

The Ancient Pattern: The Pattern For Unity

Introduction. Jesus prayed for unity in John 17:17-22. But what happened? The so-called “Christian world” is anything but united. Considering Jesus’ words regarding those who would follow Him, did He want division? He wanted all followers to be one.

In a world of dozens of denominations with thousands of independent groups, isn’t it time the world acknowledged its failure at Christ’s desire for His disciples? What then is the solution to a problem this big? What is God’s pattern for unity?

Let’s see what Jesus established, and then trace what happened to that institution. We’ll end by surveying what we can do to preserve the unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17:20-21.

I. What Did Jesus Really Establish?

- A. One church (Matthew 16:18).
 - 1. The church is the “called out” (2 Thessalonians 2:14). It was an assembly qualified by their purpose and association (cp. Acts 19:32).
 - a) The universal church Jesus established is not a collection of churches (like a denomination). It is made up of all individual believers in Christ. There is no earthly order of Christians or earthly headquarters.
 - b) The church is His body and there is only one (Ephesians 1:22-23; 2:16; 4:4), and all people are to be reconciled in it — nothing else.
 - 2. Some have the false idea that denominations are the branches spoken of in John 15:4-10.
 - a) Branches are identified as His disciples in vv. 13-17.
 - b) These are connected to Christ through obedience to His will.
 - c) Could this be said of the churches today? They teach differently on salvation, worship, organization, and authority.
 - d) God’s not the problem (1 Corinthians 14:33); man and Satan are.
- B. Although there are many local churches in the world, they are autonomous.
 - 1. These local churches are the collection of individual disciples in specific areas. They work, worship, and fulfill collective responsibilities.
 - 2. But these local churches don’t make up the universal church. The individual disciples are the universal church, as per John 15.

II. How Did We Get To This Point?

- A. The history of division in churches.
 - 1. For the first 270 years there were only congregations of the Lord’s church, faithful or unfaithful.
 - a) The letters to the seven churches in Asia showed commendable parts and condemnable parts (Revelation 2-3).
 - b) If you claimed Christ you were either a faithful disciple or an unfaithful one. You either followed Christ or you were a different religion, i.e. Jew or pagan.
 - 2. But there were multiple predictions of people falling away from the truth (Acts 20:29-30; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4; 1 Timothy 4:1-3).

3. Some of those departures may sound familiar because they were a part of the development of the Catholic Church.
 - a) The Catholic (“universal”) Church came into existence at the Council of Nicea in 325. Constantine organized churches and they gave up autonomy and worked toward being organized like the Roman Empire.
 - b) They wanted to have a universal church, but with local headquarters. This was a different pattern than the New Testament.
 - c) In 606, they appointed the first Pope (“vicar of Christ”) or God’s representative on earth.
 - d) These along with many other unscriptural practices (penance, image worship, extreme unction, Purgatory, instrumental music, celibacy, etc.) continued until 1054 when the Greek Orthodox split from the Roman Catholic Church (“The Great Schism”).
 4. The Protestant Reformation.
 - a) Martin Luther wanted to only reform problems he saw with the Catholic Church, but divisions started in 1530. The number of groups initially was small — only seven by 1560.
 - b) Religious unity continued to deteriorate and more groups developed in Europe. The Reformation was then brought to the United States. By the 1800s, groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Pentecostals, etc. were appearing.
- B. Churches are dividing all over the place today, so much so that it is really difficult to know what each new group believes.
1. Denominations, compared to the Catholic Church, are relatively small, but have splintered into a huge number of factions.
 2. The response to this has been the non-denominational movement, which basically says that as long as you believe in God and Christ you’re fine.
 - a) There are several slogans expressing the mindset: “Attend the church of your choice.” “There are multiple faiths.” “Go where you want.”
 - b) But yet, they don’t all go together. They say there’s no difference, but really there is. They don’t want to accept that some are wrong and some are right.

III. How Do We Get Back To Unity?

- A. The seeds of denominationalism were in the early Christians (1 Corinthians 1:11-15). They were dividing according to their favorite teacher or baptizer.
 1. Did Paul think this was okay (1 Corinthians 1:10)? No! He went on to show that this was evidence of a carnal mindset (1 Corinthians 3:1-5). These men are just servants to the true God.
 2. He exhorted them to put their trust in God’s wisdom and not man’s. He wanted them to have the same allegiance to Christ. This meant the same mind and the same judgment.
- B. They were expected to repent and follow the writings and authority of the apostles (1 Corinthians 4:6, 17; 7:17; 14:33, 37-38; 16:1).
 1. We can be united by a supreme commitment to the truth.
 - a) Buy the truth, and sell it not (Proverbs 23:23).

- b) Christians have an unrelenting search for truth (Psalm 19:10).
- c) Christians should sacrifice all for the truth (Matthew 13:44-46).
- 2. We have to embrace the truth without shame.
 - a) There is one true way of salvation (John 14:6).
 - b) We can't be ashamed of truth and of brethren who unabashedly stand for it and preach it (2 Timothy 1:7-8).
- C. The Lord wants unity, Paul wanted unity, and unity comes from following the truth (Ephesians 4:1-6). This is the foundation.
 - 1. Then we have to abide in the doctrine of Christ and the apostles (1 Timothy 4:16; 2 John 9).
 - 2. There is only one gospel (Galatians 1:6-9). To divide it is a work of the flesh and an abomination to God.

Conclusion. What should we do now? We should study (2 Timothy 2:15). We should discuss, talk, and debate with people who are seeking truth, affirming their hunger to study (Acts 17:11). They are created in the image of God, and they need to know there is a knowable, discernible body of truth (John 8:32).

Beyond that, we have to stand for that truth, no matter how much shame there might be involved, or how much ridicule may come our way. To Christ be loyal and be true. May His gospel be spread among the world!

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