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WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE UNITY WE SEEK?

An Introduction to This Issue

by
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The Spring 1981 issue of *Centering on Ministry* lifted up a crucial concern in the Church. That concern is "The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible."¹

This 1982 issue is a continuing series in an attempt to expand some of the basic convictions found in the 1979 School of Theology document titled, "We Believe: A Statement of Conviction on the Occasion of the Centennial of the Church of God Reformation Movement."²

The Church of God historically has believed in a cluster of biblical teachings concerning the nature of the Church. Those affirmed in the 1979 statement include:

1. God's church is the community of redeemed persons.
2. God's church is a community of divine-human partnership with Christ as the Head.
3. God's church is a holy community.
4. God's church is intended to be a unified community.³

Affirmation four above is the impetus for this issue. If God's intention is that the church be a unified community, just what is the nature of the unity we seek?

In order to contextualize the concern, the following paragraphs are excerpted from the 1979 School of Theology Faculty statement:

The dividedness among Christian people today is not just unfortunate; it is inappropriate and wholly unacceptable. Unity is clearly God's will for the church. Participation in the Lord's Supper dramatizes the intended unity of Christians as they celebrate their one Lord, one salvation, and one mission. But that unity, symbolized in worship, must find visible expression in the life and witness of the church. The goal is less a contrived peace treaty among deeply divided church organizations and more a radical reconsideration of what is an appropriate network of relationships among brothers and sisters in Christ. (Luke 22:14-19; John 17:20-21; Rom. 12:4-5; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 4:4).¹

We Believe in the principle of openness to all affirmations of the Christian faith which are expressions of the biblical revelation (John 16:13). This is a necessary stance for Christians who would venture on mission to the world with a desire to foster honest and growing relationships with fellow Christians from many cultural and creedal backgrounds.

PLEASE NOTE THE IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT THE "NEWELL LECTURESHIP IN BIBLICAL STUDIES" IN THIS ISSUE.

The intended unity among Christians is not based on the achievement of full agreement on all theological questions. Rather, it is based on a common membership in the church through the grace of God and is anchored by a common commitment to the centrality of Christ and the authority of the Word of God.

As individuals, we seek to remain humble and open to the daily instruction and leadership of the Holy Spirit. As a movement, the Church of God seeks always to allow itself to be reformed so that, by avoiding any development of the stagnation of rigid creed or inflexible structure, it can remain a pliable instrument in the hands of God.

We are privileged to have received the basic truth of Christ in the biblical revelation, but we realize that our understanding and application of that truth are always subject to the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit in our midst. The nature of the church requires that our theological understandings and church-related organizations be used to build bridges of hope to the world and not walls of division among Christians.⁵

The first article in this issue is by James Earl Massey. It lifts up a biblical perspective for the church and the unity we seek. He suggests that there are many biblical images which highlight the collective nature of the church. He suggests that unity is a given, having been given to the church by God's Spirit. However, the unity we seek can only be experienced as we open ourselves to be part of community life.

Robert D. Brinsmead in the article "The Gospel Versus the Sectarian Spirit" gives a carefully developed biblical and historical perspective on the rise of diversity and sectarianism in the Church. He identifies the sectarian spirit by developing a list of characteristics or identifying marks of the sectarian spirit. He then brings the sectarian spirit under the judgment of the Gospel.

The final two articles are in response to Brinsmead's longer article. Gilbert W. Stafford and Barry L. Callen were asked to respond to Brinsmead's assumptions from within the context of the Church of God Reformation Movement views.

Gilbert Stafford focuses on the theological assumptions inherent in Brinsmead's article. He concludes that Brinsmead is correct—that is, that the unity we seek can only be found in the person of Christ who unites. Thus, according to Stafford, Christianity must function in a wholistic mold rather than a sectarian mold.

Barry L. Callen in his article "When A Movement Ceases To Move" focuses on the implications of Brinsmead's statement for the Church of God Reformation Movement. His critique of the Reformation Movement is both insightful and pointed. He affirms that the basis of unity must be the Gospel yet confesses that the organizational implications of that affirmation are not clear.

What is the nature of the unity we seek? We continue our quest for understanding. This issue of *Centering on Ministry* comes to you with the desire for open and creative dialog and decision. It also comes with our sincere prayer that God's Spirit will enrich your reading and study.

FOOTNOTES

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²Developed by the Anderson School of Theology Faculty and published by Warner Press, Inc., 1979. Available for 25 cents per copy. Reduced price for multiple copies. Order from Warner Press.

³Ibid, pp. 6-7.

⁴Ibid, p. 7.

⁵Ibid, p. 9 ff.

The Church: A Community

by

James Earl Massey

The New Testament statements about the Church all describe it as a community whose members relate in a special kind of belonging. The belonging is special because each member has been claimed by Christ, and the life of the group is increasingly conditioned by him.

The many biblical images of the Church all highlight its life as a collective life in which all members are expected to share. One image pic-

tures Christians as "citizens" (*sumpolitai*, Eph. 2:19), another one as "members" (*melos*, Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:18, 20, 27; Eph. 4:25; 5:30), another one as a "household" (*oikeios*, Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19), still another as a "flock" (*ceder*, Isa. 40:11; Jer. 13:17; *poimnion*, Lk. 12:32; 1 Pet. 5:2, 3), and then there are additional collective terms—"race" (*genos*, 1 Pet. 2:9), "nation" (*ethnos*, 1 Pet. 2:9), "friends" (*philoï*,

John 15:15), "brotherhood" (*adelphotes*, I Pet. 3:8; 5:9), and "fellowship" (*koinonia*, II Cor. 8:4; I John 1:7).

In all these images the notion of a shared life and lot is central. The pictured life is one of community, togetherness, not in any static sameness but in a purposed relation through a common origin, a common tie, and a conscious commitment.

One of the strongest and most used images of the Church pictures its members relating as vital parts of a structured "body" (*soma*). Ephesians 4:4 is an instance: "There is one *body* and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call." The strength of the image is in the insight about functional harmony. All bodily parts serve a function, and every part bears a relationship to the whole. Individual believers are encouraged to understand themselves as related, and so share. The "citizens" image conveys the same import. Just as citizens who give to and receive from their city life, so are believers mutually dependent upon each other for the enhancement that only a planned and shared life can give and sustain.

