

The Quest For An Unidentified Unity

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When police are searching to find and apprehend an unidentified criminal, they like to have a picture or composite sketch of the person. The more detailed the picture is, the more likelihood there is of finding the man.

A story about the painter, Picasso, is going around. Having been robbed and being eager to help the police catch the culprit, Picasso made a sketch of the robber for the police. With the aid of that widely distributed sketch, the very next day the police arrested a giraffe, a refrigerator, and the Eiffel Tower!

I suppose that every sincere disciple of Christ desires and prays for unity, but the sketch of unity they draw in their minds may be as distorted as the subjective interpretations of an abstract painting. What is the unity created by the Spirit which we are to maintain (Eph. 4:1-4)? Is it identifiable?

For too many years I thought I had the simple picture of unity. Just join in with us in my segment of the Church of Christ. It was such a simple picture of five steps of conversion, five acts of worship, a scriptural name -- you know, all those marks of the non-denominational church (which made us a distinct denomination). Why couldn't the whole Christian world accept this way of unity so clearly taught in the Scriptures? Of course, we could not accept those who did not accept our concept, for they were not true Christians!

How stupid of me (I am not speaking of you!). Our own congregations were not united. We preached unity while congregations were in open conflict with each other and continued to align themselves into separate sectarian groups. As Carl Ketcherside observed, we were no more a unity movement than a hermit is a crusader.

I suppose all of us have pictured the unity in the congregations of the early church in some visionary manner. Everybody believed and practiced exactly the same things and there were no problems. What a dream! No such congregation ever existed. Perhaps the nearest demonstration was in the very earliest days of the Jerusalem church, but it did not take long for problems to develop. Didn't all the early disciples believe the same things? They all believed the same gospel, but they did not have identical beliefs about the application of apostolic teachings.

Paul called upon the Corinthians to be "*united in the same mind and the same judgment*" (1 Cor. 1:10), but he still recognized them as saints composing the church of God even while in their dissension (1:2). He had not gone into the present-day "withdrawal of fellowship mode" over doctrinal disagreements. He was not calling for them to hold exact convictions but to have the same purpose in serving God and to exercise the same judgment in maintaining unity.

When Paul urged that “all of you agree and that there no dissensions among you,” was that not a demand for complete uniformity of teaching? No, that is not the context of his instruction. The Corinthians were saying, “I am of Paul, etc.,” identifying themselves with different divisive leaders whom Paul described more fully in the context of 2 Corinthians 11:12-15. Metaphorically, he had put the name of Apollos, Cephas, Christ, and himself in the place of those divisive leaders (1 Cor. 4:6). He calls for dropping of party loyalties and distinctions, thus all speaking the same thing in saying they were of the one Lord. In this setting, Paul is dealing with party distinctions rather than doctrinal differences and individual convictions.

Another unreal picture of unity is **conformity**. In an authoritarian religion, conformity can be demanded, but even there it is difficult to maintain. Religions that have a pyramid system of authority like the Mormons and Catholics give the adherent no choice. You never hear of different kinds of Catholic churches, for instance, but the members must conform or leave. That is not unity of mind and judgment but an enforced, cultic kind of conformity. While in our congregations we protest such lordship of leaders, many demand conformity, thinking it is a method of unity. Instead of producing the desired unity, this concept has seeded the field for an abundant crop of divisions.

Three Points of Difference

Three of the “issues” over which the early disciples had strong and different convictions were **circumcision, the eating of foods, and the keeping of days** (Acts 15:1-29; Rom. 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 8:1-13). Those don’t seem as important to many in our congregations today as clapping in the assembly, songs by a quartet, midweek communion, or countless other insignificant things we have made into dividing “issues.” Our trying to base unity on agreement on all such opinions and convictions is as helpful as Picasso’s sketch.

Some Jewish disciples believed that “*Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.*” (Acts 15:1). The apostles and elders would not allow that scruple to be bound on anyone, but neither did they prohibit the practice of circumcision. They relegated this personal conviction to the realm of indifference so that Paul could later declare, “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love*” (Gal. 5:1-6). Anyone, however, who would seek justification by it would be falling away from grace (5:2-4). Do we trust in our “issues,” which we try to enforce as law, for justification, thus adding to or displacing grace? Then our case is no better than theirs!

Paul deals decisively in Romans 14 with foods and days. “*Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*” (Rom. 14:1-4 NIV).

Conformity of conviction and practice is not demanded concerning eating foods or the keeping of days. Even though meats and days are put in the area of indifference, no one is called upon to

violate his sense of what is right or wrong about them. Such things have nothing to do with our justification by grace. *“Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do”* (1 Cor. 8:8). Regardless of the combination of convictions one had in these three areas, each person was exercising these non-authorized convictions in honoring God, Paul assures us. **He condemns no one for observing a non-scriptural day or diet in worship/service to God. He does condemn those who would make those things a basis for rejecting others.** This same principle must prevail as we hold our individual convictions and scruples about disputable matters. This is being written on Halloween, and I can assure you that this thought is more frightful than anything devised for a Halloween scare. When we love our devised scruples more than brothers and sisters and the unity of God’s people, we are playing with fire – of God’s kindling!

