


1911

# The Basis of Christian Unity

J. V. Coombs

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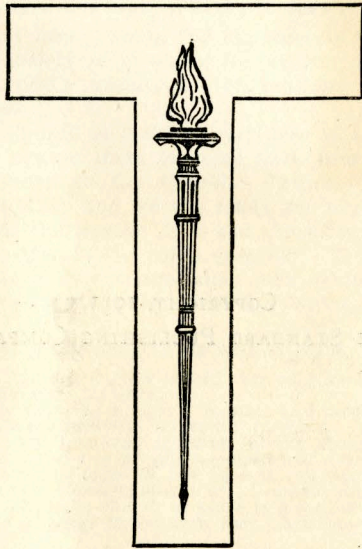
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## Recommended Citation

Coombs, J. V., "The Basis of Christian Unity" (1911). *Stone-Campbell Books*. 331.  
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# THE BASIS OF CHRISTIAN UNITY



*J. V. COOMBS*



CINCINNATI:  
THE STANDARD PUBLISHING CO.

THE BASIS OF  
CHRISTIAN UNITY



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CINCINNATI



# The Basis of Christian Unity

**TEXT:** "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me."—*John 17:20, 21.*

The paramount issue among the churches is Christian unity. Every religious society is pleading for union. It is the theme that stirs our world's missionary conventions into the white heat of enthusiasm.

The Catholic Church is making overtures to the English and Greek Churches, urging them to come back into the fold. The English Church says to the Catholic Church, "Give up your doctrine of infallibility and we are ready for union."

The Methodist Conference and the Presbyterian Synod set apart a session to discuss the union question. The great thinkers are realizing that the Protestants must unite or die. There is not a hope for the conquest of the world for Christ, with a divided church.

## THE TESTIMONY OF GREAT MEN.

The work of Christianizing the world can only be done by a united church.—*Norman McLean, Scotland.*

I would do little to make a man a Baptist and much to make him a Christian.—*E. T. Ruth (Baptist), Liverpool, England.*

The body of Christ, torn and bleeding, is the shame of the church. It is our duty to put an end to divisions.—*Episcopal Assembly.*

Denominationalism has done all the good it can do. Let it fade and pass away.—*Dr. Hunter (Congregationalist), Glasgow, Scotland.*

The want of unity in the church at home is a serious hindrance in the mission field. It is of large importance that Christian forces be united.—*John R. Mott.*

The value of Christian union is great at home, but tenfold greater in the mission field, where divisions suggest other prophets besides Jesus.—*Former President Harrison.*

The missionary problem is not a Methodist problem, Episcopalian problem, nor a Baptist problem; it is a problem for united Christendom.—*Dr. Gracey, Ecumenical Missionary Convention.*

In the missionary work, above all other kinds of Christian work, it is imperative to remember that a divided Christendom can only imperfectly bear witness to the essential unity of Christians.—*Theodore Roosevelt.*

The most pitiable sight that I saw in the foreign lands was that of churches that had been gathered out of heathenism, rent in twain by sectarian jealousy which had been introduced from the co-called Christian lands.—*Francis E. Clark.*

The greatest weakness of Protestantism is division. The demand of the hour is Christian union. Saintsship is not sectarian. Union would give us strength. A united church in New Albany would give us the power to destroy the saloon, revolutionize amusements, and relieve suffering.—*Frank Orman Beck (M. E.), New Albany, Ind.*

The time has come in the history of the church when God says, "Unite, unite." God is calling us to "unite, unite." I would not for the world forsake my denomination (Baptist), but for Christ's sake I would gladly give it up forever.—*Russell Conwell, Endeavor Convention, New York City.*

As soon as Porto Rico came under our flag, we began to parcel out the territory. This was comity. Our denominational banners should



have been left behind us. I like not the word "comity;" it is venerated selfishness. It is wrong in principle and unworkable in practice. Our ritual and creeds must not stand in the way of massing of our Christian forces, for the redemption of the world.—*A. J. F. Schreuds (Congregationalist), Brooklyn, N. Y.*

Let me speak to you in the language of heaven and call you Christians.—*Henry Ward Beecher.*

These divisions should be merged into the holy name "Christian."—*Albert Barnes.*

I pray you leave my name alone. Do not call yourselves Lutherans, but Christians.—*Martin Luther (Stichele's "Life of Luther," p. 262).*

I wish the name "Methodist" might never be mentioned more, but lost in eternal oblivion.—*John Wesley (Universal Knowledge," Vol. IX., p. 540).*

