

WHEN IS A PERSON A UNIONIST? - M.J. Witt

Many attempts have been made, especially in recent years, to bring about a union of all the Lutheran Church bodies. These attempts have revealed a great number of advocates of the principle that an outward organizational union can and ought to be achieved in spite of the lack of true doctrinal unity. This principle has found some vigorous and zealous supporters in our Synodical Conference.

A general statement about union cannot be made because union in itself cannot be condemned. A union of church bodies may be good as well as bad. The desire to bring together Lutherans and Christians in general is in itself highly desirable. If, however, a union of Lutherans and of Christians in general is to mean anything, it must be based on inner unity.

Inner unity is that condition which is brought about by the Holy Ghost through the Word of God. Inner unity is a Spirit created state. A God-pleasing union of religious bodies will express the Spirit created unity, as the Apostle says in I Corinthians 1, 10 "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

Every proposal for union is to be tested with this thought of true unity in mind and if the proposal does not meet this test, it must be rejected. When a group of Christians discover this unity of spirit which already exists among them, they may join together outwardly.

Thus we read in Acts 2,42:"And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles doctrine and fellowship (*κοινωνία*) and in breaking of bread and in prayer." In Philipians 2,1,2. we read:"If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship (*κοινωνία*) of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind." The fellowship of these Christians was based on like-mindedness, the same love, agreement and adherence to the doctrine of the Apostles. Outward cooperation followed this agreement in doctrine, (Distribution of goods to the poor, Acts 2,44-47; The preaching of the gospel--Acts 11,22-26; Relief to Jerusalem--Acts 11,27-30; Paul and Barnabas went to the Gentiles, Cephas and John to the circumcision-Galatians 2,9).

When things other than agreement or unity in doctrine are made the chief considerations for church union, unionism is evident. Unionism is false union which covers inner disunity.

The Concordia Cyclopedia defines unionism as follows: "Unionism consists in joint worship and work of those not united in doctrine. Its essence is an agreement to disagree. In effect it denies the doctrine of the clearness of Scripture. It would treat certain doctrines as fundamental or essential and others as non-essential to Christian unity--a proposition which could be defended on only one of two premises; that God either was unable to reveal His will and mind in such a manner as not to be misunderstood or was not willing so to reveal Himself. In the former case His wisdom is attacked, in the second His goodness. A Christian who believes that God has clearly spoken through the prophets and apostles and through the Lord Jesus Christ cannot be a unionist."

Dr. Theo. Graebner in the Lutheran Witness (1928, page 35 f) defines unionism thus: "By unionism we mean a definite thing. It is involved, of course, wherever church leaders try to unite religious bodies regardless of the doctrine which they teach and of the practices which they uphold. A more insidious form by far, is the tendency to unite those in worship and religious undertakings who are not united in the faith; and this is really the essence of unionism: joint worship and work where there is no unity of doctrine."

Again: "Unionism is church fellowship without doctrinal unity... In its concrete form it is accordingly the participation of congregations and church bodies, of ministers and church officials, in spiritual work, and religious worship together with those of differing belief and profession."

Dr. F. Pfotenhauer defines unionism in this way (Proceedings of the South Nebraska District, 1936, page 17): "Unionism is fellowship between churches without corresponding harmony and unity of confession and faith. It is toleration of false doctrine, mutual recognition as brethren of the faith by those who push aside and ignore differences in doctrine. This mutual recognition of the faith is then given expression when members of different confession band together in one congregation, unite in church federation, or pulpit, altar, or prayer fellowship, or undertake efforts in other church work. The essential thing in unionism is that differences in doctrine are minimized, and as a matter of principle the sharp distinction between truth and error is removed."

The Brief Statement says: "Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, I Peter 4, 11; John 8, 31, 32; I Timothy 6, 3, 4. - all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church bodies, to leave them, Romans 16, 17; We repudiate unionism, that is, church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Romans 16, 17; II John 9, 10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely", I Timothy 2, 17-21."

Dr. F. Pieper in his essay "Unionism" read before the Oregon and Washington District of the Missouri Synod in 1924 says (translated by Wm. Lochner): "By unionism we refer to fellowship with false doctrine, i. e. with doctrine deviating from the Word of God, no matter whether such doctrine is defended by individuals or by entire church bodies."

