

THE CHURCH

One Body

Jesus knowing the dangers ahead for believers prayed that all believers would be one and that there would be no divisions. He could see the danger of how the believers in Him would divide themselves based on the character and particular teachings used by their leaders.

John 17:20 " I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 21 that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: 23 I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me."

Unfortunately this is exactly what happened. Segregation started to occur in the early church depending on who had taught particular groups, Paul, Peter, Apollos or someone else. Paul identified that the problem of divisions in the church of his time stemmed from believers not living as spiritual people but rather being believers who were unable to overcome the worldly attitudes such as envy and strife.

1 Corinthians 3:3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? 4 For when one says, " I am of Paul, " and another, " I am of Apollos, " are you not carnal? 5 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?

Paul reminded the Corinthian church that he and other ministers are simply people through whom they came to believe in the Lord Jesus. He knew that Christians could only be united by all truly having Jesus as the Lord of their life and by them living spiritual lives led, taught and guided by the Holy Spirit living within them. He knew that if life was lived in this way, people would be focused on coming to know God and His will. In doing this they would automatically come together under the Lordship of Jesus and instruction of the Holy Spirit, not looking to any particular person who was their minister or teacher, but rather looking and focusing only on God. People living in this way would automatically love others who were Christians recognizing that they were all spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. Though not perfect, they would recognize the need to be one close body of believers and be seen as such by the world around them. This attitude would be seen in the way they cared for one another and accepted one another.

1 Corinthians 12:25 that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

Though Christians may have particular belief systems that line up with those held by one of the many denominations, Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal etc., all believers can be clearly identified by our core common beliefs. This set of core beliefs has been in

place since the early church in the form of the Apostles Creed. Later this Creed was extended to include other essential truths to form the Nicene Creed.

To live the life God intends for us we must believe the fundamentals of the Christian faith that are expressed in these two Creeds in our heart. The Nicene Creed is said in most churches every week by millions of people and it speaks of the following:

- God the Father is the creator of heaven and earth, all that is material and spiritual. The co-existence and co-equality of Jesus (the Word) and the Holy Spirit means that they were also involved in creation.
- Jesus is the only Son of God, and is one with God. The world was created by the Father speaking the Word. Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1v3) and all was created through Him.
- The Word was with the Father and the Holy Spirit in heaven but then came down from heaven, coming into this world by the power of the Holy Spirit as a baby born to the virgin Mary.
- Jesus was crucified, He died and rose again to life. After appearances to many people in His resurrected form, He then went to heaven and is now seated at the right hand side of God.
- Jesus will come back to earth again one day to judge all human beings and His kingdom is an eternal one.
- The Holy Spirit is one with God also and He is the one who enters us and makes us spiritually alive to God. This happens when we accept Jesus as our Savior. The Holy Spirit is a spiritual Person who was sent to believers. He is worshipped, glorified and honored in the same way as the Father and Jesus.
- There is one catholic and apostolic church. The word catholic means worldwide and universal church rather than specifically the Catholic denomination. There is one church, one body of Christ (many denominations but one church). This one true church was started by the apostles of Jesus and has continued through time since then.
- There is one baptism through which we receive the forgiveness of our sins.
- We look for the resurrection of the dead and eternal life in the world to come.

The divisions of the body of Christ that started during Paul's lifetime continue to exist. Yet there are true believers and children of God, placed among each of the various Christian denominations that openly state a complete belief in all that is included in the Nicene Creed. Christians in these denominations must be treated as our brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus and we must consistently show love towards them through our thoughts, words and actions. Even if we do not agree with all the additional teachings that may be in the denomination, as long as the Nicene Creed statements are held up as being a standard for their belief we must treat them as our brothers and sisters. In a world where selfless love is rare, Christians should be shining lights showing this love to other Christians. The world should consistently see Christians firstly loving their own Christian brothers and sisters selflessly but then also loving all others in this world in a selfless manner as well.

John says that children of God are identified by not only their faith that produces a right standing with God but also by practicing the things that are consistent with that position with God. One of the things Christians must consistently practice is our love for one another.

1John3vs10 In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.

