

FREEDOM'S RING

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

Cecil & Lea Hook

17196 NW Woodmere Ct., Beaverton, OR 97006-4820

503-690-0826; <hookc@teleport.com> <cecil@freedomring.org> <<http://www.freedomring.org>>

Number 33

November 1998

Is Jesus The Only Route To Heaven?

Roses With Other Names

Inheriting all the rationalizations of my people in defense of a distinctive name for the church, I also joined in contending that *Church of Christ* was “the Scriptural name.” It seemed hard to dispute that since Romans 16:16 spoke of *churches of Christ*. If a plurality of congregations were churches of Christ, then one congregation would be a Church of Christ. That seemed logical, though I failed to see that Paul was not writing about the name of a church.

Later, recognizing that the church should have no distinctive proper name which would be denominating, I accepted the *church of Christ* grammatical structure of the name. That was ill-advised because I still used it as a designating name on signs, letterheads, and listings. That violated a simple rule of grammar which demands that proper names be capitalized. Also, I dared not use *church of God* (1 Cor. 1:2) on the signs. A person did not need to be too bright to recognize my ignorant zeal.

In spite of being taught, even in college, that the word *church* is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, “called out”, after many years I looked for myself and discovered that such is not a proper translation, for *church* is translated from the Greek *kuriakos* (see your English dictionary). That word is never used in the Scriptures to refer to God’s saved people. So, I was making a non-Scriptural word into a Scriptural name for those people.

As many years passed and I began to see that, even though there were a number of designations or descriptions of the body of believers with none to be worn as a name, I thought a remedy for division into denominations would be to discard all names. In the early days of the church, there were no sectarian groups, hence, no differentiating names. The believers were one. Why not be like that today?

So why not? The believers in most all modern groups agree that they will not be saved because of wearing a certain distinctive name. They all agree that there is only one universal “called out” congregation or community of believers. When individuals meet in local groups to serve together, they are still parts of the universal community of disciples whether they wear a name or not. They understand that just as a penny, is a denominational part of a dollar, those saved individuals in the various groups are parts of the universal church. But no group of them is the universal, saved body for the body is not composed of local groups but of individuals. So, let us try to implement this “no-name - no-organization” concept.

Let us suppose that an industry is started in a more remote area. A few hundred people move there forming a new town named Rainbow City. In the rush to provide new homes, no buildings for worship are yet constructed. Let us imagine some person advertising to contact other Christian believers. A surprising number meet with him. He has a startling plan to propose.

This brother suggests that they go back to basics dropping sectarian names and organizational baggage. He suggests that they discard all distinctive names, build no buildings for separate groups, and just meet in their homes like many did in Jerusalem in the beginning. There would be no superstructure or organization above the house assemblies. They all agree. So they call a city-wide meeting to inaugurate this plan.

A great number of believers attend the meeting. After preliminary discussion, a call is made for persons willing to have a group of up to thirty people to meet in their homes. A sufficient number volunteers. Their names and addresses are revealed. Since no one will assume authority to assign persons to a specific host or hostess, a get-acquainted time is allowed for each person to choose with which host or hostess to meet. Also, they advertise a phone number where an inquirer may learn of the various locations of assemblies.

In the first meeting in the home of Gene Green, one person explains apologetically, "I recognize you as my brothers and sisters in Christ, but I am very uncomfortable with your lifting up hands, clapping, and claims of tongue speaking." The host responds, "Brother, we understand. We respect your convictions. Why don't you try the non-charismatic group meeting with Bill Brown?"

A woman calls the information number and explains that she wishes to serve with a group that will use her talents for leadership and teaching. She is directed to the home of Blanche White who hosts a group which makes no distinction between the sexes.

Another family visits several different groups but finds that none of them have weekly communion and all use instrumental music. On calling the information number, the man explains that, though he does not judge others of different conviction about those things, he cannot conscientiously sing with instrumental accompaniment or willingly miss weekly communion. So he is advised to meet in the home of Ray Gray where others hold the same convictions.

In broken English an interested person inquires about the possibility of a Spanish-speaking group and is happily directed to the home of Blanco Rojo.

Then there is the fellow who calls and explains that his wife was having a baby at the time of the initiation of the no-name home assemblies. Now he and his wife want to have the baby christened and dedicated publicly. Simple. Just go to the group meeting with Mac Black.

Various other home groups are formed by people of similar interests and more specific preferences. Some like informal assemblies while other prefer more liturgical services. Some have a core of several doctrinal issues they agree upon that are different from those of others. After several weeks of adjusting among house groups, it seems that everyone has found a group with whom to fit and work with ease. All want to put Christ at the center of all things. They are ready to work together for the good of all, their works being individual activities rather than those of an organized system.

This revolutionary practice brings much excitement to the new community. All are happy to be just Christians. No one denies fellowship with others. Although they are in groups with some differing convictions, they all grant other individuals freedom to serve according to their understanding of the Scriptures. All attention is centered on serving Christ. No one even mentions the name of the church of his or her previous affiliation. They are all only Christians and Christians only.

Isn't this a beautiful concept? This would be a bold and commendable step in the right direction, but it would hardly solve the problem of distinctive groups as I once thought it would. Before moving to Rainbow City, those of similar convictions had been meeting in groups identified by a church name. Now these people of similar convictions have sorted themselves out and are being identified by the name or the address of a host

or hostess. What is the difference? A rose by any other name will smell as sweet. They are just roses with other names. Or, maybe we could say that a rose by no name will smell just as sweet! They are just roses with no names.

