

FREEDOM'S RING

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"Proclaim liberty throughout the land" (Lev. 25:10).

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Jesus' Prayer For Oneness Was Answered!

Often people refer to Jesus' prayer for our oneness as his *unanswered* prayer. In the night that he was delivered up, he prayed that all who believe in him may be one. Since the millions of believers are in scores of differing groups and sub-groups, it seems evident that his prayer is still unanswered. But is that true?

As deplorable as the situation is with our many dissociating groups, I am proposing that Jesus' prayer for oneness was, and is, fulfilled. My thought is that we have let some traditional misunderstanding cloud our view.

In giving a lesson from the pulpit once, I used a golf ball to illustrate how we limit our concepts. I proposed that I could throw the ball from me so that it would stop in mid-flight and come back to me. I explained that I would not do it by an attached rubber band, by bouncing it off a wall, by throwing it to someone else who would throw it back, or by making it act as a boomerang. As I was making verbal impressions, I reinforced visual images by forward motions with the ball in my hand. Then I asked who really believed I could do that. About a dozen hands, mostly of kids, from the crowd of 400 were raised. There was laughter of surprise then, as I threw the ball straight up, it stopped in mid-flight, and it came back to me.

It is my belief that we have let previous concepts limit our understanding of the kind of unity and the true nature of fellowship that Jesus had in mind. An uncluttered mind like that of a youth might enable one to see beyond former misconceptions. Please let me introduce some thoughts which are not new but are disregarded commonly.

Let us read again John 17:20-23 (NIV): *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."* This is the core of the larger context of his prayer.

What was the nature of the unity and oneness that he earnestly desired? For what purpose was he laying down his life? Was it that we might all be brought to unanimity of belief in doctrines, rituals, and practices? Was it that we might all come under the umbrella of a recognizable group wearing a certain name like *Church of Christ*, or *church of Christ*? Or, was it not that all believers might be reconciled to God through him? The point of focus is God. Oneness is in him! "You are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us." Has that relationship been established? Are the believers one in God/Christ? *Every saved person is in God and Christ!* We sinners are reconciled to God in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18f). Reconciliation is in one body (Eph 2:6). The body is the church (Col. 1:18).

To be reconciled means that the guilt that separated us from God is remitted. We are baptized in order to receive the forgiveness of Jesus' atonement (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Mark 16:15f). By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). To argue whether this was Holy Spirit baptism or water baptism is useless, for both are accomplished at the same time, because baptism is for the remission of sins and in order to receive the gift of the Spirit. (See Acts 2:38 again.) We are baptized into Christ, hence, into his body (Rom. 6:3f). Trust in Jesus alone does not establish that relationship in Christ without baptism, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ...for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26f; Rom. 6:3f). It is then that "your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:1-3).

All the saved are united in one body, one church. But that church is not a sect or denomination. Nor is it the sum of them all. It is all who are in God and Christ. None are saved because of unity in some particular group with which they align themselves but, if they are saved at all, it is because they are one with Christ and God. The center of unity is not people, but God! If every person on earth were in agreement, that would not be what Jesus prayed for unless they were all in him reconciled to God in his one body, the church.

Since it is the Lord who adds us to his body in saving us, the creating of oneness is not our own doing, but his! It is not ours to create, but ours to recognize and respect. In Ephesians 4:1-6, Paul charges us, not to create unity in the one body, but to maintain it in the bond of peace.

Essentially, Intentionally, and Constitutionally One

Only in recent times have I given attention to and tried to understand the profound statement of the pioneer of our Movement, Thomas Campbell. While struggling with the exclusive claims of various Presbyterian groups, in his *Declaration And Address*, he declared, *"The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct."*

Essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one! What does that mean? I will not try to say what he understood, but here are a few thoughts that come to me from his statement.

That which is essential is necessary, indispensable. An essential cannot be removed without destroying the thing itself or its character. There can be no divided church! If we could divide it, it would no longer be the church for its essential nature would be destroyed. There are no fractional churches. We can divide it into neither two churches nor two hundred churches. The Lord has only one and he does all the adding to it.

God's intention, purpose, design, aim, end, and goal was deliberate. His plan was to reconcile sinners to himself in Christ in one body or family. Since he is one, we could not be reconciled in two or more different relationships. If we could

divide that body, we could defeat the determined intention of its head and creator.

Constitutionally, the church is comprised of all whom God saves. Since there is no distinction among those saved, the composite is one, and only one.

Campbell wrote of it as the *Church of Christ* before there was any group of his acquaintance wearing such a designation. So he was not referring to a segment of disciples who wear that name. He declared that this designation applied to "all those in every place that profess Christ, etc." *All those* were individuals, not *churches*. He had no goal of pulling members from various divisions into a new undenominational group, or of combining the churches into a new generic group, but it was "a project to unite the Christians in all the sects." He recognized that the Lord had saved people in the various groups in spite of their dissociation from each other. He wanted disciples to recognize and accept each other across party lines. It is ironic that many people in the various groups have learned this lesson while those in our "unity movement" have denounced it! Those persons do not expect to see their groups in heaven, but only Christians—some of whom serve Christ in their groups.

