

My Thoughts on "A CHRISTIAN AFFIRMATION" #2

This is a continuation of FR 268, so please read it first. We are considering the minimal requirements for unity. Unity is centered on individual relationship in Christ rather than conformity of doctrine or organizational oneness. How is that relationship established?

As we set forth in the preceding segment, when persons were being saved, they were being added to the one, universal saved group -- the church. By one Spirit we were all baptized into the figurative one body. By that new birth we were born into God's spiritual family. Symbolically, we were baptized into Christ. (See Acts 2:38, 47; 1 Cor. 12:13; John 3:3-5; Gal. 3:26-27.) This reveals the minimal requirement for unity. No persons had to answer questions about doctrines and practices before baptism which created the unity. Since original unity required no affirmation of a cappella singing and weekly communion, how could these become essentials to unity later as we have insisted? None were baptized into an organized church or system of religion. The individuals composed the church, but the church has no members for it is not an organization. The scriptures do not speak of members of the church.

As the numbers grew they formed congregations, but the Lord did not add persons to those churches. Disciples joined those assemblies. The Lord had already made them parts of his one body. Every saved person on earth is in the one body. That is the God-created unity. That fellowship must be respected. We do not get to choose those with whom we are in fellowship any more than we get to choose our siblings.

Persons are brothers because they have the same father. A brother is always a brother regardless of his character. Rejecting a brother does not remove him from the family, but the rejecter becomes alienated. Only his father can disinherit him. We may rightly disapprove of his conduct but we cannot remove him from the family. All of us who have had siblings in the flesh have disagreed with them and disapproved of some of their actions without denying that they were any longer our siblings. Our sisters have married, changed their names, and had families of their own, and we did not reject them for that.

Because spiritual brothers may choose to serve God in an *a cappella* Church of Christ, an *instrumental* Church of Christ, a *non-Sunday school* Church of Christ, a *non-cooperation* Church of Christ (separated groups which have been rejecting of each other), a Christian Church, a Church of God, a Pentecostal Church of God, or an Assembly of God, it does not mean that they have left the one body in which the Spirit made them members, nor that they are no longer brothers in the Father's family. How can a brother cease to be a brother, or change fathers? Even if a man never "darkened the door" of a church after being baptized into Christ, he is still a brother.

Maybe you protest that they are brothers in error because they have joined churches that teach and practice error. Right! That is the only kind of brothers and churches we have!

Do you agree with every teaching expressed in your congregation? Do you approve of all the conduct of everybody in your congregation? Well, no! Aren't they in error? Must you reject them as brothers or fellow disciples? Oh, but our errors are not as bad as

those in other groups who wear names different from ours! Rejecting others in Christ is not as grievous as worship with instruments or monthly communion! Really?

We all join congregations, work with churches, or place membership with groups not mentioned in the Scriptures after we were added to the Lord's body. We serve with others with whom we disagree and whose conduct we disapprove. But we are not accountable for the errors or sins of others which we disavow. We can teach, reprove, and exhort them but we sin if we reject them as our brothers. No inspired writer has ever advocated the dividing from a group in error in order to start a pure church. Confronting error and sin for reformation is always called for. And more decisive action is also appropriate in certain circumstances which we will review at this time.

Our belief is not in efficacious tenets of faith which we call the gospel -- belief in the Sonship, atonement, resurrection, and ascension. These have no saving power though it is declared that the gospel is God's power to save (Rom. 1:16). The power is in Christ who is the Good News of salvation. But deny any of these facts and you destroy the creed because you have taken away the basis of hope in Christ. He that believes not shall be damned.

The Gnostics in apostolic times denied that Jesus came in the flesh. To deny the incarnation was to fail to abide in the doctrine of Christ on which the gospel rested. *"Anyone who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son"* (2 John 9). This was said of *"men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh"* (v.7). That was not referring to instrumental music or kitchens in church buildings, or any other scruple, opinion, or conviction, but to our creed, Jesus Christ.

That which destroys the faith as the Gnostic teaching was doing destroys the basis of salvation. Teachers of such were not to be welcomed or encouraged (2 John 10) but were to be delivered to Satan (1 Tim. 1:19f; 2 Tim. 2:18f).

A person turning to Jesus must repent, dedicating himself to moral living. Some may willfully abandon this purity of life while still holding to the faith. That is an incompatible situation. The flagrantly immoral, impenitent person must be delivered to Satan also (1 Cor. 5). The sincerely ignorant, weak, or stumbling disciple is not in that category, however. He needs caring attention instead of rejection.

Since we are all baptized into one body, a divisive person cannot be tolerated. So Paul instructs, *"As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is perverted and sinful; he is self condemned"* (Titus 3:10f). Not all who disagree or teach some error are factional. Persons could disagree on circumcision, meats, and days and still be in harmony in the one body (Read Rom. 14). A factious person solicits adherents, builds a party, and causes division. He can even do this without teaching. Most factions are caused by personality clashes and power struggles, but they usually choose some issue as a white horse to piously ride out on as a way of saving face.

Agreement on all teachings is not the basis of unity for we could never have practical unity in even one small congregation. No one should be subjected to the creedal pronouncements of the preacher or elders. A sincere belief which differs from that of the

"powers that be" in the congregation is no just cause for rejection. If a person becomes factional, however, by forcing his convictions on others, that would be another matter, and it should be dealt with. The overzealous watchdog becomes the rejecter and divider.

Even in these corrective cases, there is no indication that a group can thrust a brother out of the body of Christ or that the offender is no longer a brother. God is the one who created the fellowship, and "*each of us shall give account of himself to God*" (Rom. 14:12). When we disavow the error and deeds of evil men and reprove them, we are not accountable for their sins. In my more than seventy years among our congregations, I do not recall a public disciplining that was done for any of the reasons described above.

People will always have differing scruples and convictions unless they are brain dead. God does not call upon us to violate our consciences. We may meet, work, and serve separately with those of like conscience without being divisive and rejecting of others who are in Christ. But we are not given the liberty of judging and rejecting other brothers.

Individuals, in order to be accepting and united with others in Christ, need not wear the same names, serve in similar systems of organization, or have the same opinions about such things as the security of the believer, predestination, millennialism, and workings of the Holy Spirit. Those are not essential to salvation or to being one in Christ. Neither is there a pattern for worship that is essential, but we will wait for the next lesson to discuss that.

From the foregoing, you may discern that I believe "The Affirmation" has failed to identify the real nature of the church that is essential to unity. []

(Cecil Hook: June 2005)

Talkin' Texas: The state animal of Texas is the armadillo, not the smartest of creatures! The mothers have but one egg that splits into four and they always either have four male or four female babies. Aren't you glad to know that?

Maybe I immodestly promote my own writings, but 83,000 copies of *Free In Christ* are now in print, mostly through person-to-person advertisement. That indicates that many thousands of people are saying you should read it. \$5.00 plus \$1.50 for mailing one copy. The same sort of challenging messages make up my other four books, *Free To Speak*, *Free As Sons*, *Free To Change*, and *Free To Accept*. \$7.00 each. Through July, I am offering the set of five books for \$30.00 postage paid. Many testify that reading these five books has been truly life-changing. If they have done that for you, think what \$30.00 can do to change the life of your friend or loved one. You may order by email.