

LESSON SEVEN: NEW TESTAMENT UNITY VERSUS CURRENT RELIGIOUS DIVISION

In Lesson Six you studied what the Bible teaches about God's plan for the salvation of the souls of men and about the establishment, purpose, organization, and worship of the church that Christ built and bought with his blood. But as we look at the religious world today and compare it with what we have studied, we are faced with many problems. Today instead of one church we see many hundreds of different churches with different names, practices, and organizations. Instead of one plan for salvation we are told many plans. Instead of one pattern of worshipping God and Christ we see many systems and types of worship.

As we observe this division and confusion, some questions arise. Is it God's will that such a situation exist and continue? Can all of these churches be right? How did this situation come about? Which church is the right church? Is there any way that all men who want to obey Christ can believe and teach and practice the same thing?

CHRIST'S PLEA FOR UNITY IGNORED

Religious division has existed for so long that many religious people have come to regard it as acceptable. Slogans such as "Attend the church of your choice" and "There are Christians in all churches" and "We are all serving the same Jesus Christ and going to the same heaven" suggest that God is pleased with the various denominations and churches that exist today, and that any kind of religion is acceptable so long as it is sincere and claims to follow Christ.

But a study of the New Testament clearly shows that God severely condemns religious division and that he is not pleased by the confusion that exists today (1 Corinthians 14:33). On the night before his death, Jesus prayed concerning his apostles and all who would follow them:

Neither pray I for these alone, 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 gave 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 (John 17:20-23).

Clearly Jesus wanted unity, not division.

The apostle Paul also called for unity. In 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 he rebuked the church at Corinth for breaking up into factions (much like today's denominations) and said:

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment (1 Corinthians 1:10).

See also Philippians 2:2. Clearly if Jesus or Paul were to return to walk among us today they would be grieved and displeased by the religious division they would find.

The Cause of Division

What causes religious division? How did these hundreds of churches and denominations get their start? The answer lies in the failure of men to continue to abide by the doctrine of Christ as given by the apostles.

As we saw in Lesson Six, Christ inspired his apostles by the Holy Spirit to preach his will for man and eventually to write down that will in the books of the New Testament:

Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matthew 1,8:18).

Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come (John 16:13).

Why did Jesus want this done? He commanded it so that all men in all ages would have an infallible guide for obeying him exactly as he wanted them to obey him. Man cannot decide for himself how he should live or how he should worship God:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord (Is. 55:8).

O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walks to direct his steps (Jeremiah 10:23).

Consequently God has given man the scriptures to guide him:

Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee (Ps. 119:11).

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (Ps. 119:105).

But once God has given man the scriptures, he fully expects man to follow and obey them exactly:

If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God gives: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever (1 Pet. 4:11).

And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him (Colossians 3:17).

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Severe condemnation falls on those who add to or take away from God's word or who in the name of religion substitute their own ideas, practices, and doctrines in place of God's. We have already seen this in the Old Testament in the case of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-7). Additional passages condemning such attitudes and practices are found in the New Testament:

But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men (Matthew 15:9).

And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition (Mark 7:9).

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:8-9).

Whosoever transgresses, and abides not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abides in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that bids him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds (2 John 9-11) .

For I testify unto every man that hears the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things. God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophesy. God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things, which are written in this book (Revelation 22:18-19).

The History of Apostasy

Unfortunately such departure from God's word is exactly what has led to the religious division existing today. In the first century, the church was careful to abide by the doctrines of the apostles (Acts 2:42). But after the first century those in the church gradually began to depart from the New Testament and to introduce practices and teachings of their own invention. Ultimately this led to Catholicism and to such human creeds and traditions as are foretold in 1 Timothy 4:1-3:

Now the Spirit speaks expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth (1 Timothy 4:1-3).

In succeeding centuries practices of worship and patterns of organization continued to develop which were in violation of the apostles' doctrine.

Some attempt to correct these departures was made during the protestant reformation movement beginning in the sixteenth century, but ultimately in these efforts men simply replaced one set of human tradition and teaching with others of human origin, and there was still little effort to follow the simple teaching of the New Testament. "Pie result after nearly four hundred years is the divided religion world of denominationalism in which we live. As we have seen, such is not the way Christ would have it.

THE WAY BACK TO UNITY: A RETURN TO BIBLE AUTHORITY AND NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY

Since the religious division today is an offense against God, and since, as we have seen in the previous lessons, it is man's whole duty to serve and please him (Eccles. 12:13-14), how can we achieve religious unity and all worship and serve God acceptably, all teaching and practicing alike? The answer is a return to a. respect for Bible authority and to believing and practicing only what the New Testament teaches. Since the inspired scriptures of the apostles speak the same message, we may all "speak the same thing" (1 Corinthians 1:10) if we will follow the scriptures and them only, as God has commanded us to do.

