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BAPTISTS AND UNITY

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(1877–1952)

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The Essentials of Christian Union

I believe in Christian union. In the seventeenth chapter of John we have recorded the prayer of Jesus in which He prayed that His people might be one. This doctrine was also taught by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. He believed in one God, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. Any Christian man is grieved at hurtful divisions among God's people and, therefore, desires with Paul and Jesus the unity of Christian people in the world.

There are, however, some essential conditions of Christian union. That is, there are some conditions without which there can be no union of God's people in the world. I wish to emphasize these conditions. As I see it there are three of them.

Spiritual Unity

First, spiritual unity. I mean by this the unity that grows out of a common relations to Christ as Savior and Lord. The thing that constitutes a man a Christian is his acceptance of Jesus Christ as his Savior and submission to Him as Lord. Without this no man can be a Christian. Christian unity then is a unity that grows out of the fact that men and women are drawn together around Jesus Christ as a common Savior and Lord. Men can never get together in spiritual unity until they get together in Christ. From a spiritual point of view sin is essentially divisive and the only thing that can overcome the dividing power of sin is the saving grace of God as manifested in Jesus Christ. But as men come to know Christ as Savior and are drawn to Him as the great spiritual magnet they are drawn to each other in a bond of spiritual unity.

In other words this is a unity that grows out of an experience of salvation. Salvation is something that is to be experienced in a man's soul. Not only is salvation an inner experience but it is an experience that carries within itself its own conscious confirmation; that is, Christ not only saves a man but lets him know that he is saved. Our fathers emphasized experimental salvation and we need to return to an emphasis upon this great fact of the Christian life. A man is a Christian by virtue of the fact that he is

united to Jesus Christ in saving faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. This inner experience is an experience that makes a common brotherhood of all who have the experience. It is thus that men become the sons of God and brothers in Christ.

Baptists believe in this brotherhood of Christian believers. They believe that every man who has faith in Jesus Christ is the spiritual brother of every other man who has such a faith. I think it was this spiritual unity that Jesus was praying for in the seventeenth chapter of John. A little later down He prayed that His disciples might be "in us;" that is, in the Father and in the Son. This spiritual unity then was a spiritual unity that was to grow out of the fact that a man was to be in Christ and in the Father. He was not thinking then so much about external organization as he was the inner unity of spirit, and I doubt if on this occasion he was thinking of external organization at all.

If what I am saying is true, it means then that there can be no Christian union until we get together on the basis of a converted church membership. The curse of Christianity was the admission into the churches of men who had no spiritual experience of salvation in Christ. It was this that brought on the Dark Ages. If we are to have Christian union it must be a union of Christians, and men can only be Christians by faith in Jesus Christ.

Doctrinal Unity

The second essential of Christian union is doctrinal unity. If we have spiritual unity, then it is not so difficult to have also doctrinal unity. The enlightenment of the understanding and consciences of men by the Holy Spirit of God is the chief condition of understanding Christian truth. Therefore, if men have this experience of salvation in Christ it is possible to have agreement with reference to the fundamentals of Christian "doctrine. But outside of this spiritual experience there is no hope of doctrinal agreement.

I do not mean to say that in order to have Christian union we must have agreement upon all points of Christian doctrine. As long as men's minds are free they will disagree on some questions. But there are some points upon which we can afford to disagree and yet have Christian and church fellowship. But on the great fundamental doctrines of Christianity there must be agreement before there can be Christian union. I do not expect every brother in the church to agree with me, for instance, on the question of the Millennium. As a matter of fact, there are some questions about which we do not know any more than we sometimes think we know and probably this is one of them. We can afford to disagree and yet work

together for the up-building of the kingdom of God and have fellowship in the same church.

I believe it was Mr. Herbert Spencer who said something like this: There are three stages in human inquiry—the unanimity of the ignorant, the disagreement of the inquiring, and the unanimity of the wise. I would a good deal rather have the disagreement of the inquiring than to have the unanimity of the ignorant. The unanimity that the Roman Catholic Church boasts so much of is of the nature of the unanimity of the ignorant. It is a unanimity that comes by keeping the minds of men enslaved and by enforcing submission to the church and stifling the consciences of men. Protestantism today seems to be in the second stage: viz. the disagreement of the inquiring. It may be that some good day, under the leadership of the Spirit of God we shall come to the third stage, the unanimity of the wise. But we will certainly not come to this unanimity by repressing thought and refusing to think and express ourselves on points of Christian doctrine.

