

How Then Shall We Live? : The Denominational Dilemma

By Jason Huff

August 14, 2011

Psalm 34:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:10-25, John 17

Our final Scripture reading comes from John 17. Listen now to God's Word. "After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name -- the name you gave me -- so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in 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. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

According to the World Christian Encyclopedia of 2001, there are over 38,000 Christian denominations. Many are small and insignificant; some have less members than our own little church here. But when we talk about Christianity, it's almost always qualified. Are we Lutheran, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, UCC, United Methodist, Free Methodist, Free Baptist, Nazarene? The list goes on with countless variations. I've even heard other Christian denominations referred to as other religions, which would imply that they don't believe in the same God we do. For most of us, it's a gigantic jumble.

Deep down, we know there's something incredibly wrongheaded about this. There are Christians in other denominations that are nearly identical to us and others in our denomination that are light years away. What gives? And what does Jesus have to say about it? It's His church, after all, given to Him by the Father. After looking through Scriptural morality over the past several weeks, this seems to be different from the rest...and yet the unity of the true church is paramount to God. Let's take a look in the Bible and find out why.

From the earliest pages of Scripture, God works to bring together a people that would worship Him and be in relationship with Him. God blesses Abraham and his family line and keeps them together despite hardships and personal betrayals. God keeps the Hebrew people separate for Himself for four hundred years in Egypt, even though they were made slaves and taught Egyptian religion and culture. He brought Abraham's descendents out through the Exodus and gave them the law to unite them in their worship and obedience.

The Israelites still were disjointed. For four hundred years after they conquered the land, they were persecuted by invaders, and God raised up judges to bring the tribes together. Eventually, listening to His peoples' cry, God established a king over them. Yet over time, God's people were divided into the northern and southern kingdoms. Eventually, the division became permanent when the northern kingdom fell to Assyria and the people exiled. It appeared that God's desire for a unified people was thwarted.

But God had a bigger plan...God wanted to unite all who might come to know Him, not just the people of Israel. Before God could do that, He had to address the issue of sin once and for all – which He did through the life, death, and resurrection of His son Jesus. As Paul said in this morning's reading from 1st Corinthians, while it seems absurd to the world, God was pleased save all those who believed in His crucified Son. He did it to rescue us from the power of sin and death, but through it He also brought together all the nations through His Son, saving and unifying all who desired a relationship with Him. Jesus said those who followed God would be His brothers and sisters. We are adopted into God's family and made one in Him.

That's why we took the time this morning to listen to that beautiful prayer of Jesus this morning from John 17. Jesus prayed this prayer just two days before His trial and crucifixion. And what's amazing is that Jesus prays for us! He first prays for His disciples, but then He prays for all those who will believe in Him through the message His disciples spread! If you have any doubts that Jesus doesn't love you or want to bring you into the family of God, throw them out. He was so far-sighted, so knowing of the Father's will and purpose, that He prayed for every last believer. Take comfort that Jesus has been talking to the Father on your behalf.

Now note what Jesus prays for first, both for the disciples and for us. First, He asks for the disciples' protection by the power of God's name. Why does He ask for protection? It's not so that they won't be martyred; all but one of them was. It's not for safety from beatings and imprisonment; they all suffered that too. Jesus asks for their protection for this purpose: "so that they may be one as we are one." He asked that they be protected from the division that the devil can bring, the kind of division that marked Judas as a traitor because he walked away from His master. He asked that the disciples be unified so closely with each other and with God that they would display the Gospel through their unity as they proclaimed the Gospel with their mouths.

And what is the first request Jesus makes for us? Listen again. “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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in 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.” Jesus prays for us to be one just like the Father is one with the Son and with the Holy Spirit. Not only that, but He prays for our oneness with them. And what is the point of this unity? It’s not just to be one happy family. It’s so that the world may believe in Jesus Christ. Our unity points to the truth that the Father loves the Son and that the Father loves us. If we want the world to know God’s love, unity is not a maybe.

So what’s to be our response? For us to be unified in Jesus’ love and grace in a world of 38,000 denominations, we need to know a few things. We need to know how we got divided in the first place, we need to understand how we can begin to be unified with other believers in Jesus Christ, and we need to know the proper limits to that unity.

First, we need to realize that division has always plagued the church. In the reading from Paul today, he decries the division in the Corinthian church. In his day, the argument was over whose teachings were most important. Many teachers came through Corinth, and often a convert might play favorites with whomever had been involved in their baptism. But Paul says, “Don’t do that! Don’t think that any of us should be praised for our words! Our goal is to give you God’s Word, the gospel, the truth of Jesus Christ, the foolishness of God rather than the wisdom of man.” So before we judge too harshly the world of denominations, we need to remember that division over pastors and teachings took place early on.

As early as 100-150 A.D., the church begins to look different in different places, reflecting different cultural viewpoints that affected believers viewed the gospel. They all believed the core truths; they all believed in sin and salvation through Christ alone, in the literal physical life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Virgin birth, and so on. But some were more logical; some were more mystical. Some focused on prayer and spiritual development; others focused on evangelism. The church stayed united for nearly 1000 years despite these differences. But in 1054 A.D., the church split between East and West, between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy over issues ranging from worship to the papacy. For several hundred years, bitterness between the two sides kept them apart.

In the same manner, in the 1500s the Reformation began. Europe split over issues of corrupt doctrine, especially surrounding the practice of indulgences. Parishioners were taught that they could buy their way out of purgatory, a middle state between heaven and hell taught not in the Bible but in Catholic theology. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and a host of others rose up to attempt to reform the church. But instead of reform, there was fracture. The church divided into factions – the Lutherans, the Reformed, and the Anglicans. Within a hundred years came the Baptist and Anabaptist movements. It was only a matter of time that these movements began to subdivide themselves. The Reformation proved that one could be a Christian without being a Roman Catholic. Over time, this led people to believe that they could be Christians without belonging to one specific church or denomination. And so we come to today’s landscape, where many churches don’t have any denominational affiliations at all.

