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God's Ecumenical Plan No.2

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Even the casual observer is struck by the divisions that exist today within so-called “Christendom.” Religious groups have multiplied in our time giving stark testimony to modern man’s spiritual rebellion and unwillingness to appreciate the oneness found in Christ and assured by God in His Word, the Bible. Last week we noticed in detail the first three verses of Ephesians 4. Today we continue our study of “God’s ecumenical plan” by looking closely at the plan itself as set forth in the next three verses of the same chapter. We re-read the verses studied last week in preparation for today’s discussion. “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

In the words of Carl F. H. Henry, “We long for a day when labels will fall away because believers so reflect the truth of God and show the love of God that the simple term ‘Christian’ recovers its apostolic purity. We weary of man-made mechanisms for repairing the man-made deformities of the Church of Christ” (p. 13, “Evangelicals and Ecumenism,” Christianity Today, May 27, 1966).

God has not left us to human forms and agreements—the devices and plans of men. Peter reminds us that God in His power gave us in the Bible “all things that pertain unto life and godliness” (II Peter 1:3). The apostle Paul directs us to “the inspired scriptures” that furnish “the man of God” completely, giving him the necessary direction for “all good works” (II Timothy 3:16,17). I believe God’s Word presents us a workable, effective method for religious unity. Listen to the inspired description of this divine platform for unity, “God’s ecumenical plan.” “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 4:4-6).

T. K. Abbott says that these verses “... express the objective unity belonging to the Christian dispensation in all its aspects” (p. 107, International Critical Commentary, Ephesians—Galatians). Another student of this passage writes, “These seven elements constitute the true unity of the Church” (p. 147, W. G. Blaikie, Pulpit Commentary, Vol. 20). Charles W. Carter, editor of a recently published work on this New Testament book says, “Paul lays down a sevenfold basis for the unity of the Church, which might be called the spiritual constitution of the Church” (p. 407, Wesleyan Bible Commentary, Vol. V).

These random samplings of the unanimous voice of Biblical scholarship in our time point to “objective unity,” the “true unity,” and “the spiritual constitution of the Church.” Make no mistake, God here reveals through the inspired apostle Paul the divine ecumenical plan.

First, God’s ecumenical plan calls for One church. This church is identified throughout the New Testament in its essential nature as “the body of Christ” (Ephesians 1:22,23; Colossians 1:18,24). Its oneness is illustrated by the unity of man’s physical body (I Corinthians 12:12-20) and with Christ’s analogy of the vine and the branches (John 15:1-8). Contrary to what in the past
was a very common but incorrect approach to this analogy, Jesus makes it clear that the individual Christian is represented by the branch. These branches are not religious denominations as a clear reading of the passage indicates but individual Christians all united with Christ and one another.

The one body of Christ, the united Church, is fully explained in 1 Corinthians 12. Paul says, "For as the (physical, jac) body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. 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. For the body is not one member, but many" (I Corinthians 12:12-14). This passage is but the beginning of a detailed explanation of the church as the body of Christ whose oneness is comparable to that of the physical body with its many organs, limbs, and members in full cooperation and unity.

The unusual objection here is stated like this, “The real body... is not synonymous with any single outward society” (p. 147, Blicke, op. cit.). One does not read the New Testament long before discovering that this was not true in New Testament times. Paul addresses his instructions about unity of speech and judgment—real, visible unity—not only to all the Christians at Corinth but also all “that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place” (I Corinthians 1:1, 2, 10). When the apostle wrote the church at Philippi he saluted her in these words, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: . . . .” (Philippians 1:1).

Here was one visible body of Christians, the church of Jesus Christ, with a definite group of spiritual leaders. The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order recognized this New Testament principle stating "It is in the local community that the scandal of Christian disunity is particularly conspicuous and injurious. Therefore it is in each place where people live, work, and worship, that our partnership in the Body of Christ has to be made manifest and lived out" (Quoted by Minus and Core, Christian Century, Feb. 9, 1966, Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, W.C.C., 1963).

This World Council of Churches' gathering further declared that the “... proving ground of unity is the local church” (Ibid). My friends, when God's ecumenical plan calls for one body or united church, do not be misled by “the invisible church” advocates. Such categories do not fulfill the Biblical meaning of the “one body.”

God's ecumenical plan is executed by the one Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 4:4 we read, “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; . . . .” (Ephesians 4:4). Earlier in Ephesians Paul says we all “have our access in one Spirit unto the Father” (Ephesians 2:18). This is the Holy Spirit of God who works through one's baptism into Christ making him a member of Christ's one body.

Paul explains in I Corinthians 12, “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. For the body is not one member, but many.” This is the birth of “water and the Spirit” that our Lord taught as necessary to enter the Kingdom of God—the One Body of Christ. F. W. Grosheide has observed that “... baptism as such is not performed by the Spirit. But baptism is only valid if there is a working of the Spirit” (p. 293, footnote, New International Commentary, I Corinthians).

This is what the apostle Paul says in Titus 3:5, “not by works in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly, through Jesus Christ our Saviour” (Titus 3:5, 6). Neither the National Council of Churches nor the World Council of Churches can ever forge the ONE BODY that God's ecumenical plan requires.

This great church of all the saved will be a visible reality only as it is shaped and created by the power of the ONE SPIRIT—GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT. "The gift of the Holy Spirit" is given to those who repent of their sins and are baptized into Christ, according to Acts 2:38 and Acts 5:32. This means that by my individual obedience and surrender to Christ according to New Testament teaching I receive God's One Spirit and thereby become a member of Christ's One Body, the church.

