

Unity or Conformity?

Thoughts on the Call to Brotherhood Unity and Revival

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August 27, 2005

Introduction

In recent days a proposal has been made to bring the former ICOC congregations back together into a worldwide organization with common methods and practices for reaching the world with the gospel and for ministering to the needs of the membership. Surely all who love Jesus desire to see the world brought to him, and to see his Body built up. However, I believe it would be a mistake to try to limit the Holy Spirit by codifying our methods, and building an organization to constrain congregations around the world to use those methods. Doing so goes beyond what is written in the scriptures, limits the Holy Spirit, and would inherently create factions within the Body of Christ.

We Are Brothers

Twenty-nine years ago I was met by a group of disciples on a college campus. I studied the scriptures with their help and became aware of my sin and my need for forgiveness. I learned what Jesus did for me on the cross. I learned what it meant to make Jesus Lord of my life, and made that confession. I repented of my sins and was baptized for forgiveness of my sins. At that time God added me to his church, adopting me as his son.

There are many, many people who have a story similar to mine. The details are different of course, but in the end we were all baptized into Christ and were adopted as sons by God and added to his church. Therefore, we are brothers.

Note, our being brothers is determined, not by our hard work, our wise and effective methods, nor anything else like that. It is entirely because of our adoption as sons by God at the time of our conversions.

Unity and Building Churches

The first four chapters of 1 Corinthians address a problem of unity in the young Corinthian church. The focus of the Corinthians was not on Jesus as it

should have been, but instead on the personalities and methods of men. In 1 Cor 3:10-15, we learn that there can be different approaches to building a church. Some approaches will be more effective than others. The quality of each builder's work will be tested by God when "the Day" brings it to light.

Continuing on this discussion in chapter 4, Paul gives further instruction on how we should view these different methods. It is required that the builder prove faithful. He will be held accountable by God. Paul did not care about any human judgment of his work, but he cared a great deal about the judgment of God over his work. In verses 5-6 he concludes the matter by saying:

1Co 4:5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

1Co 4:6 Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.

We are not to judge the builder's work "before the appointed time". Lest there be any mistake, he clarifies, "wait till the Lord comes". At that time the quality of the work will be tested. This is "the Day" when the quality of the work is brought to light. We are to permit the various builders to build according to their convictions, leaving judgment on their work to God. And we are not to create factions around preferred methods in the meantime.

Wait till the Lord comes. I believe that failure to heed this clear instruction from God will lead to many shortcuts and mistakes in building. The short term parameters by which we measure progress will overrule the long term measure which matters most--that is, who will persevere to the end? Those are the ones who will be saved.

Call to Brotherhood Unity and Revival

Brotherhood unity and revival are wonderful things. However, the recent proposal creates a new litmus test of uniform methods for deciding who is unified. That is not what the scriptures teach.

We do not need to call for uniformity of building methods in order to be unified. Remember, it is not our methods that make us brothers. We also do not need to call for a new organizational structure to make us brothers. What is needed most of all is a common love for God and each other, a mutual respect, and submission to the scriptures. We need to be sure that we "Do not go beyond what is written" in what we expect of our brothers.

The document "Call to Brotherhood Unity and Revival," or any similar effort to bring about conformity of methods, will create factions in the church. It will cause those who adopt the document to "take pride" over the others who do not, who instead choose other methods which they believe meet their ministries' needs more effectively. Remember, those who create factions in the church will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19-21).

Calling Out the Remnant?

Revelations 3:1-6

Rev 3:1 "To the angel[1] of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits[2] of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Rev 3:2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

Rev 3:3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Rev 3:4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

Rev 3:5 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.

Rev 3:6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The only positive thing Jesus said about the church in Sardis was that there were still a few people who had not soiled their clothes. Yet Jesus did not call out these few as a remnant to make a church of only "sold-out" disciples with clean clothes. Instead he left them with the others and admonished the entire church to remember what they had heard, obey it, and repent.

We should follow the example of Jesus. Perhaps we believe the condition in some church is as bad as in Sardis. Perhaps we are right about that, and perhaps not. But even if we are right, we should leave the few righteous disciples in the midst of the others as the Lord did. I think the Lord knew what was best.

Conclusion

I pray that we will not do further damage to God's kingdom by creating an elite faction within the brotherhood, one that will look down on churches that do not conform to the group's chosen methods. I pray that we can learn to respect our brothers and accept the same diversity that the Lord accepts. And I pray that we will learn not to go beyond what is written.

This is one man's view.

Your brother,
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