A unionist is indifferent regarding the Word of God; he is not a confessionalist. Since all men by nature are unionistic, the confessional Christian will find himself swimming against the stream. The unionists are great in number and are already, as it were, united in their efforts against Christ, as those described in the prayer of the Church at Jerusalem, Acts 4, 27 "For a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together".

A true Lutheran Christian who is to be known as a champion of the Truth and as one who refutes all error cannot tolerate unionism which puts Truth and error on the same plane and which so plainly violates God's will as expressed in His Word. When the Lord warns us to flee unionism, He does this for our own good lest we lose the Truth and our salvation. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole

lump" Galatians 5,9. "And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some. Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His. And, let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor, and some to dishonor. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work". The Word of God speaks clearly against unionism.

Jesus said (Matthew 7, 15-16 a): "Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits."

Jesus tells us in these words that inasmuch as and to such an extent as a person teaches false doctrine, he is a false prophet of whom we are to beware. The false prophets will be recognized by their fruits, i.e. by their doctrines and by their practice which are contrary to the doctrine of Christ.

"Beware of them"-guard yourself and give heed to yourself as far as false prophets are concerned is the admonition of the Lord.

II Corinthians 6,14,15,16. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."

Verse 17 is a quotation from Isaiah 53,11 which speaks of "touching no unclean thing"; in the passage above reference is also made to anything that is unclean. We are "to go out" (ἐξέλθατε from ἐξέρχουμαι "to come or go out" "to forsake" here the aorist imperative active, indicating decisive action). (So also ἀφορίζεσθε from ἀφορίζω -imperative, aorist passive-"be separated"-decisively).

Dr. P.E. Kretzmann says in his commentary:"This passage is properly applied in the case of false union with sectarian churches for in as much and in so far as any church body has the "unclean thing" in its midst in the form of any false doctrine or anti-scriptural practice in so much and in so far it is contaminated and may become contaminating. If even that is contamination for believers to be united with unbelievers in matters which further the idolatrous ideas of the latter, much more is the unionism of the present day to be condemned which ignores differences of creed and practice with the specious plea that the church must be a power in the world. It is only by retaining both doctrine and life in the greatest possible absolute purity that the church will be able to fulfill its mission of being a salt in the world."

The Apostle Paul exhorted the Corinthians in previous words to "give no offense in anything that the ministry be not blamed; but in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God". In chapter 5 the Apostle spoke of the reconciliation and the ministry of this

reconciliation and then followed with the exhortation "not to accept the grace of God in vain" (Chap. 6,1.). In verse 14 ff. the Apostle comes to the Corinthians with the call to separation-separation from everything which is contrary to the Gospel of reconciliation and the grace of God in Christ. Not to follow the example of the apostles in breaking away from everything that is contrary to God's reconciliation and grace could only invite disaster. "We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain".

Ephesians 5,11.12 "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret."

To say that this text applies only to the sin against the sixth commandment is wrong. In verse 8 Paul speaks of the fruit of the Spirit as being goodness and righteousness and truth. In verse 10 he tells us that since we are children of light, "we will prove what is acceptable unto the Lord." In verse 11 we are told that as children of light we will have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness. In verse 7 the idea of association and fellowship with persons is emphasized while in verse 11 the idea of association and fellowship with the works of these persons is brought into focus. Paul refers in the latter to the works-the unfruitful works of darkness. Darkness and light are opposites; the one excludes the other-fellowship, communion, association is impossible. Light produces fruit; darkness produces no fruit-hence the unfruitful works of darkness. Now we are not to have fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness; we are to withdraw. But we are not only to withdraw. The apostle adds, and that with emphasis, "reprove" them, namely these works which are of darkness and unfruitful.

Verse 12 tells us how it happens that this reproof becomes effective. The shame is not for us who rebuke but for those who are involved in all of the unfruitful works of darkness. The reproof sheds light on their hidden works of darkness-on their unfruitful works done secretly.

There are many works of darkness which are done secretly. All coveting is done in secret (not only sins against the sixth commandment). Who could name all of the things that are "secret" in connection with the fellowshiping that is done with those who have deviated from the truth. Who could name all of the secret ambitions, thoughts, and motives of men in this regard?

