

***We're Different
Because...***

By Carl McMurray

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Cover: Patriotic gentlemen work for the Yutana Barge Line in Nenana, Alaska, on the Tanana River. Photography by Sarah McMurray, for photography info email sarah@spiritbuilding.com

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LESSON 1**BECAUSE WE BELIEVE IN
UNITY, NOT JUST UNION**

There can be no question that our God desires unity among His children. That is evident in the prayer of our Lord shortly before He was betrayed as well as in the direction of the Holy Spirit given through the apostle Paul to the Ephesian Christians. Three thoughts stand out from these passages that are worthy of some meditation on our part.

Religious Unity is Only Found in God's Word

Jesus prayed to this end, that all who came to belief because of apostolic teaching ought to be one. Unity will not be found in men's opinions. It is foolish to even consider that people from diverse backgrounds and educational levels might all magically arrive at the same opinion together. Quite to the contrary, opinions of men each based on their own thoughts and feelings, have always been great causes for division. Our own opinions may be wonderful fertilizer for our own pride, but they have little bearing on what God desires and even less power to join hearts together in harmony.

Even in the Old Testament, God made Israel to understand that He did not need the additional thoughts (i.e., opinions) of men, nor should any man subtract anything from that which He had given, Deuteronomy 4:1-2. Division and disharmony occurred when Israel rejected God's decisions in favor of their own. In one case they wanted their own leader instead of God's qualified man, Numbers 16:1ff. It was depending on human wisdom that divided Israel in the days of Rehoboam, following the death of King Solomon, and it was pride that kept it divided as Jeroboam led the Northern Kingdom into idolatry in order to remain as king. These things are written as our _____, 1 Corinthians 10:11-12, so that we might clearly understand that unity (as well as peace, security and salvation) is to be found in following God's will alone, without the mixture of human opinion.

The New Testament echoes these same sentiments revealing to us God's unchanging nature when it comes to His own authority. In the teaching of our Lord, we find that He holds men accountable who seek to mix their own traditions with God's commandments. Two percent of poison mixed with 98 percent good food makes a potent mixture for killing rats. Jesus' statements were to the effect that mixing men's traditions with God's word adulterates sincere worship making it _____ (i.e., empty, worthless, of no account), Mark 7:1-9. Unity does not come from men's traditions any more than it comes from his opinions. In fact, mixing God's word with either of the above creates a "poisonous stew" that may have the appearance of spirituality, but, in fact, leads one to spiritual death because of worthless worship and disobedience.

Revelation 22:18-19 is another signpost that God has affixed in His word with the same message. Don't add to and don't subtract from God's revealed will. That is where unity will be found.



Unity is a Matter of Diligence

The apostle says to "be diligent" toward keeping unity. Diligence is effort, work, and concern. In other words, unity is something we have to work at. It doesn't just happen, it has to be created and nurtured and developed. It needs watching and caring for as well as protecting sometimes. It is something worth being concerned about when problems arise. While we give thought to answering questions, we should also be giving thought to "how" we answer them and "what effect" our words and our actions have on others. That's part of putting forth effort to keep unity. This is not to say that one should hold back truthful answers because it might hurt someone's feelings or turn one away. It is to say what Paul said in Colossians 4:5-6. We should use wisdom in our conduct and grace in our speech so that we can respond properly and make the most of our opportunities.

**Colossians 4:5-6
Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person.**

Unity is something that requires work. It takes work to sit on our pride and allow another's judgment to have priority over our own. It takes work to consider others as more important than ourselves. It takes work to control our temper when we feel challenged or to stay in a discussion when we feel like throwing up our hands and quitting. And it takes work to overcome our own misconceptions and misunderstandings so that we can accept the truth and grow. Unity has to be worked at; it is a matter of diligence.

**Ephesians 4:4-6
There is one body
and one Spirit,
just as also you
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.**

Unity is a Matter of Oneness

The above statement may sound redundant and foolish, but it may be closer to the heart of this matter than one might at first think. From Ephesians four we can see the Spirit's emphasis on oneness. The religious world has overlooked this point. They speak of unity, but what they actually practice is union. They practice many baptisms, accept many faiths, defend many bodies, and in actuality preach many gods based on their doctrines such as.....

- a grandfatherly God who overlooks sinful behavior,
- a God of confusion who treats different people in different ways,
- a God who saves you in spite of yourself and your choices to do evil,
- a God who allows you to be lost in spite of your desire to be saved, etc., etc., etc.

Division results from a failure to be in subjection to God's will. Unity will result when people come together in humble obedience. True unity as Paul wished for the Corinthians, in mind and judgment, will only come about as we are unified on doctrinal truth and practice as revealed in God's word. The oneness of divine truth will bring oneness among the believers of that truth when they seek and follow God's precepts.

Unity of belief leads to unity in understanding, which when coupled with humility, leads to unity in practice. Not just union, but real New Testament unity.

Thought Questions

1. Contrary to the preceding thoughts on the importance of truth in doctrine, humanism has been teaching since the 18th century that “truth is relative,” and “it depends on the situation,” and “whatever you believe is your truth.” How would you respond to this?