Unity With Differences

Now, how could they have unity with these different convictions about circumcision, food, and days? They certainly were not instructed to believe and practice in conformity. How could people who were conscientious about either of these issues meet, work, and worship with those who had no concern about the issues? Ideally, that may seem simple, but practically, it is not. We may say that the liberty to eat meats, observe days (other than Sunday), and do other things the weak have scruples about should be surrendered for the sake of unity. But, is that Paul’s recommendation? No, Paul did not hobble the local group to the scruples of the most immature – like we have done and continue to do!.

The weak brother can be enlightened and taught to respect others of more maturity. **The instructions are about weak brothers who may be caused to stumble, not the strong brothers who may be caused to grumble and bind their scruples on all others.** The weak are to be respected, but the strong “protectors of the flock” are usually the most demanding objectors. They become divisive. They must not be allowed to rule the group.

Having said all this, there are still problematic areas that need more consideration. As long as we are human beings, we will have differing combinations of scruples, opinions, and convictions. (What is the difference in a scruple, opinion, and conviction? If it is your belief, it is just a scruple or opinion, but if it is my belief, it is a conviction!) Regarding circumcision, meats, and days, there are nine combinations of convictions possible. Let us note them with combinations of *Yes* and *No*.

	Circumcision	Foods	Days
Group 1	Y/N	Y/N	Y/N
Group 2	Y	Y	Y
Group 3	N	N	N
Group 4	Y	N	N
Group 5	Y	Y	N
Group 6	Y	N	Y
Group 7	N	Y	Y

Group 8	N	N	Y
Group 9	N	Y	N

Only the first group is composed of persons willing to work, meet, and worship with all others regardless of their opinions on either issue. Must we denounce them as “liberal”, accepting everything and standing for nothing? Or cannot each person participate as far as his conscience allows while he, out of respect for fellow-disciples and the unity of the group, permits others to do as their consciences allow? Isn’t that the ideal that Paul pointed to?

In eight of the groups are some who would be ill at ease with something in each of the other eight groups. In order to have unity, must they all disregard their consciences and meet as one congregation like Group 1? That would be an unwarranted conclusion. It would demand more than Paul asked. For the sake of con-science, may they not meet with those of like scruples while still recognizing the brotherhood of all the groups? Being of the same mind in maintaining the unity of the body, they can do this without rejecting, condemning, or disdain the others. They can leave the judging to God while they love each other and respect individual consciences.

Meeting in separate groups with like understanding is not division unless those participating make it divisive! If any such group is militant of others who differ, refusing to recognize them as fellow-disciples in the one, universal church of the Lord and refusing to work with them in promotion of the cause of Christ, that group has become a sectarian division. On what grounds can anyone deny that?

What is of such gravity as to demand dividing from others who are serving God in Christ? Uplifting hands in praise? Singing during the Communion? Singing groups in the assembly? Saying “amen” of approval by applause? The name on the building? The degree of understanding a person had about baptism when she was baptized? Congregations cooperating in work projects? Our endless list of scruples?

Unity Without Endorsement

To assemble, worship, and serve with persons who hold different convictions and who practice things you cannot do conscientiously is not an endorsement of their convictions and actions. That blurred image of unity has been a stumblingblock in the path of unity. It has obscured the identity of unity in Christ. Even though you certainly object to things other Democrats or Republicans practice, you will unite with them to elect a candidate. That kind of unity in diversity must prevail in religion as well as politics.

In our saner and less defensive moments, all of us will admit that others with whom we meet, worship, and serve hold differing beliefs and do things that we do not approve of. It is doubtful that any two of us agree on the hundred “issues” that I listed in the first chapter of [Free In Christ](#). As long, however, as persons identify with the Church of Christ, make no challenge of our main identifying marks as a separate group, such as the name, stance on baptism, weekly communion, or *a cappella* singing, we overlook other differences without being judgmental. We maintain a degree of unity in diversity without approving what we may disagree over. **That is the only practical way to maintain unity.**

Agreement on matters, either general or specific, is not the basis for unity. It never has been. That is a fanciful “Picasso sketch” that has thrown sincere disciples off course for generations. God has accepted no one on the grounds of his correctness on all issues, but he accepts us on the merits of the atonement of our mediator, Jesus Christ. Through Jesus God has received obedient believers with all sorts of diversity and misunderstanding. No one is born into God’s family fully mature.

Attainment of unity is an impossibility for man. We are not called upon to achieve unity but to maintain it! Only God can make us one! He makes us one when he reconciles us to himself in Christ when we express faith through penitence and baptism into Christ. Since there is only one God, there can be only one body of the saved in him. The body can be divided no more than God can be divided. The oneness is in God. He accepts or rejects. He created the unity that Jesus prayed for when he brought sinners to himself.

