

Unity in Diversity

One wants to have a God with whom one can negotiate, a religion that consists of accomplishment and return, but not a God who breaks into our life as the living Lord and seizes upon something. Such a claim disturbs the balance of power; one must remove him. It can and dare not be that one is present who calls himself the Son of God.¹

In our quest for unity among God's people, individuals are frequently labeled as "false teachers" if their theology does not coincide with the *status quo*. As we seek to grasp the significance of the phrase "false prophets" in the New Testament writings, we need to rethink the traditional concept of unity within the Christian community. This study calls upon the reader to review old texts through new eyes in order to grasp and to maintain the unity for which our Lord Jesus prayed (John 17:20). The clarion call today among many sincere believers is *unity in conformity*, not *unity in diversity*. Diversity from the *status quo* frequently calls forth the epithet "false teacher." This essay seeks to set the stage for the further investigation into the misuse of the phrase (false prophets/teachers) against other believers who also believe in Christ's deity and His Incarnation. This study on **unity in diversity** is based on two chapters from the Book of Romans and one chapter from the Book of First Corinthians, which reading develops a correct understanding of the subject of false prophets within the Christian community. An awareness of Romans 14 and 15 and 1 Corinthians 8 should assist us in identifying more accurately the use of the phrase that is so loosely employed by many honest and genuine Christians that is not biblical.

It is significant that in Romans 14 and 15 that Paul does not indict believers as dishonorable interpreters or as false teachers for their lack of clear perception concerning the eating of meats and the keeping of certain holy days to the Lord. Even in the Corinthian correspondence, Paul does not castigate the Corinthians for their not fully grasping the utter futility of idols (1 Corinthians 8). The believers in Corinth were one because they believed in Jesus. They believed the Gospel facts—Jesus' Death, Burial, and Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1-8).

Their salvation was not contingent upon the acuteness of the human intellect or the logical powers of the mind to sort out all the problems encountered in their acceptance of Jesus as the Way of salvation. It was belief of and response to historical facts about Jesus that resulted in salvation by grace through faith, not adherence to opinions reliant upon the sharpness of one's human brainpower. Christianity is founded upon three leading facts: (1) Jesus Christ was crucified upon Mount Calvary, (2) His body was deposited in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and (3) He did actually rise from the dead on the third day. Christianity does not consist in matters of opinions, but upon facts.

¹Emil Brunner, *I Believe in the Living God: Sermons on the Apostles' Creed*, translated and edited by John Holden (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 66.

FIRST CORINTHIANS 8

If we profess Christianity, but, at the same time, do not understand that there is only one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 8:4-6) as many of the Corinthians did not fully comprehend, we wonder how the Christian community today would have reacted to one's lack of comprehension about the deity in the first century. Would the church today have accepted such individuals into the fellowship of the local congregation? Would today's fellowship of Christians have accused those individuals of being "false teachers" or "false prophets"? How did Paul react to this lack of comprehension about God? Just a casual reading of First Corinthians 8 reveals that many did not fully grasp the belief that there is just one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ.

Did Paul point the finger at them and lay the epithet of "false prophets" on them for their deficiency of discernment? How do we stack this unpleasant mix-up about doctrine in Corinth with the many questions that carve up God's people into so many warring factions today? Some of the Corinthians understood correctly, but, on the other hand, some believers still did not recognize accurately the identity of God. How did Paul deal with such absence in knowledge? He begins this chapter by admitting: "we all possess knowledge" (8:1b). Is correct understanding the most important issue in the life of the believer?

