

Interchurch Fellowship

By Elder David Pyles

Fellowship between churches of like faith and practice can be one of the most joyous aspects of Christian experience. It is especially beneficial for smaller churches, who can compound their effectiveness when combining efforts and resources in evangelical and charitable projects. However, a state of interchurch fellowship can also prove precarious if not prudently managed, and when it degenerates into a state of dissension, all churches involved will be greatly damaged. The dissension becomes a distraction and preoccupation, removing focus from the more profitable things commanded by God, and the discouragement it causes will lead to despair and defection, especially among church youth.

For this reason, churches in many denominations make very little attempt at meaningful fellowship with sister churches, and the relationship between churches can be more competitive than cooperative. They would prefer to peacefully go their separate ways, even in respect to points of doctrine and practice, than to endure the troubles that come with aspiring to be a unified voice. Because they bear the same denominational name, and agree to turn a blind eye to their differences, they successfully create an appearance of homogeneity and peace that does not truly exist. On the other hand, churches that aspire to interchurch fellowship can struggle in efforts to resolve small differences and create an illusion of heterogeneity that does not truly exist. These churches may in fact be in far greater doctrinal and practical harmony than those of the former class. Few people are wise enough to see through these illusions, and many quarreling churches are unwise enough to reinforce them to their own detriment.

The same type of situation can be created by churches having strong conviction and strong commitment to principle as opposed to churches having little. Strong conviction can quickly lead to strong disagreement, whereas absence of conviction can create an illusion of peace. Anyone favoring the latter state on this account has been seriously deceived. God commands to strive for peace, but never by means of casting conviction and principle aside. Further, people who remain committed to principle, especially biblical principle, will eventually resolve their differences, repent of their strife and reunite, but people having no commitment to principle, but who go wherever personal opinion and preference lead, will almost surely drift apart.

There is a common saying in modern ecumenical Christianity that “doctrine divides.” Nondenominational churches have flourished in recent years upon the strength of this presumed proverb. It is well-calculated to deceive the simple, but is an absurdity to anyone who cares to think. The opposite is actually true. Nothing unites us like doctrine. Many a troubled marriage has been saved because a husband and wife, though at odds with each other, remained committed to a sound doctrine. Many a battle has been won because fearful soldiers refused to succumb to their emotions and remained committed to the principles they were taught in training, especially

principles that preserved them as a unified, coordinated force. The United States would have been torn apart long ago had its people not been committed to the doctrine set forth in the Constitution. This nation will come to an end when commitment to that doctrine ceases, in which event it will fragment into separate entities. The truth is that sound doctrine unites, and no unification of men can endure without it. This is why men throughout history, in seeking agreement, have signed covenants and contracts, drawn treaties, ratified constitutions, etc. – all of which expressed a doctrine or derived from such.

Though modern Christianity is fragmented into many doctrines, it was not commitment to doctrine that divided Christians; rather, it was a lack of it, and their multiple doctrines are a symptom of the true problem rather than the cause of it. The modern ecumenical movement in its effort to achieve unity by discarding doctrine has instead done the opposite. Strife and instability within churches are now as bad as they ever were. Churches do more to devour each other than cooperate in causes that would truly promote Christianity, and the movement toward the emotion-fed, doctrine-dead mega-church has only cast a rug over a growing chasm of dissent among Christians on even the most basic of Bible principles.

Real and enduring peace cannot be secured without a firm foundation in doctrine. It is for this reason that the Bible, while putting great emphasis on the importance of peace, is no less emphatic on the importance of doctrine. Indeed, the same Bible that commands protracted forbearance and forgiveness also commands that a corrupter of doctrine be dealt with promptly: ***“A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject,”*** (Tit 3:10). ***“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them,”*** (Rom 16:17). ***“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,”*** (Gal 1:8). Forgiveness, forbearance, mercy and peace are all uniquely beautiful aspects of Christianity, but these concepts are built upon a doctrinal structure. They will fall and shatter when that structure is broken. This is why the usual rules of forbearance do not apply to those who corrupt doctrine. A man cannot consistently claim to value forgiveness, forbearance, etc. while laying doctrine aside. The latter is the only enduring foundation for the former.

