The Doctrine of the Church In These Times

By

Chester E. Tulga, D.D.

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CONSERVATIVE BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP   Illinois

Chapter 6

THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCHES: THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

"The fundamental problem of the Church is the existence of the Churches." (*Man's Disorder and GOD's Design*: Amsterdam Report, p. 17).

"There are two opposite errors on the whole subject which, always observable, are very prominent in modern times. One is the overvaluation of the importance of unity, as uniformity. This is rebuked by reason, Scripture, and the evidence of the fact that the HOLY GHOST does administer the work of CHRIST by sects and divisions. Much of the progress of the Gospel, and many of its most glorious achievements, at home and abroad, may be traced to the labors of Christian societies to a great extent independent of each other.

"But undervaluation of it is equally wrong. Though variety is ordained of GOD, the nearer to uniformity, or at least to thorough mutual recognition, the estate of Christendom can be made the better will it be for its peace and dignity and prosperity." W. B. Pope (*A Compendium of Christian Theology*, p. 275).

"The Almighty has always preferred union when men were disposed to do right, but disunion when they were engaged in wickedness." Thomas W. Phillips (*The Church of CHRIST*, p. 305)

"Though divisions have tended to obscure the ideal oneness of the Church and divert attention from it even as - an ideal, the very fact of division is an evidence of the seriousness with which Protestants take the concept of the Church. Every division has been the result of an effort to purify the Church or restore to it some precious element of its heritage that seemed to have been lost." W. E. Garrison (*A Protestant Manifesto*, p. 120)

"Among the suggested remedies for the present ills of Christianity one which finds many advocates today is Church union. The suggestion merits serious and indeed favorable consideration. The fact should not be overlooked, however, that the heightened interest in ecumenical Christianity with a view to the promotion of Church union is in part, and perhaps in the first instance one of the symptoms of the present debilitated condition of the various branches of the Christian Church . . . It is one of the more constructive phases of a strategic retreat," Douglas Clyde Macintosh (*Personal Religion*, p. 238).

"Luther did not want to form a separate Church; he was a monk and at first intended to remain a

monk, reforming the Church of his faith from within . . . Calvinistic Christians in England, impatient with the general strategy of waiting for reform within the Church of England, separated themselves out of the general group of Calvinists, for which they received the name of Separatists, eventually named Congregationalists . . . Methodism, not originally intended to be a separate Church, was founded by John Wesley," Robert S. Billheirner (*The Quest for Christian Unity*, pp. 14, 18, 19).

"My soul has been chilled by a decadent ecclesiasticism," Fredrick K. Stamm (*If This Be Religion*, p. 25)

In the early centuries of the Church, denominations did not exist, consequently there is no New Testament basis for denominationalism. In the larger sense, there was unity, and heresy and heretics played only a minor part in the Church life of those early centuries. The seeds of division, however, are seen in the New Testament where men were prone to follow human leaders, where heresies arise which, farther removed from the apostles, would flourish and gain many adherents. It can be said that, while there were emerging schools of thought, there were no recognized denominations.

Eventually, divisive factors became important and the first great division occurred between Eastern and Western Catholicism, a division which exists to this day. The Reformation under Luther and others produced a number of new groups which were separate from the Roman Church. The march of denominationalism had begun!

Many reformatory movements such as Methodism and others eventually crystallized into separate religious groups. The (now) strongly ecumenical Congregationalists began as Separatists, or Independents, now a term of disapproval in liberal circles. Many denominations had their beginnings in national or racial groups. Other groups owe their existence to some human leader, wise or unwise. The differences between some denominations are vital and to be respected; the differences between others are unimportant and there is no reason for their separate existence.

Denominational names, even scriptural names, have largely lost their meaning in our day and must be supported by adjectives or carefully distinguished to avoid confusion - they are more of a nuisance than a blessing in the religious world. Church leaders can hardly claim to have a cure for the disorder of the secular world when they have no solution for the problem in their own small ecclesiastical households of faith. The Christian world is cluttered up with religious antiques, needless divisions and a Babel terminology. The need for Christianity unity is great and beyond dispute, but the problems are many.

The Need

1. <u>The primary reason for unity is that our testimony for CHRIST might be more effective</u>. "That they may all be one as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may also be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:21). This prayer is not for oneness of organization as it is commonly interpreted by liberal leaders of the ecumenical movement, but a spiritual oneness that defies explanation or definition, the oneness of GOD and Son. Believers who are hid with CHRIST in GOD (Col. 3:3) are the ones for whom this unity is desired by

CHRIST, not the worldly mixture which is found in the Churches today.