The Church is best understood as a community. It is a community gathered around Christ, and its togetherness is governed by his life. As a community, then, the Church has a central spirit, on the one hand, and a social expression, on the other. Spiritual unity is by the divine Spirit, which is God's gift to us, but the social expression of that unity is our gift to each other.

Christian unity is something more than a spiritual fact, it is also a social openness for each other. The openness is necessary because conversion does not make us immediately cohesive. That is to say, all believers must sometimes learn how to relate with reason and resourcefulness. As in all human togetherness, better understandings help the process of acceptance, and increased sharing gives one a greater sense of tie with another. The potential for togetherness has always been a gift of the Spirit, but the *experience* of community deepens only through the practice of relating to each other. Unity is given but the experience of it must be gained.

There is at the heart of Christian love a community principle, an active spirit by which believers are prodded to seek each other and make common cause. Being Christian makes us heirs to a relational imperative that prompts us to seek intimacy and involvement as fellows in faith. This relational imperative shows its worth when human differences become burdensome and when contacts occasion friction. But strained relations should be expected when notions differ and opinions clash—when one *feels* distant due to some difference. But where community is *desired* that felt distance can be bridged and a continuing fellowship promoted by

personal initiative strengthened by divine love. The writer of Ephesians had this in mind when he advised, "Bel eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3).

Community life in the Church is enhanced when all the members keep a balance between private preferences and group demands. A "preference" is a first choice among personal interests, it is something that stands ahead of all other things, something to which one is inwardly drawn. Preferences are so much a part of our lives that we seldom stop to think about them until the preferences of other persons clash with our own—and then the struggle begins to handle our preferences without loss of our freedom. But community happens and is enhanced when love seeks to bring the differences under management through open sharing with each other. Preferences must be understood and valued for what they enable us to do, but they must also be disciplined lest in selfishness they block needed togetherness and impede an essential harmony of hearts.

Community life in the Church is also enhanced when all the members know how to transcend our human groupings and relate without prejudices. The Church has always been an intricate mosaic of humanity. Jesus chose The Twelve and brought them into close company with himself and each other. That original group was a strange bunch, to say the least, but the purpose of Jesus in shaping it did unfold across the years. Jesus called them all together so that they could learn to live together and then serve together. From the very start, being with Jesus was a time of being conditioned for full community and a necessary service together.

The Church began as a community and because of the relational imperative at work in its life, human groupings can be surmounted and prejudices dismissed. The affluent and the poor can make common cause in Christian love, and so can the educated and the illiterate; so can blacks and whites, conservatives and activists, mystics and zealots.

Community still happens when there is a willed movement toward each other, when there is the concern to make our way *one* and our work strong. That willed movement toward each other happens when we obey the relational imperative of *agape* love; it is a movement in the heart, an action taken with eyes wide open, mind wide open, and hands fully extended—by a believer intent to touch with trust. As persons filled with the Spirit, who unifies, all members of the Church have ready help in learning to live and share as true fellows, and thus move beyond sentiment, separatism, and selfishness to be representative and instrumental agents of love. Thus our Lord's encouraging promise: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another" (John 13:35).

John Wesley talked and wrote about the behavior of belonging, a subject about which he had learned firsthand early in his Christian walk. Wesley recorded some sound advice given to him by an unnamed serious believer: "Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven? Remember that you cannot serve Him alone. You must therefore find companions, or make them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion."¹ The truly Christian spirit is neither solitary nor sectarian.

Unity has been given to the Church by God's Spirit, but we can only *experience* that unity through openness to be part of community life. The relational imperative bids us to stay open to know and bless each other, working always against any factors that tempt us to seek distance and thus deny "the tie that binds." Psychiatrist Herbert Wagemaker, Jr. has reminded

us: "If our relationships with other human beings are going to be meaningful, they will cost us something. Relationships are demanding."²

There is a world of meaning in belonging to the Church, in being the Lord's people, part of "his body, the Church," and knowing that we belong in a special kind of way. Those who rightly value that belonging will seek to bless all others who belong—and join heart and hands with them to do a necessary work in such a world.

FOOTNOTES:

¹The *Journal of The Rev. John Wesley* (Standard edition, 1909), i, 469.

²*A Special Kind of Belonging: The Christian Community* (Waco: Word Books, Inc., 1978), p.59.

The Gospel Versus The Sectarian Spirit

by

Robert D. Brinsmead

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One of the most striking features of the Christian movement is its great diversity. It is fragmented into many denominations, sects, groups and subgroups. A forceful demonstration of the divided church confronts us in American cities such as Nashville, Tennessee, where an entire row of church structures will line a single boulevard. Most of the congregations worship on the same day of the week, each in their own little "box" separated from the others, yet all confessing that there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). The church is often divided into many hostile camps. They arrange themselves in battle array—sometimes more ready to battle one another than to make war on the world, the flesh and the devil.

In reading the history of the church, one might conclude that Christians are a pugnacious community. And they have not always been content to merely rain verbal blows upon one another. The state has often had to intervene to prevent factions from physically attacking each other. Julian the Apostate passed an edict of religious toleration in the Roman Empire. Someone has suggested that Julian, who hated Christianity, had a sinister motive for making this edict, supposing that if he granted toleration to the Christians, they would soon destroy each other.

We can thank the ecumenical movement for

making us more conscious of the scandal of a divided Christian church. Sometimes the present state of pluralism is sharply contrasted with the magnificent state of unity which supposedly existed in the primitive Christian church. We say "supposedly existed" because there has been a tendency to idealize primitive Christianity and to romanticize the past. In recent years a number of scholars have challenged the myth of an ideal early church.¹ A reconstruction of the actual situation in the primitive church reveals much greater diversity than is generally imagined. Someone has quipped that if the 120 were all of one accord on the day of Pentecost, it was only because they were not discussing theology!

The Christian faith took roots successively in different ethnic groups. The first Christians were Palestinian Jewish Christians. They tended to remain fiercely loyal to the law and even to many of the traditions of Judaism. Then there were the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jewish Christians. They saw that the old temple was superseded and were more relaxed in their attitude to Jewish ways than were the Palestinian Jewish Christians. Finally, there were the Gentile Christians who had no roots in Judaism. They did not want to conform to the law of Moses except in its truly universal moral principles.

