

6th General Assembly, 1978, 6-73, p. 82.

**REPORT OF THE AD-INTERIM COMMITTEE TO STUDY
THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF CHURCH UNION**

On the night in which He was betrayed, our Saviour went to His Father in prayer. The burden of His prayer is for the glorification of His Father through the work of the Son, for His work to be shown forth in those whom the Father had given to Him, and, that their union might be realized as the union of the Father is with the Son. "That they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee" (John 17:21). That this union exists is a fact. The Scripture is abundantly clear that the redeemed of the Lord is one people. In the covenant made with Abraham, God promises to make him the father of many nations. "Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them; and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be" (Genesis 15:5).

When the Apostle Paul was writing to the Galatians to prove the doctrine of justification by faith alone, he said this, "He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). In concluding that statement, the Apostle says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abrahams's seed, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28, 29).

This unity is begun in the counsels of eternity to which our Saviour referred when He used the expression, "Those whom Thou hast given me" (John 17:2, 6, 9, 11). In John 6 the same idea is expressed, "All that the Father hath given me shall come to me". Again, "This is the Father's will which hath sent me; that of all which He hath given me I should lose nothing" (John 6:37 and 39). When the Apostle Peter speaks of security in Christ, he says, "To the strangers scattered throughout ... elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Peter 1:1,2). In Romans 8 and Ephesians 2 the Apostle expresses the same idea that God has planned that believers should come to the redemption purchased by His dear Son. They are "my people" (Exodus 6:7; 9:1; Hosea 1:10; Romans 9:22-26). They grow out of the same olive tree (Romans 11:15-31). And when the New Jerusalem comes down from God out of heaven, it will be pronounced, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Revelation 21:3). Therefore, there is one Father of our Lord Jesus Christ "of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named" (Ephesians 3:14, 15). That means there can be but one household of faith (Galatians 6:10).

The unity of the people of God necessarily brings to mind the unity of the kingdom and body of the Redeemer of God's elect. There is one King in Zion (Psalms 2:6; 89:35-37). There is one bride (Hosea 2:19, 20; Isaiah 64:5, Ephesians 5:22 ff). There is one flock. (Ezekial 35:11-24; John 10:11-16).

This unity is brought to pass by the work of the Holy Spirit in uniting sinners to Christ. The new birth is the work of the Spirit as He effectually calls men out of darkness into the marvelous light of the Son of God (John 3:1-17; Ezekial 36:25-28; Jeremiah 31:31-34; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 8:30). This work whereby sinners are called into union with the Son of God produces life in the Spirit (Romans 8). The whole complex of the activity of the Spirit in all of His dealings with the children of

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God can be expressed by the term used in the apostolic benediction, the communion of the Holy Ghost (2 Corinthians 13:14).

This union of the people of God, the kingdom and body of Christ, the communion of the Holy Ghost will not be denied by those who believe the Scriptures. That the prayer of our Saviour is a reality must be confessed by all who hold to the essential Saviourhood of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are one in union with our blessed Saviour and with one another as the members of His body, as branches of the vine, believers in the assembly of the first born who are written in heaven (Hebrew 12:23).

This unity, often referred to as the Spiritual unity of believers, cannot be exhausted by some mystical, ethereal concept which has no realization in the arena of time and space. If we are called to union with the Lord Jesus, it is obvious that we are called to union with each other (Ephesians 4; 1 Corinthians 12). We look forward to that great day when the tabernacle of God is with men and the great voice announces that God is with His people, is their God, and they are His people (Revelation 21:3). The church triumphant has its origin in the church militant, and therefore the visible elements of the church triumphant must show forth the characteristics of the whole family of God.

More than that, our Saviour's prayer is "that the world may know that Thou hast sent me". Can there be any question that the unity of the body of believers has evidential value to the world? How can the world believe? What is the apologetic for which Christ prayed? We may not be able to describe the actual impression that the world receives from the unity of believers, but the fact that it does, cannot be questioned.

This brings us then to the matter of the character of that unity. "That they may be one as Thou Father, art in me." The mystery of the relation of the persons of the Triune God will be beyond our study. The thrust is this, that our Saviour prayed that the unity of those whom the Father had given Him have demonstrable characteristics: "that the world may know" that He is the one whom His Father has sent: "that the world may know" that He is the Messiah, the promised of God.

