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## CHRISTIAN UNITY: THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

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*Thomas N. Smith*

The Christians responsible for my early nurture in the faith were good at many things. They believed implicitly in the Bible and the fundamentals taught in it. They were convinced that men without Christ were lost and on their way to hell, and were concerned to rescue as many of them as possible through the preaching of the gospel at home and abroad. They preached the necessity of fervent prayer and practiced what they preached. They bore a tender affection and self-denying love toward those within their own fellowship. They were exemplars in these and many other virtues.

They were not very good at unity. Indeed, in the ecumenical climate of the 1960s they were downright hostile to the concept. I could be wrong, but I do not recall hearing one sermon or address on the subject of unity in the first ten years of my Christian life. All the Christians with whom I had my earliest associations were members of churches which had begun their historical existence in reaction to and separation from other Christian churches.

This aspect of my early Christian formation imprinted me negatively for most of my life as a Christian and minister. Like malaria, which continues to plague the sufferer for years after it is first contracted, this anti-unity disease has continued to trouble me. My early career as a student, a preacher, and then a pastor, fills me with shame and regret. After some fifteen years of conflict with and separation

from institutions, denominations, and friends, I began to rethink the issue of unity in the body of Christ. The most important biblical passage in this long and thorough "rethink" was Ephesians 4:1-16.

#### THE FIRST CONCERN OF THE PRISONER OF THE LORD

Having laid the doctrinal foundation of his epistle in chapters 1—3, namely that through the riches of God's free grace in Jesus Christ, Jew and Gentile are now one new man existing in a new organism called the church, in which the manifold wisdom of God is now revealed to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places, Paul (who describes himself as "the prisoner of Christ Jesus" [3:1] and "the prisoner of the Lord" [4:1]) begins to set a new ethical agenda for those who are participants in this new reality. They are "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which they have been called" (4:1). They are not to conduct themselves as they formerly did, but, rather, are to behave in a manner which is consistent with the new creation that they are (4:17-24). The life patterns which shaped their former life are to be exchanged for a new set of standards, standards that reflect the moral integrity of the One who called them (cf. 4:25-6:9). This new humanity is to be characterized by the moral excellence of God Himself, namely, God's own "righteousness and holiness of the truth" (4:24). Anything else is viewed as a complete default, for they "did not learn Christ in this way" (4:20). This moral vision is the pastoral burden of Paul, the Lord's prisoner. Indeed, Paul can regard his imprisonment as a divine means of furthering this moral renovation of the Gentiles in Asia Minor who "have also believed" the gospel of their salvation (cf. 1: 13; see also 3:1).

But, undergirding all this is Paul's insistence on the idea of "oneness" or unity. The redemptive blessings formerly

reserved to members of the Jewish nation have now come through the gospel to Gentiles, so that they are together fellow-heirs of "every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ" (1:3-14). Furthermore, because of their participation in the spiritual resurrection/restoration of the true Israel (see Ezek. 37:1ff.) these Gentile Christians are now "fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household" (2:1-20). In fact, they with their Jewish brothers and sisters are now part of the restored sanctuary of God, "a dwelling of God by the Spirit" (2:21-22). More than this, Paul regards his ministry as a ministry that reveals the mystery "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:1-13). It is through this ministry that the manifold wisdom of God is manifest to spiritual rulers and authorities and by which God's eternal purpose in Christ has been realized (3:10-11). They are, in a word, a new, a "whole family," one and indivisible (3:14-15). This is the grand theological foundation for the plea for unity—practical, visible unity which we find to be uppermost in the apostle's mind in Ephesians 4:1-16!

It is on this foundation that Paul builds the ethical superstructure mentioned before. But before he proceeds to those moral imperatives related to honesty, purity, and healthy human relationships, he pleads for unity. It is unity that is the primary concern of his heart and it is this unity that becomes the ethical heart of Ephesians. This is obvious when we begin to see how central this long paragraph—Ephesians 4:1-16—is to the structure of the epistle and to the core of the apostle's argument.

