

Together We Stand--But on What?

Unity and Doctrine

Martin G. Collins

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In the 1770s, the colonists of the English-ruled eastern coast of North America became fed up with the oppression and taxation by the English King George III and the governing body of Parliament. After years of verbal conflict and violent skirmishes, the thirteen colonies declared independence from English rule. It took all thirteen colonies—united—to successfully defy the most powerful military force in the world. No one else the world over dared defy these overwhelmingly powerful and well-trained soldiers. The efficiency and organization of the finely-tuned British military might was greater than any nation had ever seen in recorded history. Not too much later, it would be said that the sun never set on the British Empire. Who in his right mind would go against such a force?

During the course of the disagreements that led to the Declaration of Independence, the Loyalists to the crown verbally debated and physically clashed with the patriot colonists. The antagonism developed into deep hatred that flowed both ways and lasted for many years. While the British were attempting to squelch the boiling cauldron of discontentment among the patriots, the Loyalists (those loyal to the King and resident in the Colonies) harshly persecuted the rebel Patriots (those desiring independence from the rule of the King of England).

When it came to declaring independence from England, the colonies stood together. Sometimes during the war for independence, they wavered in their unity, resulting in major victories by the English. However, when the colonists stood unified, even the most powerful nation on earth could be overcome—that is, realizing that God was right there supporting the colonists and carrying out His plan as to what He wanted to happen to the future nation of the United States.

Following the American patriots' victory over the British, a new nation had to be organized. The bickering and debating continued as this fledgling infant nation struggled to maintain some form of unity.

There was actually more violence and more people died in the years following the American War for Independence. There were old scores to be settled between the patriots and the Loyalists. Although both were fellow citizens of the British colonies before the war, they had their disputes and differences that often led to violence and even murder between them. Following the war, it was payback time for the victorious patriots. Thus, many people were killed on both sides as chaos erupted throughout the thirteen new states, especially in the rural and wilderness areas where civil law was sparse. This nation was founded as a secular nation and remains so today. It struggled to find its way and to get going as a nation, even after the successful defeat of the British.

By 1812, this nation was so divided and so broke financially that the British saw an opportunity to reclaim what they saw as their former colonies. They waged war against the dis-United States of America, in what was to be called the War of 1812. This was the war in which Francis

Scott Key penned what was to become this nation's national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Had God not intervened by sending a unique hurricane to destroy and send into chaos the British troops marching on Washington, D.C., the capital of the new nation would have been taken back by the British. Our history would certainly be immensely different from what it has been in the last two hundred years or so. The War of 1812 was a wake-up call for the dis-United States of America, to stand as one people together or fall as many people divided. Before the War of 1812, this nation was very divided.

Up to this point, the citizens of the United States could not agree on the same set of standards, the same common policy, or the same doctrine for this new republic. Granted, this new nation was, in principle, loosely based on the Judeo-Christian ethic; but it was not until people agreed to follow a common standard of laws and principles—a set of doctrinal beliefs—that unity began to develop. It is interesting that Richard wrote about the Monroe doctrine yesterday in the "CGG Weekly." The Monroe doctrine—and it is interesting that they called it "doctrine"—was a principle that the United States would follow for at least a hundred years. They wanted the European affairs to be left to Europe and, in turn, the affairs of North, Central, and South America would be left to the Americas, out of which Europe would stay. The British, amazingly and probably by God's hand, protected the Americas from the European nations so that they could develop into nations of their own, because the British saw that as beneficial to them. It is interesting how they are odd bedfellows at times. Of course, we know that the United States and Britain are brothers, and they fight like brothers occasionally.

Following the war of 1812, the United States steadily became more unified until the time of the American Civil War in the 1860s. Having learned a horrible lesson on disunity, among other things, Americans united as one nation, attempting to be under God. This went on and off, primarily peaking during each of two World Wars. It did not take long after World War II for the nation to again seek freedom—or should I say licentiousness?—as selfish individual citizens.

