

Question: What does the plea for religious unity demand of us?

It may be hard to believe, but there was a time when Christians worked and worshipped together in a united and orderly fashion. In the Manual for Southern Baptist churches, Edward T. Hiscox writing on the subject of receiving members into a church stated, "It is most likely that in the Apostolic age when there was but 'one Lord, one faith, and one baptism,' and no differing denominations existed, ...now it is different..." (Standard Manual Chapter IV Church Membership Edward T. Hiscox D.D., Page 22).

Members of the churches of Christ have been asking for years, "who made it different?" As far as God is concerned, there never has been any more than "one Lord, one faith, and one baptism" that He would accept. Did God amend His will for the church, to allow for all the differing religious organizations and doctrines? Is Christ pleased with the many faiths, baptisms and organizations that employ His name? Does the Holy Spirit's message in the New Testament indicate God's approval of religious division? The clear answer is no. What first step must we take then to achieve unity in Christ?

A Return To The New Testament For Church Organization

The organization of the Lord's church does not include an earthly head or headquarters. The church as a whole has only Christ as its head (Ep 1:20-23; Co 1:18; Mt 28:18; Ep 5:23-25). As a head sits above the body to direct the course of the body, even so Christ is seated at God's "right hand in the heavenly places" to direct the affairs of His body the church. From His exalted throne on high He rules in the hearts of His people, through His word, and shall so reign until He comes again at the end of time (Dan 7:13-14; Ac 2:29-36; Jn 12:48; 2Jn 9; 1Co 15:23-28).

Furthermore, there was nothing like a "clergy/laity" system in the New Testament church. In fact, Jesus said that there would be no such distinctions among His disciples (Mt 20:20-28; 23:1-12). Simplicity of organization characterized the New Testament church. No ruling board had any authority over local congregations. Each local church was self-governing under the oversight of its elders (a word synonymous with bishops or pastors, cf. 1Ti 3; Titus 1; Ep 4:11). The apostles Paul and Peter appointed and instructed elders in their work, which did not extend beyond their own congregations (Ac 14:23; 20:17, 28; 1Pe 5:1-4).

Under the oversight of local elders, in the first century church there were special servants known as deacons appointed to attend the physical needs of their congregation (Ac 6:1-6; 1Ti 3:8-13). Then there was, of course, the general membership of penitent baptized believers who worked together and served the Lord under the oversight of the elders (1Th 5:11-17; He 13:7, 17).

Finally, there were men who served as evangelists (Acts 9:7-14; Ep 4:11). Timothy and Titus were of this class of servants. These men were commissioned to preach the word of God as the apostles taught it (2Ti 2:2). Furthermore, evangelists were to organize local churches by appointing qualified elders in each (Ti 1:5-9). Once appointed, evangelists were as much under the oversight of elders as were any members of that church.

As you can see from our study, "in the Apostolic age when there was but 'one Lord, one faith, and one baptism,' and no differing denominations existed," there were no organizations larger or smaller than the local church. This is how the Lord organized His body, the church, and mere men cannot tamper with it and remain in fellowship with Him (2 Jn 9-11). We must begin by recognizing the absolute authority of Christ if we hope to attain religious unity.

