

When Unity Hinders the Kingdom of God

Ezra 4:1-5

April 8, 2012

Rev. Greg L. Price

Ecclesiastical union and fellowship among churches is that toward which we should strive, if we would be faithful to the inspired words of the apostle Paul: “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” (1 Corinthians 1:10). This is not a suggestion offered by Paul to Christians, but rather a mandate that comes in the name and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. This unity, in which there are no divisions (literally, schisms) and in which they are joined together in the same mind and judgment as it relates to doctrine, worship, government, and discipline, is quite contrary to the conception of unity that sadly most Reformed Churches have.

For most Reformed Churches would consider themselves living in the unity of which Paul speaks, while they yet maintain their separate denominations and yet (at the same time) maintain ecclesiastical fellowship between their divided denominations. Such an arrangement is not biblical unity, but rather is schismatic confusion (and it is a denial of that unity which the Holy Spirit teaches through the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:10). For on the one hand, these various denominations maintain that they are divided from one another for some significant reason, but on the other hand, they maintain that they yet have ecclesiastical fellowship with one another (as if the reason for their division and schism from one another was after all not all that significant). I submit, dear ones, that either the division is a lawful and righteous division from other churches over matters of faithfulness to God’s Word (in which case there should be no ecclesiastical fellowship with churches that will not adhere to what is faithful to God’s Word), or the division is unlawful and unrighteous because the division is not founded upon matters of faithfulness to God’s Word (but is rather a sinful schism over matters of mere preference or priority in some area of ministry).

My point is simply this: where there is ecclesiastical division (from other denominations), there must not be ecclesiastical fellowship between those same denominations (for it contradicts the very nature of biblical unity promoted by Paul to the Corinthian Churches, and rather promotes a sinful division within the Visible Church of Christ as if schism were a virtue). Ecclesiastical unity and ecclesiastical fellowship necessarily go together, whereas ecclesiastical division and yet ecclesiastical fellowship necessarily contradict the biblical meaning of unity taught by the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 1:10. But someone may object that to deny fellowship to other Christian Churches (and even Reformed Churches) from which we are divided would be schismatic. I respond that to the contrary, the schism is actually manifested by dividing one Christian denomination from another for unlawful reasons, or by treating a lawful division as if it was no big deal (at least not serious enough to avoid ecclesiastical fellowship between the two denominations). Dear ones, if it is serious enough of a departure from God’s Word to warrant a separation from that church or denomination, then it is serious enough to avoid fellowship with that church or denomination (and attendance upon the ministry of that church or denomination) until there is a manifest repentance for the error that is the cause of that division.

In fact, where there is a clear and noted division over matters of faithfulness to God’s Word, the same inspired apostle Paul teaches that ecclesiastical fellowship **must be avoided** (“Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned [here Paul addresses a clear and marked division over faithfulness to God’s Word—GLP]; [and then in that case, Paul commands that ecclesiastical fellowship must be withdrawn—GLP] and avoid them” Romans 16:17. Thus, mark it down, maintaining an ecclesiastical (or denominational) division over faithfulness to God’s Word, biblically and

necessarily requires withdrawing an ecclesiastical fellowship as well. I submit, dear ones, to take any other position is to legalize the sin of schism and division within the Visible Church of Christ (which is labeled by Paul, a deed of the flesh that we are to mortify and not to glorify, according to Galatians 5:20). God willing, this will be made evident from our text in Ezra 4:1-5 this Lord's Day. The main points from our text today are the following: (1) Ecclesiastical Union and Fellowship Denied to Certain Jehovah Worshipers (Ezra 4:1-3); (2) These Jehovah Worshipers Become Obstacles to Building the Temple (Ezra 4:4-5).