Knowing that He would soon go to the cross, Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment. The Ten Commandments dealt with loving God and loving all people. However, this new commandment, was given by Jesus to herald in the way that Christians should act. Although definitely meaning that we should love all people, the new commandment was particularly meant for His followers, all Christians. Christians must love one other in our thoughts, words and actions.

John13vs34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. "

In fact Jesus saw this commandment as being so important that he repeated it two times later to His disciples (John15vs12 and John15vs17). Jesus meant for the love that Christians had for each other to be so noticeable by all other people in the world that they would be able to identify a Christian by it. God requires Christians in all denominations to obey the new commandment and all express love for each other.

The heart of God longs for all people who accept His truth to see themselves as He sees them, that is, as His children. Just like a natural father or mother gets grieved when one child talks down or does not respect and love another child in the family, God is impacted by Christians putting one another down and not supporting one another. He expects and demands love to flow between all His children. When people follow the most important commandment and love God with our entire being, the flow-on of this great love will mean that all other Christians are loved too. John questions how a Christian can claim to love God if they are unable to have love for their fellow Christians.

1John4vs20 If someone says, " I love God, " and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? 21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.

Head of the Body

When Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was, rather than commit to telling Him who they thought He was, they referred to what others had said about Him. The one person able to answer Jesus was Simon Peter who accurately and confidently stated that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. The reason for the accurate understanding and confidence was that it came from a revelation to Peter by the Holy Spirit and Jesus acknowledges this to be the case in His response to Peter.

Matthew16vs13 When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, " Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am? " 14 So they said, " Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. " 15 He said to them, " But who do you say that I am? " 16 Simon Peter answered and

said, " You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. " 17 Jesus answered and said to him, " Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. " 20 Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.

Peter in His response was not only demonstrating the spiritual revelation given to him by the Holy Spirit but in speaking it made a confession of his belief and faith in Jesus Christ. The name Peter means rock and Jesus gave him the name because of what Jesus saw in him and the key role he would play in establishing the church or body of Christ. In addition however, Jesus in His answer to Peter spoke of the key to the building up of the church, it would be built upon the sure foundation of Himself, the Rock. Jesus is the Rock upon which the entire body of Christ stands. He is also referred to as the Cornerstone.

Ephesians2vs19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

The church is taught, develops, grows and is bonded together through the revelation and guidance of the Holy Spirit coming to the leaders and congregation of the church. As the spiritual understanding of God increases and His will is known, all people in the church have the ability to mature spiritually. The members of the church become living spiritual stones that not only build the local church but also builds the wider body of Christ. In this way we see that there should never be divisions and Christians should act as we are supposed to, as a new creation in Christ. We should consider ourselves as part of the body of Christ rather than an individual, a member of a religious group or simply belonging to a denomination.

Christ paid a high price for all believers and as the head of the church is forming a glorious and holy church without spot or wrinkle. God will achieve His will for the church and as members of the body of Christ we must assist and open ourselves individually and corporately to the work of the Holy Spirit. For the church to meet Christ's expectation, the body of Christ must also reflect the character that Christ requires it to have.

Ephesians5vs 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, 26 that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, 27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

When Jesus returns to take the church back with Him it will be a single church made up of the Christians who truly believe in Him. As Christians we must recognize that

each of us is individually responsible to God for our spiritual condition. It is important to understand that simply being a member of a particular church or denomination will not assure any of us of eternal life for each of us will be judged according to our own belief that is held in our heart and reflected in our thoughts, words and deeds. Jesus sees Christians not according to our denominations or churches but according to our individual hearts and lives. He sees one body of believers which is taught, guided and helped by one Holy Spirit, who has one Father, God, and who is subject to one Head, Himself.

When the Holy Spirit comes into our individual lives, we know that our faith in Christ Jesus is heart-held and true. In the end no matter what our denomination is or how we may choose to label ourselves as Christians, our common union and our acceptance by God is evidenced by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 4vs4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

1 Corinthians 12vs12 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. 13 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.

Whether Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church or any other Christian denomination, believers have all been baptized into the one body of Christ. Jesus wants the Christian church to be and act as one body with Him as the Head. It is every Christian's obligation to encourage this to happen, for barriers to be broken down, differences accepted and for love to flow across the body of Christ. Jesus said that as this happens the world will truly know that He was sent by the Father. This means that the unity of the church will see great spiritual revival across the world. It is sobering to realize that the divisions of the church, although each denomination individually doing so much good, could achieve so much more in the world and spiritual realm by being united in spirit.

