

Unity and Doctrine

(One Hope)

By Ben Jones

Unity is desirable, and yet, it is often an elusive quality. Disagreements concerning the means to unity can ultimately render the end impossible to achieve. Unfortunately, doctrine itself has become a casualty, caught in the crossfire of increasingly polarized opponents. In the postmodern world, doctrine is often considered a secondary matter and an obstacle to religious unity.

The apostle Paul addressed the connection between doctrine and unity in the epistle to the Ephesians. The Book of Ephesians may be divided into two sections. Chapters 1-3 are focused on what Christ has done for the church, while chapters 4-6 are focused on what the church, in return, should do for Christ. In this context, Ephesians 4:1-6 is a sort of transitional passage linking the two sections. In Christ, men are called into the unity of the Spirit, a perfect fellowship fully realized in God's eternal plan of redemption. Christians are charged to walk worthy of this calling, "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

As indicated by this passage, true unity is the product of God, not man. In one sense, unity might be described as the proper response to God's grace, which both requires and results from walking in a manner worthy of a Christian. Such a walk involves two elements, the disposition of a servant and the doctrine of the Master.

First, Paul listed a series of Christ-like qualities that must be cultivated in the life of every disciple. These are humility, meekness, patience, tolerance and diligence. The Christian who must always have his way, constantly flies off the handle, holds a grudge or gives up at the first sign of trouble will be a disruption to the life of the church.

Second, Paul revealed a unique series of New Testament teachings that form the foundation of the Christian faith. These are the one God and Father, one Lord, one Spirit, one body, one faith, one baptism and one hope. The seven "ones" provide both a model and a means for the kind of unity required of God's people. One, by definition, is distinctive and exclusive. It means one and only one. Christians can be kind and courteous toward those who hold different beliefs, but unity calls for both an agreeable attitude and a commitment to truth.

Take, for example, the matter of the one hope. In the New Testament, hope involves a confident expectation of obtaining something real. The Christian's hope is eternal life in heaven, which is grounded in the reality of the resurrection of Jesus (1 Peter 1:3) and the immutability of God's promises (Hebrews 6:18-20). Without these facts, however, hope is little more than a daydream. Now, imagine a church in which one man hoped to be reincarnated, another hoped for a millennial reign of Christ and a third hoped for all men to be saved apart from the Gospel. The sad truth is that such a church would be no worse off than one in which everyone believed the same false doctrine.

True unity is more than an effort to get along; it is a purposeful dedication to living the Christian life. The path to unity begins with a desire to know God and to obey His Word. When we agree that the Bible is right, we will eliminate the barriers to unity.