

THE CHURCH'S UNITY AND UNDENOMINATIONAL CHARACTER

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Introduction

From his earliest knowledge that God planned the church, Satan has despised the very concept of it and everything pertaining to it. His first plan of attack was to do all that he could to prevent its establishment. He used the monstrous, murderous Herod the Great, in an unsuccessful attempt to destroy the infant Christ in Bethlehem. He personally and powerfully tempted the Lord to abandon His Heavenly mission as He prepared to launch his work of preaching, teaching, and miracle-working. The devil employed the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, scribes, and lawyers to oppose, try, and tempt the Lord relentlessly during His work on earth. He used one of Jesus' apostles to betray Him to His enemies and another of His most intimate apostles to deny that he even knew Him.

Satan worked relentlessly through the Jewish leaders in his trials and in inciting the mob to demand His death. Pilate bowed to will of the prince of all evil in releasing a murderer and delivering the Lord to the cross. Beelzebub thereby employed his mightiest weapon—death—in an effort to thwart the kingdom plans of the Father and His Son. However, as Jesus plainly prophesied, even death itself, “the gates of Hades,” could not prevail—Christ built His church just as He had promised (Mat. 16:18). Since the establishment of the church, God's faithful people in it have been a holy nation under siege by an axis of evil forces consisting of atheism, humanism, paganism, hedonism, and denominationalism, all dancing as puppets on Satan's strings. He will not cease his opposition to the God-beloved and blood-bought church of Christ until he is finally cast into the lake of fire and brimstone and confined there forever as his just due (Rev. 20:10).

From almost the church's beginning “fifth columnists,” traitors within the kingdom of Christ, have arisen. While feigning loyalty to their Commander-in-Chief and His Constitution, all the while they are guilty of spiritual high treason by consorting with the enemy. They sometimes have great swelling words of praise for the enemy while they harshly criticize and belittle the Lord's elect in the very presence of the foe. Beginning in the last third of the twentieth century these members of Judas' band have proliferated. They are in places of immense influence as elders, preachers, publishers, editors, authors, and university administrators and professors.

These ungodly and misguided erstwhile brethren are attacking the church at every fundamental point of doctrine and practice, thereby attempting to change it to fit their culturally dictated agenda. Such changes, where successful, have actually destroyed the congregations

involved as far as their Scriptural identity is concerned. Their threat is undeniably real, and blind leaders that they are, they have already led thousands of blind followers into the destructive pit of sin and error which such leaders occupy. This threat from those that were once among us is actually more sinister and destructive than that which comes from outside forces.

Satan's Attacks on Scriptural Unity

The New Testament doctrine of unity is a principal area of attack by these “Benedict Arnolds” who have gone out from us. It may surprise some to learn that only David and Paul employ the lovely word *unity*, and they use it a total of only three times in Sacred Writ:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! (Psa. 133:1).¹

Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).

Till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ (Eph. 4:13).

David used a Hebrew term that refers to a state of being together, in union, in harmony, or alike. His statement is a proclamation of the wholesomeness, pleasantness, and joy of such harmony, which applies equally to both physical and spiritual brethren. Paul used a Greek word, which in both passages in Ephesians carries the force of unanimity and agreement. His first reference is a ringing exhortation (“give diligence”) to the Ephesians to **keep** (i.e., guard, preserve, take care of) the precious and pleasurable unity that they then enjoyed. In his second reference, Paul discusses a “unity” which they did not yet possess or enjoy (“...**till we all attain** unto the unity of the faith...”). It is thus different from the unity of verse 3, which they already enjoyed and were to give diligence to keep. My judgment has long been that Paul is not referring to unity among the Ephesian (or other) brethren in verse 13. Rather, he is here referring to the completion of the New Testament revelation, as he does in 1 Corinthians 13:8–12.²

Although the word *unity* is rare in the Bible, the concept of it certainly is not. Scriptural unity among the Lord's people in the Gospel Age may be summarized under three headings:

A Prayer

Unity—oneness—is one of the three significant themes of Jesus' great prayer in John 17—the true “Lord's Prayer.” He first prayed for and about Himself (vv. 1–5). He then turned His attention to the apostles (vv. 6–19) and prayed, among other things, concerning them: “Holy Father, keep them in thy name...that they may be one, even as we are” (v. 11b). Believers on Him through the apostles' teaching are the third subject of His prayer:

Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; 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. And the glory which thou hast given me I have given unto them; that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them, and thou in

me, that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that thou didst send me, and lovedst them, even as thou lovedst me (vv. 20-23).

While the Lord would have all those in the corrupt system of denominationalism (who claim to believe in Him) bow to His will and thereby become united in His one church, they were not the aim of His prayer. It is rather aimed at those who will believe on Him to the extent of obeying Him and becoming His disciples. His will is that all of His followers—those whom He has added to His church upon their Gospel obedience—should be one, united, in harmony and agreement with one another.

Moreover, the Lord did not pray for a mere superficial or artificial “unity” that ignores obligatory doctrine and practice. He specified the nature of the unity He sought. It is to be measured by the very unity that characterizes His relationship to the Father and vice versa. This subject must have been a sublime concern of the Christ for Him to dwell on it so earnestly as it pertained both to His apostles and to all who would obey the Gospel.

A Plea

Paul issued an almost impassioned plea for unity in the divided and confused church in Corinth:

Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment (1 Cor. 1:10).

