

M I S A I M I N G S

“Who concerning the Truth Have Misaimed” — 2 Tim. 2:18

Misaiming concerning the Basis of Unity:

Misaiming: “That which unites must take precedence over what distinguishes....We must go back to the Ecumenical Creeds: the Apostles’, Nicene, Chalcedon, Athanasian” (*Chalcedon Report*. No. 381. April 1997, p. 15).

Truth: Here, as has increasingly become the case in recent years, orthodoxy is narrowly construed to mean only that which is found in the creeds of the first millennium. The above citation is absolutely correct in exhorting believers to focus on what unites rather than on what divides. He misaims, however, in defining what unites us as being the ecumenical creeds. What unites us is found uniquely in the Bible and was given to us *before* the ecumenical creeds: the oneness of the Spirit and the oneness of the faith (Eph. 4:3, 13). On the one hand, when we walk by the Spirit and worship in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16; John 4:24), we experience the oneness of the Triune God and are brought into the oneness of the Spirit (John 17:21-22). On the other hand, when we are not in the Spirit, the faith functions as a safety net to maintain the believers’ unity (i.e., the unity of the faith).

Most sound theologians would agree that “the faith” encompasses the major and vital tenets of the Christian belief as presented in the Bible, not many minor doctrines. According to Jude 3 the faith *already* had been “once for all delivered to the saints” before the time of the creeds. We must therefore seriously question what the creeds deliver. Why indeed must we go back to the creeds written several centuries after the completion of the Word of God, which are contradictory and selectively ignorant of Scripture, as the basis for orthodoxy? Historical scholars often have noted that the ecumenical creeds never served as extensive declarations of the faith. Rather, they were *polemic* in nature, written as concisely as possible in specific response to various deviant teachings of their day. In order to secure the broadest possible mandate among the churches, each creed focused on the issues immediately at hand, purposely excluding those key elements of the New Testament faith which were not in contention at the moment. Since the faith in its entirety has been once delivered to us in the Scriptures, we are obliged to take its crucial truths as our unique central focus and uniting factor.

The New Testament allows the Christian liberty of conscience in many practices and minor doctrines. However, the essential points of the faith (the Bible as the inspired Word of God, the Triune God, and the person of Christ and His redemptive work) are the central, indispensable elements of the unity of the faith for which we should contend. It is our adherence to these key elements alone which maintains our harmony in spite of divergent viewpoints on lesser issues.

Misaiming concerning the Significance of *Ecclesia*:

Misaiming: “It is sad that Christians have forgotten the meaning of the word *church* in the New Testament. It translates *ecclesia*, an unusual word which meant then the town or ruling council or government for an area.

This means that the church was called into being to become in time the true ruling body for its given area. It was not to attain this position by means of revolution, nor by political activity, but by obedience to the law of God” (*Chalcedon Report*. No. 381, April 1997, p. 2).

Truth: The Greek word *ecclesia* is indeed one of the most significant yet most misapplied New Testament terms. It is derived from *ek* (out of) and *klesis* (a calling), and while ancient Greeks used *ecclesia* to denote a body of citizens called together to discuss affairs of state, its New Testament usage carries no political connotation. Rather, in the New Testament it usually denotes the church as a gathering of believers who have been called out by God. As William Smith explains, “To the writers of the New Testament the word had now lost its primary signification, and was...used generally for any meeting” (*Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible*. Baker, 1981, p. 453). The various contexts of its New Testament usage corroborate this interpretation. It was first used by the Jewish translators of the Greek Septuagint shortly before the New Testament age to describe the religious gatherings of the Jews (Deut. 4:10; 16:16). The New Testament authors later chose the same word to characterize the congregation of Israel (Acts 7:38; Heb. 2:12). Further illustrating the word’s evolution from its original political meaning, it was even used by Luke to describe a riotous mob (Acts 19:32). By examining its usage throughout the Bible, it becomes apparent that when applied to believers, the word simply carries the

sense that the church is the gathering of believers who are called out for spiritual purposes, not “the true ruling body for its given area.” Smith accordingly cautions that “its etymological sense having been already lost when adopted by and for Christians, is only misleading if pressed too far” (p. 453).

