

In Search of

Biblical Unity

12 Lessons

Prepared by:
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2005

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Lesson One

“Biblical Unity—What is it?”

Any discussion on unity from a Biblical viewpoint has to deal with the question “Who is a Christian?” Jesus’ prayer in John 17:1-26 was obviously that the world would come to believe that He was the Redeemer, the savior of the world. But He also prayed for those who would believe—***“that they all may be one just as we are one.”*** (verse 22). Jesus wanted His followers to be unified! Whatever conditions that Jesus laid down in order for people to become His people must be done to become a child of God and to be added to the ***“One body of Christ.”*** (Ephesians 4:4; Acts 2:47). It is to these people (Christians, Children of God) that the concept of unity is to be applied! If these terms of pardon are tampered with and people think they are saved when they are not—Biblical unity is an impossibility!

Jesus prayed fervently for unity among those who believed on Him (John 17:20-23). God’s Word commands this unity (Ephesians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 1:10). It obviously was a continual challenge and threat to the early church. Paul’s admonition in Ephesians 4:3 evidently shows this when he said ***“Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace.”*** Other translations give an even stronger wording:

- 1) ASV—***“give diligence to keep unity”***
- 2) Alf—***“Earnestly striving to maintain unity”***
- 3) Wms—***“Continuing with eager earnestness to maintain unity”***

Thus, if unity is what God wants for His Redeemed people, then that should be what every Child of God should want!

“There is a strange and strong attachment that draws people together. If it were not for perverse powers there would be no need to strive for unity; it would come automatically.” This is an interesting quotation from the pen of a former editor of the **Firm Foundation** magazine. If you were planning to place membership with a congregation of God’s people and knew it was not really unified, what would you do? If you had a choice between two congregations—one that was not unified and one that was, which would you choose? We believe that unity is not only a natural desire within man, but it is a necessity in order to have a great church! God indicated this in talking about the early people after the flood: ***“Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.”*** (Genesis 11:6). How strong is your desire for unity and to be a part of a unified church?

WHAT ARE THE BASIC FUNDAMENTALS OF UNITY?

The words “unity” or “oneness” need to be understood in a general sense but also with a realization that they may have more specific basis for trying to define them. The following ideas are what could be considered some general concepts to unity:

- 1) An energetic group of people committed to achieving common objectives.
- 2) People who work well together and enjoy working with each other.

- 3) People who produce high quality results because they know how to and desire to function well with one another.

Synonyms often can give some insight to defining a word. The following are some of the words used as synonyms for “unity:” **Agreement, Harmony, Accord, Concord, Unison, Union, Unanimity, Oneness, etc.**

But we are more interested in defining the idea of unity from a Biblical viewpoint; and thus, we need to turn to the Bible for insights. Before doing so, it might be helpful to see how **Halley’s Bible Handbook** tries to define the word: *“Oneness of the church means one body. It is a complex organism, with many functions, each in its own place, working in harmony, its basic principle love, with Christ Himself its head and directive force. Being composed of many members of diverse talents and tempers, the fundamental requisite to its proper functioning is a spirit of humility and mutual forbearance on the part of the members one toward another. Its object is to nurture each of its members into the perfect image of Christ.”* From the above it is easy to see that the church is made up of people who are different, but brought into a relationship with one another under the headship of Christ to work together to carry out God’s Will in their lives and to help nurture one another.

As we turn to the Bible, we will be looking at 5 passages that use the word “unity;” 10 or more passages that try to define the concept of unity or oneness; and 6 passages that use the expression **“be of the same mind.”** The 5 passages that use the word unity are: Psalm 133:1; John 17:23; Ephesians 4:3, 13; Colossians 3:14. The 6 passages that use the expression **“be of the same mind”** are: Romans 12:16; 15:6; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 1:27; 2:2. These and others will be used in the following layout.

1 Corinthians 1:10—**“Speak the same things”**

“Joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment”

John 17:22-23—**“May be one just as we are one”**

“May be made perfect in one”

Psalm 133:1—**“brethren dwell together in unity”**

Ephesians 4:3—**“Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”**

Ephesians 4: 13—**“Come to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God”**

Ephesians 4:16—**“the whole body joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, every part does its share causes growth”**

Philippians 1:27—**“stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel”**

Philippians 2:1-4—**Requisites for unity:**

“Consolation in Christ”

“Comfort in love”

“Fellowship of Spirit”

“Affection and mercy” (2:1)

“Nothing done through selfish ambition or conceit”

“Lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself” (2:3)

“Look on interests of others as well as your own interests” (2:4)

Concept of unity:

“Be like-minded”

“Have same love”

“Being of one accord”

“Being of one mind” (2:2)

Colossians 3:14-17—*“Put on love which is the bond of perfection”*

“Let peace of God rule in your heart”

“Let word of God dwell in you richly” (3:14-16)

“Whatever you do, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (3:17)

Acts 4:32—*“Were of one heart and one soul”*

Romans 12:16—*“Be of the same mind toward one another”*

Romans 12:18—*“Live peaceably with all men, as much as lies within you”*

There are three critical questions that need to be dealt with from the above passages that can help us to arrive at a better grasp of what is meant by “unity” of God’s people.

- 1. In a congregation full of people from different backgrounds, beliefs, and opinions and that range in their maturity in Christ, how can they all believe alike? In what sense can it be said they are unified or one?**
- 2. How can such a congregation be of the same mind? About what are they to be of the same mind? To what extent are they to be of the same mind?**
- 3. How can an immature Christian who speaks before the congregation be able to speak the same thing that a mature Christian speaks?**

THE CHALLENGE OF UNITY

Please read Ephesians 2:11-22. These verses show the challenge that God faces in regards to His people. How can he bring people out of perverted Judaism and outright paganism and idolatry and make them “one” people in Christ? Just imagine the differences to be dealt with in regards to their past beliefs! How can God make them “one” with so many differences? Was it instantaneous or over a period of time?

We can see from Scripture that the early church faced continually challenges to oneness in their midst (Galatians 2; Acts 10, 11, 15, Romans 14, 15; 1 Corinthians 8, 9, etc.). These were physical, sociological, monetary, slave versus free, Jew versus Gentile, etc., differences that had to be dealt with. Unity not only involved “doctrinal” beliefs, but many other areas as well. Some times it seems that the greater challenge is in the “other areas.” The same challenges face the church today as well.

We certainly need to subscribe to the seven “Ones” in Ephesians 4:4-6 (which we will discuss in a later lesson); but the church needs to be able to stay together and work at developing to perfection our “oneness of mind and heart.” The conflict between Jew and Gentile in the early church is seen in such passages as Romans 14-15 and 1 Corinthians 8-9. Such put a great strain on the unity of the early church as we will briefly illustrate: (1) Jewish Christians felt that Gentile Christians should accept the Law of Moses and Jewish tradition while (2) Gentile Christians felt that Jewish feast days and food laws were unacceptable to them. How did they

solve their problem and keep their unity? (1) Jewish Christians could maintain their traditions as long as they did not impose them on the Gentile Christians, and (2) Gentile Christians were free from having to observe these traditions as long as they did not ignore the demands of God's will, nor put down the Jewish Christians. This showed that unity was more important than their own personal liberty in Christ, and that both parties gave up some of their liberty to promote a greater common good.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Just how serious are we about unity? Are we willing at times to give up our personal liberty in Christ to maintain that unity? Can we not see that we share more in common with believers than what separates us? The world must see us working through our differences while maintaining our oneness. We need to strive diligently to answer the prayer of Jesus. We must realize that truth is not to be compromised, but that it is something into which we grow in a loving atmosphere.

Lesson Two

“Biblical Unity is Found in Christ”

Biblical Unity **begins** in Christ! He is the center around which His people revolve. He is the one who has brought us together as “One Body.” It is because we were willing to listen to Him and do His bidding that we were “added to the number of saved people” (Acts 2:38-47) that make up the church. This is strongly emphasized by the Apostle Paul to the Christians at Ephesus when he pointed out that Christ broke down the enmity between Jew and Gentile at the cross and brought them into one body—thus, making peace between the two (Ephesians 2:11-18).

Biblical Unity is to be **maintained** in Christ! It is listening to and obeying Jesus that brought us into this “One Body.” And...it is listening to and obeying Him that helps us to maintain that unity or oneness as His people. It is the individual responsibility of every member to help maintain that unity (1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:3). Biblical Unity can only be maintained by listening to and obeying Jesus to the best of our ability. Jesus is the breadth, length, height, and depth of unity. He sets the standard. If we all use His standard, we should all be one (Matthew 28:18-20).

BIBLICAL UNITY IS FOUND IN THE ONE BODY OF CHRIST

Obedience to the Gospel not only brought us into oneness with Christ, but it also brought us into His Body, the Church (Ephesians 1:22-23). We not only have a relationship with Christ, but a relationship with all others who have come into that “One Body.” We are all “children of God” (1 John 3:1)—we have become brothers and sisters in the family of God! It is one family, not many different families. It is the one family of God—we all have the same Father, the same Lord Jesus Christ, the same Holy Spirit, the same Hope, the same Faith, and all have been baptized with the same baptism into Christ—into this family of God. (Ephesians 4:4-6; Galatians 3:26-27; Titus 1:4; June 3).

THINGS THAT CAN DISRUPT THIS UNITY

The very fact that we are strongly encouraged to maintain this unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3) shows clearly that this unity can be disrupted. In other words, where there was peace, there is confusion, division, dissension, and lack of peace among God’s people (1 Corinthians 1:10-11; 1 Timothy 6:3-5). God’s people can be at peace with one another and unified if they choose to be. But if one or more chooses to erect a barrier of some kind, this oneness can be broken—not only with the Lord, but with His people. (2 John 9-11; 1 John 1:5-10). Let’s look at some of the basic things that can potentially disrupt our oneness.

