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We Cannot Choose Our Brothers

I was at a church meeting once in which the pastor preached against smoking. He asked all the people who wanted to give up smoking to bring their cigarettes to the front.

It was very touching to see people bring their packets of cigarettes, their boxes of matches and their cigarette lighters, and throw them on the floor so that everyone could stamp on them and walk all over them. It made me especially glad to see young people there. What a testimony!

But sometimes I believe that we strain at a mosquito and swallow a camel. There are admonitions in the Bible that are much clearer than "thou shalt not smoke."

For instance, notice Jesus' prayer to His Father in John 17:20-23.

"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, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me."

Do you have any doubt that the Bible states clearly that the church is to be one? The Bible is absolutely clear in its revela-

tion of the church as one—universally one.

But we are not one. Drive around sometime and see how many different church buildings there are in your community—maybe three or four.

These different buildings say, "We are divided." It would not be so bad if all of the different churches on a particular block used the same building at different times, putting their own sign up only when they were using the building. But we would not be happy with that.

The problem is, we think of sins only in terms of murder, theft, adultery or lying. We are horrified when someone commits adultery. We are even aghast at smoking cigarettes! We condemn the sins of the flesh, while ignoring the sins of the spirit. It is time we wake up to the fact that our division is very sinful from God's point of view.

Jesus' prayer was recorded because we were meant to hear it. In fact, we are accountable if it is not answered. It was recorded so that we could hear it and act on it. It is as if Jesus prayed it out loud in our midst. He meant it to be taken seriously.

When my children want something from me; they pray aloud.

"Lord, touch the heart of Daddy to take us to Disneyland." They mean me to hear their prayer because they want it answered.

Jesus prayed aloud so that His prayer might get into our Bibles, in all of our different languages. You know, it is in every Bible—the ones with the zippers and the ones without. It was said so loudly that everyone might understand the greatest and deepest desire of Jesus' heart. This is what His mind was on as He prepared to go to the cross. So it is very important that our minds are on it, too.

We are people who call ourselves Christians because Christ is the center of our message, the center of our lives, the center of our church system. He is the center of everything. That's why we have crosses all over the place—on our buildings, in-

side them, and on our person in many cases. We preach Christ, we pray to Christ, we praise Christ, we speak about Christ.

We had a tremendous expositor of the Gospels in our Bible seminary. She taught us, not just the letter, but the life of them. I recall the occasion when we came to the 17th chapter of John. She said, "This is the prayer of Jesus, so we are going to read this chapter on our knees." And we did.

Why is it that we do so little toward fulfilling this desire of Jesus if we love Him so deeply and preach about Him so much? Why is it that we don't act on His words, that His joy may be full?

Actually, those of us who are ministers are primarily responsible because we are the handles of the Christian community. We especially need to pay particular attention to Jesus' prayer. We may be good ministers of our various denominations; but when I was ordained, although I was ordained in a denomination, I was told that I was being ordained as a minister of the Lord Jesus Christ. So my allegiance, my loyalty, my commitment is first to Him, then to a denomination.

Now the church is universally one: There is just the one church in the whole world.

But that one church has its expressions in each locality. The church in Niagara Falls is the group of members who are part of this one universal church who also happen to live in Niagara Falls. The church in Buffalo is comprised of those members of the one church who happen to live in Buffalo.

This is the reason the Bible speaks of the church in Corinth, the church in Antioch, the church in Thessalonica, and so on.

The Bible is consistent in its revelation of these two dimensions of the church—the universal and the local. The problem today is that we have a third kind of church which is neither universal nor local. It is larger than the local church and smaller than the universal church. It is the denomination.

Now this creates a major problem for us, because there is no revelation in the Scriptures concerning the creation of a denomination. We can read the New Testament from cover to cover, but it isn't there.

What are we to do with our denominations? Well, we can't destroy them because they have become a way of life for us. Besides, those of us who see the vision for the church as Jesus meant it to be are usually not in a position to change the system. So the best thing we can do is simply to live as one church, as if our denominations did not exist.

The problem really isn't the denomination itself.

We are fooling ourselves if we believe that. We are the problem! The denomination is just another excuse for our flesh to become enmeshed in division, which it likes to do. It is an excuse for pride, jealousy and envy.

"They have a new pipe organ," says the number two church in the city. "We should get another, a larger one."

"They have lots of people," says the smaller church, "but they are not holy. We may be few, but at least we are holy."