And part 2) What is the biblical description of unity?

2. Pick any two and give an example of personal comfort, old friends, family, peer pressure, or a majority of numbers affecting one’s personal beliefs, choices, and/or decisions in matters of unity.

3. Give two examples of the same in view of congregational decisions and unity.

4. Specifically, if you didn’t use this example above, explain how “family” can be a hindrance to unity 1) individually and 2) congregationally.

5. How can a lack of ability to recognize the “weightier matters” of the gospel affect unity. Please give an example.

6. Please describe one or more acts of “diligence” that will go far in preserving the “unity of the Spirit.”

7. Name one point from this lesson that stands out to you as being of primary importance.

John 17:21-23

“that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us; so that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”

Philippians 2:3-4

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

1 Corinthians 1:10

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

John 8:31-32

Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Matthew 23:23

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.”

**LESSON 2 BECAUSE WE KNOW THAT
HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF**

The following article was taken from the Gospel Guardian, written in 1949, FOUNDATION FACTS & PRIMARY PRINCIPLES, by G. C. Brewer.

Christ is in heaven and we are upon the earth and we cannot therefore hear Him speak in audible tones. In what way, then, does He direct our movements now? The church of Rome claims that He delegated the right and power to govern His people to the apostle Peter and other apostles, and that at the death of the original twelve, other men succeeded them in office and authority and that even now the Pope and his prelates have divine authority to issue decrees for the church; to make laws to govern the followers of Christ and that Christ will ratify these laws in heaven.

The assumption of complete authority by the papal court robbed Christians of their liberty and the church of its purity for more than a thousand years.

A few heroic souls like Wycliffe and Huss dared to protest against such spiritual wickedness in high places, but none of these ever thought of disputing this blasphemous claim of authority by which such wickedness was made possible. It remained for Luther to attack the authority of the Pope and to repudiate the decisions of councils as final in matters of doctrine. But even he at first made his fight against the corruptions that were in the church and was driven to see that he would have to accept these corruptions or else rebel against and reject the authority of those who authorized them. When Luther denied that the church had any divine right or even moral right to sell indulgences and showed that justification is by faith and not by works and that forgiveness is granted upon repentance and not secured by penance, he was only discussing theological questions as a monk with monks. But Luther's ideas were gaining so much favor with people and therefore retarding the Pope's schemes to such an extent that Leo X took cognizance of him and sent the most learned men in the church which called him Father, to argue with Doctor Luther, to confute him, conquer him. All that was imposing in names, in authority, in traditions, in associations was

arrayed against him.

The great Goliath of controversy of that day was Doctor John Eck. He was superior to Luther in reputation, and dialectical skill, and in scholastic learning. Doctor Eck challenged Luther to a public debate at Leipsig. All Germany was interested.

The disputants met in the great hall of the palace of the Elector. Never before was seen in Germany such an array of doctors and theologians and dignitaries. It rivaled in importance and dignity the council of Nice, when the great Constantine presided, to settle the Trinitarian controversy.

Doctor Eck was the pride of the universities. He was the champion of the schools, of sophistries and authorities, of dead-letter literature, of quibbles, of refinements and words. He was about to overwhelm Luther with his citations, decrees of councils, opinions of eminent ecclesiastics - the mighty authority of the church. But Luther's genius and his deep consciousness of truth came to his rescue. Under the mighty conviction of the righteousness of his cause and under the inspiration of the hour, Luther caught a far vision of truth. He then swept away the very premise of his opponent's argument. He denied the supreme authority of popes and councils and universities. He appealed to the scriptures as the only ultimate ground of authority.

Thus was born the basal idea of the Reformation -the supreme authority of the scriptures- to which Protestants have ever since professed to cling.

Where Are We Today?

There is a pendulum that swings back and forth in history. The Gospel Advocate article above demonstrates one end of that swing during the 16th century as the authority of God revealed in Scripture is elevated to its preeminent position after centuries of devaluation behind church authorities. All councils, decrees, doctrinal positions, and positions of men must be relegated to a distant second place behind the authority of God's word. However, that pendulum swung back in the other direction later on. Although other reformers picked up the cry of "return to the Scriptures" such as Wesley, Smythe, and Calvin, their followers (Methodists, Wesleyans, Baptists, and Presbyterians) slowly drifted back into traditionalism. Many of the practices of the Catholic Church they fought free of were later reincorporated into these groups, i.e., instrumental music in worship, unbiblical church organizations, special attire for church

leaders, blessings only bestowed by the clergy, etc. What are some other ways you think this “swing” toward or away from Bible authority might be seen?

In the 18th century the pendulum swung the other direction again. In this country, in Scotland, Switzerland, and Russia (to name a few) another movement arose to call men back to the authority of the Scriptures and out of the denominations of men. Names like Knox, Zwingli, Campbell, and Stone rose up in history. The influence of these men spread across national boundaries. One example would be that of Leo Tolstoy, the Russian author credited with writing more pieces (over 5,000) than any other author of that nation including such works as War and Peace, and Anna Karenna. His educational reforms and practices are still followed today in a great number of Russian school systems. In spite of his wealth and influence, Tolstoy was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church for advocating that the trappings and ceremonies of men were absolutely unnecessary to salvation and that men should go back to God’s word alone. Tolstoy was a pen pal of Alexander Campbell.

