

Inward Unity Versus Outward Uniformity

by Roger Day

Individual Christians could be independent from an official organization, but they should not be independent from Christ. They should be truly part of the spiritual Church that Christ built, loving God and one another in true unity.

It is possible for a group of individuals to find themselves in true unity of heart if they love God and also one another. In this case, they have the opportunity to fulfill Jesus' command that his disciples must be known by their love for one another (John 13:34-35).

In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul tells Christians that they are members one of another, not members of a particular organization (verse 25). He also writes in that chapter about striving to achieve unity. How often has unity been achieved? It seems that what is achieved too often is discord - the very opposite of unity - and the very thing that God hates the most (Proverbs 6:16-19).

A church group could appear to be outwardly unified by following identical rules and customs, or a list of do's and don't's, if you will. The do's might include conformance to a detailed dress code; giving regular donations to the group; required regular attendance; and singing only approved hymns. The don't's might include discussion of any points at variance with a fixed statement of beliefs; acquiring, reading, or distributing literature from a different religious source; attending any other church group; and directing donations outside of the group.

All of the policy-making and policy-enforcing steps that an organization might pursue will not guarantee unity of heart among church members. Likewise, there is no guarantee whatsoever that being part of such an organization will be a pleasant experience. To maintain uniformity, members must be controlled. It can be expected that some individuals will at times fail to conform, or decide that they cannot tolerate control. To maintain appearances and continued control, such individuals must be excluded by the leadership.

The style of leadership required to propagate uniformity is entirely different from the flavor of teachings that support voluntary unity of heart. And it is that inward unity in the hearts of the members that really matters. But lacking enforcement of uniformity and lacking teachings that inspire the heart, the result can be discord, fragmentation, and even dissolution.

Are you loyal to an organization or to Christ? Do you attend regularly and fit into the prescribed mold of a group simply because you do not want to risk criticism? Or do you show up because you really want to? Is your Christianity coerced or voluntarily? When all the organizational trappings are stripped from around you, and there is no group or individual demanding a particular behavior from you, then your true heart is revealed.

May you be blessed to find fellowship with others with whom you are in unity by way of the spirit of God, and not by any other influence or pressure. True unity lives in the heart. It should be nurtured by proper teachings. The Word of God speaks eloquently, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1)