While this prayer does not primarily refer to the organic unity of the Churches, which at best can never approximate the unity described here, yet there is every reason to think that our Lord desired the outward unity of His people when that unity is <u>based upon the Word of GOD, loyalty and devotion to our Lord, and fidelity to the fundamental doctrines of the faith</u>.

Churches of like faith should not permit mere human differences to keep them apart. The purpose of such unity is not that men may believe in the Church, nor extend the power of the Churches, but that men might believe in the Lord and CHRIST whom we preach. One does not have to be an advocate of the modern ecumenical movement, to assert that the 148 groups which form the World Council of Churches have no scriptural right to continue as separate bodies. One does not have to be an "ecumaniac" to assert that the hundreds of denominations in this country have no justification in Scripture or logic. Unity, however, must not be purchased at the cost of sacrificing fundamental doctrines of the faith, for the resulting unity would be unblessed of GOD. God prefers disunion for the rebellious (Genesis 6).

2. <u>Division breeds its own evils, however justifiable the original causes may have been</u>. There is an immense amount of wasted time and energy spent in trying to understand the minute doctrinal and organizational differences between these groups. These divisions confuse an already confused world. It is very difficult for the average man to understand the differences between General Baptists, Regular Baptists, Conservative Baptists, North American Baptists, Southern Baptists, American Baptists, Bible Baptists, Free Will Baptists, United Baptists, primitive Baptists and many others. The same could be said of Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Mennonites and others.

The economic waste of such endless divisions is enormous, with their separate ecclesiastical structures, their separate publishing enterprises, separate Church structures, separate mission societies and many other forms of waste. Again, we agree that waste is preferable to the surrender of precious convictions of truth, but in many cases these separate convictions do not exist. We are not pleading that truth and principle be sacrificed to unity, but we do assert that, where these differences are not vital, that the Spirit of GOD leads toward unity.

3. <u>Divisions among GOD's people hinder the accomplishment of Christian tasks</u>. Some communities are over-Churched, while others are under-Churched. Many home mission tasks are not being done, many orphanages are not being established, many slum areas have no missions, many things too numerous to mention are not being done for which the Churches are responsible to GOD. Divisions between GOD's people that hinder the work of GOD are not justified.

There are divisions which forward the work of GOD. Many over-Churched communities will be invaded by new organizations preaching the Gospel, because the Churches of that community have substituted religious notions for the Word of GOD. Such conditions both produce and perpetuate separation. It is always the duty of GOD's people to enter into any community regardless of the number of Churches if the Churches are not preaching the true Gospel. Care should be taken however, that this be the true motive for the new organization and not the enlargement of a denomination.

Liberal congregations which no longer have any doctrines to divide them might well unite. Just

why liberals, with few convictions and no theological differences to divide should cling so tenaciously to their separate denominational identities has always been a puzzle to Bible-believing people. The amazing unanimity among liberals on the ecumenical movement, and the few unions among them are hard to explain. Liberals with nothing to divide them might as well unite. Evangelicals of the same faith and not separated by vital convictions owe it to their Lord to be one in the sight of GOD and man.

The Scriptural Basis of Unity

1. The basis of Christian unity. "**All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works**" (II Timothy 3:16). "**The faith which was once delivered unto the saints**" (Jude 3). Thomas W. Phillips says truly, "The basis for the union of Christians must be a Christian basis. Among all the conventions that have been called for the union of different sects and parties they have never adopted a Christian basis. They have always attempted to form a human platform on which to unite, and, consequently, have always failed." (*The Church of CHRIST*, p. 311) He says further, "The Christian Church is a divine institution, and therefore it must have a divine constitution." (p. 311) The true basis of Christian unity must be the final authority of the Scriptures in faith and practice. There will always be permitted a reasonable latitude of interpretation due to the frailties of the human mind and the difficulty of exact interpretation, but this latitude of interpretation must not be used to deny the Fundamentals of the faith, to pervert the doctrines of the faith, or to rob the Christian faith of its original content as in the case of modernism, liberalism, neo-orthodoxy and other cults.

