

# Why Schisms in the Body of Christ?

by Daniel Borchers

December 1998

## Unity and Differences?

Is the body of Christ “one body” – *united* – as Scriptures claim? What of the differences which seem to divide that body into myriad and irreconcilable parts?

The classic hymn, *Onward Christian Soldiers*, claims Christians are “one in hope and doctrine, one in charity.” Often it doesn’t seem that way.

Catholics and Protestants are literally at war with one another in Northern Ireland. In America and around the world Christians argue and fight with one another over some of the most picayune issues. Different fellowships have differing views on ecclesiastical government, ways of worship and when and how to worship. We even argue over whether one fellowship is a *sect*, a *denomination*, or a *cult*. *Labels* take on a significance far beyond their value.

These differences have varying degrees of significance. However minor some differences may seem to us, they may hold tremendous importance to others.

*Are* Christians all “*one*” as the apostle Paul wrote?

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling: one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.<sup>1</sup>

If we *are* all “one,” why the *differences*? The very next verse gives us a clue to the answer.

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift.<sup>2</sup>

God has given each of us His grace, but, as we shall find out, that grace is different for each one of us.

## All Things to All People

Paul wrote:

“and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those that are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul became “all things to all people.” By this Paul didn’t mean that he lacked steadfast principles, nor was he implying that truth is relative. Rather, he was saying that his approach was to *relate* to people from *their* perspective. To Jews, Paul taught from the Hebrew scriptures and gave His Hebrew

credentials.<sup>4</sup> To Greeks, Paul quoted from their poets and used their altar to the “Unknown God” to proclaim the one true God.<sup>5</sup> Paul started where people *were* and brought them to where Jesus Christ *is*.

Jesus does the same thing. Jesus Christ – the great I AM<sup>6</sup> – is the penultimate expression of this approach, being quite literally all things to all people. Jesus is the great Healer for the sick, the sublime Comforter for those who mourn. Jesus is our Mediator and Advocate with the Father, and our High Priest. And, on a deeply personal and intimate level, Jesus is our Elder Brother and our Friend.

God *goes* to where people *are* – to where they’re “at” at a given moment in time.

“G. Gordon Campbell once suggested that we could better understand experientially the name Jehovah, I Am, if the verb ‘to be’ were translated ‘to become.’ The significance of this name is that Jehovah (Jesus) is and will become to us exactly what we need when we feel that need. In this sense, it is an intensely personal and subjective name of Jesus. What has Jesus become to you recently?”<sup>7</sup>

Jesus – the great I AM – *becomes* who and what we need when we need Him.

Paul tells us that Jesus is the head of the church and that Christians comprise the body. This great mystery<sup>8</sup> was revealed to us in another way by Jesus Himself, who said:

“that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us ... I in them, and You in Me.”<sup>9</sup>

These words of Jesus unveil the truth of who a “true Christian” really *is* – but more on that later.

The church is the body of Christ, *melding* peoples of all nations, cultures, and backgrounds<sup>10</sup> into *one*. God’s Spirit is weaving the different threads of the tapestry into a beautiful design which gains its beauty by the differences *becoming* one tapestry.

## Puzzle of Truth

This great mystery of the church correlates with the “puzzle” of truth which popular author and musician John Fischer explains as follows:

“We all have our jigsaw puzzle called *Truth*. It has a million pieces and will never be completed in one lifetime. Volumes of books have been written and countless schools founded for the purposes of explaining the puzzle, teaching various theories of how to put it together, and speculating over what the puzzle will look like if it is ever completed.

“But an amazing thing happens when we accept Jesus Christ: we receive the box the puzzle came in. On the cover, as always, the completed puzzle is pictured, and it shows Jesus himself. Knowing Who the puzzle is, however, doesn’t absolve the Christian of the task of putting it together – this is still our life experience – but it does mean that each new discovery, each new piece we fit, gives a more complete understanding and experience of Jesus Christ our Lord. To encounter truth is to encounter more of Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

Jesus Christ is the *picture* on the puzzle box and we are trying to put the pieces together as accurately as possible in our own lives. We all have different *pieces* of the puzzle and therefore have different *visions*

of the whole. Some of us see the picture more clearly than others because of the *particular* pieces we have been given. And we can each see an aspect of God which others may not see.