Not to fellowship and to rebuke and reprove is certainly enjoined upon us in this text as regard those who have deviated from the truth. A deviation from the truth is an unfruitful work of darkness. Fellowshiping with this unfruitful work of darkness would be unionism.

II John 9,10.11. "Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed. For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deed".

Our text speaks here of the doctrine of Christ. That "Christ is come in the flesh" is a doctrine of Christ. This, however, is not the only doctrine that is referred to in the words of our text.

Christ is the sum and substance of all true doctrine. Scripture speaks of Christ. Everything that Scripture teaches is doctrine. To attack doctrine is to attack Christ.

Since Jesus Christ is the sum and substance of doctrine, it follows that doctrine is the true representation of Christ as the substance. God is the true author of Christian doctrine. Doctrine is the infallible word of the inerrant God. Doctrine is not of men. Since all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, all the doctrines of Scripture are absolute divine truth. Scripture doctrine, which is truth and which is adequate cannot misrepresent Christ, who is its substance, nor can Scripture represent Christ inadequately. It is only when men in their handling of doctrine fail to use it as it stands in itself, but attempt to shade and color it with their own wisdom that it becomes inadequate. Man's wisdom and man's thinking misrepresents Christ and perverts the substance of doctrine. The church has the duty to represent Christ only through pure doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. Only then is it faithful to its Christ-given commission, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. Only through true doctrine-Scripture doctrine-is Christ adequately represented.

It makes no difference, therefore, whether we say doctrine or Jesus Christ. One is the substance, the other the representation of the substance. There is an inseparable relation between Christ and doctrine-all doctrine.

Now if a person represents Christ inadequately or if he refuses to accept and preach the doctrine of Christ and to practice according to true doctrine, we are not to receive him into our house (provide for him in a way that would support his work of making propaganda against Christ) nor bid him God speed (encourage his work by words which may indicate that you are supporting his efforts).

If we are not to receive into our house or to bid God speed to a person who represents Christ inadequately or falsely, we certainly cannot fellowship religiously or cooperate with him in spiritual work. The person who casts aside these words of the Lord in our text is a unionist.

I Timothy 6,3-5. "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is accord-to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but dotting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself."

These words speak of man's misuse of the doctrines of Scripture. The Lord does not want conflict between doctrine as it exists in itself and as it is actually taught by men. Whenever there is a conflict it is due to man who refuses to teach the Scriptures as God gave it. Objectively doctrine is constant unchangeable and absolute. It is the subjective use of doctrine by men that conflicting teachings exist in the church. When men set aside the Word of God, they err in matters of doctrine. Man is responsible for the false doctrines and for the divisions that false doctrines, produced by men, cause in the church. Such as set aside the Word of God, true doctrine, "the wholesome Words even of our Lord Jesus Christ" are to be shunned.

While the best readings do not have the words-"from such withdraw thyself", yet the thought is in the spirit of the passages quoted, for who wants diseased words and teachings of men which militate against the Word of God, and who wants to fellowship with one who is destitute of the Truth?

In Titus 3, 10 we have another Word of God which condemns unionism. Here we read: "A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject."

A ἄρρετικός is one who holds a δόξα or a number of them. A δόξα is a view or concept or teaching which man has chosen which is apart from or contrary to the teachings and concepts of Scripture. In Galatians 5,20, a δόξα is counted as one of the works of the flesh. In Acts 24,14, the Apostle Paul speaks of a δόξα as the opposite of the truth in Christ as revealed in the law and the prophets.

A man who holds to a δόξα is to be rejected "after the first and second admonition." The words "after the first and second admonition" bring to focus the element of time. No good and useful purpose can be served by carrying on discussions or negotiations with a heretic over a long period of time. The person who is admonishing a heretic may do harm to himself as well as to the person who is being admonished. There is the possibility that the person who is admonishing again and again and hearing on the other hand the point that the heretic may wish to make may become infected with the heresy. The heretic, by discussions drawn out to some length, may conclude that the one who is admonishing him may be willing to make concessions or may be satisfied with a compromise statement of agreement. More than one ambiguous document has been framed as a result of long, drawn out discussions with heretics. For the good of the disciples of Christ as well as for the good of the heretic fruitless discussions should be cut short. We have every reason, especially in these days when unionism is the order of the day, to heed the admonition of our Lord: "A heretic after the first and second admonition reject". We have chosen Scripture and therefore must repudiate and disown that the heretic has chosen for himself, whether that which he has chosen is little or much makes no difference whatsoever.