Once the threat of war had seemed to pass, the Korean and Vietnam Regional Wars had the opposite effect on the attitude of American citizens. Unlike the two World Wars, there was not the clear purpose of the nation's survival. The death of young American men in Korea and Vietnam was never seen as worth the sacrifice. There were innumerable attempts by the leaders to explain why this horrible sacrifice was worth it. The American populace had a hard time believing what they were being told and saw the horrible deception behind it. This is why the elite of this country have always used the media to indoctrinate the citizens of the United States. Today, however, this is done on a global scale, as we know.

The United States is in decline because it has banished God. It has lost its way. Its purpose is not clear; its moral rudder is twisted; and it does not uphold righteous standards. Its doctrine is vague and foolish. It is a secular nation that is spiritually bankrupt. We see a nation that is dis-unified and disintegrating as we watch.

The violent conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are the fruit of a deceptive, unclear path to acquire power and material things that our leaders and the news media deem important. This entire society wants more, even though they have run out of space to store

their power and their goods. It is just like the man described in the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12.

A person intent on accumulating material things is called a fool in this parable. He is incapable of being unified with anyone else, because he lives to please himself.

Luke 12:15 And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

Jesus described a man who had many possessions, described as crops and goods, who tore down his barns to build larger ones for the purpose of hoarding his wealth.

Luke 12:20-21 "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

The rich fool is unified with no one, nor does he follow any moral standards, true righteous teachings, or doctrines.

When we are bound in unity, other powers have a much harder time harming any one of us. Often, it makes it impossible to defeat us when we remain strong and intact. Separated, however, each is an easy prey for a destroying force. With the covetousness and selfishness in this nation today, we see a whole nation of individuals who are as the fool in the parable.

So it is with us in the church. Together, we are a strong, solid unit. Each member plays an important part in the church's work—but without unity, the workers cannot function. The apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 4 that the whole church—every part—is involved in the unity of the whole body.

Ephesians 4:16 From whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

Because every one of us is important in doing the church's work, we need to be like-minded and speak the same thing, relying on one another and working together to fulfill the plan, purpose, and will of God. We should "with all lowliness and meekness and longsuffering, forbearing one another in love" work hard to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The apostle Paul was constantly concerned, as were the other writers, with certain difficulties and problems in the lives of members of the church. He always dealt with them in terms of the doctrine of the church. When we read these epistles, we notice that every appeal that is made to us is not made directly; it is made in terms of membership in the church. Since we are all

interconnecting parts of the church, if we do not understand the New Testament doctrine of the church, all of its appeals, exhortations, and problem-solving will be meaningless to us.

Most of our troubles develop because we tirelessly begin with ourselves. Often, we are too biased and partial, one of the main results of sin, which places a person in the center of the problem. Pride causes us to sin, which in turn makes us feel all-important. It makes us so self-focused that nothing else matters except what is happening to us personally. Thus, life, for most of us, is spent thinking about ourselves and our personal interests. That is a naturally carnal way to be; and on a daily basis, it probably pushes its way into our lives.

The teaching of the New Testament shows us how we can be removed from that, by giving us an extraordinarily insightful view of the church and of ourselves as units and members in this great spiritual body of Christ. The minute we begin to understand our human nature, we begin to be delivered from our self-centeredness. The way to come out from under the influence of our own human nature is to see ourselves as the New Testament describes us:

I Corinthians 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

Paul's purpose throughout his epistles is to bring together individual Jews and Gentiles who by God's grace have been called and are in the process of salvation. Here, as in many other places in Scripture, Paul states God's purpose in terms of the church; therefore, we always have to see ourselves as members of the church. As we do so, we will continue in the process of being delivered from most of our troubles and trials. Since this is true concerning our problems, it is especially true regarding unity.

The only way we can envision ourselves as true members of God's church is to understand whom we worship and what our part is in our relationship with Him. The only way to learn and know that very thing is to adhere to the true doctrines of Christ. No other route is possible to the truth and God's way of life. It is a process! One false doctrine, and we begin to be led astray and to veer into a wrong direction.

