



---

*A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*  
Volume 8 • Number 3 • SUMMER 1999

---

I shall not be found wanting in any respect if it please God; I shall do and suffer as much as I possibly can to achieve a true, sound, permanent unity. Experience has taught us very clearly what "good" the disunity of the churches does—unfortunately. Christ, our Peace and Consolation, be with all of you until the end. Amen.

—MARTIN LUTHER

Divisions between Christians are a sin and a scandal, and Christians ought at all times to be making contributions towards reunion, if it is only by their prayers.

—C. S. LEWIS

## THE "ATHLETIC" UNITY OF THE CHURCH

---

*Mark Coppenger*

My fifty-first summer has been a time of modest athletic achievement and considerable discomfort in service of that achievement. First, I passed an army physical fitness test. To meet the weight standard for my height, I had to devote several weeks to serious dieting. To manage the push-ups, sit-ups, and two-mile run, I had to drive my muscles and pulmonary and cardiovascular systems from their Midwest winter lethargy.

Second, I completed a 485-mile bike ride across Iowa on a seminary team of eight. Along with more than 10,000 of our closest friends, we discovered that Iowa wasn't so flat after all. We needed hundreds of miles of road work to get ready for this undertaking, particularly the quadriceps "burns" of the hill climbs.

Not surprisingly, as I've studied the matter of unity in the body of Christ, I've come again and again to consider what I've experienced in my own body in these last months. I think that it is fair to draw lessons of fitness from the latter and that such lessons are well founded in Scripture.

### THE CHURCH IS A BODY NEEDING FITNESS TO BE EFFECTUAL AND PLEASING TO GOD

The Bible uses a number of images to characterize the church. We read of "fellow citizens," "God's household" and His "dwelling" (Eph. 2:19-22), Jesus' "flock" (John 10:16), "branches" (Rom. 11:21), a "spiritual house," "a

royal priesthood," and a "holy nation" (1 Peter 2:5-9), and the "bride of Christ" (2 Cor. 11:2).

The image of the body, however, is ubiquitous in the writing of Paul and particularly compelling when we speak of unity. The body of Christ is a unit made up of many parts, each needing the others (1 Cor. 12:12-31). God has acted to prevent divisions in this body and has so designed it that the parts suffer and rejoice in concert. Though there is essential diversity of gifts and functions, there is unity in the spirit and the identity in Christ.

On through the epistles, we find the same metaphor. There is "one body and one Spirit" (Eph. 4:4); Christ is called "the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:18); in Christ "we have many members in one body" (Rom. 12:4).

As for fitness, we do well to turn to Revelation 2 and 3, where the Lord addresses seven churches of Asia. John writes of perseverance, overcoming, holding on, endurance, and strength, or the lack thereof. The passage cheers Philadelphia along for making the most of the strength it has, while it condemns Sardis and Laodicea for their lassitude.

These two chapters also teach that association with the church does not mean membership in the body of Christ. The church in Pergamum countenanced Nicolaitans, and the church in Thyatira tolerated a Jezebel in their midst.

When such pagans show themselves to be foreign to the church, then surgical removal is the solution. Just as the competitor is crippled by bone spurs and splinters, the body of Christ can be hobbled by foreign, deviant or dead matter. Paul warns against the gangrenous work of Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim. 2:17-18), counsels expulsion for incest (1 Cor. 5:1-5), and proclaims anathema upon anyone who preaches another gospel (Gal. 1:9). And Jesus himself prescribes shunning for a sinful member who hardens himself against the church's admonition (Matt. 18:15-17).

Once the surgery has been performed, who remains?

Only the most hardened Campbellite or Pre-Vatican II Catholic would say that the actual body of Christ is limited to his own denomination. Almost all Christians acknowledge that there are heaven-bound believers spread throughout thousands of denominations. And whether or not their group encourages it, they hold to certain essentials of the faith and give evidence of regenerate hearts

In a message on separation and schism titled "Wrong Divisions and True Unity," D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones listed "things on which we must stand."<sup>1</sup> He held that evangelicals must maintain that the Bible is revelation from God, that the Fall was genuine and momentous for us all, that Christ crucified is God's plan of redemption and that the resurrected Jesus is Lord. If this be the standard, certainly we could find adherents across a vast sea of denominations.

