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## The Ecumenical Mistake

**Lesson Subject:** The principle of separation from error will not permit true churches to join forces with other religions.

**L25. Date:** May 1984. **Text:** II Corinthians 6:11-18.

**Topic:** Ecumenical Movement.

In 1910 a missionary conference was held in Edinburgh, Scotland. It was made up of 1200 people representing 159 missionary boards and societies. The purpose was to discuss and plan for the evangelization of the world. Out of that meeting grew an organization known as the World Council of Churches.

Much change has come in that organization since that time. Leaders of the council are no longer concerned about the evangelization of the world by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Publications issued by the council deal with such subjects as peaceful co-existence, total disarmament, a ban of nuclear testing and nuclear weapons, elimination of loyalty-security laws, the abolishing of loyalty oaths, the abolishing of all investigative committees on Communism, complete integration of the races and sexes, social revolution to replace the present social order, the increase of foreign aid to communist countries, clemency for convicted spies and criminals, and the scientific reconstruction of religion. Those issues are a far cry from our Lord's command, "*Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature*" (Mark 16:15).

Should Baptists be a part of the World or National Council of Churches? Should we participate in the "ecumenical movement" which is an effort to unite all Christian denominations under one banner? The central truth of the following comments will answer the questions for all Bible-believing Christians: "The principle of separation from error will not permit true churches to join forces with other religions."

### I. THE PROBLEM (II Corinthians 6:11-13)

**A. Differences of opinion put a strain on fellowship.** An ancient prophet asked the question, “*Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*” (Amos 3:3). Fellowship means “mutual sharing, like interest, the same goals.” Differences of opinion put a strain on fellowship so that agreement is impossible.

That was the problem with which Paul dealt in II Corinthians 6:12. The Corinthian Christians complained of Paul's “narrowness” and “lack of love” toward them. He replied that there was no lack of affection on his part. If they felt stiffness toward him, it was in their own heart.

In ecumenical circles, how can we walk together with a wide divergence in doctrine? What can be the basis of our agreement unless it is on the Word of God? Otherwise such a strain would be put on fellowship that union would be impossible.

**B. Differences in doctrine result in error.** The ecumenists believe that everything must be changed to accommodate the faith to the secular world. There must be a change in the image of the church, the pastor, the layman, the missionary, and even the evangelistic outreach of the gospel. There must even be a change in the authority of the Bible over the lives of Christians, they say. So long as “Scripture only” prevails, there can be no bridge built between the catholic and evangelical. Ecumenists agree to that statement, and still seek such a union. If we cannot meet together around the Word of God, why meet together at all?

Many of the theological liberals, who lead the various councils of churches and call for ecumenical dialogue, deny that the Bible is the Word of God. They say the Word may come “through” the Bible, but that the Bible in its entirety is not His Word. It is easy for them to ask for union. But how can a Bible-believing Christian desert his faith for such fiction?

Much of what is promoted through pronouncements coming from meetings of various councils of churches is directly contrary to conservative Christian convictions. Union is not to be bought at the price of the violation of a pure conscience and the violation of clear statements of Holy Scripture.

It would be wonderful if all Christians in the world could join in one great body and give a united witness to this generation. But such a union is possible only if all join around the Word of God. Any other union would create increasing problems and hinder the present witness.

## II. THE PRINCIPLE (II Corinthians 6:14)

“*Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers.*” That is the principle the people of God must follow in all relationships of life, religious and

secular. To be *“yoked together”* means to form intimate ties which are inconsistent with our Christian profession or doctrine. It is to be mismatched.

**A. We must identify that which is spiritually unclean.** God requires us to *“put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean”* and that applies to *“all the statutes which the LORD hath spoken”* (Leviticus 10: 10, II). Every relationship and every alliance must be put under the examination of God's Word. It is our business to *“hold fast our profession”* (Hebrews 4:14). If the truth of God brings us into union with other Christians, praise God. If it separates us from some who call themselves Christians but who do not hold to the truth, we must obey God rather than men.

**B. We must separate from that which is spiritually unclean.** The acts of sin which identify the way of the wicked and unrighteous must be forsaken (Isaiah 55:7). No one would question that. But God also commands, *“Withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us”* (II Thessalonians 3:6). A disorderly walk could be wrong conduct or wrong doctrine. Paul was not concerned with union so much as with purity.

God calls, *“Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty”* (II Corinthians 6:17,18).