What we have described in Rainbow City may be a part of the picture of the early church in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Formerly, overlooking the evident problems that the Scriptures point out in the early church, I was convinced that there was perfect harmony of belief, practice, and identification. However, in reality, there was much factionalism to contend with. For instance, there were the *circumcision* believers and the *uncircumcision* believers. Discomfort existed between Jewish and Greek disciples. Doctrinal difference between keepers of the Law and those who relied on grace strained unity. Some rejected others over the issues of eating meats and observing of days. Whether some of these contenders met separately or their partisan spirit was evident within the congregation as in Corinth, it was not always one happy family.

The rejecting, divisive party spirit was condemned. However, individual convictions were not condemned. The individual conscience was to be respected though not given license to rule over others. The idea that we can and must agree universally on all points of doctrine is a fantasy. The many who blithely and confidently declare that we can and must understand the Scriptures alike do not agree among themselves. Such a unity has never been and there is no prospect of it this side of heaven. Having different understanding and meeting separately for sake of conscience is not divisive if there is no attitude of rejection of others who differ. It is the rejection of other disciples that is divisive. In the Jerusalem church, for instance, the debate over circumcision could be heated, but until one side might reject the other over it, it would not be divisive. It is the rejecter who is at fault rather than the one with a different conviction.

In Rainbow City, the group meeting with Ray Gray, or any other host, would not have to investigate the views and practices of every other group and pass judgment in deciding whether to recognize them as Christ's disciples. "*Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?*" (Rom. 14:4; read the chapter again!) Out of interest for common understanding, discussion of differences would be of value. If the discussions were to become confrontations to demand conformity, however, those seeking to bind conformity to their views would be divisive.

Conformity is possible so that no sign on the building would be of value. There was a long period of time when that prevailed. It was during the Middle Ages. Then the religious system ruled with the civil government so that any dissenter could be dealt with and the "unity" would be preserved. Enforced conformity is tyrannical. Congregations, beware when you are so eager to publicly reject dissenters calling for reformation!

Martin Luther would have been a dead duck had the German princes not stood behind him politically and militarily. Eventually, the reformed church became the State Church in Germany replacing the Roman Catholic Church. Conformity to Lutheranism was then enforced in Germany. As reformation spread, conformity to different Protestant groups was enforced in various countries. That may be a kind of unity, but I don't think many of you want that – unless, perhaps, you could be the one to list the beliefs to be enforced!

Those who are so eager to reject others with whom they disagree have that spirit of tyranny – like Diotrophes who "*refuses himself to welcome the brethren, and also*

stops those who want to welcome them and puts them out of the church” (3 John 9-10). It well might be that Diotrophes was zealous to keep the church *pure* by driving out dissenters while preserving “the simple New Testament pattern.” He exercised the spirit of tyranny in his own little domain to keep it free from those he judged to be undesirable because of their non-conformity.

The problem is much deeper than agreement on a name or lack of a name. It is deeper than whether we can agree to worship and serve in the same assemblies. The party spirit and sectarian attitude in Corinth was no more acceptable while they met together than if they had met in their separate groups. In Corinth there were certainly conflicting beliefs, yet Paul never urged the “loyal, true church” to separate from others due to their different beliefs in order to keep the church pure. He did urge them to be of one mind and to speak the same thing in focusing on Christ, the center of their unity. Being one in Christ had nothing to do with their agreement on such things as circumcision, eating meats, whether a woman could pray or prophesy, or whether or not they all drank of the same cup in communion. Far more important was their love and acceptance of each other as brothers and sisters through the grace of God in Christ.

How would you speak of other congregations that have as many serious problems as were in the Corinthian church? In your righteous stand for truth, would you be forced to deny them recognition as a “loyal, true church of Christ”? Was Paul soft and liberal, endorsing divisions, when he addressed them: *“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)?

In Paul’s corrective teaching, he called for them not to associate with immoral men and idolaters (5:9-13; 6:9-11), but his censured list does not include the doctrinally misinformed. He gave them redirection through teaching and exhortation, and surely we should follow that example.

“I cannot endorse all the beliefs and practices of all other churches,” you may rightly protest. Neither can I! Neither was Paul endorsing everything in the Corinthian church of God! Neither am I suggesting that you endorse what your conscience will not allow. If your convictions do not permit you to sing with instrumental accompaniment, sing in a quartet in assemblies, drink from an individual cup in communion, or worship with the Baptists (except when they visit our services!), then don’t do it! I don’t know of any believer who would advise you to do it.

We have made a grave and disastrous error in equating the respecting of the convictions of others with whom we disagree with endorsing, condoning, or sanctioning their beliefs and practices. Consistent application of that will destroy any congregation. Every congregation is made up of people of varying beliefs and practices which are not approved by all others. You do not approve of every other person’s beliefs, yet you recognize them as fellow-disciples with whom you meet and worship regularly. Are you giving blanket endorsement and approval? Or does their being in the Church of Christ – wearing the “right name” -- make their differences acceptable?

What I am suggesting is not an abandonment of all doctrinal teachings – accepting everybody and everything, as it is sometimes stated prejudicially. If the people of another church denies the incarnation, that Jesus was the Son of God, that his death was an atonement for sin, or that he was raised from the dead, then they have denied the

foundation of faith. However, I don't think you will be confronted with a church like that for it would have no reason for existence. If, however, people who have accepted the Gospel and are dedicated to discipleship even as you are hold some practical differences of understanding on debatable matters, you are not given the luxury of rejecting them.

Our center of unity is Christ. If I reject others over a doctrinal matter unrelated to the saving Gospel, then I place greater emphasis on my interpretation than on unity in Christ. A rose of a different color, tint, or fragrance is still a rose. My interpretative hue and aroma of Christ may not be the same as yours. []