

Robert H. Boll : The Freedom of Simple Christians

If in the midst of the multitude of religious bodies and denominations, which make up the professing Christendom of our day, a number of men should rise up professing themselves simply Christians, and as not identified with any sectarian body whatsoever, but as belonging only to the one church of the New Testament, it would be proper and right to ask them a few pertinent questions. On what ground do you try to distinguish yourselves from the various bodies and denominations around you? By what right do you appropriate to yourselves that universal, non-sectarian name "Christian"? Are you standing on such a free, broad, universal ground that the name "Christian" describes you and your position? If so, what is your position and in what respect does it differ from that of the various denominations? And by what right do you claim to belong to the very New Testament church itself, in contrast with all the denominational world?

These are fair questions and demand a fair answer. It is evident that no man has the right to call himself simply a Christian if he belongs to some peculiar and distinctive clan or sect. Nor can he honestly and honorably claim to be a member of the church of Christ, if in reality he is an adherent of a sectarian body. We must know therefore what constitutes a man simply a Christian, and how a man may rightfully claim to belong simply to the New Testament church.

WHEN IS A MAN JUST A CHRISTIAN?

A Christian (if he is just that and nothing else) is a man who belongs to Jesus Christ - one who accepts Him as Lord, Savior, and as the Son of the living God. And, of course, that means as wholly and exclusively committed to Christ for everything. From Him alone he has his life, in Him alone he rests his hope. From Him alone he takes orders; from Him alone he receives light, instruction, truth, guidance. He has no other spiritual authority - no other master, rabbi, teacher. The Lord Jesus is the one only

source of light and truth to him; and Christ and Christ's word is his only standard and criterion. The word of Christ's inspired messengers, the apostles, is to be expressly included in this statement as being Christ's; but all outside and human authority, and all merely human standards are expressly excluded.

Now if one who confesses Jesus as Lord does at the same time acknowledge other lordship and authority in spiritual matters, he ceases to be simply a Christian. He is then of a special kind and stripe, according to the kind of alien authority to which he owns allegiance. He is, as it were, a "hyphenate" Christian, one whose loyalty is divided, and whose obedience to Christ is limited and modified by the human over-lords to which he is subject. His allegiance to man's creed and authority makes him an adherent of the particular sect and party which adopts those peculiar human standards. And in all fairness and honesty he should not pass as a simple Christian, but should adopt some appropriate human name by which he can be known or distinguished.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH OF CHRIST?

The church of Christ in the New Testament sense is the aggregate (local or general) of baptized believers who own allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ alone. By their very name and charter they are a free people - free from all men. They are not under any yoke of human masters or human creeds. The bond that holds them together is their common faith in Christ, their all in all, and their common love toward Him and one toward another. They are directly responsible to their Lord for all they do or say. "To his own Lord he standeth or falleth" (Rom. 14:4,8,9). Under Christ they also have mutual responsibility one toward another. If in their study of God's will and word they come to different conclusions (as may well happen) they mutually correct, counterbalance, and supplant one another in fellowship and brotherly love. Thus they grow together into the unity of the faith in the knowledge of the Son of God. This is a great part of their schooling and discipline. For in personal study of the word difference of view will arise;

and if love abounds they will be mutually helpful. Instead of setting up each his own findings as standards, and splitting into factions and sects, these Christians will help one another to apprehend the word of the Lord more perfectly. They will also bear with one another in mistakes and misapplications; and unless it be for some error that destroys the very foundations of the faith itself, or by the intrusion of something that necessarily causes disruption, this bond of loving fellowship is held sacred and inviolate by them. And to be sure, such a thing as an attempt on the part of any one to dominate the faith of the rest, or move to assume arbitrary authority over the brethren and to threaten and intimidate them into submission is not so much as to be named or thought of.

Regardless of any relative merits of any questions involved in any particular controversy - this is a matter of principle. It is fundamental. The very existence of the undenominational church of Christ depends on that. Any belief, though it were truth, if it is imposed upon men by human pressure or authority, loses its virtue (Isa. 29:13). The imposition of a human creed darkens the spiritual vision, stifles faith, stunts spiritual growth, brings men into bondage and makes simple New Testament Christianity impossible.