Because these believers came to Christianity from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, and because Christianity does not needlessly upset existing cultures, these early Christian communities developed different pat-

terns of worship. F. F. Bruce² and James D. G. Dunn³ have conclusively shown that the Palestinian Jewish Christians, led by James the Just, maintained a rather orthodox Jewish way of life in Jerusalem. They worshipped at the temple, kept the Sabbath, circumcised their children and continued to live in harmony with the dietary laws of Moses. Among the Jews with whom they lived for many years—often quite amicably—there was no accusation that James and his group had forsaken the law. Many years after the church had been established in other lands, Luke could record that many of the Palestinian Jewish Christians were still zealous for the law (Acts 21:20). As far as this branch of the Christian church is concerned, therefore, we must exclude any sharp or sudden break with Judaism on such matters as the sacred calendar, diet and other lifestyle patterns.

Many of the Gentile Christians were slaves living in a Greco-Roman world. They came to Christianity from a wholly different cultural background and developed different patterns of worship. The Jerusalem Christians, who were still devoted to the law, wanted the Gentiles to conform to certain aspects of the law. It was probably obvious that Gentile slaves could not refrain from work during all the festivals of the Jewish calendar. But the Judaizers insisted that they should at least be circumcised. Paul argued that if they did this, they were obligated to go the whole way and keep the entire law—which they evidently were not intending to do (Gal. 5:3).

It is certain that those early churches also developed their individual patterns of church life. Not too many worship services today would function like a Corinthian gathering in which one had a psalm, another a tongue, and still another an exhortation—and all of them so enthusiastic that the next speaker often could not wait until the others had stopped talking. There was no Book of Common Prayer in those days. Headquarters (was there any?) did not provide a church manual on how to conduct a baptism, how to administer the eucharist or how to officiate at a funeral. Would not the New Testament have avoided a great deal of controversy if the apostles had precisely defined the correct mode of baptism so that there would be no room for dispute? The New Testament is so brief and vague on many questions of form that Christians who are equally dedicated to the Bible have differed sharply on many of these things. The arguments continue, not always because Christian groups are willfully disobedient, but because they cannot find scriptures that would wholly squelch Christians with a contrary view.

We could even speak of different theological or spiritual emphases in the primitive church. There were authentic apocalyptic enthusiastic and pietistic elements within the churches. There was great diversity. Even Peter and Paul

could not work harmoniously together. Neither could Paul and Barnabas. The "First Church of Jerusalem" distrusted Paul. If they were reconciled to the Gentiles' ignoring the law of Moses, they were not reconciled to the report that Paul was encouraging Jewish Christians of the Diaspora to become lax toward the law. Luke recounts the fascinating story:

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to their customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."—Acts 21:17-25.

The great difference between Judaism and Christianity is that one is cultic and the other is catholic. Christianity is transnational and transcultural. It must not be identified with any culture. Yet Christianity has often become almost completely identified with Western culture, including its political and economic institutions. For example, being a "good Christian" may mean conforming to the culture of white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon Americanism. And if we listen to some flag-waving, Bible-thumping, "evangelical" preachers, it is difficult to distinguish between Christianity and American civil religion.

We too easily forget that Christianity arose in an Eastern culture. Those of us who search for appropriate proof-texts in order to read back into the New Testament our modern patterns of worship or forms of church organization are being exceedingly naive. Moreover, on what basis can we say that the New Testament patterns of church worship and church organization must be rigidly-applied norms for today?

Consider the diversity which must have existed in the first church at Rome. Some had scruples about eating certain foods. Others did not. Some wholly abstained from wine. Others did not. (Romans 14 is not talking about grape

juice.) Some observed the sanctity of certain days. Others regarded all days alike. In writing to these Roman Christians, the great apostle showed no disposition to enter into any dispute on these matters (Rom. 14). Would Paul, then, become involved in many of the hotly-disputed points among Christians today?

We must not, however, emphasize the great diversity in the New Testament church without also emphasizing its unity. This was not an organizational unity. It was not a unity in which all conducted their church services from the same book of church order. If we look for the unity of the New Testament church in such things as forms of worship, we will be disappointed. Neither will we find it in loyalty to the right denomination, because denominations are a relatively recent phenomenon. The unity of the church consisted in its commitment to the gospel of Christ. The only worship or behavior pattern to which Paul objected was that which was not "in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14).

Paul was both tolerant and intolerant. He circumcised Timothy as a concession to Jewish scruples. Yet with Titus he would yield nothing to the demands of the Judaizers (Gal. 2:3-5). To those observing special days in Rome, the apostle had no word of condemnation (Rom. 14). But to those observing special days in Galatia he had nothing but hot indignation (Gal. 4:10). Was he making fish of one and fowl of the other? No. But when a manner of life or a pattern of worship denied the gospel of salvation by unconditional love, Paul was vehemently opposed to it.

The apostolic gospel was greater than any single thread of thought. Jesus Christ cannot be contained in a closed system of theology. His grace is greater than all the "isms" that have tried to circumscribe the boundaries of infinite truth.

If we should look for magnificent unity in Christian forms, patterns of worship and organization, we will not find it in the primitive period of the church. That began to develop in the second and third centuries. Ignatius proposed that the only way to protect the church from wandering prophets (charismatic enthusiasts), from schism and from heresy was to establish the rule of the bishops. The church became increasingly institutionalized and gravitated toward centralized authority. Orthodoxy was more and more closely defined. Creeds were developed with increasing particularity. By the time of Constantine, heresy was outlawed. It was finally stamped out with great brutality. When monolithic Christianity fully developed, the Dark Ages of the church began. The unity that the Catholic Church achieved not only quenched heresy, but also the Spirit. Someone has well said that the church which cannot produce a heresy is dead.

The Reformation was a breaking forth of the

prophetic spirit of Christianity. It transformed the earth—economically, socially, politically and culturally as well as religiously. Protestantism brought with it a breath of the spirit of apostolic Christianity. Because it brought vitality, it brought diversity—as the critics of Protestantism have been quick to observe.

The Reformers rebelled against the papal monopoly, but they were too ready to establish one of their own. The Lutherans were first. But if they thought they could establish a Protestant monopoly, they were soon disappointed. The Swiss Protestants (Zwingli), the French Protestants (Calvin) and the Anabaptists quickly followed.

