

## **Is the Reformation to be Blamed for Everything?**

The New Testament (NT) books from Acts to Revelation confirm the fact that Christ has always renewed his church, “cleansing her by the washing with water through the word” (Eph 5:26). The renewal of the church, thus, exists since the very beginning of the church itself. The renewal is not, and it cannot be, a non-repetitive act; the movement of the Reformation of the church did not start as late as the Middle Ages, but had already started on the day of the establishment of the church in Jerusalem.

The church is a “living organism” comprised of people inclined toward mistakes and failures. Therefore, it is not an odd fact that the church has staggered and suffered, not only because of evil forces from without, but because of continual struggles from within. The church has suffered some of its worst strikes when it looked strong on the outside, and when its leaders were preoccupied with dominion, might and the conquering of territories. The struggles were always fought against different opinions, and that which was considered to be a heresy was fought against by “fire and sword”. However, that was far from a real and intrinsic renewal. Endless division and splits are well known in Christian circles. When a person disagrees with another person, they depart and found “their own church”. It is hard to consider this to be the way and path to a renewal of the unified church.

The Bible teaches that the process of the renewal of the church begins and ends at a personal level. The renewed church is an assembly of renewed individuals. Is this not what Paul meant when he declared: “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (2 Co 4:16)?

If the inner person is renewed day by day, then the same thing happens to the whole church. What a wonderful thing it would be if all Christians were in one accord and praised the Lord in unison and love! The church is losing a lot through disunity. Every person is pulling to his/her side, and they think that they own the right to present God’s truth, especially the right to hold their thumb on that which they consider to be the truth of God. Through his own Son, in the greatest and most powerful prayer ever spoken, God pleaded for unity, as written in the Gospel of John. This prayer contains much invoking, much praise and much humility. Jesus was ready to do that which the Father was requiring of Him.

“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me” (Jn 17:6-8).

The first condition for the unity of the church is found in “obedient adherence to the Word.” Therefore, in the further sequence of his prayer, Jesus prays: “also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one” (Jn 17:21). Division leads to intolerance and argument, as Jesus warns in the Gospel of Matthew: “Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand’” (Mt 12:25). But the church has known periods of peace, agreement and unity: “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had” (Ac 4:32). But such periods did not last long.

No one can be proud of the current situation, namely the disunited Christian world. During the past twenty centuries, the followers of Christ have founded several hundred different confessions and religious groups. Their sizes range from small groups that have only several hundred members to those that gather several million adherents. The spectrum is diverse: from traditional and fundamental to extremely liberal. Various teachings of allegedly divine background often represent the most unbelievable viewpoints. These teachings of various religious groups are mutually inconsistent in many aspects. They all consider themselves to be solely and absolutely correct, thus imposing their doctrine and speculations on others. The interested spectator is offered a long list of possibilities. Rivalry and argument are on the agenda. Thus, because of the overall confusion generated as a result of the desire for predominance on the spiritual scene, the meaning of the gospel is being altered beyond recognition. Nothing has ever brought more harm to the reputation of Christianity than the senseless drowsiness among those that argue to follow the Savior. Thus, Satan is conceded with a vast field for a destructive operation.

There are several reasons that have led to the division of Christianity:

**1) Neglect and ignorance of the revealed Truth:** “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also reject you as my priests; because you have ignored the law of your God, I also will ignore your children” (Hos 4:6). “Jesus replied, ‘You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God’” (Mt 22:29).

**2. Speculations regarding still unrevealed truths,** e.g., the time of the second coming of Christ, even though the Lord Himself said, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mt

24:36).

**3. A distorted biblical teaching:** Christ's followers are divided most often by the things which the Bible does not teach, and not by that which it teaches.

**4. Humanity's aspiration for power:** "I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church" (3 Jn 9:10).

Various forms of church autocracy are typical examples of this phenomenon. Following are abstracts of three examples:

1. Rules and regulations that flow out of tradition, thus placing pressure on one's conscience, e.g., the tradition of the Pharisees in the time of Jesus' life:

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'" Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'" Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit" (Mt 15:1-14).

2. The pressure of the collective conscience – a tendency to place loyalty to a leader above loyalty to Jesus Christ and His church:

And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. "Everything is permissible for me" – but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me" – but I will not be mastered by anything. "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food" – but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ

himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body (1 Co 6:11-18).

3. A compromise with the world – a tendency to adjust the teachings of Christ regarding his value criteria to that of the world in order to become more attractive to the inert and pleasure-susceptible nature of the physical person:

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (Jas 4:4).

All of this leads to the sad consequence of divisions among Christians. So many delusions are being preached that many people do not know what is of a human and what is of a divine source, and this actually leads to fragmentations into small groups that are often incapable of spiritual life. The disunity of the church was well known in the very beginning of its history, and that is why Paul warns:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name (1 Co 1:10-15).

God's word strictly condemns the division of Christians. Division is in opposition to the teaching of Christ because it abnegates Christ's command to love: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:34-35). It is contrary to the spiritual because it belongs to the fleshly atrocities that destroy a person's humanity: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:19-21). Disunity should be repulsive to Christians because it causes members of the Body of Christ to defile the same Body: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ,

and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Co 12:26-27).

God’s word explicitly directs toward Christian unity:

“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited . . . May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ro 12:16; 15:5-6).

“Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Co 13:11).

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3).

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God . . . make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose . . . Only let us live up to what we have already attained” (Php 1:27-28; 2:2; 3:16).

“Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble” (1 Pe 3:8).

In order to actualize the biblical unity of the church, it is necessary to return to the common New Testament and to exercise the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* - Scripture only - because it is only in the Holy Scriptures that one can find a true sign post:

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!” (Gal 1:6-9);

“Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (2 Jn 9).

Embracing believers in the church, however, must coincide with the conditions and the revealed examples in the word of God. Adoring and worshiping God must be done according to the example of the early church, in Spirit and in truth. Membership in the church, beginning with the day of conversion, must depend only upon the consistency of the Christian way of life. The Bible condemns every division of Christians as a sinful act. Conversely, it demands a sincere unity of the followers of Christ as a true necessity. All the followers of Christ bear a personal responsibility and obligation to work toward achieving Christian unity. There is no need to wait for the whole Christian world to be united on the basis of agreement among the highest leadership of the church, rather to endeavor to live obediently according to God's word, and thus contribute to the actualization of biblical unity: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" (Ps 133:1).

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