THE UNITY PLEA

It may be urged, however, that unity must be maintained, and that therefore disturbing teachings must perforce be excluded. This principle has its measure of truth, but can with the greatest ease be abused and turned into a weapon of spiritual tyranny. This false unity-plea is really the genesis of all authoritative human creeds. They were all "unity" measures at first; and they have all been the fruitful cause of division and sectarianism. "You must cease to teach this or that, or there will be division," say some reputed leaders. And straightway those leaders themselves see to it that there is division. They will have their way and their doctrine or nothing. If a man will not submit he must be marked and avoided (Rom. 16:17,18) because, forsooth, he is causing division. Now if

any man can distinguish this from creed-making, and see any difference between this sort of procedure and the way of the sects he must have a better microscope to detect fine lines than the rest of us possess. That is not the way of unity; it is the exercising of arbitrary jurisdiction over the minds and hearts of God's people; it is the imposition of a human yoke. Nay, already it is altogether a fault in us if the honest presentation by a brother of what he has found (or, say, what he thinks he has found) in God's word should cause trouble in the church. Why should that cause trouble? Unless there were some in power who are intolerant of having their own findings regarded as the final authority. To be sure, if the offending brother had denied the Lord Jesus Christ, or the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, or if he had rejected the Gospel, or if he had claimed for himself some special right to depart from the word of God, or if he had tried to form and lead off a faction, or had tried to introduce some practice which would force a separation among God's people - we must needs deal with such a one according to the instructions of Romans 16:17,18. But if it is merely a case of opposition on the part of some who think that they have the very last word on Bible truth and who wish to cast out those who differ with them - it ought to be obvious that somebody is assuming pope-ship over God's heritage, and that such men do not know and have perhaps never known what New Testament Christianity is.

NON-ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Again, it is argued that if trouble is caused over non-essential doctrines, say about matters of prophecy, such doctrines ought to be suppressed. We can be saved without them. It is not necessary to bring them up at all. It is mere wantonness to stir up trouble over such matters. No one knows or can know anything about it at any rate, they think, and every man should keep his ideas on prophecy to himself.

This specious and fallacious reasoning seems to have weight with some. They do not see that it finally rests upon the authority of men who presume to lay down to their brethren what is, and what is not necessary,

and therefore what is, and what is not, to be taught. It would be strange if a Christian, having the word of God in his hands, needed somebody to define for him what part of it is necessary and what superfluous; and what can be understood and what cannot; and what should be taught and what should be left off. Surely no sectarian leader would wish any wider concessions than that, and any man given that right would have no difficulty in constructing a human creed for the church. What part of God's word is unnecessary? What is the irreducible minimum of essential doctrine? Perhaps only a few verses - say fifty, or a hundred? And shall we discard all the rest then, if someone challenges it, lest it might cause trouble? And what if the man who sorted out the essential from the non-essential made a mistake? Is any part of the word to be set aside as valueless? Granting, however, that a man could be saved without a knowledge of Bible prophecy - ought not that to be the best reason for mutual tolerance on the subject? But with strange perverseness some will make that very thing an excuse for intolerance. A man is worthy to be condemned, say they, if he raises differences over doctrines that are non-essential. Of course if he raised differences over things that are essential, he would then have to be condemned and cast out. It comes then to this, that if you dare to differ with certain of the "leaders" in the church - if it is on a non-essential out you go, because it is non-essential; if it is on an essential - out you go, because it is essential. If you differ with them at all then on anything whatever - out you go. No sect on earth, Rome herself not excepted, is more creed-bound than that.

VIGILANCE AND LIBERTY.

"For freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage." This admonition applies especially to those who would be simple Christians. Here also it is true that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. And here, too, it is true that,

"They enslave their children's children
Who make compromise with wrong."

Now liberty is not license. We do not advocate individualism and self-will. The free Christian will feel all the more responsibility to consider his brother's interest, to weigh well his speech and guard his teaching, because of his liberty; for through love we must be servants one of another. But watch we must forevermore; for on one pretense or another, under one cover or another, comes the danger of thralldom to man's creed. The high position of the simple Christian and of the undenominational church must be zealously maintained against all encroachment of false authority and against the spirit of sectarianism.

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