Where Are The Saved?

We must recognize that sobering truth today. If God does not have saved people among the separated groups today, then where are they? There is no such thing as a recognizable "one-true-church" on earth made up of all the saved. The Lord adds the saved to his universal, invisible church which is the fellowship of the redeemed—millions whom we do not know, hence, cannot judge. If churches today were to attempt to follow the course of Barton Stone and the Springfield Presbytery willing that their "bodies die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large," where would they find the body of Christ at large with which to associate? If the individuals were not in it already in their churches, would dissolving their churches put them in that universal body? Would they have to cease meeting together? Or, would taking down their signs and changing their letterheads be sufficient?

In our confusion, we affiliate ourselves with groups that are less than the whole who distinguish themselves from each other. One is not baptized into a congregation or added to one by the Lord. We affiliate with congregations on our own initiative. Many in Churches of Christ claim only universal association. They deny having joined a church while they have associated themselves with groups by "placing membership" which is actually a *joining*. Thus they become "members of the church," though the Scriptures do not speak of persons being members of the church. The saved are the church. The saved have no members! The only way to become a church member is to join a congregation! Those congregations are less than the whole and usually reject others in Christ—even other Churches of Christ! None of those groups can claim to be the whole without becoming sectarian. When people reject others whom the Lord has saved, they become sectarian in attitude. However, a person may be associated with a group of people who reject other disciples without himself assenting to their sectarian attitude.

The next questions follow just as surely as the tails of Little Bo Peep's sheep came wagging behind them. How can a

person be in association with believers who reject other disciples without being in fellowship with their sectarianism? Can one be in a divisive group without being divisive? Can a person be in a group that is in error without being in error himself? How can a person be in the one body and a denominational body at the same time?

Such questions have no easy answers. There are two main problems. The first is our general failure to recognize the

kind of unity Jesus prayed for, as we discussed above. The second is our misconception about the nature of fellowship.

The Nature of Fellowship

We are reconciled to God in Christ when our sins are forgiven and Jesus' righteousness is imputed as our own. This new state or condition of salvation makes us fellows or associates with all others in Christ and God. A *fellow* is an associate, comrade, or peer. *Ship* is a suffix denoting state, condition, or quality in nouns like *kinship*, *hardship*, or *workmanship*. Fellowship is a state of being in association with peers, and the word may be best understood when translated as *communion* or *sharing in common*. All the saved share life in common in God and Christ as the *ekklesia*, or church, metaphorically depicted as the body, household (family) of God, kingdom, assembly, temple, etc. That is true fellowship—a noun, not a verb. It is a state established for us rather than being something we do.

The focus of this fellowship is God, not man. It is not something that we give or withdraw. Only God can create it and only he can end it. We are related to one another as we are related to God. Just as spokes of a wheel are related to each other only in the hub, God is the hub in which we share the common life. To withdraw fellowship, if such were possible, would be to withdraw from God. One fellow cannot withdraw another from God. He can only withdraw himself! It may shock some to learn that our popular term "withdraw fellowship" is not in the Scriptures.

Sharing the common life in God is based upon accepting the gospel of Christ, not on our individual goodness, doctrinal correctness, maturity of understanding, agreement on everything, or sinlessness. If it were based on any or all of those conditions, none could ever enjoy the shared life of the redeemed either with God or fellow-disciples. Who can challenge this? Yet, sadly, eyes have been blinded to that truth. The ball can stop in mid-flight and return!

Kinship is a word similar to *fellowship*. Since we relate as God's family, let us use this word to illustrate our shared relationship. I had no choice about kinship to my father. Nor to my sisters. Nor my brothers. I was not consulted, but we were stuck with each other! (Ours was a happy relationship.) I was not chosen for kinship because of any quality of goodness that I possessed. If a sister had become reprobate, I could not have *dis-kinshipped* her. The siblings grew up, left home, married, and had families of their own. But we all still had the same relationship with our father in his family. I might strongly denounce the sins of a brother, but he would still be my brother. I could protest his misconduct while respecting his kinship as a person. I could not disinherit him. Only my father could do that. I could only seek to separate myself from family members, but I would still be in kinship all along. Only a rejecting attitude would cause me to question whether a sibling was truly a sibling and to demand a DNA test to judge him or her by. Who was I to question my sibling, for our acceptance came from our father, and it was the responsibility of neither sibling to judge the status of the other.