As we put the pieces of the puzzle together the picture becomes ever clearer. Jesus doesn't change, but our *understanding* of Him does. Though we will never see Him perfectly in this life, we are assured that we will someday see Him as He truly is.<sup>12</sup>

## Mission Fields

Christians are called to preach the gospel wherever we may be – *throughout the world*.<sup>13</sup> But the world is a mighty big place with all different kinds of people. There are so many different languages, customs, cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs as to be utterly unimaginable. Where is a Christian to *begin*? Right where he *is*!

Each and every Christian has his own calling,<sup>14</sup> his own gifts<sup>15</sup> and his own mission fields.<sup>16</sup> We cannot judge another person's calling and gifts nor should we disparage the work God has entrusted to them.<sup>17</sup> That is God's prerogative. Only God can judge the value of His servants.

For instance, John Fischer and others have disparaged the advent of numerous Christian how-to books, ten-step programs and the like, claiming they are just rip-offs from the world, in effect calling the Christian Self-help Movement a *commercialization* of Christianity. To the contrary, these are part of a *genuine Christian experience* where God meets the needs of His children and in the process His children find Him. Some of these books and programs may be frauds, but many are not.

We must be careful not to throw out the good with the bad. We must not ignore how God is using a particular "brand" of Christianity (e.g., evangelicalism, fundamentalism), or a particular form of church government (hierarchical, Presbyterian) or a particular method (self-help, reparation therapy) or a particular approach (witnessing, personal testimony) just because it isn't right for *us*. It *is* right for *someone*! It is *tailor-made* for someone. We must *never* deny the *legitimacy* of a God-inspired ministry.<sup>18</sup> To do so is to partake of *legalism* and to *limit* God and *limit* the gospel message.

We are all *different*, yet all partakers of the *one* body of Christ. God deals with *different* people in *different* ways. We should not attempt to preempt what God may be doing in the lives of others because we don't think *He* is doing it the *right* way! God knows the right way for every one of us.

No *human* institution, no *human* endeavor, no *human* movement – no matter how *divinely* inspired – will be *perfect*. There will *always* be flaws. Some would, like the counterculturalists, tear down the *entire* existing (and imperfect) structure to replace it with another (imperfect and untested) counter-structure.

It's *because* we are all imperfect – and imperfect in *different ways* – that we need all these different *ministries*. Each ministry, while imperfect, reflects some important aspects of God's truth and character – aspects which are necessary for the well-being and salvation of someone, somewhere.

## Spirituality & Personality

The expression of our spirituality, as it turns out, is often closely connected to our personality.

For instance, there are essentially six forms of *spirituality*: evangelical, charismatic, sacramental, activist, academic and ascetic. Each of these forms of spirituality represents a different way of encountering God. While the *goal* is the *same* for each Christian – being formed and shaped by God into a new creation,

becoming more like Christ, growing in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ, imitating Christ – our *approaches may differ*.

These differences arise, in part, due to what has previously been presented and, in part, due to our differing *personality types* (introvert, extrovert) and our differing *temperaments* (intuitive, sensory, emotive, cognitive).<sup>19</sup>

Each of these personality types and temperaments has its own strengths and its own weaknesses, as do the differing forms of spirituality which are expressed. As we express our *own* individual and corporate expression of our spirituality in our personal and collective encounter with God we should recognize the validity of *other* expressions of spirituality.

Christians should also be aware of the strengths and the weaknesses of each way of encountering God with the goal of helping one another achieve the unity which God desires within the body of Christ, with each member contributing its own gifts and ministries to the welfare of the whole. We should, in effect, practice the principle of “iron sharpens iron”<sup>20</sup> by honing our strengths and minimizing our weaknesses.

Yes, we come to God as we *are* (with our personality, temperament, and everything else we are) and God transforms us into what He would have us *be* – the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

## **Liberty in Christ**

The message of the New Covenant is “liberty in Christ.”<sup>21</sup>

As Christians we have an obligation to extend to other Christians the same grace God extends to us. When we study the Scriptures it becomes clear there are *essential* doctrines of the faith once delivered, and there are other matters which are open to *question* – “doubtful disputations”<sup>22</sup> concerning matters of secondary importance.

