

CHIEF

MINISTRIES

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Constantly, different men run up to me and asked me what I believe about this, that and the other regarding religions, ideology, eschatology, etc.: etc. Why are Christians so divided?

I would like to give you 4 reasons. The first one is simple but probably the most difficult to tolerate. The discord among Christians lies in the nature of man. *“The heart is deceitful above all things,”* said Jeremiah, *“and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9). Believers can argue that through Jesus they have received a new heart (Romans 6). Rightly so! And yet Christians have to battle with sin in their old body (Romans 7). As long as we are in this body tainted by sin, it is impossible for us to see everything correctly. *“Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face”* (1 Corinthians 13:12). Only when we are resurrected and transformed, and see our Lord face-to-face will we understand everything (1 John 3:2).

Christians have different personalities; they have various strengths and weaknesses, preferences, sins with which we have to do battle. Our education, our maturity, our spiritual gifts, our relationship with the Lord, our perception is different. No wonder we are often so divided! People are complicated, feeling and thinking beings. Christians are no exception. Conversion has not made us into robots that all perform alike. *“The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out”* (Proverbs 20:5).

God’s Word is objective truth, but it is subjectively viewed by man. Jacob (James), the leader of the Jerusalem mother church, said concerning doctrine, *“We all stumble in many ways”* (Jacob [James] 3:2). For this reason Christians should not be too hasty to become teachers of the word, *“.... Because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly* (Jacob [James] 3:1)

Jacob (James) 3:2 is a “royal verse” in connection with our question. If a half-brother of Jesus and a “pillar” of the early church (Galatians 1:9) says that “we all” stumble and includes himself, how much more does this statement apply today, seeing that we are 2000+ years and culturally light years away from the apostles?

Today, we have various competitive theological systems and premises, which have an influence on how we read our Bibles. We may not realize this consciously, but through the churches that we attend, the classes we take, who the teachers are, what theological background they have, what Bible classes or schools we’ve attended, or the Christian literature that we read, yes, even this newsletter, we are all influenced differently. On the Protestant side we have covenant theologians, replacement theologians, dispensationalists, ultra-dispensationalists, progressive dispensationalists, Baptists, Calvinists, Lutherans, open and closed brethren, Universalists, Armenians, amillennialists, post-millennialist, pre-millennialist, mid- tribulationists, post-tribulationists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, etc., etc., etc..... And almost all of them can rightly say that they only believe in the Bible, but they are all influenced by different interpreters and systematic theologians. The Christian culture in which we live inevitably colors the glasses with which we read the Bible.

Do not interpret this wrongly. Everyone has such glasses, and this is fine. The art is to find the right glasses. Paul expected us to read the Word of God *“by sound doctrine”*. (Titus 1:9) The sound apostolic doctrine should be our filter. Anyone who says they read the Bible without their glasses deceives themselves. For instance, no normal Christian applies the Sinai covenant to stone rebellious sons in their daily life. (Deuteronomy 21:18-21)

We must realize that we all - even the wisest and most pious Bible teachers are fallible creatures. None of us would excel above Jacob (James) in any way. We are people who can even deceive ourselves. The Bible knows this (Jeremiah 17:9). Secular psychologists have already discovered this. By nature we tend to perceive the reality as it fits in our schema and our subjective view of the world. This is why we often speak at contrary purposes and get nowhere. We are always in danger of applying words and sentences in the Bible according to our personal view.

For example, there is a person who is very neat and tidy in his views and systematic in his thoughts. Everything in his life needs clear structures and explanations. He is rational and logical and does not like ambiguity. Where will he

lean in respect to Bible interpretation? He may have a liking for a sound system of exegesis, which orders the doctrines of the Bible completely into different water tight and clear dispensations. It would be important for him to have everything explained in detail, and he would see that no errors found their way into it.

Then there is another person who is a so-called artistic type. His motto is, only stupid people need order, the genius overlooks the chaos. He believes that he himself is a genius. What others would find to be contraindications are for him the spice of life. He strives continually for a higher spiritual level. He is never tired of life. He would have a dislike for systematic, exegetical systems and maintained that we must not put God in a box. He would desire a more mystical, "holistic" approach to the Bible that has the 'big picture' in mind. Paradoxes are welcome, and there is room for ambiguities.