- 1. Failing to walk in the light (1 John 1:7).** If we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship with Him. But when we choose no longer to walk in that light, we lose that fellowship and the cleansing of the blood of Christ. The Apostle John stated it again in his 2nd letter, verse 9—***“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.” Abiding in the teaching (doctrine) of Christ keeps us unified with both Deity and each other as well. The Dangers are real and clearly stated by Jesus in Mark 3:25, *“A house divided against itself cannot stand!”*

2. **Exalting men above Christ (1 Corinthians 4:6).** This can be done in various ways. We can give too much allegiance to certain person or persons where we take their word without question over the Words of Christ (Galatians 5:4, 10, 12). The Bereans illustrate the true attitude to have by being willing to listen, but search the Scriptures to see that this is what is taught by God (Acts 17:11). The church at Corinth was in grave danger of losing their oneness, as well as their relationship to God, by exalting men and listening to them rather than the Word from God. They were showing their allegiance to different teachers among them—not to Christ (1 Corinthians 1:12-13). Wearing human names is not the cause of the division, but they do show that there is division and help to perpetuate division. We are urged to do all in the name (by the authority of) Jesus (Colossians 3:17). Jesus unifies us, but exalting men over Jesus will certainly divide us.
3. **Putting family before Christ (Matthew 10:34-37).** One of the strongest ties we have in this life is with family. This is generally good, but it can have its negative influences as well. When the choice is forced upon us as to whether we will listen to Jesus or listen to our family—then, family can become our spiritual enemy! When we choose family over Christ, He says we are not worthy of Him!
4. **Selfish Ambition or Pride (Philippians 2:3).** This is shown in different ways—seeking pre-eminence, lust for power and position, the need to win an argument at the cost of unity, and desiring to get one’s way. The wise man tells us that pride brings nothing but strife (Proverbs 13:10). James says that *where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.*”(James 3:15-16). He insists that this outlook does not come from above, but is earthly, sensual, and demonic. God’s wisdom is *“pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.”* (James 3:17). Paul states that the proper spirit to have that promotes unity is *“to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love.”* (Ephesians 4:1-2). We are encouraged not to become conceited and thereby provoke one another and envy one another (Galatians 5:26).
5. **Living ungodly lives (Galatians 5:19-21).** Those who participate in such ungodliness are not listening to God (Holy Spirit), but following the desires of the flesh. If we want to remain in Christ, we must crucify the flesh with its passions and desires and listen to and walk after the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:24-25). People who have become Christians but turn back to engage in such ungodly living are to be turned away from (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Their ungodly living has broken their fellowship, not only with God, but with God’s people (1 Corinthians 5:1-13). This oneness can be restored with both by turning back to the way of righteousness (2 Corinthians 2:1-9).
6. **Our wrong treatment of one another:**
 - a) Not going to someone who has offended us and in the proper spirit (Matthew 18:15; Galatians 6:1). Instead of going to him, we talk to others about him and make matters worse. It leads to biting and devouring one another (Galatians 5:15). We may go, but with the wrong spirit—not one of gentleness (Galatians 5:22), realizing our own weaknesses and limitations. We need to go in a way that we

would want others to come to us. Actions may have to be taken, but in the proper spirit and proper motives (Matthew 18:16-17; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15).

- b) Not conducting ourselves out of love towards one another (1 John 3:11-18, 22). Love is the glue that binds God's people together in harmony (1 John 4:7-11). Not speaking and acting in love can lead to a disrupting of oneness between God's people.
7. **Not consenting to wholesome words (1 Timothy 6:3-5).** Inspiration adds, *“even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness.”* This will lead to pride, disputes, arguments, envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, and useless wrangling. We are encouraged to keep guard over what the Lord has given to us—listen to Him, not the profane and idle babblings of men (1 Timothy 6:20-21). This danger is real and must be watched for. Men will not endure sound teaching, but want it changed to please their wishes (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

Possibly other things could be suggested from Scripture and personal experiences, but these should help to illustrate the enormity to the dangers of unity among God's people that must be watched for and dealt with. Human weaknesses can enter into the picture more often than we might like to see. Continue ignorance of the Bible plays a big role in disrupting unity when people are willingly ignorant and love it that way.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

All of the above dangers to unity show a basic problem—people have forgotten to listen to Jesus! We forfeit unity when someone or something else takes the pre-eminence over Jesus in my life. Paul's words are still so fitting in this context: *“But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.... Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life...”* (1 Timothy 6:11-12). The world about us is watching to see if we can work through our differences, love one another, and be at peace with one another. If so, we have a much better chance of convincing them of their need for Christ (John 17:20-21; 13:34-35). May we, each one, begin with ourselves and do everything possible to help maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace!

Lesson Three

“Biblical Unity Must Be Desired!”

Unity in a congregation can often be sensed, “smelled,” picked up on! People love to come into an atmosphere of unity and harmony, not only in the church, but in the home as well. Even the humblest of homes can have an atmosphere of love, care, concern, unity and harmony that money cannot buy! If a home or church has hostility, negative feelings, it cannot be hid for long. And one of the saddest of things is where a church or home has allowed disharmony to lead to division or separation. This animosity is often passed on from generation to generation. Some churches find it very hard to overcome a division that has taken place. A church is most fortunate and blessed when it can say it has never had a church fuss, split or division. Churches need desperately to live in harmony with each other and do all they can to preserve unity in their midst.

Biblical unity cannot be forced! God can command such, but it is of no value unless we respect the one who has commanded it! Elders can plead with the congregation to be unified, but they cannot force it on them. Preachers can preach on unity, but that may not accomplish it. **Unity must be desired!** We must understand that God commands it, that Jesus prayed earnestly for it, and we are the benefactors of it. If we recognize and respect Jesus’ lordship over us, we will want what He wants! The Lord only wants what is good for His creatures; therefore, we need to look for the great value of unity in our midst. The Psalmist expressed it so well—***“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”*** (Psalm 133:1). A unified group is a wonderful environment to be in. And it is because of unity that great things can be accomplished (Judges 20:11; Genesis 11:6). But one of the blessings that Jesus mentioned was that the world may believe in Him as the Son of God (John 17:21). Biblical unity is at the foundation of a great church of the Lord!

DISUNITY IS OF HUMAN ORIGIN

Biblical unity is made possible by God’s love and actions. He has made redemption possible for all men! He has brought the redeemed into “one body.” This body has “one head” (Christ) (Ephesians 1:22-23). He has given us the instructions and understanding in His Word on how to maintain this unity. So, disunity is not a problem brought on by God—it is brought on in spite of all of God’s efforts by human frailties! Thus, we believe that all disunity is human in origin. It is when we allow the perversities in human nature to accentuate the differences that lead to a dividing of the church for which Jesus died. Three of these perversities are mentioned in the letter to the church at Philippi:

1. **Envy and Strife (1:15; 4:2).** Some Christians were fighting one another, rather than Satan. They were envious of Paul and wanted to put him down and outdo him. Classes of human personalities or temperaments had become obvious.
2. **Selfish ambition (1:16; 2:3).** There were not sincere in their efforts of teaching Christ to others. They sought their own glory instead of the glory of God. Their effort at preaching was to bring more afflictions to Paul.

3. **Selfish Interest (2:4).** Their actions showed that they were only interested in promoting their own interests, but the interests of the whole church. These sins can bring undue damage to the Lord's church if not dealt with.

What is the Divine solution to these things that causes disunity in the church? The answers are simple:

1. **Be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, and of one mind (2:2).**
2. **Stop doing things out of selfish ambition or conceit (2:3).**
3. **In humility count others better than yourself (2:3).**
4. **To look not only to your own interests, but also the interests of others (2:4).**

It is quite obvious that this is easier said than done! But Paul reminds us of the great example of Christ that we have committed ourselves to follow.

1. **He had a mind of humility (2:5-8).** He was God, but emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant. Unity is diligently sought by the humble of heart. We serve others!
2. **He was obedient even unto death (2:8).** He did not want to die, but He did. Unity is dependent upon a mind of obedience to God. All our interests are put secondary to being obedient to God!
3. **He renounced His own interests to care for our interests.** He did not die for himself, but for us. The welfare of the Lord's church is put above our own petty interests.

True spiritual unity is from the heart. Unity comes from hearts that are right with God and with one another. The basic cause of disunity is selfishness and selfishness comes from pride. If our outlook is selfish, our actions will be divisive and destructive. Jesus had an unselfish attitude—He thought of others. He willingly sacrificed Himself for us. Jesus challenges us to sacrifice our interests for the good of others. His desire was to also bring glory to God in all that He did. Our concern should be the same...glorify God, not ourselves. Joy should come in knowing what we are doing leads to God's glory. **Unity among God's people comes when we develop a spiritual mind-set that promotes it** (Ephesians 4:1-3). Unity helps us to have peace in which we can be developed to the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:3, 13). ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."*** (Matthew 5:9). Unity does not come without a great price to be paid (both on God's part and ours), but the outcome is well worth the sacrifice!

HOW TO SHOW OUR DESIRE FOR UNITY

If unity can only be had by those who desire it, then how do I show that I want unity with my fellow-Christians? The following general admonitions should be obvious:

1. **To realize that all are subject to weaknesses, failings, and differences.** Paul's admonition to the Roman Christians was for both the weak and the strong to keep good attitudes toward each other—the strong bearing with the infirmities of the weak, and the weak refraining from judging the strong (Romans 14:13; 15:1-2). To have a spirit of love and compassion for each other so that a multitude of sins can be covered (1 Peter 4:8).
2. **To not keep account of faults.** Where such is not done, harmony and unity can blossom and thrive. We show our desire for unity by being understanding, courteous, and thought-

ful of others. We need to be Christ-like in our thinking, working, and dealing with each other. Such will keep down bitterness, unjust criticism, mistrust, suspicion, ill will and negativism (1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Galatians 5:15)

- 3. Church leaders must lead the way with a unity mind-set.** If the Devil can split the leaders, then it will be easy to split the church. If the leaders are not really concerned about unity, why should the flock be concerned? The only way they can lead is in separate directions. (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:19-20; Hebrews 13:7). Elders need to take a stand for unity, deacons need to take a stand for unity, and the preachers and teachers that stand before the congregation must also take that same stand. Let such be known constantly by the leadership that unity is a priority in this congregation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Unity will only come when there is a strong desire for it—both on the part of the leadership and the congregation. This is God’s desire for His people and it therefore should be the desire of every sincere child of God! How strong is your desire for unity? How much of a sacrifice are you willing to make to have Biblical Unity in this congregation? Are you willing to work at promoting it, exemplifying it, and praying for it? May God help us to have the vision that we are His people, engaged in a great work, and we have a mind to work together with God to accomplish great things to His glory.

Lesson Four

“Biblical Unity is based on Common Beliefs”

While unity in a general sense does not necessarily require that everyone believe the same things; yet, Biblical unity does put an emphasis upon speaking and believing the same basic teachings of Christ. This might be illustrated this way—A religious group can be highly unified and working together to accomplish their goals and purposes, but in order to do this they have agreed among themselves to allow people to believe what they choose on the basic teachings of Christ. This can be called unity, but not Biblical unity! The reason is that Jesus does not give us the privilege to just believe what we want to.

STRUGGLES IN EARLY CHURCH

The early church struggled at times over being unified. Human conflicts and interests, as well as, staying with the teachings of the Apostles were a constant challenge. Unity had to be desired and worked at in order to survive as one body or one people. Many of the admonitions given in the New Testament concerning unity deal with a oneness of spirit and mind (see lesson one in particular), while many warnings were given about holding to the teachings delivered to them (1 Corinthians 1:10; Galatians 1:6-9; Colossians 2:6-7; etc.). Those teachings (the One Faith) that they first heard were basic teachings of the Gospel. They were taught about the “One God” who has created all things. They were taught about the One Lord Jesus Christ that has made redemption possible for all. They were told what to do in order to be saved. When they believed and obeyed these things (Repented and were baptized with One Baptism), they became Christians and were added to the “one body” of Christ (Mark 16:15-16; Galatians 3:26-27; Acts 2:37-47). Upon baptism they received the indwelling of the One Spirit that has given us the assurance, not only of salvation in Christ, but of the One Hope of a resurrection unto life eternal. It is these seven basic things that unify us in Christ upon obedience to the gospel. All have been taught the same things, and we are to continue to teach the same things. The early church continued in the Apostles’ teaching (Acts 2:42).