We are far enough removed from the bitter conflicts within fledgling Protestantism to look more objectively at the reality of the human situation. The Swiss Protestants were different from the German Protestants. Luther bitterly charged that the Swiss had another spirit, and he refused to give them the hand of fellowship. But the Swiss came to Protestantism from a different background and a slightly different culture. (What would have happened if they had come to the gospel from a culture wholly alien to the Germans?)

Paul Gerhardt (1606-1676), one of the great theologians of Lutheran orthodoxy, declared, "I cannot regard the Calvinists, *quatenus tales*, as Christians."¹ The Lutherans succeeded in driving the Anabaptists out of their German territories and established a religious monopoly. But today even Lutheran historians acknowledge that being deprived of the prophetic ministry of the sects was one of the worst things that happened to the Lutheran Church.

Neither Luther nor Calvin could answer the Anabaptists without irritation. These Reformers could not see as clearly as we can today that a kind Providence had something to do with sending them that irritation. Experience has taught us that no political or economic monopoly is good. And a religious monopoly is the worst monopoly of all. The Lord of history permits a political balance of power in the world today. It should be obvious that Providence did not want a monopoly within the Christian movement. The division of the Reformation into different streams was not an unmitigated disaster.

Of course, Protestant orthodoxy did its best to establish unity of doctrine, form and fellowship. To its creeds it added its systematic theologies, where every aspect of the faith was carefully defined and given its precise place in the theological system. The church is greatly indebted to the labors of Protestant scholasticism, although time has also taught us that the kind of unity sought by orthodoxy was not an unmitigated blessing to the church. Ardent advocates of orthodoxy zealously suppressed heresy, but they often quenched the Spirit as

well.

The sects frequently made war on the great churches, and the great churches often responded in kind. Today wiser observers acknowledge that the sectarian groups, despite all their limitations or distortions, have often nourished a more virile and challenging religious life than the great churches. Lutheran scholar William Hordern even speaks of the necessary prophetic witness that the sects bear toward the great churches.⁵ Robert McAfee Brown declares:

The multiplication of the sect groups today is first of all a judgment on denominational Protestantism. When the children of this age have cried for bread, the denominations have given them stones. The sects have clearly provided bread. Some Protestants will feel that the bread is a bit mouldy. Others will feel, on the contrary, that it has not been fully baked. A few will claim that improper hands have been laid upon it. But it is bread nevertheless, and the bread of life.

There is a degree of concern and a sense of contagion about sectarian Christianity that makes most respectable church Christianity seem pale and insipid. There is a glow in the life of the twice-born sectarian that would embarrass the conventional Protestant and yet looks suspiciously like the life of the New Testament Christian. There is an assurance in the faith of the sectarian that more sophisticated Protestants, carefully balancing intellectual probabilities, do not even begin to attain. There is a willingness to go to the four corners of the earth and preach the sectarian gospel to every creature, that makes the missionary concern of organized Protestantism look puny in proportion to the vaster resources available to it. Denominational Protestants must be grateful that the sectarians are witnessing to these things.⁶

Most of the great churches began as sect groups, often in response to the movement of the Spirit in the life of a single man (e.g., Martin Luther, Menno Simons, John Wesley). In a recent article L. A. King made these disturbing comments:

To date, no denomination (we are assuming that all of them represented new movings of the Spirit) has maintained its original distinctiveness and power . . . Of course, the power of God must not be discounted, but I fear that restoration is most unlikely . . . Arthritis is not curable.⁷

In an unpublished paper on the subject of doctrinal unity in the church, Robert M. Johnston made this plea to his own church, which is disturbed by a polarization between traditionalists and reformists:

C. Northcote Parkinson has somewhere stated as one of his famous "laws" the principle that perfection of layout is achieved only by institutions on the verge of collapse. He cites the example of the Vatican which completed construction

of St. Peter's just as the Protestant Reformation broke out. Perhaps we can formulate a parallel "law": Absolute doctrinal unity is achieved only by religious movements on the verge of senility. Let us not hasten too rapidly toward our Trent. When we pass from youth to maturity we lose some things and we gain some things, but the process is inevitable till death. Let us yearn neither for an infancy which is past nor for denominational death. Where there is the Spirit, there is life; and where there is life, there is thought; and where there is thought, there is risk of difference; but this is no tragedy where there is love and fellowship and devotion to our Lord.⁸

Where is the greatest vitality being manifested in the Christian movement today? Not within the old religious structures. Most of them appear to be in an advanced state of senility. If the greatest vitality is not found in offbeat sects, then it is found in parachurch ministries—such as Francis Schaeffer's L'Abri Fellowship, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, Campus Crusade for Christ, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and countless other agencies, large and small, which seem to be doing something the old church structures are not doing. We say this without making a value judgment on these ministries. Some of them are doubtlessly involved in heresy. But even in the face of this, we must say with P. T. Forsyth, "A live heresy is better than a dead orthodoxy."⁹

The church is being swept by all kinds of movements which give particular emphasis to various aspects of religion and life. The two biggest developments at present seem to be the apocalyptic movement and the new Pentecostal movement.

While diversity is inevitable and even beneficial to the church, the sectarian spirit which often accompanies it is to be deplored. The sectarian spirit is not limited to small Christian groups. It can exist in the large churches as well. It is found wherever there are sinful human beings. Just as no one is entirely free from sin, so no one is entirely free from sectarianism. Even those who most vigorously condemn it are sometimes guilty of it.

We will now try to identify the sectarian spirit and bring it under the judgment of the gospel.

The sectarian spirit majors on minors. This appears to be the almost inevitable result of denominationalism. It cannot be denied that the church is often enriched by the distinctive emphases of different Christian groups. By these means valuable insights into the Christian faith may be retained or emphasized. But the distinctive "truth" of a group too easily becomes the thing which justifies that group's existence. The fellowship within the group tends to be based more on commitment to the distinctive "truth" than on the faith common to the entire Christian

church. Opposition to the distinctive "truth" by other Christians causes the members of the group to rally around the belief under attack. It becomes almost impossible to resist elevating the distinctive "truth" to a place of importance which the Bible does not recognize. Says Hubert Jedin:

Thus the form and rise of the denominations were greatly influenced by the "anti" to the other. People were in danger of overlooking the common inheritance because of the emphasis on differences and even of becoming impoverished and narrow.¹⁰

At this point sectarianism becomes heresy.