This emphasis is a challenge for reformation in our moral understanding and sensitivity. Evangelicals have long stressed the need for moral renovation in the areas of honesty, sexual purity, and integrity in family relationships. This is good. But all too often, we have failed to place unity

in the church on the same level of priority and importance as these and other moral concerns. This is not good. Such a perspective fails miserably to see the moral vision of Paul, a moral vision that is focused, not just on questions of personal morality, but on the larger question of our life together in community in the church of Jesus Christ. Christian ethics is unique because, among other things, it is concerned with a morality which constrains our lives in terms of our relationships to one another within the daily functioning of the church. A morality that fails here is not, even broadly speaking, Christian morality at all. In fact, when we look carefully at the moral imperatives of Ephesians 4:25-5:21, we see that each of them is related directly to our life in the body of Christ; see, for example, the commandment respecting falsehood and truth in 4:25.

Is this our moral vision? Are we as concerned about Christian unity as we are about sexual morality, decent speech, the work ethic, and other areas of moral concern? Do our words and attitudes reflect the high level of moral concern which we find in Paul regarding this issue of unity in the church? It is attitudes which Paul immediately stresses in this plea for unity: "walk . . . with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love" (4:1-2). Such things will promote and "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." And we are to show "diligence" in this matter. It is to be for us, like Paul, a matter of primary concern.

#### UNITY ASSUMED AS A REALITY

But beneath the apostolic plea is a reality. "Keep the unity," says Paul. But we cannot keep what we do not already have. If I say to a couple going through marital difficulties, "Keep your marriage together," I am assuming, along with them, that what they have is a marriage, albeit a troubled one.

The reality of the Christian is this: Unity is the gift of God in His grace to us in Jesus Christ. All that Paul has already said in chapters 1-3 establishes this fact. Like all the blessings of the gospel, unity is a gracious gift, a thing bestowed, a privilege granted. And like those other blessings, unity is a thing that is ours whether we realize it or not, and no matter how well we understand the precious nature of the gift.

This seems to be Paul's point in 4:4-6. Because we have been granted the gift of faith and salvation, we have become, in a way at first unknown to us, the possessors of these seven gifts: "One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father." Moreover, these are blessings which we share with every other person who has become a Christian. Strictly speaking, these seven privileges are not *mine*, but *mine with other Christians*. And like the other gifts of grace, from God's election to this inheritance (1:3-14), these are mine with other Christians long before I know or understand them. Indeed, on one level, I shall never know nor understand them!

But, if these things are the gracious gift of God, (2:8-9), how do we come into the realm where they exist and function? What is this gracious realm? Paul, from the beginning of Ephesians stresses that we have been introduced into a new and gracious existence which he calls in his fullest expression of it "the heavenly places in Christ" (1:3). Into this new realm of blessing God has admitted all who "have listened to the message of truth, the gospel of salvation . . . [who] also have believed" (1:13). Those who have believed in the message of Jesus Christ have entered this realm; they have become the recipients of all God's blessings in Christ. And among these blessings is the unity which they now share in Christ with other believers!

We must be very careful to maintain the apostolic witness at this point. Our unity is not based upon doctrinal

correctness, but upon faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Put very simply, this means that grace rests upon all those who love Jesus with a sincere love, while the divine wrath rests upon all those, even within the confessing church, who do not (Eph. 6:24 and 1 Cor. 16:22). Wherever we find true faith in Jesus, the faith which works by love (Gal. 5:6), we find true Christians. Such faith may exist within Christian churches which are deficient in doctrinal definition. It may exist outside denominations altogether. It may exist within churches characterized by gross immorality and theological declension. It may exist within individuals whose understanding is deplorably deficient and whose lives are a tangled skein of good and bad. But where such faith exists, it exists within the reality of God's grace in Christ, and it exists in unity with other Christians in heaven and on earth (Eph. 3:15). This cosmic perspective, so typical of Paul, becomes for us the basis upon which we through the graces enjoined in 4:1-2 may realize a unity that is already there while working for a unity that is as yet unknown.