Both believe the same: in this example there is not a good man and an evil man. Both love Jesus Christ, accept the Trinity of God, uphold the Word of God, and believe the gospel. And yet the theologies that they have formed around the core of their faith are somewhat fundamentally different.

In a way, we all want a theological house in which we can feel comfortable; and because we have very different personalities, our theological houses may look quite different. As a Bible teacher once explained, however, every theological house has its skeletons in the closet! Because we err, because we are sinful, because we have our preferences, and because we have our limitations, in our inner convictions there will always be points that others do not understand, and - are wrong! And here we come to the second point.

We Christians are so divided because we are living here on earth and not in heaven. Are we always aware of what we are actually talking about and discussing? Ultimately, we are talking about God the Almighty, about the One who the "highest heavens" could not contain (1 Kings 8:27), and whose thoughts are so much higher than our thoughts as "the heavens are higher than the earth" (Isaiah 55:9). Certainly, this God reveals Himself to us in His Word and is visible in Jesus Christ. And yet He is still the eternal God, "Who lives in an unapproachable light" (1 Timothy 6:16).

What does this have to do with skeletons in the closet? It is quite simple. We can never fully comprehend God with our systems and human thoughts. There will always be parts of God's word and in theology that we ultimately cannot completely fathom. We are concerned with the Almighty God and the inexhaustible riches of His immeasurable, manifold wisdom. We are concerned with the knowledge of His plan of salvation, which exceeds our understanding and which angels longed to look into (1 Peter 1:12)

We often discuss and argue with Christians the things which we cannot completely understand: the sovereignty and being of the triune God, His plan for the future and eternity. It is completely normal that we finite people are stretched to our limits when we think of and meditate on the eternal God and therefore reach different conclusions.

"Our God is a consuming fire," it says in Hebrews 12:29. Every meeting with Him, the infinite One, will cause us finite creatures to tremble and, according to our nature, affect us differently. "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him (Psalms 34:9). Everyone can and may experience the goodness of the Lord, but because He is so different in His nature, so infinite, every person will taste and see His goodness differently.

Be careful! There is no excuse for the greatest of all false doctrines that show all religions lead to God. The Bible says unmistakably, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Only those who believe in Jesus Christ alone and recognize Him as the Lord of their lives (Acts 16:31) will be redeemed, and no one else. But, because they are different and finite, these Christians will attempt to explain the inexhaustible fullness of their God differently.

If all Christians of all time were in agreement on every detail of the contents of the Bible, one could say that we have a very superficial book in our hands. Because the opposite is the case, however, and there is so much controversy concerning the Bible, because the words of the Bible speak to and divide our hearts and families, churches and even countries; and because we never see the end of arguing over it, we know and recognize that God is God and His word is His word.

Certainly, a Muslim could say the same about the divisive Koran, but here we come to the third point - demons are profound. This is not exactly politically correct; oh well, but false religions are from the viewpoint of the apostles, demonically inspired (1 Timothy 4:1). And this is something that we Christians often forget. *We are dealing with rulers, authorities, the powers of this dark world, and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).*

The idols that Israel worshiped in the Old Testament were real! The statues made of stone and wood, which served as objects of worship, had no life or content, but the gods of the Nations themselves were real, for behind them were real demonic powers. It would be silly to say of God that He is greater than the god's if these did not exist (Deuteronomy 4:7, 10:17, Isaiah 36:20) that would be like the Lord saying, "I'm greater than Santa Claus!"

These gods were and are real. They are demons that inspire false doctrines, and religions, and war against the only true God and His church. We are concerned with the "*devil's schemes*" (Ephesians 6:11), an opponent who can disguise himself as an "*angel of light*" (2 Corinthians 11:14), and "*like a roaring lion prowls around looking for someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:8)

Do we really believe that this real enemy, with thousands of years' experience and a network of demons similar to God's angels, has not managed to do damage to the church of the living God? If we are not watchful and not wearing the whole armor of God, we are a target for beings that are much more powerful than we are.

