“Are there too many churches?” When first heard, our subject sounds rather strange. Obviously, there are not too many, but rather too few churches when you consider that the church is a bulwark against every form of evil. The church stands against infidelity, vice, crime, greed, lust, hate, war, and many other evils. Obviously, there are not too many, but rather too few churches when you consider that the church is a lighthouse for sending forth rays of faith, hope, love, truth, morality, and other Christian virtues.

But considered from another standpoint, there are too many churches. There are too many divergent religious doctrines and practices. In fact, there are so many different creeds in existence today that a recent religious census of the United States listed more than 250 separate, distinct denominations existing side by side here in America. It is this multiplicity of churches, based on different doctrines and creeds that lead us to say that there are too many churches.

Christ’s Plea for Unity

In considering this theme, as in every other, we need to go back to the inspired Scriptures in order to hear the teaching of the Lord. Listen first to Christ’s prayer, prayed on the night of his betrayal, just a few hours before his death on the cross. We find it in John 17.20-23, “I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”

The Lord’s teaching against division in the church is never stronger than in 1 Corinthians 1.10-13, “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the
name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ.” Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” It is obvious that even in the first century Satan had begun to wield his deadly tool of division. This passage indicates that the church at Corinth was already beginning to divide over personalities. This tendency did not stop, even with such warnings as we just read. But rather it has continued down to the present day. The names have changed – Luther, Calvin, Knox, Wesley, and others, but the practice remains the same.

In the Galatian letter Paul warned, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed” (Galatians 1.8-9). The invention of new doctrines, the change of old doctrines, and the development of creeds are foreign to the will of God. They have brought about these divisions, which God opposes.

**The Modern Ecumenical Movement**

Motivated by a realization that the present divided state of Christendom is both wrong and hurtful to the cause of Christ, religious leaders of our day have been active in recent years in trying to bring about a union of the various denominations. This is known as the Ecumenical Movement. In the past decade, for example, several large, historic churches have united or consolidated. As a result of this union, they now have a common name, a common membership, a common organization, and wide latitude of freedom in doctrinal matters. For example, if a man wishes to become a member by being baptized, he is welcome; however, if another man wishes to become a member without baptism, he is equally welcome. Still other church groups are currently considering such union, and it is very likely that within the new few years several of the largest and oldest denominations will unite in the “United Churches of Christ of America.”

While we certainly commend the motivation behind these efforts at union, there is one serious fault: these are unions without unity. There is still no single faith, no single body of doctrine, no single set of convictions. There is simply an agreement to disagree on matters of faith. In some instances it is a matter of, “Believe anything you like, but let us be members together.”

This is quite similar to the older view which for several generations has been quite generally accepted among the denominations. People of different churches have not wished to be offensive to those with whom they work and among whom they live, so they have come to the compromise position of saying, “I think all the churches are all right. We are just going to heaven by different roads.” This has been almost universally felt among members of the major denominations for many years. Honesty of purpose, sincerity of conviction, and depth of feeling have been considered sufficient. These have been substituted for unity of faith as taught in the New Testament.

In spite of vast differences, in both the new ecumenical movement and among the denominations generally, there has been a willingness to consider doctrinal differences as being unimportant. Baptism can be pouring, sprinkling, or immersion, according to the individual’s own choice. Worship can be held on Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath) or on Sunday, according to one’s preference. Infant baptism or adult baptism is offered according to the recipient’s wishes. The Lord’s Supper may
be eaten weekly, quarterly, semi-annually, or annually. Wide latitude of doctrine concerning marriage and divorce, drinking alcohol, participation in carnal warfare, and many other matters has been treated as though it were of no importance. Even such basic convictions as the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, and the existence of a personal God, have been dealt with on a “Choose your own position” kind of basis.

In other words, all of these things have been considered of no special importance, so let each person decide which way he wants to go. How different this is from the scriptures, “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1.10).