Traditional denominational practices were thrown off as surely as Catholicism had been thrown off two centuries earlier. However, by the mid 1800’s this movement, which began in the 1700’s, started to water itself down and once more accept the reasonings and desires of men as authority. The Restoration movement in Russia was crushed in large degree by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the growth of communism. In this country we had no such excuse. Earlier claims of speaking where the Bible spoke and remaining silent where the Bible was silent were revoked by some of the very men who originally made those statements. Alexander Campbell, one of the champions of the Restoration movement in the U.S., abandoned his earlier plea as he caught the vision of world evangelism and determined that it simply couldn’t be accomplished without the aid of a MISSIONARY SOCIETY to organize the churches. Without biblical authority, many were led toward unbiblical church organization.

By 1901 the main group of restoration churches in this country was divided. Those who chose to stand strictly upon the Scriptures went in one direction and

came to be known as churches of Christ. Those who supported the missionary society and the reintroduction of instrumental music into worship came to be known as Christian churches. A few decades later the liberal element in the Christian church rose to the top and they divided again. The original group attempted to stay their steps on the slippery slope they had chosen of relying on men's arguments. The more progressive folk, however, kept on in the direction away from biblical authority and more in line with the denominational churches seeking acceptance and fellowship among those groups their forefathers had left. This group came to be known as the Disciples of Christ.

A recent email from a preacher with the Disciples of Christ denomination in the midst of a discussion may serve to illustrate how far some have come as the pendulum of Bible authority continues to swing.

The written code (Bible, cm) is only a guide, some have stated, and rightfully so. They sort of act like training wheels on a bicycle. When we have developed the skills and ability through usage, the training wheels are no longer needed. So it is with us as Christians. As new born babes, we really do need the guidance of a written law. The 'Thus saith the Lord.' As we mature, we become developed in doing good and begin to discern more readily, what is 'good' for our neighbor. As we grow in grace and love, we discard the training wheels. Not because they are no good, but because we have developed in our ability to do good without the restrictions of a written code.

What unmitigated arrogance. The Bible is like "training wheels." It is good for beginners, but mature Christians like this preacher can discard and disregard it because they have developed their own ability to do good without the restrictions of the Scripture.

Where has the above attitude led? On the same email list there were many affirmations of homosexual marriage and homosexual pastors. One woman "pastor" wrote advocating premarital intimacy and using her own daughter as an example. She wrote of encouraging her sixteen year old daughter toward many intimate relationships "so she might grow." This, she claimed, was done with "God's direction." This is where men and women always go when they leave the direction of holiness in the Scriptures and decide their own way. They will

always choose the way of pleasure, self-service, and pleasing men.

It's Not Just "Them"

Closer to home, the pendulum is likewise still swinging. Although the centralized organization of a missionary society has been resisted among churches of Christ, other forms of uniting autonomous congregations have been devised. In the mid 1950's, a couple of worldly wise brethren with a vision of world evangelism (like Alexander Campbell?) devised an organization called the sponsoring church arrangement which basically did all that the missionary society did, but called itself by a new name and presented itself as a new game because elders were asked to oversee it instead of a board of directors.

This "national" source of income got a lot of attention, so in the 50's, benevolent homes found their way into church budgets as if this were the work of Christ's body. Starting with the sympathy attraction of children and using orphan homes, this practice has grown to include unwed mothers' homes, hospitals and clinics, boys' homes and retirement villages. As the focus of work and money changed slowly from God's work to good works to helping the needy to helping the children...schools, from kindergarten to college, likewise got in line for their handouts from these congregations in the 60's. Now with every church building built there must be discussions about fully equipped kitchens, playground equipment, and family life centers (more commonly known as gymnasiums). We are back in 1901 doctrinally as recent polls among these liberal congregations have indicated that over 75% of the membership in these groups have no problem with using instruments in worship. Some of these churches have even begun using instrumental music in worship, calling them "praise services" and young people's events. Is it a new generation of Bible students or a lack of understanding of God's authority?

HOW SHALL WE ACCEPT THE SCRIPTURES?

1. Consider 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Define "inspired" in this context.



2. How much of the Bible falls under this definition?
 3. What parts of God's word are exempt from this description?
 4. What areas do the Scriptures guide us in?
 5. What areas of life fall outside of these parameters?
 6. Consider 1 Peter 4:11. Depending on the word your Bible translation uses, define "utterances" or "oracles."
 7. What does this mean as far as our teaching and practice?
 8. Consider 2 Peter 1:3. Exactly what areas are covered by the knowledge of Christ?
 9. Consider 1 Corinthians 4:6. What was Paul forbidding in this passage?
 10. What attitude often arises when men determine to leave "what is written"?
 11. Consider Revelation 22:18-19. What is being taught in this place?
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