Note first that Paul’s plea rests upon the foundation of “the name of Christ,” a reference to His authority. This plea therefore carries all of the weight of a command, though politely stated. It consists of three parts: (1) They were to speak the same things, which required oneness in their teaching. (2) They were to halt the divisions that existed among them, which is a negative way of telling them to be one. (3) They were to be “perfected together” after the manner of several parts that have been so fashioned as to match and fit together so as to become a whole. This fitting together was to involve the very way they thought and reached conclusions. While these pleas were abundantly appropriate for the Corinthian Church at the time, we are not to suppose that the apostle desired such thoroughgoing harmony of doctrine, speech, thought, and judgment only for the errant Corinthians. Several other passages issue the same exhortation to various recipients (e.g., Rom. 15:5; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phi. 1:27; 2:2; 4:2; 1 Pet. 3:8; et al.).

A Plan

Paul set forth a sevenfold plan whereby the Ephesian Church (indeed, any congregation) might maintain the unity they enjoyed and were to keep:

There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye 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 (Eph. 4:4–6).

These seven elements (of which there is only one of a kind) embrace every facet of religion, including the church, the hope of life eternal, the one faith of the Gospel, the key to accessing the cleansing blood of Christ (baptism), and all three persons of the Godhead. Those who respond to the faith in baptism are added to the one church, in which alone there is hope, vouchsafed by the triune Godhead. If all abide in the one faith, they cannot be otherwise than united.

Humble submission to the doctrine of Christ is the pivotal element in unity. To the “doctrine-doesn’t-matter” crowd, I assert that it matters altogether. The Lord prayed that His apostles and that other believers would be one, even as He and the Father are one. This would necessarily include uniformity of doctrine. Christ came from Heaven to do the Father’s will (John 6:38) and to speak what His Father “taught” Him to speak (12:50). Biblical unity does not ignore doctrine for the sake of loose “union,” but said unity depends upon adherence to doctrine from which true unity derives.

Likewise, Paul’s injunction—that all of the Corinthians speak the same thing and be of the same mind and the same judgment—involves uniform compliance to the doctrine of Christ. Furthermore, the apostle’s seven-point plan for unity is grounded in specific doctrines and their respective implications. When one attempts to separate doctrinal emphasis and compliance from unity, he is advertising either his ignorance or his liberal agenda.

The very unity for which the Lord prayed was beautifully realized in the early days of the church in Jerusalem: “And day by day, continuing stedfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart” (Acts 2:46). We do not have to wonder how such wonderful unity characterized these saints. Luke had written four verses earlier: “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching...” (v. 42).

Biblical unity is not forced or contrived. It is initially achieved “automatically” when two or more people obey the Lord’s plan of salvation. Only as long as they steadfastly continue in the same doctrine, they will continue to be Scripturally united, and not one minute longer.

The church in Jerusalem demonstrates this very pattern. The people were told to repent and be baptized, which about three thousand souls did (Acts 2:37, 41). The Lord added them to His church (vv. 41, 47), that is, they became united with Christ and with one another by obedience to the same commands of Scripture. That blissful unity continued as long as they continued in “the apostles’ teaching” (v. 42). Claimed “unity” on any other basis is utter vanity. John forcefully taught the same principle: “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have

fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

Divisive Factors

The precious unity that should characterize God’s people is often shattered by a carnal-minded man or woman possessed of unholy ambition or in search of power and control. Such folk may not be doctrinal apostates, but they are definitely behavioral apostates. Sometimes an elder or deacon will let his ego get the upper hand, and rather than swallow his pride in humble repentance, he may split the church. Preachers are sometimes guilty of the same shameful behavior. The issue may be nothing more significant than the color of paint or carpet for a building renovation or who is to teach a class or lead singing. Whatever the issue, such utterly selfish folk are bound to have their own way or divide the church trying. The destruction of unity is sometimes so devastating that congregations take years to recover, and some never do. All such folk, who have become pawns of Satan, badly need to remember the New Testament’s emphasis on unity.

While selfishness still causes heartbreaking division, perhaps the devil’s most effective weapon against Biblical unity in recent times has for some four decades been a continual escalation of doctrinal corruption and aberration. Likely a week does not pass but that several congregations are rent asunder by teachers of strange doctrines. Ironically, one of the most divisive doctrines Satan has “inspired” in some, who at one time were our brethren, is a false view of unity. It is not really a new doctrine, but one that the denominations have been teaching for generations; it is a “pretend” unity. The tactic is to redefine *unity* so as to accommodate division. Such folk long ago decided to “agree to disagree” and call it “unity.”

The Fellowship Factor

The study of unity involves the subject of fellowship. Unity implies fellowship. Satan has had a “field day” in leading various ones to attack the Scriptural concept of fellowship as it pertains to the church. The liberals’ plan to bring about religious unity involves extending the borders of fellowship to almost all who claim to believe in Jesus as the Christ, regardless of their heretical doctrines and/or practices. This assault by enemies of the Truth upon the doctrine of fellowship is understandable.³ If this writer were going to try to destroy the church, he would certainly make fellowship a primary target of assault because it is so fundamental to the purity and unity (yea, the very existence) of the church. If the Lord’s enemies (whether within or without) can destroy or even blur the borderline between the power of darkness and the kingdom of light, they will hardly need to succeed in any other assaults. If the battle is lost on

the issues of unity and fellowship, it is lost completely. This being so, we need to study carefully the weapons Satan is using to attack the church on this issue.

While the church was riding the crest of a tremendous wave of growth in the late 1950s and early 1960s, some of the “mainline” denominations (e.g., Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, et al.) were being overwhelmed with modernism. They were “sitting ducks” for modernism because they had long been enslaved to liberal theology and hermeneutics, which had produced liberal doctrine and practice (a part of which was “fellowship-everybody-ism”). These religious bodies, captured almost totally by modernism, no longer stand for anything but super-tolerance of everything and everybody—except those still determined to abide in the doctrine of Christ. The Southern Baptist Church began to feel the same pressures in the 1970s, and those in that denomination who still claim to believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible are in a fight-to-the-finish struggle for control with liberals and modernists. This struggle threatens to split the Baptists right down the middle.

