

Unity, Division, Doctrine, and Jesus' Prayer

by Dave Miller, Ph.D.

Who would question the importance of **unity** in the body of Christ? God wants every Christian to be united and at peace with every other Christian (Philippians 2:1-4). He wants us to be knit together cohesively in love and fellowship (Ephesians 4:1-3,16; 1 John 1:5-7). He wants us working together harmoniously to accomplish the same objectives (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). Far too many congregations of the Lord's people have been racked by division and discord due to petty jealousy, immaturity, prideful self-assertiveness, and unjustified disagreement over matters of opinion.

In addition to the division that sometimes exists within individual congregations, churches of Christ currently are experiencing a significant cleavage brotherhoodwide. Such division has occurred in the past over a variety of issues, including instrumental music, multiple communion containers, support of orphan homes, located preachers, and cooperation among congregations in mission work.

Beyond the division that exists within churches of Christ is the widespread division that exists within "Christendom." Look at the multiplicity of religious groups, churches, and movements that claim affinity and affiliation with Christ and Christianity: the Protestant denominational world, Catholicism, the so-called "cults" (a term historically applied to Mormonism, Seventh Day Adventism, Christian Science, and Jehovah's Witnesses), and the prolific spawning of "nondenominational" community churches. Beyond the division that exists within "Christendom," look at the religious smorgasbord that exists among the world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam—involving **billions** of people.

What is the solution to division? Can division be eliminated? How does God want us to achieve unity? Perhaps the premiere proposal being advanced to solve the matter of division today is—**de-emphasize doctrine!** This relaxation of doctrinal stance manifests itself in at least two ways. Some reduce the fervency with which they hold to doctrinal positions. Doctrinal viewpoints that previously were unquestioned—and for which compromise would have been considered intolerable—now are being softened and held as mere opinion. Those who continue to affirm the importance of those same doctrinal viewpoints are labeled "legalists" or "radicals."

Other brethren cope with division by attempting to reduce the number of doctrinal viewpoints that one must firmly hold. This maneuver has given rise to the notion of "unity in diversity," and a so-called "core doctrine" classification scheme. Those who travel this route insist that many of our past doctrines (like the exclusion of instrumental music, the use of choirs, and female leadership in worship) should not be considered matters of **fellowship**. They say that, ultimately, the only doctrinal belief that matters is Jesus. If a person acknowledges God as Father and Jesus as Lord, he or she should be considered a saved believer, and in full fellowship with every other Christian (see Miller, 1996, pp. 282-331 for a more complete discussion of this concept).

Several writers and speakers appeal to Jesus' prayer for unity in John chapter seventeen as evidence of this alleged need to override doctrinal concerns for the sake of unity. One well-known writer and speaker has stressed that, when Jesus got ready to depart the planet, His final remarks—His parting words—did not pertain to instrumental music or doctrinal soundness, but to unity: the need for believers to be one (John 17:21).

Appealing to Jesus' prayer for unity as justification for replacing unity based on truth with unity based on indiscriminating acceptance, and an emotional sense of togetherness, is both unfortunate and unscriptural. If the reader will take the time to read John 17, one will see that the unity for which Jesus called was unity based on **correct doctrine**. Notice His repetitious reference to the "truth," the "word," and the need for "keeping" and "receiving" that word (John 17:6,8,14,17,19). Clearly, **obedience to a body of doctrinal truth must precede unity**.

Jesus also identified how unity is to be achieved among believers: "through their word" (John 17:20). In other words, people must hear the word that the apostles preached which, in addition to the Lordship of Christ, includes the gospel plan of salvation (faith, repentance, confession, and baptism for the remission of sins), as well as faithful Christian living. The compliance that occurs as a result of "their word" automatically brings unity and fellowship with Christ and each other (1 John 1:3,6-7).

Further, those of whom Jesus spoke in His prayer were clearly those who would become New Testament Christians. He was speaking with reference to the church of Christ—not the world with its denominationalism (John 17:9,16). Until one obeys the gospel plan of salvation, one is not a genuine believer in Christ. It is possible to be a "believer"—in the sense that one recognizes Who Jesus is, acknowledges that fact, and even offers a measure of commitment—and still not be acceptable to God (John 8:30,31,44; 12:42; Acts 8:13,20-23). The believers for whom Jesus prayed were members of the church of Christ—not members of denominations that

profess faith in Christ. Jesus was praying for unity in His church. To identify adherents of denominationalism as “believers” is to redefine the term in an unscriptural sense.

