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“Unity: The True and the False”

by Thomas Ice

During the Los Angeles riots of the early '90s, Rodney King made an impassioned media appeal in an attempt to quell the violence when he said, “Why can’t we all just get along?” A similar sentiment has become an evangelical mantra in the late 1990s. We are frequently told today that unity will bring a much needed revival to the American church, but only if we’ll all “just get along.” What does the Bible have to say about unity and ecumenicalism?

EVANGELICAL ECUMENICALISM

The last few years have witnessed a shift in aggressive ecumenicalism from Liberals to Charismatics and now to Evangelicalism. We are told that we must unite with any and everyone (including Catholics and even Mormons) so that our evangelism efforts will bear fruit. Sure we can maintain our doctrinal distinctives, but those should not be a barrier to this new spirit of group participation. For example, Joe Stowell, President of Moody Bible Institute participated in The National Consultation on Evangelism on May 1, 1996 near Washington, D.C. It is reported that he “reminded participants that God historically moves only when His body is unified.”¹ Joe Aldrich, then president of Multnomah School of the Bible, argues that unity is the universal cure for all spiritual ailments.

Its presence would silence the critic and attract the unconvinced. Its presence would release large amounts of spiritual energy. Remember, where it exists, God commands his blessing (see Psalm 33). When Present, unity scatters hope in every direction.

Its return would be a miracle.

Friend, we’re talking about UNITY. Not uniformity, not even union, but unity.²

I recently recall hearing a charismatic espouse the following formula for effective evangelism in any community: “If a city has 10% unity, then there will be 10% response to the gospel. If 30%, then 30% response. If 80% unity, then an 80% response to the gospel.” The implication was that if you or your church don’t participate in city-wide events, then your non-participation would prevent people from getting saved. Such Evangelical superstition is increasingly common in our day. However, no such thing is taught in the Bible.

BIBLICAL UNITY

The New Testament does teach us about the unity of Christ’s Body—the Church. However, I believe that it is very different than many popular notions that are even penetrating some IFCA churches through such recent movements like the “March for Jesus” and “Promise Keepers.” Both organizations were conceived within the Vineyard movement of the late John Wimber and have as goals a unity that is in conflict with the New Testament faith.

There are two unity passages in the New Testament that we should consider in order to understand this issue (John 17:11, 21-22; Ephesians 4:3, 13). Correspondingly, I see two aspects to biblical unity. John 17 speaks of *positional* unity, while Ephesians 4 instructs Believers about *experiential* unity. Confusion of these two aspects of unity are at the core of the error of ecumenical unity.

POSITIONAL UNITY

John 17:21 says, “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.” This passage in Christ’s High Priestly prayer is a seed-plot statement about Church Age Believers being placed into the Body of Christ and thus union with the Triune God. This is a forensic work done by God in the bookkeeping room in heaven at the moment of salvation on behalf of all believers. It is not an experience, even though this act will be the

basis for experience with our Lord. The unity spoken of in this verse is not the result of any human act. It is a sovereign work of God when an individual believes the gospel. Every Believer in Christ is in unity with the Triune God and every other Believer in the history of the Church because God has never failed to fulfill what He said He would do. Nothing in this passage speaks of any human activity. At this point, the Believer is passive. It is a statement of what God will do on our behalf. I am confident that God The Father answered His Son's prayer.

The increasingly popular teaching that experiential unity is the basis for greater results in evangelism or will bring revival cannot be supported from this passage. Further, the phrase, "that they may all be one" refers to the union of Jew and Gentile into one body, the Body of Christ. This was accomplished, as Paul teaches in Ephesians 2—3, with the birth of the church as Jewish and Gentile Believers are co-equal in the Body of Christ. They are made one—positionally—enabling the world (i.e., the Gentiles who were previously "without God in the world" [Ephesians 2:12]) to now have access to God through Christ. It is instructive at this point to read Ephesians 2:11–22 paying attention to the phrases of unity that Gentiles now enjoy with saved Jews on the basis of Christ's work for the Body of Christ. Jesus prayed for it in John 17 before the cross and Paul reports on the fact that Christ's work is an answer to the prayer.

EXPERIENTIAL UNITY

I recall our church history professor in seminary noting that the basic of theological error of holiness and Pentecostal/charismatic theology is their confusion of positional and experiential truth. For example, the idea of sinless perfection was erroneously developed by teaching that we could experience what Christ has done for us (usually related to justification) with what He has enabled us to experience in our Christian walk (usually related to sanctification). This same error is at the heart of those who think that Believers will ever experience the type of union that Christ has provided for us positionally. However, Paul does teach in Ephesians 4 that there is a basis for experiential union. Simply put, doctrine is the basis for experiential union. Strangely, this is the very item that current ecumenicists insist must be set aside if we are to have their kind of unity and its fruits. The context of Ephesians 4 is that of doctrine.

until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:13–16)

CONCLUSION

The basis for Christians getting together to do things for Christ is to be based upon what we believe and not on the liberal counterfeit of setting aside our beliefs to accomplish some greater good. Starting at Babel, apostates have always wanted to get together to accomplish some great feat, to "make for ourselves a name" (Genesis 11:4) through the power of numbers. Yet, God Himself judged them by scattering them. Today we see the same spirit telling us that we should lay aside God's Word, come together with any willing soul in order to accomplish some great task—evangelism. History has shown that Satan still uses the same basic lie of Babel, but he has refined it by attempting to blend it with some degree of the truth.

The IFCA and similar organizations were formed earlier this century as a response to liberalism. Their basis for fellowship was a doctrinal one based upon a faithful adherence to God's Word. Our forefathers fought the battles of their day and stood strong regardless of the circumstances. Years later the issues have changed (at least their packaging), yet the

basic issue remains the same: Are we going to express our loyalty to our Lord Jesus Christ in the way He has prescribed devotion—doctrinally? Or, will our hearts be stolen away by the promise of pseudo-success if we will all just get along?

¹Gary Thomas, “Leaders Map Out Evangelism Plan,” *Charisma*, July 1996, p. 22.

²Joe Aldrich, *Prayer Summits: Seeking God’s Agenda for Your Community* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1992), p. 9.