The unity created by God's ecumenical plan, in the third place, rests on the common hope of all Christians. Paul's words in our text say, “even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling” (Ephesians 4:4). This is the hope of being "the people of God" (Romans 9:25). In “time past,” the apostle Peter remembers, "we were no people, but now are the people of God" (I Peter 2:9, 10). God has finally revealed His secret "mystery," Paul remarks in Colossians 1:27, "which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." Because of the Christian's justification through faith he rejoices “in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1, 2).

Every child of God knows the experiences about which I have just spoken. These common events in all our lives can only produce a common hope, “even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling.” This hope, Peter reminds us in his first General Epistle, is “a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (I Peter 1:3).

God's ecumenical plan centers in the one Lord Jesus Christ. The proclamation of this great spiritual fact cannot be separated from the previous three elements in the divine plan for religious unity. Paul reminds us that "no man can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit" (I Corinthians 12:3).

The one Spirit of God witnesses to the one Lord Jesus, sent from God! The one Lord is what we confess in surrendering to God for salvation. The Scripture teaches, "because if thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved: . . . ." (Romans 10:9). The pagan and the Christian are compared and contrasted in I Corinthians 8 with the major difference being, "yet to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him" (I Corinthians 8:6).

The oneness of Jesus Christ is a concrete unity that affects all who surrender to Him. In the words of the apostle Paul, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek: for the same Lord is Lord of all, and is rich unto all that call upon him: . . . .” (Romans 10:12).

Since this "one Lord" is the one head of the "one body," I find it inconceivable to believe that our present divisions and denominational differences can in any significant sense represent the church of the New Testament (Colossians 1:18, 24; Ephesians 1:22, 23).

God's ecumenical plan again demands the same faith of all men. Ephesians 4:4 not only talks of "one Lord" but also calls for "one faith." Later in the same chapter we read of "the unity of the faith" which is further described as requiring "a (common) knowledge of the Son of God" and creating "a (spiritually) fullgrown man" whose "stature" approximates "the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

The "one faith" taught in our text is "the faith of the gospel" or the belief in Christ as God's son, which
is created as one listens, ponders, examines, and accepts the testimony of Christ (Philippians 1:27; Romans 10:14, 15, 17). Faith, Paul says, comes from hearing the word or gospel of Christ (Romans 10:17). If we hear the same gospel—the one gospel of Christ—we will come to the same faith—the one faith. This one faith never changes in two essential details.

First, the manner in which we fulfill, express, or ratify that faith is fully described by command and example in the New Testament. As an example, the jailor at Philippi and his family are declared to be “believers in God” in Acts 16 only after hearing the gospel, repenting of their sins, and accepting baptism into Christ (Acts 16:30-34).

Second, this one faith remains the same in content. Jude instructs us to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3), and the apostle Paul charges the churches of Galatia to permit no perversion of the message of Christ already fully preached and completely accepted at the time of its dedication (Galatians 1:6-9). E. K. Simpson recently wrote, “The church rests on the given (Forsyth), not on the conjectural or subjective data” (p 90, New International Commentary, Ephesians).

This faith comes as we listen to the “given” story of Christ and totally commit ourselves to Him in obedient faith (John 20:30; 31).

God’s ecumenical plan also includes the one baptism as man’s uniting step with God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and all present-day Christians. The New Testament teaches that this “one baptism” brings one into living connection with the “one Lord” (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27). Furthermore, the “one baptism” brings the penitent believer into the “one body” (I Corinthians 12:13). In view of the things just said it is also clear that the “one baptism” is the New Testament way to express and ratify our “one faith” in Christ as Lord (Acts 19:1-5; Mark 16:16). It is at this point that one’s sins are pardoned and his “new life” begins, thus allowing God to make him a “member” of the “one body” of Christ—the church (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 6:4; I Corinthians 12:13, 18). A thorough study of the New Testament leaves no question but that this “one baptism” just described is an immersion in water for those who have prepared for it by coming to faith in Christ, repenting of all sins, and publicly confessing Christ.

The ecumenical plan we urge today culminates in the one true “God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all” (Ephesians 4:6). The Old Testament religion arose out of one principle reality, “I am Jehovah thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2, 3). This is the first commandment in the Decalogue. But such a foundation was not confined to the Old Testament.

Paul expresses the essential Christian faith when he says, “to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him” (I Corinthians 8:6). This is the God “who worketh all things in all,” the apostle explains in I Corinthians 12:6. The expressions “over all, and through all, and in all” point to God’s sovereignty, supremacy, imminence, providence, abiding presence, and indwelling nature. These phrases show “… what He is to the Christian people in His dominion over them and His gracious operative presence in them” (p 323, W. Robertson Nicoll, Expositor’s Greek Testament, III).

We conclude with the words of Romans 11:36, “For of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen.”

The New Testament “furnishes the man of God completely” regarding the how of religious unity. (II Timothy 3:16,17). “The church is one body, having one Spirit in it, and one Lord over it; then its inner relations and outer ordinances are one too; its calling has attached to it one hope; its means of union to Him is one faith; its dedication is one baptism: and all this unity is but the impress of the great primal unity—one God” (p. 276, John Eadie, Commentary on Ephesians).

I beg you this very hour to hear the one gospel from the one God and come to the one faith in the one Lord, which when expressed in the one baptism brings you into union with the one body through the one Spirit, and creates within you the one hope for all eternity. This, my friend, is God’s ecumenical plan.