

"A MATTER OF UNITY"
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He grew up in a Christian home.

Both of his parents loved and served the Lord Jesus.

When he was six he asked his father if he could become a Christian.

That night in his bedroom at his father's side, he asked Jesus into his heart.

His parents were elated.

There was no marked change in his life but after all he had grown up with Christian influences from his parents and his church family - and he fit in well with all that was expected of him as a Christian boy.

But by the time he was in high school it became increasingly apparent that following Jesus was not his highest priority.

He still went to church though not happily.

And while he still controlled his tongue when around his parents, if you had heard him at school or when with his friends, you would have heard very different language and topics of discussion.

By the time he was 19 he dropped all pretense of interest in spiritual things - and his lifestyle was little if any different from those who didn't even claim to be Christians.

When his parents confronted him, asking him if he was a Christian, he said, "Sure I'm a Christian, I'm just sowing some wild oats before I have to settle down."

"Don't worry dad and mom, I'm a Christian - don't you remember when I asked Jesus into my heart when I was six?"

"I'm just backsliden, I'm just a 'carnal' Christian, I just don't want to live like a Christian right now. But I'm o.k. Don't worry, if I died right now I'd still go to heaven - after all I am a Christian."

What's wrong with that picture?

Last Sunday I told you I wanted to do three things in this message today.

First I will speak to a topic that some have raised out of chapter three - the topic is the one I raised in the illustration I just gave you.

If a person asked Christ into his life, is he a Christian regardless of how he lives from that time on?

Does I Corinthians 3 teach that there are worldly, carnal, backslidden Christians?

Secondly, I said I wanted to briefly outline Paul's teaching on unity as found in his closing remarks on the subject in chapter four.

Thirdly, I will attempt to answer some questions you have raised in response to my first four messages from I Corinthians.

Several people wrote to me with their questions so I will attempt to respond to those first and then I will open it to any questions you may have today.

Let's begin by going back to the 19 year old I mentioned.

He prayed a prayer to invite Christ into his life when he was six but now, though he still calls himself a Christian, he has no interest in following Christ. Is he a Christian.

Some use I Corinthians 3 to build a doctrine that goes something like this:

There are three kinds of people in the world:

The natural person - the one who is not a Christian.

The spiritual person or Christian - the one in whom the Spirit of God dwells and rules.

And the Worldly Christian - one who is a Christian but is refusing to allow the Spirit of God to rule in his or her life.

The implication is that it is possible to remain very worldly in one's outlook and behavior and yet be a genuine Christian.

Or as the 19 year old in our illustration suggests - "I'm a Christian, it's just that I'm a worldly one."

The problem with this view is this:

What if there are many people who think they are o.k. with God when they are not?

What if a "worldly" Christian, as too commonly defined, is in fact no Christian at all?

It is eternally devastating to have a false security - to think you are a Christian when you aren't.

So what about this view that there are two kinds of Christians - those who are following Christ and those who aren't?

Please look at I Corinthians 2:14.

As we saw two weeks ago Paul clearly sees the difference between those who do not have the spirit of God (called "the natural man" in both the King James and the New American Standard translations) and those who do have the Spirit of God.

The difference here is between Christians and non-Christians.

Look now at I Corinthians 3:1.

As I said last week Paul here remarks on the contrast between what he expected the Corinthian Christians to be and what they in fact were.

He expected them to be "spiritual" (characterized by the Spirit) - in other words - he expected them to be obeying and following the Lord.

But what he discovered was that they were "worldly" (characterized by the world) - or in other words - he found that they while they are Christians they are acting like he would expect non-Christians to act.

Now if I have been clear in my words you could be expected to think that I have just confirmed that there are two kinds of Christians - spiritual and worldly.

But I think the context makes it evident that Paul is not talking about two kinds of Christians he is talking about levels of maturity.

And his criticism of them is that they are not as mature as they ought to be.

Paul has not, with these words, created two classes of Christians - Christians who follow Christ and Christians who don't.

Contrary to the popular application of these verses - there is nothing here to suggest these Corinthians are living in willful rebellion against the Lord.

In fact we discover in many of the chapters of this book, they are actively involved in worship, they are using their spiritual gifts, they think they are living in obedience to the Lord.