My own denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, includes this conviction in its confession, *The Baptist Faith and Message*.<sup>2</sup> In Article VI, it speaks of the church not only as the membership of local congregations but also as "all of the redeemed of all the ages," and the Southern Baptist Convention has not existed through all the ages.

This church universal is not a dream or goal but a reality. It exists and will continue to exist and grow because God makes it so. As B. B. Warfield put it, "In a word, the Church is one, not by virtue of any efforts of ours to make it one, but by virtue of the divine life that binds it as his body to one leader. . . . It is ours not to make this unity, but in head and life to realize it."<sup>3</sup>

That being said, there is much to do. While the church has unity in the sense of being an existent entity, it does not follow that its unity is maximized. Warfield goes on to say that God is "daily smoothing the wrinkles and wiping the spots of his church away" so that it might be presented without spot and blemish to the Bridegroom.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' prayer for all believers makes it clear that we have

not arrived in this fuller sense of unity, for if we had, there would be no need for this intercession (John 17:20-26). The same could be said of Paul's closing exhortation to the Corinthians—"Be like-minded, live in peace" (2 Cor. 13:11).

In his book, *Irenicum: Healing the Divisions Among God's People*, Jeremiah Burroughs lists a number of "dividing principles," unfortunate convictions which undermine the realization of unity in the church. Among these are "Nothing which is conceived [of as] evil is to be suffered," and "There can be no agreement without uniformity." To these "toxic" notions, he added the "dividing distempers," such as self-love and rigidness, and "dividing practices," such as "men not keeping within the bounds that God has set for them" and "giving characterizing names to men that are names of division."<sup>5</sup>

Few have done better than Comedian Emo Phillips to portray the man beset with these dividers:

"In conversation with a person I had recently met, I asked, 'Are you Protestant or Catholic?'

My new acquaintance replied, 'Protestant.'

I said, 'Me too! What franchise?'

He answered, 'Baptist.'

'Me too!' I said. 'Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?'

'Northern Baptist,' he replied.

'Me too!' I shouted.

We continued to go back and forth. Finally, I asked, 'Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879, or Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?'

He replied, 'Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912.'

I said, 'Die, heretic!'"<sup>6</sup>

If Emo Phillips is wrongheaded, surely the answer is not indifference toward doctrinal confusion in the church.

Francis Schaeffer warns against "a kind of gooey love" and cautions that "we must be careful . . . not to say that what is wrong is right, whether it is in the area of doctrine or of life; in our own group or another."<sup>7</sup>

### THE CHURCH'S SPIRITUAL FITNESS INVOLVES THE PAIN OF CONDITIONING

Speaking of the individual Christian's responsibility to take on the pain of hard training, Paul uses an athletic metaphor: "Everyone who competes in the games exercises self control in all things. . . . I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:25a, 27).

The body of Christ appropriately "beats itself" in its effort to tune its muscles. Using Scripture, it teaches, reproves, corrects and trains in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). The orders are clear, as we see in the first chapter of Titus. In verses 5-16, Paul counsels his protégé to "set things in order" (5), to appoint new, solid elders who are able and willing to refute opponents of sound doctrine (9), and to silence rebellious people (11). You might well say that this congregation was familiar with all the grunts and gasps of the weight room. And, as the sign says, "No pain, no gain."

Those who attend Promise Keeper rallies are sometimes called upon first to shout out the name of their denominations and then to shout out the name Jesus. Not surprisingly, the first round is unintelligible and chaotic, the second, sweetly consonant. There is, of course, a point to be made, that the body of Christ includes members from the many groups represented there. But, I submit, it demeans the essential doctrinal pummeling the body needs to build itself. Antidenominationalists would deny the body of Christ its full-blown regimen of self-criticism. The result is doctrinal flab.

