

HOW MUCH AGREEMENT IS NECESSARY?

By George Battey

On July 22, 2008 a brother in Christ wrote the following question: "You continue to state that we are not in fellowship. Please list for me all issues that you and I must agree on in order to be in fellowship." Two things are implied in this question:

- a) The question implies all people cannot understand the scriptures alike.
- b) Therefore, since it is impossible to understand the scriptures alike, there must be some picking and choosing. Someone must determine which items are "important." Brethren will be required to agree on those "important" things and the rest will be considered superfluous.

CREEDS

Questions about which items brethren must agree on in order to have fellowship give rise to this important question: Who chooses the "certain items" that are "important"? Who will decide what is absolutely essential and what is not? This is how human creeds started.

Creeds are lists created by men which enumerate the cardinal doctrines and practices which are absolutely mandatory for people to believe in order to have fellowship with one another. The Augsburg Confession, written in 1530, was designed for Lutherans. This creed lists all the things which must be believed in order for Lutherans to have fellowship with one another. The Heidelberg Confession, written in 1563, was a list designed to give unity between the Swiss and German Churches (Luther and Calvin's followers). The Westminster Confession of Faith, written in 1648, was written to provide a list of cardinal doctrines in order that Presbyterians could have unity among themselves. Creeds were running rampant. Everyone was busy deciding what was important and what was not.

THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT

In the early 1800s the Restoration Movement was beginning. Some were seeing the folly of creeds (lists). Brethren were asking important questions like: How can uninspired men pick and choose what must be believed and accepted in order to have fellowship or even to be saved?

Men began to preach a "back to the Bible" message. They insisted brethren and sisters needed no creed (list) but the Bible – the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible. A common saying was: "If a creed says less than the Bible, it says too little; if it says more than the Bible, it says too much; if it says exactly what the Bible says, it is

useless because we already have the Bible." No opponent could successfully argue against this reasoning.

In 1809 Thomas Campbell gave his famous motto: "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent." (West, I:47). In other words, brethren will have unity based on what the Bible says (Bible-based-unity).

THE MODERN TREND

The church is now seeing a return to the creeds-of-men-method for establishing fellowship. Unwittingly, brethren are returning to creeds (lists). Some brothers and sisters want unity more than any thing else. They want unity more than truth. They realize their circle of unity will be quite small if they insist on Bible-based-unity. Therefore, in order for the circle of fellowship to be broadened, they have learned they are going to have to limit how much of the Bible must be agreed upon. They begin to compose lists (creeds) of cardinal doctrines which are mandatory and the rest becomes superfluous. The list might be as simple as, "Believe Jesus is the Son of God."

Though these modern lists are unwritten, they exist nonetheless. The only difference between the historical creeds of the Reformation Movement and modern creeds is: Modern creeds are unwritten.

"WHAT SAITH THE SCRIPTURE"

The old King James version records the following question in Rom 4:3, "What saith the scripture?" That question is appropriate here. What does the Bible have to say about list (creed) making? How much of the Bible do brethren have to agree on in order to have fellowship and unity with one another?

To answer this question other questions must first be addressed. The first question that comes to mind is this: Is Bible-based-unity even possible? After all, if Bible-based-unity is not even possible, there is no reason for even pursuing the idea.

In order for Bible-based unity to be possible two things must be true:

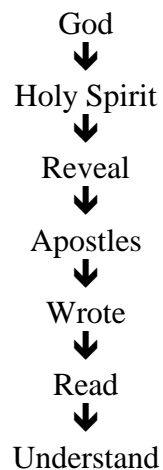
- a) Men must be able to understand the Bible.
- b) They must be able to understand it alike.

Consider briefly each of the above questions.

UNDERSTANDABLE?

First, is the Bible understandable? Can ordinary men and women read the scriptures with any reasonable expectation of understanding what they read?

The Bible is the revelation of God's will to man. "God has revealed them to us [apostles] through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God" (1 Cor 2:10). Paul wrote the above passage speaking about himself and the other apostles of Christ. Through His Holy Spirit God revealed His will to the apostles. The apostles in turn wrote down what was revealed to them. "By revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)" (Eph 3:3-4). The key words to focus on in this passage are "revelation," "written," "read" and "understand." The following chart illustrates the revelation process.