We may dissociate ourselves in sectarian groups, but the unity is in God, not groups. When we look across our lines of distinction, we can see the unity in God. If our lines of distinction separate us from all others, then we have separated ourselves from God where he has brought the saved to him in unity. *That is strong medicine, my separatist brothers and sisters, but it is the truth!*

Maybe we need a lot of rethinking about “withdrawing fellowship,” a term commonly used among us. If we cannot create the unity, can we destroy it by making two bodies of the saved? If we cannot create the fellowship in God, can we excommunicate one from it? We commonly think that withdrawing fellowship is excommunicating someone else from the fellowship, but can we excommunicate anyone except ourselves? The saved are in fellowship with God as center. We are not the center, gathering the saved around ourselves. He alone judges who is there in relationship with him. So, if we withdraw fellowship from others whom God claims, are we not withdrawing ourselves from God who has the saved in his fellowship?

Some of God’s children withdraw themselves from him. That list would include (1) those who deny the basis of their salvation and destroy the faith of others (2 John 7-10), (2) the impenitent, flagrantly immoral who choose a life of sin (1 Cor. 5), and (3) divisive persons (Titus 3:10) including those who seek to bind their convictions on all others and who reject those who do not comply. From such persons we can withhold our approval without separating ourselves from other saved persons.

The Baptismal Barrier

For many of us in the Church of Christ, the most formidable barricade to unity with other believers is our judgmental mindset, and it centers around our definitions of baptism. If the claims of salvation and sonship of others do not meet our critical criteria, we deny their proper relationship with God which we claim to enjoy. If they do not pass our DNA test, we feel that our accepting association with them is sinful.

This is no small problem with a simple answer, or it would have been remedied long ago. How judgmental must I become of others who claim to be in Christ? Must we question all others to determine if their conversion measured up to our expectations?

As I have associated with various congregations, my conversion has never been questioned. My new birth was taken for granted because I professed to be a child of God. Yet others do not know if I have been baptized, whether I was immersed or sprinkled, what I believed about baptism at the time, my purpose in being baptized, or if I was sincere. You accept me on my profession. I accept you on your profession. If my baptism was invalid, that is my problem, not yours. Out of loving concern, you may discuss it with me, but the judgment lies between God and me, not between you and me.

You should have assurance of your own convictions, and you should allow the other person to have his own assurance (Rom. 14). If the various aspects of baptism were not debatable, the whole Christian world would have been in agreement long ago. You are not obligated to accept the conclusions of the great, dedicated students of the Bible through the centuries, but it is brash to contend that they were all deluded or insincere scholars who had no respect for the authority of the Scriptures.

Never have I encouraged anyone to be satisfied with sprinkling or infant baptism. My conscience would not allow that. But others are not bound by my conscience. Paul forbids that in Romans 14. While I hold strong convictions about various matters, I am not necessarily obligated to assemble with those who violate them in full participation in all their activities. But I am forbidden from rejecting them.

If the Judean disciple could welcome the uncircumcised, if the vegetarian could serve with the meat eater, and if the objector to religious holidays could be in the united body with those who honored God on special days, then surely the oneness of mind and spirit can allow us to accept and serve with persons having convictions differing from our own. If we cannot apply Paul's teachings to ourselves in maintaining the unity that God creates, then they are wasted on us, and we are the losers.

John writes, *"That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ"* (1 John 1:3). In sentences following he continues, *"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that **God is light** and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk **in darkness**, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if **we walk in the light, as he is in the light**, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."*

Walking in the light is living in a relationship with God in Christ. By no manner of interpretation can we make it mean living sinless, perfectly obedient, and doctrinally correct lives. If we did that, there would be no sin for him to cleanse! The very next sentence confirms that we continue to sin: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

This is paradoxical. Those living in darkness (away from God in sin) cannot be in the fellowship of God but, if they are in our atoning mediator, Christ, their confessed sins are not charged against them. Those judged as sinners before God are not accounted as sinners when in God in Christ! The atonement offers continued cleansing and security in spite of our lack of merit, our ignorance, our weakness, our misunderstandings, and our imperfection. Therein lies the only hope of all of us.

The continued cleansing of the atonement of Jesus creates and maintains the perfect unity and fellowship with God in his kingdom. Division among us, which is a work of the flesh (Gal. 5:19f), wherein we reject each other, removes us from that fellowship. Is it not high time for each of us to renounce and confess this sin in order to receive his continued cleansing?

“Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7). Meditate on that powerful passage as you lie in bed tonight. It is a heavenly forged chain to bind you in unity with all who have fled to God through Christ.

You may be far from ready to accept the message of this essay. I submit it for your most earnest consideration. Don't jump on your horse and ride off in all directions at once. We have not solved the problem of disunity so far, so some radical change in mindset may be profitable. As long as we base our quest on some “Picasso sketch” of unity, we will never recognize it. []