What differences do we still have today? Each denomination has its own unique points of doctrine that it believes are correct. For example, our church is Presbyterian, a branch of the Reformed church. One of the unique doctrines of Reformed branch is predestination, the idea that before we ever chose God, God chose us, His saved people, before the creation of the world and is working out that choice in human history. Other groups believe in free will, that everyone has the opportunity to make a choice for or against God and that God has no say in whether or not we believe in Him. Our tradition says that Christ genuinely meets with us at communion but that He is not literally present in the bread and juice. A Roman Catholic believes that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus. Lutherans and Baptists believe something different still. Who do we baptize, infants or adult believers? What liturgy do we use in worship? Do we trust in Scripture alone as the Word of God, or are church history and tradition just as important as the Bible? Do we believe that we are saved by faith alone, a faith that God instills within us, or do our works help to save us? The list goes on.

So what are we to do? Is there any hope of unity in the midst of all this? The good news is yes. And we aren't going to be unified by abandoning our principles but through emphasizing the things we hold in common. I've always liked that we are Church of the Covenant. We aren't Presbyterian first. In my mind, we shouldn't be. We are first and foremost Christians, and as Christians, we stand with every last person who believes the essential orthodox tenets the church has held for over 2000 years.

That means our goal is to find common ground with other believers. We have what's known in many circles as "liberty in non-essentials." That means that no matter if someone is a Catholic or a Lutheran or whatever, we grant them the freedom to believe what they want about issues that are not ultimately related to salvation, and we will ask them to show us the same grace. Denominations believe what they do because each thinks it is right, and it's good to have conversations about non-essentials. I learned a great deal from friends at seminary who came from very different Christian backgrounds. We learn and grow by engaging with other believers.

And the results can be fantastic. When we unite with other believers and other churches, we can accomplish far more than what we can accomplish alone. When I went to Russia, over 100 organizations worked together to send thousands of people to Russia to spread the good news of Christ. Some were non-denominational, some were Charismatic, some were traditional...you get the picture. But working together, we covered far more of Russia with the Gospel than we ever could have separately. It says a great deal to me that we as a church have partnered with Bethel Church recently for special services and events. That's the kind of unity we should have. Think too about groups like World Vision and Compassion International. They aren't worried about the small points of doctrine; they work so that Christians of all kinds and stripes and colors can help those in need know that God loves them and wants to be in a relationship with them.

Unity is a wonderful thing; Jesus prayed for it, and we should unite with each other to obey our Lord. But what are the limits of unity? We see them in the letters of the New Testament. Even in the early church, the Gnostics taught that they alone knew the “secret” teachings of Jesus. They taught that the physical world was evil, so they promoted either asceticism where everything was forbidden or hedonism where every sinful pleasure was OK. The apostles strongly condemned it. They were very concerned about churches that tolerated evil or untruth in their midst. In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul said, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” Paul encouraged expelling those who would not be disciplined and who continued sinning with no regard for repentance or forgiveness.

So what are the boundaries of unity for us? Here’s what I see...we can only be unified with those who believe differently about things which do not put salvation in jeopardy. Salvation doesn’t rest on whether we believe that God gave us free will or not. No one will be condemned for believing Saturday to be the Lord’s Day rather than Sunday. But we cannot be unified with those who believe things that endanger one’s soul. For example, it’s a salvation issue to believe that Jesus was only a man and not the son of God. It is dangerous to reject the clear teachings of Scripture on sin. It is treacherous to believe that all religions lead to God, because it denies the unique saving power of Jesus Christ. I could go on, but the chief question is this: is the issue on which I disagree with someone an issue of debate within the whole of Christianity, or is this something where there is consensus? If 99% of the church agrees and you do not, there’s a problem. I encourage you, if you aren’t sure on an issue, if you haven’t given it enough thought and need guidance, let me know and we can talk about it. Because if God calls us to be unified with other faithful Christians but to stand apart from those who hold false teachings, the best thing is to make sure you know which is which.

Sadly, these issues face us in our own denomination. As many of you know, we have tried to find unity where there is no unity. We have professing atheists in Presbyterian pulpits who readily admit to having no belief in God. The former stated clerk of Transylvania Presbytery preached at the church where I interned in Kentucky and spoke of the Ten Commandments as the “Ten Suggestions.” We have those who refuse to recognize sin as sin. In the coming months, we will need to pray diligently, listen carefully, and determine how we can be unified with likeminded believers. In less than two weeks I will be going to Minneapolis to a conference where nearly 2000 Presbyterians will be discussing how we might move forward faithfully together. I’ll keep you posted.

Perhaps the best thing we can do in the midst of all this complexity and uncertainty is to seek unity within our own church. Many of our unity issues have nothing to do with doctrine or denomination whatsoever. They have to do with personalities and preferences. We quarrel over music or who provides snacks, little things. We get bitter and resentful. And friends, Jesus calls us to be unified. When we decide to work together in the Holy Spirit despite our differences, we can accomplish far more than we ever dreamed possible. The Holy Spirit has the power to take our meager offerings and turn them into gigantic blessings when we stop arguing about insignificant things and decide that we will be unified in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Friends, there is so much more we could talk about on this subject. But I encourage you, think about your friends and neighbors who know Christ as Savior and Lord and begin to dream what you might accomplish together for God's Kingdom. You are already brothers and sisters in the Lord. What might it mean for us to lay down those labels of Presbyterian or Baptist or Lutheran and say, "I will stand beside you because you are a Christian?" I believe it would change the world. Amen.