It was predictable that sooner or later these religious currents would affect the Lord’s church. There had been isolated cases of loose fellowshippers among us all through the years, but they were just that—isolated. Even as late as the early 1960s, when a liberal preacher or professor was discovered, he was generally dismissed and deprived of a pulpit or classroom unless he repented. Liberalism would soon prove to be not so isolated and unpopular. One of the early indications of a more widespread influence of liberalism among us was the accusation from some brethren in the early 1960s that preachers had over-emphasized the plan of salvation to the neglect of Christ Himself. The “Man or the Plan” issue, as it came to be popularly styled, was thoroughly discussed in the brotherhood papers. This was an early attempt by some to shift emphasis away from sound doctrine, which obviously had some success to that end.

The late Carl Ketcherside and Leroy Garrett (still living) called their version of this assault in the late 1950s, “Unity in Diversity.” They sought to convince brethren that religious people do not have to be united in “doctrine” (e.g., worship, congregational organization, etc.), only in a few basic tenets of the “gospel” (e.g., the virgin birth, the Deity of Christ, et al.). It appears that they may have succeeded beyond what most of us anticipated.

Mission Magazine, a monthly journal that first appeared in July 1967, played a leading role in this effort. Until its demise about twenty years later, it would carry the banner of liberalism (at times evincing outright modernism) for the young liberals in the church. It attacked the concept of a Biblical pattern for the church and the Scriptural bounds of fellowship at least as early as the January 1973 issue. Likewise, in the late 1960s Reuel Lemmons, editor of *The Firm*

Foundation, defended Pat Boone's fellowship with Oral Roberts on nationwide television. The attack on Scriptural fellowship and the pressure for some sort of unity with denominationalism were accelerating.

During the 1970s the influence of those who wished to extend the fellowship boundaries picked up momentum. They were led by such forces as the once-solid (and still influential) Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas, and the Herald of Truth radio and television programs, which had come under strong criticism for their liberal leanings. These criticisms culminated in a marathon meeting in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1973 attended by over two hundred preachers and numerous representatives of Highland and Herald of Truth. The meeting only intensified the fears and confirmed the suspicions of concerned brethren.

Institutions of higher learning were a fertile breeding-ground for the digression that carried away so much of the church in the nineteenth century. They are repeating this dubious function in the present. Since the 1950s Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, has been a bastion of liberalism on the West Coast. The school's concept of "fellowship" is best demonstrated by the fact that it has non-Christians on its faculty and board. For many years its lectureships have been a haven for purveyors of every strange doctrine. The other colleges were generally perceived until the 1970s as conservative, with some more so than others.

With the retirement of Don Morris as president of Abilene Christian College (now ACU) in 1970, a spirit of unprecedented tolerance on that campus soon became observable. The Bible department and the lectureship gradually began to be increasingly staffed with men of "uncertain sounds," including the subject of fellowship. With succeeding administrations the drift has become an open and obvious shift.

Today ACU is one of the foremost proponents and encouragers of unscriptural unity and fellowship as the following matters illustrate:

1. The almost exclusive use of liberal speakers on its lectureships, workshops, and seminars from the 1980s on.
2. Outrageously heretical statements, both orally and in writing, by various men on the faculty of the Bible department and the president himself (so numerous and well-known as to need no documentation).
3. Books authored by ACU professors and/or published by ACU Press. A case in point is a book by Carroll D. Osburn, ACU Professor of New Testament, in which he writes that he rejects "arrogant exclusivism" and that in his view "Christian fellowship is extended to a broader arena."⁴ Lest anyone doubt just what he means, he further explains:

There should be room in the Christian fellowship for those who differ on...whether the Lord's Supper must be taken every Sunday, or whether instrumental music is used in worship.
There should be room in the Christian fellowship for those who believe that Christ is the Son

of God, but who differ on eschatological theories such as premillennialism...or soteriological matters such as whether baptism is “for” or “because of” remission of sins.”⁵

4. The appointment in 1992 of a Methodist preacher, a student at ACU, as editor of the school paper (defended by the president).

All of these things relate directly to the tearing down of the limits and bounds of fellowship as set forth in the New Testament. Lamentably, several other colleges and universities supported by the Lord’s people are rapidly following this ecumenical, “unity-in-diversity,” lead of ACU.⁶

In 1983 Rubel Shelly shocked the brotherhood by declaring his newfound ecumenism, stating that he believed there were faithful and devout Christians among all the denominations. This represented a total reversal of his previous strong and true doctrinal stance spanning several years in defense of the Truth. The next year he and his cohorts organized the first of a continuing series of “Unity Forums” with leaders of the Independent Christian Church (ICC). A major aim of these meetings was to pursue fellowship and unity between the Lord’s people and the ICC. These Forums were “tailor-made” for the devil’s devious designs against the church, and he has used them to the fullest.

From the beginning these sweet little powwows almost exclusively featured men who purported to represent the church of the Lord, but who were known for their ultra-liberalism by their repeated capitulations on both doctrinal and practical issues. One of the ICC prime movers in the Forums soon began a tabloid he named *One Body*, the major purpose of which was to leave the impression and to foster the concept that we and they are indeed one—united and in fellowship—in spite of their numerous departures in doctrine and practice. Many liberals who have abandoned the Truth were all too willing to take up the ICC *unity* mantra. Both Pepperdine and ACU have hosted these Forums at various times. (In spite of the hundreds of hours spent in these discussions, the ICC people have adamantly said they are not about to give up their unscriptural innovations, particularly instrumental music in worship.)

