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BASIC BIBLE STUDIES

THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE

Study Number 1

A few hours before His crucifixion, Jesus addressed a prayer to His Father. We find this prayer in the Gospel of John. He prayed for the unity of believers and expressed His wish in these terms: *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. (John 17:11)*. And once again, *I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one. (John 17:20,21)*

Nevertheless, we have to recognize that there is often very little unity among Christians. I do not intend to propose a radical remedy to this sickness. But I think that Christians could get along a bit better if they followed the recommendations of tolerance that we find in Paul's epistle to the Romans, chapter 14.

1 Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.

4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

10 You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or

obstacle in your brother's way.

15 If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

If only we realized that there is a mixture in the things that we believe. All of the “truths” that we defend are not necessarily found in the Bible. In certain cases, we adhere to ideas that we have inherited, to ideas that perhaps go back several generations, but that do not go all the way back to the apostles.

The definitions of biblical truths have been worked on by Christians thinkers for centuries. As we contemplate this mass of Christian beliefs, we ought to be both thankful and responsible. We should be thankful that others have thought through these truths before we were on the scene, but we should also accept the responsibility of thinking them through for ourselves.

The most intolerant individuals are not those who have thought through their faith, but rather those who blindly accept the dogmas of their church without personal thought.

It is therefore the duty of each Christian to study the Bible for himself. It is true that some religious leaders fear such freedom, thinking that it will only multiply the differences among Christians. They forget the words of Christ promising the help of the Holy Spirit. Here is his promise: *When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.* (John 16:13)

We must of course study the Word of God with a sincere desire to be illuminated by the Spirit. Let us not look for verses to prove our preconceived ideas. Let us seek rather to be freed from them.

There are truths which are taught so clearly in the Bible that a well-meaning person cannot go astray. These are fundamental doctrines without which Christianity would crumble. When you study the history of the Church, it is interesting to note that there has always been a large consensus on these doctrines. The discordant interpretations never lasted long. They sounded false in the ears of Christians who were open to the Spirit of God. Here are some of the pillars that hold up the building which we call the Church:

The Bible was written under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. There is only one God manifested in three persons. The human race has lost its initial moral perfection. Actions which are considered by the Bible as reprehensible deserve the judgment of God. God has provided a means of salvation by the sacrifice of his Son. Those who persist in their condition of revolt against God will spend eternity separated from the presence of God, while those who have turned to Christ for their salvation will spend eternity in the presence of God.

These are elements of the Christian faith that have always met with the agreement of all Christians who have thought through their faith sincerely and honestly. On the other hand, there are other subjects on which various opinions are held. Christians have sometimes violently disagreed with each other in these areas.

Among the subjects which have caused very marked disagreement, we can name the following: the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the manifestations of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the interpretation of prophecy, drinking of alcoholic beverages, visiting of places of amusement, style of clothing, involvement in military service.

Let us make it clear once again that there is an important difference between basic doctrines and secondary questions. Those in the first list are indispensable to the Christian faith, while those in the second list are not. God Himself shows us that the fundamental doctrines have a greater importance by giving us very clear teaching concerning them.

However, some believers demand an identical view on secondary questions as a condition for fellowship. They consequently refuse the counsel of Paul to accept fellow Christians without getting into arguments on nonessentials.

Too often, each one does his utmost to defend his point of view, and thus runs the risk of harming the unity of the

body of Christ. Is there a biblical teaching that can help us to avoid such a danger? Let us look at the recommendations that the apostle Paul gave in Romans chapter 14.

In the first verse, he says: *Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.* This means that identical points of view should not be the prerequisite for unity of heart. We can have fellowship with our brothers in Christ without even inquiring as to their opinion on contentious questions. It is our natural tendency to be curious that trips us up.

Then the apostle Paul teaches us that we should not judge our brother (or our sister) who has an opinion that is different from ours. He is not less spiritual than we are, nor is he less intelligent, nor is he less enlightened. Instead of despising him, we should respect him as much as if he had the same point of view as we have on all these secondary questions.

If we really respect our brother just as he is, we will not exert all our energy with the goal of winning him to our opinion. It seems that, already in the time of the apostle Paul, Christians had fallen into this trap. Because when he wrote to Timothy, the apostle told him: *Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.* (2 Timothy 2:23) There are useful discussions, but there are others that are a waste of time and energy, causing quarrels and creating a cold atmosphere between brothers.

Finally, love for our brother ought to take the upper hand over our natural tendency to wish to conquer him. When we treat him like an adversary to subjugate, we do not act in love. It is again Paul who makes this clear: *If your brother is distressed, you are no longer acting in love.* (Romans 14:15)

Therefore, the apostle exhorts us to show signs of tolerance in the area of opinions that we might have on secondary questions. It is in this context of tolerance that we will feel at ease with our brothers and that, without any ulterior motives, we will sense genuine joy when we find ourselves assembled in Christian fellowship.

A great theologian expressed a motto on this subject:

“On essential points, unity;

On secondary points, liberty;

On all points, charity.”

That They All May Be One - Questions

1. Why did Jesus feel it so important that believers be united?

2. Why is the wish of Jesus often not practised by Christians?

3. What are the recommendations of tolerance that we find in Romans 14?

4. What is the mixture that is found in our beliefs?

5. Why can we express some of our beliefs in a dogmatic way?

6. What attitude should we have toward those who have studied and defined biblical truths in the past?

7. What should we do before accepting their teaching about doctrine?

8. Why is it difficult to discuss opinions with intolerant Christians?

9. What promise do we have to assure us that Bible study will lead us in the right direction?

10. What risk do we run concerning beliefs that have been handed down to us?

11. Why are certain doctrines called fundamental?

12. Why should we avoid being dogmatic about secondary issues?

13. What judgment should we avoid toward those who have a conflicting opinion on a secondary matter?

14. How can we show respect for those who have a point of view that is different from ours?

15. What is the attitude that we should show toward those whose opinions are different from ours?