As we learn more about the true doctrines of Christ—the more we understand and know who and what God is, what He has planned, and what is required of us—we acquire a more complete and clear picture of reality. We see things the way they really are, rather than the clouded way that we human beings look at our lives specifically.

There are warning signs in the New Testament that there were already troubles concerning a true understanding of the nature of the church. Paul's reason for writing his first epistle to the Corinthians was that there were divisions, sects, and splits in that church; and what he expresses to them is that their troubles stem from their failure to understand the nature of God's church, which is defined by its doctrine. They were thinking of themselves in individualistic terms, and many had formed themselves into little groups of individuals. If they had truly seen the idea of the church as a whole, as a united body, they would have been fearful of God's dissatisfaction with their attitudes of disunity and wanting their own self-sovereignty.

Notice how Paul expresses the doctrine of unity to the Ephesian congregation. He emphasizes

such necessary characteristics as humility, gentleness, and patience.

Ephesians 4:1-3 I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

These righteous characteristics are necessary, but what must go hand in hand with them seeing ourselves as members of the church—one body and one spirit. God's word places great emphasis on the theme of unity and oneness. If we do not see ourselves as members of the church but as individuals, then we are going to have a problem even showing up for the events that the church has, and it may even get as bad as not even showing up for Sabbath services.

Ephesians 4:4-6 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

In these three verses, the word *one* is used seven times, implying the need for perfect oneness in God's church. Seven is the number of perfection and completion. Unity is oneness, a condition of harmony and accord, a quality or state of being made one. In order for this unity we have to be following the same doctrines. When Sue and I left the Worldwide Church of God, we gave the doctrines as one of the reasons why we left. A friend of ours said to someone else at church, "What is so important about doctrines?" That was her attitude, and she remained in Worldwide and eventually left.

Paul emphasizes and establishes through repetition of the word *one* this principle of the essential unity of the church. We know that we must be practical, but we cannot be practical unless we know how and why we should be so. This is where doctrine comes in: It explains, and takes us through the process of growing and overcoming.

Notice the order in which Paul structures oneness and unity: He starts with the church, then goes to Holy Spirit, moves on to the Son, and ends with God the Father. Why did he list them in this order? Why does Paul seem to reverse the order of real importance? He is primarily concerned with the practical application. He begins with the church, a fellowship consisting of people who are baptized members. He starts with us to show that we have a responsibility to conform to God's way of life—a way of consideration and concern for the good of others. Then Paul takes us to a higher point: the church as a body, the Head of which is Christ. Finally, the Head of Christ is the Father. His process is practical. Not only does it make sense, but it also works! Of course, mentioned there, as well, is the mind of God the Father and Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit.

Paul shows us that we are where we are and what we are because of the work of Jesus Christ in us through God's Spirit. However, our receiving of the Holy Spirit would not be possible if it were not for the Son and what He has done; and the Son would not have come were it not that

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." This makes perfect sense and is practical in the order that Paul has stated it here.

The apostle Paul is determined to show us that there is no room for argument over "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The unity is already there; it is certain and firm. The question is, "Are you part of unity?"

In Ephesians 4:4, the phrase *there is* brings out this truth clearly: "There is one body." The words *there is* are not in the original but were supplied by the translators. These words were added to increase the clarity of the thought that is very obvious here. In other words, these words *there is* remind us that Paul is not appealing to us to form the unity; what he is telling us is that this unity is already there, and he is asking us not to break it—"endeavoring to keep it," to safeguard it. He is not making a strong appeal for us to come together; he is urging us to be careful not to break away from the unity in any way or to be the cause of any kind of division.