What then are the demonstrable characteristics? The virtues which the Apostle calls the fruit of the Spirit must be evident in the unity of believers. "That they may be one in love, joy, peace . . ." (Galatians 5:22). "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). That all the virtues that would confirm the genuineness of their allegiance to the risen Christ might be obvious in their life together.

There is a great deal more involved than the virtues of the individual life. The corporate structure of the visible fellowship of believers is designated as the church and has been delineated by our Saviour and His Apostles. The instructions are given for the guidance of the communion of saints. The instructions are given for the guidance of the communion of saints. The instructions include government; therefore, if the union of believers with one another is to be realized as the union of the Father with the Son, it will be impossible to ignore or to treat as unimportant those many directives given for the government of the body (Acts 6:20; 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1; Philippians 1; Hebrews 13:17). "Since government in the church is the institution of Christ (cf. Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7; 1 Peter 5:1,2), this unity must be expressed in government. The necessary inference to be drawn is that the government should manifest the unity and be as embracing in respect of its functioning as the unity

of which it is the expression. A concrete illustration of this principle is the decree of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:28, 29; 16:4)."⁸⁴

Since the unity of all believers under one government is the necessary obligation of believers, how can this be accomplished? There are two obstacles to be faced. The first obstacle is ignorance or disregard to the truth. The modern attempts to unify denominations without regard to the truth of the Word of God is a travesty of that Word. Error must be revealed and opposed. Sinful practices must be resisted. Compromises to the directives of the Apostles must be acted against. Heretics must be disciplined, and sinful men cast out of the fellowship.

The second obstacle is the native sinfulness of human beings. Though regenerated, Christians still exhibit a great lack of a whole-hearted obedience to the law of Christ; and because of the residual effects of the old nature on our minds, we do not always perceive clearly the law of Christ on secondary matters. Any union must be a whole-hearted desire to fulfill the Saviour's prayer. To unite people who obviously are not going to get along would be to dishonor the very request that our Saviour made the subject of His prayer. We must avoid, therefore, any union that would mean that dividing of the body as was exhibited in the Corinthian church (I Corinthians 1).

The basic principle that must be agreed to in the arrangements of any meaningful union will be the wholehearted submission to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God, with the understanding that the directives of that Word will be over-riding criterion guiding all of the actions of the body. There must be agreement as to the functions of the body. The primary function of the church is to worship. Worship involves the acknowledging of "the true God as God and worshipping and glorifying Him accordingly". This means worshipping only by such exercises as He has revealed in His Word.

The second criterion of the true unity of the body then, will manifest itself in confession. One of the blessed fruits of the Protestant Reformation is the profusion of confessions. Those who had come to understand the truth of the gospel wanted the world to understand what the Bible had to say. To that end they formulated concise statements of what they believed the Bible taught. Do we confess the same teaching? Do we witness to the same truth? "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). We include those who by their history have demonstrated a genuine interest in and devotion to that understanding of the Scriptures that we call the Reformed Faith.

The third criterion is the practice of the church. There are those who say that the way of the New Testament church is not necessarily for the twentieth century. But are there practices and attitudes which are better than those of the apostles and their followers in the early church? Is not the life in the Spirit (Romans 8) the directive for all of life? The application of those practices to the contemporary scene may not be easy, but they are a part of our total obedience to the Word of God.

The final criterion would be our submission to the united brotherhood. "Submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of God" (Ephesians 5:21). There can be no communion of the Spirit if we refuse to acknowledge our mutual prerogatives, privileges, and responsibilities with those with whom we are in fellowship. "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the

⁸⁴Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume I, The Claims of Truth, Banner of Truth Trust.

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same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man on the things of others" (Philippians 2:1-4).

The solution to denominations is not to forget the past and ignore the real doctrinal differences of Christians. The teachings of the Bible are important, so much so that Christians are commanded to separate from those who espouse false doctrines or who practice immorality. (2 John 9-11).

Where there already exists basic doctrinal unity, as in the case of those who adhere to the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards, the way is open to give organizational expression to that unity. Expression of this should be done carefully and prayerfully lest the peace of the church be destroyed in the process.

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