Our disunity unfortunately comes from the fact that we let ourselves be taken by surprise by demonic thoughts. We believe the worst of others; we don't allow ourselves to be guided by the principles of the gospel and love; we fall into gossip and slander, and into traps that are made to measure for us; we let ourselves be flattered, except false advice, or act in anger. So often in Christian quarrels, hatred, anger and bitterness are involved. These feelings do not come from God, in whom is light and no darkness.

I need to beat my own chest. We forget so quickly that we are easily influenced, weak, fragile and dependent creatures, who are in the midst of a cosmic battle that we are not able to win in our own strength. With this we come to the fourth reason for division.

This spiritual battle becomes fiercer and more dangerous the nearer we come to the end. The wealth that we in America enjoy, and the deception that surrounds us on all sides, can cloud our views of this reality. But the New Testament makes it clear that the time between the cross and the return of Jesus is an evil time, which gets worse and worse (Hebrew 1:2, Ephesians 5:16, Matthew 24-25). Paul emphasizes that "*there will be terrible times in the last days*" in one of his letters concerning the church (2 Timothy 3:1), in which "*people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power.*"

Notice that lovelessness, pride and irreconcilability will increase in the last days. I do not know how far we have progressed, but one thing is clear; we are nearer to the end now than 2000 years ago, and the increase of the above characteristics in our day should at least make us think. We need to be surprised that Christianity today appears to be more quarrelsome than at its beginnings. The signs of the last days are undermining the church, and it's getting worse. Biblical prophecy tells us this.

That is why it is a miracle that Christians today are of the same opinion on anything! Considering the limited nature of man, the infinitely mysterious nature of God, the demonic power of the invisible world, and the biblical proclamations for the end times, we should be asking; "Why are Christians so often united? The answer is, it is thanks to the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the underestimated God. Many people attribute absurd ideas to Him, and others expect nothing at all of Him. And yet God is a triune God and not a twofold God and this is the guarantee of our security. Through the Holy Spirit, the fullness of God dwells in us. (Ephesians 1:13-14, 17; 3:14-19). He is the comforter and advocate who changes our unwilling, stormy and weak hearts, and makes us still. He has sealed us. This is why we can understand the word of God (1 Corinthians 2:11). And for this reason we are more than the greatest prophets in the Old Testament, and can do greater things than the miracles of Jesus. (Luke 7:28, John 14:12). God himself dwells in us, and has made us capable of functioning for 2000 years without a visible King, as a "religion" without a visible sanctuary, and as an organic unity without blood relations. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are in a position to be one with people from whom we are separated by thousands of years, thousands of miles, or thousands of cultural differences. This miracle is greater than all that took place under the old covenant. But do you really see it that way? Or have you become so "religious" that you're full of dead man's bones and don't see yourself as you perhaps really are?

We are not united with a sword, or fear, or nationality, but with the Holy Spirit of God. The power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead has watched over us for 2000 years, that the redeemed of the Father may worship Him "in

Spirit and in truth”, confess the name of Jesus, and wait for His return. This is the greatest miracle that the invisible world has ever seen (Ephesians 3:9-10). God’s limitless fullness in weak, once fallen and still limited people.

This is all very well, some people may object, but despite the Holy Spirit, it is a fact that we believers are often not one in spirit. What can we do about this? There is only one answer, in my opinion. This refers only, however, to particular theological disputes among Christians. It is not about the question of what we should do when other believers sin against us through their behavior, their deeds, their words, and what they neglect to do for us. And it is not just about Christians who try to justify immorality, greed, or similar things under the cloak of the gospel.

Let’s first admit this. There are good reasons why many Christians are so argumentative. It is their task. Paul emphasizes that good church leaders should “silence” the false teachers and “rebuke them sharply” (Titus 1:11, 13). Like Paul, they should not tolerate for a moment the false brothers who had “*infiltrated their ranks to spy on their freedom (they had) in Jesus Christ and to make (them) slaves*”. “*We did not give in to them for a moment, and that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.*” (Galatians 2:4-5). Christians, especially church leaders and teachers, cannot allow themselves to compromise (Titus 2:7). Believers must fight for a sound doctrine (2 Timothy 1:13, Titus 1:9, 2:1). The question that arises here is, who has, in the jungle of Christian confessions and creeds, the one sound doctrine, and who should be avoided? Let’s look at the word.