We hear much said today about a creedless church. What kind of a church would a creedless church be? Of all the absurdities that I ever heard of I think the idea of a creedless church is the greatest. The creed of a church is what the church believes. A creedless church, therefore, would be a church that believed nothing. I think I know of one place where such an organization would be appropriate; viz., in the insane asylum. A creedless church would be the finest kind of a church for people without minds. But as long as men and women have minds they will necessarily believe something. The church is an organization for the purpose of propagating Christianity. But to propagate Christianity the church must hold certain teachings about Christianity. Otherwise, there could be no work of propagation. Whenever the church ceases to have a message for the world it is always a dead church, and in order to have a message it must hold to certain fundamental truths with a conviction that is as deep as life. There are certain fundamental doctrines upon which the very existence of the church depends. I mean such doctrines as the inspiration of the Bible, the deity of Christ, His vicarious atonement, the lost condition of men, the fact that salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ and that there is no salvation outside of Him. These doctrines are essential to the very life of Christianity.

Some time ago I read where three organizations were united—a Baptist Church, a Congregational Church and a Unitarian Church. Now think of that combination! Passing over for the present such questions as the disagreement of the Baptist and the Congregationalist on the question of infant baptism, think about the difference between the Baptist and the Unitarian. A Unitarian says that Jesus Christ is not the eternal Son of God; that he did not make a vicarious atonement by his blood for the salvation of sinners; in fact, that man is not a sinner, utterly lost and ruined

in sin, but that naturally man is a child of God and all that he needs is for the spark of divinity within him to be cultured and developed. Now the Baptist says, if he be a true Baptist, just the opposite on all these points. He says that man is lost in sin and that his only hope of salvation is in the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. I am not arguing now that the Baptist is right and the Unitarian wrong. I am simply saying that there can be no Christian fellowship on the part of people who so fundamentally disagree.

On these questions which involve the very deepest things of life and destiny there must be doctrinal unity before there can be Christian union. As a matter of fact, these great doctrines concerning man, God, Christ, the Bible and destiny have always been held as fundamental in Christianity and any man who does not hold them is not entitled to Christian fellowship, for the simple reason that he is not a Christian.

Unity in Form and Ordinances

I name as a third essential of Christian union what might be called symbolic unity, or to put it in another way, agreement with reference to the forms which are necessary to express the fundamental doctrines and inner life of Christianity. I will take as representative here the form of the organization of the church and the two ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In general on this question there have been two extreme positions, neither of which is correct. One position is that of identifying the essence and life of Christianity with the form. This is the error of Roman Catholicism and some other perverted forms of Christianity. Romanism identifies salvation with the priesthood and with the church. It makes the church a great world-wide imperialistic organization with the pope of Rome at its head. The New Testament knows nothing about such an organization and certainly nothing about the pope of Rome. Romanism also makes the church a storehouse of merit, where salvation is kept to be doled out by the priesthood. The sinner gets to Christ only by coming to the church. Salvation is in the church. This is fundamentally opposed to the idea that salvation is a spiritual experience which comes by faith in Jesus Christ under the power of the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament idea with reference to salvation is that every man comes to Christ for himself. There is no proxy religion, according to the New Testament. The New Testament emphasizes the priesthood of all believers, and the priesthood of all believers means that the church must be a democratic organization. Since every man comes to Christ for himself, no man or set of men, priest, pope, or anybody else, has a right to come between the individual conscience and Christ as Savior and Lord.

Therefore, in the church every man stands on a level with every other man. Democracy in church affairs then is not an incidental matter. It belongs to the very genius of Christianity and any organization that is not democratic is not a church of Christ.

Some people tell us today that the form of the church is a thing that can be left to convenience or circumstances. This is not true. The question of the form of the church is not a question that depends on the exegesis of certain passages in the New Testament. The New Testament certainly favors the democratic idea of the church, if one take it as a matter of the exegesis of particular passages. But it is more than that. It is something that is embodied in the very fundamentals of Christianity. Christianity is a religion of vital fellowship with God. It is a religion in which man has direct access to God in Jesus Christ and this makes it essentially democratic.