The fact that they are wrong about that and very wrong in some of the ways they are acting, especially toward each other, does not equate them with the person today who willfully turns his back on Christ and sets out to live life his own way while still saying "Oh, I'm a Christian, just a worldly one - like the "worldly" Christians in Corinth."

But our own experience tells us there are times in our lives when we do disobey God - when we act "worldly" - when we act like we expect non-Christians to act.

Are you saying that if that happens I'm not a Christian?

No I'm not talking about the Christian who struggles with sin in his or her life.

Notice I said, "struggles".

Christians struggle - we fail, we sometimes fail miserably and repeatedly - but our desire is to follow the Lord.

Sometimes even that desire seems weak - but it is there.

I'm talking about the person who claims to be a Christian but couldn't care less about following Christ.

There is no basis in these verses for such a person to call himself a Christian - a worldly one.

Some wish to include verse 15 (3:15) in this discussion. READ

They say, "See, there it says there will be some who have nothing to show for their lives but because they became a Christian they will be saved as it were by the skin of their teeth.

This verse is not talking about all Christians but about leaders.

And furthermore this verse is not talking about their sin but about their attempts at helping other Christians.

Some leaders will have worked in vain because they used the wrong materials to try to build up other Christians.

There is nothing here about some Christians still making it to heaven even though they never followed Christ.

Paul is very clear about those who don't follow Christ.

In 2Corinthians 13:5 he writes:

Examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you - unless, of course, you fail the test."

If their lives demonstrate everything but following Christ - there is serious reason to doubt that such people are Christians.

It doesn't square with the Scriptures to apply the label "Worldly" or "carnal" Christian to every one who made a profession of faith in Christ years earlier but who has lived for umpteen years without any evidence of Christian faith, repentance, values or interest.

It is much more likely we are dealing with someone who never truly became a Christian in spite of their words and even in spite of some of their actions for a time.

As your pastor, I implore you to never take any comfort from a misinterpretation of these verses to live in disobedience to the Lord and say "Well I'll be o.k. in the end - after all I am a Christian."

To be a Christian is to follow Christ - I will not do that perfectly, and I may even do it poorly at times, but the direction of a true Christian's life is to follow Christ. That is exactly what Paul is arguing for in this whole letter.

As I said earlier it had been my intention to summarize chapter 4 this morning before answering questions.

But the more I studied that chapter, the more I realized I could not do it justice by putting it into a 5 or 10 minute summary.

Instead, I will come back to chapter 4 in two weeks.

Next Week Pastor Wayne will be preaching from I Corinthians 5.
And then we will look more closely at chapter four in two weeks.

Last week I said I wanted to give time today to attempting to answer some of the questions that these messages in I Corinthians have raised.

So that is how we will spend the remainder of the time.

Let's summarize the first four chapters of Corinthians by reading again a key phrase. It is found in chapter 1 verse 10.

The bottom line then of these first chapters is that acting with spiritual pride toward each other and dividing from each other and picking our favorite spiritual leaders to the exclusions of others is contrary to everything about Christ, about the cross and about real Christian living.

But if that is true, what about the real world we see around us?

Why so many churches, so many denominations?

Is it wrong to have a Methodist church and a Baptist one?

How can I have unity with people with whom I disagree on important issues?

Let's see if we can respond to some of those questions:

Several of you sent me questions that were similar in that you asked

"What is a Christian to do when the church they are part of begins to teach and practice erroneous doctrines that are a matter of life and death?"

The key words in this question are "doctrines that are a matter of life and death".

I am choosing to define "life and death" as spiritual life and death.

In other words: those doctrines without which one could not become a child of God, beliefs without which one could not become a Christian.

I first of all answer that,

if a group of people, a church, has become apostate, has left the faith, is not Christian even though they claim to be,

if the truth about how to become a Christian is denied or not taught,

if being a part of that group is to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers,

then to leave such a church is not dividing from Christians at all but is simply to divide from those who are not Christians.
In fact we are commanded in 2Cor 6:17 to separate from them.

But the question remains: "What doctrines or issues are 'life and death'?"
What doctrines are so fundamental to Christianity that if one does not believe them, one cannot be a Christian?

And therefore if someone else doesn't agree on these, they and we are not brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Let me answer that first by asking some questions:

If another person claims to have placed their faith in Christ alone for their salvation and their actions bear witness to that faith,
and yet they don't understand or don't believe in baptism the way I do are they not a Christian?

