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God's Ecumenical Plan No.1

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The Protestant Reformation accomplished many desired objectives. But one cannot be accurate respecting the reformation heritage without sadly recognizing the differing religious denominations which resulted. For more than three hundred years the prevailing thought within so-called Christendom has supported and encouraged the denominational differences. The denominational theory says that "one way is as good as another" and "the more differences the merrier." But sober Bible study leads one to an entirely different conclusion. The denominational lines that have divided us for centuries are in direct, open, flagrant violation of explicit and implicit Biblical truth!

Fortunately the kind of thinking that promoted this religious disunity has largely disappeared with the dawn of "the ecumenical era." Many prominent voices have long cried "in the wilderness" of church disunion. A religious leader on the American frontier remarked in 1809, "That division among Christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many evils. It is anti-Christian, as it destroys the visible unity of the body of Christ; as if he were divided against himself" (p. 112, Thomas Campbell, "Declaration and Address" pp. 71-209, Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union).

In our own time Oscar Cullmann, a continental theologian, has raised his voice along with many others to say, "What does the New Testament say about the unity of the church? If we ask the question from this point of view, then it is clear that we cannot be satisfied with the radical division of the church in the present day" (p. 11, A Message to Catholics and Protestants).

“How did all this division arise?” we ask. I charge that the refusal to honor the Bible as God's final and full revelation to modern man has created the divisions that curse Christianity today! “What is the answer?” you ask. William Barclay provides us the answer when he writes, “It is God's design and God's purpose that all this disunity and disharmony should be resolved in Christ, that all men and all nations should become one in Christ, that in Christ the differences should be abolished and the separating walls torn down” (p. 157, Daily Bible Study Guide, Galatians-Ephesians).

God does have an answer. The Bible provides in full detail a plan for the unity of all Christians. It is a divine answer to a human problem. I call it "God's ecumenical plan." Listen as we read from Ephesians 4 the heavenly solution to our spiritually torn world. "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, (writes the apostle Paul, jac) beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all” (Ephesians 4:1-6).

The first truth that makes an impact on us when reading these six verses of Ephesians, chapter 4, is that unity is the Christian's responsibility. No one is to blame for disharmony among the followers of God but the followers themselves. The promotion of unity is the Christian's responsibility. The first three verses of our reading clearly reveal this principle. Notice the development of Paul's thought in this passage.

The Christian is urged to live a life in keeping with his call. Paul's words are “walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, . . . .” (Ephesians 4:1). Reflection on the nature of the Christian's call provides one insight and inspiration. It is "the high calling of God in Christ Jesus," Paul explains in Philippians 3:14. Remember what you heard, believed, and accepted, is our admonition in this passage. The Christian is called by God to the most thrilling, most responsible, most rewarding life one can live.

Following this admonition the writer describes the Christian life with five positive attitudes. Here are
Paul’s words: “Walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love . . . ” (Ephesians 4:1-2). Paul once described his own conduct as “serving the Lord with all lowliness of mind” (Acts 20:19). This lowliness calls for “profound humility” on the Christian’s part. Jesus suggested the meek would inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). The Christian demonstrates meekness through “gentle but disciplined living.” The Holy Spirit in the Christian’s life encourages one to be “longsuffering” (Galatians 5:22, 23). Such an “enduring temperament” results from Christian love (I Corinthians 13:4).

A fourth attitude of the Christian is forbearance or “patient self-possession.” Paul encourages us to “Let your forbearance be known unto all men” (Philippians 2:14). Finally, Paul suggests that the Christian living in agreement with his high calling will display genuine love for mankind. The apostle wrote on another occasion, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). In lowliness, meekness, longsuffering, forbearance, and love the Christian lives a triumphant, meaningful life after the very nature of the great call of God.

At this point, after urging a life in keeping with the Christian’s call and describing the Christian’s life with five positive attitudes, the inspired writer reveals religious unity as one of the Christian’s great concerns. Read with me again the first three verses of our text. The “unity of the Spirit” or “bond of peace” does not permit the confusion, division, conflict, and misunderstanding that prevails in our time.

Our Lord’s prayer that all “believers” might experience the unity of Him and His Father should eliminate any question about the Christian’s responsibility to encourage religious unity (John 17:20, 21).

Paul wrote all the Christians in Corinth and in addition addressed his inspired remarks to “all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place” (I Corinthians 1:1, 2). At verse ten of the first chapter of this epistle the author urges “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). The very nature of the Lord’s Supper requires that all Christians seek a real oneness in the midst of a divided world.

Paul wrote, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ? seeing that we, who are many, are one bread, one body: for we all partake of the one bread” (I Corinthians 10:16, 17). Every principle of God’s Word for our age requires that the Christian seek, promote, and realize with other Christians religious unity.

The question we now ask arises out of the discussion that has just occurred, “Of what must this unity consist?” Has God left us an answer? Many ecumenical leaders say, “No.” They suggest that everything changes, and our modern world has certainly changed. Any Biblical forms for unity might have been acceptable in primitive times but not in our own. My question, however, is, “Who decides which plan of union to follow?” My plan, to me at least, may be either just as good or better than another’s plan. My friends, mark this well. If we concede that the Biblical norms for religious unity are no longer relevant for our time then we have surrendered the possibility of any substantial unity like that described and commanded in God’s Word! Dr. James DeForest Murch properly assesses our contemporary dilemma in the following statements.

“Ecclesiastical leaders, comparable to those of Christ’s day, have set themselves up as arbiters of truth and rulers over God’s heritage. Repudiating the Christ of the Holy Scriptures, they attribute their liberal doctrines, heretical practices and revolutionary programs to ‘the will of Christ’ and ‘the leadership of the Holy Spirit.’ They claim freedom from ‘the dead letter’ of Scripture and access to special channels of communication with Christ vouchsafed them by their status as church officials” (p. 5, The Free Church).