This then leads to a case where interchurch fellowship may not be scriptural. If a church or group of churches has departed into doctrinal error and become entrenched in it, then the scriptures command that sound churches withdraw their fellowship. This plainly shows the error of the ecumenical movement. If doctrine is important enough to justify such drastic measures, then the dismissive attitude this movement takes toward doctrine must surely be in gross error. The ecumenical movement claims to make fellowship of higher priority than doctrine, whereas the Bible clearly makes doctrine a higher priority than fellowship. Indeed, under the scriptural meaning of “doctrine,” it is the only thing having higher priority than fellowship. The scriptural

meaning refers not only to what a man believes but also to how he acts. Of course, how a man acts likely makes a more accurate statement of his true beliefs than the mere words of his mouth.

The drastic measure with which heresy is to be dealt also dictates that any charge of it must be substantiated beyond reasonable doubt. The charge of heresy has been a convenient excuse for those who were already bent on dividing, and were therefore eager to make much over differences that Christians should be willing to forbear. A man stands nothing to gain from another man who thinks exactly as he does. So our differences, if handled properly, can serve toward our mutual progress. It must also be considered that thousands of sound Christians have been censured and excommunicated under the charge of heresy when the true heretics were actually their accusers.

What then is “heresy?” Interestingly, the literal meaning of the underlying Greek word is “a choosing” or it can also refer to “that which is chosen.” It is a self-willed choice that puts personal opinion or preference above the authority of truth. But the scriptural usage of the term also shows it especially means someone who imposes his self-willed, truth-defying choice in a contentious way. Because of this, what would have otherwise been a small error can become significant if promoted so as to stir strife. It is reasonable in that case for the church to deal with the issue as though it truly had the importance its divisive advocate pretends. This is a fair principle of justice since Jesus Himself said, “...*with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again,*” (Mt 7:2). The reverse can also be true: More forbearance can be shown to an errant idea when it is peacefully held as a private opinion. So in determining what is heresy and what is not, it will oftentimes be necessary to consult the spirit of the one who is advocating it.

Doctrinal errors do of course come in varying degrees, some of which are bearable and some of which are not. The first question addressed by religious doctrine is of course: Who is God? The second is: What does He teach? Pursuit of this will lead to a third question: Where does He teach it? The first question leaves no margin for error. We must be at agreement on who is God. This implies we must also be at agreement on who is Jesus Christ. It is surely a heresy that denies the basic biblical facts concerning the identity of Jesus. Such facts include: His divinity as the only Son of God; that He is the promised Messiah; that He was born of a virgin; that He genuinely became a man; that He led a sinless life; that He was crucified for our sins; that He was buried and rose the third day; that He ascended to Heaven, and that He will return to resurrect the dead, bless the righteous and damn the wicked. God strictly commanded that we are not to have any other gods before Him. Anyone who denies these and other basic biblical facts concerning Jesus Christ, the very image of the invisible God, has fabricated to himself an alternative to the biblically-revealed God and become a heretic in so doing.

Nor is there any margin for error on the third question. If we cannot agree on where the teachings of God are to be found, then it is naïve to suppose that we can be at peace on what those teachings happen to be. A belief in the inspiration and authority of the Bible is therefore absolutely essential to soundness. While some who are called “Christians” claim belief in the inspiration of the Bible and others do not, they are in fact birds of a very different feather. They should be regarded as two separate religions, even though they errantly bear the same label.

The second question is of course much broader and more complex. We will not undertake to identify every essential aspect of what God teaches; however, there are two generalizations we can confidently make: First, the Bible says concerning Jesus Christ: “*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved,*” (Acts 4:12). Next, it says, “*For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power,*” (Col 2:9-10). Add to this: “*Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, according as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue,*” (2Pet 1:2-4). Other verses could be added conveying the same general idea, namely, that Jesus Christ is absolutely necessary and also absolutely sufficient for salvation. Any doctrine denying either is a heresy. Hence, the doctrine of inclusivism is a heresy, because it denies the necessity of Jesus, claiming instead that there are multiple paths to God and Heaven. Accordingly, all doctrines that base salvation, in whole or in part, on human works and merit are also heresies, because they deny the sufficiency of the works and merit of Jesus Christ. So also are doctrines that dishonor Christ to the spiritual conscience, or deny Him the praise and credit He is due. As such things are antithetical to the very purpose of Christianity, they are deserving of the harsh label “heresy.”

But this great emphasis upon the supreme and ubiquitous role of Jesus Christ in true religion does more to condemn common breaches in fellowship than to justify them. If we are truly “*complete in Him*” and if “*it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell*” (Col 1:19 & 2:20), then it follows that those who are at sincere agreement on Him, and are at agreement on who He was and what He taught, have all the basis for fellowship they should ever need. The sad fact is that many breaches in fellowship have occurred between brethren who neither had, nor even claimed, any difference concerning Jesus Christ. Further, we can generally state that where unwarranted strife has existed between ministers and churches, or even within churches, the most common root cause of it was that fellowship and peace were conditioned upon something other than Jesus Christ or in addition to Him. Quite commonly, it was conditioned upon agreement about Jesus Christ and another man or group of men.