In reminding us of what we are as members of the church, Paul uses the analogy of the one body. He often uses this analogy throughout his epistles when explaining the doctrine of the church. In the second chapter of his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul compares the church to a nation when he refers to them as "fellow citizens with the saint." He also says that Christians are "members of the household of God." In other words, the church is like a family. Also, he says that the church is like a building: "You have been built together on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." In chapter 5 of Ephesians, we find him comparing the church to a bride. He says that the church is the bride of Christ and that the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church is the relationship between a husband and wife. However, he seems to use the illustration of the body more than any other, especially in connection with the matter of unity. He has already used this analogy twice in this epistle. He does this at the end of chapter 1, where he writes:

Ephesians 1:22-23 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

He repeats this in Ephesians 2:

Ephesians 2:16 ...and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.

In these last two examples, Paul mentions the body analogy almost in passing, but in Ephesians 4:4-6, he expounds on it. The church is the unseen and spiritual church. It cannot be referring to a visible and external church, because a visible and external church consists of many bodies, not one! Paul is asserting that there is only one true church. There cannot be many, because the church is the body of Christ, and a human cannot have many bodies. There is only one unseen and spiritual church of God. There is only one body. God's church consists of people of all types, kinds, and colors, from different continents; but this variety makes no difference to this invisible spiritual church.

Similarly, time makes no difference to this fact, either. The early Christians and Christian martyrs down through the ages are being reserved for resurrection in this body. You and I are also in this body if we are truly in Christ and He in us. In a sense, the church is ageless, spanning the centuries.

Natural ability plays no part in this issue. The one thing that ultimately matters is that you and I belong to this body. We can be members of a visible physical church and, wretchedly, not members of this unseen spiritual church. It is obvious that the apostle Paul believed that this analogy of the body conveys the things that we must understand about this unseen spiritual church. Notice what he says in I Corinthians 12, where he deals with it in a very thorough way. We will read only the first part of it.

I Corinthians 12:12-14 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many.

Here we begin to see the structure of the unity that is in the church. Since the members of the church are a new creation, the church body as a whole is also a new creation. In bringing the church into being, God has done something as entirely new spiritually as was the creation of the physical universe.

II Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

He did not simply take an Israelite and a Gentile and bring them together somehow in a kind of coalition and make them sit down together around a table and agree to be friendly. This is the way that mainstream Christian churches work; they bring people in and they try to get them to be friendly with one another. The church is an entirely new creation. We are being delivered from things that separate us from God.

This can be seen plainly in the analogy of the body. The body consists of ten fingers, ten toes, two hands, two feet, two legs, two arms, and so on—but the body is not a collection of these parts. Not one of them has been created independently or separately and then put with the others. That is not how the body develops and comes into being. It all starts from one cell, which begins to develop and grow and shoots off little buds. One of these buds will eventually be the right forearm and arm and hand; another goes off to form the same on the left. Then the bud that forms the trunk comes down, and the legs come off of the trunk. It all comes out of the original primitive cell. The parts have never had an independent living existence; they are all offshoots, outgrowths of this central primitive cell. That is why there is an essential unity in the body. This illustration shows by analogy what is true of us as members of God's church.

A visible church organization is necessary, but can be confused by those still holding on to false, worldly ideas that God's church is a physical organization or building. What happens in them is that there is a church roll, and when a person begins attending, his name is added to those already in membership. It has to be done that way, but it tends to give us a false notion of the nature of the church. We are not added to Christ in that sense, by joining an organization. Even the baptismal ceremony says that you are not baptized into any organization but into the Family of God. The true church is a new creation, and all who belong to her are spiritually begotten of God with water baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit, through the laying on of hands by God's minister. Once we see the truth in such terms, the certainty of the unity is obvious.

Another principle that Paul emphasizes is the variety in the unity. I am not talking about the politically correct "unity through diversity" doublespeak that we hear from politicians and academia. What we see in the church is unity, not necessarily uniformity. To express this principle, Paul states the matter in a seemingly negative fashion, using sarcasm and ridicule in I Corinthians 12.

He had received letters from those who belonged to the household of Chloe and from others, telling him that one member was saying, "I am of Paul"; another, "I am of Apollos"; another, "I am of Cephas." They were divided into factions and were bickering and arguing. The apostle Paul's way of dealing with that was to tell them that they had obviously forgotten that the church is the body of Christ. He tells them that it is as if the eye says to the hand, "I have no need of you," and the foot says the same to the ear. He ridicules all that and proceeds to teach the principle that in the church, as in the human body, there is variety in the essential unity.

