

“Unity” Or “Union?”

Tim Haile

It is good for God's people to be disturbed by division. After all, division is a *work of the flesh*. As such, it is *sinful*, and it will keep people out of Heaven (Gal. 5:20; 2 Cor. 12:20). Division also reflects a *carnal mindset* (1 Cor. 3:1-3; 4:6). The terrible nature of division can quickly be seen by the other sins that are associated with it. In connection with division, Paul also cited the sins of *jealousy, strife, envy, contention, wrath, selfish ambition, pride, backbiting, whispering, conceit, tumult, sedition and heresy*. Since true Bible unity means that these sins are being avoided, then *yes, it would be great if we could all just get along!*

Of course, there is more to unity than just "getting along" with each other. If we are to please God, our getting along with each other based upon God's standard of unity. This requires that we accept His definition of "unity." Failure to understand true unity has led many of God's people to accept those who practice sin and error. They have accepted those whom God has not accepted. This usually happens when people equate Bible *unity* with simple *union*. They are not the same! For example, "union" is what you have when the tails of two tomcats are tied together and the cats are draped over a clothesline, but no one would call the result "unity." *Union* can exist without *unity*. Russia was called the Soviet "*Union*" for a reason. Previously independent peoples formed a political unit. This is sometimes done for economic and political purposes without the peoples renouncing their own peculiar political ideologies. Sadly, *unionizing* is what often happens in the religious world, and even among God's people. They do not have unity; they have a tremendous desire to just "get along" with each other. This mentality has fueled the mega-church movement. These huge churches attract and accept people of "all faiths." They call themselves *non-denominational*, but they are actually *multi-denominational*. They stay together by ignoring one another's sins and errors. These large "churches" would fly apart if some of their members started teaching the whole council of God.

Though there may be areas of life where union is acceptable, religion is not one of them! *Union* leads to compromise. *Compromise* leads to apostasy. *Apostasy* leads to eternal destruction (Matt. 7:13-14).

The unity that God requires, and for which, Christ prayed, is a unity that is based upon divine revelation. Jesus prayed,

{20} "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe on me **through their word**;

{21}"That they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (Jn. 17:20-21).

Notice that the apostles' **words** are the basis of true unity. This explains why early disciples continued steadfastly in the *apostles' doctrine* (Acts 2:42). This body of truth is elsewhere referred to as "*the doctrine of Christ*." The apostle John stressed the absolute essentially of our "*abiding*" in that doctrine if we wish to maintain fellowship with God (2 John 9). How do we maintain unity? The instructions are clear and the process is simple. Read the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:10:

"Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name ("**authority**," th) of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all **speak the same thing**, and that there be **no divisions among you**, but that you be **perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment**."

In order for people to have the kind of unity that pleases God, it is necessary for all of us to appeal to the same standard of religious authority. God's word should be our exclusive guide of faith and practice. We will all "*speak the same thing*" when we all "*speak as the oracles of God*" (1 Pet. 4:11). Paul wrote, "*Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the **same rule**, let us be of the **same mind***" (Phil. 3:16). By following the *same rule*, we will be of the *same mind*. "*Two*" cannot "*walk together, except they be agreed*" (Amos 3:3). The only way that we will be able to *get along with each other* is when we *agree to walk according to God's infallible word*.

"Getting Along" (*Without God*)

Free moral agency is a powerful thing. It grants us such great freedom that it gives us the ability to actually defy our very Maker: God Himself! Of course, with freedom comes responsibility. Though one may reject God's standard and escape any consequences *in this life*, yet in the hereafter he will suffer both immensely and eternally (Rom. 2:8-9; 2 Thess. 1:8-9). One of the areas where many people defy God is the area of *fellowship*. Yes, humans do have the *ability* to tolerate sin and error, but **God does not approve** of this practice! God's people are commanded to avoid fellowship with "*the unfruitful works of darkness*." In fact, we are even told to "*reprove them*" (Eph. 5:11). 2 Corinthians 6:14-16 enlarges upon this thought. Paul taught that:

1. Believers are not to be unequally *yoked* with unbelievers.
2. The righteous are not to have *fellowship* with the lawless.
3. Light has no *communion* with darkness.

4. Christ has no *accord* with Belial
5. Believers have no *part* with unbelievers.
6. The temple of God has no *agreement* with idols.

The words "*yoked, fellowship, communion, accord, part, and agreement*" are used interchangeably to refer to acts of acceptance of, and joint participation with others. The examples cited in this passage are prohibitions regarding general categories. Let us consider some passages that are more specific with regard to the application of this fellowship principle. The following passages show some areas where *we cannot have unity*. In these areas we cannot merely "get along" with each other, and ignore what God says:

2 John 9-11: Christians are commanded to refuse fellowship to those who "*bring not the doctrine of Christ.*" They are not allowed to just *get along* with them.

Romans 16:17: Christians are commanded to "*mark and avoid*" those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine they have learned. We obviously can't get along with errorists.

Titus 3:10-11: Paul did not command Christians to just get along with heretics, regardless of the cost. He commanded them to "*reject*" heretics. A heretic is one who substitutes his opinion for the truth, and binds his unprovable conclusions upon others.

1 Corinthians 5: Christians are commanded to *disassociate* themselves from those who call themselves "brothers," but who are practicing immorality or other sins. There is no *getting-along* in this context!

2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15: Christians are told to *withdraw* themselves from brethren who walk disorderly (those who are lazy, unruly, gossips...etc)

1 Timothy 1:20: Christians are told to *withdraw* from brethren who blaspheme (speak evil of others, especially used of derogatory, disparaging words against God).

1 Timothy 6:3-5: Christians are told to *withdraw* from brethren who teach anything contrary to "*sound doctrine.*"

2 Timothy 3:5: Christians are told to *withdraw* from hypocrites.

Galatians 2:5: Paul did not yield, "*even for an hour,*" when there was a chance that truth might be sacrificed or compromised.

Conclusion

Millions of religious people think they have found the solution to the problem of religious division. They think they have discovered a way to "*get along*" with each other, religiously, without disagreements over various matters of faith, doctrine and morality. Actually, all they have done is *compromise* the

Truth. They have learned that getting along religiously with others is easy as long as you are willing to sacrifice your convictions. In order to get along with others all you have to do is give up, or remain silent about any previously held doctrinal convictions, and be willing to tolerate all other religious beliefs and practices regardless of what they are. People won't *get along* too well with you if you criticize their beliefs. The Bible teaches a different way. There are times when our convictions cause others to be upset with us. Paul said that his purpose was to *please God, not men* (Galatians 1:10). James said that friendship with the world is enmity against God. He said, "*whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God*" (James 4:4).

It is indeed pleasant when we are able to all *get along* with each other. However, true children of God, those who *continue in the faith* (Col. 1:23) and in the *words and doctrine of Christ* (John 8:31; 2 John 9), will find that there are times when they must stand alone (2 Timothy (4:16). At these times we will not be able to get along with others, for they stand dead opposed to those precepts and principles of divine Truth that we hold dear. Let our first priority be friendship with GOD. If others share our convictions and wish to *get along* with us on the basis of God's teaching, then we will be happy to accept them. Otherwise, let us not compromise divine Truth in order to be able to get along with our human friends. God will stand with us, even if others do not (Acts 18:10; 27:23; 2 Tim. 4:16).

Tim Haile

timhaile@biblebanner.com