Meeting Together

The community of believers has been important since the inception of Christianity and the writer of the book of Hebrews tells Christians that we should continue to meet together.

Hebrews 10vs24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 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.

The church provides the ability for Christians to come together to share with one another the individual spiritual lives that we already live, to learn about Christianity, to praise and worship God, to minister to each other and to spread the gospel. It is an opportunity for believers to come together to pray for, edify, encourage, love, support

and strengthen one another. It enables us to build the work of God upon this earth through our prayer and service to others, and by providing financial support for the particular church that we belong to and the wider body of Christ.

A particular church, denomination and the wider body of Christ can only be as strong as its members. If any member relies only on attendance at a church service to live a strong spiritual life it is not going to happen and will weaken the living body of Christ. We cannot spend virtually all our time affected by the secular world we live in and think that a short weekly service or two will be enough to keep our spiritual life strong. If we try to be a Christian with this attitude we will not be anything more than just a lukewarm carnal Christian unable to spiritually mature.

For the church to be all that God wants it to be, all members need to be committed to living the Christian Spiritual Life and be willing to yield our wills to God's will. We need to be committed to the renewal of our mind, the redirection of our emotions and the transformation of our heart. Each Christian should receive our own and unique spiritual revelation from God rather than only relying on what others have to say about their own experience with God. The strong spiritual life that is individually lived should then be complemented by attendance at a local church.

The Holy Spirit provides gifts to believers as He wills to build the body of Christ, to edify believers, to encourage us, to guide us and to reveal Jesus. These gifts are the word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, healings, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, different kinds of tongues and interpretation of tongues. When used properly by people within the church, they are of great value in building up the church as well as bringing glory to God.

1Corinthians12vs1 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant: ... 4 There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. ... 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are meant for every believer to receive. If these gifts are used by any of us without our lives reflecting the fruit of the Holy Spirit, they bring no glory to God. It must be understood that bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit is the priority for all of us. The fruit is evidence of the person walking closely with God and therefore our spiritual growth and maturity, whereas the gifts are provided for service within the body and do not reflect the spiritual maturity of the person who possesses them.

The church is far greater and larger than any building or particular Christian denomination. A church building is a place where Christians go to pray, worship, serve God and link up with other Christians. The unbeliever goes there because they know that Christians are there meeting with one another and they can hear about God. Although a church building may be called the house of God, God tells us that He does not dwell in temples made by hand.

Acts7vs47 But Solomon built Him a house. 48 " However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 49 ` Heaven is My throne, and

earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the Lord, or what is the place of My rest? 50 Has My hand not made all these things? '

The church is the all encompassing body of true believers that has Jesus Christ as the head and the Holy Spirit within each believer as the teacher, guide and helper. It is made up of all those who have become one with Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus lives in us through the presence of the Holy Spirit, and from God's perspective, we live in Christ Jesus.

God wanted to draw near to the nation of Israel but the people chose to have Moses as their mediator resulting in the people not being near to God. Instead of directly talking to the people, God spoke to Moses and then he passed on what he heard to the people. Later, rather than having God as their Ruler, they wanted a king like the nations around them. This drew them even further from God's presence and as a result of their choices, they never rose up to become all that God desired them to be. They found that living for God without a one to one personal relationship with Him was difficult and usually could not be sustained.

Under the New Covenant we are honored and privileged to be able to draw near to God's presence in a direct relationship with Him, by means of the Holy Spirit coming within us. For various reasons, this relationship is not a reality for many Christians and they instead choose to have people as mediators between themselves and God. Like the people of Israel, these people rely on their religious leaders to tell them what God has to say to them. This form of relationship with God is no relationship at all, for no person will be able to draw near to God unless they have a direct relationship with Him by inviting His presence within them and then living their life led by His internal spiritual presence. While ideally this direct relationship flourishes in an individual's life when they are part of a church group, there are some within the church denominations that still need to earnestly seek it. I attended a church nearly every Sunday for the first twenty two years of my life and never experienced this direct relationship until I came to a point in my life when I turned to God and directly sought it with all my heart.