Instead of steadfastly calling for the ICC folk to repent of their apostasy, many of our soft, compromising, and “irenic” brethren who were (and are) participating in the Forums began to urge that we view the use of instruments as merely a matter of opinion or conscience, rather than one involving Scriptural authority and sin. In the very first Forum (1984), Furman Kearley suggested that congregations could first begin using ICC preachers to teach a class, and then gradually move them into our pulpits. (Significantly, a few months afterward Neil Anderson, publisher of *The Gospel Advocate*, summarily removed the late Guy N. Woods as editor and replaced him with Kearley.) In 1985 Calvin Warpula, one of the frequent Forum speakers, dogmatized that it was “untenable” to demand the that ICC folks publicly repent of error and sin

in using instruments in worship before we extended fellowship to them.⁷ Such folk have achieved the only kind of unity in which they seem to be interested—“unity” in error.

Several publishers, editors, and authors through periodicals and books have lent (and continue to lend) themselves to Satan’s agency. Besides *Mission Magazine*, referenced earlier, other publications contributed to the fellowship apostasy. Reuel Lemmons, who had compromised Biblical fellowship and unity for several years as editor of *The Firm Foundation*, was relieved of his editorship by its new owners in 1983. Within a year he had found backing from Alton Howard (an elder in the notoriously digressive West Monroe, LA, church) for a new journal (*Image Magazine*), in which he could have full freedom to propagate his liberalism and ecumenism. In 1992 Rubel Shelly was instrumental in beginning *Wineskins*, an even more liberal journal (difficult as this was!).

The Christian Chronicle, which was all but dead by the 1970s, was purchased and revived by Oklahoma Christian University in the mid-1980s. Its editors have turned it into the major “unity-in-diversity” influence (do not miss this additional school connection). Its purpose statement reads in part that it “...seeks to inform, inspire, and unite churches of Christ worldwide.” It **informs** all right—about everything liberal and outlandish. It must surely **inspire** and encourage liberals greatly in their liberalism. Through its utter lack of discrimination relating to apostates and their activities, it **seeks to unite** all—as long as everyone will submit to its liberal, fellowship-everybody agenda.

A spate of books from liberal brethren (again, many of them professors in “our” universities) has flowed from the press the past two decades, and their central theme is one: The church must make whatever changes are necessary, including broadening its fellowship, to attract, adapt to, and unite with those addicted to current culture. They have all but completely abandoned any quest for Scriptural authority for their changes. Books and periodicals have played a major role in leading many astray.

Ecumenism has also received great impetus from various workshops, seminars, and lecture programs. In 1978 the first “Tulsa Soul-Winning Workshop” was conducted. By 1980 the liberal doctrinal agenda of this annual event was clearly evident. From year to year it provides as speakers a “who’s who” of the most liberal and denominationally minded people who were once among us. They have not been timid about urging fellowship with those outside the family of God. In 1989 three of the largest and most liberal churches in and around Nashville, Tennessee (Woodmont Hills, Madison, and Antioch), at the prompting of Madison, planned the first “Nashville Jubilee” (now defunct, for which we thank God). One did not even need to see the first slate of speakers to understand that it would be another hotbed of avant-garde doctrine

and practice. The three sponsoring congregations were evidence aplenty of where it was headed before it even started. When the lectureships of some of our higher institutions of learning, as already mentioned, are added to these efforts, these combined forces constitute a powerful force for the “gospel of change” concerning fellowship as legislated by the Son of God.

Rubel Shelly has been the foremost advocate among us of fellowship with children of darkness in recent years, both in word and deed. Besides his statement that he believes there are devout Christians in all the denominations (1983) and his leadership in the ecumenical Forums with the ICC (1984 to the present), he has more recently been even more blatant. On April 10, 1994 he was the featured speaker at the post-Easter “celebration” of seven denominations (including Woodmont Hills for which he preaches). It included the employment of various kinds of unauthorized music, including choir singing and a brass band. The theme of his sermon was unity and fellowship based on the “central” and “core” themes of the Gospel, of which the resurrection is an example, never mind such “trivialities” as Christ’s law concerning the work, worship, and organization of the church.

Three days later (he was a busy boy that week!) he spoke at Christ’s Church, a Pentecostal Holiness group in Nashville. He praised their pastor as a “godly man” and said that God’s kingdom is “wider, deeper, larger, greater” than any of the denominations (including us, of course). He condemned the setting of boundaries against one another in religion and gave the Lord’s church a good bashing, much to the delight of his sectarian audience. He called the church “our little part of the body of Christ.”⁸ One could not frame statements more directly opposite to the New Testament doctrine of unity and fellowship.

Attacks on the Undenominational Nature of the Church

When Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Mat. 16:18), He did not have a denomination (a mere **part** of His church) in mind. When the church became a reality on Pentecost (Acts 2:38–47), it was not a denomination (merely a **part** of the church). When the Lord began adding people to the church (Acts 2:41, 47), He did not add them to a denomination (one among two or many religious bodies). When the apostles and other brethren began to take the Gospel to Judea, Samaria, and finally, to “the uttermost part of the earth” (1:9), they did not establish varying denominations or congregations of the same denomination. They simply established the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, for which He died (20:28; Eph. 5:25). In its very nature, the church Jesus built is not only **undenominational**—it is also **anti**-denominational.

