

Build Bridges Among Groups

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By Larry J. Walker

We must now face the sober reality that God's people, like sheep, have been scattered, and many have regathered into other flocks.

Have we recreated the tragic situation that plagued the Corinthian Church (1 Corinthians 1:11, 12)? "Is Christ divided?" Paul's rhetorical question should haunt the conscience of God's people today. God clearly wants His people "joined together" (1 Corinthians 1:10). Jesus fervently prayed for the unity of God's people of all generations (John 17:11, 20-23). What can we do to help build bridges between members and the church organizations to which they belong? Before we can build bridges, we must first remove the barriers. Let's consider what is keeping us apart and how to work for unity.

Historical factors

Leaders of existing Sabbath- and Holy Day-keeping church organizations are miffed by the formation of new organizations. Why did they have to start a new church? they wonder. Why didn't they just come with us?

Here is one answer I offer: When the house is on fire, you are concerned with getting people out to safety. Where to put them can be decided later. Many of us left under great duress after crises of conscience had exacted a heavy toll. We were simply not ready to jump right back into another organization.

What we have experienced is much like a divorce. One does not normally seek a new relationship immediately after a painful breakup of a marriage. Some never marry again. Sadly, there are apparently more members sitting home by themselves than the total number of all the breakaway groups. How many of those would seek the safe haven of fellowship if we could all be together? When members have to decide between groups much as voters have to decide between mudslinging political candidates with all their issues, what kind of incentive does that offer to hurting, estranged brethren?

It is time to leave the past and face the realities of the present and the challenges of the future. For some this will require apologizing for what we have said or done to hurt others. Ministers and members alike need to pursue this reconciliation as a matter of prime importance. It is time to heal the hurt and leave the past behind. We must then find ways to work together and build bridges of understanding that can lead to meaningful unity. Spiritual unity must transcend the barriers of corporate organization.

Personality issues

"I could never be in an organization headed by ..." Have you heard that said? Have you said that? What does this suggest? Is the person in question not one of God's people? No, it's just that some think they could not coexist with someone whose approach is different from theirs. Virtually all of us know someone who thinks he cannot get along with us.

Is this grounds for separate church organizations? Again, is Christ divided? Many of us have a lot to learn about what the Bible calls "bearing one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2, Colossians 3:13). We should consider all that God has forgiven us for and what He puts up with in us before we write off a brother or sister in Christ. Read the parable of the unforgiving servant if you need to refocus your perspective (Matthew 18:21-35).

Should personal problems or personality issues be grounds for rejecting that person's work of preaching the gospel? Paul didn't think so (Philippians 1:15-18). "Paul's conclusion ... reveals his sense of values. The importance of the gospel and its proclamation so outweighed any personal considerations that he would not cloud the issue by insisting on settling personal grievances" (Expositor's Bible Commentary). Paul was able to rise above personality issues and concentrate on doing the work of God. So must we.

Doctrinal differences

Now we come to what many think is the main barrier to our all being together. It really isn't, but it serves as a noble cause to mask the other barriers, which are not so noble. There are, of course, legitimate doctrinal differences between church organizations. But so are there between members of the same church. Are these differences fundamental enough to justify separation?

The apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians. 6:14-18 commands us not to be "yoked together" with unbelievers. Paul asks, "What fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness?" The Greek word for "fellowship" means sharing what one has in common with others. Major doctrinal differences render fellowship impossible and inappropriate. The apostle John in 2John 10 tells us we must reject those who promote a different doctrine. Or, as Paul concludes in 2 Corinthians. 6:17, "come out and be separate."

Expositor's Bible Commentary explains: "The issue involved more than disagreements in interpretation or personal misunderstanding among members of the body of Christ. It was radical and clearly defined unbelief, and it involved active and aggressive promotion of perversions of truth and practice that struck at the heart of Christianity" (Vol. 12, pages 365, 366).

The teaching that the Sabbath need not be kept by "New Covenant Christians" represents a major doctrinal difference that is grounds for separation (see 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 and 2John 10). However, what if a Sabbath-believing Christian considers golfing on the Sabbath an appropriate way within the spirit of the law to unwind from the rigors of the week in an outdoor setting in God's creation? Is this grounds for separation from a Sabbath-keeper who considers golfing on the Sabbath a sin? The answer is found in Romans 14.

Here we find two brethren whose applications of biblical principles were poles apart. If the issue happened to be meat sacrificed to idols, the vegetarian was playing it safe by eating no meat at all, lest he inadvertently eat meat that had been part of a pagan ceremony. In his eyes, to do otherwise would be breaking the Second Commandment. Yet God "has received" both, so Paul tells each not to judge the other. It is a case of variation of application, not difference of doctrinal belief.

Verse 1 tells us to "receive" someone in spite of differences of application of Bible principles and to avoid "passing judgment on disputable matters" (New International Version). The lesson of the chapter is live and let live. We must focus on our common doctrinal heritage, not on areas of disagreement. We dare not "destroy the work of God" for what we consider to be "good" (verses 16-20). Are we hindering the work of God by allowing relatively minor doctrinal variations to divide us? Could we not do a more powerful, effective work by combining efforts instead of each church having its own telecast and publications?