Look at a finger, and contrast it with an eye. At first, there does not seem to be anything in common. The finger seems very ordinary. Then consider the eye. Think of its delicacy, its subtlety, the refinement, the balance, the tenderness—what an instrument, so uniquely designed and so powerfully useful! At first sight, it appears as if there can be no relationship at all between an eye and a finger or a foot or other parts of the body, which are still less impressive or unattractive. Yet, the truth is that although they are all so different, look so different, and serve different functions, they are all one in the essential sense that they all belong together and are all essential parts of the body. The body is not complete without every one of them being there.

Then look at the analogy in terms of the interdependence of any one part upon the others. Not one of them has any real sense, meaning, or existence on its own, in and of itself. As Paul puts it, if the whole of the body were a hand, it would not be a body. If the entirety of the body were a foot, it would not be a body. What makes the body a body is that all these various parts are one in this organic whole, in this essential unity, and they are all absolutely interdependent on one another. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you." If you have no hands, you will find yourself very crippled and rather helpless. The eye cannot work the whole body. There is no independence in the body.

I explain this once again—I know that I have used it in other sermons—because I am building the case and building a foundation, so to speak, for the fact that doctrine is extremely important. We have to understand the doctrine of the church itself and how it works. Each part

derives its meaning, its essence, from its relationship to the rest. That is the truth about the body, and it is equally true about the church. Each organ needs the others, and each one benefits by the function of the others.

Now look at Paul's illustration of the less attractive parts. He says that if we have the right conception of the body we will not despise any part of our body. No part is unimportant; every part counts. Every single member of the church is important. People sometimes say of themselves in the church, "I am not a very important member," to which the reply is that there is no such thing as an unimportant member. What they mean, of course, is that they do not have some very obvious striking or unusual gifts that others have. They may mean that they cannot speak, preach, or pray eloquently in public. However, they are despising the gift or gifts that they do have.

Paul says, "On the less comely members we bestow the more abundant honor." Every member of the church is essential to the harmonious working of the whole. Those who may be in wheelchairs, invalids, or having to stay home have the power of prayer to be able to help with the unification of the church. In the church, persons and actions all matter; therefore, anything we do to interfere with this idea of the interdependence is not only being false to doctrine, but it is introducing an artificial division. It is being guilty of schism in some shape or form.

Another principle that is evident is that all the parts of the body work together to the same magnificent end and have the same objective. Each part of the body has its own function, but it plays its part in the whole. We think with our brain and act with our will, but we must have some instrument through which to carry out our purpose. If we want to shut a book, we do so with our hands. We think it; we will it—but we put it into practice with our hands. If we are without hands and without arms, we cannot shut the book.

Thus, all the parts serve one great function, all working to the same great end and objective. The church is the body of Christ, and we are members in particular. Paul had already told the Ephesians that it is through the church that God is going to reveal certain things.

Ephesians 3:10-11 To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord,

The principalities and powers are looking down from heaven; and it is through the church—through you and through me, every one of us, all of us together—that these principalities and powers are really beginning to understand the manifold wisdom of God. It is to that we are called.

What are some of the ways that we can uphold unity in God's church? Here are seven brief points that Dexter Faulkner came up with in one of his articles, years ago:

1. Cooperate. As members of the same body, we need to work together in harmony to achieve the goal. Whether we are acting on an instruction or following directions from the church leadership, we should do so in a willing,

humble attitude.

2. Have a constructive attitude. Many a worthwhile project has been ruined by pessimism alone. Satan is the source of negativity, but Philippians 4:8 shows us on what we, as Christians should keep our minds: the positive, the uplifting, the helpful, and the encouraging. Therefore, we certainly must avoid gossip and tale bearing. No other force is more destructive in God's church.

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things.

