



UNITY

QUEST LESSON F-11

The Problem: To what extent does God wish to have unity within His church on earth, and what kind of unity is He concerned about?

These are important questions for which many different answers have been given throughout the history of the Christian church. Some have thought it sufficient to have a kind of external unity based on universal acceptance of authoritarian administrative control over the church. If only everyone, irrespective of his personal ideas and lifestyle, would give loyalty to the individual or individuals appointed to rule the church, it is thought there would be quite adequate unity. Is this the kind of unity among believers that Christ wants? Is this what His Word teaches?

Others have looked for a unity of love and tolerance among Christians, despite marked differences of doctrinal belief. They argue that, since the very basis of the Christian message is love, unity should be possible even among those who hold contradictory interpretations of what Jesus and the apostles taught. In fact, people of varying philosophies are supposed to be able to worship together peacefully as long as they love one another. Is that true? Has history indicated that? Is the kind of Christian unity that Christ and the apostles extolled possible while His professed people are holding contradictory, irreconcilable ideas of Christian belief?

Some other Christians speak as though doctrinal unity is all that matters. In a quite unloving way, they try to force their views upon others and feel rewarded when everyone professes to believe as they do, even though love is absent from the hearts of their converts. This is the approach to unity that Jesus said was being practiced by the Pharisees of His day. Jesus' condemnation was very strong: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him more the child of hell than yourselves" (Matthew 23:15).

Everyone knows the value of unity in those areas of life requiring teamwork. No sporting team, business establishment, educational institution, or hospital can function with genuine efficiency unless people are willing to work together. Such teamwork usually requires the sacrifice of at least some of one's own personal desires and interests. "No man is an island." We have to live and work in a community of people, and that place demands upon us to cooperate with others.

What kind of cooperation does Christ want of us in the Christian church? What is the basis of the unity He wishes us to enjoy? Let us turn to the Scriptures and discover.

Objectives

First, we shall discuss unity based on commitment to Christ.

Second, we consider the importance of unity in doctrine.

Third, we note Christ's wish that we be united in character.

Fourth, we shall list a few things that destroy the unity of the church.

Fifth, we conclude by noting that the unity of the church before the second coming of Christ was prophesied by Bible writers and by Jesus.

I. Unity In Commitment To Christ

The very first condition to unity within the church is that its members are all thoroughly born-again Christians who have Christ reigning in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

The Word

1. To what extent are Christian believers to be united? Romans 12:5.
2. How does the communion service illustrate the unity of believers in Christ? 1 Corinthians 10:16-17.
3. In what way are national and racial differences transcended within the church? Galatians 3:27-28; Ephesians 2:14.
4. Who produces the unity in Christ enjoyed by believers? Ephesians 4:3-6.

Explanation: Christian believers are "one body in Christ, and everyone members one of another" (Romans 12:5). That thought is emphasized throughout the New Testament. We all believe in Christ, we all partake of Him symbolically in the Lord's Supper, and we all receive Him daily into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives to each of us the love of Jesus and renders us loving, merciful, tolerant people. We are not interested in discriminating against others in view of their nationality or race or in view of their personality differences. We are able to love all people, even those who do not believe as we do because Jesus died for all and loves all. This does not mean that we are willing to condone sin or false teaching. It simply means that we are determined to follow Jesus' methods in combating such things.

Relevance: Total commitment to Christ by every member of the church will inevitably result in unity of love, belief, and behavior. Of course, there are issues, that are not matters of Bible principle, on which there will be disagreement among us. And there are some practices, that are merely a matter of taste, in regard to which there will be differences of opinion. But, in terms of our religious commitments, what Christ said and did is what we wish to believe and practice. He is the criterion of our Christian life and conduct.

II. The Importance Of Unity In Doctrine

Would there be a Christian church if there were no unity in doctrinal beliefs? For example, if one person believes in the full Deity of Christ and His eternal pre-existence, while another person does not so believe, are they worshipping the same Savior? Can their fellowship be truly meaningful as long as they believe so differently?