Flab is no great problem so long as you do not have to

run the race against Mormons or wrestle with Jehovah's Witnesses. But, if the church is to distinguish itself in competition, it cannot despise its doctrinal coaches and the pain they impose. J. Gresham Machen was one such coach, a man who understood the strengthening power of judiciously applied pain:

Again, men tell us that our preaching should be positive and not negative, that we can preach the truth without attacking error. But, if we follow that advice we shall have to close our Bible and desert its teachings. The New Testament is a polemic book almost from beginning to end. . . . It is when men have felt compelled to take a stand against error that they have risen to the really great heights in celebration of the truth.<sup>8</sup>

We Southern Baptists are inclined to call a meeting without dispute or conflict, a "great" one, as in, "We had a great convention this year; every office was unopposed, every vote unanimous." Even if heretics continue to teach undisturbed in the colleges and unbiblical pragmatists pushed their programmatic wares unhindered by reflection or complaint, "peace" is "great."

Proponents of such sub-Christian peace point to Jesus' prayer in John 17:20-24: "I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee."

What they miss in this prayer for unity is the fact that the Father and Son are in doctrinal alignment and that true church unity on this model involves doctrinal agreement. Given the power of the world, the flesh, and the Devil, such unity on earth is no small achievement. It takes a great deal of struggle and is scarcely ever attained at by mellow acquiescence.

Given that the vital church must "beat itself," Promise Keepers and Southern Baptists may, from time to time, be marked down for turning from or demeaning pain, but one can just as surely neglect body tone through fundamentalist separatism. Instead of coaching and "tormenting" the flabby body, some of these people simply abandon the project. They spare both the body and themselves the pain of conflict, leaving the larger element to its own slack ways. Citing their text, 2 Corinthians 6:17, they choose to "come out from their midst and be separate."

Charles H. Spurgeon counseled separation from the Baptist Union during the Down Grade Controversy of the late 1800s. In his publication, *The Sword and Trowel*, he wrote:

Believers in Christ's atonement are now in declared union with those who make light of it; believers in Holy Scripture are in confederacy with those who deny plenary inspiration; those who hold evangelical doctrine are in open alliance with those who call the fall a fable, who deny the personality of the Holy Ghost, who call justification by faith immoral, and hold that there is another probation after death. . . . Yes, we have before us the wretched spectacle of professedly orthodox Christians publicly avowing their union with those who deny the faith, and scarcely concealing their contempt for those who cannot be guilty of such gross disloyalty to Christ. To be very plain, we are unable to call these Christian Unions, they begin to look like Confederacies in Evil. . . . It is our solemn conviction that where there can be no real spiritual communion there should be no pretense of fellowship. Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin.<sup>9</sup>

One may ask whether those with whom Spurgeon dealt were more odious and influential than the "savage wolves" who were corrupting the Ephesian church. Yet we look in vain in Acts 20 for Paul's counsel to separate and form a new congregation. Rather the biblical impulse seems to be one of

"throw the rascals out." And who can deny the biblical bias toward unity and against division? Psalm 133 celebrates the fellowship of the brethren, comparing it with anointing oil and dew. Paul urges his readers in Colossae to be patient, to bear with one another, to put on the love which binds, and to respond to the call to peace (Col. 3:11-15).

---

*Which, then, shall it be? Shall we remain together so that we might beat each other into shape? Or shall we define ourselves into separation, thereafter minding our own business?*



Which, then, shall it be? Shall we remain together so that we might beat each other into shape? Or shall we define ourselves into separation, thereafter minding our own business?

Clearly, neither the call to separate nor the instruction to bear with one another amount to a precise, absolute, universal mandate. Rather they represent the biblical principles of holiness and love. And the day-to-day amalgamating of those values is one of the great intellectual and practical challenges of the Christian life. If ever there was cause to show patience with one another, it is here. The book of Proverbs repeatedly counsels prudence, calling on us to use our sanctified wits to balance competing interests in the absence of knockdown rules.

### A BALANCED PROGRAM OF FITNESS IS ESSENTIAL

When I moved toward my Army test, I subjected myself to the pain of dieting and calisthenics, but there were limits. I did not press to the point of starvation or muscle tears. I alternated days of exertion and rest; I stretched and warmed up before running. I knew my body could handle only so much before it was harmed, and so I paced myself. So too must the body of Christ show measure and timing in its self-conditioning.

