

Unity in Diversity

by Walton Weaver

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Question # 12: What is “unity in diversity”? Is this a scriptural expression? How much diversity can there be in the body of Christ and there yet be only “one body”? The expression Aunity in diversity does not appear in the Bible, yet within certain limits the thought conveyed by these words expresses a true biblical concept. We found some illustrations of the kinds of diversity that can exist in the body of Christ (even in a local church) in our first chapter, titled “One Body Yet Many Members.” The Bible describes the church as a diversified unit. In the church at Corinth Paul found different nationalities, social classes, and gifts. Yet in spite of this kind of diversity there was unity of origin, and unity of heritage. There is also unity of relationship, each member being united to Christ as head, and as long as each member maintains this contact with the head, there is also cohesiveness of the body because each member provides benefit to all the other members (see pp. 10-11).

Some have been frightened away from using the expression “unity in diversity” themselves because it has been so grossly misused by others. But just because a term is misused does not mean that the term should no longer be used by us. My denominational friends misuse the word “conversion,” but I go right on using the term the way it is used in the Bible. Others misuse the word “prayer” when they teach the “praying through” system of salvation, but the word has a legitimate use in Scripture and I refuse to stop using the term just because others are misusing it. These may not be the best examples, but the reader can see the point.

It is the abuse that is made of the expression “unity in diversity” that should concern us, not whether or not the expression can be scripturally used. Cecil Hook, for example, charges that where brethren have gotten off track is due to

a legal approach to the Scriptures and justification. According to this line of thinking, since salvation depends upon rightly keeping of law, each point of law must be known and practiced in detail. Unity and fellowship are based on total doctrinal agreement, ruling out any thought of unity in diversity. This mentality will continue to emphasize differences and force those distinctions into dividing issues (*Free in Christ* 9).

Following this statement Hook then gives a list of 100 things about which brethren have differed and says, “We have continued in congregational fellowship while disagreeing on these many points; thus

our very practice has been inconsistent with our denial of unity in diversity” (9).

I will grant that for those who refuse to admit that the terms “unity in diversity” properly describe the condition of the church as it actually is today cannot be consistent in their view. We have had, and will continue to have, diversity in the way Hook claims in this statement. We would expect this kind of diversity among an intelligent and free-thinking people. The issue is not whether or not there are many different points of view held by different people on a number of Bible subjects. The issue is, how can we hold differing points of view and yet remain united?

Yet not all the differences in his list of 100 items are equal. Some of the things in the list are bound to be more troublesome for some people than others. Some involve moral issues (abortion, serving in the military during times of war when lives are taken, remarriage of a divorced person, modesty in dress, social drinking, dancing, etc.), while others involve collective action and in some cases would call for all members to participate (those things involving the collection, such as the use of the church building for secular purposes, fellowship halls, support of colleges from the treasury, church benevolence, operation of church hospitals). Some other things in the list involve what is done in the assembly of the church and would also involve all the members, either by direct participation, or by indirect participation by being present as the activities are being engaged in (special group singing such as choruses and choirs and quartets, and solo singing, or applauding in the assembly, lifting hands while singing, singing as the emblems are passed).

The kinds of things we have just listed in the above paragraph are things that cause real problems in local churches. The separate list of 11 items (given on page 13 of his book) over which Hook says he has known of cases where churches have divided are described by him as things over which

we have become hair-splitters serving a God of quibbles. Sincerely, but being either ignorant or intellectually dishonest, we have twisted and misapplied Scriptures to support our contentions. We have become fixed in the tracks of dogmatism. God=s purposes in His directives have been overshadowed by emphasis on lawful requirements. Binding incidental details often has become more important than the love without which we cannot be bound together. Doctrine, instead of the Savior, has become our center. The binding of scruples has limited the liberties of others. We have not trusted others with the freedom which Christ gives. We have become judgmental and exclusive and have given ourselves a name to distinguish ourselves from others. God=s grace has been

limited to our achievement. We continue not only to divide but also to prevent the only true unity. Unless we change our perspective, we shall continue on this ill-fated course (*Free in Christ* 13-14).

Just how one can be sincere and at the same time intellectually dishonest, Hook fails to explain. But that's how he describes the "hair-splitters serving a God of quibbles," which of course in his view is a fitting portrayal of all except him and those with whom he is identified. So at the outset of his book we see Cecil Hook, and all those who are with him, standing alone among his brethren as those who are the intellectually honest, and they could never be guilty of twisting and misapplying Scripture! Only the "hair-splitters serving a God of quibbles" could ever be guilty of that crime.

And who are the "hair splitters" who are either "gnorant or intellectually dishonest," and who twist and misapply Scriptures to support their contentions? All those who will not give him and his the "freedom" or the "right" he is pleading for to *teach and practice* all of the 111 items he lists on pages 11-13 of his book. Yet, the truth of the matter is, there has never been a man who is more able to twist and pervert Scriptures in defense of what he claims is his "right" to teach and practice any and everything he wants, than this man. And all the while he could not call any of us a "false teacher" (since his only criteria for a *true* teacher is sincerity) because he begins by crediting all of us as being "sincere"— even if we are "ignorant" and "intellectually dishonest"!

Hook's point about "directives" and "lawful requirements" in the above quote has been thoroughly dealt with in earlier chapters of this book. He is simply laying down here what is to be the central thrust of his book. No one believes that a Christian should bind incidental details, and they certainly should not put the binding of incidental details above love for God, or as being more important than love that binds Christians together. But, at the same time, those who are more conservative in their interpretation of Scripture are going to continue to believe that many of the things in this list are not mere "incidental details," and that when Jesus said, "if you love me, keep my commandments," he is saying that commandments are "lawful requirements" and not simply "love directives." John says, "And this is love, that we walk after his commandments . . ." (1 John 6a).