**C. We must stand against the unclean.** *“Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them”* (Ephesians 5:11). When Simon Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ before Paul was ever saved, erred from the way, he was rebuked by Paul (Galatians 2:11-21). That is standing against that which is spiritually unclean. *“Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear”* (I Timothy 5:20). That is standing against the unclean. The Christian is to *“speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority”* (Titus 2:15) in spiritual matters. How, then, can Bible-believing Christians join with those who reject the teachings of the Bible?

Pagan religions can be followed by worshipers who hold to more than one. One can be a Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian worshiper at the same time. But Bible Christianity is an exclusive religion. It admits of but one God who has revealed himself to mankind. It holds that revelation of the one true God is written without error in the Holy Bible. Anything that disagrees with the revelation of God in the Bible is false and is to be rejected and opposed. That is why the only union possible for Christians is on the basis of agreement on Bible teaching.

### III. THE PARADOX (II Corinthians 6:14-16)

Opposites cannot mix and produce something good. The apostle Paul draws five contrasts to show that truth and error are incompatible.

**A. The righteousness received in Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:9) is incompatible with the unrighteousness from which we have been delivered by grace (Titus 2: 12).**

**B. Light which is revealed in Jesus Christ (John 1:4, 5) cannot be joined with the darkness which we cast off in Jesus Christ (Romans 13:12).**

**C. Christ, who is the Son of God and the image of God (Hebrews 1:2, 3), cannot be one with Satan (called Belial in the text according to a common Jewish name for him), who is the enemy of God (John 14:30).**

**D. He who believes in God and gains victory through faith (I John 5:1-13; John 3:18,36) can have no agreement with one who rejects the very existence of God (Hebrews 3:12; 4:11).**

**E. The temple which is consecrated to the worship of God (I Chronicles 22:19; I Corinthians 6:19, 20) has nothing in agreement with the idols which are strictly forbidden in the worship of God (Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 7:25; Isaiah 42:8).**

Those contrasts paint a vivid picture. The Christian can engage in fullest fellowship with that which agrees with the nature and purpose of God. But he can have no fellowship with that which contradicts the Word of God or violates the purpose of God.

That is why all Christian union must be based on the truth of God as revealed in the Bible. "Scripture only" should be our theme when ecumenism is considered.

### IV. THE PECULIARITY (II Corinthians 6:16)

**A. "Ye are the temple of the living God" (verse 16).** Your very physical body is the sanctuary, the holy-of-holies, in which the Holy Spirit dwells (I Corinthians 6:19). Then believers are built together as "*lively stones*" (I Peter 2:5) to make a holy temple designed for the habitation of God by His Spirit (I Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19-22). That makes you different from all unregenerate people in the world.

**B. God lives in you.** "*The anointing which ye have received of him*

*abideth in you*” (I John 2:27). God has promised, *“I will dwell in them, and walk in them”* (II Corinthians 6:16). That blessed indwelling is true of every Christian, not just a few special saints. *“If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his”* (Romans 8:9).

**C. You belong totally to God:** *“Therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's”* (I Corinthians 6:20). The conclusion is obvious: *“Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men”* (I Corinthians 7:23).

Total allegiance belongs to God alone.

## V. THE PROMISE (II Corinthians 6:17, 18)

**A. The promise is based on a prerequisite:** *“Come out from among them, and be ye separate. . . and touch not the unclean thing”* (verse 17). As regards ecumenism, the commandment is to have no spiritual fellowship with those who deny the doctrines of the Word. There is “some good” in most all such efforts, but there is total good to be found in the Word. There is no need to drink from mud puddles when pure water is available.

**B. The promise is blessed beyond anticipation.** (1) God will receive those who separate themselves from error. We call such a separation from sin *“repentance.”* Jesus promises, *“Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out”* (John 6:37).

(2) God will be our Father and we will be His children. Who could want anything better than that? Why worry about human acceptance or approval when we have been accepted and approved of God?

If we want religious union, let us gather around the Word of God for union. Any merger of religious groups that is based upon sacrifice of scriptural principles is against the gospel of Christ and the will of God.

Let us give our energies, each in our own fellowship, to getting out the glorious gospel of Christ. That is what God commissioned us to do when He left the church in the world.

*“Be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life”* (Philippians 2:15, 16).

## QUESTIONS

1. What is the ecumenical movement?
2. How does doctrine keep Baptists out of it?

3. Why should doctrine be so important to us?
4. What does II Corinthians 6:14 say about it?
5. How is II Thessalonians 3:6 related to it?
6. How does II Corinthians 6:14, 15 show the foolishness of it?
7. What makes you special according to II Corinthians 6:16?
8. What is God's promise in II Corinthians 6:17?
9. What requirement does He put on that promise?
10. How do you distinguish between Christian fellowship and church fellowship?