What happens when our knowledge exceeds that of another? What is the most worthy characteristic that exemplifies our favor with God? Is it knowledge or is it love? Paul goes right to the heart of what Christian fellowship is all about: "Knowledge **puffs up**, but love **builds up**" (8:1c). Do we say, "I know that I am right?" Is our fellowship with other believers based upon a relationship with Jesus through faith or is our fellowship based upon perfection in knowledge? Listen to Paul once more as he seeks to set the record straight: "The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know" (8:2). Regarding this same concept, Carl Ketcherside (1908-1989), author and editor of *Mission Messenger*, writes with justification:

Those who were in Christ in the days of the apostles were in error on many points. They were mistaken about a lot of things but they were not charged with "preaching another gospel." Freedom from error is not a condition of salvation else all men would be damned. We are not saved by attainment to a certain degree of knowledge but by faith in Christ Jesus. **It is by belief of facts related to him, and not by grasp of abstract truth, that we are justified before God.** Certainly it is not by performance of meritorious deeds nor by legalistic conformity. When we postulate a program of justification by knowledge we hang ourselves on the gallows we have constructed to rid ourselves of others, unless we are prepared to make ourselves even more ridiculous by affirming that we know as much as God.² (Emphasis mine—bold)

Do we know everything we ought to know? What is God concerned about? Again, Paul, through the Holy Spirit, plunges headlong into the very heart of what matters with God: "But the man **who loves God is known by God**" (8:3). If we love God, God loves us in spite of our

²Carl Ketcherside, "Another Gospel," *Mission Messenger* 27, no 1 (January 1965): 6-7.

lack of perfection in knowledge. Paul now argues that it is true that there is only one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ, but, at the same time, he stresses that not everyone knows this (8:7). How did Paul behave in response to those who were correct in their thinking? He says: “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (8:9). Are we following the example of Paul in this matter? Paul, as he seeks to summarize the attitude of toleration, cuts away all underbrush about one’s own path:

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³² Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—³³ even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. ¹ Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (10:31-33; 11:1)

Paul exercised the spirit of open-mindedness for shortage of knowledge within the fellowship of God’s new community. He followed the example of Christ. Do we follow the pattern of Christ? What did Christ do? Paul describes Christ’s spirit of liberality and generosity in the Roman Epistle. One can hardly read this statement of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 without reflection upon his conclusion to Chapter Fourteen in the Book of Romans:

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³ For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”^c ⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Romans 15:1-7)

ROMANS 14 AND 15

False teachers are not by definition those whose knowledge is inadequate. To require that we have perfect knowledge of every detail of God’s Word in order to be a trustworthy teacher is to insist on inerrancy and infallibility, an impossible task, even for the most highly trained in the field of biblical interpretation. To expect such an accomplishment is to demand that one be God. **Romans 14 is a chapter on how to maintain unity in diversity.** There will always be differences within the Christian community. Therefore, we ought **not** to denounce one another as dishonest guides when we do not dot every “i” or cross every “t” in the same way.

We can no more all think alike than we can all look alike. God has never made absolute perfection in knowledge a condition of salvation; otherwise, none of us could be saved. On the other hand, we can also say that absolute freedom from error is not a condition of salvation either; otherwise, none of us could be saved. We are one in Christ because God has reconciled us unto Himself in and through Jesus, not through intellectual attainment. Toleration for differences of opinions is the subject of Romans 14 and 15, not absolute conformity in belief

c Psalm 69:9

with other believers, whether right or wrong.

Within the natural realm as well as the spiritual realm, we recognize that there are **infants, children, young men and women**, and **fathers** in both domains, and, as a result of these separations, misinterpretations exist in our endeavor to understand God's Word more perfectly. This diversity resides in both worlds—**secular** and **spiritual**—because of the discrepancy of age, the degree of education, cultural background (physical and spiritual), and many other factors. And, as a result of this individuality in perception, distinctions in sharpness are unavoidable.

Is misapprehension of God's Word defiance against God? No! Misunderstanding of God's Word is not rebellion. An honest mistake of the heart is not mutiny. There is distinctiveness between a guileless infraction of the heart and an uprising against God. It is not right for us to castigate (haul over the coals) someone just because we think that our knowledge is more accurate or more developed than someone else's knowledge. We should never exclude another human being from fellowship because of a condition of mental deficiency, or feeble-mindedness, that is to say, one who does not assent to our opinions.