2. The basis of Christian unity must be the acceptance of the full New Testament stature of CHRIST as recorded and interpreted by the four evangelists and the apostles. Since CHRIST is the very Son of GOD (John 3:16), the Head of the Church (Colossians 1:18), the One who, with authority, gave the commission to the Church (Matthew 28:18-20), the position that unity must rest upon a full conception of His deity and authority is inescapable. To take any other position, or to allow too much latitude of interpretation here, is to be guilty of treason to our Lord. True Christian unity cannot compromise on the New Testament teachings concerning our Lord.

3. The basis of true Christian unity must include the autonomy of the local congregation of true believers, rejecting hierarchies and ecclesiastical authority over the Churches of CHRIST. The local government and final authority of the New Testament Churches is not an accident of history, but a divine provision against ecclesiasticism, the lessening of local responsibility to GOD for doctrine and practice, and total apostasy. New Testament congregations were independent, local assemblies, associating together voluntarily, with their group decisions advisory in nature (Acts 15). Christian unity must include this independence and direct responsibility of GOD for doctrine and life. (See *The Independence of the Local Church* by the author.)

4. The possibility and shadow of apostasy constantly threatens the peace and purity of the Churches. Paul, in the days of the early Church, warned against these things and even predicted their coming. "**Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of demons**" (I Timothy 4:1, 2).

"**This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves . . . having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away**" (II Timothy 3:1, 5). Peter and Jude sound the same note of warning and justify the rejection of heretics and apostates who threaten the peace and purity of the Churches.

True Christian unity cannot include apostasy, even though it is cloaked in religious language and enjoys ecclesiastical sanction. The modern ecumenical movement has no safeguards against apostasy and no testimony against apostasy, and its latitudinarianism may lead it into apostasy. Christian unity, beyond all question, must be thoroughly Christian in the biblical sense.

Four Types of Religious Unity

The new emphasis upon the Church has brought into being four types of movements toward religious unity.

1. <u>The one true Church type</u>. The Roman Catholic Church, and certain other groups take the position that they have the true form and doctrines of the Church, a valid ministry, and those who desire the unity of the Church should unite with them. Robert S. Billheimer (*The Quest for Christian Unity*, pp. 5, 6) says, "The Roman Catholic Church is not a party to the present ecumenical movement. She is not by her own choice and by virtue of her own position. From her viewpoint she is the only true Church on earth, CHRIST having passed His authority and His work exclusively to her. Union with Rome is possible, and can be discussed, only on the basis of a return to her basic position. She cannot and will not talk with Churches which demand that they be recognized as Churches. She can only as the true and righteous talk with the schismatic and heretic, with a view to their correction. For this reason the Roman Church does not appear in ecumenical discussion." Churches which believe they are the only true Church may be very close to the New Testament pattern, but will have little success in getting others to leave all and follow them.

2. <u>The liberal universal type</u>. The World Council, the various national councils, the state and city councils, are based upon the idea that all Church groups are a part of the universal Church, which they conceive to be the body of CHRIST, regardless of differences in belief or manner of life. The basis of membership in such unions is vague and plausibly simple to secure harmony. The underlying basis of fellowship is not a common faith in the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith but a common task. The organization is generally indifferent to belief or unbelief.

3. <u>The inclusive evangelical type</u>. Such evangelicals think there is a real need for a united evangelical front against modernism, for united action in certain fields of service, and a united testimony on certain issues. They are commonly organized on a confessional basis, professing faith in the Fundamentals of the Christian faith as held by true evangelicals through the years.

In the interests of a united front, Churches and individuals can subscribe to these Fundamentals, and at the same time serve and support denominational organizations which do not subscribe to these Fundamentals, and even deny them. Churches and individuals can give a portion of their income to the evangelical cause, while the rest of their contributions are used to support the very thing against which the evangelical fellowships are organized, making for confusion. This basic contradiction is seen in every department of the work of such fellowships. The inclusive

evangelical fellowships, attempting to hold consistent evangelicals in the same fellowship with inconsistent evangelicals, are continually in a state of tension between principle and practice. It cannot be thoroughly inclusive, it dare not be consistently exclusive in harmony with its theological confession. Unable to unite evangelicals on the basis of truth consistently applied, it appeals for love to overlook the violation of truth.

4. <u>The exclusive evangelical type</u>. These groups extend membership to such Churches which subscribe to their confession of faith and refuse fellowship to those who deny the Fundamentals of the faith, thus making religious fellowship confessional rather than experiential or expedient. This makes for consistency between profession and practice; between principle and policy.

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