

CHURCH UNITY

SOME CANDID COMMENTS



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1. THE DILEMMA OF A SMALL GROUP

We, the people who have produced this booklet, are members of a small religious group. We have a problem that we should like to tell you about; and we also believe that we have a significant contribution to make to this discussion about Christian unity. First, let us try to explain our problem.

When we are asked, “Do you think that the Christian churches should unite?” we are embarrassed. We find ourselves in the same sort of dilemma as the husband who is asked, “Have you finished beating your wife?” We are notable to answer with a simple “yes” or “no”.

It is not that we are indifferent to questions about Christian unity. One could imagine a person who is frankly non-christian saying, “I don’t care whether the churches get together or not”. This is not our position.

Why then the dilemma? Like the husband, we cannot answer with a direct “yes” or “no”, because the question assumes something that we cannot accept. The assumption that the happily-married man cannot accept is that he has been a wife-beater in the past.

And the assumption that we cannot accept? Well, that is what this booklet is about. It is an attempt to explain our point of view, and to say a few important truths that may be helpful to you. But of this, you must be the judge.

2. A DISUNITED CHRISTENDOM

Let us imagine that a man from a distant land, who has never even heard of Christianity, visits one of those countries that are popularly called Christian countries. Quickly he learns that many of the inhabitants of the country to which he has come call themselves Christians; and he decides to find out what he can about these Christian people and their religion. It is not long before he learns that a Christian is a person who professes to be a follower of a certain Jesus Christ, a remarkable character who appeared amongst the Jews of Palestine nearly two thousand years ago.

Naturally, he expects all the followers of this Jesus Christ to be united. To express it figuratively, he expects them to travel in the same direction, and to move along together. Imagine then his surprise when he discovers that these Christians are divided-up into hundreds - yes hundreds! - of sects, some large, some small, differing from each other in matters of doctrine and organization. The strangest, saddest fact that confronts him is that these conflicting, competing Christian communities claim to be following a man who is reputed to have devoted himself to preaching and practising that wonderful - indeed, that unique - virtue called Christian love. It doesn’t make sense.

Suppose that our friend from afar, in his quest for further knowledge about Christianity, asks the members of a dozen different Christian denominations to enlighten him concerning the distinctive features of their particular types of Christianity. The first Christian whom he addresses explains patiently that his Christianity is based on an ancient, sacred book, called the Bible. And the second?

Strange to relate, the second Christian, who belongs of course to quite a different denomination, makes precisely the same claim. He also explains that his Christianity is based on an ancient, sacred book called the Bible. And so with the third; and so with them all. How bewildering! How absurd! All profess to follow the same man; all claim to base their beliefs on the same book; and yet, they are different and disunited.

It is probable that, by this time, our visitor comes to the conclusion that these Christians are completely crazy, and that if he pursues his enquiries any further, he will become just as crazy as they.

But what of ourselves? Here we are, surrounded by this perplexing problem, and, by our very circumstances, deeply involved in it. What ought our reactions to be?

Tumultuous Story

The situation is indeed an extraordinary one. It is more complex than many appreciate. The story of the progress of Christianity after the days of the apostles is a strange, tumultuous story that does great discredit to many people.

When Constantine was Roman emperor, he arranged an unhappy marriage between the state and the Christian Church. Inevitably, Christian principles were compromised, and the standards laid down in the Sermon on the Mount were left far behind. Whereas the Christian Church had suffered persecution, it now became a persecuting power itself. Those who dared to differ from the established church were driven “underground”. Then came a great division in the Christian Church that gave rise to the Greek Orthodox Church in the east, and the Roman Catholic Church in the west. A few centuries later, the Reformation overtook the Catholic Church, and the Protestant communities were born. The Protestants subsequently divided again and again, and created a host of sects, too numerous to name.

To say that the relationship between the various sections of the Christian Church was not amicable is a ridiculous understatement. In a vain attempt to check heterodox teaching and division, the Roman Church used physical violence - torture and death; and there were those amongst the Protestants who responded with like, anti-Christian weapons.

