

Question: There are so many different Christian denominations that it's confusing. What would Jesus say about all the religious division among Christians today?

In the night that he was betrayed and taken to be crucified, Jesus prayed for unity among those who would be his disciples. He prayed first for his immediate disciples who were with him, and then he also prayed for those who would follow in the centuries to come. Jesus prayed: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, *that all of them may be one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so *that the world may believe that you have sent me*. . . *May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*" (John 17:20-23 NIV. Italics mine-RY). Unfortunately, division among Christians has tarnished the witness of Christ before the world. The strife and division among believers have made it difficult for some to believe in Jesus and that God loves them.

In addition to denominational division, the problem extends even to the level of local congregations. Local churches have often divided over the most inconsequential matters of personal opinion about things which the Bible has little or nothing to say. For example, the Bible says nothing at all about church buildings, but I've known churches that divided over whether they could eat a common meal in the church building. Long ago some Christians divided over whether or not it was right to wear one or two suspenders. Some of these people were of the opinion that one suspender was a necessity but adding another was frivolous and unnecessary. Some believers continue to argue over what is appropriate to wear when the church assembles. The Bible says nothing about these and other issues that have divided churches. Such division among Christians is often a matter of pride, envy or jealousy as well as a lack of love, grace and forgiveness. Such Christians are still in the process of becoming like Jesus.

Because of our individual differences in personality and life experiences, we will always differ in matters of personal opinion. That's not what concerned our Lord. Generally, we can unite in the matters that are important, matters on which the Lord clearly spoke in scripture. With a commitment to search for truth in

humility and respect for one another, we should be able to come closer to answering the prayer of Jesus for Christian unity. However, I believe Jesus would admonish us to agree to disagree on matters of personal opinion without passing judgment, which might lead to condemning and dividing from one another (Romans 14).

Even if we do not agree, we can show a spirit of love toward each other as we continue to strive to overcome our division and maintain the unity God's Spirit has given us. The Bible says, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:2-3). Unity takes strong effort along with the attitudes of humility, patience and love. For the sake of a world enslaved to sin, Christians need to strive toward Christian unity in peace and hope. I believe this is what Jesus wants us to do.

[Send questions or comments to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071 or phone 270-753-1881. This article is reproduced on the web: www.nchrist.org] 2012/10/12