During his captivity in Rome, Paul experienced that some Christians (or pseudo-Christians) preached the gospel to harm him. He rejoiced over this because for him, the main thing was that Christ was preached, whether from false motives or true (Philippians 1:15-18). Paul did not make any argument to correct the argumentative. For him, those people did not belong to those who had to be silenced. A sign of sound doctrine for Paul was not that somebody should be in his camp, but that they preached Jesus Christ. The apostles letters made it clear that to preach Christ is the same as preaching the gospel (Romans 1:9, 16; 10:15-16; 15:20; 16:25; 1 Corinthians 9:2; 2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6-11; 2:5, 14). In the last epistle of the apostle Paul, we see that the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is closely connected with sound doctrine. (2 Timothy 1:8, 2:8; 4:5). Those who have recognized Jesus have recognize the gospel, and those who have recognize the gospel have recognize sound doctrine - and vice versa. Sound doctrine is the gospel! So much of that other stuff men have added is their own religion getting in the way of the Holy Spirit. Trust me, they will all have to answer for that one day.

When Paul writes in the letter to the Ephesians, that he expects us Christians to “*keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*” (Ephesians 4:3), then that is never possible without the gospel of Jesus Christ. After this, Paul shows us why Christians can and must be one, for we are 1) one body; we believe in 2) one spirit; we have 3) one hope; we serve 4) one Lord; we share 5) one faith; we practice 6) one baptism; and we have 7) one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4-6). We can see in this a summary of the sound doctrine and gospel.

The great challenge is to give these points a concrete foundation. A possible problem in our consideration of other believers, is that we require unity on an unrealistic basis. We only accept the Christians who are one with us in almost every detail - thus making us fallible creatures in the measure of all things. And yet the measure for unity is much simpler: it is the gospel of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that we do not mention errors, which as a teacher of the gospel, I am certainly not afraid to do. Nor should we tolerate sin! If we let everything stand because they mention the name of Jesus, we will never make any progress. But we should examine things very carefully on whether it is necessary to combat them, or whether we should let love, forbearance and peace prevail. And here we come to the answer on how we can find true unity.

The answer, the keyword is: humility. Sometimes we must simply render our pride as dead (Romans 6:11). This is not easy but it is necessary. When we read the epistle of Jacob (James) carefully, we see that the recipients had their problems with pride and knowing better. (Think of the people around you including yourself right now). Everyone wanted to teach the other and be a teacher of the church. (Sound familiar?). Now Jacob (James) asks those who would like to be, the measure of all things, “*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom*” (Jacob [James] 3:13). With this our pride is attacked. Our wisdom and understanding in doctrinal questions is not proved in our detailed dogma, but in how meek we are in our dealings with others. This is true wisdom.

“But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness” (Jacob [James] 3:14-18).

Mind you these words are in a chapter in which Jacob (James) says that not many should desire to be teachers, as we all stumble in many ways. Unity in the spirit is possible if we really display wisdom from above. The wisdom is not shown in being argumentative, assertive or condescending, but in the will to be meek, compassionate and seek peace. Thus, unity, does not begin with Christians who in my opinion, error in their theology and must be corrected, but with ourselves - with each one of us personally.

Good Christians and Bible teachers are peacemakers, who rejoice when Jesus Christ is preached. Paul says it like this in Ephesians 4:1-3, *I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ^{v2}with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ^{v3}eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

It is a challenge to each of us not to be proud but humble, not quarrelsome but meek, not abstinent but compassionate. It's easy to criticize other believers from the pulpit, newsletters, "confidential" conversations. True greatness and wisdom consist of something quite different.

Our attitude concerning those followers of Christ with whom we are not of the same opinion on everything should be like Paul's in Philippians 1:18, *What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.*

..... Praying that we may be one.

Chief

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Christ's

Heart

In

Every

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