

Unity in God's Church

Unity is important to God. How can we achieve it?

by Larry Salyer

Over the last few years I have found it fascinating to see how the matter of unity is viewed in the Churches of God. Generally speaking, we might say that most organizations, remnants of the mother church of this era, seem to expect absolute dedicated unity within their organization, but don't think much about it across organizational lines. We are doing our thing, they are doing theirs and so be it.

I hasten to say here, from my experience of being part of another group and then joining with United, that most in United, including the ministry and the leadership, do not feel that way. If they did I probably wouldn't be here.

Actually back in the Global Church of God we were approached by a number of United ministers as early as 1997 when we first began to talk about getting a group together to explore the unity of the two groups. I think we may have even been contacted somewhat less formally back in 1995 shortly after United was formed. Other groups have come together, some before and some since the merger of United Church of God and Church of God, a Christian Fellowship.

So the United Church of God has in a sense taken the lead, made an effort to reach out and say, "Hey, if we're all of one mind, if we're all of one spirit, then let's get together and make it more efficient and effective to do God's work." I commend the organization for that.

But some today seem to put pet ideas and doctrines above the real doctrine of unity in God's Church. It is a clear and prominent teaching of Christ and the apostles that God's people should be united, and unity is even used to define true Christianity.

Government and Unity

Ironically, some feel we cannot be unified because of different opinions about Church government. I say ironically because Worldwide Church of God founder Herbert Armstrong placed a lot of emphasis on Church government. Any of you who were around in those years know that.

What most fail to realize is that Mr. Armstrong was emphasizing and pushing Church government precisely for the purpose of maintaining and preserving unity within the Church. That was his goal and his purpose. He had learned by bitter experience, as you

can find easily by reading through his autobiography, that leaving individual congregations sort of loosely federated and under their own local leadership never tended toward unity. Church government, which did not actually mature in the Church for decades, was a means of preserving the unity of the Church.

But sometimes we end up throwing out the baby with the bath water. Because in this case the unity of the Church is the foundational doctrine, and the preservation of that unity in the Church is what was important and still is. How it is achieved may vary from time to time as we see in various biblical models, but unity is ultimately a very important doctrine in God's Church.

Today United does not have one-man government because we didn't see one man clearly set apart for that role, but we seek to have a Spirit-led collaborative approach. As a person who has participated in both forms of government, and as a person who was for a short time president of another organization, I can tell you that governing by one-man rule is so much easier than governing by collective rule. You know, it's really easy to get things done if everybody says somebody is in charge and whatever he says, that's what we do.

But when you get a collective group of people giving input, it is a very difficult thing to manage. It's a difficult way to produce the goals and the focus that you need to get the job done, because everybody has a perspective. Everybody has a reason for feeling and seeing things the way that he does. And that is very valuable. But it's hard to pull all of that together and make it a meaningful whole.

We are now successfully doing that. And while I would much rather have the easier way in one sense, I respect and appreciate the effort that has gone into making this collaborative system work. And what does it do? It promotes and preserves unity, because we have systems of written documentation and processes of governance that are undergirded by principles that everybody has agreed to. And so it promotes unity, it promotes togetherness, it promotes efficiency and effectiveness.

It puts us in a position to promote unity, to encourage unity, to reach out to others for the sake of unity.

Fellowship Starts With God

But let's review a few scriptures in order to keep fresh in our minds the importance and even the urgency of promoting unity in the Church of God. Let's start in 1 John 1:3: "That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ."

The focus of the fellowship is between human beings and God. And the implication here is, if I have fellowship with God the Father and Jesus Christ, and you have fellowship with God the Father and Jesus Christ, then we automatically have fellowship one with another. God is the conduit, the connection between us.

All those who are of God should also have appreciation and respect and fellowship with one another. But today that simply is not the case. Would anyone say he doesn't know of any Christians in any other organization? I could name a whole bunch of people I consider good Christians who are not in the same physical organization I am in. Those who are true Christians are separated here and there and scattered among various organizations. Most of us would acknowledge that. But what we must also acknowledge is that if we are all of God, we have not only a responsibility to God in terms of fellowship, but a responsibility to one another.

Corinthians and Unity

We know 1 Corinthians 1 is a place we often go to talk about unity, or division as the case may be. "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:9). Here is the apostle Paul saying the same thing we just read from the apostle John. We are the called out circle of friends that surround Jesus Christ as our leader.

"Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name 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" (verse 10). There are lots of big demands in the Bible. This is one of those very, very big demands—"That you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

Do we begin to comprehend how hard this is? Have we even begun to achieve this even within organizations separately, much less across organizational lines? It isn't going to happen—yet—but it is what we want to come to. We want to represent Jesus Christ and His way of life so thoroughly that we are instantly identifiable by what we believe and practice, by what we teach and how we treat one another. We want people to be able to say, "Wow, you must be of them."