Early in the history of the United States men in widely varied positions and locations began to despair of Christianity as represented by the ‘warring sects’ on the frontier. Many small wilderness communities would go without spiritual nourishment for months, and when a visiting preacher came to the settlement he would be boycotted by those not espousing his peculiar “brand” of religion. It was also during this same period that American churches like their counterparts in England and Europe were beginning to assume hardened denominational forms.

One man, James O’Kelly watched the societies originally encouraged by John Wesley slowly turn into a well-organized hierarchy. At that group’s Christmas Conference, 1793, O’Kelly severed his ties with this group. Out of his move came a group who later formulated what they called the “Five Cardinal Principles of the Christian Church.” These propositions stated that “Christ is the only head of the church; “the name Christian is the only acceptable name; “the Bible is the only rule of faith; “Christian character is the only test of church fellowship . . . ; and “the right of private judgment is the privilege of all” (p. 312, F. W. Mattox and John McLaren, The Eternal Kingdom).

At a meeting on August 4, 1794, a member of this group, Rice Haggard, arose with His Bible in hand and said, “Brethren, this is a sufficient rule of faith and practice, and by it we are told what we call Christians, and I move that hence forth and for ever the followers of Christ be known as Christians simply” (p. 116, W. E. MacClenny, The Life of Rev. James O’Kelly). A considerable influence was exerted by these men in the areas of Virginia, North and South Carolina.

Somewhat later, during the years 1803 and 1804, Abner Jones and Elias Smith felt the necessity to withdraw from a prominent denomination in New England because of the church’s failure to teach only those things authorized in the Bible. Out of their efforts to be “Christians only” came a number of congregations in Vermont and New Hampshire and the “first American religious newspaper” called the Herald of Gospel Liberty.

The rigid and unscriptural Calvinism of his day
caused Barton W. Stone, a Kentucky preacher, in 1803 to leave the organized church with which he had been affiliated. He and several other preachers formed the "Springfield Presbytery." But before the middle of the next year Stone's group realized they had only added to the religious divisions by forming the Presbytery. Writing an unusual document called "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" this group published their desires for New Testament Christianity. Speaking of the presbytery they had formed, they wrote, "We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one Body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling" (p. 20, "Last Will and Testament of Springfield Presbytery," pp. 19-26, Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union).

Later in the same document they directed, "We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven: and as many as are offended with other books, which stand in competition with it, may cast them into the fire if they choose; for it is better to enter into life having one book, than having many to be cast into hell" (p. 21, ibid). As a result of this devotion to God's Word as the sole source of authority in Christianity, Barton W. Stone led more than 15,000 persons to the same convictions by the year 1830 (p. 94, James DeForest Murch, Christians Only).

In 1807 a Presbyterian minister, Thomas Campbell, moved to the United States from Ireland. For two years Campbell attempted to properly represent his denomination on the frontier of Western Pennsylvania. He could never understand why all professing followers of Christ in the rural outposts to which he ministered should not worship together. In fact his convictions became so strong that when the Associate Synod of America would not allow such "union services" Campbell found himself in a strange land at forty-six years of age without a formal connection with an established denomination. "But he still had God and the respect of a host of Christian people in the community who gloried in his bold stand for the unalloyed 'faith which was once delivered unto the saints!'," (p. 39, Dr. James DeForest Murch, Christians Only.)

Out of this experience came from the pen of Thomas Campbell a document known as the "Declaration and Address." This work has been called by Dr. James DeForest Murch "...the earliest and a most important document in the background of the modern Ecumenical movement, the basic Biblical principles by which the union of all Christians might be accomplished" (p. 35, ibid). Four basic ideas are prominent in this document: the authority of the Holy Scriptures; the individual Christian's responsibility before God and the right of private judgment; the evil of sectarianism; and the way to peace and unity in the body of Christ is through conformity to the teachings of the Holy Scriptures (p. 43, ibid).

At almost the same time Thomas Campbell completed writing the "Declaration and Address" his wife and children arrived in America. With their coming Thomas found a great helper in his son Alexander who was fresh from a year's study at the University of Glasgow. During the next sixty years these men along with those already mentioned were to see the effort to restore Christianity after the Biblical order enlist the aid of hundreds of thousands and to become "the largest free church movement of distinctly American origins" (p. 49, Murch, The Free Church).

The plea of the men we have mentioned and our plea today is the unity of all Christians through restoration of the New Testament pattern of the church. We plead today for "the centrality of Christ" in your life. The divinity of Christ is the rock on which the church is established, Jesus Himself taught in Matthew 16:16-18. To seek Christ and proclaim him "Lord" as required by God's Word is to "think only what would please Him, do only what He commands, ... " (p. 368, Murch, Christians Only).

We plead today for a return to Biblical authority. God has a word for today's man (Hebrews 1:1,2). It is God's final, full revelation for every essential detail in our conduct and worship (Galatians 1:6-8; Revelation 22:18, 19). We can all unite on obvious Biblical principles regarding the life of the church and the Christian.

We plead today for the one body of Christ, the united church. Into that body we are all baptized, Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12 (Verse 13). That united church is fully described in the New Testament as to name, creed, rule of faith and practice, ordinances, government, and mission. You become a part of it by becoming a Christian—obeying Christ—in complete faith or trust (John 3:16), through genuine repentance (Luke 13:3), by open confession of your faith (Romans 10:9, 10), and with immersion in water (Acts 8:36-38). Our call today is for God's ecumenical plan—the one church of the Bible—to be realized in your life through humble and penitent return to God's Word, the Bible.