Even in the same congregation we find division. There is rivalry among the deacons and elders. The problem is the flesh, not the system. The system is just one of the many avenues the flesh finds for expressing its divisiveness.

Most denominations begin in the same way. In a church, one group of people barks at another group, dividing over a particular issue. The other group then barks back. It takes two to fight. So we bark at one another, and division follows. Denominations are just an outgrowth of this division.

Martin Luther called the Pope the antichrist and the Catholic church the great harlot of the book of Revelation. No wonder he was excommunicated! We would be excommunicated from our denominations today for much less.

And so the Protestants divided from the Catholics. Then they divided among themselves many more times. Hundreds of denominations resulted.

I love Martin Luther. And I believe he played a very impor-

tant part in the history of the church. But that doesn't make everything he did right. There was a mixture of flesh and Spirit, as there is with all of us. This is what creates the problems we have. Divisions are a work of the flesh.

It is the nature of the church that it is one. It cannot be other than one because it is the church of God, and God is one. Though there are Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God is one. It is His nature to be one.

Remember when Moses was called to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt? God spoke to him on the mountain out of a burning bush. He spoke his name, "Moses!"

"Who are You?" Moses asked. "Tell me Your name."

"My name?" answered God. He thought to Himself, "Poor Moses. He is used to so many gods and he thinks I am one of those gods. So He wants Me to give My name to identify Myself."

"Moses," He said, "I have no name."

"How come?"

"Because besides Me there is no god."

You know, we need names to identify one person from the other because we are many. Eve had to be given the name "Eve" because there was an Adam already. If Adam had remained alone, he would just have been himself without any need of a name.

"Come on, God, give me Your name."

"Moses, I tell you that I have no name."

"But I have to have a name!"

"Well, tell them that 'I am' sent you."

"I am what?"

"No, no. Just 'I am,' period. 'I am,' that's all. There is no other."

"But You can't...."

"Moses, I am who I am. So go and tell them 'I am' sent you."

"What a funny name."

The first thing people ask me is, "Brother Ortiz, which church are you from?" I tell them that I am from *the* church.

"The church of what?"

"*The* church. *The* church, period."

"The period church?"

"No, no. Period isn't the name of the church. I mean *the* church."

Look in the Scriptures and tell me if you find a name for the church. It is just the church of God. The church is the church. It means the "called out" of God. It is composed of all who have been called out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God.

Are you called out? Then you belong to the same church that I belong to. By its nature, the church is one because we all have been called out of everything else into the kingdom of God.

Really, we shouldn't speak of the church as divided.

You can divide the number ten into ten ones, into two fives, or into five two's. You can divide a group of five into two groups (three and two) or into five ones. You also can divide two into two ones. But you cannot divide one. The church is one, and it cannot be divided. You can only break one.

When they amputate your leg, you don't say, "They divided my body." You say, "They cut off one of my legs."

So, too, the church is not divided; it is broken in pieces. And it is the job of the ministry to put the pieces together and to try to heal it so that it can function as one.

In the days of King Solomon, there were two women who each had a baby on the same evening. They were sleeping with their babies in bed and one turned over and crushed her baby. So while the other was still asleep, the one who had lost her baby stole the other woman's baby and put the dead child in bed with the mother.

Next morning, the woman found her baby dead and she recognized that her baby was the live one. No one had

witnessed the exchange, so there was an argument. Each claimed the live baby was hers. So they brought the case to Solomon to judge.

"Both women claim the same baby," they told Solomon. "And there are no witnesses. We don't know what to do."

Solomon answered, "This is ridiculous. Divide the baby in two if both claim it is theirs. Bring me the baby and a sword, and we will divide it right now and give them half each."

The real mother said, "No, don't divide him. Give him all to her."

The other woman said, "Yes, divide him."

We have the same problem with people today. Some say, "Divide," when there are issues in which two parties disagree. Others say, "No." They understand that a body cannot be divided without killing it.

The trouble with the church today is that we have lost sight of the fact that there is a world to conquer.

The primitive church was just starting. It was small to begin with, but they conquered. Wherever they went, all over the earth, one desire consumed them: to bring the whole world into the worship of Christ. They preached Jesus, not a systematic theology.

The aim of the primitive church was not to have a bigger church, so that they could say, "Ours is larger than that one."

It wasn't to form separate denominations based on certain doctrines, calling themselves "Methodists" or "Presbyterians." No, their whole purpose was to expand the kingdom under Christ. They had unity because they were centered in Jesus.