I sometimes feel sorry that the word "Baptist," which was flung at us by our enemies and stuck, should be our name, for often its accent of an act obscures to others our great mission in the world. Perhaps yet we will go back to the name "Christian."—*Dr. P. S. Henson (Baptist), in the General Convention of Baptist Churches at Cleveland, O., May 19, 1904.*

It is a privilege to join with you in your tribute to John Wesley. The more we study him and his life the nearer we shall come together. . . . I never think of Wesley, the attitude of the English Church toward him, and the action of those who broke away from the mother church, without feeling anew that it is the self-will of man, and not the will of God, that separates and keeps his family apart. The supreme duty of all Christian churches is to place unity, actual and real, as the unity of an army, in the forefront of every prayer and of every effort that God in his good time may bring them to subordinate individual will to his purpose for his church.—*Silas McBee, Editor of the "Churchman" (Protestant Episcopal), New York City, in "Northwestern Christian Advocate" (Methodist Episcopal), June 17, 1903.*

The division of the church into sects is a distinct and flagrant sin.—*Ian MacLaren" (Rev. John Watson, Presbyterian Minister, Sefton Park, Liverpool), in "The Bonnie Briar Bush," p. 270.*

In the beginning, we are told, the Christian church was "all with one accord in one place," but if Peter and Paul were to come to New York or to New Orleans or to San Francisco or to Boston, they would find the members of this one church in 169 different places, with a practical man, named James, leading one group of disciples; an emotional Peter leading another group; the æsthetic John leading still another group; and the philosophic Paul guiding his own band. The cross of Christ stands in the center, but each regiment, with back toward that cross, marching away from his fellows, while his denominational leader beats time. Yet, unity, co-operation, could combine these scattered regiments into a solid army marching on to victory.—*Newell Dwight Hillis, in "Everybody's Magazine" for April, 1904.*

With the testimonies of these great men, and the declarations of these mighty assemblies, little must be the man who defends divisions and declares that God wants different denominations to satisfy the temperaments, tastes and prejudices of man.

#### WHY WE SHOULD UNITE.

We should unite because our Lord prayed four times that we might all be one. Our Lord's unanswered prayer should touch our hearts, and urge us to do all we can to bring about the union of his people. There is nothing in the Bible more carefully taught than the unity of his own. The New Testament church was a unit. Jesus said "my church." The church in the beginning was one body, one fold and one household. The New Testament church was a unit, and this unity can be restored. We plead for unity because it has the sanction of revelation. Let us hear what the Spirit says:

"Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you; but *that* ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10).



"Seeing that we, who are many, are one bread, one body: for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17).

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. *There is* one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all" (Eph. 4:1-6).

"Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits" (Rom. 12:16).

"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ: that, whether I come and see you or be absent, I may hear of your state, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27).

With a united church, we should conquer the world for Christ in ten years. God has given us these mighty forces, the press, telegram, steamboat, railroad, the cablegram annihilating space and resistance, that we may use them so that the kingdoms of this world may become the kingdoms of our Lord.

We should unite because Christ and the apostles condemned division. Christ tells us that there is one fold and one shepherd. Paul tells us there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord and one baptism (Eph. 4:4-6). But in our day we have many faiths, numerous baptisms, several bodies, and more than one Lord. Instead of the union of the faith, we have division, strife, confusion, jealousy, hate and contention. We have twenty-nine kinds of Methodists, twenty-two kinds of Lutherans, sixteen kinds of Presbyterians, eight kinds of Baptists, four kinds of Episcopalians and six kinds of Catholics. All under different government and law. Could any earthly nation live under such government?

#### THE BIBLE EVERYWHERE CONDEMNS SEPARATION.

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment.

For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them *which are of the house* of Chloe, that there are contentions among you.

Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.

Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Cor. 1:10-13).

And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, *even as* unto babes in Christ.

I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to *bear it*, neither yet now are ye able.

For ye are yet carnal: for whereas *there is* among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?

For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I *am* of Apollos; are ye not carnal?

Who then is Paul, and who *is* Apollos, but ministers, by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? (1 Cor. 3:1-4).

That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another (1 Cor. 12:25).

In this discussion Paul made use of the figure of the human body to teach the lesson of unity. If one member suffereth, all suffer. The separation of any member of the body of Christ causes suffering to the whole body. The consequences go further than to merely injure the one that separates. It injures all. The blood of Jesus Christ never circulated through



the veins of sectarianism. Think of the members of different denominations "having the same care one for the other" (1 Cor. 11: 18). "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them" (Rom. 16: 17).