Ephesians 4 clearly distinguishes spiritual unity from doctrinal unity. Spiritual unity exists via the common bond of the Holy Spirit and must be preserved (Ephesians 4:1-6). Doctrinal unity is an elusive ideal that must be pursued (Ephesians 4:13-15). Spiritual unity based on love must be what we must all work for. God is not trying to build a doctrinal master race. "We know in part ... " We must not argue over pieces of the puzzle. Let's get our eyes on the the trunk of the tree. Jesus Christ is the Head of the church and the Savior of the body. The Holy Spirit is the source of our unity. Let's look to Christ to help us build bridges of understanding. Let's reach out to each other in love, "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

Misinformation

Now we come to the main barriers to unity. Misunderstandings must give way to true understanding. In the meantime, we are misrepresenting and being misrepresented because of false impressions. Why does this happen, and what can we do to be properly informed?

Gossip and rumors: Many hurt feelings are caused by false information passed along the grapevine. Gossip and rumors are often fueled by hostility and resentment (Proverbs 26:19-28). Proverbs 10:18 states, "Whoever hides hatred has lying lips. And whoever spreads slander is a fool." Pretty strong words.

How much of what you think you know about other church organizations have you pieced together from gossip, rumors and hearsay? The rumor mill is raging out of control. Gunpowder words: Words are powerful instruments for good or for evil. Some words carry a heavy charge of explosives. Like land mines, they threaten to blow away anyone who dares walk the trail to reconciliation. Some examples? How about "hierarchy," "local autonomy" and "voting," for openers? These and other gunpowder words must be defused. How? Like porcupines make love: very carefully. Sensitivities must be respected. Some words conjure up dark images that we do not want to relive.

Emotions: Gunpowder words are fueled by emotion. Emotion can cloud, even destroy, reason and objectivity. Some doctrinal issues are exacerbated far out of balance by emotional baggage. Remember the makeup issue of years past? How could anyone forget. Makeup was blown way out of proportion because it was associated with what some termed liberal movement to water down the truth. So the makeup issue became a symbol of the entire ideological struggle.

Today the nature of God, the verses concerning whether we're born again and governance are doctrinal issues with heavy emotional investment. Human nature: The common denominator of our problems of strife is what we often call human nature. Paul is more blunt. He blatantly labels division and strife as just plain carnal (1 Corinthians 3:1-4). Like it or not, we have a similar situation today. Satan: Of course, as always, Satan is the real culprit. He is the source of all division. He is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). He is the "accuser of the brethren" (Revelation 12:9). He seeks to divide God's people even as he plots to unite his own forces. We must not be ignorant of Satan's devices. We need to remember that Satan, not human beings, is our real enemy (Ephesians 6:12).

Our common concerns

We are in this together. We need to do all we can to destroy the barriers and build bridges so we can be together. Can we all be together? This is a question we all must answer. I believe we can. I believe we must. We all need each other too much to think otherwise, especially in the times ahead.

One person remarked that it would be nice to be together, but we cannot let that interfere with the work God has called us to do. I say that not being together is a major deterrent to the work. Jesus said, "By this shall all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). The main work we have before us now is to patch up our differences so all God's people will be together. Then and only then can we present a powerful, credible message that the world will sit up and take notice of. More important, it will provide a clarion call, to our battered brethren who are sitting it out at home, that we are indeed God's people.

So many brethren have broken off and formed groups only to have them sdisintegrate and virtually disappear over the years. This is the frightening alternative that none of us wants. The good news is that Jesus Christ will bring us all back together as one flock (John 10:1-16). Ultimately we will all be one as He and the Father are one (John 17:11). How soon this happens, and how much grief and pain we go through in the meantime, depends on how much we work for the precious unity that God loves and that Jesus prayed for and will achieve.

Here's what all of us can do. We can be part of the problem or part of the solution. Specifically, here's what can be done:

Realize and be convicted by the need to build bridges and draw together.

Deal with your emotions. With God's help, put away your anger. Remember that God says, "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay" (Romans 12:19).

Stop spreading rumors. Get the straight scoop direct from the source.

Seek understanding of doctrinal differences and agree to disagree on matters of application.

Accept each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and treat each other with love and respect.

Here's what ministers can do

Ministers, especially church leaders, in addition to the above must:

Seek input from fellow ministers and members. Victor Kubik, a member of the UCG interim board of directors, jokingly recommended installing a gong in every meeting hall that members could sound when the minister says something that, based on a Christian code of ethics, is inappropriate.

Establish a dialogue between organizations. Seek to learn from other points of view, not just defend your own.

Strive to iron out doctrinal differences and misunderstandings through open, honest Bible study and discussion. Clearly define doctrinal differences and respect everyone's right to practice his beliefs without criticism or condemnation.

Plan joint activities between church organizations. Begin with social activities. Work toward combined Holy Day services and even combined Sabbath services, especially in areas in which members are few and far between. Establish ground rules such as: Preach on common ground, avoiding issues that could cause offense. Make sure members understand and respect doctrinal differences. Make announcements and give news of all the groups represented. Do not allow putdowns, pressure or proselytizing.

Pursue other joint ventures in publishing, evangelism and educational seminars.

Why can't we all be together?

We can. We must. We will.