3. Welcome responsibility. Look for opportunities to help and serve individual brethren and the church as a whole. Do not leave things for someone else to do. Look for ways to get involved.
4. Show enthusiasm. As the old saying goes, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm," and enthusiasm is infectious. If you are excited and positive about a particular project or job, those around you will see your attitude and follow suit. One of the examples of this is how we all felt at the Feast of Tabernacles, when everybody was up and feeling enthusiastic. Although we were very tired, we still had energy from that enthusiasm.
5. Do not worry who gets the credit as long as the job gets done. Members of the church can accomplish a great deal, as long as no one becomes selfish. Our purpose as Christians should not be personal aggrandizement, but the overall good of the Body of Christ.
6. Keep learning and growing. Correct past mistakes in your personal behavior. Think of and apply new methods of promoting togetherness and strong bonds of unity among brethren and in your family.
7. Fellowship with the brethren. This is one of the greatest keys to strengthening unity in the church. Get to know every member of the congregation. The more involved you become with your brethren, the more genuine, godly love you will develop for each other. This promotes unity among God's begotten children. I think that many times, members of God's church do not realize that part of Sabbath services entails fellowship. If a person is missing Sabbath services on a regular basis, or even once in a while that is not due to sickness, then he is missing out on a lot of fellowship. I remember years ago in a Bible study, John Ritenbaugh said that with attendance being so low at Bible studies compared to the Sabbath service attendance, he was wondering if that may be one of the determinations of who would go to the place of safety and who would not. Of course, that is paraphrased. We can apply that to Sabbath services. If you are not at Sabbath services, will God feel that you just do not want to be with the brethren, and maybe you will not be one who

is blessed with going to the place of safety? Satan would like to destroy God's people. The only way he can do this is to divide and attack us individually. Alone, none of us is a match for Satan's diabolical devices; but if we stick together, supporting, helping, praying for, and encouraging each other—especially staying in unity with God and Jesus Christ in every way—nothing can make us fall.

Psalm 133:1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

This scripture came to life at the Feast this year. Almost everyone, through the church's unified way of life, was very orderly, courteous, and thankful for the services they received; had refreshingly clean language; and gave a good witness of God's way of life. Unity is a wonderfully effective way of witnessing the effects of the true doctrines of the church. Since the church is unified, then I have to ask myself if those who cause trouble at the Feast are even true members or part of the church. A few were not; a few were just visiting. They were not unified with the body, because they were not of the body.

The church's body of beliefs about God, man, Christ, the church, and other religious concepts are considered authoritative and thus worthy of acceptance by all members of the church. Christ condemned the doctrine of the Pharisees because it was of human origin.

Matthew 15:3-9 He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God" — then he need not honor his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"

By contrast, Jesus' teaching was not systematic and repetitious. It was fresh and new.

Matthew 7:28-29 And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Jesus had authority, and everything that He spoke carried that authority. His apostles, and the prophets before them, all carried this authority.

After Pentecost, Christian doctrine began to be systematized. Doctrinal instruction was given by

special teachers to those who had responded to the gospel. The earliest doctrine of the Christian declared (1) that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ (Acts 3:18); (2) that God had raised Him from the dead (Acts 1:22; 2:24, 32); and (3) that salvation was by faith in His name (Acts 2:38,16). These three truths were presented as a clear fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament. Paul taught that true doctrine is essential for Christian growth and that false doctrine destroys the church. Thus we see that the Pharisees' doctrine was destroying the Jewish people, whereas the doctrine of Christ builds and edifies.

The pagan religion of Rome was a rite rather than a doctrine. In effect, the emperor declared, "This you must do, but you can think as you please." I find that interesting, because that is basically the rite that the mainstream Christians are adopting more and more, especially through this "outcome-based religion" philosophy. Roman worshipers believed that they needed only to perform the proper ceremonies of religion, whether they understood them or not. As far as they were concerned, a hypocritical skeptic could be just as "religious" as a true believer, as long as he offered sacrifice in the temple of the gods. Today, those sacrifices are offered by people going to the worldly churches and giving their ten minutes each week to sitting and listening to a sermon that is usually vague and contains no doctrinal information. In reality, it is vital that true Christians believe and behave in accordance with God's written word. Jesus stated unconditionally that we must worship the Father in spirit and truth.