The above sounds simple and it is! But the problems come because we come into that one body of Christ with all kinds of ideas, opinions, previous beliefs, and obviously different levels of maturity as a people (Hebrews 5:12-14). It is important that we hold to these basic teachings, but also work at being unified as we progress in our Christian life—***“endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*** (Ephesians 4:3). These differences in people have to be dealt with in order to solidify our oneness of mind and heart. Maturing as a Christian does not take place over night and a desire for unity and peace has to be uppermost in our hearts as we progress towards spiritual maturity. The differences in understanding and beliefs between Jew and Gentile in the early church illustrate this fact clearly (Romans 14-15; 1 Corinthians 8-9). A spirit of unity can be maintained while we continually work towards a perfected (completed) unity in Christ (Ephesians 4:13). Division in the body of Christ can come because of jealousy, envy, hatred, contentions, etc. But it can also come because of not holding to those original teachings, basic teachings, or not abiding in the teachings of Christ (2 John 9). The Apostle

John's first letter dealt with those who were not willing to hold to those original teachings, but his third letter had to deal with a man who may have believed the same basic things, but allowed pride and arrogance to destroy the peace and unity of God's people (3 John 9-11).

Our worship assemblies help to illustrate the concept of unity. We can become so dis-unified that we will not speak to each other, nor sit together, and eventually will not worship together. Or, if someone brings into our worship assembly something not authorized by Christ, the group is immediately faced with a problem of worshipping together in unity. Or, again, if the one speaking before the church begins to teach something contrary to Scripture, there is a need to bring about a correction of teaching. Yet, in all of these situations, we must try desperately to be unified in spirit until the problems are solved in our midst. This seems to have been the attitude and spirit that the Apostles wanted the churches to have as they corrected things in their midst.

THE SEVEN BASIC TEACHINGS IN EPHESIANS 4:4-6

These seven basic teachings of Christ are simple and easily understood on the surface. To say that there is "**one God**" is to say that all other so-called gods are not really God! This did not really pose as much of a problem to the Jews as it did to the Gentiles. However, as we delve deeper into the concept of the "one God" it was a struggle for some Jews to accept the Deity of Jesus as the Son of God and as being part of the Godhead, while the Gentiles had to turn from their many God's to the triune God of heaven. A Deeper and more mature understanding of this one God and Father requires much study and plenty of time!

For one to honestly confess that Jesus is **Lord** requires a very simple understanding that He now is the one who tells me what to do and how to live (Romans 10:9-10). Jesus was preached as Lord and Messiah by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:36). But if there is only **One Lord**, this means that all other so-called lords are really not the Lord of heaven and earth who has been given "**All authority.**" (2 Corinthians 8:5-6; Matthew 28:18-20). The one Lord unifies us because it is He whom we listen and submit to and to no other (Luke 6:46)! But to know the fullness and the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge found in Him will require much time and study.

There is **One Spirit!** By this Spirit the Gospel was able to be preached to all the world. It is by this Spirit that we are born again in order to enter the kingdom of heaven (John 3:3-8). And God has given His people His Spirit to dwell in them as a seal of what is yet to come (Ephesians 1:13-14). While there are many spirit beings, there is only one Holy Spirit that Christians believe in and are guided by. While this is a simple belief, it is obvious that a correct understanding of the Holy Spirit's nature and work requires a great deal of time and study.

True religion begins for the person who believes in the one true God of heaven (Hebrews 11:6). **Faith** is a basic pre-requisite in coming into a relationship with God. The Bible speaks of:

- 1) **People being obedient to the faith** (Acts 6:7).
- 2) **Churches being established in the faith** (Acts 16:5).
- 3) **The need to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith** (2 Corinthians 13:5).
- 4) **Earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints** (Jude 3).

5) Paul that preached the faith that he once tried to destroy (Galatians 1:23).

It is critical that all Christians hold to the **one faith** that is revealed to us by His Spirit and written down and preserved for us in the Scriptures. We can spend a lifetime learning and understanding it.

The **One Baptism** takes on a significant role in our becoming a Christian (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21). It is a simple and humbling act to submit unto. It is not hard to understand what we must do. However, there is a depth of understanding that comes from a deeper study of the Scriptures that helps us to appreciate more fully why God has required certain things of us.

When one is baptized, he is added to the church, which is the body of Christ (Acts 2:47; Ephesians 1:22-23). Both Jews and Gentiles had their ceremonial washings and the concepts that such would indicate in their religious services or activities. But God chose an act of immersion in water to be connected with not only the remission of sins (Acts 2:38), but also the act that puts one into the **One Body** of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26-27). It is a simple concept to believe that there is “one body” or one church that Jesus established and is the head of, but it takes a lot of study and time and understand all that the Bible teaches about this One Body.

When one is saved and comes into the church of Christ, he is challenged to begin his walk of righteousness with God (1 John 1:7). He is challenged to become like his Lord, to be like his God, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to live godly and righteously upon this earth until death (Revelations 2:10). When we begin that journey, we are told that we can have that **One Hope** of a resurrection unto life eternal some day (John 5:28-29). This is a very simple and desirable thing to hope for, but there is a depth of understanding that we need to continually hunger and thirst after (Matthew 5:6).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Biblical unity is commanded by God, earnestly prayed for by Jesus, and to be earnestly desired by God’s people. It is intended to be a blessing for Christians and a means whereby we can help to convince the world of their need of Christ. We have a great challenge on our hands, and God believes that we can live up to the challenge if we really want to. Let’s work hard so that He can use us to this end.

Lesson Five

“The Goal of Biblical Unity”

Unity is good for the church, the world, children, grow-ups, etc. Harmony is a lovely and desirable thing. Families working and playing together is very uplifting. Orchestras playing in unison make music so desirable. A church living in harmony with one another with all parts working together in peace and love is a most desirable goal towards which every congregation should strive. Such an atmosphere pulls people together and makes the rough roads smoother. It gives the church hope for growth and effectiveness. But a church that is bickering is doomed to division and decay! Jesus blesses the peacemaker (Matthew 5:9) and God hates those who sow discord among brethren (Proverbs 6:19). Division, strife, contention are works of the flesh and are condemned by God (Galatians 5:20). Disunity is one of the main causes for an unbelieving world (John 17:21).

If unity is so desirable, then why don't profess believers in Christ do all within their power to bring about unity among themselves? Why don't preachers preach the same things and congregations hold to the same truths given by God? At least three factors could be suggested among other possible reasons:

- 1. A lack of concern for unity.** Unity doesn't just happen automatically without effort on the part of God's people. We need to pray for it as Jesus did (John 17)! We need to earnestly work at the job of maintaining unity (Ephesians 4:3)! And we need to give thanks for the degree of unity that a congregation has in their midst and hold up the ideal before all and encourage them to keep trying to reach the ultimate goal of being like Jesus. Unity must never be neglected. Unfortunately, unity is like freedom—it is most appreciated when it is lost!
- 2. Human weaknesses not being brought under the control of the Spirit of God.** The church at Corinth had all the miraculous gifts so the preachers and teachers could teach God's truth to them accurately. But in spite of that, they had division raising its ugly head in their midst. The Apostle stated that such a condition existed in their midst because of carnality (1 Corinthians 3:1-4). They were exalting men in their midst, rather than Christ (1 Corinthians 4:6). The old man of sin needs to be crucified—we have made a decision to die to the way of sin (Romans 6:1-2, 6). To continue in the way of carnality leads to death for the Christian, but to be led by the Spirit of God leads to life and peace (Romans 8:6). The inspired James states the problem straight-forward—***“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.”*** (James 1:26). To live the Christian life requires discipline, and so does unity in the midst of a congregation require discipline! Human weaknesses must be dealt with!
- 3. We allow Satan to get a foothold in our midst.** He is constantly at work striving to sow discord among brethren. He seeks to build barriers today as he built them in the church at Corinth. He smiles when people follow party leaders rather than Christ. When we allow discord, division, and dissension to continue in our midst, we are letting the Devil have his way in our lives. We are warned to be sober and vigilant and realize who the real

enemy is that we must fight (1 Peter 5:8-9). The early church was plagued by people who pledged their devotion to Christ, but did the bidding of Satan (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). We must be on our guard constantly and not give in to his temptations (1 Peter 5:9).

STRIVING FOR THE GOAL OF UNITY

Ideal unity would be where everyone in a congregation is of the same mind, the same judgment, and all speak the same things (1 Corinthians 1:10). And the first reaction to such a condition is—*“Is that ever possible?”* And someone may add, *“If such is possible, then to what degree is it possible?”* Why the skepticism? What’s the problem? And very quickly someone tells us why—*“We don’t all agree on everything! One person believes it is a sin for a woman to cut her hair, while another believes it is alright. One person believes that the use of instrumental music in worship is wrong, while another believes it is alright. One person believes it is wrong to eat in the church building, while another believes it is alright.”* And on and on and on this list could go of the differences within even one congregation of God’s people—must less all of them. Why do we have these differences? How do we handle these differences? Do we allow such to divide us or do we strive to remain united in spirit in the midst of such?

A preacher tells a story about when he was a young boy in a Bible Class where a person brought up this issue to the preacher. It was pointed out in the class of the differences in beliefs about certain things. This led to this person asking the teacher, *“Why can’t you preachers get together on these things?”* Yes, why don’t the preachers get together and decide what the truth is on these matters so we can all believe alike? In the first place, that probably could never happen among preachers. In the second place, I don’t think that that is what is needed nor desired. We would end up with a “Creed” of the church and everyone would have to believe that way—right or wrong! We would not have the right to read the Bible for ourselves because we would have to take what some group of men has decided is the truth. So, maybe it isn’t all that bad that we have some differences among us—just like the early church (Romans 14-15; 1 Corinthians 8-9). They had to learn how to deal with those differences just as we have to learn how and still work toward the ideal unity. God’s admonition to them and to us is: ***“Let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.”*** (Romans 14:19). It must have been that spirit which enabled the early church to survive and flourish in spite of the different backgrounds and opinions of its members. One of the great slogans that came out of the Restoration Movement was: ***“In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; and in all things, love.”*** God’s people must stay together and work through our differences as we strive towards the ideal of unity.

UNITY IN THE MIDST OF WEAKNESS AND DIFFERENCES

It seems that many believe that a congregation cannot be unified where human frailty or differences of opinions exist. If this were true, there probably would never be unity unless only one person composed the congregation. If there were two, more than likely there would be some kind of differences that would destroy their “unity.” But common sense tells you that a congregation is made up of many people:

1. **Some who are new in the faith and just beginning their walk with Christ. (1 Peter 2:1-2)** They have much to learn and a lot of maturing to do to become strong and stable in the faith. There is no way that they will believe exactly the same as a mature, well-studied, and faithful child of God.
2. **Some who are matured in the faith after years of learning and experiencing.** (Hebrews 5:13-14). Such will possess more of the wisdom that comes from above and should be more disciplined in their lives as a Christian (James 3:17-18).
3. **Some members will be lukewarm (Revelations 3:15ff), some carnally-minded (1 Corinthians 3:1-3), some fearful or cowardly (Revelations 21:8), some weak (Romans 14:1), some doubtful of beliefs (Hebrews 3:12), and some who are caught up in sinfulness (James 5:19ff).** While such may not destroy the unity of a congregation, they are certainly a threat to such.