The Truth Shall Make You Free

We live in an age when the search for truth has been the watchword of the day. Ours is the scientific age. We have seen thousands of men and women spend millions of hours in laboratories doing research to find the facts. The scientific method has been respected everywhere. As a result there has been much progress in the fields of communication, transportation, and living standards generally. If we were choosing a motto for our age, we might well choose, “Buy truth and do not sell it” (Proverbs 23.23). Facts count. Ours is a generation in which people are not willing to stop at approximations, but they want to know the exact truth about everything.

Yet strangely, when modern man leaves his six-day-a-week activities and moves into the field of religion, he hauls down the flag of truth and raises in its place the flag of honesty of purpose, sincerity of conviction, and depth of feeling. Quite inconsistently with the general scientific emphasis of our day, when modern man moves into the realm of religion, “Anything goes.”

This “winking at truth” in the realm of religion is costing Christianity the respect of thinking people throughout the world. It does not make sense to a hard-headed engineer or a keen-minded doctor that a thing can be white or black, brown or gray, pink or orange, depending upon the desire of the person seeing it.

Let me be more specific. Just a few blocks from the building in which I preach, there is a man who, under the guise of a Christian minister, holds the views that God is not the personal God of the Bible, that Christ was merely a man, and that the Bible is not inspired in the sense that it came from God. On the other hand I preach that the God of the Bible is real, that Christ is the divine Son of God, and that the Bible is inspired. The hard fact is that no matter how generous our feelings toward each other might be, this preacher and I cannot both be right. Either he is right, or I am right. Christ cannot be divine in one place and merely a man in another. Truth does not live on opposite sides of the same fence.

In a slightly different direction there is a group of people, admirable in so many ways, which believes and teaches that baptism is not essential to salvation. As you know, I teach, because of numerous passages in the scriptures, that our Lord requires us to meet not only the condition of faith, but also the conditions of repentance, confession, and baptism, before he forgives our sins and saves our souls. Now again, either I am right or those who preach a different view are right. We cannot both be right, holding opposite views on the necessity of baptism.

Still only a few minutes’ walk in a different direction there is another group of people, again a group admirable in many ways, who believe that Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, is the day when Christians ought to worship. We, of course, believe in worshipping on the Lord’s resurrection day, the day the early Christians
met to eat the Lord’s Supper, that is, Sunday. Now either these people are right, or we are right. We cannot both be right, holding opposite views on this point. Truth again does not lie on opposite sides of the same fence.

Just as we have long known that two plus two equals four, and can never equal thirteen or ninety-nine, and just as we now know that the earth is round and not flat, we must come to know that the teaching of God is true and that other teachings different from his are not true. A teacher who might, because of family background or personal preference, want to teach that the earth is flat, would not remain in the employment of any school system in America. Facts count. The same kind of thinking must be applied in the realm of religion. The teaching of God’s word is true, and all variations, divergent doctrines, or deletions from the Scripture are false. “And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8.32).

The Christian religion is based upon truth and upon fact, and modern Protestantism in “winking at the facts” is losing the battle for people’s minds. Already waves of unbelief are sweeping across the earth. In England, for example, only 7% of the population attends worship services as much as once a year. In America only approximately 20% of the American people can be found worshipping God on any Sunday that one might wish to survey. Thinking people are saying, “If Christianity can be believed any way that one wants to believe it, it must be a fairy story.”

Conclusion

We must go back to the Bible, letting it define for us God’s truth on each point of faith and practice. Let us speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent. Let us have a “Thus says the Lord” for everything that we do in faith and in practice. Let us restore in our times the original church as found in the New Testament. Let us use God’s word as the blueprint, and build again Christ’s church. If each of us will tune his own thinking to the things that are written in God’s word, we will find that we are in agreement with each other and in agreement with God. Then, standing on one solid foundation of truth – God’s truth – we can conquer the world in the name of Christ.

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