I. Ecclesiastical Union and Fellowship Denied to Certain Jehovah Worshipers (Ezra 4:1-3).

A. As Ezra Chapter 4 begins, we are not told how much time had elapsed between the loud shouting with tears and joy over the laying of the foundation of the temple (in Ezra 3:13) and the opening words that we find here in Ezra 4:1. However, it would seem Ezra 4:1 follows very soon after Ezra 3:13. For we read that "the noise was heard afar off" in Ezra 3:13, and then we read in Ezra 4:1: "Now when the adversaries of the Judah and Benjamin **heard** that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the LORD God of Israel." It would seem that the narrative from Ezra 3:13 just continues into Ezra 4:1. The initial steps in rebuilding the altar and laying the foundation of the temple aroused the attention of their adversaries, who also lived in close proximity to them within the land. These adversaries were already in the land when God's people returned, for you will recall that the people of God feared them (according to Ezra 3:3) even at the point that the altar was rebuilt. But here for the first time, these same people who were already in the land when God's people returned from Babylonian captivity are called "adversaries".

1. What is an adversary?

a. Biblically, an adversary is one that stands in the way and seeks to hinder others from confessing and walking in the paths of scripturally-revealed righteousness and truth. On the one hand, there are adversaries that clearly **intend** to take you off the path of following Christ in what the Lord has revealed in His Word (they know what they are doing); and on the other hand, there are adversaries that **may not intend** to take you off the path of following Christ and His revealed Word (they may not realize what they are doing).

b. In the first case of one who clearly intends to prevent you from confessing and walking in the paths of righteousness and truth, there is the example of Satan.

(1) The word, Satan, means adversary. Satan hates and despises Christ, and therefore hates and despises Christ's righteousness and truth, and all who take a stand for it in their words and deeds. Satan especially hates the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). He will do whatever he can to pervert and distort it. For it is through the glorious light of the gospel that God turns sinners from their own righteousness and inward graces to look by faith alone to Christ and to rest by faith alone in Christ's righteousness as their only ground of acceptance before God and as their only hope of eternal salvation (2 Corinthians 4:5-6). Although this adversary is granted power by God, he is finite and limited in what he can do. He can only go as far as God permits him to go. He is like a dog on a leash that God shortens or extends (as in the case of Job, whom Satan sought to bring to such a point in taking from him his family, health, and earthly possessions that Job would eventually curse God and die). Satan and his fellow spiritual adversaries (or fallen angels) will seek to use temptations (within and without), events, and people to discourage or to de-sensitize with apathy and lukewarmness the child of God or the people of God (collectively) from continuing in their course to think, speak, and walk in faithfulness to the gospel of Christ and to the commandments of Christ.

(2) There are also human adversaries, who like Satan, do intend to do everything in their power to hinder you and resist you in confessing and standing for the righteousness and truth of Christ because they despise Christ and the one true Christian religion revealed in Scripture (this hostility may come from the news media, from politicians, from false religions, from teachers, from music, from TV, from employers and employees, and from even our own family). This hatred for Christ and His only

true religion as revealed in Scripture is satanic and is intended to discourage you, to terrify you, or to desensitize you to following Christ. Such adversaries may be conspicuous and in your face (like Herod who slaughtered the baby boys in order to kill Christ), or they may be subtle and come with kisses and compliments (“The kisses of an enemy are deceitful” Proverbs 27:6). The Jewish leaders used this tact for the most part in seeking to catch Him in His words, by first buttering Him up with a compliment (Luke 20:19-26). Let us not be fooled, dear ones, by those who flatter us in order to hinder us from following Christ.

(3) We who stand with and for Christ and His revealed religion must necessarily have adversaries in this world who would hinder us in bringing biblical reformation through the gospel to individuals, families, churches, and nations. And dear ones, if you face no such intentional opposition (whether conspicuous or subtle), you must ask yourself if you are really taking a stand for Christ. If there are no sacrifices in your Christian life that you must make, and if there is no tribulation and opposition in such a dark and desperate world, you must not be a threat to the adversaries of Christ.

b. But there are also adversaries who do not intend to be adversaries to Christ and His revealed religion, but unwittingly have become adversaries. In Mark 8:33, we see how the apostle Peter became such an unwitting adversary to the kingdom of Christ. Fellow Christians may unwittingly place stumbling blocks before us in following Christ and His revealed religion in their sincere attempts to defend a doctrine, a practice in worship, a system of church government, or some activity in life that he/she believes to be scriptural (but which is actually contrary to Christ and His truth), just as Peter did with Christ. Dear ones, we must stand our ground against all opposition to Christ’s righteousness and truth, whatever may be the source of that opposition. However, we must love such brethren who do not intend to be adversaries, and we must humbly address their opposition to the truth, knowing that it is only the grace of God that any of us are able to stand for the truth.