The word "reveal" means to "uncover, make apparent." If the scriptures cannot be understood, then God did not actually reveal anything. If He truly revealed His will, by definition it can be understood. Jesus Himself taught that ordinary men and women were able to hear the words of God Himself and understand those words. "He who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (Mt 13:23).

So, the first question, Is the Bible understandable?, is answered by Jesus and His apostles in the affirmative. Yes, ordinary men and women can either read or hear the scriptures and understand what those scriptures teach.

UNDERSTAND ALIKE?

Second, can the Bible be understood alike? If it is not possible to understand the scriptures alike, then Bible-based-unity is not an option.

Read carefully the following statement: If men and women truly understand the scriptures they will of necessity understand those scriptures alike. There are a thousand ways to misunderstand something, but if something is understood it will of necessity be understood alike by everyone involved.

To illustrate understanding, consider a student working on a math problem. Imagine a student saying to his instructor, "I understand this problem differently than you. It should not be marked wrong." This would be absurd. There is no such thing as "understanding differently" in regards to math problems. The student either understands or he does not (period). If the student truly understands the problem, he will of necessity understand the problem like the instructor.

Now notice the following passage:

Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. The place in the Scripture which he read was this: "He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth." So the eunuch answered Philip and said, "I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?" (Acts 8:29-34).

Think about this carefully. The eunuch was reading Isa 53 about someone who was rejected and slaughtered. He wants to know if in this passage of scripture the prophet was writing about himself or someone else.

Philip understood this passage. If the eunuch reaches some other conclusion, he will simply misunderstand the passage (period). There are a thousand ways to misunderstand a passage, but only one correct way to understand it.

The passage was explained to the eunuch. "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him" (Acts 8:35). In other words, Philip explains the passage is speaking about Jesus and only Jesus. This is the correct understanding of the passage. The question is: Did the eunuch come to understand the passage like Philip? Yes he did. "He answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God"" (Acts 8:37). This story demonstrates two people can understand the scriptures alike.

An event occurred near the end of Jesus life which illustrates the same truth:

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" So he answered and said, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbor as yourself.'" And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live." (Lk 10:25-28).

When Jesus asked, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?", He stood prepared to argue and correct. If the lawyer gave a "different understanding" of the answer, Jesus was prepared to oppose him. However, when the lawyer "answered rightly," he demonstrated it was possible to understand the scripture like someone else. More than that, this story demonstrates it is possible for a human being to understand the scripture like God understood the passage. After all, Jesus was God (Jn 1:1) and the lawyer understood the scripture like Jesus (God). More than that, the lawyer understood the scripture without a miracle being performed by the Holy Spirit.

So, the two questions, Is the Bible understandable? and Can the Bible be understood alike?, are both answered in the affirmative by Jesus, His apostles and the prophets.

SUBMISSION PROBLEM

When people complain that (a) the Bible cannot be understood or (b) it cannot be understood alike, the problem is not an understanding problem but a submission problem. Mark Twain once wrote, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." Twain was right. The Bible is all too understandable and the disagreements that arise often revolve around passages people understand all too well. When 1 Pet 3:21 records, "baptism saves us," that is plain enough. Some people simply do not want to accept what this says. Again, 1 Cor 14:34-35 is plain enough to understand. It teaches women to remain silent in worship assemblies of the church. When people disagree over this passage the problem is simply a submission problem.

Some readers today, quite frankly, do not care for what the passage says. On the one hand they want people to think they respect and "believe in" the Bible, but on the other hand, there are passages they simply do not wish to submit to. To save face, they invent an "understanding" problems that is fabricated from start to finish.

When Eph 5:23 records the husband is "head of the wife," it requires seminary-trained professionals to assist readers in misunderstanding the passage – for the ordinary reader will understand all too well. The problem is a submission problem, not an understanding problem. It is the age-old problem of men and women wishing to excuse themselves for disobedience.