We are not divided over the essentials—Gospel facts—but rather we are on bad terms over issues we have inherited from our traditions. We should practice *unity in diversity* as advanced by Paul in his admonition to the believers in Rome and Corinth. In **Romans, Chapter 14, Paul develops the concept of unity in diversity** and forcefully concludes with the following counsel as stated earlier in this chapter (repetition is unavoidable and is repeated for emphasis):

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.² Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.³ For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."^c ⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,⁶ so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Romans 15:1-7)

Who are the strong? Who are the weak? Were the weak false teachers? Were the strong true teachers? Does inaccuracy in doctrine automatically make us corruptible teachers? Does it not all depend on what the teaching is? Were some wrong in their sensitivity about the keeping of certain days holy to the Lord or the legality of eating certain meats? Were some correct in their views while others were mistaken in their views? What does fellowship mean? What does endorsement mean?

Can we be in fellowship with another person and not necessarily subscribe to the totality of what the other person believes? **Are we in fellowship with persons or things?** Which? Should we equate fellowship and endorsement as one and the same? For example, do we consider ourselves in fellowship with God? If so, do we maintain that God endorses everything we believe or do? Who would be so foolish as to make such a claim? If we can be in fellowship with God without God endorsing everything we believe or do, can we not be in fellowship with

c Psalm 69:9

other believers without endorsing everything the other believes?

What does it mean to exercise “a spirit of unity”? What does it mean to glorify God “with one heart and mouth”? What does it mean to “accept one another . . . just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God”? How does God accept us? Does He not approve of us with warts and all? Should not we take in other believers with warts and all? Has God received us with imperfection in our knowledge and famine in our daily living? Are we to receive others with shortage in their knowledge and fallibility in their daily living? These are questions that we must address. The Holy Spirit nails the coffin shut about these issues: “**Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you**, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7).

Again, from the Scriptures, we determine that a false prophet/teacher is not automatically someone who has deficiency in understanding. The question that still confronts us though is: How do we settle from Scripture who is or who is not a spurious prophet/teacher? What meaning should we attach to the various Scriptures that speak of false prophets? **The first step in explaining Scripture is to read the text.** To fathom a passage involves the **immediate** context, the **remote** context, and the **larger** context. The *immediate context* includes verses preceding and following the reference that one is studying. On the other hand, the *remote context* may take in the entire book in which the text is found. Also, the *larger context* may embrace the whole of God’s written Revelation. This understanding of contexts helps to determine the meaning or meanings that we attach to any distinct phrase. Otherwise, we may impose conjectured convictions on a text without due reflection upon what the author says. Without a conception of context, a person’s particular context tends to shape his or her understanding and interpretation of the message.

WHO IS A FALSE PROPHET?

The first part of this in-depth study analyzed First Corinthians 8 and Romans 14 in order to determine how Paul dealt with differences within the various congregations. These conflicts did not discuss the philosophy of those who sought to undermine the very foundation of Christianity, namely, Jesus as the Messiah, such as I John 4:1-3. When we deny that Jesus is the Christ, we are denying the very foundation on which Christianity stands (2 John 7-11). John goes right to the jugular vein in dealing with false teachers. In fact, he pinpoints, without equivocation, the error of false teachers:

I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth.²² Who is the liar? It is the man [person] **who denies that Jesus is the Christ**. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son.²³ No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also. (1 John 2:21-23)

John calls attention to the errors of the false teachers, but, on the other hand, as stated above, it is significant that Paul did not accuse those individuals who were wrong in Corinth (1 Corinthians 8) and Rome (Romans 14 and 15) as being false teachers, for he called them brothers. As we return once more to John, we soon discover that John continues to develop the identification of false teachers in his Second Epistle. In his Second Epistle he deals with

Gnostic teaching that denied that Jesus came in the flesh; he does not discuss **unity in diversity** over peripherals (non-essentials) as Paul did in Romans and First Corinthians. Consider John's warning:

Many deceivers, **who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh**, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. 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. ¹⁰**If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching**, do not take him into your house or welcome him. (2 John 7-11)