(1) It is not those who lovingly correct us with the truth of Christ that are adversaries (“Faithful are the wounds of a friend” Proverbs 27:6).

(2) It is not those who are ignorant, but are willing to learn the righteousness and truth of Christ that are adversaries.

(3) We can become adversaries to ourselves, by placing ourselves in tempting situations, by refusing to see and learn the truth that is given to us, and by simply walking in rebellion against what we know to be contrary to Christ’s righteousness and truth.

(4) We can become adversaries to others by pushing buttons in wives, husbands, children, and parents that we know will likely get a sinful reaction. In such cases, we have certainly assumed the role of an adversary rather than assuming the role of a peacemaker.

B. We now learn more about these “adversaries” as we continue with Ezra 4:2: “Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither.”

1. These “adversaries” do not immediately express their opposition to the rebuilding of the temple or to the faithful and revealed religion of Jehovah found in God’s Word. To the contrary, they come to Zerubbabel and to the chief of the fathers with a conciliatory message of unity (“Let us build with you: for we seek your God” Ezra 4:2). In other words, “Let’s unite our hands together in rebuilding the temple, for we both serve Jehovah God.”

a. Dear ones, it is not those who cry out for peace and unity that are necessarily standing for the truth of Christ (or true biblical unity). There are many ecumenical movements that promote a supposed conciliatory message of simply working together as churches or as fellow Christians in promoting what we have in common together. On such a foundation, we have seen Evangelical leaders working together with Roman Catholic leaders in promoting public statements (like the Manhattan Declaration) as to what they

hold in common. All such efforts lead not to biblical unity, but to satanic confusion and compromise of the truth of Christ. The one and only basis for a biblical unity is the love and truth of Jesus Christ revealed in Holy Scripture.

b. Likewise, professing Christians will promote various causes (which in and of themselves are worth defending, like pro-life, and homeschool causes), but dear ones, when professing Christians seek to stand for various causes (but have stark disagreements as to what is biblical doctrine, worship, government, and life), the inevitable effect is the dilution of the truth, the downplaying of the differences that divide us, and more of a willingness to fight a common foe (such as abortionists) at the expense of offending professing Christians and churches that stand for error. Such seeking to join hands in common social causes with those who profess the faith (and may be genuine Christians) is one reason why churches begin to question whether denominationalism is really a sinful division and schism, whether the Romish Church is the whore of Babylon, whether the pope is that man of sin and antichrist addressed in Scripture, or whether it is a sin to work and play on the Sabbath. I submit to you, dear ones, that such joining of hands with those who may speak the words of unity, but with whom we sadly are not united in doctrine, worship, government, and practice will eventually lead us to be skeptical of whether the truth in a point of doctrine can be known, to compromise the truth, and then eventually to reject the truth in order to join hands with other Christians and with other churches.

c. God's people in the case before us rightly refused to join hands with these Jehovah worshippers from the land about them (who became the ancestors of the Samaritans, whose religion Christ condemned in John 4), however, God's people just 80 years later had in various way joined hands with the people of the land and had begun practicing some of their abominations through marriages with the people of the land (Ezra 9). The means by which Solomon was led into a compromise of the true religion in his life was likewise through his many polygamous marriages and through the idolatry of his wives that was tolerated in Jerusalem. God's people at the time of Ezra, and Solomon himself did not first turn to compromises in the doctrine and worship of God, but rather in joining hands in marriage and other causes, which then led to a compromised religion.

2. There is a sense in which these "adversaries" did serve Jehovah God, and a sense in which they did not.

a. These "adversaries" did serve Jehovah God in that they were the remnant of the ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel that were left in the land by the Assyrian kings and who were mixed with foreigners from other nations as was the policy of the Assyrian kings that we find in 2 Kings 17. This mixed group was taught to worship Jehovah, but it was corrupted with all types of superstition and idolatry from various pagan nations (a paradise of religious polytheism in which each family worshipped God in the way that pleased them, rather than in the way that pleased Jehovah). Thus, these adversaries had the name of Jehovah upon their lips, but their superstition, their idolatry, their doctrine, and worship were the inventions of man's mind rather than doctrine and worship according to the commandment of God (Mark 7:6-8).

b. Thus, these adversaries (in the faithful and true sense that fundamentally matters) did not serve Jehovah God, for their doctrine and worship were after the tradition of men rather than after the commandment of God.