As a further example of this error of identifying the life of Christianity with the form, we might take the Roman Catholic position with reference to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Romanism teaches the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. She says that in the act of baptism sins are remitted and the soul is regenerated. One's sins are literally washed away in baptism. We get into Christ by baptism. On the other hand Christ gets into us by means of the eucharist. Romanism teaches that the bread and wine when blessed by the priest are converted into the literal flesh and blood of Christ, so that when we partake of that which was bread and wine we are literally eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of man.

The other extreme repudiates this error of identifying the essence of Christianity with its forms. It says that since the essence is not identical with the form, therefore the form is a matter of indifference. It says that it is useless, therefore, for Christian people to be divided over the forms of Christianity. For instance, with reference to baptism, it says what difference does it make whether you have a little water or much. One's salvation does not depend upon it. The essential thing is the spiritual experience. We readily grant; nay, more, we affirm, that the spiritual life in the soul does not depend upon the form of baptism nor upon any other ceremony or outward process of any kind. It depends only upon faith in Jesus Christ as a personal Savior, but it does not follow as a consequence that the form of baptism or other religious forms are therefore of small consequence.

Let us see if we can look this matter squarely in the face for a minute. Jesus Christ gave to his people two ceremonial ordinances. These ordinances were intended to do at least two things. They were intended to commemorate the fundamental facts of Christianity and to symbolize the Christian's inner experience of salvation. The fundamental facts of Christianity are the death of Jesus Christ for our sins and His resurrection for our

justification. On these two facts Christianity as a power in human history depends. These two ordinances were intended constantly to remind us and to remind the world of these fundamental facts. Every time a penitent sinner goes down into the water to be baptized he is preaching the gospel of salvation through a crucified and risen Redeemer. He thereby confesses himself a sinner and Christ as his Savior. Therefore, the form of baptism is important. Somebody says it is only a form, so why stickle for a form. It is a form, but we must remember that it is a form with a meaning, and the meaning lies in the form. Therefore, if the form be changed the meaning is destroyed. There is no Christian baptism then apart from immersion, which pictures a burial and a resurrection. The same great lesson is contained in the Lord's Supper.

The history of Christianity will bear out the statement that apart from the observance of these two ordinances as taught in the New Testament the gospel has never been preached in its purity in the world, and I believe that it never will be. It is not, therefore, an incidental or unimportant matter that we should observe these two ordinances as given in the New Testament. As referred to above, the heresy of Christian history is infant baptism. Whenever infants are sprinkled and taken into the church the church in its purity cannot exist. I mean then, that before there can be organic union of Christians there must be unity with reference to the meaning and observance of these two ordinances as well as with reference to the form of the church.

What Kind of Unity?

Now, supposing that we have these three conditions (spiritual unity, doctrinal unity, and symbolic unity) fulfilled as the basis of Christian union, what kind of union can we have on this basis?

Certainly we cannot have any kind of territorial or national or world-wide organization called a church. The New Testament knows nothing about any such organization, nor can we have any such organization which governs the local church and thus destroys its autonomy. The Roman Catholic idea is that the supreme authority on earth in civil as well as in spiritual affairs is a world-wide organization called the church, with the Pope of Rome at its head. The state, according to this idea, is simply one function of the church. On the other hand is the idea of Martin Luther and of the Anglican church that the supreme authority is civil and that the church is simply one function of the state. Either of these ideas destroys the church as a spiritual body and makes impossible the church as a fellowship of Christian believers.

Nor can we have any kind of organic union under a set of self-appointed supervisors of the kingdom of God who seem to think that it is

their function to parcel out the world and tell every man where and when and what he shall preach.

The only kind of union that we can have, in agreement with the principles here enunciated, is the co-operation of free churches for the purpose of extending the kingdom of God. Any other kind of union or federation is foreign to the very spirit and genius of Christianity. Such cooperation on the part of democratic spiritual brotherhoods is greatly to be desired, but it can only come when men have experienced the salvation that comes by faith in Jesus Christ and think alike with reference to what is involved in that salvation and agree with reference to the forms that are necessary to express the truth of that salvation.

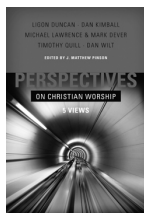
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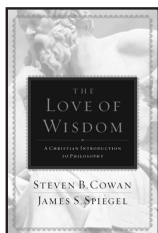
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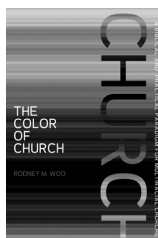


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