How ironic that the very passage, to which agents of change frequently appeal in order to advance their agenda of change, finds its most pertinent application today **in them!** They are tampering with the foundational principles of Christianity in order to broaden the borders of the kingdom. In so doing, they are guilty of creating division, and are wreaking havoc on the body of Christ! Jesus prayed that such damage might not happen.

To understand Jesus’ prayer in John 17 as a call to make unity top priority—even over truth and doctrine—is to misconstrue the entire book of John. The purpose of John’s gospel account was to prove the deity of Christ in order to elicit an obedient belief. He selected seven **signs** as evidence to verify Christ’s claim. Belief is based on **truth** (forms of which are used some 40 times), and **knowing** (used 87 times). John made it clear that it is not enough to acknowledge the deity of Christ. One must listen to Christ’s **words**, and then comply with them (e.g., John 6:63,68; 8:31; 12:48; 14:24). Contextually, unity among believers is possible only when the believers commit themselves to the **doctrine** that Christ imparted.

If one desires to be sensitive to context, and engage in genuine exposition of the Word, the prominent passage in the New Testament that addresses division within the body of Christ is 1 Corinthians. The entire letter constitutes Paul’s plea for Christians to be united. The theme is stated in 1:10: “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (NKJV). The rest of the book delineates one doctrinal item after another in order to correct divisive Corinthian conduct. These items include their sexual behavior (chs. 5-7), their use of food in relation to idolatry (chs. 8-10), disorders in the worship assembly [including female leadership (11:1-16), Lord’s Supper (11:17-34) and the use of miraculous gifts (chs. 12-14)], misconceptions about the resurrection (ch. 15), and the collection (16:1-4).

Their aberrant (i.e., **divisive**) behavior was directly due to their **doctrinal** error. Consequently, the solution was not to **de-emphasize doctrine!** The solution was not to lessen or downplay doctrinal commitment. The solution was not to relegate all but one or two doctrines to an optional status. The solution is clearly stated: **speak the same thing! Be joined together in the same mind and judgment!** Christians have the divine obligation to study their Bibles, and to arrive at the truth on every matter that God sets forth as essential. God’s doctrine concerning salvation, worship, the church, and Christian living is critical, and every believer **must** come to knowledge of that doctrine, and submit to it.

Ironically, those who push for unity at the expense of truth and doctrine are now compromising even on the essentiality of water baptism **for the remission of sins**. Yet in the very context where division within the body of Christ is discussed, Paul advanced an argument that showed the necessity of baptism. In rebuking the factious Corinthians, he asked: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1:13). Notice that Paul gave two **prerequisites to salvation**. Before an individual can say “I am of ” another person, first, the person would have to have been **crucified** for that individual, and second, the individual would have to be **baptized in the name** of the person. Christ was crucified for all of us. But you and I cannot legitimately say we are “of Christ” until we have been **baptized in His name!** Unity and fellowship cannot be extended to anyone who has not been baptized to be saved!

Countless sermons have been preached in recent years recounting the division that has plagued churches of Christ. The preacher inevitably insists that our factions are due to our over-emphasis upon doctrinal purity, and our insistence upon being doctrinally correct on every point possible. He then affirms that if we will cease our concern for doctrinal accuracy, or focus upon a few commonalities that we share with the denominational world, we can achieve the unity God demands. It never seems to dawn on such agents of change that the denominational world (which they want us to emulate, embrace, and fellowship) are hopelessly divided and are splintered into as many factions as we—maybe more! Frank S. Mead documented many years ago in his *Handbook of Denominations* that all of the mainline denominations (Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians) are divided into multiple groups, as are virtually **all other religious groups**—Catholics, Pentecostals, and Mormons, as well as the Moslems, Buddhists, and Hindus. Neither unity nor division proves that a group possesses God’s truth (cf. Mead, 1979).

The pathway to unity is simple. God’s truth can be ascertained and known (John 7:17; 8:32). All who truly submit themselves to the Word of God can and will be united. Those who do not conform to the parameters of truth will automatically be separated from the obedient. But **they** will be held responsible for the disunity that results. **Cain** was responsible for the break between himself and his brother—**not Abel**—because of his own departure from the instructions of God! (cf. Genesis 4:3-8; Hebrews 11:4; 1 John 3:12). Those who remain faithful to God’s words will continue to enjoy the unity that Jesus said was possible. Doctrine, and compliance with that doctrine, take precedence over unity. No wonder Jesus declared: “Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division” (Luke 12:51).

REFERENCES

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