Today we are not under Christ, but under other banners. So we have a broken church that is fractured into hundreds of denominations. But Jesus does not have many churches. The church is the bride of Christ, and He is not a polygamist. He is going to marry just one church.

Don't ask me which church I belong to, because there is

just *the* church. When you say "Baptist," "Methodist" or "Lutheran" . . . be careful. Those names are bad words in the kingdom of God. Don't repeat them too often, because Jesus may wash your mouth out with soap if you keep on saying those things.

We cannot choose our brothers. All the children of God in the same area belong to the same church, whether they like it or not. We cannot say, "You are my brother, but he is not my brother."

Who can choose his brothers in any family?

We are five in the family I was born into. I happen to be the last one. So when I was born, the other four were there. I didn't choose them, and they didn't choose me. When we were born, it was a fact that we were brothers.

Were we responsible for the fact that we were brothers? We did nothing to make ourselves brothers, nothing at all. The guilty ones were Mom and Dad. That my brother is my brother is not something I decided by myself; it is something I have to accept.

So it is in the spiritual family of God. You cannot pick out your brothers and sisters. You can select your friends perhaps, but not your brothers.

The church is formed of all those who have the Son within them. Whether they are Anglicans, Seventh Day Adventists, or Roman Catholics—if they have the Son, they are in the kingdom. They belong to the family of God. It's not by philosophical approach, but by the life they have.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Our system of religion tells us that if we believe that Jesus is the way, that's okay. That's enough to be saved.

But it's not okay.

Jesus is not the way just so that we can believe that He is the way.

He is the way so that we can walk with Him. He is the truth not just so that I might believe that He is the truth, but that I may

trust Him. And He is the life not just so that I can believe that He is the life, but that I might live that life. We cannot just have a doctrine or a concept, we must have the reality.

The primitive Christians were called those of "the way." Is the Anglican church the way? Are the Methodists or the Baptists the way?

No, the way is Jesus. It doesn't matter whether you are a member of a denomination or of an independent congregation. To be in "the way" is to have Him who is "the way."

If you are in Jesus, you are in the same way that I am. If you have the Son within you, you have the life of God.

It doesn't matter whether you believe in the millennium, or you don't believe in the millennium; whether you believe in the coming of Christ before or after the tribulation. Those things divide the people of God and have no value for living. They are just an intellectual approach to the philosophy of the Bible. They may be interesting, but they have nothing to do with whether or not we are brothers.

The church has a tendency to be a Christian club. A club is an institution in which all of the members agree to certain principles.

If we start a new club, say a non-smokers and non-drinkers club, it's because all of us agree not to smoke and not to drink. So non-smoking and non-drinking is what unites us.

If we start a single men's club, we are all single men. If you get married, "Out of the club!"

When we gather together around principles or doctrines, that's a club. Anything that is centered in a set of rules or concepts is a club. But when we gather together around a living person whose name is Jesus, we are a church.

In Argentina we have two big rival football clubs. They really are against each other. People come from all over the country to see their main matches. I went once, but I won't go again. I was almost killed.

When we get converted, we become Baptists or Episcopal-

ians. We are rivals. It's like two clubs. Before we fought for our politics or for our football club. Now we fight for our doctrines. But it's the same flesh finding new channels to manifest itself.

I used to belong to a church which prayed kneeling down. We never prayed standing or seated.

Once we went to visit another church where people stood to pray. We were scandalized. "Look at that! These cannot be Christians. They pray standing."

Today, the issue might be whether a brother is immersed or sprinkled in baptism, or whether he speaks in tongues or not. But all of these divisions are because we are more centered in doctrine and concepts than in life.

A person becomes your brother because he has been begotten by the Father.

I am your brother even if you don't like some of the things I am saying. I am sorry, but I cannot help it. I am your brother whether you accept the fact or not. Your acceptance doesn't make any difference. In fact, you had better accept me now because it might be that tomorrow, up there, the Lord will place my home beside yours!

Who knows whom the Lord will put in the same room of the same Holiday Inn in heaven? The Pentecostals and the Presbyterians together for eternity!! We had better get acquainted now. We had better accept each other now, regardless of our philosophies.

When Jesus comes to church, He does not find joy in our doctrinal divisions.

He commands us to repent of our hatred of one another. And when He lives within us and we are led by His Spirit, we will accept each other as members of His body not because of doctrines, but simply because He has accepted us. We will be one church because we all share one common life—the life of Christ in us.