Some exceedingly basic principles are involved in the foregoing statements, none more basic than the invariable seed–harvest rule: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). From the beginning God decreed

that this principle would govern the world He had created. Its earliest applications related to the vegetable and animal families. Seed corn has never produced watermelons, dogs, or roses, but invariably, more corn. From the first union of a ram and nanny goat until the present, the offspring of such unions has never been a toad, a turnip, or anything else but a kid goat. (This same inviolable law exposes a major fallacy of evolutionary theory, incidentally.)

While the foregoing principle is so elementary and universally observable that none should ever be able to forget or gainsay it, some nonetheless deny its application in the realm of religion and morals. Paul wrote the inspired statement of this rule primarily in application to moral, spiritual, and religious issues. However, we do not have to wait for the Gospel era to understand that it has always been in force relative to religion. As men proliferated and were scattered abroad from Babel, they invented their own gods, religions, and doctrines. God's sowing and reaping law is behind His revelation of the law to Moses and His decree that parents were to keep it faithfully themselves and teach it constantly and without fail to their children (Deu. 6:1–14). God knew that, religiously and morally, they would be the products of their teaching. He knew that only the "seed" of true teaching could produce future generations that would remain true to the very first commandment He gave them: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). Just as the false doctrines about idols could not produce faithful Israelites, neither would God's pure law ever produce idol-worshippers. Lamentably, of the second generation of the settlers of Canaan, the Bible describes the evil harvest of the false doctrines ("seed") they accepted:

And...there arose another generation after them, that knew not Jehovah, nor yet the work which he had wrought for Israel. And the children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah, and served the Baalim; and they forsook Jehovah, the God of their fathers, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the peoples that were round about them, and bowed themselves down unto them: and they provoked Jehovah to anger" (Jud. 2:10–12).

The sowing and reaping principle in regard to doctrine is implicit in every admonition to abide in and faithfully teach God's Word (e.g., Jon. 3:2; Mark 16:15; John 8:31; Rom. 10:15; 2 Tim. 4:2; et al.). It is also implicit in every warning against accepting or teaching false doctrine (Mat. 7:15; 16:6; 24:11; Gal. 1:6–9; Col. 2:8; 2 Pet. 2:1; et al.).

In Luke's account of the Parable of the Sower and Jesus' explanation of it (Luke 8:4–15), Jesus began His explanation by saying, "The seed is the word of God" (v. 11). Two indisputable implications derive from the fact that the Word of God—the Gospel, God's Word since Calvary—is the seed of the kingdom:

1. Only the Gospel "seed" can produce the New Testament church "crop." One cannot produce the Lord's church from the seeds of the *Methodist Discipline*, the *Philadelphia Confession*, the *Book of Common Prayer*, the *Catechism*, the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Book of Mormon*,

or any other kind of seed. Those “seeds” will bring forth after their kind as surely as will corn and cows.

2. When the Gospel is faithfully preached, if it produces anything at all, it will always produce **only** the undenominational church of Christ. The unadulterated Gospel has never produced a Mormon, a Methodist, a Muslim, a Roman Catholic, a Baptist, or a Presbyterian, and it never will. Furthermore, the beautiful and simple Gospel has never produced a liberal preacher, professor, eldership, or church, and it never will.

The late Thomas B. Warren nailed it exactly in the title of one of his books: *The Bible Only Makes Christians Only and the Only Christians*. If the undenominational church of Christ came into existence and was maintained by the preaching of the apostles originally (and it was), then the same undenominational church of Christ will come into existence and will be maintained by the preaching of that same Gospel in any age. In spite of the simplicity and clarity of this principle, there are those who still want to be counted as part of the church, but who despise both the principle and the nature of the undenominational church it produces.

Such folk deny that the faithfully restored church of Christ in our age is the church of the apostolic age. They deny the possibility of as well as the need for restoring the New Testament church. They cannot abide the distinctiveness of the church revealed in the New Testament. They view themselves as members of merely another denomination that may be a little closer to the New Testament than other denominations, but nonetheless a denomination. (Of course, if they are only talking about the congregations they have corrupted according to their denominational concepts, then we could not agree more that they are members of denominations. Many religious bodies still hypocritically wear “Church of Christ” on their buildings and property when they long ago ceased to be such.) Lynn Anderson, while preaching for the Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas, stated in a 1973 sermon that “the Church of Christ is a big, sick denomination.” Many have followed his lead with the same perverted view of the church in the ensuing years.

The Crux of the Matter, a 2001 book by three ACU professors, provides ample evidence and is a good sample of the elitist attitude that can think of nothing but *denomination* when it hears the word *church*. The book ridicules the idea that the saved can be identified only with the church of the Lord. Its authors label such an idea as “arrogance” and describe the church of Christ as merely an “American-born body.”⁹ They declare that it to be “extremely sectarian” to deny that anyone “outside our churches could be a true Christian.”¹⁰ Disparaging the idea that we (or they) are members of the church that the Christ founded and to which He still adds obedient believers, they speak of the Campbells, Stone, and other early nineteenth-century restorers as “the founders” and “founding leaders” of churches of Christ.¹¹ The erudite ACU

authors obviously do not believe that Christ founded the church. (Once more, do not miss the campus as the source of this material.)

It would be bad enough for such folk to abandon the Truth themselves (for they will be lost if they persist in their error). However, they are determined to “convert” as many as possible to their denominational paradigm. With but few exceptions, those who are attacking the undenominational nature of the church are trying to stay among us. Casting aside even the possibility of restoration, they are bent on restructuring the Lord’s body after human designs. Unfortunately, the hypertolerant climate of society in general, coupled with gross and general Biblical ignorance in most members of the church, provides fertile soil for their poison seed. The devil must be gleefully smiling at their efforts on his behalf. We will do well to notice some of the tactics Satan is using to destroy the church by denominationalizing it.