CONCLUSION

Who is the false teacher? Who is the deceiver? Who is the antichrist? John says that the deceivers, that is to say, the antichrists, are those “who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (2 John 7). It is at this point that John issues a strong admonition to not receive anyone who “comes to you and does not bring this teaching” (v.10), that is, the teaching “about Christ.”³ Just as John did not contemplate the issues that Paul discussed in First Corinthians 8 and Romans 14 and 15, neither did Jude, our Lord's brother, write about these issues in his discourse on false teachers. Paul, in dealing with **unity in diversity**, did not approach the works of the flesh addressed in the Book of Jude concerning false teachers. On the other hand, neither did Jude deal with *unity in diversity*, but rather, with a denial of God's Word in the lives of men and women and a denial of Jesus as Lord. Think about the words of Jude:

For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are **godless men**, who **change the grace** of our God into a license for immorality and **deny Jesus Christ** our only Sovereign and Lord. (Jude 4)

Paul also warned against *false teachers*, even as John, Jude, and Peter. But, we should not apply the phrase *false teacher* to one who is contending for the faith (Jesus' Death, Burial, and Resurrection) once delivered to the saints, as recorded by Jude (Jude 3). Paul did not so employ the term (false teacher/prophet) in his discussion of **diversity** within the Corinthian and Roman congregations. The difficulties in Corinth and Rome, in and of themselves, did not deny the Messiahship of Jesus, did not reject that Jesus had come in the flesh, and did not disagree with the principles of morality upon God's people. One who denies that Jesus is **the Christ**, one who denies **the Incarnation** of Christ, and one who **turns the grace of God** into a license for sexual immorality—this one is a false teacher. Are we following the example of Christ and Paul in our relationship with other believers who do not know as much as we know?

Again, the question that confronts us is: False Prophets: Who Are They? How do we respond to this question? Do we still answer this question based upon whether or not one agrees

³For a detailed study of 2 John 9, see “Doctrine of Christ,” in Dallas Burdette, *Old Texts through New Eyes: Reexamination of Misunderstood Scriptures* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 215-233. This book is now available in PDF format on this site for free: click on BOOKS to access my PDF format.

or disagrees with our brand of orthodoxy? The following lengthy quote from Alexander Campbell's (1788-1866) writings should help us to see the fallacy of making salvation contingent upon absolute perfection in knowledge a condition of salvation:

Amongst Christians there is now, as there was at the beginning, a very great diversity in the knowledge of the Christian institution. There are babes, children, young men, and fathers in Christ now, as well as in the days of the Apostle John. This, from the natural gifts of God, from the diversities of age, education, and circumstances, is unavoidable. And would it not be just as rational and as scriptural to excommunicate one another, because our knowledge is less or greater than any fixed measure, as for differences of opinion or matters of speculation?

Indeed, in most cases where proscription⁴ and exclusions now occur in this country, the excluded are the most intelligent members of the society; and although no community will accuse a man because he knows more of his Bible than his brethren, and on this account exclude him from their communion; yet this, it is manifest, rather than heresy, (of which, however, for consistency's sake, he must be accused,) is, in truth, the real cause of separation.

If God has bestowed better gifts or better opportunities on one man than another, by which he has attained more knowledge, instead of thanking God for his kindness to the community, they beg God to take him away; and if he will not be so unkind, they will at length put him from among them under the charge of heresy. In most instances the greatest error of which a brother can be guilty, is to study his Bible more than his companions—or, at least, to surpass them in his knowledge of the mystery of Christ.⁵

This present study seeks to escape the orthodoxy of a frozen waterfall. Liberation from legalism enables us to rediscover the original understanding of God's Word. Unfortunately, many sincere believers cite Scripture through the lenses of their traditions, not the context itself. As in the first century, tradition for many Christians is still the foundation stone for their religious heritage or culture. With the religious leaders in Jesus' day, tradition played an important role within the Jewish community. It is still difficult for us to resist the temptation to imprison God's written Revelation in a system of human traditions. Regrettably, many genuine Christians still fail to distinguish between God's Word and their customs. Trained ministers or theologians frequently become the pattern around which the fellowship of God builds its foundation or traditional interpretation of the Scriptures.

⁴Proscription: An imposed restraint or restriction—PROHIBITION

⁵Alexander Campbell, "To Mr. William Jones, of London, Letter IV," *Millennial Harbinger* 6, no. 3 (March 1835): 112.