Seventeenth-century Scot James Durham reflected this spirit of protection when he wrote: "Divisions ought not to be endeavored to be removed in such a case, in such a way as doth undo or destroy either side, because that is not the good of the whole."<sup>10</sup>

A spirit of destruction is, in itself, self-destructive. The old illustration of the entangled deer antlers on the wall makes this point. Intent on combat, two bucks found themselves unable to extricate themselves, and so died in futility. Of course, the Lord provided the deer's horns for a purpose, but here their exercise became a ruinous snare.

With a nod to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, let us say that there are rocks on both sides as you seek to navigate the waters of prudence and virtue. What then is the proper navigational course for the Christian who would honor both unity and integrity? I submit that there are at least two acceptable channels.

Harold Ockenga marks the first:

An up-to-date strategy for the Evangelical cause must be based upon the principle of infiltration. . . . The communists in their battle for Korea, Indo-China, and Tibet used the principle of infiltration. . . . We evangelicals need to realize that the liberals and modernists have been using this strategy for years. They have infiltrated our evangelical denominations, institutions, and movements and then have taken con-

trol of them. It is time for firm evangelicals to seize their opportunity and influence modernist groups. Why is it incredible that the evangelicals should be able to infiltrate the denominations and strengthen the things that remain, and possibly resume control of such denominations.<sup>11</sup>

Defending this position David Baxter wrote:

Super fundamentalist alliances have castigated devout men of many denominations because they have refused to forsake their churches because heretics have invaded. Fortunately, Athanasius didn't get out of the church when the Arians with their denial of Christ's divinity took temporary control of it.<sup>12</sup>

These are, of course, only fine sounding words unless those who remain within are active critics of heresy. They must be rebukers and refuters, albeit loving and measured ones.

The second channel is that marked by Spurgeon, but with an important proviso, that all members of the body of Christ should feel free and even responsible to rebuke the errant and encourage their fellow Christians, wherever they might be found. By doing so, they acknowledge and honor their membership in that larger body.

This, of course, goes against the line of counsel which says you have no right to criticize another's program, that it's simply none of your business. This rests on two misunderstandings. First, there is ultimately only one organization, the body of Christ, and all us Christians are members, whatever our label may be. Second, criticism can be the way of love and life, and it is often irresponsible to withhold it.

Though they are not perfect models of this second path, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches

(founded in 1932) included an important and instructive clause in an early pamphlet. At this fourth annual meeting after separating from the Northern Baptist Convention, Robert Ketchum outlined their threefold purpose: (1) to provide a haven of fundamentalist fellowship; (2) to promote independent, orthodox, Baptist missions; and (3) to disseminate authentic information concerning conditions in the Northern Baptist Convention.<sup>13</sup>

Many would count that third purpose as petulant and meddling, but this is only so if one counted the NBC as utterly outside the body of Christ. If, on the other hand, it still represented a great assembly of Christians, then charity permitted a continuing work of admonition, however irksome.

In sum, in our efforts for biblical church unity, we must not overlook the importance of the devoted and measured ministry of pain, for without it, there is no gain in fitness. This ministry of pain is, if you will, the golden mean between the excess of destructive abuse and the defect of irresponsible indulgence. And to run to either extreme is sin. Years ago, John Howe wrote:

When in one place (Jude 3) Christians are exhorted to contend earnestly for the faith; and in another (2 Tim. 2:24) we are told the servant of the Lord must not strive; it is plain there is contention for religion which is a duty, and there is a contention, even concerning religion too, which is a sin.<sup>14</sup>

A final note on the ministry of pain. Those who attempt to follow these two channels of orthodox contention—the National Association of Evangelicals and the GARBC—should pummel each other in love as needed. One is susceptible to compromise, the other to cold insularity and the persuasive calculus of second and third order separation.<sup>15</sup> Neither extreme is a mark of fitness.

### BODY LIFE ALONG THE WAY IN IOWA

Earlier, I spoke of a bike trek. This RAGBRAI (*Des Moines Register* Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa) draws an amazing mix of people—young and old, cultured and counter-cultured, conventional and unconventional, beautiful and aesthetically challenged, rich and poor. Though many wholesome folks take part, a somewhat lewd and rude party spirit theme seems to rule. Teams proudly sport their off-color names on their jerseys, and towns along the route vie for our dollars, advertising their beer parties with Burma-Shave-like signs on the approach. It's not a church event.