The Way We Are to View and Interpret the Bible

Some of the liberals who attended the first unity forum with the ICC in 1984 came home crying for a “new hermeneutic” (i.e., a new set of rules of Bible interpretation) so we could have fellowship with those in the ICC in spite of their being members of a denomination. A few years later some of the self-proclaimed “scholars” began to holler for a “new hermeneutic” at their “scholars’ conferences.” They especially want to discard any respect for the prohibitive nature of the silence of Scripture. They would have us believe we do not have any law under Christ, that the New Testament is not a “constitution,” but merely a “love letter” from Heaven. They deny that the Bible contains patterns for the church or that we are obligated to follow it strictly. Some have already taken positions, the implications of which constitute a denial of the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture. What chance has the Scriptural teaching on fellowship or the undenominational nature of the church if such views of the Bible prevail?

The Way We Are To Worship

Some are suggesting (and practicing) the observance of the Lord’s Supper on other days besides the Lord’s Day. Some now say that the use of mechanical instruments of music in worship is a non-issue—that they have no scruples against them and can worship with those who use them. An increasing number of congregations are regularly using “special” or “presentation” music (i.e., solos, choirs, and other groups such as “praise teams” that are separate from the congregation) in their worship assemblies. Casually dressed suave promoters presenting pop-psychology pep talks—laced with a few funny stories—long ago replaced Bible-quoting preachers in many pulpits.

Drama and theatrical productions are frequently filling or almost crowding out the normal sermon time in some congregations. The practice by those in the congregation of lifting and

fluttering their hands over their heads during songs and prayers and applauding (during the songs, at points of agreement with the preacher, at a baptism, or at some announcement) is on the rise. Some have already done away with a Gospel invitation and ridicule those who continue to offer one at each assembly. It has become increasingly common for congregations to meet only on Sunday morning and to replace the normal evening worship period with “cell” or “life group” meetings in homes.

Some congregations now have two morning worship assemblies. One is structured along “traditional” lines and is conducted for those who might be offended by “non-traditional” practices. The other, usually styled “contemporary,” is for liberals who care little or not at all for Scriptural authorization for what they say or do and who, sooner or later, will impose their entertainment “worship” on the whole church. Ironically, they do not seem to realize that what they are doing is not “fresh” or “new.” Rather, they are merely borrowing hollow, worn-out practices and rituals of sectarianism and combining them with the religious jive of Pentecostalism, as if these wholly emotion-driven activities possessed some magical formula for creating “spiritual worship.” All of these represent major alterations that already greatly affect the subject of fellowship and the church’s undenominational status.

The Role of Women in the Church

The secular, social, political, and humanistic “women’s liberation movement” of the 1970s and 1980s has had an obvious influence on some brethren who seem to care more about being “politically correct” than about being doctrinally correct. The liberals are pushing women into leadership roles in the church as rapidly as they can. Their usual beginning point is to use them as ushers or announcers and to pass the trays during the Lord’s Supper.¹² The next “progression” in the incremental change agenda of the liberals is to have them read Scripture (perhaps while seated on the front pew) or lead a song or a prayer from a pew. The next step may then be to have them teach mixed adult classes, with the intent eventually to move them into the pulpit. A few years ago an Alabama congregation published its agenda for appointing women as deacons, then as elders, and finally, turning the pulpit over to them. The Richland Hills, Texas, congregation recently did away with the office of deacons and in their place appointed a large number of “special servants,” which included both men and women. Faithful brethren will have no choice but to refuse to fellowship such apostates who already conceive of the whole church as a denomination.

The Plan of Salvation

As previously cited, Carroll D. Osburn, ACU Professor of New Testament, avers: “There should be room in the Christian fellowship for those who believe that Christ is the Son of God,

but who differ on...soteriological matters such as whether baptism is 'for' or 'because of' the remission of sins."¹³ Jimmy Allen, a longtime Bible professor at Harding University, has written an entire book devoted to the proposition that a believer need not know or understand the Scriptural purpose of his/her baptism for it to be Scriptural baptism.¹⁴ Max Lucado, who long ago left the church in his convictions (but still preaches for a denomination that calls itself "Oak Hills Church of Christ" in San Antonio, Texas), told listeners to his radio program just to call God their Father and He would save them. Then, he offered, that they should be baptized, but not in order to be saved. These quotations are crucial to the issue of fellowship. If it makes no difference whether baptism is "for" or "because of" remission of sins, if immersion "for any reason" is Scriptural, and if baptism is not even necessary in order to be saved, then we are actually in fellowship with multiplied millions of denominationalists. In fact, the church is indistinguishable from a denomination.

Moral Issues

In the 1970s some prominent brethren, led by James D. Bales of the Harding University Bible faculty, began advancing doctrines that relaxed the Lord's teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage in Matthew 19:9. As a direct result of the "loopholes" he and others invented in God's law for marriage, there are now men in leadership roles (preachers, elders, deacons, Bible class teachers, et al.) in some congregations who have divorced and remarried on grounds other than fornication. There are likely thousands of couples by now whose adulterous marriages have been justified by themselves and by church leaders on the basis of these alleged "loopholes" and who are accepted as faithful members in hundreds of congregations. Some brethren vigorously defend "social drinking" of alcoholic beverages, dancing, the wearing of immodest apparel in public (including public mixed swimming), and playing the state lottery. Some have already suggested an attitude of tolerance on the subject of abortion.¹⁵ All of these relate to the subject of who will or will not be retained in the fellowship of the local congregation and whether or not the church will follow the lead of most of the major denominations that have fully capitulated on most moral issues.