C. This plea for unity in rebuilding the temple of the Lord is, however, not met with a conciliatory message from Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the chief fathers of Israel. To the contrary, the plea for unity is met with a flat out denial and refusal in Ezra 4:3: "But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us."

1. These “adversaries” may with their lips worship Jehovah God, but their man-invented doctrine and worship cannot be tolerated side by side within the same church with that doctrine and worship which proceeds from the mouth of God as it is revealed in Holy Scripture. “Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God” Ezra 4:3.

2. Only those who believe and practice the one true religion of Jehovah, that Jehovah God Himself has revealed in the Bible, are to join themselves together in one church to rebuild the temple and to restore the ancient landmarks of the biblical religion of their forefathers.

3. This was the point of the Solemn League and Covenant, that the kingdoms of England, Ireland, and Scotland could only work together in civilly and militarily seeking to oppose tyranny in England under Charles I (and any other tyrant) after they had covenanted together to pursue a covenanted uniformity of the Christian religion in adhering to the same doctrine, worship, government, and discipline within their respective national churches. The basis for pursuing common civil and social causes was uniformity in the same religion, not division and diversity of religion into various different denominations. And this very truth became the reason for the sad division within the Church of Scotland in 1651 between the Protestors and the Resolutioners.

II. These Jehovah Worshippers Become Obstacles to Building the Temple (Ezra 4:4-5).

A. Once the offer of these “adversaries” to be united in rebuilding the kingdom of God was adamantly refused by Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the chief fathers, the adversaries revealed their true colors by showing that they really only sought to hinder the rebuilding of the temple by uniting with God’s people: “Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” Ezra 4:4-5.

B. When the more subtle and deceitful approach of unity and numbers in building the kingdom of God did not work in hindering the restoration of the true religion revealed in Scripture, then the more open and vicious attacks were undertaken by the “adversaries” to forestall and delay, to discourage and depress God’s people with whatever methods they might use (short of actual violence on their parts).

1. How often this occurs in the church. All of the sweet talk of unity and peace comes to a screeching halt when it becomes clear that there can only be a biblical unity that is founded upon the love and truth of Jesus Christ. We certainly must love our fellow Christians in various churches and earnestly desire and pray for a biblical unity of Christ’s Visible Church, but such a biblical unity can only be founded upon a blessed uniformity of religion in doctrine, worship, government, and discipline (per Amos 3:3 and the Solemn League and Covenant).

2. Dear ones, adversaries to the precious truth of Jesus Christ which we have been taught and which we have embraced will always be willing to unite with us or to have us unite with them, **IF** we are willing to compromise those precious truths (or at least not declare others who oppose these precious truths to be in error). Remember, dear ones, a unity without the love and truth of Christ is a conspiracy against Christ and His supreme headship over His church. It is to become our own pope in opposing and compromising that which Christ has revealed and that for which His faithful followers through the ages have suffered and died.

3. I am reminded of the words of that faithful covenanted minister and martyr of Jesus Christ, James Renwick, who looked upon his adversaries (not with fear and not with a sinful rage for personal vengeance), but with a thankfulness and joy when he encouraged his fellow suffering covenanters with these words (from *The Life & Letters of James Renwick, Last Scottish Martyr* by Rev. W.H. Carslaw):

Let us be lions in God’s cause, and lambs in our own (p. 35). And when the world frowns most, I

know, it is the time wherein the Lord smiles most upon His own (p. 130). Glory in your present tribulation. Rejoice in your light affliction which is but for a moment. Count your antagonists your greatest friends, for what are they doing by all the storms they raise against you, but contributing to the mass of your glory? O fear them not, but keep your Captain-general upon your right hand, and then cry to them to shoot their fill (p. 168).

Dear ones, if you would reign with Christ, you must also suffer with Christ from the adversaries he sends your way in order to sanctify you and prepare you for the glories of heaven. Amen.

Copyright 2012 Greg L. Price.