Pressing the etymological sense too far has detrimental effects. First, it distorts the intended meaning of the divinely-inspired biblical vocabulary; it also skews and truncates the believer’s experience. For example, if a believer perceives the “church” as merely a building down the street, his experience of the vast, rich reality conveyed in this term will be woefully inadequate. Our experience is dictated by our vision and understanding. In this case, an apprehension of the church as a political entity greatly disserves the reader by leading him into a distorted experience of the church. The adequate and accurate unfolding of the Scripture, on the other hand, serves to lead the seeking believer into all the profound realities of the church as the Body of Christ, the mystery of Christ, the fullness of the One who fills all in all.

Misaiming Concerning the Lord’s Fasting

Misaiming: “Jesus fasted for 40 days before he started his public ministry. Can you imagine that? The very son of God, fasting in order to get in touch with His own Father!” (*Preaching*. Vol. 12, No. 5, p. 17).

Truth: Jesus was never out of touch with His Father. In fact, in the verse immediately preceding this section on the fasting in the wilderness, the Father openly declares, “This is My Son, the Beloved, in whom I have found My delight” (Matt. 3:17), lovingly attesting to the harmonious co-existence of the Father and Son in the Trinity. It is inexcusable to presume that the Lord Jesus’ fasting was needed “in order to get in touch with” the Father, the One with whom He maintained an uninterrupted intrinsic, organic, and coinherent relationship. “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), declares the Son, and “He who has sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him” (John 8:29). As the divine Son of God, the One in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily (Col. 2:9), He was not for one instant of His life without a vital, intimate, and organic relationship with His Father. Even the Father’s forsaking of Christ on the cross was only economical and temporary, not essential in substance.

Why then did He fast? While the interpretation cited above stretches both the reader’s imagination and Christological truth, the scriptural interpretation illuminates a precious truth concerning the person and work of Christ. Though His divine status as the Son of God had been

personally affirmed by the Father in Matthew 3:17, it was necessary that He first defeat Satan in His status as the Son of Man, in order to fully inaugurate His ministry as a God-man. Therefore, in His humanity He fasted and was tempted for forty days and forty nights, signifying a time of testing and suffering (Deut. 9:9, 18; 1 Kings 19:8). This temptation, apparently a purely diabolical detour, was in fact a test into which Christ was led by the Spirit to prove that He was qualified as the Son both of God and of man to reign as the King of the kingdom of the heavens.

Satan’s temptation of the first man came in the matter of eating. Likewise, he enticed the second Man, the Lord from heaven (1 Cor. 15:47), with the same snare. Though he was successful with the first man, his attempt to lure the second man ended in utter failure! Rather than exercise His legitimate divine status as the Son of God to work a bread-producing miracle, the Lord chose instead to remain in His human status, to confront and reject Satan’s temptation by willingly suffering hunger as a man. Thus, the Lord Jesus’ fasting, far from being simply an exercise in filial adoration, was a means of defeating His enemy. In exercising His human will to refuse to abandon His standing as a man, Christ overcame the tempter and established His divinely human ministry.

Misaiming concerning Clergy/Laity Distinctions

Misaiming: “We are not the same as the one whom we represent, that is certain. We are not Christ. But we are not the same as laypeople either. We in the ministry, the designated leaders, are often targets for the world’s hostility, lightning rods of opposition, consecrated servants, mediators of the Gospel, and preachers of the crucified Christ in word, deed, and suffering. Ours is a calling that imitates the pattern set by Jesus” (“Suffering and Joy: The Ministry as Participation in Christ’s Cross,” J. A. O. Preus, *Modern Reformation*. Vol. 6, No. 4, July/Aug. 1997, p. 22).

Truth: These comments are redolent of hierarchical clericalism, a system which has uplifted some believers to a higher class than that which the majority occupies. Such a system does indeed receive mention in Scripture; in Revelation 2:6 and 15 the Lord says that He hates the works and teaching of the Nicolaitans. In the absence of a historical record of a group by this name, we can examine the Greek term which derives from two words, one meaning “to conquer” or “to be victorious over” and the other signifying “common people, the laity.” Nicolaitans must then refer to a group of people who esteem themselves above common believers. Where this author declares, “We are not the same as laypeople,” the Lord anathematizes, “The works of the Nicolaitans which I also hate.”

by the Editors