But the people of God are at work all along the way. In Ireton, some churches joined together to broadcast Christian music and gospel preaching from a flatbed truck. Out on the road, we passed Gideons handing out Bibles. In Quimby, the Southern Baptists offered free popcorn and a word of Scripture. On the entrance to Boone, Evangelical Frees were handing out bottled water with tracts about Living Water. That same congregation showed the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association film, *The Ride*, in their fellowship hall, just outside the campground. A nearby Lutheran Church joined them in that presentation, as did a Christian and Missionary Alliance Church across town. Walking through the campground in Boone, I came upon a young man from a Reformed church in Iowa who wore a T-shirt with Scripture and a witness-bead bracelet on his wrist.

In Rockwell City, a Methodist pastor gave me the use of an air-conditioned Sunday school room to do some office work. A Southern Baptist layman pedaled alongside and said he appreciated the jersey. He was a computer expert who loved to play a Roman soldier each year in his church's Easter pageant. A GARBC lady called out to me in Dike, Iowa, wanting to know for whom I rode. When I said the seminary was Southern Baptist, she smiled and said that we

were both basically just Christians. A Lutheran pastor from California, standing beside me, overheard our exchange and seconded the observation. Later on an older fellow, seeing the cross of our logo, wanted to talk about what a Promise Keepers rally in Minneapolis had meant to him.

These were members of Christ's body, and were a great encouragement to us. Does that mean that doctrinal differences make no difference? Not at all. By my lights, the Lutherans are flabby in their thinking when it comes to baptism, and we Baptists need to keep up the pressure to get them in shape. Methodists are careless in their doctrine of the believer's security, but we can give them a disputational workout to help whip them into shape, just as they might teach us a thing or two about connecting with the community and rendering gracious service along with the gospel. We can all afford to have someone bark at us as we do some laps around the field. Such is the way of athletic unity, the unity that enables the body to perform with grace and strength for God's glory.

#### Author

Dr. Mark T. Coppenger is president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri. He has been a frequent speaker for Reformation & Revival Conferences across North America. He is the author of *A Christian View of Justice* and has contributed numerous articles to journals and magazines. This is his first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

#### Notes

1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. "Wrong Divisions and True Unity" *Unity in Truth: Addresses Given by Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones at Meetings Held Under the Auspices of the British Evangelical Council*. Hywel R. Jones, editor (Darlington, County Durham: Evangelical Press, 1991), 110-18.

2. Hershel Hobbs. "Baptist Faith and Message" (Nashville: Convention Press, 1996).
3. B. B. Warfield. "True Church Unity: What It Is" in *Selected Short Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Vol. 1. John E. Meeter, ed. (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970), 305-306.
4. *Ibid.*, 306.
5. Jeremiah Burroughs. *Irenicum: Healing the Divisions Among God's People* (Ligonier, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997).
6. Emo Phillips. "Unity" in *Leadership*, Fall Quarter, 1992.
7. Francis Schaeffer. "The Mark of a Christian" *Christianity Today* (March 6, 1995), 31.
8. J. Gresham Machen. *What Is Christianity?* Ned Stonehouse, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 132-33.
9. Charles H. Spurgeon. *The Sword and Trowel* (November, 1887).
10. James Durham. "The Scandal of Division Among the Godly" *The Reformation of the Church*, 366.
11. Harold J. Ockenga. "Resurgent Evangelical Leadership." *Christianity Today* (October 10, 1960).
12. David Baxter. "Why I Joined the N.A.E." *United Evangelical Action* (January, 1964), 6.
13. "The Position of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches on Separation" in a pamphlet published by Regular Baptist Press: Schaumburg, Illinois.
14. John Howe. "The Carnality of Religious Contention" in *The Works of John Howe*, 3 volumes (Ligonier, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 111.
15. Ernest Pickering. *Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church*, (Schaumburg, Illinois: Regular Baptist Press, 1979), 217.