The Challenge of Religious Unity

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The unanimous testimony of all credible witnesses to the religion of Jesus Christ, as accepted and lived by men and women in His day, describes a united movement, a single cause, a doctrinal and practical oneness that is unknown in our time! Since the Protestant Reformation, and in many respects even earlier than that, the image of Christianity has been one of competitive religious groups teaching conflicting theories and proclaiming divisive dogmas.

Our Lord Himself, in His famous prayer for the Apostles, said: "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me" (John 17:20, 21). Jesus prayed for a substantial unity of life, thought, and action just like that prevailing between Himself and God, the Father. Jesus said that He and His Father were as two witnesses in a court of law whose testimony agreed, thus providing an accurate judgment (John 8:16-18). We speak the same things, He also explained (John 12:49, 50). To see and know me is to see and know the Father, Jesus said to Philip (John 14:7-10). Of this relationship Jesus says simply, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). His prayer for all Christians is "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee."

The unity among God's people for which Jesus prayed is not accomplished externally by decree of council or vote of synod. Jesus revealed that the unity which would properly represent the relationship of Father and Son with their followers had to arise out of the context of discipleship. He taught this in the analogy of the vine and the branches in John, chapter fifteen, verses one through eight. Christ is "the true vine." God, the Father, is "the husbandman." Christians are the "branches" cleansed by the Word of God. No fruit can be borne by the branch that does not stay in constant contact with the vine, thus receiving the vine's strength and nature. Jesus promises, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7). All the branches participate in the common life of the one "true vine," Jesus Christ, and are cared for by the husbandman, God our Father.

Paul explained the unity of God's people, the Church, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, chapter twelve. The Church is the Body of Christ, the same apostle explained in letters to the churches in Ephesus and Colossae (Ephesians 1:22, 23; Colossians 1:18, 24). In I Corinthians, he compares the Body of Christ, the Church, with one's physical body. "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ" (I Corinthians 12:13). This oneness of the Christ's spiritual body occurs when men respond to His offer of forgiven sin and new life (Matthew 11:28-30; Luke 19:10; John 10:10). This calls for an obedient faith in Christ that, according to New Testament standards, expresses and actualizes itself initially in baptism (Mark 16:16). "For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free, and were all made to drink of one Spirit." Paul explains in the next verse of I Corinthians 12 (verse 13). Then in the thirteen verses that follow Paul makes his comparison between man's physical body and Christ's spiritual body, the Church. Among other things, he explains, "But now hath God set the members each one of them in the body, even as it pleased him. . . . But now they are many members, but one body" (I Corinthians 12:18, 20).

The concrete, visible, real unity of all Christians today is not optional. The Church of Jesus Christ is indivisible, and those who profess to represent Jesus on the earth today cannot do so while supporting denominational loyalties that create and maintain religious division. Addressing "the church of God" at Corinth, as well as "all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place," the Apostle Paul pleads: "Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all
speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Corinthians 1:10).

Fortunately many concerned churchmen in our day have become deeply troubled about a divided Christendom which, they readily admit, cannot properly represent Christ and His Church. The “ecumenical movement”, about which one has heard so much in recent years, is only about one hundred years old. Unfortunately, however, there are still many prominent religious leaders who illogically and unbiblically maintain that religious unity is not Christianity’s most pressing internal problem. The present call for denominational union is hardly more than a weak invitation to an interconfessional and interdenominational grouping that would neither resolve vital differences nor represent the Body of Christ among those so uniting. Theological liberalism with its denial of the authority, authenticity and inspiration of the Scriptures has spawned the idea that ultimately all men will be saved regardless of their response to Jesus Christ in this life. When this attitude, coupled with sociological and political interests, reflects much of the thinking of national and world ecumenical groups, one must stop and consider, “What is the challenge of religious unity in our time?” And this is the question I want us to answer in the time that remains today.

What then is the challenge of religious unity in our time? It is, first of all, the challenge to find a universal faith. In the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews we read: “God, having of old spoken unto the fathers by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son, . . .” (Hebrews 1:1, 2). God made known His Word for man in Jesus Christ. John says “the Word was God” and “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:3, 4). That Word is applicable to all men in every situation. When men respect God and His Word, obeying His will for them, there will be unity. God’s message universally proclaimed will create a universally common faith in Jesus Christ.

The challenge of religious unity is also one of finding a universal God. The God that Paul knew in Tarsus and whose grace he received was the same God that Christians receive (Acts 3:19), to publicly confirm our faith in Him by the baptism of the New Testament that also brings us remission of sins and the new spiritual life (Acts 2:38; I Corinthians 12:13; Romans 6:3, 4). When men and women who come to Christ come to fully honor God and His Word, to know His life in Christ, and to realize membership in His one body, religious unity will have been realized, as our Lord so prayed hundreds of years ago (John 17:20, 21).

true God’s House: “All the nations will stream to it, peoples without number will come to it” (Isaiah 2:2, 3, T.I.B.).

The challenge of religious unity, in the third place, is one of accepting a common Lord. Paul explained in the second chapter of his Epistle to the Philippians that the same man, Jesus, put to death by the Roman soldiers, was the resurrected Christ also subsequently exalted by God, and before whom every tongue would bow in His presence (Philippians 2:5-11). “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved,” Paul also stated (Romans 10:9). In accepting a common Lord, we come to an identical source of authority for all our religious convictions, to an identical sovereign for all our alliances and to the same governor of all our actions.

The challenge to find a singular source of spiritual life is also part of the quest for religious unity, Jesus taught plainly, “It is the spirit that giveth life; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life” (John 6:63). On another occasion He said, “He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, from within him shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). To this Paul adds in his Epistle to the Romans, “There is therefore now no condemnation that resteth upon them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death” (Romans 8:1, 2). If all men respect the teachings of Christ, if all submit to Christ’s sway over their lives, if all come to a spiritual union with Christ, all will participate in the common life of God, the common spiritual vitality given to Christians.

The concern for religious unity also creates the challenge of finding a common religious authority. The New Testament is the inspired record of Christ’s life and its teachings, as well as the chronicle of how His teaching affected the lives of first-century men, then with the proper understanding of New Testament teachings we can obey Christ, receiving the same blessings enjoyed in those early years of the Church’s greatest strength and unity.

An inspired apostle of Christ charges us: “Now I beseech you, brethren, (i.e., “all the Christians at Corinth”) and “all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”) that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (II Corinthians 1:1, 2, 10).

I echo the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ today as I call on all of us to believe in Him as the Son of God (Matthew 16:16-18), to repent of our rebellion against God (Acts 3:19), to publicly confirm our faith in Him (Romans 10:9, 10), and to become spiritually united with Him by the baptism of the New Testament that also brings us remission of sins and the new spiritual life (Acts 2:38; I Corinthians 12:13; Romans 6:3, 4). When men and women who come to Christ come to fully honor God and His Word, to know His life in Christ, and to realize membership in His one body, religious unity will have been realized, as our Lord so prayed hundreds of years ago (John 17:20, 21).
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He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, “The Praying Christ and Other Sermons” and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville’s Young Man of the Year in 1963.