To return to the New Testament pattern is the practice and the plea of those who are sending you this course. We simply ask that you and all men do what the Bible teaches, not what we or any other men teach.

The church of Christ today is not another denomination. Rather it is the restored church of Christ, which he founded on the day of Pentecost two thousand years ago. On that day he set forth the terms of admission into his church, and in the writings of the apostles he outlined the purpose, the organization, the worship, and the doctrine of that church. When men today take only the New Testament and follow it exactly in its teachings about the church with no additions or omissions of any kind, they are members—not of a denomination—but of the church of the New Testament. This is precisely what the church of Christ in your community is attempting to do.

The same principle might be illustrated this way. Suppose the game of baseball ceased to be played and were not played for two thousand years. Then suppose after all of that time someone discovered a book of the rules of baseball written two thousand years before. If he and some

other men then played a game of baseball using only the book that they had found, what would they have done? They would not have invented a new game--rather they would have restored the two-thousand-year-old game of baseball.

In the same way, when honest and sincere people today take the New Testament and follow it and it only as their creed, they are not forming another denomination—rather they are restoring the New Testament church and practicing New Testament Christianity. Clearly this is what Christ and the apostles want men to do.

But, you may ask, are not all denominations trying to do what Christ would have them to do⁷ unfortunately we cannot conclude that they are, for if they were they would all do only what Christ and the apostles said to do in the New Testament, and consequently they would all be doing the same thing. Remember that Paul told the Corinthians that they should all "speak the same thing" and that there should "be no divisions" among them (1 Corinthians 1:10). This is only possible when men all follow only the New Testament teachings.

We do not ask you to become a member of our church; we ask you to become a member **of the Lord's church**. We do not ask you to accept **our** creed; we ask you to accept **Christ's** creed. We do not ask you to believe and practice what we say; we ask you to believe and practice what **the New Testament** says. If we will all do that, we can all serve God in harmony as he would have us to. We will all be saved by the New Testament pattern, belong to the New Testament church, be called by the New Testament name of Christian, and practice New Testament worship—all in keeping with the commands of Christ and the apostles.

CURRENT RELIGIOUS ISSUES

With this understanding of the importance of Bible authority before us, let us now consider some of today's most common religious questions and issues in the light of what the Bible teaches. Let us remember that all that matters is what the Bible says on these questions, and not what men say.

How Many Churches?

As we have seen, men today commonly accept the idea that having many churches is acceptable with God. What does the Bible say?

The Bible says that there is only one church (cf. Ephesians 4:4 and Colossians 1:18). It is the church that Jesus built (Matthew 16:18), the one that he bought with his blood (Acts 20:28), the one that he established on Pentecost (Acts 2), and the one over which he is the head (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Which church is the right church? The right church is the one which in every way fulfills the characteristics of the church described in the New Testament. These characteristics include the following:

1. Its head is Christ (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22-23).
2. Its only creed is the doctrine of the apostles (Acts 2:42).
3. Its purpose is to bring men to salvation (Matthew 28: 19-20; Acts 5:42).
4. Its members are those who have believed on Christ, repented of their sins, and been baptized for the remission of sin and consequently have been added by the Lord to the church (Acts 2:38, 47).
5. Its organization is independent, autonomous congregations overseen by elders (Gal. 1:2; Acts 11:30; 1 Timothy 3:1-7).

6. Its name is one given to it in the New Testament (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 1:2).

7. Its worship consists of observing the Lord's supper each first day of the week (Acts 20:7); prayer (1 Timothy 2:8); reading and teaching God's word (Acts 20:7); singing (Ephesians 5:19); and giving to support the work of the church (1 Corinthians 16:2).

Is Salvation by Faith Alone?

A commonly held religious belief today is that men are saved by faith alone. What does the Bible say?

The Bible clearly teaches that men are saved by faith:

[That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life](#) (John 3:15).

The Bible does not teach, however, that men are saved by faith **alone**. Other steps are also required. For example, man must repent to be saved (Luke 13:3), and he must confess his faith in Christ to be saved (Romans 10:9-10). These verses show that salvation is **not by faith alone**. The Bible also teaches that man must be baptized in order to be saved. While many denominations teach that baptism is not essential for salvation, the Bible teaches that it is essential:

[He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned](#) (Mark 16:16).

[Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost](#) (Acts 2:38).

[And now why do you wait? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord](#) (Acts 22:16).

It is God that has made baptism a condition of salvation, and we must obey his command to be baptized if we would be saved.