It is up to each Christian to be open to the instruction of the Holy Spirit, praying, meditating and regularly reading the Bible. It is our individual responsibility to develop our love for God and our knowledge of Him and His will. Each of us, including leaders of churches and Christian denominations, are accountable to God for our own life. Christian pastors, priests, deacons, acolytes, evangelists, preachers, healers and any other church leader must walk in submission, obedience and holiness. As all do and encourage all in their care to do the same, the bride of Jesus will truly make herself ready for His return.

Christians should be able to recognize who they can trust as leaders through their own spiritual discernment and knowledge of God, as well as, the fruit of the leader's life, including their actions and words. The result of all that the leader says and does should be an encouragement for the individuals in their care to seek God diligently and persistently draw near to Him. The veil is torn and all believers can now draw near to God's presence to learn from Him and be guided by Him. We must understand this and believe it so that we can be more confident about our spiritual

walk and be able to accurately and confidently discern what we choose to accept or not accept from other people's books, words or actions.

It is therefore extremely important to be a part of a church where your Christian life is fed and encouraged, not only by the leadership, but also by what you are able to do to support and be involved in the church.

While it is important to settle as a member in a particular church, care must be taken in choosing where to fellowship with other believers and which person you choose to be your spiritual leader. There is a great responsibility for each of us to be under the right spiritual leader and there is an even greater responsibility upon Christian leaders to ensure that they do the work of God diligently by speaking the truth to people and ensuring that each one in their spiritual care matures spiritually in the way God wants them to.

Jesus, after rising from the dead, speaks to seven churches that were in existence at that time. His words are recorded in the New Testament book of Revelation, chapters two and three. To each church He speaks that they have to overcome areas that were adversely affecting their Christian lives. The people in these churches were already Christians and undoubtedly had the Holy Spirit in them but Jesus made it clear that His expectations of the church are high.

Some of the churches were under severe persecution and had still held on to their faith despite the dangers. Yet Jesus tells them that they have weaknesses and if they are able to overcome the world they can receive the rewards in heaven. Jesus could see that the Christians had not carried on in their walk with God to separate themselves from the world and live strong Christian Spiritual Lives. As a result, they were in danger of losing their heavenly reward.

We read in Revelation that these Christians had to specifically overcome:

- the self-willed life so that they could yield to God's will and live a life focused on God and His kingdom;
- temptations and attractions of the world so that they were not drawn away from God by them;
- evil spiritual influences, so that they were not dragged into sin; and
- the difficulties that physical people have in accepting and living a spirit-led life.

To five of the seven churches Jesus opens His message by saying that He knows their deeds. Once again it is important to recognize that these people were Christians, most likely filled with the Holy Spirit, but Jesus was looking at their deeds and telling them to repent. In some cases He tells them that unless they repent of their deeds they would not inherit the rewards of heaven. Undoubtedly the life they lived was not one of obedience to God's will and they therefore had to seek forgiveness from God for things in their life and make a commitment to God to turn away from those things.

Jesus' message to those Christians and to us today is clear. Even after we are redeemed we are to overcome and repent of any deed that is not in accordance with the will of God. If a Christian sows to a life outside of God's will the person will reap destruction by eventually losing the belief they hold in their heart. If we choose to

sow to the spiritual life God wants us to live, we will reap the eternal rewards of heaven. Jesus made it clear that as Christians we must still overcome many things in our life as we walk on the pathway to eternal life. As we successfully overcome and reach our heavenly destination, Jesus promises us rewards.

Revelation2vs7 ... I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. " "

Revelation3vs5 ... shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.

Revelation2vs11 ...shall not be hurt by the second death.

Revelation3vs12 ... I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name.

Revelation3vs21 I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

Revelation21vs7 He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.

The Bible warns us that in the last days, before Jesus returns to earth, people will accumulate for themselves pastors and preachers that tell them what they want to hear (tickling their ears) rather than telling them what they need to hear.

2Timothy4vs3 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; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

As Christians we are to overcome the temptations and lure of the world, overcome sin and overcome our tendency to live according to the flesh and not the spirit. As Christians, our spiritual life can be in danger if we only go to churches or choose to listen only to those people who do not confront us with the full truth of the gospel.

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