This means that whenever I meet another Christian, I meet someone with whom I have more in common than either of us can possibly realize. But the sad fact is, being human, the darker side is often that which each of us chooses to stress. In the face of the declaration "there is one body," we may spend our time discussing which tradition within the church we belong to: the Western or the Eastern, the Catholic or the Protestant, the mainline or the separatist, etc. In the presence of the declaration "there is one Spirit" we may choose to discuss our differences respecting the person and work of the Spirit. Do we believe in the *filioque* clause? Do we believe in the continuing gifts of the Spirit? Or their cessation? In light of the truth that there is "one faith," we may devote ourselves to distinguishing between Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant views of justification, or traditional and "new perspective" views of the same. And on and on.

Not that such things are unimportant. They are. But if any progress is to be made in understanding and resolving the many things which divide us as Christians, we must begin—ever and always begin—in our dealings with one another in the judgment of charity that where we find faith in Jesus, we find another Christian. I submit that it is just this perspective which we find in Ephesians 4:1-16. It is on the basis of our common faith and unity in Christ that it is possible for us to inform and influence one another by "speaking the truth in love" (4:15), and thus to "grow up" into the perfect unity which is God's saving goal in Christ.

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*My own tradition, of which I spoke in the opening paragraph of this article, was the opposite. From the beginning, I was trained in the fine art of suspecting and detecting the false believer. I was schooled—by attitude and process—in determining who was regenerate and who was not. I was coached in the subtle craft of discerning and discovering the heretic and the true believer. In the process, my Christian life and ministerial career have been littered with former associations and friendships.*



To be sure, we may find in the process of such interaction that we are dealing with those whose perspective on the gospel is so alien to the New Testament so as to be "false brothers" and, thus, not Christians at all. But, we must be slow to conclude this and in the judgment of charity be ready to "bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things" (1 Cor. 13:7). My own tradition, of which I spoke in the opening paragraph of this article, was the opposite. From the beginning, I was trained in the fine art of suspecting and detecting the false believer. I was schooled—by attitude and process—in determining who was regenerate and who was not. I was coached in the subtle craft of discerning and discovering the heretic and the true believer. In the process, my Christian life and ministerial career have been littered with former associations and friendships. Furthermore, a visible unity with other Christians with questionable theological and ethical credentials has not occurred. The parlous result of all this has been a tragic and sad disunity in that part of the body of Christ that it has been my privilege to touch and know. I suspect that the same thing could be said of many who read this article. A little poem learned in my grammar school years sums up the proper attitude being engendered by Paul in the opening verses of Ephesians 4:

He drew a circle to shut me out—  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to clout;  
But love and I had the will to win—  
We drew a circle to shut him in.

This is our primary moral responsibility in the matter of practicing and promoting unity in the body of Christ. We must remember who we are in Christ and act this out through the graces given us by the Holy Spirit.

### GIFTS FOR THE PERFECTING OF UNITY

The God of "lavish grace" (1:8) has gifted the church with every spiritual blessing, including our oneness in Christ. In addition to all this, the generous God has given gifted men and women to the church to establish and perfect that unity upon solid ground. This, too, has been given out of the full measure of Christ's gift (4:7), a gift earned by Him through His self-emptying and humiliation (4:8-10). Those gifts are described by Paul as "apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors-teachers" (4:11). These gifts are specifically new covenant ministries (cf. 2:20 and 3:5). These ministries have been given to complete the ongoing growth and upbuilding of the body of Christ, the church (4:12).