Unity in a congregation can be like the Christian—he is challenged by God to be perfect (Matthew 5:48), but he never reaches the ideal. Yet, he is to constantly strive for the ideal—to be like God! Not being perfect does not say that he is not a Christian and right with God. In the same way we probably will never see Ideal Unity in any congregation, but God commands it and we must always be striving towards that Ideal Unity. But, not having perfect unity, does not mean that we cannot have unity in our midst in a lesser form. If we are at peace in a congregation, then we are unified to that extent. We may not have everything perfect, but we are still unified in our efforts to serve God and our fellowman. And we are constantly endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3) as we worship together and work together to the glory of God

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Devil works the hardest against the churches that are unified and doing well. He obviously does not need to bother with dead churches. And he can stop a great work in its track with bickering and pettiness. Unity, harmony, peace, a loving atmosphere, warmth, goodwill, closeness, and fellowship are the things God's church depends upon. Bickering churches, filled with fussing and negativism and hard-heads will do immeasurable harm to the success of its efforts. One of the greatest dangers to the unity of the church is faultfinding and unjust criticism. Such may give a false sense of security and satisfaction to people who do such, but they will have a negative and harmful effect upon the group. And one of the sad things about such is—they often get their way. It becomes a minority rule. They keep brakes on so the church never really grows. It takes leaders with courage and determination to deal with such people in a congregation. One writer suggested the following statements need to be made to a congregation:

1. *"We are going to tie down the throttle and clear the tracks for a great work for Christ. you will either have to get on board and work with us for the Lord, or get out of the way so you don't get run over."*
2. *"We do not believe it is right to let a few people hinder the greatest work on earth from going forward."*
3. *"We, as elders, need to take a more aggressive stand for growth and what is right and not allow the negative to hold back growth."*

Lesson Six

“Unity out of Diversity”

We normally think of unity and diversity as the opposites of each other—and they are, generally speaking. However, it may be of interest to notice that God made man to be greatly diverse from others. Of all the people that I know by face and name—each one is an entirely different person that I recognize immediately—in spite of all his similarities that he has to other human beings—because of his differences. Christianity is unique among the religions of the world for many reasons, but one in particular—it was not a national religion like religions were in that time, but it became an international religion. God’s intent was to bring people from all the nations of the world into one body (church) to worship and serve under His Kingship. All these people with all their differences were to become one in Christ. What a challenge! A new song was composed by God to extol this great effort (Revelation 5:9-10). Diversity was to no longer be a barrier for people to be in God’s kingdom—whether Greek or Jew, Barbarian, Scythian, Slave, Free—it no longer matters (Colossians 3:11; Galatians 3:26-28). Now, in Christ, they all have access by one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:14, 18). Jesus brought unity out of diversity! This was and still is the great challenge of Christianity.

However, from an outsider’s point of view, the church would appear to be a strange mixture indeed with little hope of unity. But in spite of all the diversity, the church was able to work its way through and retained and strengthened its unity in a world set on its destruction. This was not achieved without a struggle and some agonizing moments. In Acts 6, the Apostles quickly acted to solve a problem between the Jewish Christians and the Grecian Christians. A greater problem arose when the church began to be made up of Gentiles. Acts 15 tells us how the question over circumcision of the Gentile converts was dealt with that helped to deepen their unity in spite of those differences. Bringing unity out of diversity will take time, but God recognizes that fact (Ephesians 4:13). We need to give ourselves some slack so that we can have room and time to grow up into the unity of the faith.

MARRIAGE SERVES AS AN ILLUSTRATION

Jesus, in speaking about marriage, quotes Moses in pointing out God’s intent for the two to become one in marriage (Matthew 19:5-6). They are one in a sense, but it is a brittle oneness until they work at the job of deepening that unity between them. Marriage brings two different people into a new relationship. How can two such diverse people really be one? It certainly is not easy and it certainly must be desired or else the marriage will end in divorce.

After a similar fashion the church must work to bring a deepened unity out of all the diversities that we have. We know probably that the same causes of friction in a marriage may be the same causes of friction in a congregation. And just as a marriage is better after dealing with their differences, so the church is made stronger as a results as well. We must commit ourselves to each other; stand by each other; learn from each other; change with each other—and by so

doing, we will mature into the fullness of the personality of Christ and peace will reign. We will have learned how to differ without dividing.

UNITY THROUGH A BALANCED APPROACH

Biblical Unity cannot be fully attained from extreme approaches. But neither can it be attained by paying any price. The call for sound doctrine is strong in Scripture:

- 1) **“till we all come to the unity of the faith”** (Ephesians 4:13).
- 2) **“rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught.”** (Colossians 2:7).
- 3) **“charge some that they teach no other doctrine”** (1 Timothy 1:3).
- 4) **“in the latter times some will depart from the faith”** (1 Timothy 4:1).
- 5) **“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”** (2 Timothy 4:2).....etc.

God’s truth must not be ignored because it does make a difference what people believe. Error is not as good as truth. It is only the truth that can make us free (John 8:31-32). So unity at the expense of truth is unacceptable; but.....truth at the expense of unity is unacceptable as well. Both are desirable and demanded by God!

The extreme of wanting unity in spite of any and every extreme of doctrine is not the answer. Unity to them is so vital that they are willing to pay any price for it. The opposite extreme is one which insists that everyone must be in agreement with him on every issue or be labeled a “liberal.” The first extreme will cause us to be **“tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, in craftiness, after the wiles of error.”** (Ephesians 4:14). The second extreme will lead to a form of binding things on people that have not been bound by God (Matthew 23:4; Colossians 2:20-23) and take away our freedom to read and study the Bible for ourselves to see what God would have us do. God made no allowances for a pope in the church!

PRINCIPLES THAT MAINTAIN UNITY

Christians find their unity in their connection with Christ as they come into His one body. In spite of all their differences there is, or should be, a spirit of oneness and a continuing desire for harmony and peace among us (Ephesians 4:3). We maintain what unity we have as we attempt to deepen that unity through constant effort on the part of all. Following are some ideas or principles that we believe are critical to the maintenance and maturing of unity among us.

1. **One’s attitude towards the Bible is critical.** Do we have the attitude, *“Let’s go back to the Bible. Let’s be just what the Apostles taught the church of the first century to be.”* Brother Robert F. Turner suggested an important concept in this regard: *“Two men who do the same thing religiously—one because he sincerely believes God wants it that way and the other because he likes it that way and has no intention of changing regardless of God’s word—may be less unified than two men whose practice is different, but who are both sincerely searching for truth and are willing to conform to all truth found. The first two will drift further apart; the second two will be drawn together in the paths of God.”*

Oneness of God's people in any given congregation does not consist in total agreement on everything, but in an attitude of humble submission to the Word of God, which keeps them moving in the direction of conformity to the will and way of Christ in all things. ***"If we walk in the light, we have fellowship with one another; and the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin."*** (1 John 1:7). Neither concept carries the idea of perfection, but it does indicate that in spite of some differences we are seeking to know and do the will of God and will continue to maintain a harmonious atmosphere in which this can be done. In other words, it is important to know which direction we are going!

2. **Don't seek to bind traditional beliefs on others.** Tradition is fine as long as it remains tradition. It is when it is equated as God's truth that it becomes a disruptive force (Matthew 15:5-9). It is important that the congregation knows the difference between tradition and truth, and that traditional ways of doing things can be changed, but not the truth of God.
3. **It is important that we do not try to push someone into going against his conscience.** It is important that we live up to our conscience, but at the same time be open for our conscience to be better instructed (Romans 14:19-23). Our public assemblies become a critical place for this principle to be recognized. We should not try to force our private likes upon others who have a conscious problem with such an activity.
4. **Without compromising, we need to emphasize areas of agreement and minimize areas of disagreement.** But at the same time sustaining our relationship as brethren as we move closer together (2 Timothy 2:24-26; Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20). It is our mutual respect for the Word of God that keeps us deepening our unity with one another.
5. **Don't be over-sensitive.** Most disruptions of unity come from people who do not watch their tongue and others who are over-sensitive. We must not allow our faithfulness to Christ, or our loyalty to the congregation hang by a thin thread that any remark could cut it. We all need to be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath (James 1:19).
6. **Above all, let love reign in our hearts, which is the bond of perfection.** It is the glue that holds us together (Ephesians 4:2). True Biblical unity can only exist where there is love for God and for one another (Matthew 22:37-38; John 13:34-35). This love is shown by forbearance, gentleness, kindness, consideration, forgiveness, and all other such attitudes necessary to the maintaining of a spirit of unity and peace. A group of people together is just a group of people. But bind them together with the love of Christ and you have a beautiful building of God. Love keeps us together while our rough edges are being smoothed and our extremes and idiosyncrasies are being mellowed. Love is **not** the best way to achieve unity, it is the only way.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

God's people need to be peacemakers. We need to bring people together, not drive them further apart. We need to learn true tolerance, firmness in gentleness, and forbearance with all who earnestly and sincerely seek the way of the Lord. We must put off their ugly attitudes that would disrupt unity and put on those wonderful attitudes that helps us to enjoy and appreciate one another's company in the lord.

Lesson Seven

“Biblical Unity and Hedge Building”

Years ago, I remember that people use to hedge their property in. Farmers would often leave what was called a hedge row to define their property line. It was a simple way of saying—this is where my property line ends. When we lived in Camp Hill we heard about one of the members having to deal with a neighbor who planted his hedge row quite a bit onto their property. Obviously, he was claiming it as his. He went beyond what he should have legally & morally. He had to correct what he had done.

Spiritually, we plant hedges! Parents want to be protective of their children. They set up hedges or boundary lines for their children not to go beyond. They do it for the well-being of their children. Christians want to make wise decisions for their lives. So, they voluntarily set up hedges or boundary lines for themselves not to go beyond. They do it as a safe guard for their spiritual condition before God.

What are the reasons for these hedges! There are quite a few things that the Bible does not specifically deal with. We are called upon to make decisions for our lives & those of our children on these matters. Hedges are set up as warning or danger signs—“Danger Ahead!” We know that to participate in these things can be fraught with danger and that the safe course is not to engage in them. So we emphasize....stay away from the hedges!

Let’s remember that we are talking about things that the Scriptures do not specifically state is wrong. But these things could lead to what the Scriptures do condemn. A Biblical illustration of this can be found in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13. Paul knew God did not condemn eating of meat, even though they had been offered to an idol and later sold in the market place. But Paul set up a hedge for himself and encouraged others to do the same: ***“I will eat no meat if it causes my brother to stumble.”*** His eating meat was far less important than a brother being led to go against his conscience or to stumble in his journey to eternity.

SOME HEDGES TO ILLUSTRATE

- 1. Dancing.** The Bible no where specifically deals with this by name. Then, why do we try to set up a hedge to discourage our children & ourselves from dancing? Is it because of the dangers that such activities could lead to? We reason thusly—when one dances he has bodily contact that can increase sexual urge, and the Scripture say: ***“For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things that defile a man...”*** (Matthew 15:19-20) and ***“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are....Fornication, uncleanness, lewdness...”*** (Galatians 5:19). The downfall into open sin has come to many a couple that started on the dance floor, then to privacy of a car, and then fornication. We know the dangers are real. The evidence is too over-whelming. But do all people who dance wind up in this condition—OBVIOUSLY NOT! Then, why the hedge? Is it for the purpose of serving as

safe guard spiritually & morally? Is it a way to avoid the temptations that go with this situation? We would believe and hope so! Is it a sin to dance? Where does the Bible say so in so many words?