The Specific Issue of Fellowship

Rubel Shelly has publicly renounced his former Scriptural convictions in favor of liberal views of Ephesians 4:4–6 and 2 John 9, which views imply the existence of fellowship between all who believe (1) in the atonement of Christ for our sins and (2) in His Deity.¹⁶ Carroll Osburn, referenced earlier, likewise argues that 2 John 9 refers only to teaching concerning the nature of the Christ, not to the things He taught and/or authorized others to teach). Therefore, they allege, fellowship should not be withheld from those who do not believe the Lord's supper should be

taken every Sunday, those who wish to use instrumental music in worship, premillennialists, or (as noted above) even those who teach that baptism is “because of” remission of sins.¹⁷ The move for unity and fellowship with the ICC (and other denominations as well) is both the effect of this push for a broader fellowship and the cause of additional efforts of this sort. More and more preachers, especially in the large metropolitan churches, are joining denominational ministerial alliances.

Blunting Satan’s Attacks

I must not conclude the study of this subject without exploring some possible ways to repel the assaults upon the unity and the nondenominational character of the Lord’s church. Accordingly, I suggest the following:

1. We must understand the meaning of *unity* as defined by Scripture and help others to understand it also. It is that which exists when people are in fellowship with each other and who thus jointly partake or participate with others in a common blessing, experience, work, or some other such thing. It is the harmony that is produced when people share in a common relationship due to meeting like qualifications, conditions, or characteristics. Unity in spiritual matters derives among those who have obeyed the Gospel plan of salvation and who are continuing to “walk in the light” (1 John 1:6–7).
2. We must understand what the Bible teaches about whom we should and should not fellowship and therefore with whom we are to be united. A better treatise on the subject could not be desired than Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 6:14–18:

Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers: for what fellowship have righteousness and iniquity? or what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what portion hath a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement hath a temple of God with idols? for we are a temple of the living God; even as God said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be to you a Father, and ye shall be to me sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

This passage (along with many others) will prevent one who is serious about loyalty to Christ from having any perception of unity with or of extending spiritual fellowship to any member of a denomination or anyone else outside the body of Christ. It will also prevent one from having fellowship with many who are members of the Lord’s church, as many passages instruct (Mat. 18:15–17; Rom. 16:16–18; 1 Cor. 5; 2 The. 3:6, 14; Tit. 3:10; et al.).

3. We must identify and refuse to extend fellowship to those who were once among us, but who have now (I say it with great sorrow) gone over to the enemy and are trying to take the entire church with them. There is no sense in which God’s faithful children can be united with them in their present state of apostasy. It is far past time that we quit coddling, tolerating, and handling with kid gloves these folk as if they were still deserving of some degree of respect and credibility. There is no justifiable reason to pretend that they are something besides what they are—spiritually evil and ungodly folk who are bent on destroying the church of the living God! We must recognize that they have made shipwreck of the faith and they have gone so

far in their rebellion that in many cases to refer to them with the warm, familial term, *brother*, is to besmirch it. For our part, we will no longer do so.¹⁸ As John wrote of the anti-Christ of his day, so he could write of these: "They went out from us,... but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). I earnestly wish that, as they have gone out from us spiritually and doctrinally, they would all also bodily depart and start their own denominations. If they possessed either honor or integrity they would do so.

These include such men as Carroll Osburn, Rubel Shelly, Mike Cope, Royce Money, Max Lucado, Jeff Walling, Marvin Phillips, Steve Flatt, Lynn Anderson, Alton Howard, Rick Atchley, Wayne Kilpatrick, Harold Hazelip, Michael Armour, Calvin Warpula, and a host of others of their ilk ("And what shall I more say? For the time will fail me if I tell of Jim Woodroof, Randy Harris, Phillip Morrison, Denny Boultinghouse..." [to appropriate Heb. 11:32]). By the words these men have spoken, written, and published and by the things they have done and are doing deliberately, repeatedly, and openly (we can only imagine what they have done and said in secret council and private chambers!), they have shown beyond any question for even the least observant saint that they have sold out to the Prince of Darkness and are determined to serve his purpose to destroy the church of the Lord. Their method seems to be to so cloud the perception of what the church is that brethren will perceive it to be merely a humanly-devised denomination (and a second-rate one at that) and will thereupon join in fellowship with and be lost in the religious cesspool of denominationalism at large.

With much grief I must say that apostate congregations include Woodmont Hills and Madison (Nashville, TN), Richland Hills and Midtown (Fort Worth, TX), Preston Road, Skillman Avenue, Highland Oaks, and Preston Crest (Dallas, TX), Garnet and Memorial (Tulsa, OK), Highland and Hillcrest (Abilene, TX), White Station and Highland (Memphis, TN) and many, many others. These have shown their true colors, not over a few weeks or months, but over many years in most cases. Their elders and deacons (at least in the majority) are apostate and they have employed, endorsed, and financially supported (in some cases with six figure salaries) some of the rankest heretics among us, and they continue to do so. They have not just temporarily and innocently "made a mistake" in these matters, which they have tried or are trying to correct. Rather, they are firmly settled in their direction, and they will not be turned back in spite of all the pleas and warnings faithful and concerned brethren.

