize that God accepts both brethren as they are; there is to be no disputing on those issues, no judging, no lines drawn. Romans 14 does not teach toleration for sin and it is disheartening that we must now discuss which sins to fellowship and which sins to not fellowship.

B. People in the first century preached and practiced doctrinal unity until sinful preaching and practices appeared. When they did, truth opposed them. Brethren in America have preached and practiced doctrinal unity until sinful preaching and practices have appeared. We must oppose them with truth and "maintain the unity of the Spirit."

Conclusion. The greatest care must always be exercised by Christians to properly discern between righteousness and sin. Having discerned the difference, Christians then must stand for truth and not in any way compromise with evil by teaching unity in diversity. To do so jeopardizes our souls and weakens the church for which Jesus gave His life.