Once we implement this foolhardy system that conditions fellowship on people or things other than Jesus Christ, division will be the inevitable result. It may take a year, decade or century but

the outcome has been predetermined. The Holy Spirit carries men toward a common opinion of a common Savior, but He does not carry men toward a common opinion about all things, much less to a common opinion about each other. If He did, then all people would be fans of the same team, thus leaving it with no other team to play. All men would be in pursuit of the same wife and all women desirous of the same husband. All churches would be competing for the same pastor. And any deceiver capable of duping one man would be capable of duping them all. Were this commonalty carried further, then the results would be even worse. In that case, every man would want to be a painter, and no man a plumber, or every man a farmer, and no man a pharmacist – the result being total economic and social collapse. A common ploy of Satan is to take essential, God-ordained differences between men and turn them into division and strife. When two people are at agreement on Jesus Christ but divide because they cannot agree on the color of the carpet, then they have been thoroughly duped by Satan, and have abased themselves to the most abject form of fool.

Further, this type of system not only preordains division, but also creates circumstances for cascading and escalating division. A common scenario is that one preacher becomes at odds with another and then demands that other preachers and churches share his opinion of this man. His dubious terms of fellowship are therefore that there must be agreement on Jesus Christ and that one must love those he loves and hate those he hates. A second preacher is then censured because he has a different view of the man at issue, then a third is censured because he consorts with the second, and so forth, thus creating a fragile, precarious and volatile system where division tends to escalate. Since offenses between men are an inevitable fact of life, it is obviously a foolish system that inherently fans such sparks into forest fires and turns coughs into contagions. Our fellowship is conditioned on agreement about One Man, Jesus Christ. The terms of this agreement should be detailed and rigorous, but even in that case, peace and fellowship will be attainable and sustainable goals.

Oftentimes divisions have been blamed to heresy when in fact the blame belonged more on differences about people than differences about principle. While the Bible is clear that heretics are to be rejected after the first or second admonition (Tit 3:10), men are apt to disagree on what is true heresy and what is a mere semantic difference, or on what is a difference in principle as opposed to a mere difference in emphasis. Even if there is agreement on this, there may be a difference of opinion on whether the evidence is sufficient to sustain the charge. Such differences are to be expected. This is why juries have more than one man. These differences will be manageable provided that all parties understand that fellowship is based strictly on Jesus Christ. The Bible says to reject a heretic. It does not say to reject an otherwise sound man having a dissenting verdict on one who is accused of heresy. Much less does it authorize rejection of a man, who does not reject a man, who does not reject a man, etc. who is thought to be a heretic. A man who fails to reject a true heretic is in error and should be admonished, but his error is one that can be treated with usual degrees of scriptural forbearance provided he

himself remains sound. This will also be the prudent course because such disagreements will usually resolve themselves with time. True heretics seldom become any better. They nearly always become worse, at which point, all parties will be able to see them for what they are.

If this rule is not followed, then division becomes an eventual certainty. Heresy is a fact of life. No generation of the church has been without it or allegations of it. When a reasonable degree of peace and fellowship can be achieved only if a state of soundness exists across all churches and preachers, then a reasonable degree of peace and fellowship becomes impossible. It demands circumstances that not even the Apostles themselves were able to produce. Since allegations of heresy are almost sure to occur, it is important that terms of fellowship be such as to minimize their consequences. The word “heresy” mixes two concepts, namely, that of false teaching and that of divisiveness. Satan has prevailed against churches by means of heresy either when he corrupts their thinking or produces unwarranted division among them. Both possibilities should be respected and feared. The solution to this problem is that both truth and fellowship be anchored in Jesus Christ alone.

The Bible praises Jesus Christ the very “*Prince of Peace*” (Isa 9:6). Jesus told His disciples, “*These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world,*” (Jn 16:33). When peace and fellowship are conditioned on Jesus Christ and His teachings, then peace and fellowship can be found, but when they are conditioned on other things, tribulation will be the sure result. Only in Jesus can men find true and enduring unification. “*For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us,*” (Eph 2:14). God confounded the languages of men and divided them at Babel, but He unified their languages and brought them back together at Pentecost. Any attempt to reverse what happened at Babel on terms other than Jesus Christ and His teachings is resistant to the very hand of God and doomed to failure.