2. **Gambling.** Where does the Bible specifically state that gambling is a sin? If it is not there, then why do we set up a hedge to discourage our children & ourselves not to gamble? Is it because of the dangers of what gambling can lead to? We reason as follows—a person can become addicted to gambling and not take care of his family. The Scriptures plainly teach: ***“If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”*** (1 Tim. 5:8). The evils that are often connected with gambling are sufficient for many to want to avoid such. Do all people who gamble wind up in these terrible conditions—OBVIOUSLY NOT! Can a person gamble and not get addicted or not hurt himself or his family? Can he engage in such things as matching pennies, or all put a dollar into a pot—drawing for a prize and no one be hurt and maybe even someone be blessed that may need it? Possibly yes! Then why the hedge? Is it because of the possibilities of getting hurt or hurting others? Is it because of the possibilities of addiction to gambling and bringing on terrible consequences? Possibly yes! Is it a safe course to take to stay on this side of the hedge? Certainly yes! But can or should I bind that upon other Christians?

3. **Drinking Wine or Strong Drink.** Do the Scriptures specifically state that such is wrong? I know of no scripture! There are plenty that warn of the dangers of strong drink. But there are Scriptures that would seem to say such is okay—***“No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities.”*** (1 Tim. 5:23). Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast (Jn. 2:1-10). Qualifications for elders & deacons expressly say: ***“Not given to wine...”*** (1 Tim. 3:3); ***“Not given to much wine...”*** (1 Tim. 3:8); older women are not to be given to much wine (Tit. 2:3). Then, why do we set up a hedge and say “Don’t drink at all!” Is it because of the dangers of a lack of control? Is it because of the consequences of intemperance? Is it because the Bible specifically condemns DRUNKENNESS? —***“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are....Drunkness....”*** (Galatians 5:21). Is it because of the warnings that the Scriptures give on this matter? ***“Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.”*** (Proverbs 20:1). The dangers are real— of which we are all aware. Will everyone who drinks some wine get drunk, be rude, nasty, and hurtful to others, accidentally kill someone, or hurt or destroy his family? Obviously not! Then, why the hedges? Is it because not to drink strong drink is a safe course to pursue?

4. Other Areas:

- a) *Slang words can lead to Cursing, or even taking God’s name in vain.*
- b) *Taking drugs can become an addiction—the cost—the damage it does to the person & family.*
- c) *Smoking can become an addiction—the cost—the damage it can do to one’s health, etc.*
- d) *Pornography can lead to lustful or evil thoughts—even to fornication itself.*

We know that none of these are specifically mentioned in Scripture. But, we also know what is safe and best for all concerned. So, we set up hedges, and say don't do these things!

THE DANGERS OF HEDGES

- 1. To bind our opinion as Law on others.** Where does the Bible say so? If it doesn't, then it is a hedge that we have erected for our spiritual and moral safety. Such should not be bound as Law on others. We can bind it on ourselves if we wish, but not others.
- 2. Hedges can go to an extreme.** Passages that show this—Colossians 2:20-23; 1 Timothy 4:1-5. Dancing in some forms may pose no problems. Gambling in some situations may hurt no one. Drinking in temperate amounts may hurt no one. We need to watch out for extremes!
- 3. Hedges can pose a problem for our conscience**—if we preach such as the Law of God! Or, if when we are under pressure in a situation, we give in and thus feel guilty. But I didn't really do wrong—I did not go against Scripture. And unless I go against my conscience on the matter, I have not sinned.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Do we really need hedges for ourselves & our children? It would seem they have a value when properly understood. I want to safe guard my children & grandchildren from dangers. I would like to safe guard young Christians to stay away from dangers that could cause them to go back into the world. I want to set a high standard for myself. I have set up these hedges for myself. I try not to bind them on others as law. But at the same time, I would like to emphasize the dangers involved.

The following questions may help each of us to set up our own hedges and do it in the right way:

1. Do we want to think, act, dress, and conduct our lives like the world about us?
2. Are the examples that we want to follow—those of the world or those that are godly and righteous?
3. Do we want to see how close to the world we can get or how far away?

Yes, Hedges have their value, but they also can be misused. Let's recognize them for what they are—hedges, not law. Let's appreciate them for what they are trying to do. Let's appreciate those who are showing a concern for our welfare by hedges. Let's make our own hedges. **And all the time we maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace!**

Lesson Eight

“Undermining Biblical Unity”

Unity is what God wants and requires in every congregation. But it is just as obvious that unity is not easy to maintain and must be diligently worked at (Ephesians 4:3). And, at the very best that we can do, there is always a possibility of one or more persons who will bring about a divisive spirit within a congregation. Sadly, Inspiration told the early church that false teachers would come into their midst to divide and destroy them (Acts 20:28-30; 1 Timothy 4:1-5; 2 Peter 2:1ff; 1 John 4:1, etc.). The Spirit even foretold of a coming great apostasy from the faith in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-13. How can we avoid such among us? How can we know who they are? What should we do with them once they are uncovered?

STUDY OF FOUR GREEK WORDS

The Greeks had four words that identify with the concept of disunity or division. We believe a brief definition of each will be very helpful to this study.

Eritheia—It is defined as: *“A desire to put oneself forward, a partisan and factious spirit...”* The word denotes a disposition of mind that craves distinction and self-assertion. It is a disposition that leads to the disruption of the peace, harmony, and organic oneness of the group. It is translated “factious” or “contentious” in Romans 2:8; 2 Corinthians 12:20; James 3:13-16; Philippians 1:15-17. This self-seeking and self-willed disposition of mind is probably the major reason for division among God’s people. Such an attitude desires to promote personal aims rather than serving God and others that results in faction or factiousness among those that are influenced thereby. The term could be applied to those who serve in official positions for their own selfish interest, and who, to that end, promote a party spirit and faction. Eritheia is not division in its finished state, but the attitude that leads to and produces organic division. From a mind that delights in self-assertion, self-seeking, courting favor, and that desires to put oneself forward, we might expect some very definite opinions and tenets to come from his mouth.

Hairesis—It is defined as: *“One’s chosen opinion or tenet; an opinion varying from the true exposition of the Word of God...”* Its original meaning was simply a choice (a set of opinions). Later, it came to have reference to the opinions themselves. And still later, it was applied to the sect that maintained the opinions. Hairesis is an opinion, a pattern of thought, a tenet. As long as this opinion remains a theory in the mind of its originator, it is harmless and is not a matter of concern. But when the opinion is taught and pressed to the point of becoming practical or reduced to practice, it ceases to be heresy and becomes a schism—which is heresy put into practice. So, whatever produces a schism or a party in the church is a heresy and condemned by God. Doddridge defines Hairesis as *“one so fond of his own darling notions, that he will ruin the peace of the church for them.”* (2 Peter 2:1; Galatians 5:20; 1 Corinthians 11:19).

Schisma—It is defined as: *“A cleft, rent, and metaphorically a division, dissension.”* A Schism is a rent in the church. (1 Corinthians 12:24-25; 11:18-19) This schism is brought on by a party

spirit within the church. A faction is formed when a teacher puts himself forth and sets forth his chosen opinion or pattern of thought which causes a rift within the church. The rift is caused for two basic reasons: (1) He is teaching something different from Scripture; (2) He is being resisted by members of the church who refused to accept his opinions (2 Timothy 2:15; Acts 20:29-30; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 Corinthians 15:58).

Dichostasia—It is defined as: “*To stand apart, division, dissension*” This word gives the final outcome of the other three words—the two parties has gone their separate way! (Galatians 5:20; Romans 16:17). Men arise out of a disposition to seek self-assertion and push themselves forward and court distinction. They choose some opinion or pattern of thought and press this in their speaking. Their purpose in speaking “*perverse things*” (Acts 20:30) is to draw away disciples after them. The pushing of their opinions rends the peace and harmony of the church. If this condition continues, and bitterness, hate, and rancor are aroused, it will end up with two different groups not in fellowship with each other. These words give the source, cause, development and consummation of all division in the church.

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE DIVISIVE PERSON

There are quite a few passages that describe the characteristics of the divisive person. We will look at only a few to illustrate:

1. **Jude 4**—Ungodly men, who turn the grace of God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.
2. **3 John 9-11**—Men who love to have the pre-eminence and will not respect knowledgeable people in the church—and even wishes to do them harm.
3. **2 John 9-11**—Men who transgress and do not abide in the doctrine of Christ.
4. **Titus 3:10-11**—People who are warped and sinning being self-condemned.
5. **1 Timothy 4:1-3**—Men who speak lies in hypocrisy, whose conscious is seared, and who make up their own rules and regulations.
6. **2 Thessalonians 2:1-4**—Men who oppose God’s will and exalts himself above God, accepting the adoration that belongs to God, and usurping God’s place in the church.
7. **Romans 16:17-18**—Men who teach contrary to the doctrine of Christ, who do not serve Christ, but their own bellies, and who by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.
8. **Proverbs 26:20; 21:23**—A talebearer or one who will not guard his mouth and tongue.
9. **Proverbs 22:10**—The scoffer
10. **Proverbs 21:4**—A haughty look and a proud heart.

It is sinful to stir up trouble that will lead to division in the church. God says that he hates those who sow discord among brethren (Proverbs 6:19). Such persons are worldly-minded, carnally-minded—who mind the things of the world or of the flesh (Romans 8:5-6). They are guilty of acting out of jealousy, anger, contempt, hate, malice, and conceit (2 Corinthians 12:20). Our attitudes are critical to unity...we may have to do some tall changing in order to have unity. And when we see the listing of sins that the divisive person is lumped in with....it should cause changes quickly for the better (Galatians 5:19-21; Proverbs 6:16-19).

THE FRUIT OF DIVISIVENESS

The law of sowing and reaping applies here also. If a person sows a divisiveness spirit, he will bring about division, which God condemns. Several obvious undesirable fruits are reaped from divisiveness. The following will illustrate:

1. **It arouses an un-Christ-like Spirit in the congregation.** Love brings unity, hatred brings division. Jesus is called the Prince of peace. Unkind words, unwise accusations, backbiting, gossiping, hard feelings, etc., are not the kind of things that identify with Christ. *“Now if any man has not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.”* (Romans 8:9).
2. **The Strength of the congregation is dissipated.** *“United we stand, divided we fall.”* *“Divide and conquer.”* *“A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.”* The cooperation within the congregation is greatly hindered. Its strength has to be expended on dealing with the divisive person rather than reaching the lost.
3. **The church becomes a scandal in the community.** It is brought to shame before the world that it is supposedly trying to reach. The renovator of society shows its need to be renovated. Satan wins a victory in the very institution founded to overthrow his power. We give occasion for the world to blaspheme the worthy name of Christ (James 2:7).
4. **It poses a hindrance to unbelievers.** Their conversion can be hindered. Men who are seeking peace are hesitate to cast their lot with those who show hate, envy, distrust, etc., towards one another. A crucified Christ invites the sinner—a divided church repels him (John 20:20-21).
5. **The church is in danger of losing its relationship with God.** I John 4:20; 3:15; Matthew 6:15; James 3:16. If we are turned from abiding in the doctrine of Christ, we lose our relationship with both the Father and the Son (2 John 9).

DEALING WITH THE DIVISIVE PERSON

Unless such a person is stopped, one way or another, the church will suffer. Such a person must not be allowed to continue in his divisive ways. One qualifications for appointing an elder is that he not only holds fast the faithful word himself, but he is able to exhort and convict those who teach contrary to such sound teaching (Titus 1:9). A divisive man is to be admonished twice and if he will not repent, he is to be rejected (Titus 3:10). Paul told the church at Rome to “note” the person who is causing divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching of Christ and avoid such people (Romans 16:17-18). The Apostle John said that we not to invite him into our homes, nor bid him God’s speed, less we become partakers of his evil deeds (2 John 9-11)

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The oneness of God’s people is important to God! It must also be important to us as well. We need to be a church full of “peacemakers.” For such people are blessed of God, but they in turn are a blessing as well. We need to make peacemaking a top priority in our lives.