Choosing, Judging, Sanctioning

That illustrates our fellowship with our Father and all his children. I cannot choose or judge his children, and I show him and his children disrespect when I reject those who do not measure up to my expectations. I do not sanction and approve the sinful beliefs or practices of others simply because I am in fellowship with them—as long as I disavow those beliefs and practices. Otherwise, we could not be in fellowship with anyone! There is no person who is free of sin! We have that information

on good authority. But the sins of others are so much worse than mine! ☺

In Chapter 1 of *Free In Christ*, I listed one hundred things that we in Churches of Christ differ about in opinion, scruple, and conviction. Disciples in the same congregation disagree on those things, yet they maintain fellowship and unity. Though the various members do not hold all convictions in common, they share a common life in Christ. As an example, while one may be convinced that abortion is murder but killing in military service is not, another may be convinced that killing in military action is murder but abortion is not. One may think hand-clapping in worship is fine but eating in the assembly building is sinful, while another reverses that order. These all may accept each other as God's children without endorsing the convictions of each other.

In Romans 14, Paul teaches us clearly and emphatically that we are not compelled to share common convictions, but he demands that we accept each other without condemning or trying to enforce conformity. "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?" Paul shames the judgmental (v. 4). That is the only basis on which we can serve together in any group. Traditionally, as long as the group wears the name *Church of Christ* we find this diversity more acceptable, but if they go under any other designation such as *Church of God*, we have looked upon them as *brothers in error* at best. But why are those holding different views in another group brothers in error when if they hold them in our own group they are not? We are forced to conclude that we may be in fellowship with disciples with whom we disagree without sanctioning or endorsing their beliefs, practices, or moral weaknesses.

Look again as Paul addresses his letter "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:" (1 Cor. 1:2). Shouldn't he have stated it "all in every place in the church of Christ," making the fellowship church-centered instead of Christ-centered? You know the answer to that, for Paul declared, "you were called into the fellowship of his Son" (1:9).

The Corinthians were quarreling with divisive spirit (1:10-17), destructive to God's temple (3:16), arrogant about an incestuous relationship among themselves (Ch. 5), and suing one another (6:1-8). Some were not too convinced that there is only one God (8:1-7). Women were not respecting proper decorum while praying and prophesying in the assemblies, and some disciples were becoming drunk in the meal in which the Supper was served (Ch. 11). Certain spiritual leaders were showing off their gifts in the assemblies (Ch. 14). Some denied the resurrection of the dead (15:12). We are just hitting the high points of the shameful things among the Corinthian disciples.

Do you know of any church anywhere that ranks worse than Corinth? No? I don't either. Then why do you disdain fellowship with those in less offensive groups? Paul referred to them as a fellowship of saints composing the church of God in

Corinth! Oh yes, he called for correction and he clarified some points of misunderstanding. They were warned not to associate with those who arrogantly flaunted their sin. Otherwise, he called for consideration for the weak that they might become strong rather than suggesting that they drive out their stumbling and wounded. They were to quarantine the infectious without abandoning the sick. None were advised to leave and start a pure church. Area congregations were not warned "to withdraw fellowship," from the Corinthian Church of God, as though that were possible. Churches are not called into the fellowship by God. Only individuals.

Sharing With Other Sinners

We have been considering the noun form of *koinonia* translated *fellowship*. There is translation of the word into verbs

signifying sharing in common, partaking, participating, and sharing the common life. We must not participate in any person's sin, but we can be in the state of fellowship created by God without debating and judging scruples with him or participating in any action with him that violates our consciences. There are tares and bad fish in the kingdom. We must live with them. Only God can cast them out (Matt. 13:24-43; 47-50).

Even though we must respect our relationship which God created, we must not approve the misconduct of those in the fellowship. We must denounce the immorality of those *tares/bad fish* who willfully abandon purity of life and flaunt their sins (1 Cor. 5). We cannot give encouragement to one who promotes teachings that destroy the basis of our faith in Christ (2 John 7-9; 1 Tim. 1:19f; 2 Tim. 2:18f). The person who is trying to draw away disciples in divisiveness should be shunned (Titus 3:10f; Rom. 16:17f). But we are not referring to the sincerely ignorant, weak, or stumbling disciples. We cannot shun all the sinners, for there would be no one left! We are a bunch of lifelong sinners brought into and kept in fellowship and union with God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and one another through the grace of God in Christ.

In this fellowship are those who differ in convictions over many teachings and practices comparable to eating meats, observing days, and making circumcision an essential. Such things become issues only as we make them so. Concerning debatable matters of faith, Paul still tells each of us, "The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God" (Rom. 14:22). Right? Right!! God and Christ surely know that all people could never hold identical understanding and convictions on everything. God makes unity out of diversity, else there could be no unity at all.