Heresy means selected truth; it does not mean error; heresy and error are very different things. Heresy is truth, but truth pushed into undue importance, to the disparagement of the truth upon the other side.¹¹

The sectarian spirit subordinates the gospel to its distinctive truth (heresy). If a particular sect finds the reason for its existence in its distinctive truth, that distinctive truth becomes more important than the gospel. For example, members of a sect may hold the most diverse views regarding the gospel of how a poor sinner is justified before God without disturbing the peace of the community. But if a member questions the validity of a distinctive truth, there is a mad scramble to defend the theological ramparts. Does not this prove that the sect has made its distinctive truth more important than the gospel?

While every denomination, sect, group and subgroup is busy witnessing to its distinctive truth, the glorious gospel becomes a poor Cinderella in the Christian family. No wonder the gospel is the most ignored and misunderstood doctrine in the community! Yet only the gospel can make a Christian person and create a Christian church. What sect has made the gospel its distinctive witness? Any sect doing this would not be a sect in the true sense of the word because it would not have the sectarian spirit. Would it not be refreshing to have a new "sect" in the church which unashamedly confessed, "Our heresy is the gospel"?

The sectarian spirit may not only subordinate the gospel to its pet doctrine (at which point it becomes a heresy), but it may preach its distinctive doctrine as the gospel. Thus, an emphasis on holiness of life and the work of the Holy Spirit in Christian experience has encouraged the development of new Christian movements. Who would question the importance of holiness and the indwelling life of the Spirit? Insofar as these movements have drawn attention to neglected biblical truths, they have performed a prophetic ministry to the church. But when a fellowship is based on something other than the gospel, that "something" is in serious danger of becoming another gospel. We need to

remember that the ultimate deception occurs when a very good thing is put in the room of the best thing.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, there is no such thing as the gospel of the Holy Spirit. The gospel is about Christ (Rom. 1:3). He is its decisive content. The gospel is about a historical thing, a saving event which took place two thousand years ago. That event was final and unrepeatable. Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament—all its demands and all its promises. As the new Adam and the new Israel, Jesus rewrote human history. He took the curses of the old history, bore them and buried them. Sin, death, hell and the devil were overcome, and by His resurrection He inaugurated the new history of humanity. All of God's power, love and wisdom are concentrated in this one, unique act of redemption.

The Holy Spirit adds nothing to the finished work of Jesus Christ. The Spirit's chief work is the proclamation of the gospel (Isa. 61:1; 1 Cor. 2:2-4; 1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Pet. 1:12). All who are genuinely filled with the spirit (Eph. 5:18) will make the gospel their chief work. Next to proclaiming the gospel, the Spirit's chief work is giving sinners faith for it, for it is by faith in Jesus that a sinner receives all that God and the future have to give (John 5:24; Rom. 8:32; Eph. 1:3). The fruit of the gospel is to take the sinner out of himself, out of preoccupation with himself, so that he has a new center and lives by what Another has done. The Spirit-directed life cannot be preoccupied with itself and cannot fall in love with its own experience. Under the guise of honoring the Holy Spirit, some groups make their new-found experience of love, joy and peace the central point of their witness. Instead of witnessing to the objective reality of what has been done in Christ, they witness to what the Holy Spirit is doing in their lives. If Christian experience remains a handmaiden of the gospel, all is well. But when Hagar thinks she can supplant Sarah, it is time for her to be cast out.

The sectarian spirit may offer its distinctive truth as an addition to the gospel. The gospel is not explicitly denied. In fact, it may be confessed as absolutely necessary. "But, in addition to the gospel . . ."

Insofar as sectarianism offers an addition to the gospel, it is a denial of the gospel. The gospel will be a final thing, a complete thing and an all-sufficient thing, or it will be nothing at all. In the gospel God has spoken His final word to man. There is no way of going on from hearing the gospel to some more profound experience of God. If we may borrow the words of Käsemann, "The gospel is . . . the final word beyond which there is no more to be said or experienced."¹² If anyone suggests that believers can go outside or beyond the gospel for a fuller revelation of truth (be it in some prophetic revelation or in some charismatic

experience), he is advocating a heresy.

The sectarian spirit makes its distinctive thing a "testing truth" which is supposed to determine whether other people are genuinely Christian. Even worse, the sectarian spirit may make its "testing truth" something which is supposed to determine who shall be saved or lost. As far as the New Testament is concerned, the gospel of Christ is the decisive, final test which comes to the whole world (John 3:18, 19). If the New Testament does not clearly make a certain pattern of worship, a form of church government or a point of theology a test of salvation, neither should we.

The sectarian spirit will not accept other Christians as worthy of fellowship unless they subscribe to its distinctive doctrinal emphasis.

Luther repented of sin; he received Jesus as Lord and Saviour; and he believed all that was spoken by the prophets and apostles. But these virtues fell short of Roman requirements. An offense against the form of the church was the same as an offense against fellowship and doctrine . . .

In an alarmingly short time, however, Lutheranism converted to an institution which defined faith as assent to right doctrine, and which granted the prince many of the rights enjoyed by the Roman bishop. Lutherans were no more charitable to dissenters than Roman Catholics were. An Anabaptist could repent of sin; he could receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour; and he could believe all that was spoken by the prophets and apostles. But these virtues fell short of Lutheran requirements. Unless a penitent affirmed, according to the Wittenberg Concord, "that with the bread and wine are truly and substantially present, offered, and received the body and blood of Christ," he was not part of the fellowship.

But when Calvinism converted to a theological system, it turned out that the "elect of God" were those who accepted the distinctive teachings of John Calvin. Once again, doctrine and form ranked higher than fellowship. An Arminian could repent of sin; he could receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour; and he could believe all that was spoken by the prophets and apostles. But these virtues fell short of Calvinistic requirements. Unless a believer accepted the doctrine of irresistible grace, he was not a part of the fellowship . . .