John 4:23-24 But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

All those who truly and sincerely worship God do it with the heart and not merely in form. Acceptable worship of God is always done sincerely; with the offering of gratitude, praise, and prayer; with a desire to glorify Him; and without it being a spectacle. Spiritual worship involves the heart and mind being offered to God for His use, as He sees fit.

Hebrews 10:19-23 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

The church's gathering for worship is essential to our faith and represents the presence of God. Those who, with boldness, may enter through the flesh of Christ into the Holy of Holies must not neglect meeting together, but must gather in worship in anticipation of the hope of being with Christ in inseparable glory. Worship will then have achieved its ultimate goal.

Hebrews 10:24-25 And let us consider one another in order to stir up

love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

What we believe with our minds and feel in our hearts we will do in our actions. This is essentially Christianity when it is based on truth. The apostle John wrote,

I John 3:18-19 "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him."

It is a way of life in Jesus Christ that brings genuine obedience to His doctrines. In our personal Bible study, we learn and firmly imbed the doctrines into our minds—provided we are basing the study on scripture and on the teaching of the ministry.

Hebrews 5:12-14 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Hebrews 6:1-2 Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.

The elementary principles of the doctrines of Christ are seen and understood by those who are spiritually mature and in "those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." We can learn or memorize doctrinal stances as much as we want, but it does not do us a bit of good if we do not apply them in our lives. It is through use that we learn to discern both good and evil. A spiritually mature person already keeps God's Commandments and statutes, which develops discernment and wisdom in him.

The seven doctrines listed in Hebrews 6 are not all the doctrines of the church, but are a beginning understanding of God's truth in the early process of conversion. The fundamental doctrines are going on to perfection, repentance from dead works, faith toward God, the baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

The first, going on to perfection, is also translated by others as, "let us go or press on to maturity." It is not enough for a Christian to maintain a certain level of understanding, but he must grow toward perfection, completion, and maturity in the doctrines of Christ. Part of this process we call overcoming sin.

When members of God's church do not apply themselves to God's way of life, they are continually needing to relearn the basic principles of the knowledge of God—that is, the milk of the word rather than the solid food. A Christian who is able to digest only the basic doctrines of the church is immature in the word of righteousness.

I Corinthians 3:1-3 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?

A deeper understanding of the wisdom from above is acquired only by active use or practice of God's standard of righteousness. This in turn enables the mature Christian to discern both good and evil.

Jesus Christ is the author of our eternal salvation. He is the author and finisher of our faith, the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. He will freely give to him who is thirsty the fountain of the water of life. Jesus begins and ends every Christian's eternal salvation.

It is self-evident that everything God begins spiritually, through human instruments, must start small. As human beings, we have to start somewhere. There was a time in the life of each true follower of Christ when he began to be a Christian. Everyone starts out as a spiritual infant; and when a person is called, he must start as a babe in Christ—not as a full grown, mature Christian.

Understanding true doctrine is absolutely necessary for guiding the life of a Christian.

False and misleading doctrine unavoidably deceives and devastates. Our attitudes and actions most certainly originate from our foundational doctrines, whether good or bad. For this reason, we must "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

In I Timothy 1:10-11, Paul tells us to learn nothing that is contrary to sound doctrine. Elsewhere, Paul admonishes us to hold fast the pattern of sound words, which we have heard from him, in faith and love, which are in Christ Jesus. We are to hold fast the faithful word as we have been taught, that we may be able, by sound doctrine, to both exhort and convict those who contradict.

The Law and the Prophets and the teachings of Jesus Christ are the doctrines of the church. This doctrine of truth agrees with and harmonizes with godliness.

I Timothy 6:3-5 If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of

corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.