Lesson Nine

***“Biblical Unity Requires Proper Attitudes
with which to Approach the Bible”***

For unity to be Biblical unity, it must be based on the Bible! Without a Biblical basis there can be no religious unity which is acceptable to God. The following passages give a strong emphasis to this concept:

1. **“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine.”** (Acts 2:42)
2. **“And this is the message which we have heard from him and announce unto you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”** (1 John 1:5-7)
3. **“Whosoever goes onward and abides not in the teaching of Christ, has not God: he that abides in the teaching, the same has both the Father and the Son.”** (2 John 9)
4. **“Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me.”** (2 Timothy 1:13).
5. **“By which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached unto you.”** (1 Corinthians 15:2).

Biblical unity at the same time requires that one have the proper attitudes in his approach to the Bible. This lesson will strive to emphasize some of the main attitudes that we must have towards the Bible.

WE MUST RESPECT THE BIBLE’S CLAIMS ABOUT ITSELF

To claim to believe the Bible to be the Word of God, but then deny one or more of its claims about itself would seem to invalidate the person’s claim. The Bible makes some very critical claims about itself. Following are some of these claims:

1. **It claims to be an inspired revelation from God (both Old and New Testaments).** (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 1:1-2; 2 Peter 1:20-21, etc.). It clearly states that the Holy Spirit of God revealed the message and guided the person in the speaking and writing of that message. Thus, the Bible can truthfully be called the “word of God” (Hebrews 4:12).
2. **It claims to be a perfect or complete revelation of God’s will to man.** (2 Timothy 3:17; James 1:25; Jude 3; 2 Peter 1:3). It is the final and complete revelation of God to man. There is no need of anything further to be revealed.
3. **It claims to be the only power to save lost humanity.** (Romans 1:16; 1 Peter 1:22; James 1:21; 1 Corinthians 15:1-2). Jesus’ statement about the truth making us free shows clearly that God’s Word, which is truth, is what makes us free.

To reject the above claims will invalidate any unity that claims to be Biblical unity. There is all kinds of unity in the world, but there is only one Biblical unity. The Bible is either inspired

or it is not! It is either complete or it is not! It is the only power that can save us or it is not! The choice has to be made—to respect the Bible’s claims or not.

WE MUST HAVE A LOVE OF TRUTH

The Bible claims to be truth (John 17:17). Jesus said He was the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). But He is also the giver of the Truth of God that can set man free (John 8:32; Matthew 22:16). Jesus’ disciples were sent the Holy Spirit from Heaven to guide them into all truth (John 16:13; 2 Corinthians 7:14). If we desire truth, love truth, then the Bible is the right place for us to go to find truth. Unfortunately, man has a way of taking truth and changing it into a lie (Romans 1:25). This is what the serpent did to Mother Eve....He took God’s truth and changed one word and it became a lie that she believed (Genesis 3:1-7). This Word of truth must be handled correctly or it can easily be changed into a lie (2 Timothy 2:15). Without a love of truth, we can so easily be misled! The Apostle Paul warned the church at Thessalonica of the eventual apostasy of the church and gives two basic reasons for it: 1) The Christians lost their love for truth; and (2) They preferred to believe a lie than the truth, so they could indulge in unrighteous practices (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12).

But it is not enough to say “*I have a love of truth!*” We must be willing to pay the price for truth! The wise man exhorted, “***Buy the truth, and do not sell it, also wisdom and instruction and understanding.***” (Proverbs 23:23) Jesus told two parables that emphasize this same concept in Matthew 13:44-46. Truth is not really ours until we have made diligent effort to put it into practice in our lives (Matthew 7:21; James 1:21-22; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 1:6; 3 John 4). The acquiring of Truth also requires the giving up of all error, false notions, opinions, and ideas of men (Matthew 15:7-9). Then, unity can truly be called Biblical unity!

WE MUST HAVE AN OPEN AND HONEST HEART

Jesus quoted a passage in the book of Isaiah and applied it to many of the people to whom he spoke. It states that people can hear, but do not understand and they can see, but do not perceive—WHY? Because they had become dull of hearing and had closed their eyes to God’s truth (Matthew 13:13-16; 2 Timothy 4:4; Titus 1:14). Even Jesus, the Master Teacher, could not get through to people when they have closed their minds and hearts to truth. Paul stated that the Jewish people had a zeal for God, but it was not according to the truth. They were ignorant of how God made people righteous and were too busy trying to develop their own ideas of how to be righteous before God—thus, not submitting to those things that make us right with God (Romans 10:1-4). The people of Berea illustrate the kind of attitude that a person needs to have towards that which is being taught: “***These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.***” (Acts 17:11). It should be obvious that the open-minded person stands a much better chance of learning God’s truth than the closed-minded person. And it is the willingness to hear the Word of God and do it and it alone that makes Biblical unity possible. The dishonest person may make a claim to be open and honest, but his actions in holding to false opinions and false beliefs in spite of what the Bible says speak louder than his words.

WE MUST BELIEVE THE BIBLE CAN BE UNDERSTOOD

Many have been taught from youth that they cannot understand the Bible themselves, but need to have someone to help them. This often causes people not even to read the Bible, but depend upon a teacher who may or may not be teaching them correctly. Then when they observe that there are so many different beliefs that people have claiming to be from the Bible, they are confused and usually do very little reading of the Bible. We don't really believe that the problem is with the Bible itself. In the first place, just common sense should tell us we should be able to understand it. We may need to spend some time and effort, but that it can be understood. Why? Because to say that we cannot understand the Bible is to indict God. It is saying that God would not or could not give a revelation that we can understand. To say that He could not is to question His power. To say that He would not is to question His justice and love. Are you willing to do either? The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Ephesus, states that when they read his letter that they may understand his knowledge in the mystery of Christ (Ephesians 3:4). As we stated, we believe that the problem is not with the Bible, but the fault must be found elsewhere.

A preacher who lived in the 1800s named Raccoon John Smith often spoke on how plain and simple the gospel of Christ was in contrast to the complicated systems of men. A person who had heard him asked the question: *"If the gospel is so very plain, as you say, why do you have to labor so hard to get people to understand it?"* To which he replied: *"I have often prepared ground in the wilderness for a turnip patch and though I had the kindest soil, and the best of seed, and the sowing was easy, I never got top or root until I first took my axe and hoe and went in, whacked and grubbed and cleared away the ground. The Lord knows that I do not esteem it hard work to preach the simple gospel to those who are prepared to receive it, but it is labor indeed to root out prejudice and clean away the trash that cumbers the minds and hearts of the people."* He too, believed that the Bible could be understood if the person really sets his mind and heart to the task. We are convinced that the attitudes with which we approach the Bible can make a big difference in whether we understand the Bible correctly or not. If we are going to be judged by the Bible (and we are—John 12:48; Revelation 20:11-15), then we must be able to understand it or else God is awfully cruel! The many misunderstandings that supposedly come from the Bible may have another cause for an incorrect understanding of its contents. To read the Bible in order to confirm our opinions will certainly lead to a misunderstanding of its contents. It needs to be approached, wanting to know what God is saying and that I can understand it. If man is incapable of understanding the Bible, how in the world can he have Biblical unity???

WE MUST BE SEEKING ETERNAL LIFE

During the public ministry of Jesus a young man who was rich approached Jesus (running to meet him) asking the question: *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* (Luke 18:18). He evidently realized that Jesus was a teacher sent from God and would have the answer to his question. But when Jesus gave him the answer, it was not what he was expecting and went away sorrowfully disappointed. Then, was the young man really sincerely seeking to know the way to everlasting life, or did he have another agenda? He asked the right question—outwardly showing a right attitude, but something was bad wrong! The answer Jesus gave did not suit him. This is probably the reason why Jesus observed: *"How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!"* (Luke 18:24). It is possible that the sincerity of our search will be put to the test when we decide whether we will do what it takes to have eternal life. The hypocrisy of many

is shown by their watering down the demands of God to make it much easier for people to have eternal life. Biblical unity then goes out the window!

We must be sincere seekers after life—realizing that God alone has the answer (Jeremiah 10:23; Romans 3:4; 1 Corinthians 1:21, 25). When many of Jesus' disciples turned to walk no more with Him because His teachings were too hard for them to accept, He turned to His chosen Apostles and said: ***“Do you also want to go away?”*** Simon Peter's answer was a “classic”—***“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”*** (John 6:66-69). It is to truly recognize that He and He alone can answer the question, and that we must be willing to do what He says if we expect to see this life (Hebrews 5:8-9; Matthew 7:21). And certainly Jesus strongly encourages this seeking, searching attitude on our part (Matthew 7:7-8).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The purpose and attitude with which we approach the study of the Bible will determine largely what we derive from our study. If it is approached with the idea of proving our point, we will find something that we feel proves our point. And, often, our conclusion will contradict many very plain Scriptures that are much clearer than the ones we used to prove our point. To help illustrate the point we can go back to the time of Galileo. All the learned church leaders believed that the world was flat. They could even turn to Scriptures to prove their point (Ezekiel 7:2; Isaiah 11:12). But Galileo had sufficient evidence outside of Scripture that showed that the earth was round. They persecuted and banish him as a heretic. But their search in Scripture was to try to uphold their ideas and completely overlooked the passage in Isaiah 40:22, where it speaks of the circle of the earth.

We need to approach the Bible believing it to be of God, Authoritative, and containing the words that lead to eternal life. We should sincerely seek to understand and receive the guidance that God wants to give. And when we have learned what to do, we must be willing to humbly submit to it. By doing so, we will show the proper reverence of God, of His Son, and of His Word. Then, Biblical unity can continually be maintained in our midst.

Lesson Ten

“Biblical Unity Requires Proper Approaches to the Bible”

I believe that it is man’s duty as well as his privilege to study the Word of God. It is a personal responsibility—one that cannot be shifted to others. In fact, there are grave dangers in shifting it to someone else to do for us. We can easily be misled.

Our efforts to understand the Bible should be both **honest** and **intelligent**. If a person does not know how to study the Bible, it does not matter how honest he may be, he may never understand the truth. A person may be just as honest as can be, but if he does not know the difference between the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Christ—he may never learn the truth. A lack of intelligent study of the Bible has caused many honest people to think they could be saved like the thief on the cross. It has also caused them to think that the Publican’s prayer justifies the sinner’s prayer to be saved. It is a failure to make an intelligent study of the Bible that cause many to think that instrumental music is right in Christian worship just because David used it. Thus, you can see that it is not enough that we make an honest study of the Bible, but our study must be an intelligent one. We must rightly divide the Bible, if we study it intelligently (2 Timothy 2:15).

WHY THE CONFUSION OVER THE BIBLE?

Is the Bible a confusing book to you? Do you really think that God intended for it to be such a confusing book? Even though the Bible does contain some passages that are **“hard to be understood”** (2 Peter 3:16); yet, it is not and was never meant to be confusing. However, due to widespread mishandling of the Bible, mostly by preachers, the Bible has been made to appear confusing.