The religious wars in England trace, in great part, to the intransigence of the established church. Dissenters could repent of sin; they could receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour; and they could believe all that was spoken by the prophets and apostles. But these virtues fell short of Anglican requirements. Unless a believer supported the traditions of the established church, he was not part of the fellowship . . .

The Puritans restored the classical standards in theology. They composed a body of literature which was a credit to that or any other day. No major topic in the theological encyclopedia was left unexplored.

But the Puritans (with notable exceptions) tended to be parochial in outlook, for they never succeeded in transcending the limitations of Calvinism. They used the distinctive elements in this theology as a measure of correct doctrine, and thus of fit fellowship.¹³

We all know that the sad story of sectarianism does not end with Puritan history.

The sectarian spirit may even manifest itself by claiming to be the one true church which has "the truth." All other churches and patterns of worship are said to be illegitimate. Very often this extreme sectarian attitude is associated with making loyalty to a particular religious organization the test of orthodoxy. Insofar as this attitude confuses loyalty to an ecclesiastical system with loyalty to Jesus Christ, it becomes an antichrist. Perhaps the word "sect" becomes too weak at this point, and we should substitute the word "cult" to describe a group which claims exclusive possession of the truth.

The sectarian spirit is a denial of justification by faith alone. A simple way to test whether any group of Christians has the sectarian spirit is to enquire whether it requires any tests for acceptance within the group that God does not insist upon for acceptance with Himself. What is sufficient for acceptance with God ought to be sufficient for acceptance with a truly Christian community. Whereas the sectarian spirit is anxious to draw a line which identifies the spiritual elite, the gospel is accompanied by the catholic spirit, which is anxious to draw a circle that makes the Christian fellowship as wide as Christ intended.

A divided church may often be an expression of how seriously God's people are taking their commitment to the truth. But unless diversity is kept subordinate to the gospel, it may exceed its bounds. We need the graciousness and humility to recognize that despite our best endeavors to be true to what the Bible says, we all bring to our study of the Bible the inhibiting influence of our own background, culture and sinful limitations. The article of justification by grace alone means that we cannot be saved by theological rectitude any more than by ethical rectitude. The gospel must continually call into question all that we do or teach. We must forgive the theological blunders of our fellow Christians, even as we ask God to forgive ours.

We would gain nothing if, after fleeing the bear of sectarianism, we were bitten by the viper of compromise. The agony of division is better than the complacency of indifference. The passionate commitment to our sectarian distinc-

tives needs to be channeled into a passionate commitment to the gospel of Christ. A fellowship based on sectarian distinctive needs to be sublimated by fellowship based on the gospel. It would be a welcome change to have a sect whose "heresy" (its distinctive thing) unashamedly pointed away from its own history to the holy history of Jesus Christ.

FOOTNOTES:

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

¹See Walter Bauer, **Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971); James D. Dunn, **Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry Into the Character of Earliest Christianity** (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977); Peter Toon, **The Development of Doctrine in the Church** (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978); Robert W. Wilkin, **The Myth of Christian Beginning, History's Impact on Belief** (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1972).

²See F. F. Bruce, **Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free** (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977).

See Dunn, **Unity and Diversity in the New Testament**.

³Quoted in Hubert Jedin and John P. Dolan, eds. **The History of the Church**, Vol. 5. Erwin Iserloh, Joseph Glazik and Hubert Jedin, **Reformation and Counter Reformation**, tr. Anselm Biggs and Peter W. Becker (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 429.

⁴See William Hordern, **Christianity, Communism, and History** (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954) pp. 17-18.

⁵Robert McAfee Brown, **The Spirit of Protestantism** (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) p. 212.

⁷L.A. King "Legalism or Permissiveness: An Inescapable Dilemma?" **Christian Century**, 16 Apr. 1980, pp. 434-38.

⁸Robert M. Johnston, Unpublished Manuscript, 12 August 1980, p. 5.

⁹Quoted in Brown, **Spirit of Protestantism**, p.128.

¹⁰Jedin and Dolan, **History of the Church**, 5:428.

¹¹William Lincoln, quoted in Augustus Hopkins Strong, **Systematic Theology** (1907; reprint ed. 3 vols. in 1, old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1974), p. 800.

¹²Ernst Käsemann, **Commentary on Romans** (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), p. 10.

¹³Edward John Carnell, **The Case for Biblical Christianity** (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 14-17.

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IN THIS ISSUE.

Christianity—In A Sectarian Mold Or In A Wholistic One?

by

Gilbert W. Stafford

What kind of unity did the church in the New Testament have? That is the question which Robert D. Brinsmead addresses in his article "The Gospel versus the Sectarian Spirit." His answer is that the unity of the New Testament church was a unity in the Gospel. Even though the church had much diversity in its organizational patterns, cultural outlook, and doctrinal emphases, it was nevertheless united in its faithful devotion to the person of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Gospel of our Christly salvation was the common point of reference in the midst of all the church's diversity. It was the person of Christ that united them.

I fully agree with Brinsmead's answer.

Beyond this, however, perhaps it should be stressed that the person of Christ was also the crucial factor for determining who was in the Christly fellowship and who was outside it. Judas placed himself outside the Christly fellowship by virtue of his rejection of the person of Christ.

During the fleshly ministry of Jesus, being inside or outside the Christly fellowship was demonstrable in terms of whether a person was one of the Palestinians who followed Jesus. But, following his fleshly ministry, being inside or outside the Christly fellowship was not quite as simple as it had been during the days of Jesus' incarnational life. In the course of time, being inside or outside the Christly fellowship came to be determined on the basis of more conceptual matters. For instance, we have Paul warning the Corinthians about those who preach "another Jesus whom we have not preached" (see II Corinthians 11:1-4); and in Galatians he severely condemns those who distort the gospel of Christ: "If any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed" (2:9, New American Standard Bible here and elsewhere).

In I John 4 we find the following twofold Christological criterion: "every spirit that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh is from God" (v. 2), and "whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God" (v. 15). According to I John, confession of both Jesus' humanity and his divinity is crucial for determining whether one is to be counted inside or outside the Christly community.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, what one trustingly believes about Jesus is both

the cohesive center of the church's unity, as well as the fundamental line of demarcation between those who are within the Christly fellowship and those who are outside it.