The Word

5. How important is it that Christian believers teach the same truths? 1 Corinthians 1:10; 1 Timothy 1:3.
6. What danger is there in false doctrine? Ephesians 4:14-15; Galatians 1:6-8.
7. What instruction are we given regarding unity of mind? Philippians 1:27; 1 Peter 3:8.
8. Who brings believers into the unity of doctrinal understanding? With what documents will His teaching always be consistent? John 16:13, 26; 2 Timothy 3:14-17.

Explanation: The divisions within the Corinthian church in the time of the apostle Paul were not just matters of Christian practice. They involved variant teachings and doctrinal divergencies. Paul's instruction was as strong and clear as could be: "... that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). Such unity of belief cannot be imposed by church administrators; it must come from each individual's reception of the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit.

False doctrine is dangerous because it separates people from Christ. This is why Paul was so insistent that the doctrinal uncertainty of the early Christians should be replaced by acceptance of the inspired counsels of the Holy Spirit. In fact, he pronounced a curse upon those who taught otherwise than the Spirit had instructed. The disciples were to have unity of understanding and unity of belief.

Such unity comes from the Word of God as interpreted by the Spirit Himself. Any teaching that contradicts the Bible is not of God, and not for Christian believers. The Holy Spirit inspired the messages of the Bible in the first place (2 Peter 1:20-21), and He will never contradict His own messages. The Bible as interpreted by the Holy Spirit to the truly committed believer is the sure foundation of our doctrinal beliefs.

Relevance: Have you prayerfully sought an understanding of the teachings of Scripture? Always, Christ will be the center of the teachings He has given in His Word. Knowing Him and knowing what He teaches are inseparable. You do not really know any man until you know what He believes. And you only know Christ when you understand and accept His teaching.

III. Christ's Wish That We Be United In Character

Holiness in character is constantly upheld in the Scriptures as God's ideal for His people. Holiness is not intended to be the exclusive experience of a privileged few. It is for every believer.

The Word

9. How did Jesus emphasize His wish that His people be united in love and character? John 17:21-23.
10. What ideal of character development does God seek for His people? Ephesians 4:11-15.
11. In what words did the apostles stress the importance of unity in holiness? 1 Peter 1:15-16; Hebrews 12:14; Revelation 3:5.

Explanation: The character that Jesus wishes each of His followers to possess is stressed in His statement: "... I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one" (John 17:23). It is perfection in view of the perfect Deity dwelling in the heart of the believer. No fallen human being will be free from human imperfection this side of heaven. But every believing Christian is to be free of sin. Unity of character is to be characteristic of God's people because they have received by faith the character of Jesus Christ.

Paul spoke of "the perfecting of the saints." He referred to all Christians developing "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:12-13). Likeness to Christ in character is thus upheld before us as the divine intention for our lives.

Peter underlined the same truth when he urged that the followers of Jesus be holy "in all your conduct." As Jesus who called us is holy, so we are to be (1 Peter 1:15-16). Such holiness, which comes only as we receive the Holy Spirit into our hearts (Romans 8:9-10), is essential to those who wish to have eternal life with Christ (Hebrews 12:14). It is the one who, by the grace of Christ, overcomes sin because He has received the gift of the Spirit, who has the power to live a holy life, and who is qualified for heaven (Revelation 3:5). Holiness within is the basis of holiness manifested in conduct.

It stands to reason that the ideals | and character qualifications of those who receive this divine gift of holiness will be so in harmony that they will be united in the bonds of Christian fellowship.

Relevance: Are you seeking such a union with Christ by the Holy Spirit that you will be the recipient of His holiness and united in heart with others who are enjoying the same experience?

IV. What Destroys Unity?

The answer, in a word, is sin. It was this that first disturbed the unity of heaven, and throughout history, it has been a constant source of disunity among God's people.