Most distortions of the Scriptures can be traced to a common source—improper approaches to an understanding of the Bible. Because of the wide variety of approaches taken by different religious leaders, the teaching of Scripture has been warped and confusing that has resulted in the misleading of millions of people. Different approaches are going to result in differences in beliefs and practices as well as a lack of Biblical unity. What are these approaches? Can they be identified clearly? The following is an effort to look at the major approaches by different people and using an accommodating term to make a distinction between the different approaches.

WRONG APPROACHES TO THE BIBLE

1. The Mythical Approach. This advocates that all historical events in the Bible are made up in order to teach certain things. This is mainly aimed at the story of Adam and Eve. Those who take this approach to the Bible come up with some pretty far out things.

2. The Allegorical Approach. It treats the Bible as one big riddle. Everything in it is made to be figurative. The historical aspect is completely removed from the Bible as far as any importance. It is to teach by use of symbols and figures of speech. The reader is free to draw from various passages whatever lessons are true for him. The subjective nature of this approach is clearly evident and one can easily see why it leads to confusion.

3. The Pietistic Approach. The reader is supposed to be guided by an “inward light.” Rules and principles of understanding are discarded and the Spirit’s enlightenment follows. Subjective feeling or fanciful ideas becomes the rule. The Bible is relegated into the background. Such people really become a judge of the Bible.

4. The Accommodation Approach. Miracles, Redemption, Resurrection, Eternal Judgment, Angels, Demons are all in the Bible to accommodate the superstitious and prejudices of men of their time. It becomes an open rejection of Divine Inspiration also.

5. The Moral Approach. Emanuel Kant was the one who advocated this so strongly. The simple purpose of the Bible is to improve man’s moral behavior. Redemption, justification, godly living, etc., was not seriously accepted. It was an open rejection of Divine Inspiration as well.

6. The Naturalistic Approach. Anything in the Bible that does not conform to what we can see and experience today were rejected. Miracles were merely the opinions of the writers and were not really miracles.

7. The Rationalistic Approach. This is characterized as the testing of everything by reason. The most obvious thing that is dealt with again is the miraculous. They feel that there is a rational explanation for all those stories in the Bible which contain miraculous events. The flood is purely a natural event and was local. The parting of the Red Sea resulted only from unusual weather conditions. The fall of the walls of Jericho is attributed solely to an earthquake, etc. This approach takes the very heart out of the Bible.

8. The Hierarchical Approach. This is sometimes called the Ecclesiastical Approach. This approach advocates that only certain “church leaders” can understand the Bible correctly. People are encouraged to look to the organized church as the final authority. Church leaders, creeds, or church writings are considered the only acceptable understanding.

9. The Mystical Approach. This approach does not make use of logically accepted rules of understanding language. They advocate such things as: *“Just open your Bible and whatever a passage means to you, that’s the meaning.”* This approach is defined as follows:

“By a calm and holy contemplation they have direct contact with the Divine Spirit, and thereby acquire a knowledge in Divine things which is not plainly stated in the Bible and which is not attainable by the reasoning faculties.”

Early in Christianity, philosophers felt that those “truths” that they had discovered before becoming a Christian must be harmonized with the teachings of the Bible. The literal meanings of Scripture were changed into a spiritualistic or mystical sense when they did not agree with

their previous philosophical “truths.” They began to advocate that Scriptures had two meanings or double meanings: An obvious or literal meaning, but also a hidden and mystical meaning. The literal more and more was neglected for the later—which was more appealing and building of the ego! One writer states: “*They used their genius to darken the Scriptures with idle fictions than to investigate their true and natural sense.*” The main-stream of Protestantism did not entirely give up this approach. It still raises its ugly head at times. An illustration:

1. Learned men hold cherished doctrines.
2. Plain Scriptures show open contradiction.
3. They must either reject old doctrines or resort to mysticism.
4. Most of the time, they resort to mysticism.
5. They will say, “*Parts of the Bible have double meanings or secret meanings.*”
6. They then ignore the literal, obvious meaning of the passage for their “higher spiritual meaning.”

Why is it so hard to give up mysticism?

1. The Truth of the Bible would condemn many of their ancestors—can’t accept that.
2. It would mean that millions of people would be wrong—can’t accept that.
3. They would be labeled as a fanatic and enthusiast—can’t accept that.
4. They would be labeled as uncharitable, a bigot, a radical, and a heretic by their peers—they can’t deal with that.

But, let a man be flattered with the idea that in some sense and to a certain degree he is inspired to know the hidden mysteries of God—he will be lost to common sense! Every appeal to him from the Bible falls powerless, for he attaches a secret meaning to the passages. His explanation must be heard for it is the authority, no matter how far-fetched. If you question his understanding, it insults him, for he knows the mysteries and the deep things of God! For him to doubt the correctness of his understanding would be to question God’s Spirit.

Protestantism still has its mysticism to one degree or another. While they all hold to some truth which causes them to survive, they have their false doctrines as well that cannot be upheld by a correct understanding of Scripture. This is what causes them to differ one from another. The Pentecostalism and Charismatic Movement have helped to revive the mystical approach more than any other group judging by their numbers.

10. The Dogmatic Approach. The dogmatic has been an outcome of giving up the mystical approach. Church leaders have assumed certain doctrines to be worth believing and go to the Scriptures to seek support for them. These doctrines are maintained by misuse and misapplication of Scripture. They are also supported by statements from “learned doctors” of the Bible. To question these doctrines and dogmas would be considered heresy. To reject them leads to damnation!

The Reformation Movement leaders set out to throw off the shackles of all human authority and just let the Bible speak its full message to men. They were greatly successful in getting the Bible into the hands of the people, but the influence of a number of the leaders caused them to hold to old concepts—which almost reversed the reformation concept! Roman

Catholicism ruled by Canons, Decretals, Traditions, Philosophies of men. The Reformation was advocating to reject all of these and go to the Bible alone for beliefs and practices. Unfortunately, this concept is held to more in theory than in practice. The Bible is not, and never has been, the only rule of faith and practice among Protestants. The truth of the matter is—“*think for yourself, as long as your thinking conforms to the great men and councils of our church!*” Each church has its own special beliefs that a person must accept to be a member with them. Why does Protestantism continue in this inconsistency?

- a) They, in most instances, believe their creeds are a proper understanding of the Bible.
- b) They evidently distrust their own judgment from an honest study of the Bible. They would not think of putting their judgment against such great men of learning that went before them. They would not take a stand as Luther did in spite of this. The following is supposed to be what the Roman Catholic Leaders said to Luther:

“I am astonished at the humility and diffidence with which the reverend Doctor undertakes to stand alone against so many illustrious fathers, thus affirming that he knows more of these things than the sovereign pontiff, the councils, divines, and universities!.....It would no doubt be very wonderful if God had hidden the truth from so many saints and martyrs till the advent of the reverend father.”
- c) Their fathers, grandfathers, friends, ministers have all died and gone to heaven believing their rules and doctrines.....surely, such couldn't be wrong!

THE CORRECT APPROACH TO THE BIBLE

Different terms are used to identify this approach: “Common Sense Approach” (as you would any other book); “Grammatical-Historical Approach;” “Inductive-Deductive Approach.” God has revealed Himself to man in his two great books: Nature and the Bible. These are the beginning and the end of our studies and investigations. They should be in complete harmony—be uniform in their conclusions. The same basic approach should be used to understand both.

It wasn't until men threw off mysticism and dogmatism that Scientific progress was made in the world. The reason is obvious—

- 1) They actually dealt with the facts.
- 2) They used common sense logic and reasoning to draw valid conclusions.
- 3) They put aside opinions and notions.
- 4) They gathered sufficient facts and information upon which to draw valid conclusions.

We have quite a contrast in the two men that are being described as follows:

- 1) A man who is candid, upright, fearless of issue of investigator:
 - a) Who is solely interested in truth.
 - b) Who searches all sides.
 - c) Who refuses no evidences.
 - d) Who is anxious that every circumstance be brought into its true colors.
 - e) Who is free from anger against opposition.
- 2) A man who takes a different approach:
 - a) He directs all his abilities to one side.
 - b) He looks into sources of information only giving one side—his side.
 - c) He looks for what he wants to find.

d) He does not control his anger against those who oppose him.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Fortunate indeed are we who live now because the shackles of mysticism and dogmatism have been thrown off, and we can sit down to the simple Word of God, read it, and come to an understanding of God's great truths for ourselves. We can give up this great privilege by letting others do our studying, reading, and thinking for us, or by letting men dictate what we are to believe without having the Bible to back it up correctly. If we want Biblical unity, our approach to the Bible must be a correct one.

Lesson Eleven

***“Biblical Unity Requires Fellowship
With God and One Another”***

In our search for Biblical Unity, we have concluded that it exists because God has made us one upon our obedience to the Gospel that we accepted. It is taking people from all kinds of backgrounds and beliefs and bringing them into a relationship with God and one another that is called unity. This unity is in spite of those differences and the different levels of maturity among us. God made us “ONE” and He wants us to stay as “ONE!” So, it is up to us to keep this oneness among us that God originated—***“endeavoring to keep the unity (oneness) of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*** (Ephesians 4:3). We have also understood from our study that there are things that threaten that oneness that we enjoy in Christ. In other words, it is not *“once unified, always unified!”* We must be alert, watchful, and diligent in our efforts to keep this oneness among us.

We also have concluded from our study that “Ideal Unity” is something we strive for, but will never attain unto. It is like God’s challenge for His people to be perfect as He is perfect, but we know that we shall not attain to that perfection. That unity or oneness is begun, maintained, and developed to a mature (complete, perfected) level in each congregation—if they are doing what commands of them. If we can agree on the above thoughts, then we are ready to ask the important question: *“What can destroy this oneness where we no longer will have fellowship with one another?”* And this question leads to an even more important question: *“How and when does a Christian lose his oneness or fellowship with God?”* We want to look at the things that the Bible says can destroy our fellowship with one another and with God.

LOSS OF FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

It would seem to be logical that if we have fellowship with God (acceptable with Him), then we should also enjoy fellowship (unity) with one another. And as well, if we lose our fellowship with God, we also **SHOULD** lose it with one another! So, what could be said of one may or should apply to the other. Let’s see some things that can cause us to lose our fellowship with God. The following would not necessarily be all that the Bible says on this matter.

1 John 1:5-7. Those who walk in darkness cannot have fellowship with God. But those who walk in the light can have fellowship not only with God, but with one another if we choose to do so.

1 John 2:3-6. Those who no longer keep God’s commandments cannot have fellowship with God. Thus, those who do keep God’s commandments do have fellowship with God.

1 John 2:8-11; 3:11-15; 4:7-8, 20; 5:2. The Christian who hates his fellow-Christian is walking in darkness and cannot have fellowship with God. To hate one’s brother is the same as being a murderer and no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. If we do not love our brother we do not

know God. The way we know that we love or don't love our brother depends upon what we do with God's commandments in regards to our brother.

1 John 2:15-17. If the Christian goes back to loving the world, he loses his relationship with God.

1 John 2:18-19. When a Christian voluntarily leaves the people of God and desires to have no more fellowship with them, he also leaves the fellowship of God.