SUMMARY

In summary, this study has demonstrated three truths:

- a) The Bible is understandable.
- b) If two people truly understand the Bible, of necessity they will understand it alike.
- c) Therefore, Bible-based-unity is possible.

NECESSARY ITEMS

If Bible-based unity is possible, what items are necessary for brethren to agree upon in order to have fellowship (unity) with one another? The apostle Paul addresses this question in the following passage:

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 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" (Eph 4:1-6).

A life that is "worthy of the calling" is a life that involves both (a) the right attitudes and (b) the right actions. Watch closely the attitudes which this passage enumerates. These attitudes are part of "walking worthy" of the gospel:

- Lowliness
- Gentleness
- Longsuffering
- Bearing with
- Love
- Endeavoring
- Peace

Here are seven attitudes which brethren and sisters must have for unity. There will be no unity without these attitudes. All the truth in the world will not compensate for a lack of these qualities.

The "unity of the Spirit" means unity produced by the Holy Spirit. It means unity based on what was revealed by the Holy Spirit in the scriptures. Any other type of unity is not "unity of the Spirit."

Now follows seven things which must be agreed upon. Three of these seven items have to do with the Godhead: (a) One Spirit (Eph 4:4), (b) one Lord (Eph 4:5) and (c) one God and Father (Eph 4:6). Because these are essential items for unity, there will never be unity between God's people and Oneness-Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Muslims and Mormons. None of these groups believe in the Godhead as outlined in scripture and none of these will ever have unity with God's true people unless they forsake their false ideas about God.

The fourth item necessary for unity is belief in one body (Eph 4:4). This refers to one organic (living) body – the church. The church is explicitly called the body of Christ:

"[God] put all things under [Jesus'] feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:22-23). Since this belief in one body is an essential element of unity, there can be no unity with any denomination. All denominations compete with the one church of the Lord. Denominations do not promote, help or cooperate with the truth propagated and upheld by the church (1 Tim 3:15). There will never be fellowship between God's people and denominations like the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Catholics or simple "community churches." The reason is because each of these denominations compete with the one church revealed in the scriptures (Mt 16:18; Eph 1:22-23; 4:4; 5:23-25; Jn 10:16; Acts 20:28; Rom 16:16).

The fifth item necessary for unity is one hope (Eph 4:4). This refers to the hope of a bodily resurrection and eternal life in heaven. "Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption" (Acts 2:26-27). The "hope" of the Lord was a bodily resurrection from the dead. This did not refer to some spiritual resurrection. It refers to His bodily resurrection. "But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" (Acts 23:6). Here the apostle Paul hoped for the bodily resurrection from the dead. "I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust" (Acts 24:15). "Because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel" (Col 1:5). God's people hope for a bodily resurrection from the dead and glory which is laid up in heaven. Any doctrine which contradicts this hope will result in division. True unity, according to Eph 4:1-6 requires that all Christians have the same goal the same hope. For this reason, no fellowship can exist with any group that does not hope for a bodily resurrection and eventual glory in heaven with the Godhead. This means there will never be any true fellowship with Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons or those who advocate "Realized Eschatology" (the 70 AD doctrine).

The sixth item necessary for unity is belief in the one baptism (Eph 4:5). Baptism is the consummating step of salvation.

SCRIPTURAL BAPTISM

Scriptural baptism consists of six qualities.

Quality #1: Scriptural baptism is immersion (Rom 6:3-4).

Quality #2: Scriptural baptism is in water, not Holy Spirit baptism. Holy Spirit baptism did not save from sins. In Acts 1:5 the apostles were promised baptism in the Spirit, but

they were already saved. By contrast, water baptism is to be taught to everyone so they can be saved (Mk 16:15-16).

Quality #3: Scriptural baptism is preceded by belief, repentance, confession (Acts 8:37; 2:38).

Quality #4: Scriptural baptism is for the purpose of putting one into the right relationship with God – the entire Godhead. "Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," the Lord Himself said (Mt 28:19). Therefore, there can never be true unity and fellowship with Pentecostal-Oneness groups which baptize "in the name of Jesus only."