But, what about all of the special groupings within the universal church? We have the Anglicans stressing the historic episcopacy; the traditional peace churches teaching pacifism; holiness churches preaching entire sanctification; Trinitarian Pentecostals emphasizing that tongues are the initial evidence of Holy Spirit baptism; Calvinists theologizing about eternal security; Independents refusing connectional church life; and a special group called the Church of God movement maintaining that church membership and salvation are identical.

If the official doctrinal statements of all these groups were to be compared, one would find great unanimity among them regarding the personhood of Jesus Christ. Let us look at two examples of formal doctrinal statements about Christ, each coming from a tradition in some ways very different from the other.

1. *The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparately joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and man.*¹
2. *Jesus Christ the Son is fully God and fully man: the only Savior for the sins of the world. He was the Word made flesh, supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and was perfect in nature, teaching, and obedience. He died on the cross as the vicarious sacrifice for all mankind, rose from the dead in His own glorified body, ascended into heaven, and will return in glory. He is the Head of His body the Church, victor over all the powers of darkness, and now reigns at the right hand of the Father.*²

The commonalities between these two confession are obvious. If one were to look at the whole

doctrinal statements from which these quotations are taken, it would be clear that there is nothing said in either of the above quotations with which those using the other statement would disagree.

It so happens that the first statement above is found in a Calvinistic doctrinal confession, whereas the second is found in a Charismatic confession. As different as Calvinists and Charismatics are in some secondary matters, they are nevertheless in basic agreement when it comes to the person of Christ. In fact, if we were to consider the official doctrinal statements from a wide range of other Christian traditions even as diverse as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Baptist, for instance, we would find that they would be in basic Christological agreement with the quotations given above. The central Christological affirmations would not be the major bone of contention between these groups. Not until such matters as eternal security, entire sanctification, pacifism, and the nature of church membership are discussed, do group distinctives become apparent.

This, then, brings us to the major point under consideration, namely, that all too often we allow special concerns to move to the center of our respective fellowships, thereby replacing the person and work of Christ as the cohesive center. We begin building our communion around our special concerns rather than allowing our communion to find its eternal center in Christ and His Gospel.

Should we then abandon all special concerns? The answer is No, for two reasons: first of all, it is unrealistic. To be human is to have special concerns and since the church is very human, a multitude of special concerns will continue to characterize her until the Lord returns, at which time these concerns will melt into the glorious brightness of Christ himself. But, until that day, we will inevitably continue organizing those concerns which we are convinced other Christians ought to share along with us.

Beyond this, though, there is a second reason why we should not abandon special concerns: it has to do with the universal presence of the Holy Spirit, who is at work within the whole church, here understood as the universal fellowship of those who trust in the Jesus of Scripture for their salvation. If the Holy Spirit is at work among all his people, then perhaps we should be cautious about too quickly condemning the special concerns of fellow believers without asking what the Holy Spirit might have to say about these matters even to those of us who traditionally do not share the same concerns. In saying this it is not being claimed that the Holy Spirit writes doctrinal statements—we are the ones who do that—but what we are saying is that persistent concerns are very likely inspired by the Holy Spirit. Concerns are expressed in

doctrinal statements but they are not identical with such statements. We can have a Holy Spirit inspired concern and yet produce a doctrinal statement which is not exactly what the Holy Spirit wills to say. Our doctrinal statements may very well distort those concerns which are in and of themselves inspired by the Holy Spirit. While we may not agree with the Calvinistic doctrine of eternal security, perhaps those who uphold the concern expressed in that doctrine do challenge others of us to think more carefully about the biblical doctrine of our security in Christ. Or, while we may not agree with the Pentecostal stress on the externals of Holy Spirit baptism, perhaps they do cause all of us to consider more thoroughly the nature of that baptism. To put it in personal terms, my understanding of the whole counsel of God is fuller because of the issues with which Anglicans and Calvinists and Pentecostals have challenged me. As I wrestle with their special concerns, even when I do not agree with their doctrinal statements, the Holy Spirit teaches me about matters to which I had not previously given much thought.

Some Christians function within a sectarian mold, while others function within a wholistic one. Those functioning within a sectarian mold have their doctrinal eyes turned towards each other—they are doctrinally cross-eyed—as their eyes focus on concerns near to their theological noses, rather than focusing on Christ and his Gospel. They also have severe doctrinal myopia in that they see only their own special doctrinal concerns and are seemingly oblivious to those raised by other Christians. Anglicans have doctrinal myopia whenever they refuse to consider what Scripture has to say about sanctification; those associated with the Church of God Movement have the same disease whenever they refuse to study Scripture to see what it has to say about the security of the believer; Calvinists have it whenever they refuse to learn from Scripture about Holy Spirit baptism; Pentecostal churches are afflicted with it whenever they refuse to look carefully at Scriptural passages pertaining to good order in the church.

But not all Christians function within this kind of sectarian mold; those functioning within a wholistic mold keep their doctrinal eyesight focused on the person of Christ and his Gospel; they also develop strong eyes as they exercise them by looking at all sorts of issues called to their attention by fellow Christians lifting up other special concerns. Christianity within this mold openly and genuinely affirms its oneness with all others who likewise are called into existence by the one Gospel; it rejoices with all of like precious faith in the one Gospel and urges all to maintain the unity of the Gospel by keeping it central; and it unabashedly seeks to understand the secondary doctrinal concerns of others not for the purpose of adopting their particular

positions, but for the purpose of asking anew what the Spirit has to say to the whole church as a given issue is considered in light of the biblical Word.

Christians who function within the wholistic mold hold that all of us need each other as the one people of the Gospel; whereas those who function within a sectarian mold hold that "we" are better than "you" simply because "we" have the Gospel enlightened by "our" special understandings while "you" even though perhaps having the Gospel, have distorted it by "your" special misunderstandings.

But, you may ask, (1) Does that mean that we should not have rather comprehensive doctrinal agreement among the teaching and preaching ministry of the church? Should persons be ordained who espouse doctrinal views not generally held among one's own group? (2) Does this mean that we ought to feel guilty about believing that our group is the healthiest fellowship possible for Christian development? and (3) Does this mean that we ought to cease setting forth our distinctive understandings to other Christians? The answer to all three questions is No: (1) The teaching and preaching ministry of a particular group of Christians does need to be in basic agreement in order to avoid unnecessary doctrinal confusion among the people of God for which that ministry is primarily responsible; (2) If we are not personally convinced that our group is the healthiest of all fellowships for Christian development we ought either to be in earnest about making it so or be in earnest about finding what we believe to be the healthiest fellowship; and (3) If indeed our persistent concerns are

inspired by the Holy Spirit, we ought to be challenging others with them.