Sometimes Christians can be judgmental, devising “tests” for determining the “authenticity” of a fellow Christian. Usually these tests revolve around a particular doctrine, frequently over “doubtful matters,” and these tests are often inaccurate gauges of one’s spiritual condition.

The apostle John, in fact, only gave one doctrinal “test” to determine who a Christian is – one who affirms that Jesus is the Christ.<sup>23</sup>

## **True Christians**

What is a “true Christian?”

This has been debated for millennia and the debate will never end in this age. As human beings we are always searching for a test to determine a person’s status. Almost invariably those tests are wrong because we try to mold people into *our* image rather than *God’s*.

But the Bible is clear on who a “true Christian” is – it is someone in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells.<sup>24</sup> *That* is the biblical *definition* of a “true Christian.” Jesus spoke of this in John 17 – He is *in* us and we are *in* Him.

True Christianity is not *measured* by one’s observance of days, times or seasons, or by one’s acts of service, or by one’s adherence to politically correct doctrines, or by one’s expression of spirituality.

A Christian is simply one in whom Christ dwells.

A Christian is – be *definition* – *holy*.

A Christian is – by *definition* – *set apart* (to be a light).

A Christian is – by *definition* – a *saint*.

Christians are not *perfect* and, therefore, should not be *judged* as *non-Christians* because of our *imperfections*. Some see our *imperfections* as *hypocrisy*. They are *not*. We're simply *human*.

Jesus is the Light of the world,<sup>25</sup> yet He calls us the “light of the world”<sup>26</sup> because He is in us. Sometimes we hide His light under a bushel.<sup>27</sup> At other times we poorly reflect His light. Sometimes we fail to see the light within each other because we see only the *differences* between us and not what is *common* to all of us – *Jesus Christ*. These are *our* failings, not God's.

But then, isn't that why we need God?

Paul admonished the Corinthian church not to mistreat one another by creating *factions* within the body of Christ.<sup>28</sup> Paul strenuously opposed this “us versus them” mentality, warning that it actually *nullifies* the meaning of being one in Christ.<sup>29</sup> We *are* one body<sup>30</sup> and should recognize that different parts of the body<sup>31</sup> have different functions and different ministries, which should *work together* to further the Work of God.

Instead of condemning one another for our differences – differences which are *legitimate* in the eyes of God and which are actually *inspired* by God – we should recognize what we all have in common: the spirit of Christ within us.

God did, after all, give us our different gifts so that we might become perfected in Christ in unity.<sup>32</sup>

Let us remember that glorious hymn, *Onward Christian Soldiers* – we are “one in hope and doctrine, one in charity.” Let the charity begin with us.

## Endnotes:

---

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:4-6.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:7.

<sup>3</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 9:20-22.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 3:3-7.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 17:23.

<sup>6</sup> John 4:25-26;8:24,28,58;13:19;18:5-6,8.

<sup>7</sup> Elmer Towns, *The Names of Jesus*, Accent Publications, 1987, p 121.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 5:32.

<sup>9</sup> John 17:21,23.

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 5:19.

<sup>11</sup> John Fischer, *Real Christians Don't Dance*, Bethany House, 1988, pp. 170-171.

<sup>12</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> John 3:2.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 1:8.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 11:29, Philippians 2:10, 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 1:10.

<sup>15</sup> Romans 12:3-8, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12:4-10,28-31, Ephesians 4:11-12, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 4:10-11.

<sup>16</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:10-17.

<sup>17</sup> Romans 14:4.

<sup>18</sup> Mark 9:38-41.

---

19 **Intuitive** people are imaginative, creative and conceptual and experience God *intuitively*. **Sensory** people experience through their five *senses*. **Emotive** people experience God *emotionally*. **Cognitive** people classify, objectify, and experience God *analytically*.

20 Proverbs 27:17.

21 John 8:32,36, Galatians 2:4; 5:1.

22 Romans 14:1. See Romans 14:1-15:13 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 8.

23 1<sup>st</sup> John 2:22-23;4:1-3;5:1, 2<sup>nd</sup> John 7.

24 Romans 8:9-11.

25 John 1:7-9;8:12;9;5.

26 Matthew 5:14.

27 Matthew 5:15.

28 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:17-19.

29 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:19-22,27-29.

30 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:17.

31 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12:12-31.

32 Ephesians 4:11-16.