Paul here visualizes the church as both an undeveloped body and an uncompleted building, specifically, a holy temple or dwelling-place of God (cf. 2:20-22 with 4:12-16). The body already exists from the Head down, the building already exists from the foundation up. But both are immature and incomplete. The church exists, already. The unity of the church exists, already. But the eschatological "not yet" applies here as it does to all the redemptive blessings currently enjoyed by the people of God: "It does not yet appear what we shall be." The present reality of the church of Christ is this: She exists in the grace of God, but "by schisms rent asunder and by heresies distressed." Or, to use Paul's own image in Ephesians 5:27, the church in her present, "already" state is marked by "spots and wrinkles." She is not yet existentially "holy and blameless." She is in a state of imperfection rather than "glory." Or to use the image of 4:1-16, the church, while now the body of Christ, has "not yet" reached the state spoken of in verse 13: "the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."

It is to accomplish this perfect state of things that the ministerial gifts of verse 11 have been given to the church. Think of this for a moment. The ministerial gifts—from the founding of the church through the ministry of apostles and prophets to the extending and maturing of the church through evangelists and pastors-teachers—the ministerial gifts of Christ are given to us for the securing of our perfect unity! This is a momentous thought! And its implications are momentous as well. Let us consider some of these.

First, the present imperfection of the church in respect to its imperfection in truth, in life, in unity, is fully known and understood by Christ her Head. Those of us who believe in reformation and revival, who are burdened over the present state of the church, who long and pray for better things and better days for the body of Christ, must remember this: The state of the church is of greater importance and concern to Him who fully understands her and whose understanding of her is saturated with perfect love.

Second, the One who understands and loves the church with perfect love is at work in her by His Spirit and through gifted men and women. Whatever the state of the church, she has not been abandoned to her self-destructive tendencies by her Lord and Savior. He is at work, and this work will eventuate in her perfection in truth, holiness, and unity (Eph. 5:25-27).

Third, this work is taking place in history. History with all its human qualities, with all its weakness, blindness, perversity, fallenness! The Lord of history is at work in and through and despite the human qualities of history to perfect His church. And this means, not just the past, but the present. Not just in triumph, but in failure. Not just in the present, which we see with such imperfection, but the future that we do not see at all!

Fourth, this ongoing work of perfection is being accomplished through weak, fallen, mortal instruments.

Men and women! "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves" (2 Cor. 4:7).

Fifth, the work of perfection in unity shall be finally accomplished. Because Christ has been exalted above all rule and authority and power and dominion (1:21-23), the church shall finally reach His predestined goal: perfection, unity, and completeness. The "already" shall finally be swallowed up in the larger, more glorious reality of the "not yet"! (cf. 4:13-16 with 5:25-27).

### THE BUILDING UP OF ITSELF IN LOVE

The rich ministerial gifts given by Christ for the accomplishment of the church's perfect unity are given to the church itself. That is to say, they are given to the body for the sake of the body. But they are given to the body for the self-functioning of the body. This is the meaning of verse 12: "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." In other words, the ongoing work of unity is accomplished, not through the presence of gifted men and women who exercise special ministry among the saints, but by the equipping of the saints for a ministry themselves. And what is this ministry?

Paul summarizes it in the words of verse 16: "the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."

Christ is at work in the church. Christ is working in the church throughout her history through ministerial gifts. Christ is working in the church through the church itself. He has created a living organism which is capable of growth and development. This reality exists by virtue of its union with Him, the Head (v. 15). How is this accomplished?

The equipping ministry of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers accomplishes it. These gifted people are engaged in discovering, developing, and using

the spiritual gifts and potential of the members of the body of Christ. On the most basic level, this means that the people of God are engaged in encouraging one another to the kind of conduct that is set forth in Ephesians 4:17-6:20. This leads to a high level of Christian accountability and accomplishment. While the involvement of "pastors-teachers" is essential, such involvement will not, of itself, ensure success in these areas. Direct, personal interaction among believers within the body is most conducive to exemplary Christian living in all these areas.