Quality #5: Scriptural baptism is for the right purpose – the remission of sins. "Let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" said the inspired apostle Peter (Acts 2:38). There can be no fellowship and no true unity with groups baptizing for other reasons (e.g. Baptist churches, Methodist churches, Presbyterian churches, community churches, non-denominational churches, etc.).

Quality #6: Scriptural baptism must place sinners into the right body – the church of Christ. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free — and have all been made to drink into one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13). The baptism mentioned in this verse is not Holy Spirit baptism as noted under quality #2 above. Holy Spirit baptism was for the purpose of giving miraculous power to the apostles and others (Acts 1:5). It was not for the purpose of adding people to the body of Christ (the church). Men and women were added to the church when they obeyed the Spirit's instructions to be baptized in water for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38, 41, 47). Hence, by listening to the instructions of the Spirit, given through the Spirit-inspired apostles, it can truly be said, "By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13). The one body, as noted previously, is the Lord's one church for which He died (Jn 10:16; Eph 4:4; Acts 20:28). Baptism which makes someone a member of a denomination is the wrong baptism. No matter how closely Mormon baptism or Baptist baptism may resemble Bible baptism, these are not the one baptism mentioned in Eph 4:5.

NECESSARY ITEMS

(Continued)

The seventh item necessary for unity is belief in one faith (Eph 4:5). The word "faith" in this verse refers to the body of doctrine taught by the apostles. "A great many of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). "The Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith" (1 Tim 4:1). "Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). "Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith" (Rom 1:5). In this passage "the faith" is something that requires obedience. Simply put, "the faith" refers to "the apostles'

doctrine." "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42). Hence, the creed (list) of the church of Christ which must be believed and practiced consists of the doctrine taught by the apostles.

REVIEW

By way of review, what is a creed? A creed is a list of rules and doctrines which must be agreed upon in order for brethren and sisters to have fellowship and unity with one another. Since the creed of the New Testament church was "the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42), in order for brethren and sisters to have unity and fellowship, everyone must agree to and follow all the creed.

This brings up the following four significant points.

POINT #1

POINT #1: For unity to exist, everyone involved must agree to not "go beyond" what is written.

"Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds" (2 Jn 9-11). The ASV has, " Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: ..." The problem with some is "going beyond" what Christ taught. Here is scripture itself telling brethren and sisters what must be agreed upon.

All the "do not add" passages agree that nothing can be done which is "beyond" what is written. "Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written" (1 Cor 4:6). (Read also Dt 4:2; Prov 30:6; Gal 1:8-9).

The warning to not "go beyond" what the scriptures teach means the silence of the scriptures must be respected. As noted in previous studies, silence forbids. Unless brethren agree on this, there will be no unity. There will be bickering, fussing, fighting and turmoil, but there will be no unity. Furthermore, the ones "going beyond" what is written are to be branded as the guilty ones causing the turmoil. The ones "abiding in the doctrine of Christ" are not the ones stirring up any resultant trouble, on the condition that they maintain the proper attitude. While it is possible to have the truth with the wrong attitude, it is never possible to have the right attitude while stubbornly persisting in doctrines and practices which "go beyond" what is written in sacred scripture.

POINT #2

POINT #2: Everything required and prohibited must be agreed upon.

Everything taught in Bible is taught in only one of two ways:

- Explicitly – "clearly expressed, leaving nothing implied." (American Heritage)
- Implicitly – "understood, though not directly stated." (ibid.)

This produces six possibilities:

- a) Matters explicitly required (e.g. Acts 2:38)
- b) Matters explicitly permitted (e.g. Rom 14:5)
- c) Matters explicitly prohibited (e.g. 1 Cor 14:34-35)

- d) Matters implicitly required (e.g. Ex 20:8)
- e) Matters implicitly permitted (e.g. Eph 4:28)
- f) Matters implicitly prohibited (e.g. Mt 5:44)

Those things which are required are required. Brethren and sisters must agree on those things. Is anyone willing to make a list of requirements which are not required? To ask the question is to answer it.

Those things which are prohibited require agreement. Is anyone willing to make a list of prohibitions which are not required for Christian to refrain from? "If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself" (1 Tim 6:3-5). (Read also 1 Jn 2:3-5; 1 Pet 4:11).