Exactly what our true standing is in relation to Christ is not simply a matter of choosing between doctrine and the Savior, nor is our standing to be determined by whether we give more emphasis to the Savior than we give to doctrine. The question to be answered is, can one truly let Christ be his center without having a proper respect for his doctrine or teaching? How can one ignore or deliberately disregard *any* teaching of Christ and keep Christ as Savior at the center of his life?

We come to a restatement of Hook's real purpose in writing his book, when he says, "The

binding of scruples has limited the liberties of others. We have not trusted others with the freedom which Christ gives.” The “binding of scruples”! Everything in Hook’s list of the 111 items is a scruple to him. What he really is saying is that *as long as he can have his way* on these 111 items (actually, other things could be added to the list, such as a plurality of elders in a local church, since he does not believe there is a pattern for this practice in the N. T.) we can have unity. But in those passages where Paul is discussing such matters (incidentals and scruples) he usually emphasizes the need for *the denial of one’s rights* in order that there might be unity (Phil. 2:1-11). He never insists on himself or any other brother having their way on such matters in order that unity might prevail. He went in the exact opposite direction and argued that brethren must deny their own personal rights for the sake of unity.

On the other hand, when the great doctrinal issue over the law arose, and some maintained that certain requirements of the law should be bound upon Christians, Paul insisted that the binding of these requirements is to deny the freedom (from the law) one enjoys in Christ. Such matters are not mere incidental details and scruples. When one turns back to the law, he reasoned, they are severed from Christ, and have fallen from grace (see Gal. 5:1-6).

Whatever the difference in teaching and practice may be between two brethren, how can one man be free to teach and practice the kinds of things given in this list and another not be free to oppose such teaching and practice? The person who does not believe that a certain teaching and practice are right has every “right” to oppose that teaching and practice. This is why early restoration leaders maintained that in such areas each must hold his views as private property if unity is to be maintained.

Do you suppose, as Hook suggests in this statement, that our real problem is that “we have not trusted others with the freedom which Christ gives”? If that is our problem, then Paul must have been guilty of making the same mistake. He did not allow people to teach and practice just anything they wanted to teach and practice. The same may be said of Jesus. And if “we have become judgmental and exclusive,” so was Jesus and so was Paul. Jesus said to certain Jews of his day, “And in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt. 15:9), and he said he hated the doctrine of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:15). Paul would have nothing of the teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus because “concerning the truth,” he said, “they have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some” (2 Tim. 2:17-18). Were Jesus and Paul being judgmental in these matters? Were they being exclusive? You can count on it. They were indeed being both judgmental and exclusive, and so must we.

Do you suppose Jesus and Paul had this problem? Did they not trust others with the freedom that Christ either would give or had given to them? Of course not. It was not a matter of whether or not they trusted others with his freedom, and that is not our major problem today. Our problem has more to do with those who do not understand the meaning of Christ’s freedom; they are not properly

defining it. If the unity that Christ advocated and prayed for is to ever be created, and then maintained, freedom cannot be license. Jesus never taught that freedom is the license to teach and practice just anything one wants to teach and practice.

On the statement that we “have given ourselves a name to distinguish ourselves from others,” see the next question.

Hook says that “God’s grace has been limited to our achievement.” On the surface this statement appears to mean that man’s obedience is not required in order for one to be a recipient of God’s grace. Yet, we suspect this is not what he means in any absolute sense. But if this is what he means, just how do you suppose he would attempt to prove this statement from the Bible? Try he may, but prove it he never shall! By achievement Hook may mean perfect obedience. If this is what he means, then of course none of us believes anyone shall be saved on the basis of perfect obedience. Anyone who lives perfectly does not need God’s grace.

Grace is available to the sinner (both the alien sinner, and the Christian who sins), but not unconditionally. God’s grace has appeared to all men bringing salvation (Titus 2:11), but only those who obey the gospel of God (2 Thess. 1:7-9; 1 Peter 4:17; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38) and continue faithful to him (1 Cor. 15:58; Matt. 25:21, 23; Col. 1:23) will be saved. Do you suppose Hook would say that “work out you own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12) involves any achievement on man’s part? Or, we might ask, what about the alien sinner? Has God limited his grace to achievement for him? We know he is saved by God’s grace, but as Hook concedes in his book, there are certain conditions involved. Does this mean God’s grace for him is limited to achievement because there are conditions? The answer he gives here should say something about how God’s grace is made available to the Christian. It is certainly not unconditional.

Hook thinks he has the answer to (or should we say, plan for) the only true unity, and that all who are not with him are preventing it. And what is his answer? From the way he writes, he appears to be saying that we should let him, and those with him, have their way! Isn’t he saying, “Just back off and let me and those who are in agreement with me do as we want (in both teaching and practice) on all 111 items in my list on pages 9-13 of my book, and we can have unity”? That and that alone, according to Cecil Hook, will produce the only true unity! And why should we do that? Maybe its because, as he said earlier in this chapter, we are either ignorant or intellectually dishonest, even though we are sincere!

Perhaps another reason Hook thinks we should all adopt his plan for the only true unity is because he has the only sound hermeneutic: love that is the only effective motive for our actions, love that fulfills the intent of all other laws, love that lifts us above efforts of legal justification, and love that transcends any sense of duty. We have dealt with these points and his enlargement upon

them in some detail in chapters 7 through 17 of this book.

— * *That They All May Be One*, pp. 299-305 (Copyright 2003)