In Romans 16,17,18 the Lord says: "Now I beseech you brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple."

God's people are to "direct attention" or "to mark those who cause", i.e. continue to make-persist in, "division (dissentions) and offenses (ἁρμολογία) contrary to the doctrine, which they have learned. Professor Robert Hoerber of the Norwegian Synod in his "Grammatical Study of Roman 16,17" clearly shows that "contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned" is an adjectival modifier of "divisions and offenses". "Paul's 'contrary' covers all error" wrote Dr. Graebner in 1937, Lutheran Witness, page 90. The doctrine refers to corpus doctrinae-all doctrine. From such as cause dissentions and offenses contrary to the doctrine-any and all doctrines-we are to turn aside. Ἐκκαίνετε present imperative in a number of documents and Ἐκκαίνετε aorist imperative in others. The aorist

imperative seems the favored form. The present would indicate time; the aorist would emphasize decisive action. That a complete separation is definitely meant can be seen from the use of the word in I Peter 3,11, where we are told to "eschew ἐκκλινάτω evil" (see also the Psalm quoted) and the use of the word in Romans 3,12, (also quoted from the Psalm) where we read "they are all gone out of the way". By no stretch of the imagination can the word ἐκκλινάτε mean to hold on or to remain attached in some degree.

In verse 18 Paul tells us "why" and not "whom" we are to mark and avoid. *γὰρ* gives us the reason. For they that are such, namely, as cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine, do not serve the Lord Jesus, but their own belly, and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.

In view of the words of Paul in these verses no one could brand him as even lukewarm regarding unionism. He, by inspiration of God, exhorts us to mark and avoid false teachers who persist in their errors and by their errors and deviations from the truth cause dissensions and offenses. Anyone who makes propaganda for teachings contrary to the doctrine is to be avoided. That person is a persistent errorist. To set aside this will of God in regard to His people, to make light of it or to ignore it is unionism.

With this Word of God as a foundation we arrive at the following answers in regard to the question which has been posed; "When is a person a unionist?"

When a person, in spite of Scriptural admonition---

- I. continues in, contemplates, or practices religious fellowship (i.e. altar, pulpit, prayer, communion)
 - a) with a heterodox or schismatic body or individual,
 - b) with a properly excommunicated individual,
 - c) with a person or group of persons who have separated themselves from the christian communion in a sinful way;
- II. negotiates, sponsors, or encourages union with an erring and heterodox body on the premise that non-fundamental doctrines are not divisive of church fellowship or with the proposition that there may exist an area of allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teachings of the Word of God;
- III. continues a cooperative work or joint action in the name of the church, not in the field of externals, with an individual or group with whom he is not in confessional agreement;
- IV. under the argument of testifying, attends meetings with a heterodox group in the name of the church, or witnesses under the sponsorship or the encouragement of a heterodox or erring body which has not by its practice and confession of the Word given evidence of an existing unity in spirit and has not indicated that it recognizes its errors, desires to abide in the truth and to hear the whole truth or return to the Truths of God's Word;

NOTE: I Peter 3,15. "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts; and be ready to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that it is in you with meekness and fear." This passage should not be misapplied and misused so that it nullifies Romans 16,17.18; Titus 3,10;

Matt. 7,15. None who testifies and witnesses to the whole counsel of God will be invited very often by the heterodox or schismatic groups.

- V. after a reasonable period of fruitless discussion continues efforts toward union with a heterodox or schismatic body.

Because the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has actively supported, and encouraged Scouting, the Chaplaincy, cooperative efforts and joint work in the name of the church with bodies with which it is not in confessional agreement, negotiations with a heterodox church body in spite of God's clear exhortation to reject and to avoid, the Common Confession as a settlement of the controversies treated therein, the Communion Agreement with the Bureau of Service to Military Personnel of the National Lutheran Council and prayer fellowship with heterodox groups, it must be branded as unionistic body. In view of all of our fruitless admonitions and pleas, the official Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has shown itself persistently unionistic.

Our hope and our prayers which have accompanied all of our admonitions and exhortations have been that the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod might repent and bring forth fruits meet for repentance.

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