POINT #3

POINT #3: Those things which are permitted are not required. Brethren and sisters do not have to agree on these things.

This is the purpose for four entire chapters of the Bible:

- Rom 14
- 1 Cor 8
- 1 Cor 9
- 1 Cor 10

These four chapters have been devoted to matters which are permitted – matters which brethren and sisters do not have to agree on.

"Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things [permitted things]. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him" (Rom 14:1-3). Matters of liberty are matters which are neither required nor prohibited. Matters of liberty, however, still require authorization. For example, before one may eat meat there must be authorization for eating meat (cf. 1 Tim 4:4-5). Although matters of permission are authorized matters, they are not required. One is allowed to eat or not eat. Verse 3 contains instructions concerning these matters of liberty.

- Those participating – must not despise those who do not participate.
- Those refraining – must not condemn those who do not refrain.

Again, the point to be gleaned from these passages is simply the fact that matters of permission are not required. Brethren and sisters may have unity without agreeing on matters of permission.

POINT #4

POINT #4: All matters require the right attitudes.

Review Eph 4:2. Focus again on the seven attitudes required for true unity.

- Lowliness
- Gentleness
- Longsuffering
- Bearing with
- Love
- Endeavoring
- Peace

As mentioned earlier, all the truth in the world will not compensate for a lack of these attitudes. Nor let it be forgotten that one in error can never claim the "right attitude" while persisting in error.

CONCLUSION

The church of the Lord cannot have manmade creeds (lists) wherein uninspired men pick and choose what is mandatory for salvation and discarding the rest as superfluous. The Lord and His apostles have already revealed the list of necessary items. Jesus Himself said, "Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20). Paul

wrote, "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor 14:37).

It has been demonstrated from scripture that Bible-based-unity is actually possible because the Bible can be understood (Mt 13:23) and it can be understood alike (Acts 8:30-39).

In Eph 4:1-7 the scriptures explicitly state what constitutes "unity produced by the Holy Spirit." This unity involves seven fundamental beliefs and requirements. Three matters involve the proper understanding of the Godhead – belief in (a) one Father, (b) one Son and (c) one Holy Spirit. Four other requirements are likewise required: (d) one body, (e) one hope, (f) one baptism and (g) one faith. It has been demonstrated "the faith" mentioned in Eph 4:5 refers to the doctrine taught by the apostles (Acts 2:42; Gal 1:23; 1:8-9).

"The apostles' doctrine" is the list (creed) for the Lord's church. Christians of the first century were strictly warned not to "go beyond" what the apostles taught (2 Jn 9-11; 1 Cor 4:6). Together these passages are teaching silence is significant. Significant silence is called legislative silence. Legislative silence is when the law is purposefully silent about an action and that silence is viewed as expressing the intent of the lawmaker. Since Bible silence is legislative silence the conclusion is: Silence forbids. That is, when the Bible is silent about a doctrine, it is forbidden to teach that doctrine; and when the Bible is silent about a practice, it is forbidden to implement the practice.

The "apostles' doctrine," when rightly analyzed, can be broken down into six categories:

- a) Matters explicitly required (e.g. Acts 2:38)
- b) Matters explicitly permitted (e.g. Rom 14:5)
- c) Matters explicitly prohibited (e.g. 1 Cor 14:34-35)

- d) Matters implicitly required (e.g. Ex 20:8)
- e) Matters implicitly permitted (e.g. Eph 4:28)
- f) Matters implicitly prohibited (e.g. Mt 5:44)

Those things which are requirements must be agreed upon. Those things which are prohibited must also be agreed upon. However, those things which are permissions are not requirements by definition.

Doctrine, practices and attitudes are the three important ingredients given for unity in Eph 4:1-6. Three verses are devoted to discussing the doctrines and practices required for unity and fellowship. Another three verses discuss the proper attitudes required. The proper attitudes have been focused on twice in this study and while it has been admitted the proper attitude is essential for unity, all the attitude in the world cannot compensate for the lack of proper doctrine or practice.

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