The Word

12. What effect does pride have upon the body of believers? Proverbs 28:25; 1 Corinthians 4:18; Revelation 3:17.
13. What does persistence in sin by one or a few do to the church? Joshua 7:1; Jude 4, 11-13.
14. What is the effect upon the church of a conspiracy of unbelief? Matthew 8:34; Acts 17:5-6; (compare Revelation 17:3-6).

Explanation: Pride of opinion can destroy the unity of the church. One person who regards himself more highly than he regards his brethren and sisters can disrupt the peace and unity of the body of Christ. One reason for the disunity in the Christian church of the last days is that pride rules in the hearts of so many Loadiceans (Revelation 3:17).

The sin of any variety can destroy the church's unity. The Lord cannot bless His people when there is cherished sin amongst them. The suffering brought upon Israel by the sin of Achan is a case in point. Jude gives other examples and likens the sins of some professed Christians to the apostates who had afflicted the people of God in past ages. Cain, Balaam, and Korah are just three examples of men who destroyed the unity of God's people by cherishing sin in their lives.

When a group within the church unites to cause difficulties for the main body of believers, there is inevitable division and heartache within the church. Such a conspiracy of unbelief or evil is a tool in the hands of Satan to destroy the faith of those who may be weak spiritually. When the Gadarenes (KJV: Gergesenes) united to resist the influence of Jesus in their territory, they lost the richest blessing heaven could bestow upon them. When the Jews rejected Christ and the Christian message, they brought division and conflict around the Roman world. Just as destructive were the efforts of those within the church who taught false doctrine and strove to exalt themselves above others. (See Acts 15:1, 24; Galatians 2:4; 6:12).

Towards the end of time spiritual "Babylon" (Revelation 17:5) represents false Christian churches that have united with the world to persecute the true people of God who will not be diverted from Bible truth. Peace and unity are under violent attack, but God's faithful ones press together to live for Christ and proclaim His truth.

Relevance: The only way for each individual Christian to ensure that he is not a catalyst for disunity and conflict within the church is for him to live in an unbroken union with Jesus. Sin in one heart can result in division for the whole body of believers.

V. The Unity Of The Church Predicted

Bible prophets foresaw that before the second advent of Jesus, the Christian church would enjoy unity and strength.

The Word

15. What unity of belief and practice did Isaiah predict for God's people before the end of time? Isaiah 11:12-13; 52:8.
16. What similar prediction was made by Jeremiah? Jeremiah 50:4.
17. What statement of Jesus indicates that the Old Testament predictions will be fulfilled for the true church of Jesus Christ? John 10:16; (cf. Revelation 18:4-5).

Explanation: Old Testament prophets foresaw that God's people would come together again in a unity of love and devotion to the Lord. Since literal Israel failed to fulfill the divine purpose, these predictions refer in a secondary sense to the Christian church. (See Romans 9:8; Galatians 3:27-29). Now the promises of the Old Testament, which could have had a literal fulfillment had Israel accepted the Messiah, apply to the true church of Jesus Christ around the world.

Jesus emphasized the point when He said: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice, and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd" (John 10:16). Towards the end of time God will call out of "Babylon" those who wish to be true to Him and follow the counsels of the Holy Spirit (Revelation 18:4) Then God's people will be united in commitment to Christ, to the doctrines of the Bible, united in character because of the dwelling of the Spirit in their hearts, and united in their total rejection of sin as a way of life.

Relevance: Have you found unity of commitment and understanding with God's people? As you receive Jesus and His Word, this fellowship with others of the same faith will be your privilege. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1) Such a united fellowship with other believers is essential to your

peace of mind, and growth as a Christian. God has given us to one another so that we can encourage and support each other, contributing to one another's faith and providing emotional and material assistance in times of need.

May the Lord grant you a part in this united communion of the body of Christ.

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. Unity is merely a matter of obeying church rulers.
 - b. It is not important to believe the same doctrines as other people in the church.
 - c. Jesus wants His people to be united in character.
 - d. Sin of any kind is the cause of disunity in the church.
2. Discuss: What was the cause of disunity among the disciples of Jesus? How did Jesus handle the problem?