The word of God condemns divisions, and yet the truth remains that, instead of standing fast together, we stand loosely, striving separately; three hundred party spirits, rejecting the commandments of God that we may keep our traditions.

#### THE EVILS OF DIVISIONS.

Divisions create doubt, skepticism and infidelity. The unbelieving world sees the folly of faction and separation, and rejects the faith. They see denominationalism is false, and reject all. Sectarianism breeds skeptics. Doubt is found everywhere. Our schools and universities are filled with scorn and doubt. Dr. Christlieb, in speaking of his own country (Germany), says: "Wherever you go, into the schoolroom of the professor, the barracks of the soldier, or the shops, you hear the same tale. The old faith has become obsolete; no new churches are being built. Only five in one hundred go to church in Germany, and not one in one hundred in the capital, among the Protestants, go to church. Everywhere religion is ridiculed and condemned." This wide spread of unbelief is alarming in our own country. Jesus prayed that "all might be one," and his reason for praying for this unity was "that the world might believe that thou hast sent me." Unity will cause the world to believe in Christ. Disunion will cause the world to reject him. Disunion is largely responsible for the havoc of skepticism. When the unbelieving world sees the soldiers of the cross at war with one another, it turns away in disgust, and has no desire to enter the ranks of those contending factions.

Disunion hinders evangelism. People wedded to a denomination often prefer to see their friends and relatives stay out of Christ rather than join some other denomination. "I do not know what church to join," is the common excuse of thousands in every community. In my evangelistic work I have met these excuses thousands of times.

Disunion hinders church discipline, admonition and rebuke. Immorality and heresy find protection in disunion. All know if men are rebuked for their sins or threatened suspension for their folly, that they can find a home in some other rival denomination, and often these disturbers of peace are treated as heroes. The outside world sees this folly, and sneers. Over such a scene Satan sits upon his throne and smiles. The divided church is doing his work for him.

On account of rivalry and jealousy among religious societies the Christian religion is not taught in our public schools nor in many of our colleges. Teachers can teach history, geography, mythology, and the religion of the Greeks, but they are not



allowed to teach the Christian religion. As most of our children are educated in the public schools, the majority of our American youths grow up without any religion. Teachers are compelled to assume an attitude of indifference, and many even exhibit antagonism to religion. They must not show any interest in religion, as it may ruin their influence and even lose them their places in many schools. Skepticism enters the classroom and faith goes out.

#### DISUNION CAUSES GRIEF.

Sickness, poverty and misery have caused less grief than divisions have caused. These divisions bring sorrow, heartache, anguish and disappointment. Disunion divides homes, and causes the parents to quarrel over the cradle of the new-born babe. Children remain out of the church because father belongs to one church and mother to another. Do you think that Jesus ever expected the home to be so divided that we can not train the children for the Christ?

Denominationalism hinders the work of charity. Divided into warring factions, the churches do not relieve misery, care for the sick and alleviate pain. Were we one people, we could hire great physicians that could be consulted free by the poor and needy, make happy many suffering homes, fill the hungry mouths, and clothe the shivering body. In every community there are persons who have gone to an untimely death, and filled paupers' graves, who could have been saved by Christian care.

To many so-called Christians our Lord may say on that great day: "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat; sick, and ye visited me not." To care for the poor is laid upon the Christian church, and God will hold it responsible for the neglect.

Disunion is a wicked waste of mind and money. Disunion weakens the church, wastes its money, squanders its resources, creates rivalry and extravagance. Millions of dollars are put into great temples of worship, not because they are needed, but in order to vie with one another. We try to outstrip our rivals in erecting great buildings, and securing popular preachers who can draw the masses. If we would turn loose the hundred thousand rival preachers and set free the millions of money tied up to perpetuate division, we would have men and money to carry the gospel to the slums, the heathen and the waste places of the world. None need be idle. The work of mercy need thousands of Christian workers and millions of dollars of money. One hundred and fifty million people have never heard the name of Jesus pronounced. One billion of human beings have never acknowledged his authority. Not one worker would be thrown out of employment if denominationalism was abandoned, but all workers could go forth with the true spirit of brotherly love, conquering the kingdom of sin for the King of kings.



