

The Basis for Christian Unity
Pastor Steven J. Cole, May 1996

Christian unity is a hot topic. Here in Flagstaff, there have been a number of inter-church "Unity" services and other cooperative events which often include both Catholics and Protestants. I recently received an invitation to attend a worship service being held at the Nativity Catholic Church, where Dr. Emilio Castro, former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, spoke on, "Together on the Faith Journey." In 1993, several prominent evangelical leaders signed a document, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," calling for closer cooperation between these groups. The popular Promise Keepers movement includes as one of its seven promises, "Reaching beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity."

These trends and events raise the issue, What is the basis for Christian unity? Should Protestants and Catholics join together in the cause of Christ? Some of you may have wondered why I do not endorse or participate in "ecumenical" activities. I can only give the briefest sketch here. (I wrote a more lengthy paper on this several years ago; if you want a copy, let me know.) Here are a few thoughts that I hope will clarify and enlighten.

Biblical truth on essential doctrines, *not "Christian love,"* must be the basis for unity. I often hear, "Jesus said that the world will know we are Christians by our love and unity, not by our doctrine." The implication is that doctrine is both divisive and secondary to love. But a careful reading of John 17 will show that Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth" (17:17). To sanctify means to set apart or make separate. We are to be set apart from the world because we hold to God's truth.

Satan, the master at deceit, has many servants who claim to be Christian, but who deny fundamental biblical truth and thus are not truly Christian (2 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 John 2:18-27). Jesus warned of false prophets who are wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). One of the main duties of shepherds (pastors) is to guard the flock, which involves warding off the wolves (Acts 20:28). They also must exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9, plus many references to "sound doctrine" in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus). If a person or church knowingly denies or distorts the essential Christian doctrines about the nature of God, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the way of salvation, or the inspiration and authority of the Bible, we are not one with that person or church, in spite of their claim of being Christian (see Gal. 1:6-9). We are warned not to do anything to endorse such false doctrine (2 John 8-11). Rather, we must refute it.

While we must never compromise sound doctrine, we must hold to truth with wisdom and love. It's not always easy to distinguish essential doctrines from those that are important, but not absolutely essential for defining orthodox Christianity, so we must be discerning. Also, we may draw lines for personal friendship differently than we would for church unity or cooperation. It is not our place to judge the salvation of a person who differs with us doctrinally (unless he or she clearly denies the faith). Some may be truly saved and yet greatly deceived on some important doctrinal or practical issues. We can be cordial toward the person, and yet register our strong disagreement with him on the particular issue.

We must show grace toward those who are young in faith, who may be confused on certain doctrinal issues (see Acts 18:24-28). We must be patient, kind, and gracious toward those who differ with us on non-essentials. Perfect knowledge is not the requirement for fellowship, since none attain it this side of heaven. We must always be on guard against the spiritual pride that causes us to delight in proving that we are right and others are wrong. We can demolish a brother with our correct doctrine and thus sin by speaking truth without love. But we must never sacrifice essential truth on the altar of love. They cannot be separated.

My desire is that we work with all who truly know Christ to speak the truth in love, so that we all grow up in all aspects into Him (Eph. 4:15). But to join our church in cooperation with other churches which profess to know Christ but deny core biblical truths is to violate the biblical teaching on maintaining sound

doctrine and holding to God's truth. This is why I'm not comfortable participating in "Unity" services with the Roman Catholic Church, which officially promotes serious heresies. The basis for unity is God's truth, held to in a loving, but uncompromising, manner.