Even today, in this age peculiar for its religious toleration, Christians often quarrel, and sometimes fight. During both world wars, the relationship between some Christians and others with whom they had no religious quarrel was tragically anomalous. Finding themselves on opposite sides, these Christians proceeded to kill each other. Indeed, different members of the same religious communities often found themselves on opposite sides, and like obedient sons of their respective countries they responded to the call, and went to war against their brethren. One feels constrained to ask, as our stranger from afar would have asked, “What sort of Christianity is this?”

3. THE CHRISTIAN IDEAL

It was not like this when Christianity began. There was a time when people were astonished because these Christians were so united. They worked together like one big, harmonious family. If one suffered, they all suffered; if one was happy, they all

rejoiced. Materially and spiritually, they shared and helped each other, and in times of famine and persecution the bonds that held them together were stronger than ever.

Occasionally, human nature asserted itself even in those early days of Christianity, and there were tensions, rivalries and displays of selfishness, but more often those early Christians were noted for their loyalty to each other and to their common cause. The Christians had separated themselves from “the world”, and become united to Christ and to each other, as members of a great family in Christ.

This was just as their Master had intended. Throughout his ministry he had set a wonderful example of selfless service. On one memorable occasion he deliberately played the role of a humble servant, and washed his disciples’ feet. And having done this, he proceeded to tell his disciples that they ought to help each other in the same way as he had helped them:

“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14,15. R. S. V.).

It was on the same occasion that he said:

“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35. R.S.V.).

The Apostle Paul also emphasised the importance of unity amongst the members of the Christian Church:

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil 1:27. R.S.V.).

Unfortunately, the Corinthian church had not learned this lesson of unity, and Paul was evidently distressed about it. Bluntly he **told them that the** disunity **that** disgraced the Corinthian church was evidence of carnality, and not of spirituality. “Is Christ divided?”, he asked them indignantly.

But Corinth was hardly typical - and in any case there is evidence that, after Paul’s rebuke, there was an improvement in this church. Generally speaking, the unity of the Christian Church filled men with astonishment and admiration.

We have travelled a long way since those happy days, because now it is the disunity, and not the unity, of the Christian Church that makes men marvel.

4. MOVEMENT TOWARDS UNITY

It is not surprising that many Christians are deeply distressed about the divided state of Christendom. Indeed, they are appalled by the fact that Christendom today is so far removed from the high standard that the Founder of Christianity set when he said,

“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”.

Many modern Christians are also grieved because their enemies have been given such an opportunity to reproach and taunt them.

They see an urgent need for re-union - a need that is the more urgent because a massive wave of godlessness is bearing down on our civilization, threatening completely to engulf us. A united Christendom, they say, is the only **answer** to this threat. **And** so **the cry** goes up **for** Christians everywhere to sink their differences and unite.

The ecumenical movement is gathering momentum. The World Missionary Council, The World Council of Churches, Pope John XXIII's Vatican Council: **many** dedicated people regard these as significant stepping stones in the movement towards ultimate unity.

Problems

Much has certainly been done, and there have been astonishing changes of attitude on the part of some who are deeply involved. But there are still huge problems that seem to mock the well-intentioned workers towards church unity.

The status of the Pope - declared to be infallible in the First Vatican Council of 1870 - is only one of the problems. Will Christians with a Protestant background accept the doctrine of papal infallibility, or will Roman Catholics renounce it? Or will the issue be conveniently forgotten, or regarded as such an unimportant one as to permit of liberty of opinion?

There are other important issues that have to be resolved - questions of Christian doctrine, Christian living and church organization. The doctrine of the “assumption” of Mary; hell and purgatory; baptism; birth control; **confession: these are only a few of the** questions that stand between the churches and unity. Some people will have to yield on these questions before the churches can unite.

5. THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Yes, there are many problems to be resolved. There is, however, one major question that ought to be settled first. It is right that this question should take precedence, because if we have to answer it in a certain way, the other problems referred to become almost irrelevant.

The question is this: **Is it God's will that all the churches of Christendom should work together towards** unity?