Most of you would say a person can be ignorant of or wrong about biblical baptism and still be a Christian.

What if they don't believe in the virgin birth of Christ?

Isn't it possible for them to be ignorant of or wrong about the implications of no virgin birth and still be genuinely Christian?

What if they don't believe in the inerrancy of the Bible?

Isn't it possible for someone to believe the first chapters of the Bible are mythological in style and still be truly a Christian?

What if a person doesn't believe you can know for certain that you are a Christian?

Isn't it possible for them to be uncertain and still be born again?

In fact isn't it possible for people to be ignorant of, or uncertain of, or wrong about many things and still be genuinely a child of God?

Yes! there are many things they don't have to understand but what must they believe?

Let me answer that first with the words of the Bible:

Jn 1:12 "to all who receive Jesus, to those He gives the right to become children of God."

Jn 3:16 "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life".

Rom 10:9 "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead you will be saved."

To become a Christian is to trust in Jesus -

It is to turn to Jesus, trusting that through his death on the cross for me he can and will forgive me for the sin that separates me from God and will give me spiritual life which will never end.

If a person has turned to and is trusting in Jesus as saving-Lord then he or she is my brother or sister in the Lord.

Lacking that, he or she is not by brother or sister in the Lord and there is no spiritual unity between them and me.

If the doctrines are a matter of spiritual life or death then we not only may separate from those with whom we disagree on those issues, we are commanded to.

But several wrote asking, "What if we agree on the core doctrines but disagree on other very important issues?"

I concur that is a matter of real concern.

I have asked myself, could I stay in a church, under the preaching and teaching ministry if it taught that not only can you not be certain of whether you are a Christian or not but if you sin certain kinds of sins you lose your salvation and need to be born again, again?

I don't doubt that many true believers hold such doctrines but could I worship and cooperate in such a church?

I have asked myself, could I stay in a church where the pastor and elders, though personally godly men - truly converted to Jesus, didn't believe the Bible is the inspired inerrant Word of God?

Could I allow my children to grow up under teaching that could jeopardize their understanding of what, in the Bible, is important and what is not?

What issues would you fit into that category?

Because your list may be different than mine.

Now remember I am still talking about a church that truly is a church that belongs to Christ - these are real Christians.

But with the differences I've named, could I remain?

And if I left would I be sinning in the way Paul prohibits in I Corinthians?

Would I be dividing the body of Christ?

I think this addresses the issue of denominations as well.

Are denominations wrong?

And are those churches that refuse to be a denomination wrong by refusing to affiliate with those who are denominational?

Whether it is a denominational church or a non-denominational one they are separating from others on some issues (in the case of the non-denominational church it is the issue of denominationalism).

If we lived in a perfect world I don't think there would be denominational or non-denominational differences.

If we lived in a perfect world I don't think there would be different understandings of what God expects of us as a church.

I don't think we would differ on baptism, communion, worship style, perseverance of the saints, perfectionism, gifts of the Spirit, etc.

But we don't live in a perfect world.

And so I have to admit, as much as it hurts, that there may be issues over which we disagree that are so important to us that we cannot fellowship as intimately as brothers and sisters in the Lord as we wish we could.

Maybe for you the issue of the inerrancy of the Bible, or abortion, or baptism, or the rapture, or church government, or the gifts of the Spirit, or style of worship

would for you be so important that you could worship most intimately only with those who agreed with you on that issue or those issues.

While I may not agree with you that your particular issue is important enough to separate you from other believers, I do believe that God, in I Corinthians, has commanded us concerning the kind of attitude we have in such situations.

1. I think we learn from these chapters that remaining united is a high priority and nothing but the most serious issues should separate us.
2. I think we learn further, that we must do everything within our ability to bring a compromise, bring some accommodation that would enable us to live together in harmony rather than separate.
3. I think we are instructed to care so much about unity that it would pain us greatly to separate.
4. I think we are taught to consider the other person our brother or sister in the Lord even if we must separate.

5. I think we are to speak well of them and pray for them, and work for their welfare whenever we can in spite of the differences we have.

6. I think we are to be charitable even toward their understanding of the Bible on those issues where we disagree - recognizing that we too may be wrong.

I don't think the world around us has much problem with there being Baptists, Lutherans, Free Churches, Presbyterians, and Methodists.

But we invite their ridicule of our God not when we have differences but when we fight over them.