Second, it is accomplished by loving, caring communication, "speaking the truth in love" (v. 15). As Christians share their common life in Christ and communicate with one another concerning the incentives and the demands of that life, growth is ensured. We must be with one another, and we must be in constant open, frank and loving communication. Each of us has received truth; each of us has come to know the truth through experience of life under the lordship of the Spirit. Each of us, therefore, has something to contribute to the overall building up of the body of Christ. Let me illustrate. In many of our churches a logical, even rationalistic, approach to reality dominates. It dominates the preaching; it dominates the governing of the church. This is often the case because input from the female members of the church is not encouraged and is, not infrequently, discouraged. Yet, despite the logical soundness of both pulpit ministry and leadership in the church, something is lacking in both. The same hollowness recurs in the preaching, and the same blind spots leading to small and large disasters continue to repeat themselves in the governing of the body. What is wrong here? Well, for one thing, as every wife knows, a man can out-argue a woman and still be wrong. There is an intuitive, lateral way of thinking through things as well as a more direct and logical way. Both have their places in the world, and should

have their places in the church. When one or the other dominates, error, theological and ethical, is inevitable.

Third, growth into the full unity of Christ is achieved as we lovingly receive and listen to one another. We must learn to "hearken" to use an old King James word. The inability to listen and to hear clearly what is being said to us by our brothers and sisters in Christ is a chief cause for much of the disharmony which exists within the church. How often we "listen" to one another only to establish our own position, to defend our own preconceptions, to maintain our own prejudices. We are not, in fact, listening at all. Such mental deafness shuts the door to growth and to unity.

#### THE PRIMACY OF LOVE

Throughout this passage, the apostle has stressed the primacy of love: "Showing tolerance for one another in love" (v. 2), "But speaking the truth in love" (v. 15), "For the building up of itself in love" (v. 16).

This is perfectly consonant with what we find elsewhere in Paul. The Christian church was born out of the love of God (Eph. 1:4-5), and redeemed by the love of Christ (5:25). It has been called to "walk in love" (5:1; cf. with 4:1). Indeed, elsewhere Paul can bring an indictment upon Christian gifts, knowledge and sacrifice, where love is absent (1 Cor. 13:1-3). So it is here.

When I come to appreciate the fact that others, like myself, have become the objects of God's mighty love in Christ, that they, like me, are the special recipients of His love, then, and only then, will I begin to love those who are thus loved. This is the basis of my diligent attempts to preserve the unity of the Spirit. An older pastor once wrote to me, "It is possible to love preaching more than we love those whom we preach to." Too true! But, it is also possible to love our own tradition, our own doctrinal position, our own standard of morality, our own distinctives, our own



denomination, *ad infinitum*, more than we love the body of Christ, particularly that manifestation of the body which we are, here and now, involved with. When love fails, all else fails.

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*Certainly there are breaches of orthodoxy and orthopraxy which must merit our stern disapprobation, and, if not repented of, must receive our censure and rejection. This is Christian. But when censure and rejection are among our most immediately apparent traits, as individuals or as churches, something is sadly amiss.*



Love will lead us to tolerance. We humans are by nature and practice intolerant creatures. Differences in others are repellant to us. Even those of us who love nonconformity nurture a desire to conform others to ourselves. This is especially true within those social subcultures where ideology is taken seriously. As such, it is true within those evangelical churches which value truth and holiness. Certainly there are breaches of orthodoxy and orthopraxy which must merit our stern disapprobation, and, if not repented of, must receive our censure and rejection. This is Christian. But when censure and rejection are among our most immediately apparent traits, as individuals or as churches,

something is sadly amiss. We must show tolerance for one another out of the motivation of love (4:1). This is the whole point of that vital argument found in Romans 14:1-15:7. In matters not directly related to the faith and life of the gospel, freedom in a non-threatening environment must predominate. There must be no contempt; there must be no judgmentalism. There must be love. There must be tolerance. Or to illustrate it in another way: It is not just the smart members of a church who have something to say to the life and direction of that church.

Those members who are not so cerebral, but who pray and who listen to the voice of the Spirit in the Scriptures have something vital to contribute to the church's life and health. This is surely in keeping with Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 12:14-26. Tolerance will lead us to respect one another. Tolerance will, therefore, lead to growth.