Sometimes men object that since one is saved by grace and not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9), he cannot be saved by baptism, since it is a work. But the Bible speaks of two kinds of works. One kind is that which one does so that he deserves payment or a reward because of his works. This is the kind of works meant in Ephesians 2:8-9. Certainly one can never do any works that will cause him to deserve salvation. The other kind of works described in the Bible, however, is works of obedience, which God requires as a condition for his blessings (cf. Romans 2:6-13; 2 Corinthians 11:15; Philippians 2:12; James 2:14-26; Revelation 2:23). God Has always required this kind of works, as when he required Abraham to leave his home country (Genesis 12:1-3) and later to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22). These works did not cause Abraham to deserve God's blessing, but they did show his obedience, and because he was obedient God blessed him. Today baptism is a work of obedience that God requires of us. By our submitting to baptism God knows that we are willing to obey him, and upon our meeting this condition of obedience he gives us the salvation made possible by the blood of Christ (1 Peter 3:21).

Who is a Christian?

The name Christian is used very widely today. Anyone who makes any claim at all to following Christ, or anyone who is a member of some denominational church, or any one who has "accepted Christ as his personal Savior" is called a Christian. What does the Bible say?

The Bible says that those called Christians were the disciples of Christ (Acts 11:26). These were those who on or after Pentecost had believed on Jesus, repented of their sins, and been baptized for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:8-10). According to the Bible, then, Christians were those who had obeyed all of these conditions for salvation and been added by the Lord to his church. What was required by God in order for one to become a Christian in the first century is of course still required today. Therefore today one is not a Christian unless he also has believed, repented of his sins, and been baptized for the remission of his sins.

Who Will Go to Heaven?

The conception of many people today is that God will save in heaven anyone who is religious, and even those who are not religious if they live reasonably good moral lives. What does the Bible say?

The Bible says that only those who obey the will of God will be saved, and that many religious people will be lost because they did not obey fully the will of God:

Not every one that says unto me. Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day. Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (Matthew 7:21-23).

The Bible says that at the end of time Christ will deliver the church up to God (1 Corinthians 15:24). Only those who have been added to the church by the Lord upon their belief, repentance, and baptism, and who have lived faithfully until death (Revelation 2:10), may therefore expect to go to heaven. This is true because there will be no sin in heaven (Revelation 21:27), and only those who have been baptized for the remission of sins have had their sins taken away (Acts 22:16). These, as well as children and other unaccountable persons without sin (Matthew 19:14), will be the only ones allowed into heaven.

Additions, Deletions, and Substitutions

In both the Old and New testaments God condemned those who would alter his commandments:

Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you (Deut. 4:2).

See also Revelation 22:18-19.

In spite of this warning, adding to, taking from, and making substitutions for God's commandments is common among religious groups today, whether motivated by a love of the praise of men (John 12:43), a desire for convenience, or a desire to do their own will rather than God's, men have altered the belief and practice set forth by the apostles.

Most of these departures have come in the form of additions. Not satisfied with the simplicity of the New Testament pattern, men began calling their churches by sectarian names nowhere found in the scriptures. Rejecting the autonomy of the local congregations of the church and the authority of elders, they added hierarchies, synods, and general officers. To the Bible they added their own creed books and disciplines, "teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:9). Their ministers put on robes, added to their names such titles as "Father" and "Reverend" and "Very Reverend" and "Very Right Reverend" (cf. Matthew 23:9; Ps. 111:9), and created distinctions between themselves and the members of their churches. To the New Testament pattern of worship men added choirs, mechanical instruments of music, counting of beads, and burning of candles. And in addition to worshipping God and Christ, they worshipped

Mary and saints (cf. Matthew 4:10). How strange and unseemly all of these unauthorized additions would appear to Jesus and the apostles!

Men have also taken away from the scriptures. As we saw above, baptism is required in the Bible for the remission of sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38). But men have taken away this command of God and declared that baptism is not essential for salvation. Another instance of deletion from the scriptures concerns the Lord's Supper. The apostles gave us the example of observing the Lord's Supper each first day of the week (Acts 20:7) so that we would be constantly reminded of Christ's sacrifice for us. But in most churches today the communion is observed only once or a few times a year, and the apostolic teaching is ignored.

Finally, men have made substitutions for the teachings of the scriptures. For example, nearly all biblical scholars agree that baptism in the first century consisted of immersion, and that the word translated **baptize** in the English Bible literally means immersion (cf. Acts 8:38-39; Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). In many churches, however, men have substituted sprinkling or pouring in place of immersion, substituting their own practice for that of God's.

We do not point out these matters to be unkind. Rather we are stressing to you how far men have come from the authoritative scriptures delivered to us by the apostles, and how important it is that we all return to following those scriptures. Only then can we have the unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17:20-23) and be pleasing to him.

In your studies thus far you have learned of God's plan for salvation and the true nature of the New Testament church. In your final lesson, Lesson Eight, you will learn of the obligations and wonderful blessings that come with being a Christian.

Please feel free to read and study this lesson as many times as you wish to do so. After you are comfortable with the knowledge you have gained you may want to test yourself to learn how well you remember. Questions for review and study on this lesson may be found by going to <http://64.177.52.39/8LESSONS/7Q.htm> .

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