

TOWARD CHRISTIAN UNITY

By

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Unity in Christ must be unity in that which brings us to Christ — faith. Anything short of that may be a union of sorts, but not real Christian unity.

There may be many outward signs of unity, such as wearing the same name, or label. People may sit in the same church week after week and yet have nothing in common except this outward sign of being worshippers in the same building.

There are other common grounds which may be wrongly interpreted as unity. For example, some may be drawn to the Church because they like its particular type of music. Others may band together because they agree on a particular rule of conduct or interpretation of a certain prophecy, and still others may be united in their admiration of the preacher's charisma. But none of this is actually Christian unity; it is not unity at the core of Christian commitment: their faith.

By faith I do not mean the popular concept of brave self-confidence which many choose to call faith. Biblical faith is faith in propositional truth, the truth which is revealed in the facts of the gospel. The gospel which draws us to Christ is the same gospel which draws us together and holds us together in Christian unity. When the Apostle Paul wrote that “the gospel is the power of God unto salvation,” he was speaking of this propositional truth which we believe in order to be saved. That gospel continues to hold power for us in ever drawing us closer to Christ as we learn more and more of His Person and His purpose.

Our unity must be enforced by the essence of that faith, not by loyalty to any movement nor to any outward manifestation of that faith nor to any subjective view of that faith. The members of the body of Christ are united by the same power that makes us members of that body, just as the branches of a tree are united by the trunk which makes them the branches. We are united only insofar as we are bound to Christ, and that unity is only as strong as the bond that unites us to Christ — our faith.

Therefore, the truth that flows from Christ to our minds to strengthen our faith will also unite us to one another. As I know more of Christ and have more understanding of His purpose, His person and His power, I will grow in faith and my attachment to Him will increase in strength and become broader in base. As I focus on the central elements of faith, I enter into a deeper fellowship with Christ and with others who enter into the same fellowship.

Thus we become united at the heart of the faith. The peripheral differences still exist, but they do not stand between us. Appendages may hang from each branch of the tree but the branches are united at the trunk. This is the kind of unity for which Christ prayed.

On the contrary, when we seek to unite on peripheral things such as the mode of worship, methods of evangelism, organizational policies and textual interpretations and are not united at the base (at the trunk), such unity is flimsy and fragile and without inner power to hold us together.

Unity that is based upon our being united at the trunk does not need to be established. It is already established when we enter into Christ. We do not have to search for the rock which is to provide the foundation for our unity because when we are in Christ, we are already on the rock. Therefore, in order to realize greater unity in Christ, our major studies and doctrines should consist of those things which have to do with Jesus Christ” His person, His power, His purpose, and the things that He taught in regards to our discipleship.

To be more specific, we must not focus our attention on any system, however orthodox we may believe it to be. Putting one another to the test of our own system leads to legalism, self-righteousness and division. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Lord did not see fit to have one of His apostles write us a letter detailing a Christian system such as we have from various religious leaders since the days of Origen and Augustine and on through the reformation to modern concepts of these same systems.

It is the truth that unites. But when it first must pass through the filter of a systematic order ordained by a group (or movement or school) of men, it has already been warped out of shape and robbed of its original power, and can no longer be the catalyst for bringing believers together. The faith must not be the Reformed faith nor the Restoration faith nor the Evangelical faith, but scriptural faith.

I often receive letters complaining that I am not holding fast to the traditions of the Calvinist System or the Arminian System. This is true. I have no loyalty to either system. I am not compelled by my Lord to try to work out a system in which our finite minds can perceive all the mysteries of the Godhead. Rather I am challenged to study and understand what God has revealed of Himself and what He expects of me, whether or not I am able to bring all of the revelation of His mighty power and wondrous works down to some kind of logical system that can be outlined “a-b-c.”

But, God’s attributes and marvelous character He clearly reveals to us through many pages of scripture and finally through the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The death and resurrection of Christ are so plain and simple that all can understand. The commandments that God has given portray His righteousness and reveal that He wants us ultimately to arrive at His own image. The promise of a resurrection to eternal life in the new creation doesn’t belong to any system or denomination. It is for us all.

To attain unity we must not abandon truth. Some have sought unity at the expense of faith in the very basics of the gospel. To do so may give us bigger crowds in one place, so we might boast of church growth and a spirit of unity, but it defeats the purpose of unity: “That the world by believe” (John 17:21). We can bring no one to belief if we have abandoned the truth to be believed.

It is not essential to know and understand all issues of the Bible in order to be saved and be one with Christ. But once one is a Christian trying to walk in the light, he will find great difficulty in his walk unless he comes to terms with truth at every encounter with it. He cannot grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ if he insists on hanging onto false concepts. He must be willing to unlearn them and leave them behind if he is to press on to know truth and be drawn to the mind of God by it. Such willingness is essential to unity, and equally as hard to find.

Instead of abandoning truth in order to minimize difference we must seek to know it all the better and freely talk about it. If Christ is the light, then we must uphold that

light in all of His fullness, remembering that it is His light that is to shine and not bright ideas of our creation, nor the popular shimmer of human traditions.

The cause for unity world also be enhanced if we could all remember that it is the person of Christ lifted up, not our own personalities, which is to draw all men to Him.

Years ago when I began writing the **Witness**, I had no thought of using it as a means of attaining any kind of unity with those of different backgrounds, but through the years, the paper has gradually grown in readership to include hundreds of people of a great diversity of denominational backgrounds. I have made no effort to try to adjust to any of the concepts held by those of different backgrounds, and yet, in time, simply by upholding Christ, His sovereignty, His power, His person and His purpose, denominational walls have been breached, traditional barriers have diminished and a sense of unity has been reached with a great number of these people, a unity in Christ and the gospel.

Christ's prayer for unity forms an illustration of the kind of unity possible. "That they all may be one, even as thou, Father, are in me and I in thee, that they also may be in us...that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that thou did send me, and love them even as thou love me" (John 17:21-23). The unity between Jesus and the Father — aside from the ramifications of the Godhead — was demonstrated in the fact that Jesus loved the Father, and the Father loved Jesus, plus the harmony that existed, by Jesus always acting to do the Father's will and accomplish His purpose. We, too, are to have that love for one another, and seek to do the Father's will and accomplish His purpose.

This is further reason for us to focus on Christ and His person — His holiness, righteousness, beauty; upon His purpose — to make us into the image of God; and His sovereignty the fact that He had the power to accomplish all this, and, in fact, is doing it right now.

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