Even some in the church—mostly tares—will see little value in true doctrine. Paul says,

11 Timothy 4:3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers.

This is exactly what we see today, with the number of different groups there are, the number of different teachers in those groups, and the number of different people who are flowing from one group to the next. They are "heaping up teachers for themselves" of all types.

The apostle Paul's repeated emphasis on sound doctrine implies that the body of teaching in the church is more than just a gospel *about* Christ. It is the gospel *of* Christ—what He taught and lived in His own life. The sound doctrine of Christ is the pattern of sound words and a body of truth once for all delivered to the saints.

The New Testament writers were inspired to warn us that God's church has to have a foundation of the sound doctrine of Christ in order to successfully defend and contend for the faith because of the constant bombardment of false doctrines. I wonder if in the history of the church there have ever been so many false doctrines thrown around by so many people as there are now. I think that the Internet has certainly helped to get those out and about.

Just as counterfeit money is recognized by studying the real thing, so also false doctrines are recognized by becoming well-acquainted with the true doctrine of Christ. This is why we are told to not learn the ways of the Gentiles.

Jeremiah 10:2 Thus says the LORD: "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them."

The principle here is that following the doctrines of other churches or reading the material of worldly churches can very easily lead one astray. Their ways are full of counterfeits of God's doctrines. Every major religion of the world has claimed that its "founder" had unique insight into the eternal truths of life. However, true Christian doctrine claims far more, for Jesus Himself told us in John 14:6 that He *is* the truth, not just a teacher of the truth.

How long are we to search out the true doctrines of the church? Just in our infancy in the church?

Ephesians 4:13 Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

This means until we all arrive at a state of complete unity and complete perfection; until we all hold the same truth—the same doctrines—and have the same confidence—the same faith and trust in the Son of God. That means that we are to continually study the doctrines until the day we die or are changed.

The apostle Paul mentions another principle, in I Corinthians 12. Because of this essential unity, if one member suffers, all the members suffer with him. We cannot say, "Only my little toe is sick." If the little toe is sick, we are completely sick. If there is pain in that area, we are feeling the pain in our whole body. We cannot divorce ourselves from our little toe.

I Corinthians 12:27-31 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

That more excellent way is the way of love, the way of give and outgoing concern for others, as I Corinthians 13 explains in great detail. Nevertheless, true godly love cannot be learned and applied without the knowledge and understanding of true doctrine.

Because of the unity of the body, the same blood flows in all its parts. This vital power animates the whole. Therefore, if one member suffers, all the members suffer with him; and if one member is honored, all the members glory with it. If we truly understood this doctrine of the church, any idea of competition, rivalry, self-seeking, self-importance would be utterly impossible, even ludicrous. When we are guilty of such things, we are simply proclaiming that we have never understood the doctrine of the church. The way to avoid that error is to be clear about the doctrine. We cannot fully understand the practicalities of God's way of life until we have learned the doctrine first. The foundation of the doctrine of the church is love.

What a privilege we have and enjoy! You and I are members of the body of Christ, and that is our relationship to Christ. He is the Head, and we are the various members. There is no greater privilege. The psalmist in Psalm 84 says, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness." Even that position in the palace of the King is a wonderful position, but this New Testament blessing goes infinitely beyond that! We are in Christ; we belong to Him. As Christians, we are part of His invisible spiritual body. Now we are the body of Christ and members in particular. If we realize that, we will inevitably "endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

The "unity of the spirit" is the union between Christ and His saints, by which the same divine spirit dwells in both; and we have the same nature and goals. We have unity among ourselves by which, being joined to the same Head and having the same spirit dwelling in us, we have the same graces of faith, hope, and love. We are rooted and grounded in the same doctrine of Christ and bear a mutual affection for each other.

I wanted to just cover these simple principles on unity and doctrine, even though John Ritenbaugh spoke about it just two and a half years ago. In future sermons, I want to cover some doctrines; and I felt that, for my own self, I wanted to cover this foundational information concerning unity and doctrines first.