

THAT THEY MAY ALL BE ONE

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SCRIPTURE: John 17:20-23 (This is preceded by Jesus' prayer for his apostles.)
 Neither pray I for these alone (the apostles), but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.

And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul..... And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus; and great grace was upon them all.

The World Almanac lists approximately two hundred fifty religious denominations in the United States. Many well-intentioned people have deplored this fact as the "sin" or the "crime" of Christianity, pointing to Christ's prayer "that they may all be one," and stressing the division that exists in contrast to this prayer. Periodically some major or minor effort is made to weld together the various segments of Christianity, with varying degrees of success. My observation has been that all too often when denominations A and B agree to merge to form denomination C, there are minorities in each group who refuse to go along. The net result there is that we have the two old groups, plus one new one -- or three denominations where we had only two before. Yet the efforts towards church unity continue.

Granted that unity is a desirable end, what should be the basis of our unity? The American people have traditionally rejected the idea of religious unity as represented by a state church, which by decree, legal enactment, or ecclesiastical fiat seeks to prescribe the basis for unity and enforce that unity regardless of men's consciences. We demand freedom for heart and mind and conscience; therefore there can never be that kind of religious unity among us.

Other attempts at unity have been based on credal statements of various kinds; but as men grow in religious understanding and appreciation, old creeds become increasingly unsatisfactory and increasingly useless as a basis for unity. Some men sincerely advocate a unity based on the teachings of the Bible; but because without some final authority each religionist brings to the difficult task of Bible interpretation his own natural bias and prejudice, his own doctrinal slant, each interprets his Bible in his own way, leaving the divisions right where they were before.

Some men have sought a basis for unity in a belief in Jesus Christ; but even here there is no unity among Christians. Some regard him as Deity, unique, the Son of God, miraculously conceived and born, miraculously raised from the dead. Others who call themselves Christians do not believe in a literal incarnation, deny Jesus' death on the cross, deny his physical and literal resurrection. Still other Christians regard him as a good man, a great teacher, a great prophet -- they even ascribe to him a superb degree of divinity, but are careful to stipulate that his divinity is the same as the divinity in us, greater in quantity, but the same in kind or quality. Experience has taught us that there is no sound basis for unity in any of these methods.

We might as well face it -- religious differences are the most difficult of all differences to reconcile and resolve, because people believe religious principles to be so important that they will die rather than surrender them. When our beliefs are

right, that is good; but when we are wrong, a stubborn insistence on our beliefs is bad. Many men who think themselves to be devoutly religious, and who are very militant in maintaining their own doctrinal beliefs, are more interested in justifying their own beliefs than in discovering truth -- are more interested in defending their own way than in yielding to God's way. The man who is so cock-sure of his own beliefs that he refuses to consider the beliefs of anyone else, but tries to enforce his own beliefs on everyone else, lacks the fundamental, indispensable Christian grace of humility. Paul points out in the first chapter of First Corinthians that not many wise, or mighty, or noble men are chosen for God's work. Why? Because they insist on doing things their way, in their own strength and wisdom -- and God requires humility and obedience.

Another basis for unity proposed by many religious leaders is compromise. Men give up easily and readily those beliefs and principles which they regard as unimportant. But if principles, doctrines, beliefs, and practices are important, there can be no compromise. One of the major signs of decadence in our contemporary civilization is its willingness to sacrifice principle for expediency. Few men, high or low, can be relied upon today to stick to their principles in any situation, under any kind of pressure. We despise the man who forsakes his principles and sells out his country for the sake of expediency. Similarly, any man who waters down or discards early the basic principles of Christianity for the sake of a precarious unity was not a good Christian at first, and is a poorer one after the compromise than before.

There is only one safe basis for unity in the church. That is the unity which is found in Christ, as through correct belief in the principles of his gospel, and obedience to its principles and saving ordinances, God's nature is begotten in us through the power of Christ, so that we are Christ's, and Christ is God's, and we are all one. It is sin which separates men from each other, and from God. It is first of all the sin of pride, self-will, and stubborn opinionation which tempts each man to set himself up as the arbiter of what everyone else should believe instead of humbly seeking to have Christ's nature begotten in him, that he might humbly believe and do God's will. The more like God we become, the nearer we are drawn to him, and the nearer we are drawn to each other.

It is the opinion of your speaker that with God there is an absolute of truth, of right, of good. God cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance. Because our judgment is always imperfect, we are frequently confronted with situations in which we can detect no absolute right and wrong, no absolute black and white, but only varying shades of gray. Because we cannot always be sure, we should not judge our neighbor too harshly when we think he is wrong. But does this mean that God is equally tolerant? Does he ever compromise? Does he ever regard as right today that which he regarded as wrong yesterday? No! God is perfect. He is the absolute. With him is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. If all of us would spend more time in finding out God's will, trying to understand it, and obeying those laws and principles and ordinances which would beget his life within us, we would not need to spend so much time in discussing which of our differences should be compromised for the sake of unity.

Jesus compares the unity of the church to the unity existing within the Godhead. This is not the unity of utter uniformity. There is differentiation of function even within the Godhead. There is unity even in diversity in the church, where many men, with many diverse gifts, with many points of view, are united in one living, functioning organism which is directed, controlled, and vitalized by one force, one life, one Spirit -- the Spirit of Christ. There can never be unity in Christianity until there is such an organic, functional unity in the church. Without that organic unity, differences of opinion or of doctrinal interpretation will only divide and scatter. With such unity, men can regard their own opinions and the differing opinions of others as fragmentary views of the truth which is larger than any one of them, or than all of them put together.

Unity in the church is an indication of Christ's presence there -- an indication of fellowship with God and with each other. Such unity is a testimony to the world that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; for only the supernatural intervention of his Spirit, his Life, can take men of differing races, nationalities, backgrounds, and opinions, and make them one, while at the same time preserving the dignity, the worth, the individuality, and the personality of each. The world still awaits this kind of unity, not only in Christianity as a whole, but within the two hundred fifty single denominations into which Christianity is divided.