

# THE IMPORTANCE OF UNITY IN THE CHURCH

## INTRODUCTION

Like secular organizations, the church of Jesus Christ requires unity to enable her live to the expectations of God. The people of the world know the importance of unity hence such saying as *"Unity Is Strength," "United We Stand, Divided We Fall" e.t.c.* It therefore goes without saying that when there is division and rancour within the rank and file of the brotherhood, the church will fall short of her functions of evangelism, edification and benevolence.

Our Lord knowing the importance of unity prayed for it - **John 17: 20 – 21** *"<sup>20</sup> I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; <sup>21</sup> that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."*

Paul, in his epistle to the Corinthian Christians also emphasized the importance of unity in that local congregation - **1 Corinthians 1:10** *"<sup>10</sup> Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."*

## EXISTENCE OF DIVISION IN THE CHURCH

Division has continued to plague the church from its earliest day to the present. Even before the church was established during the days of Christ earthly ministry, Jesus' disciples argued with one another about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God - **Matthew 20:20-23** *"<sup>20</sup> Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. <sup>21</sup> And He said to her, What do you wish? She said to Him, Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom. <sup>22</sup> But Jesus answered and said, You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They said to Him, We are able. <sup>23</sup> So He said to them, You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father."*

After the church began on the day of Pentecost (**Acts 2**), division soon became evident among Christ's disciples. The first significant problem involved dissension between Hellenistic Jewish Christians and Hebraic Jewish Christians over negligence of their widows - **Acts 6:1** *"<sup>1</sup> Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution."* But for the timely intervention of the apostles, the church at Jerusalem would have been torn to shreds. Much of the last chapters of the book of Acts relate to how Jewish Christians could be united in one church.

The church at Philippi was a good church but members needed Paul to exhort them not to be divided. He told them to be “<sup>2</sup>...like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” **Philippians 2:2**. He asked *Euodia and Syntyche* to “<sup>2</sup>...be of the same mind in the Lord” **Philippians 4:2**. Apparently, dissension arose between the Jews and the Gentiles in the church in Rome over the eating of meat (**Romans 14**).

When Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, he warned them about *works of the flesh* including “<sup>20</sup>...hatred [**enmity**], contentions [**strife**], dissensions [**factions**]...envy...” **Galatians 5:20-21**. Division was not limited to the first century churches. Throughout history, Christians have been plagued by *contentions and dissensions* and till date these problems are still issues of serious concern in the Christendom.

### **THE CAUSE OF DIVISION**

Why do people have a tendency to divide? In fact, the history of human race is a story of divisiveness. Cain killed Abel and then was separated from the rest of the family. Jacob and Esau were estranged owing to greed. Joseph’s brothers sold him into bondage. The Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. As long as avarice, inordinate ambition, pride, envy, ignorance and hatred are in the world, people’s relationship will be cursed with division. When division occurs within the church, brethren act too much like the people of the world. The Corinthian brethren needed to quit their **worldly behaviour** [**1 Cor. 3:1-3** “...For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?”] and put on **the divine nature** [**2 Peter 1:4** “<sup>4</sup>...that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust”].

### **THE CURE FOR DIVISION**

Much of **I Corinthians** was written to help the church avoid division and strengthen unity within. The principles though specifically addressed the division in that local congregation; nevertheless, they can also address similar problems in any other local congregation if applied diligently. What can be done to solve this problem?

- ❖ **First**, follow only Christ, not men. The problem in Corinth was that the Christians were following men. **1 Corinthians 1:12** “<sup>12</sup> Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’” Too many churches divide today because people are following men.
- ❖ **Second**, preach the gospel of Christ and Him crucified. This was what Paul did in Corinth. **1 Corinthians 2:1-4** “<sup>1</sup> ...I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified...” **1 Corinthians 2:12-13** “<sup>12</sup> Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. <sup>13</sup> These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”
- ❖ **Third**, grow up. When we are divided because we are following men, we are behaving as spiritual babes. **1 Corinthians 3:1-4** “<sup>1</sup> And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ...For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?”
- ❖ **Fourth**, keep our disputes among ourselves. In Corinth, one problem the church had was that brethren were going to law against one another. **1 Corinthians 6:1-8** “Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints...I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one

*another...!*" Paul said that instead of *go to law against one another*, they should ask "*wise men*" in the church to resolve disputes - **1 Corinthians 6:5**. He added that *accepting wrong would be better than going to law against a brother* - **1 Corinthians 6:7**. Likewise, we ought to settle our problems among ourselves.

- ❖ *Fifth, do not misuse Christian liberty*. To be one, we must sometimes be willing to give up our liberty. We should have Paul's attitude in **1 Corinthians 8:13** - he said "<sup>13</sup>...if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."
- ❖ *Sixth, emphasize love*. Paul paused in discussing problems with spiritual gifts to present love as the greatest virtue (**1 Cor. 13**). Probably, love is the solution to all problems addressed in **1 Corinthians**.
- ❖ *Seventh, hold fast to those doctrines which are essential to the gospel*. In **1 Corinthians 15**, Paul wrote about the doctrine of the resurrection because some in the church denied the resurrection of the dead. The Corinthians needed to hold on the essentials of the gospel. In a similar way, we must never sacrifice the essential teachings of God's word for the sake of unity.
- ❖ *Eight, get involved together in helping others*. In **1 Corinthians 16**, Paul told the brethren how they were to help with contribution for the poor saints in Jerusalem. They were to give *on the first day of the week* so that it would not be necessary to take up *collections* when Paul arrived - **1 Corinthians 16:1-2**. The passage suggests that we ought to be concerned not only about being one in the local congregation, but also about being united with sister congregations both far and near.

## **CONCLUSION**

*Practical Unity In Christ* grows out of a careful attempt on the part of each member of Christ's body to think of his brother or sister with love and grace. The Christian is to be less demanding about his own opinions and wishes. He is to do nothing ... *through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let [him] esteem others better [more important] than himself* - **Philippians 2:3**. He is not to *look out only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others* - **Philippians 2:4**. As he so lives, he is uniquely exhibiting the mind of Christ on unity - **Philippians 2:5-8** "<sup>5</sup>Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, <sup>7</sup>but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

Christ, through His gospel calls us to the unity in His body. God planned it - **Ephesians 3:6** "<sup>6</sup>that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel." Christ prayed for it - **John 17:21** "<sup>21</sup>that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me." **Ephesians 2:16** "<sup>16</sup>and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity." Paul pleaded for it - **1 Corinthians 1:10** "<sup>10</sup>Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." The Holy Spirit produces it - **Ephesians 4:16** "<sup>16</sup>from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."

Should we therefore not accept this unity by receiving it and living in it?

***The Lord adds blessings to His words in Jesus Name – Amen!***