I was in a Western town of five thousand people where fourteen churches were struggling for an existence. On Lord's Day morning not one of them had one hundred people in attendance. All combined had less than five hundred in services that day. Two good churches, with two able ministers, could have served the people much better. Instead of working together, they were in bitter antagonism. Could stupidity be more stupid than to perpetuate in a town of a few hundred people, so many church houses, so many preachers, so many congregations, burdened with debt and asking the missionary societies to help them live, when they should have been contributing to the evangelism of the world?

#### THE SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM.

I have listened to the addresses at our world's congresses, federation assemblies and missionary conferences. These great assemblies show the evil of disunion and the beauty of union, but I never heard one of the speakers offer a solution for the problem. They all admit that the divided church is sick, but they offer no remedy. They examine the case and declare the disease, but prescribe no cure. In all the addresses that I have read, delivered in the conferences and assemblies, all admit that the problem of the church is union, but they do not offer a solution.

I trust I am not prejudiced, but it seems to me that the people called Christians are the only people that offer a solution for this question. And even our great orators generally speak of the evil and fail to offer the remedy. Our remedy is to restore the New Testament church in doctrine and practice. All who do this are abiding in unity. We should show denominationalism the beauty, strength and justice of Christian unity. When men can be made to see this power of unity, they will abandon disunion.

#### THE BASIS OF CHRISTIAN UNITY.

1. *The basis of Christian unity must contain every essential in Christianity.* If we omit one essential, some people will see that all the truth is not taught, and they will organize another religious society. Instead of unity, we only have another division. Unity will never come by accommodating the truth to the prejudices of men. Faith is unvarying, and men must accommodate themselves to it. Parts of the truth must not be taken as a whole. There can be no unity only as we cling to the truth, and the truth shall make us free. Here is where the blunders have been made in the past. Christian union is not new. The Moravians pleaded for union, but they failed because they omitted some of the cardinal points in Christianity. The Christian Connection made character the basis of union and gave people their choice as to doctrine. The Friends (Quakers) attempted a spiritual union, but failed, as they omitted the two Christian institutions—baptism and communion. They failed, and these religious societies are becoming a disappearing brotherhood. The only thing they accomplished was to make more



divisions. Abner Jones, of Vermont; James O'Kelly, of North Carolina, and Barton Stone urged union, but they were too liberal and failed. Jesus said, "Why call me Lord, and do not the things I say?" All his teaching is essential, and must go into this basis in order to succeed.

2. *This basis of unity must not contain one non-essential.* If it contains a non-essential, good people will not accept it, and again you have division instead of union. That has been the trouble with creed and creed-maker. They put in their basis things not taught in the Bible. A man may believe in hereditary sin, total depravity, election and direct operation of the Spirit and be saved. He may reject all these doctrines and be saved. They are non-essentials, and must not go in the basis of union.

Well did the author of "That We Might Be One" say, "All the congresses and federations of the world can not bring union on the basis of man's opinion." We must come back to the New Testament church. The federations and congresses may advance the cause of union, but more often they hinder. They convey to the world that these combines have divine sanction. The Bible forms no basis for churches. It teaches unity, one church. A federation of churches is not unity.

Were it not for our divided conditions, I would not have to discuss this subject any further. But on account of divisions we have departed from the divine line. We must return to the New Testament church.

#### THE NAME.

There is no other name under the stars upon which we can unite except "Christian." It is the only name that includes all who are followers of the Christ, and excludes all who are not. It is a universal term, one that applies to all who own our Lord. Try your logic on any other word, and you will fail. Disciples and brethren are too inclusive. They include many who are not Christians. The Oddfellows and Masons are brethren. Plato and Socrates had disciples. "Lutheran" is too exclusive. The name excludes many who are Christians. With Alexander Proctor we say: "The only term on earth upon which we can unite is the term 'Christian'." Christians of all denominations are willing to wear that divine name. We can never agree upon a party name. Go to a brother of some denomination and say to him, "You are not a Unitarian?" "No, sir." "You are not a Lutheran?" "No." "You are not a Christian?" "Yes, I am." He is willing to wear that name. It is not in controversy. The name "Christian" has the sanction of revelation. "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch" (Acts 11: 26; Acts 26: 28). Peter says: "If a man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God in this name" (1 Pet. 4: 16).

#### THE BOOK OF AUTHORITY.

The New Testament must be the book of authority. Whatever it commands us to do, we must do; whatever it commands us



not to do, we must not do. Where the Bible is silent there is freedom of opinion. We can unite upon no other book. Those who cling to the Discipline will not surrender that book for the Westminster Confession. The people who accept that Confession will not give it up for the Augsburg Confession, and the Lutherans will not give up that creed for the Nicene Creed. But all of them are willing to make the Bible the last appeal. We say, make it the last, first and only appeal. The place for all the creeds and Disciplines is the museum.