Notice verse 11: "There are contentions among you." Then he goes on to describe one example of those contentions, which is that they were all divided because they were following men. What are we divided about? What is it we are not really willing to commit to as something that serves the Body and serves the greater good of the whole of the people of God?

Even if we have differences of judgment and differences of speaking in our private lives, they must be subjected to the greater good of the unity of the Church. Again, one of the things Mr. Armstrong always taught us was to stick to the trunk of the tree. If you go off on branches and leaves that are not attached to the trunk of the tree, you are not filling out the tree. You are planting a different one. So following men here is only one of those things that can take us astray.

The Unity of the Faith

Ephesians 4 refers to the purpose of the ministry and the functioning within the Church of those whom God has put there.

"He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping [perfecting, KJV] of the saints" (Ephesians 4:11-12). What he is really saying here is God has put a place, a role, an accountability within the Church into which He puts certain people who have the responsibility of doing what He is doing—for Him on His behalf—as God's workmen. And notice what that purpose is. "For the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:12-14).

We are all sheep. Christ is the chief shepherd, but He appoints assistant shepherds here and there to take care of parts of His flock.

And every one of those shepherds knows that sooner or later somebody who is presently very nicely ensconced within the fold is going to jump the fence, and is going to say, "I have discovered new truth." Or, "I have decided that I cannot in good conscience continue to participate in an organization that fails to do this," whatever that thing might be. Now, I do not question the sincerity or the honesty of such individuals in many cases.

They do what they do of a good conscience or an attempt to obey God. But do they do it on their own counsel without the help and advice and counsel of the greater body, God's Church?

We do have to be responsible for our actions and accountable for them. And we all make decisions accordingly day in and day out. But we ought to be very, very cautious not to make them on our own authority with our own counsel without really getting the best counsel and guidance and advice that we can possibly get. People go off to follow their own light, and they end up disappearing.

We can't solve the problem of lack of unity with other organizations, though we do have a responsibility to set the example, to reach out and to be available when they come looking for us. Or to reach out to them as United reached out to us in CGCF years ago.

It is clear that the purpose of the ministry, the physical corporation, the Church itself in some sense, is designed to maintain and preserve the unity of understanding of doctrine, of practice, of example and the capacity to really do God's work. Because we cannot do it individually and separately.

Christ's Prayer for Us

In John 17:20 Christ said, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word." So Christ was praying for us. "That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us" (verse 21). Again, a very lofty expectation. How much were the Father and Son one? To the point that Christ is described in Hebrews 1:3 as being the exact image or expression of His Father.

"That the world may believe that You sent Me" (verse 21). Now that takes it to a whole new level. There's going to be an example that says these people are so like Jesus Christ, they are so committed to the truth that they have to be of God. The very validity of Christ's authority as the Son of God and the Savior is to some degree tied to the ultimate fruit of His ministry, part of which is unity among His people. Does that put a little bit of burden on you? I hope it does.

You and I are hardly even on the map as far as the world is concerned. And yet ultimately it sounds like we have got to come to the place where we are recognized as being absolutely of one mind and judgment under the authority of God and as an exact imprint of the mind and thinking of Jesus Christ. They aren't going to say, "Are you a Jehovah's Witness?" They'll say, "Are you part of the Church of God? Do you keep the Sabbath and Holy Days and the commandments? Do you love your fellow man? Do you love God?"

Each of us has a responsibility to deepen our fellowship with the Father and the Son, which will in turn automatically increase and deepen our fellowship one with another. And it will also make us of one mind and judgment with all others who have true fellowship with the Father and the Son. So we are promoting unity by the way that we commit to the truth as God has revealed it to us, letting patience and the fruit of the Spirit help us ascend above our own little judgments, pet doctrines and theories which can separate us from the trunk of the tree and from one another.

As a personal position it seems doubtful to me that Christ is going to continue in the long run to work through competing judgmental groups of Christians who are so focused on their own work that they fail to see the need for unity and promote it with zeal by the way they serve God and the way they hold out that openness and love and care for one another.

I have been through some pretty difficult times in the last 15 years. I have been through what I consider some fairly abusive circumstances. But with God's help I have come to really want total unity with all of those brethren, even those who slap me around a little bit.

I am not saying that that unity and that peace and that one mind and judgment is going to come by us having sort of a "live and let live" attitude. True unity in God's Church is not

going to come in some loose federation of organizations any more than it ever came in some loose association of individual congregations way back in the '30s.

God is going to bring all of those who are His children into one mind, one fellowship and the unity of the faith. The responsibility for each of us today is to be able to be used in that way, to be malleable clay in God's hands. We need to accept His guidance and direction to make us what He wants us to be, so that we together produce a much more effective witness and light, not only to the other organizations, but to the world itself.

That unity will come when we individually and collectively achieve fellowship of the mind and heart and attain the goal of one judgment. That will come when we each achieve the fullness of the stature of Christ.

Unity of the faith is important to God. It must be important to each of us throughout the Church of God.