

“Who concerning the truth have misaimed”—2 Tim. 2:18

Misaiming concerning Christ’s Prayer in John 17 and the Oneness of the Body of Christ

Misaiming: “Some time ago, I received a letter from a concerned religious leader who told me that he had received a personal revelation from the Lord Jesus Christ. He claimed Christ appeared to him and said, ‘My body is broken...please heal my body...I want my body to become one again.’ The letter went on to say that it was time that we minimized our differences as Christians and united around the doctrine of Christ. Catholics, Protestants, and various other Christian groups should confess the sin of division and come together to fulfill Christ’s prayer for unity...“Should we bring together all of Christendom under one banner in the interest of unity? Should we assume that ‘because everyone believes in Christ’ that we must unite the body of Christ because it is broken? I think not...So, how shall I respond to the person who claims to have had a revelation from Christ saying we must unite? I reply as did Paul, ‘But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed’ (Galatians 1:8)” (Erwin W. Lutzer, *How the Gospel Sets Us Free: Transforming Truths from Galatians*, pp. 7, 14).

Truth: Lutzer’s response to the brother’s echo of the Lord’s cry for the oneness of His Body is a grievous rejection of the Lord’s express desire for oneness as revealed in John 17, a desire that accurately corresponds to the content of the brother’s letter. The oneness that Christ created on the cross (Eph. 2:14-16) is universally expressed and is meant to be practiced among Christians wherever they live as a visible and practical expression of the universal Body of Christ. In John 17:11 Christ prayed to the Father, saying, “Holy Father, keep them in Your name, which You have given to Me, that they may be one even as We are.” In His time of prayer immediately prior to His crucifixion, the Lord’s desire for the believers to experience and express the oneness that He shared with the Father is plainly stated. Verse 11 pertains to the expression of a universal, intrinsic oneness between the believers and the Triune God. In verses 18, and 21, the Lord expanded His desire for this universal oneness to be visibly expressed, saying, “As You have sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world...That they all may be one; even

as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that You have sent Me.” The Lord’s sending of the believers into the world involves a visible display of the universal oneness, because only a visible display of oneness can convince an unbelieving world that the Lord was sent to bring into existence a oneness between the Triune God and redeemed humanity. Not only does Lutzer dismiss the brother’s appeal for the oneness of all the believers; he sadly appears to have no interest in unity at all. His brief answer to uniting the Body, “I think not,” contradicts Christ’s profound prayer for unity in John 17. He continued His prayer to the Father in John 17:22-23: “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as We are one; I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected into one, that the world may know that You have sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.” Lutzer, rather than joining himself to the Lord’s desire in His prayer, misaims by saying, “Let him be accursed,” to believers who share the same desire as Christ has for His believers to be one. The result of the Lord’s prayer in John 17 is the practical manifestation of the oneness of the Body of Christ. Lutzer, however, rejects the Lord’s deep sentiments and even implicitly labels the brother’s reflection of this desire as another gospel, which should be accursed. This is a great offense! The contents of the brother’s revelation is not another gospel; it is the essence of the gospel: the oneness of the Triune God and the redeemed believers as well as the oneness of the redeemed believers with one another—visible and practical.

Misaiming concerning Sanctification

Misaiming: “After declaring some hard teachings about God’s sovereignty in salvation, which provoked many of his followers to abandon him, Jesus in John 6 asked his closest disciples if they would also leave...Peter’s response that he cannot go anywhere else than Christ for words of eternal life reveals that Christ’s words require submission, which is an aspect of sanctification. Although it may not be the most positive way of describing it, sanctification is in part a process of learning more and more to submit to Christ’s words.” (Harrison Perkins, “Sanctification, Submission, and Scripture’s Authority,” *Modern Reformation*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 35-36).