Love will lead us to communicate with one another in a manner most conducive to growth. How do we speak the truth in love? In the Corinthian church its members were enriched in every way with spiritual gifts (1:5), but they were appallingly lacking in love for one another, especially in the use of spiritual gifts.

So, in teaching and correcting them in chapters 12-14, the apostle shows them the more excellent way of love in the justly famous chapter 13. But is this chapter really about Christian love in general? I suggest that Paul's purpose is more pastoral and specific. Paul shows the Corinthians how to use their spiritual gifts in a manner which promotes growth and edification. Paul tells them what love is as it is lived out within the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 shows us how to "speak the truth in love":

Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does

not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

What more need be said?

Love will be concerned with the building up, rather than the tearing down of the body. In addition to being intolerant, the human animal is destructive and wasteful. Witness our penchant for war, for cruelty, for vandalism, for environmental plunder. This destructive tendency is not absent from the Christian because of his imperfect sanctification. Neither is it absent from those places Christians inhabit, Christian churches. When the graces of Ephesians 4:2 dominate our lives, peace and unity will prevail. But the fact is this: Christians are too frequently arrogant rather than humble; harsh rather than gentle; testy rather than patient; suspicious rather than tolerant; and selfish rather than loving. That is why such emphasis must be constantly placed on these graces. Doctrinal fidelity and scrupulousness in matters of honesty and sexual morality do not, of themselves, make us Christian. This is Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. We must be diligent to protect and preserve those for whom Christ died. To conduct ourselves in a manner which leads to their destruction involves us in a grave sin whose heinousness cannot be calculated (Rom. 14:15). "Let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Rom. 14:19). Such a spirit will dissuade us from pursuing a personal and private agenda with the church which will be harmful to others. It will cause us to bear long with the body, eschewing the all too-human tendency to "love 'em and leave 'em." It will produce within us the attitude of Christ (see Rom. 15:7 and Phil. 2:1-11).

Love is the path to unity. It is the way to unity in that it

promotes tolerance, communication and constructive interaction with the church. But there is another way in which love leads to unity, and it is a facet of the truth which often remains neglected: Love stubbornly demands growth and change from those who are loved. Now, clearly I want this stern, uncompromising declaration to be understood within the context of what has already been said. Without tolerance, patience and communication which involves both speaking and listening, such a statement is cruel and ugly. But where love lives and thrives, this demand is inexorable and delightful. Think of this in light of our relationship with our children. Children thrive within an environment of love and acceptance, or patience and encouragement. But within that same environment, children are expected to progressively change; they are expected to "grow up." This is precisely the image that Paul uses in Ephesians 4:14-15: "As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but . . . we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ."

The love that promotes unity has its determined side as well as its gentle side. Without both sides working in conjunction with one another, love fails, growth fails, and unity fails.

#### ULTIMATE UNITY IS INEVITABLE!

While we lament the disunity and outright schism apparent within the Christian church we must avoid a sorrow that leads to despair. The church of Christ belongs to Christ. The Head of the church will accomplish His purpose in her at the end of human history. We are privileged to be a part of that ongoing continuum. Ours is a small part and our lifespan an infinitesimal blip on the screen of that history. But what we are, where we are, and when we

are there are all important to Christ, who sovereignly has appointed us to our time and work in His church. We must work for the ultimate unity of the church. But there is, as always in the matters of God's grace, a greater, more certain reality. "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). Christ will be triumphant, the church will be glorious, and God's wisdom in her will be manifested to rulers and authorities through all the ages of eternity!

Then we shall be where we would be,  
Then we shall be what we should be;  
Things that are not now, nor could be  
Then shall be our own.

"Now to Him, who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and forever. Amen" (Eph. 3:20-21). And, Amen!

*Author*

Rev. Thomas N. Smith is pastor of Randolph Street Baptist Church, Charleston, West Virginia. He also serves as associate editor of *Reformation & Revival Journal* and is a frequent conference speaker both in the United States and Great Britain.