

## UNITY, DIVISION, AND FELLOWSHIP

In our age, which prides itself in being “ecumenical”, many people argue that the unity of the church should be based on the common recognition of “Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.” That is the official view of the World Council of Churches. The Lutheran World Federation has given up requiring unity in all teachings of the Scriptures, and has adopted the principle of “reconciled diversity.” It has, for its part, also withdrawn condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions, of Roman Catholic doctrine about the Antichrist and about Justification through faith.

When we look at the teaching of Jesus and of the church at the time of the apostles we see two major principles. Jesus said that He had one Hock. Paul insisted that there is only one body of Christ. The one holy church consists of all those who belong to Jesus Christ.

Jesus also warned His disciples to beware of false prophets. He charged His disciples to keep everything that He had commanded them. In the churches at Corinth, Ephesus, and elsewhere, the line between truth and error had to be discovered in each teacher and each teaching. In Second Corinthians Paul condemned false apostles at Corinth. Paul delivered an anathema on teachers within the churches in Galatia who by their legalism were making the Gospel another Gospel. In spite of the unity of believers in Christ in one body, Paul warned and admonished people at Ephesus, Colosse and elsewhere. In letters to Timothy and in Revelation, Paul and John rejected false teachers by name.

If the falsely ecumenical principle of granting fellowship to all who recognise “Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour” had been followed in the early church, the Montanists in Phrygia would not have been declared heretical for what they said about the Holy Spirit. Marcion, who rejected the authority of the whole Old Testament, would have continued in fellowship instead of organising his own churches. Valentinus, who included “Jesus” and “Christ” in thirty “aeons” between God and the world, would have remained in fellowship. The early church had to decide the boundaries for its practice of fellowship.

The principle of Ignatius of Antioch, that, to keep the church free from error, the people should stay close to their bishop, just did not work. Cyprian in North Africa directed Christians to the Catholic bishops in solidarity, who, he said, derived their authority from the apostles, with Peter at their head. However, differences in doctrine would have led even Cyprian to break fellowship with the bishop of Rome if he had not prematurely died as a martyr in 258 AD. The question often was, “Which bishop?” Several centuries later the bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata, was condemned for saying that Jesus Christ was a mere man, whom God adopted. In the early fourth century there was a schism at Antioch, and three bishops each claimed to be in the true succession from the apostles. The Sixth Ecumenical Council excommunicated five patriarchs, after they had died, as well as Macarios of Antioch while he was still alive. Pope Leo 11 confirmed the condemnation of one of his predecessors, Pope Honorius I. Long before the Reformation the East and the West several fellowship with each other on the question of the procession of the Holy Spirit and other matters. The notion that the church was undivided, and had unbroken fellowship up until the time of the Reformation is foolish and false.

In the light of the dual principles of the hidden unity of all believers in Christ in one body, and the actual disparity and error in much teaching that goes under the name “Christian” there are arguably four different responses. One is to say that the church of Christ is a visible earthly organisation, and decide for the earthly organisation that boasts the most adherents. The second is to take the modern falsely ecumenical line, that it is enough to acknowledge “Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour”, and settle for any visible churchly entity, without looking any further at differences in doctrine. A third response is to throw up one’s hands in despair. There are differences in teaching in virtually every aspect of Christianity, and from this the cynical conclusion seems to follow that the hundreds of differing-Christian denominations indicate that the Scriptures themselves are unclear. To add to the confusion, there are differences in the understanding of many people within particular denominations. However, the New Testament insists that the Word of God must be taught faithfully, and that there must be separation from those who teach it falsely.

This third view requires some analysis. The basic choices for a believer who looks at all this diversity are not so many. Four questions are usually enough. 1) Is there one God in three persons, each fully divine? A “Yes” here immediately rules out bodies such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Mormons (now renamed as “Community of Christ”), the Christadelphians, and other cults. 2) Do the Scriptures alone determine what should be believed? A “Yes” rules out the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox, who recognise, alongside Scripture, oral tradition, inspired councils of the church, and, for the former, the authority of a Pope to declare new doctrines that the faithful must believe, such as the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary. “Yes” rules out those who want to have

human reason as a judge of what is believed alongside Scripture. For example, there are those who reason that infants cannot believe, and therefore should not be baptised. This conflicts with the teaching of the Scriptures that God works faith through baptism, and that all who are baptised receive forgiveness and are made members of Christ's body. In spite of professions to the contrary, the principle of Scripture alone is vitiated by reason in the Calvinistic churches, which use reason to limit the atonement won by Christ to the elect. The principle of Scripture alone also rules out those whom the culture of our day influences to advocate women pastors. That is clearly against the command of the Lord, which says that women should be silent in the churches. This principle of Scripture alone is the basis for deciding the correctness of all articles of doctrine, including the full deity of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit.

3) A third question should be: Are justification and salvation through faith in Christ alone, without works? A "Yes" rules out the Roman Catholic Church, which consistently links faith with renewal of life as necessary for justification and salvation. It rules out free will theology in the Orthodox churches. It also rules out the Arminian wing of the Reformed Churches, in which human co-operation and good living are necessary requirements for salvation. This question too, involves the second question, because the Scriptures say, repeatedly, "without the Law", "without works", and "freely. "

4) One further question is enough to decide between the great churches of the Reformation, with all their divisions: In the Lord's Supper do all the communicants receive, orally, the true body and blood of Christ? The second principle again comes into play here, because those who reject the Real Presence do so because their reason tells them that it could not be possible for people to eat Christ's body and drink His blood.

The Scriptures insist that those who teach God's Word must teach it faithfully. They require Christians to mark and avoid those who cause the divisions and the offences that are contrary to the doctrine that has been received from the apostles. Because the Scriptures are clear, and make the simple wise, any person may grasp what they are saying, state it, and believe it. Because the Scriptures are a grand unity, the teaching of one book of the Bible nowhere contradicts what is taught in another, even where basic teachings are expressed in different words. For example, some New Testament writers do not use the term "justification." However, "forgiveness", "reconciliation", "peace" and "adoption" are alternative ways of expressing the same truths.

What about the reply: "But that is just your interpretation"? We hear that often. In all honesty, it is a "cop-out." It flows either out of cynicism about the clarity of Scripture, or out of a conviction that anyone should have the truth and call others wrong is arrogant and impertinent, or out of culpable reluctance to study the Scriptures for oneself.

The truth is the answer to questions about division and fellowship. Jesus said, "If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." His sheep hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. He said, "If anyone is ashamed of Me and of My Words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." Being faithful to His Words does matter. We judge no one's eternal salvation, for no human being knows how much unfaithfulness may cause the loss of faith in anyone individual. All of us must stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Jesus assures us that He will confess before His Father those who confess Him here on earth.