#### THE BAPTISMAL CONTROVERSY.

The subject of baptism should not be in our way. The same rule that applies to the name and the creed applies to baptism. We must adopt the practice that all will accept. We are not discussing the mode. It is our purpose to accept that practice upon which all will agree. The immersion of a penitent believer in water is accepted as Christian baptism by all Protestantism that practices any mode of baptism. The Methodists, Presbyterians, United Brethren, Congregationalists, Baptists and Lutherans admit to membership immersed persons. This baptism is not in debate. These millions of people acknowledge that immersion is valid baptism. Here we can unite.

But we can not unite upon any substitute. The ninety millions in the Greek Church, the millions of immersionists in the world, and the large number of immersed among other religious societies, will never accept any substitute for the New Testament practice. All will accept immersion. To leave this out of our basis of union is fatal. One hundred million people will not consent to this unscriptural practice.

We are playing havoc with God's plans when we try to unite upon any human substitute. We are wasting time and courting disunion even in trying it. Union means obedience to God's laws.

Those who plead for union should learn lessons from the trend of the age.

Thousands upon thousands who have been sprinkled demand immersion every year. In every city, town and village, men and women leave the ranks of the affusionists and demand immersion. This is not true among those who cling to the baptism that Jesus enjoined upon his people. Christian unity must come by keeping the marching orders of our King, and not by rejecting some of his teaching. Jesus said: "Why call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I say?" Jesus gave the Christian institution of baptism. To reject it is to reject his word. To ignore the word of the Lord is to ignore the Lord who spoke it.

Unity will not come by comity, federations and combines. We must unite, not mix. Oil and water can not be united. Oxygen and hydrogen unite. Denominations may combine, but they can not unite. The union that Jesus prayed for was the union of individuals, not of churches. *Our work is to restore the New Testament church.* For this purpose we were sent into this world. We were not sent to evangelize the world. True,



we are intensely evangelistic, because we believe that is the best way to enlist men under the banner of unity. But we realize that the evangelistic problem is settled when we come to the unity of the faith. Our mission is not to preach to the heathen world. We are enthusiastically in favor of Foreign Missions, but other religious bodies are equally enthusiastic. Our work is to unite God's people. The missionary problem is solved when we unite, and not before. United, we can conquer the world in ten years. In our zeal for missions *we* must not silence the cry for unity. The missionary on the foreign field that is not preaching unity, is building on the sand.

No truce must be made on the foreign field. He who compromises is standing on a volcano that may burst at any moment and carry all to destruction. The man who does not teach New Testament Christianity on the foreign field should be recalled. We are sent not only to evangelize, but to preach to other churches. We must teach them until they come to the unity of the faith. We were not sent to build great universities. Let the state and others do that. We are sent to prepare young men to go out and preach the unities of the faith. Let us do *first things first*.

Paul tells us there are seven gospel unities (Eph. 4: 1-6). In order to restore the New Testament church, there must be unity of worship, because there is one God; there must be unity of authority, because there is one Lord and Christ; there must be unity of practice, because there is one baptism; there must be unity of preaching, because there is one faith; there must be unity of organization, because there is one body; there must be unity of life, because there is one Spirit; there must be unity of purpose, because there is one hope. The Great Commission contains every essential and omits every non-essential in God's ritual. It tells clearly what a man must do to become a Christian. We must preach it just as it is—all of it and nothing else.

We take hope and rejoice when we see the tendency of the religious world is toward unity. The thinkers among all religious societies champion the cause of unity. Among the Baptists, men like Conwell, Ruth, Tupper and Henson; among the Methodists, Buckley, Vincent and Hamilton; among the Presbyterians and Congregationalists, Schaff, Hillis, Van Dyke and Mott; among the Episcopalians, Stanley and Farrar. This one thing we do: forgetting the minor things of the past, with determination we put our faces toward Christian unity. Theories, speculations, advanced thought, higher criticism, evolution, the new learning, and kindred subjects, must be cast out upon the dumping-ground of the past. It is our duty to make way for the united kingdom of our Lord.

"Men of thought and men of action, clear the way."

Bring about this unity of God's people, and there will be joy in heaven and gladness on earth. Then we can sing the angel song, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to men."



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