Truth: The process of sanctification is not an issue of an objective self-directed submission to God's words, of learning to submit to Christ's words and of focusing on obedience to scriptural authority. In contrast, the Scriptures stress three aspects (or stages) of sanctification: First, the seeking sanctification of the Spirit in causing God's chosen people to repent and believe in the gospel (1 Pet. 1:2). Second, the positional sanctification by the blood of Christ at the time of the believer's believing (Heb. 13:12). Third, the Spirit's dispositional sanctification over the course of the believers' Christian life in which their inward being is saturated and permeated with God as the Holy One (1 Thes. 5:23-24), causing them to become different and distinct from everything that is common. In Ephesians 1:4-5 and Hebrews 2:10-11 the many sons of God are led into glory by becoming exactly the same as the Sanctifier, that is, sharing His sanctified life and nature in every part of their inward being. This dispositional sanctification occurs when God's words are received as an inward supply of spirit and life to subjectively reconstitute the believers' inward being.

This process of sanctification is not an issue of objective submission to God's hard words. The hard words of the Lord in John 6 do not refer to the difficulty of submitting to God's word but to the disciples being required to eat His flesh and drink His blood (vv. 53, 60). It is a matter of receiving God's words as "food." The Lord clarified the real focus of His hard words in verse 63, saying, "It is the Spirit who gives life; *the flesh profits nothing; the words which I have spoken to you are spirit and are life*" (emphasis added). Here, the Lord made it clear to His disciples that the true way to be sanctified is not by obedience or submission but by eating His words through prayer (e.g., Jer. 15:16; Matt. 4:4; Eph. 6:17-18). The thought of receiving the words of the Lord as spirit and life through a prayerful ingestion is central to the underlying plan of God for man related to sanctification. By our taking in the truth of God's word to reconstitute our inner being and not vainly trying to obey outwardly the commands within God's words (cf. Rom. 7:18), the God of peace, who is the Sanctifier, is able to sanctify our entire tripartite being (1 Thes. 5:23). This truth of sanctification through the dispensing of the divine element of spirit and life contained in God's words to sanctify our inner being is confirmed by John 17:17, which says, "*Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth,*" and Ephesians 5:26, which says, "That He might *sanctify* her, cleansing her by the washing of the water *in the word*" (emphasis added).

Misaiming concerning the Church

Misaiming: "What exactly is the church? When we say

that the church is a pre-supposition for biblical interpretation, which church do we have in mind: the local congregation, the group of people who identify as 'Christian' in a national census or Pew Research Center survey, a particular confessional community (defined, for example, by the Augsburg Confession or the Westminster Confession of Faith), the so-called Great Tradition defined by the first four (or more?) ecumenical councils, or something else entirely?" (David W. Congdon, "The Nature of the Church in Theological Interpretation: The Culture, Volk, and Mission," *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, Spring, 2017, vol. 11, no. 1, p. 104).

Truth: The author's questions concerning what the church is indicate an inadequate understanding of the church and its place in God's heart as revealed in the Scriptures. The building up of the church as the greatest prophecy in the divine revelation—the goal of God's salvation (Matt. 16:18)—and as the deep longing in God's heart have been missed for centuries (Isa. 66:1-2; cf. Eph. 3:5-6).

The clear teaching concerning the church in the divine revelation has two basic aspects: (1) the universal aspect, as seen in Matthew 16:18: "I will build My church," and (2) the local aspect, as seen in Matthew 18:17: "Tell it to the church." The universal church spoken of in 16:18 comprises the entire Body of Christ throughout time and space (cf. Eph. 1:22-23), including every genuine believer according to the common faith; the local aspect of the church refers to the church in each city, comprising all the genuine believers of Christ located in a geographical city at any one point in time (cf. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Rev. 1:11) and pointing to the oneness of all the believers in any one city, intrinsically and in practice.

By presenting many natural answers to the question of what the church is, the author conflates man-made and unscriptural perspectives but leaves open to interpretation a key element of the divine definition of the church. At the same time, he misleads believers into a Christian walk that is subject to definitions that vary according to their current human practices or concepts. The church should not be defined by a census, survey, confessional, or tradition but by the teaching and practice of the early church. By seeing the vision of the church and the practice of the church in its universal and local aspects, a believer can be led into the reality of the church life today. At the same time the universal church can be built up according to the practice in the local gatherings of the early believers in their various localities (1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 4:16).

by the Editors