This question would make some people flush with indignation. They would probably want to say something like this: “The Lord Jesus Christ preached unity; Christendom is divided: surely there is a compelling need for Christians to get together. It is virtually an act of obedience to Jesus Christ. And as for the obstacles, these are the challenge that is presented to the Christian Church. With faith and resolution, and

above all with the help of God, whose work this is, the obstacles can and will be overcome.”

This sounds admirable. But please bear with us while we try to present another point of view.

The argument for church unity is irrefutable **if a certain assumption is accepted**. But it is submitted here that the assumption ought not to be taken for granted.

The assumption that makes all the difference - the assumption that so many people accept without a thought - the assumption that we feel compelled to challenge - is that the churches of Christendom that are seeking to unite are truly Christian Churches.

If the divided churches of Christendom are truly Christian Churches, then it is their bounden duty to unite as soon as possible, and they can do it with an assurance that God is with them, and that He is greater than the problems that stand in their way. But because (as we see it) the divided churches of Christendom that are seeking to unite may not be entitled to the name ‘Christian’, there can be no assurance that this work is of God.

To express our point of view unambiguously: it is submitted that, in the main, the Christianity of the churches is not the Christianity of Christ.

Sincerity and Zeal Acknowledged

It is not easy to make a proposition of this kind without causing offence. It is very easy to be misunderstood. Let it then be stated clearly that although this is a severe indictment of the major churches of Christendom - those most concerned, at present, about Christian unity - it is not intended to be a blanket condemnation of all denominations, nor is it a judgment of individuals. There may well be individuals who are in an anomalous position, and stand head and shoulders above the religious organizations to which they are related.

Nor do we want to impugn the sincerity of those vigorously engaged in promoting unity. Indeed, some of us feel rebuked by the sincerity and the zeal of some of these men.

Another comment here that conscience compels us to make. There is no such thing as a perfect community. We, who dare to publish this challenging point of view, have no illusions about our own limitations. But this does not prevent us from reviewing the situation in the light of Scripture, rebuking ourselves for our shortcomings, and striving - as we urge others to strive - to “go on unto perfection”.

6. THE EVIDENCE

The Christianity of the churches is not the Christianity of Christ. What is the evidence for this startling proposition? It will be presented under four heads:

1. Attitude to the Bible
2. Doctrine

3. Christian Living
4. New Testament Prophecies concerning the Corruption of Christianity.

Attitude to the Bible

“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psa. 119:105). The Bible is the true Christian’s constant guide. Although nearly all denominations claim to base their Christianity on the Bible, a moment’s reflection will convince us that the attitude of most professing Christians to this treasury of divine wisdom is utterly unworthy. How many of those people who call themselves Christians are diligent, daily readers of the Bible? How many have read the Bible through **just once**? **Very few indeed. Human beings are very facile at finding excuses for their failings, but neglect of the Word of God can never be justified. People find time to do what interests them, and the simple fact is that most professing Christians - are not interested in** the message that the Creator has given them. The average church-goer leaves the doctrinal side of his religion to professional men, in much the same way as people trust the doctor to look after their physical ailments. Frankly, this is not good enough. If the Bible is God’s message to us, then we insult God, and do ourselves an incalculable disservice by **neglecting the book. The Scriptures themselves** make our responsibility clear. Here are some typical statements:

“Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy word” (Psa 119:9).

“Whoso despiseth the word shall be destroyed: but he that teareth the commandment shall be rewarded” (Prov 13:13).

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim 3:16,17).

Doctrine

How can those who are not diligent readers of the Scriptures expect to hold doctrines that are in accordance with Bible teaching? The Creator declares that “as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9). Because God’s thoughts are so much higher than ours, we could never guess what these elevated thoughts are. God Himself must tell us: and this He does in the Scriptures. If the Scriptures are neglected, ignorance of divine wisdom is inevitable, and human folly - false doctrine - fills the void.