We do not fall into the sectarian mold by answering No to the above questions unless we deny that others who feel the same way about their respective groups, have equal standing before God solely on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ and his Gospel. The sin of sectarianism does not have to do with the fact that we differ on secondary issues. Rather, it has to do with (1) substituting our respective doctrinal concerns for the centrality of the person of Christ; (2) loveless attitudes toward those with whom we differ; and (3) being motivated by the spirit of competitiveness within the community of Christ.

Christianity with a multiplicity of groups each functioning in a sectarian mold as it centers on its own doctrinal distinctives presents to the world many off-center gospels, whereas Christianity functioning within a wholistic mold as it centers on the Scripturally-presented Christ and his Gospel is in the most advantageous position possible to present to the world the only message of hope that can give eternal salvation to all who believe.

FOOTNOTES

¹The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter VIII, section II. Quoted from John H. Leith, ed; *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*. Revised edition, (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), p. 203 f.

²Doctrinal Statement, Melodyland School of Theology, Section V.

When A Movement Ceases To Move

by
Barry L.Callen

Robert Brinsmead has expressed appropriate appreciation to "the ecumenical movement" for sensitizing contemporary Christians to the scandal of a divided Christian community. While he does not identify the constituency of this general unity movement, it is clear that the reformation movement of the Church of God should not be excluded. From its beginning this particular body of Christians has been seeking to expose the sectarian scandal and reach for some realization of the unity intended by Christ. But the path of such realization has been found to be long and difficult.

It is obvious that even the church of the first century suffered sectarian difficulties. There

were regional, cultural, personality and theological problems which necessitated then and now that those who long for unity must nevertheless adapt to the realities of diversity and change. In fact, it may be concluded that escape from "the sectarian spirit" is less the realization of some contrived uniformity and more the achieving (or receiving) of the wisdom to judge where and when diversity is inevitable, acceptable and even enriching. Present circumstances within the life of the Church of God indicate that the pains of this process are real and continuing.

We in the Church of God have lived in our world of ambivalence for over a century. We have been "liberal" in spirit and "conservative" in

theology. We have both championed Christian unity and stood aloof from its most prominent organizational manifestations. We have denounced denominationalism and feared that we might soon be a denomination ourselves. We have been both pioneers in equality for minorities and women in the Church and victims of the related prejudices in our society. We have developed a loyalty to a unified World Service budget, only to compromise it with competitive parachurch ministries and individual initiatives.

We have been the captives of a consensus mentality. Sometimes we have squelched legitimate diversity or failed to challenge questionable trends because we were committed to preserving the unity of the body. Part of the price of this selective silence has been the occasional build-up of mistrust and frustration, resulting periodically in awkward bursts of anger and accusation.

This world of ambivalence has extended to every phase of life within the Church of God. There continues to be tension between the chaos of unchecked individualism and the desire to be efficient and responsible disciples together. On the one hand, we so want to break with the shackles of sectarianism that we prize a substantial freedom and flexibility of thought and structure. On the other hand, we are painfully aware of the lack of long-range planning, of the absence of regularized vehicles of serious communication and of the maverick and crisis-oriented nature of so much in the life of the Church. We have yet to discover how Spirit-led persons can provide genuine guidance for the work of the Church in a way that remains free of what we would judge to be the seductive taint of secularism.

It is comforting to affirm with Brinsmead that the unity of the church must focus on a common commitment to the gospel of Christ rather than on artificial issues and parochial preferences. It is quite discomforting, however, to realize that even a unity-conscious movement like the Church of God must struggle with the seeds of sectarianism that keep appearing in its own midst.

We fear creeds, so we often fail to engage in serious theological dialogue. We tend to face diversity in the Church with strategies of either defiance or default. We do not wish to humanize

and intellectualize qualifications for ministry, so the rumor persists among us that disciplined training for ministry is optional, even unspiritual. We hate words like "headquarters," so we permit church colleges to develop haphazardly and chart their own courses with little apparent regard for each other or for their corporate impact on the whole Church. When we read in Acts 15:28 that the church acted in light of what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," we care deeply about the primacy of the Holy Spirit and wish sincerely for some clarification about the proper role of "us" in directing the life of the church.

Potentially there is exhilaration and frustration in constant change. If a "movement" ceases to move, it ceases being a movement and becomes a traditional institution. Church of God people have wanted to be a movement, a leaven in the stale loaf of denominationalism. This desire has given birth to idealism and sacrifice—and to motion, confrontation, questions, frustrations. Operational guidelines, especially clear and unchanging ones, have been harder to discover than the inspirational visions. A "free church" arrangement featuring local church autonomy can be either an open door for the work of the Spirit of God or a blank check for the sectarian spirit of man. The quest for unity can itself become a sectarian banner carried proudly, dividing as it goes.

What is the result of such a dynamic and dangerous situation? We can either become cynical about it all or reaffirm the rightness of the quest and, in faith and without all the answers or guarantees, determine to move on. It might be that the Church of God has already invested too much energy in searching for its identity as a distinctive people under God. Maybe constant introspection is itself a step toward sectarianizing the movement.

Brinsmead's suggested solution to sectarianism is putting into practice the belief that "a fellowship based on sectarian distinctives needs to be sublimated by fellowship based on the gospel." Possibly, for the Church of God, the best way to find herself is finally to be willing to lose herself for the sake of the gospel. It will never be fully clear just what that implies organizationally; but its implications for our goal, our motivation and our commitment are unmistakable!

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Dr. Bruce Metzger is the George L. Collord Professor of New Testament Language and Literature, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. He is Chairman of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) Bible Committee; Author of twenty-five books; Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy; former president of the Society of Biblical Literature of Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, and of the North American Patristic Society; Member of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (1969 and 1974); Visiting Fellow, Clare Hall, Cambridge (1974); Visiting Fellow, Wolfson College, Oxford (1979).

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