

Unity

By H. A. (Buster) Dobbs

Vol. 117 No. 2

February 2002

I pray ... they should be one" (Jesus). The fact that the Lord prayed for unity among his disciples has been used to generate a hateful judgmental rejection of those who "having heard the word, hold it fast."

Not a few among us incorrectly claim that Jesus' prayer for oneness means doctrinal purity must yield to fellowship with all who profess to accept Jesus as the Son of God ... and some go so far as to say that the unity must extend to religions that reject Jesus as the unique Savior of the world – which, of course, makes the cross meaningless.

Well, let us look at the prayer once again. The exact words of Jesus are, "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me" (John 17:20-21).

Jesus prayed for those who believe on him through the word of the apostles – which was not their word, but the word given to them by the Spirit of Truth (John 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:13).

Paul made the point that he had not received the gospel from men, but it came to him "through revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11-12).

It is by the power and truth of the word of Christ that belief comes (Rom. 10:17).

Belief and faith in the New Testament translate the Greek word *pistis*. This word is sometimes translated "faith" and other times it is rendered "belief." There is therefore no essential difference in faith and belief in New Testament usage.

Those who hear, receive, and obey the word of Christ as reported by the apostles through the agency of the Holy Spirit are believers. All others have a dead faith, or no faith at all. Demons are said to believe and shudder (James 2:19), but demons are not saved. They believe that Jesus is the Son of God (Matt. 8:28-29), but do not obey him, and, therefore, their worthless faith is dead (James 2:26).

When Jesus prayed for those that "believe on me through their word," he was obviously and undeniably praying for those whose belief was sincere and strong enough to obey him. Only such believers were the subjects of the Savior's prayer for unity. To make the plea of oneness apply to unbelievers or professing believers who do not- or will not- obey him is egregious.

For example, the Bible teaches that baptism is to be administered to penitent believers (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16), and involves burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:4-5; Col. 2:12). Its purpose is a new birth (John 3:5), a washing away of sins (Acts 22:16), and is unto (to obtain) the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Baptism saves because it is the point at which salvation from alien sins occurs (1 Pet. 3:21).

There are several possible reactions to this biblical teaching on baptism. The correct response is to accept what the Bible says and practice what it teaches about baptism. However, a person may (a) disregard what the Bible says about baptism involving immersion and insist on sprinkling as a substitute, or he may (b) deny that the candidate for baptism must believe and repent, or (c) that baptism is the new birth, or (d) some combination of these possible responses.

Others may insist on baptism being a burial and resurrection but stoutly deny that it brings forgiveness and salvation, asserting that salvation comes at the point of faith before and without further works of obedience – all of this without any credible scriptural proof and in defiance and denial of unmistakable Bible teaching.

How is it possible for a person who accepts the Bible teaching that baptism is a burial and a resurrection (Rom. 6:4-6; Col. 2:12) to have unity with one who rejects what the Bible says and teaches that baptism is sprinkling?

How is it possible for one who knows that “except one be born of water and the spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5) to unite with someone who advocates the false idea that the new birth into the kingdom of God does not involve water?

Here is another illustration: the Bible teaches that in making music in praise of God we are to sing (Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16-17; James 5:13). The believer is also told “Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God” (2 John 1:9). To emphasize: *anyone who goes beyond the New Testament command to sing and uses machinery in an attempt to worship deity has not God. ... He is without God. ... He is devoid of a right relationship with his Creator.*

Now, how can a believer who has God be “one” with another person who does not have God?

Contrary to what some seem to think, those who first raised the appeal on the American continent for a restoration of the New Testament church were primarily and above all else concerned with going strictly by the Bible. The idea that “calling Bible things by Bible names and doing all things in the Bible” way was also a basis for unity came later.

Here was the sequence: those who first raised the clarion call for a return to the new covenant pattern of teaching, work, and worship were members of various denominational churches. Many were Presbyterians, some were Methodists, others were Baptists, or were identified with some other Protestant or Anglican denomination. Their study of the Bible convinced them

that the creed books of their assorted religious orders were wrong.

If the Bible is right, inherited depravity, direct operation of the Holy Spirit on the human mind, salvation by faith alone and through grace only, impossibility of apostasy, mechanical instruments in worship of God, and ecclesiastical hierarchies are wrong. Their plea was, "Let us cast aside the creed books that are of purely human origin, and go by the Bible only, which is given by revelation of Jesus Christ."

There is a magnetic power in the magnificent plea to "speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent."

It is right. It is scriptural. It is charming and, when properly presented, almost irresistible, though it is always possible to deny the obvious.

Search the scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of me [Jesus]; and ye will not come to me, that ye may have life (John 5:39-40).

In other words, there can be a rejection of the teaching of Jesus while the person is claiming to search the scriptures in pursuit of righteousness.

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven (Jesus of Nazareth).

Some honor God with their lips but their heart is far from him (Matt. 15:8).

Note, too, that Jesus is in a familial relationship with those who do the will of God (Mark 3:35). The implication is that if the will of God is not honored with obedience then there is no fellowship with Jesus.

Shall we fellowship those whom Jesus rejects?

When the 19th-century pioneers of the restoration of New Testament Christianity began to "speak as the oracles of God," and reject human creeds that vainly "teach as their doctrine the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:9), they were driven out of their denominational affiliation.

When Campbell spoke the truth on the two covenants and baptism, he was forced out of the Redstone Baptist Association. They would not accept the teaching of the Bible, and Campbell would not turn away from that teaching. There was an impasse. All of the early advocates of restoration had the same experience.

Now, what makes anyone today think that the denominations will tolerate the whole truth on baptism, or worshiping God only in song, or the Holy Spirit working through the revealed and confirmed word?

The creed books are still preferred above the Bible.

When people do “the will of God from the heart” and steadfastly refuse bowing to manuals and disciplines of mortal origin, there will be a dichotomy – an irreconcilable difference. To bridge the chasm the Bible must be compromised because most men will not give up their cherished human creeds. They “love vanity, and seek after falsehood.”

It is embarrassingly tragic when some among us present the champions of denominationalism as heroes, and brand those who stand staunchly for the Bible, the Bible only, and nothing but the Bible as culprits.

Some use Jesus’ prayer for unity as an excuse to wrongly accuse the faithful of being the cause of division. The saints are browbeaten in public discourse because they will not forsake eternal verities, and those who place man-made creeds above Christ are adored.

Guilty about what? – Guilty at being ourselves, guilty at not being ourselves. I don’t know: guilty at feeling guilty, guilty because we don’t feel guilty. Above all we want to confess – to anybody about anything (Cecil Jenkins, Message From Serious, 1961).

Self-contempt and self-loathing cause some national leaders to travel the world apologizing for the imagined sins of previous generations (but never mentioning their own iniquity).

We may feel noble for confessing when we haven’t done anything wrong. Many religious leaders have fallen into this error.

God grant that we never express regret and ask forgiveness for being right. And may he give us the inner strength to stand foursquare for the saving gospel though the entire world may frown its displeasure.

And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever (1 John 2: 17).

Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word (John 17:20).

I have given them thy word; and the world hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world (John 17:14).

P.O. Box 690912
Houston, TX 77269-0912