4. We must not associate with those who are in error in any way that can be interpreted as approval or endorsement of them. Further, we must rebuke those who, though they do not themselves actually teach error concerning fellowship or related subjects, will still associate with, defend, and give implied endorsement to those who do. Robert R. Taylor, Jr. gives an excellent description of this all-too-frequent phenomenon in the following passage:

It is difficult to figure out some of our brethren in their inconsistent actions. They will bemoan the liberal spirit that is capturing large portions of our once uniformly conservative brotherhood. Yet on a continuing and even increasing basis they will appear with them on lectureships, workshops, seminars, and other occasions. It would be wonderfully courageous and highly commendable if they went to unmask their errors and uphold Truth with militant majesty; yet this they do not do as a general rule.... If they went there with the spirit of Elijah before Ahab or the false prophets of Baal, the spirit of noble Nathan before adulterous David, the spirit of John the Baptist before Herod and Herodias, the spirit of Christ before Pharisaic hypocrites, or the courage of Paul facing Judaizing troublemakers, they would not have the

welcome mat extended to them for repeat performances. Will any doubt it? If so, on what logical basis?¹⁹

In my boyhood days on a central Texas ranch, we had several hundred goats. I learned at an early age the meaning of the expression, “You can’t run with the goats without smelling like them.” While these exact words are not in Scripture, the principle they embody is. Verily, “Evil companionships corrupt good morals” (1 Cor.15:33). For the same reason and in like manner, close companionships with apostates tend to corrupt sound doctrine. Even if a brother who associates with liberals and heretics in a close and friendly way does not actually succumb to the error of those companions, undoubtedly his boldness to cry out against such errors is thereby lessened and he tarnishes his own reputation by doing so.

Those who do such and who are called to account for it often squeal in protest that we are assigning “guilt by association.” In their view, there is no such thing. However, if John does not teach this principle, we fail to see what he is teaching: “If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works” (II John 10–11). The brother who would receive a false teacher into his house and give him greeting so as to imply encouragement and endorsement (“bid him God speed,” KJV) must share in the guilt of the false teacher’s sin. This is so even if the host in this case does not actually do any false teaching himself. **He is guilty merely by his amicable association with the heretic he befriends!**

5. Elders must be awakened to the pivotal role they have the responsibility of fulfilling in these onslaughts of Satan. False teachers would never have gained such notoriety and influence had elders not provided safe havens for them and continued to use them. Even now, some otherwise sound and conservative elderships see no inconsistency in inviting a false teacher for a Gospel meeting or workshop of some sort. Likewise, they will allow programs to be announced from the pulpit, on bulletin boards, and through the church bulletin on which false teachers are featured. Perhaps elders could do more than almost any other one group in the church to halt the march of liberalism. Let them make it clear to their respective congregations that they will not knowingly invite liberals into their pulpits, either as local preachers or as guests, and let them forbid the publication of articles in their church bulletins that are written by these men (even if a given article teaches no error, the publication of his material gives the unworthy author undeserved credibility and implied endorsement). Rather, let them furnish the congregation with sound and strong reading materials, both in a good local bulletin and in other Scripturally sound publications such as *The Gospel Journal*.

Conclusion

Repelling Satan’s attacks against Scriptural unity and the undenominational nature of the church with all of our might is absolutely crucial. If the walls of Zion are breached at either of these gates, the cause will be lost utterly, for then the church will no longer have a Scriptural identity. It will simply be absorbed into the kingdom of darkness with all the rest of counterfeit Christendom. God forbid!

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

2. See author's discussion of this passage in "Some Commonly Misapplied Scriptures, Part 6," *The Gospel Journal* December 2001:29–30.
3. Parts of the remainder of this chapter first appeared in a modified form in the author's chapter, "Declaring War on the Fellowship of the Lord's Church," *Heaven's Imperatives or Man's Innovations: Shall We Restructure the Church of Christ*, ed. Curtis A. Cates (Memphis, TN: Memphis School of Preaching, 1995), pp. 81–117.
4. Carroll D. Osburn, *The Peaceable Kingdom: Essays Favoring Non-Sectarian Christianity* (Abilene, TX: Restoration Perspectives, 1993), p. 64.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.
6. Actually, they are not truly ecumenical. Their ecumenicity extends only and always leftward.
7. Calvin Warpula, *One Body*, Winter, 1985, p. 31.
8. For a fuller discussion of Shelly's antics on these and other occasions see Curtis A. Cates, *The "Core/Bull's Eye Gospel" Concept Refuted* (Memphis, TN: Cates Pub., 1994), pp. 79–83.
9. Jeff W. Childers, Douglas A. Foster, Jack R. Reese, *The Crux of the Matter* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001), p. 116.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 114, 135.
12. Dick Sztanyo in "An Overview of the Present Discussion: The Role of Women in the Church" in *Women to the Glory of God*, ed. Jim Laws (Memphis, TN: Getwell Church of Christ, 1994), pp. 154–155.
13. Osburn, pp. 90–91.
14. Jimmy Allen, *Rebaptism* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Pub. Co., 1991).
15. David Vanderpool, "Abortion: A Look at Questions and Controversies Surrounding a Major Societal Issue," *The Christian Chronicle* November 1993:14–15.
16. Rubel Shelly, *I Just Want To Be a Christian* (Nashville, TN: 20th Century Christian, 1984), p. 82; *The Restoration Movement and Unity: Preachers and Church Leaders Forum* (Henderson, TN: Freed-Hardeman College, 1986), p. 72.
17. Osburn, pp. 71, 90–91.
18. See the author's comments in "Editor's Clippings," *The Gospel Journal* February 2002:31–32.
19. Robert R. Taylor, Jr., "Where and When Shall We Draw the Line of Fellowship?" in *Studies in Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Valid Publications, Inc., 1994), p. 528.

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