My siblings and I don't have to move into the same house together and follow the same pattern of daily conduct to prove our oneness as a family. We prove that by our love and acceptance of each other. Even so, disciples of different culture and scruples don't have to move into the same congregations with the same name on the building to prove their oneness in Christ. They do that by loving and accepting each other.

Yes, Jesus' prayer was and is answered. God has made us one. When we reject others whom he has accepted, we become self-righteous judges who usurp God's prerogative. It is sad when people find more satisfaction in working against that unity than in embracing it and enhancing it. []

HOOK'S POINTS

Your prayers for us personally and for this ministry are a source of strength for us. Lea continues to struggle with the limitations caused by her stroke in March. She dismissed any thought of going to Shreveport, Louisiana for the wedding of our grandson, Daniel, and Amy. But after the doctor insisted that she go, she agreed. Although it was difficult, she was happy about it, but has let down again now.

I never have time to read the books and manuscripts you good people send me. But every letter is cherished. If, in my confusion, I fail to fill your order properly or to acknowledge your donations, please call it to my attention. Pressures squeezed out the June issue. So this is June-July. Welcome, new readers. This mailout is free for the asking.

We distributed 289 copies of *Free In Christ* in June and July, 163 of them being gifts from you to others. You keep our working fund healthy, now at \$2,114.75. You are our indispensable partners. Thank you.

Vic Phares tells me that in June our Web Site ranked No. 8 of those on Softdisk with 1300 "hits." Here are the leading hits in July on certain books, chapters, or topics:

1797---Home Page

515---*Recycling God's Love*

365---*The Great Belly-Button Controversy*

254---*Our Heritage of Unity & Fellowship*, Chapter 1
212---Search Function
199---Message Board
195---*Free In Christ*
167---*The Christian and Homosexuality*
153 ---*Free To Change*, Chapter 16
150---*Free To Change*
140---*Free In Christ*, Chapter 1
137---Links to Other Sites
131---*Our Heritage of Unity and Fellowship*
113---*Free To Change*, Chapter 7
94---*A Journey Toward Jesus*
80---*Women May Preach*
69---*Free To Speak*
62---*Beyond The Sacred Page*
59---*Free To Accept Etc.*

Several others from the Worldwide Church of God have been in contact. I have great admiration for them as they are seeking so openly to redefine their course, even as many of you in the COC are doing. They are praying for us. Let us pray for them.

Did I lose you this time? I keep wondering as I write my articles. But you still encourage me, even though essays like this one are very *un-COC*! I can understand how you would reject my stuff for it has not been long since I felt the same way. But hang on! There's room for you to change also.

<p>Address Changes Email: hookc@teleport.com Web Site: http://www.freedomring.org</p>
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Vic Phares, working out of Shreveport, Louisiana, operates the Web site, along with other spiritually oriented sites. He puts valuable time, skill, prayer, and dedication into it with no financial reward. I had not met Vic until last weekend when I was privileged to spend a short time with him. Look up *Phares Wheel* and his picture at <http://www.softdisk.com/comp/vic>. Check out his links.

I am convinced that God has prepared this man for the unique task of being the first **Cyberspace Missionary**! We need for Vic to be working full-time in this field. He has all the computer expertise, is deeply spiritual, is fully mature in grace-oriented concepts of Christianity, is regarded highly in his congregation, and is a self-starter (a workaholic, I was told).

The Church of Christ/North in Shreveport, with whom he meets, would like to sponsor him in this farsighted mission. They just do not have the money. After getting a little necessary equipment, most of the cost would be his salary. The church will provide an office for his use. Here is a world-wide ministry for the mere cost of one family's upkeep.

Would you, or your congregation, like to have part in such an exciting, far-reaching, pioneering ministry? To express interest or get information, contact Church of Christ/North, 3401 N. Market St., Shreveport, LA 71107; phone: 318-226-1305; Fax: 328-226-1306. You may e-mail Garry Knighton, the pulpit minister, at kuon@aol.com.

This would be a world-wide, non-sectarian ministry. It might never bring one person to your congregation. But searching people around the world would be directed to Christ through sources of Biblical information, discussion groups, having their specific questions answered, and by special counseling.

Isn't this an exciting prospect? God has opened a door into the 21st Century!!

Pioneering The Twenty-First Century

A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

Even though some of you do not have computers or are unable to access the World Wide Web, you must realize that we are in the dawn of the revolution of communication. By computers, the information of the world is at our fingertips. We can communicate instantly with someone in Kenya or Hong Kong as easily as someone across town. The few months that I have been online have made me see the awesome possibilities. In as few as ten years from now, anyone who does not have computer access will be as a dropout, I believe.

Just as in other means of communication, evil persons use it for evil purposes. But there are many searchers for truth from around the globe using the internet. Sincere people are searching for answers. Some are desperate cries. We have received some of them.

If you are not online, please ask a friend who is to look up our Web site to show you how it has expanded our ministry beyond imagination.