1 John 2:22-24; 4:1-3, 15; 5:5, 12-13; 2 John 7. To no longer believe that Jesus is the Christ is to lose one's fellowship with God. To no longer believe that Jesus came in the flesh is to lose one's fellowship with God. The same is true if one no longer believes Jesus to be the Son of God.

1 John 2:29; 3:7, 10. When one no longer walks or practices righteousness, he loses his fellowship with God.

1 John 3:8-9. The one who continues to practice sin shows that he desires fellowship with the devil rather than with God.

2 John 9. Those who do not abide in the doctrine of Christ do not have fellowship with God any longer.

Jude 4. Those who turn the grace of God into lasciviousness deny the Lord God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore, do not have fellowship with God.

Jude 19. Those who are sensual, carnal and cause division have lost their fellowship with God because they do not have the Spirit of God in them. Those that do not have the Spirit of God (Christ) do not have fellowship with Him.

Possibly other Scriptures could be used to show the things that break one's fellowship with God, but hopefully these are sufficient to illustrate the possibility. These same things above should break our fellowship with one another as well, but often does not! Possibly, the greatest challenge to our understanding is at what point in the above things will our fellowship with God be broken? None of us are perfect—none of us keep the commandments of God perfectly—none of us are without sin in our lives, but hopefully we are dealing with them in God's appointed way. God knows where that line is—and generally, we can tell when someone has reached that line or beyond it by his actions. Our oneness with God depends upon our constant efforts to walk in the way of righteousness!

LOSS OF FELLOWSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER

After so much stress on the oneness, unity, and harmony among God's people, the following thoughts at first may seem strange. God wants us to cut off our oneness with certain Christians! The following passages will illustrate this.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13. When a Christian walks in an ungodly or unrighteous activity and will not repent after efforts have been made to correct the situation, he is to be withdrawn from—to have no fellowship with him—to not keep company with—not even to eat with such a person. We are to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. We are to put away from ourselves this evil person. But, if afterwards he repents, we are to receive him again as a brother acceptable (2 Corinthians 2:5-8). We can be re-united with him.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. If a brother continues to walk disorderly (not after the traditions that have been taught) and will not repent, he is to be withdrawn from. Such a person is to be noted and God's people are not to keep company with him so that he may be ashamed. He is not to be counted as an enemy, however, but admonish as a brother.

Matthew 18:15-17. Where a brother sins against another brother, the two of them are to work it out so they can maintain their unity (fellowship). But if they are unable to do so, the matter should be discussed in the presence of witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, it is then to be brought before the church. If the guilty person will not listen to the church, he is to be treated as a "heathen and a tax collector." Their unity is gone—no longer to have fellowship together.

Romans 16:17-18. Those who teach things contrary to the doctrine of Christ and thereby cause divisions and offenses among God's people, they are to be noted and avoided—to no longer have fellowship with! Their efforts to deceive the hearts of the people by their smooth words and flattering speech need to be stopped in the midst of the church.

Titus 3:9-11. The person who conducts foolish disputes, who causes contentions concerning genealogies, and stirs up strife concerning the law is a divisive person and needs to be rejected after a first and second admonition. This type person is warped and sinning and is self-condemned.

2 John 9-11. The person who will not abide in the teachings of Christ is not to be received in your homes, nor do you bid him God's speed—for in doing so, you become a partaker in his evil deed. Don't fellowship such a person!

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Again, we suggest that this may not be all of what the Scriptures teach in regards to whom we are to cut off our fellowship from, but the above references show that such should be done in the varying situations mentioned. The unity with such people is broken because they no longer desire to let Jesus be the Lord of their life and they turn back into their old ways of living and believing. They are guilty of sin that leads to death (1 John 5:16-17).

God wants His people not only to be unified, but he wants us to deal properly with those things that can destroy that unity. If it cannot be solved with one or more persons, then fellowship is to be withdrawn from them in order to maintain the proper unity of the church. All unity among people is not necessarily pleasing to God—only that unity based on His Word.

Lesson Twelve

***“Biblical Unity Requires
Biblical Teaching and Preaching”***

It should be an obvious truth that Biblical Unity does not come from people who teach or preach the doctrines, commands, and opinions of men, but by those who teach or preach the Bible! Biblical Unity is made possible and encouraged by teaching those things that are clearly taught in Scripture. It is brought about and maintained by those who teach what the Bible authorizes to be done, not by teaching what the Bible does not condemn. The Lord’s church is being plagued by those who do not have a respect for the Lord’s headship, but set themselves up as being smarter than God Himself. Division is promoted among God’s people when men are exalted above that which is written (1 Corinthians 4:6) and when they do not feel that the Bible is enough to serve as a guide for man. Some of the most obvious evidences of this can be seen in the “councils of men” that began in the 4th century that made changes that led to the papacy as a replacement of Jesus as the head of the church. The Mormon religion came out with their own Bible that actually invalidates the True Word of God in their eyes. The Jehovah’s Witnesses have done the same. But so has every church that has drawn up a creed to which men must subscribe in order to be a part of “their church.” The Reformation Movement gave lip service to the concept of letting the Bible be the only guide, but in practice they have failed to show the proper respect for the Bible.

THE GRAVITY OF TEACHING

Men must recognize the gravity of striving to teach others the way to Eternal Life (James 3:1). The warning is plain, and the danger is real...the danger of being a “false teacher” and misleading people. We shall face a stricter judgment because we choose to teach. Jesus warned of the dangers of false teachers who wear “sheep’s clothing” to disguise their true nature—“ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15). The differences between a “righteous teacher” and a “false teacher” can be seen in his **motives for teaching, in his life, and in what he does and does not teach**. The Scriptures are filled not only with the admonitions on what to teach, but on how to teach and how to live up to those teachings. There are also many Scriptures that identify who is a false teacher, what he teaches, his motives for teaching, and his life.

WHAT WE ARE ADMONISHED TO TEACH OR PREACH

Preach the Word. (2 Timothy 4:2)

Preach Sound Doctrine. (Titus 1:9; 2:1, 7-8; 2 Timothy 1:13)

Things previously taught by the Apostles. (2 Timothy 2:2; 3:14)

Traditions you were taught. (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

Preach Christ out of goodwill, love, and sincerity. (Philippians 1:14-18; 2:20)

Warn every man. (Colossians 1:28)

Teach with grace, seasoned with salt. (Colossians 4:6)

Speaking the truth in love. (Ephesians 4:15)

To exhort, comfort, and charge every one. (1 Thessalonians 2:10-11)

To establish you and encourage you concerning your faith. (1 Thessalonians 3:2-3)

“These things” command and teach. (1 Timothy 4:6, 11)

Not to preach to please men. (1 Thessalonians 2:4)

Not to preach to satisfy itching ears. (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Not to preach to receive glory of men. (1 Thessalonians 2:5-6)

Not to preach out of shame of the gospel. (Romans 1:16)

Strive to live up to my teaching. (Philippians 1:27-28)

Be willing to sacrifice and suffer persecution for preaching truth. (Philippians 2:29-30)

HOW TO IDENTIFY A FALSE TEACHER

BY HIS LIFE:

a) **By his fruits.** (Matthew 7:15-20)

b) **False humility, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.** (Colossians 2:18)

c) **Opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.** (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4)

d) **They exploit people to get what they want.** (2 Peter 2:1-3)

e) **Transform themselves into apostles of Christ or as ministers of righteousness.** (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

Unless there is close association with such a person, it may be very hard to identify a false teacher by what little we may know of his life, unless he openly advocates ungodliness or unrighteousness. The Corinthian letter indicates that they can pose as ministers righteousness, but they are not. They are deceitful, crafty and clever and camouflage their true identity. They are deceptive and cunningly devise a way to conceal their real purpose (Genesis 3:13; 2 Timothy 3:13; Ephesians 4:14; 5:6; 2 Peter 2:1-3).

BY HIS TEACHINGS:

a) **Turn to weak and beggarly elements—teaching to observe days, months, seasons, and years.** (Galatians 4:9-11)

b) **Empty words.** (Ephesians 5:6-7)

c) **Teaching observances of Old Covenant.** (Colossians 2:16)

d) **Teaching the worshipping of angels.** (Colossians 2:18)

e) **Teach basic principles of the world, regulations—touch not, taste not, do not handle.** (Colossians 2:20-23)

f) **Teach a lie.** (2 Thessalonians 2:11)

g) **Teaching a rejecting of the faith.** (1 Timothy 1:19-20)

h) **Teach doctrines of demons, speak lies in hypocrisy from a seared conscience—forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from foods.** (1 Timothy 4:1-5)

i) **Teach fables, endless genealogies that cause disputes.** (1 Timothy 1:3-4)

j) **Idle talk, erroneous teachers of the law from misunderstanding.** (1 Timothy 1:6-7)

- k) **Strive about words to no profit—profane and idle babblings that increase to more ungodliness.** (2 Timothy 2:14-16)
- l) **Teaching that the resurrection is already past.** (2 Timothy 2:18)
- m) **Teach things that are foolish and ignorant that leads to disputes and strife.** (2 Timothy 2:23)
- n) **Turn from truth and teach fables.** (2 Timothy 4:4)
- o) **Teach things that lead to foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, strivings about the law that is unprofitable and useless.** (Titus 3:9-11)

Simply stated, the false teacher turns to the authority of men and rejects the authority of God. He does not want to build a church and call it the church of Satan for he is too clever. He wants to turn the church of God into a church of Satan. The false teacher becomes the mouthpiece of Satan.

BY HIS MOTIVES FOR TEACHING FALSE THINGS:

- a) **They desire to pervert the gospel.** (Galatians 1:6-9)
- b) **He teaches to please men, not God.** (Galatians 1:10)
- c) **To rob us of our liberty in Christ and bring us into bondage.** (Galatians 2:4)
- d) **To hinder us from obeying the truth.** (Galatians 5:6)
- e) **Their god is their belly.** (Philippians 3:18-19)
- f) **To deceive with persuasive words.** (Colossians 2:4)
- g) **To cheat us through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world.** (Colossians 2:8)
- h) **To judge us and to cheat us of our reward in Christ.** (Colossians 2:16, 18)
- i) **To use flattering words to get gain and glory from men.** (1 Thessalonians 2:5-6)
- j) **To deceive.** (2 Timothy 3:13; Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9)

It should be obvious to the good Bible student that all of the above passages are not the full extent of what could be given on these things. However, we believe that sufficient references have been given to give a strong indication of the characteristics of false teachers. The curse of God rests upon the false teachers that would pervert the Gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:9; 5:10, 12), but the damage will still be done by their false teaching.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is important that we not only recognize false teachers, but know how to deal with such. We are warned to beware of them by Jesus (Matthew 7:15). False teachers and false doctrines have been around for a long, long time. It started in the Garden of Eden by the serpent and it has continued ever since. There is a grave danger of being tolerant of such teachers to the point that their damage will become great. We are reluctant to denounce their false doctrines as well as to denounce them if they will not cease. This gives them time to subvert whole houses, divide churches, lead multitudes away from the Lord. We certainly ought to manifest love and understanding towards such, but at the same time be diligent to correct the false teaching or stop them from teaching. God hates workers of iniquity (Psalm 5:5; 119:128). When we know that such teachers are in our midst, they need to be admonition; and if they will not stop their false teaching, to withdraw from them and have nothing to do with them (1 Timothy 6:3-5; Romans 16:17-18; 2 John 9-11). We need to hear Biblical teaching and preaching!