A simple, testing question here. What does the average church-goer know about the covenant that God made with Abraham? If the Bible is our guide, we have to recognise that Abraham is one of the greatest characters who has ever lived. There are numerous references to him in the Old **and** New Testaments. He is referred to in the opening verse of the New Testament. Galatians 3 tells us that the Gospel, as it affects all who will be saved, was preached to Abraham. Faithful people **are** spiritual children of Abraham. True Christians, like Christ Himself, are heirs to the Abrahamic inheritance. Yet most professing Christians have never even heard of

God's covenant with Abraham.

Here are some examples of unscriptural doctrines popularly believed in Christendom:

1. The belief that the essential part of man (sometimes incorrectly called the 'soul') continues to live in heaven, after death.

The Scriptures teach that death is a punishment for sin (Gen 2:17; Rom 5:12); that the dead are unconscious (Psalm 146:4; Eccles 9:5); that man does not go to heaven (John 3:13; Acts 2:34); that the soul - an expression that usually means 'the whole man' - is mortal, not immortal (Jos 10:28; Ezek 18:4); that the only hope beyond the grave is that of a bodily resurrection, such as the Lord Jesus experienced (John 5:28; 1 Cor 15:29); that resurrection will take place when the Lord Jesus returns (1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 4:16,17); that the ultimate dwelling place of the faithful will be the earth (Matt 5:5; Rev 5:10),

2. The belief that Christian baptism may be administered to babes.

The Scriptures teach that baptism is necessary for salvation; that it must follow belief - and is therefore adult baptism; and that it involves immersion in water (Mark 16:16; Acts 8:36-39; Rom 6:1-7).

Christian Living

This is not a subject that we discuss with relish, and one example must suffice to show how far those who call themselves Christians today have departed from the principles of Christian living laid down in the Bible. It has already been referred to in another context: the Christian attitude to war.

Christ said to his followers: "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, **turn to him the other also**" (Matt 5:39); and Paul endorsed this by saying: "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves..." (Rom 12:18,19). Yet most professing Christians are willing to go to war.

Prophecies concerning the Corruption of Christianity

It is prophesied clearly and repeatedly in the New Testament that Christians would forsake the way of truth. Here are two examples.

"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their licentiousness, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled". (2 Pet 2:1,2. R.S.V.).

"The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths". (2 Tim 4:3,4. R.S.V.).

Observe that these prophecies do not speak of a minority going astray. They indicate that Christianity generally would move in this direction. Thus Peter speaks of ‘many’ following the false teachers; and Paul says that ‘they’ would not endure sound doctrine.

The position then is this. Nearly two thousand years ago, Peter and Paul, writing under the direction of the Spirit of God, prophesied that Christianity would become corrupted, and that false doctrine would prevail. Is it then so outrageous that we, nearly two thousand years later say, “Peter and Paul were right, and their prophecies have been fulfilled. False doctrine has come, and it has prevailed”.

Christianity began like a spring of pure, sparkling water. As the stream grew and became a river, its waters became fouled and poisonous. Whereas the cool, clear water of the spring would save the life of a man dying of thirst, the polluted water of the broad river would kill a healthy man. We must quench our spiritual thirst by drawing from the fountain head. We must get back to the Bible.

7. THE MEANTIME AND THE ULTIMATE

Christianity looks as if it has failed. Even if the churches of Christendom were to become completely united, this unity would not be acceptable unless there were a drastic and dramatic change in attitude to the Word of God.

Christianity looks as if it has failed, but God’s purposes are never frustrated. The God who told us that Christianity would be corrupted has invited us to look beyond the confusion to the ultimate triumph.

When Christ returns to the earth, he will be united to his faithful followers of all ages. Many will be raised to life and immortality. Church unity indeed! The Apostle Paul looked forward with eager anticipation to that grand re-union when he said:

“For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For ye are our glory and joy” (1 Thess 2:19,20).

Christ is coming soon. The glorious consummation is near.

Meanwhile the churches of Christendom are getting closer together. It would be unworthy to despise or belittle their efforts. How far they go depends, as much as anything, on how much time is left to them.

And during this meantime those who have learned to appreciate the value of the Word of God, and who strive to believe and obey, will be drawn closer together by their common interest as they wait and watch and pray.

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him.”