

The article below, by the hand of J. N. Armstrong, first appeared in *The Way* entitled "United, Yet Divided" [4 (14 August 1902) 156-158].

Failure to recognize and appreciate man's imperfections and the different degrees of development in the church is sometimes a discouragement and even an occasion of stumbling to some.

The union required in the church is perfect. Jesus measures it by the union existing between himself and God. "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 though, 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. And the glory which thou has given me I have given unto them: that they may be one, even as we are one" (John 17:20-22, R. V.).

"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" (I Cor. 1:10, R. V.).

This all means that a perfect union is required by the New Testament; and the loyal church will seek for it. Jesus and the Father always agreed. They always held to the same doctrine. Both of them knew all the truth and held it unmixed with error. Therefore they are thoroughly one.

Just as the model life, Christ's life, is spotless and perfect, so the standard of union is perfect.

I suppose no one ever met a man who came up to the perfect life of Christ in his conduct. Neither did [157] any one ever see, read or hear of a church so perfectly one as Christ and the Father. Before such a church could be, every member must be perfect in knowledge and must hold the truth without error; or all must hold the same truth and the same error; and they must develop alike every day or the union will be destroyed.

These are impossibilities, for there are babes, boys and girls, men and women, in Christ, hence the different degrees of development and the varied imperfections that must necessarily exist in every church. Then it is expecting too much to expect perfection in union among such imperfections and developments. Individual growth must continue. Each individual conscience must be respected and left free. On the fundamental principles of Christ the church does agree, and has always agreed. Whenever a man takes Jesus as Lord we are to bear with him in his weakness and wait for him to grow, regardless of his errors and false doctrines. The church at Corinth had members who believed there were other gods than the true God. (See 1 Cor. 8.)

Sometimes two brethren begin to discuss some question through the papers, and Christians raise their hands in holy horror because these brethren differ. Someone says: "I wish our brethren would not debate. It does no good. I am ashamed for the sects to know that 'our' brethren debate with each other. I used to give my Advocate and Way to my neighbor, but I have quit it. I don't want him to know about all these quarrels and differences in 'our' church. The brethren ought to agree any way, and when they do disagree, they ought to keep it out of the papers."

I am sorry that Christians think this way. Do you mean by this that you want to deceive the world? Do you want to make them believe that all the brethren who write for the different papers are perfectly agreed? This would be a deception, for no two of them agree in everything, and yet they so agree as to be able to fellowship one another as brethren of the Lord. Each one knows the others are in Christ all are loyal to Christ, and desire to know the truth and to do it. And yet they differ; for none of them hold all the truth, and none are free from error.

I am glad for the world to know of these friendly and Christ-like discussions among the brethren. It shows, that we are not bound down to a man-made creed, but that every man is left to study the Bible for himself. We can never find Bible union "by agreeing to disagree," by avoiding the discussion of practical and vital differences. Let us have a free and fair discussion of all these matters about which brethren differ whenever these differences involve principle and truth. "But foolish and ignorant questions refuse, knowing that they gender strifes" (2 Tim2:23, R. V.).

Let those who discuss be sure the questions are practical and profitable.

Do not be discouraged, then, because two brethren may discuss some question about which they may differ. Neither should we let our personal preference for one or the other of these men influence us in reading after them. Let us remember they are only men, and either of them can be wrong. Neither should age influence us too much. Each article ought to go for just what it is worth in truth, regardless of the ability and age of the writers.

Brethren often see bitterness in such discussions just because they are looking for it and expecting it. Many times they talk about bitterness when there is no bitterness.

Repeatedly have I heard of the 'bitterness' manifested in the late discussion of 'Laying on Hands' between Bros. Lipscomb and Harding. I read every word written by these brethren in this discussion, and re-read much of it, and was much interested in it, and received light from it. I am glad the discussion occurred. I thought there were a few expressions that were a little sarcastic, and would have been glad had they been left out. But I thought the discussion was a clean, pure, Christ-like discussion, and I believe so yet.

"But," says one, "how can we little fellows know about these things if such men as these disagree about them?" Many times little fellows find the truth about a matter when big fellows have skipped over it. Then, too, this sounds like if they agreed about this matter that it would settle it. Whom are you following? It also seems that people are surprised that these men differ. Surely we ought not to expect too much of them, although they be great men. They are not perfect in knowledge, they are not equally developed, and neither one believes things just because the other one does; and how could they agree about everything? Yet both are loyal to Christ, and are so agreed that they can work together and their conscience be left free.

But while the above facts are true, it is also true that as every Christian is to strive to live as Christ lived, so every Christian is to seek for that perfect union demanded by the New Testament. Causing divisions contrary to the doctrine of Christ is one of the most grievous sins of the age, and God hates the man who causes these divisions.

The only way to bring about New Testament union is for everyone to seek for truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The more truth we obtain, the less error we will hold and the more nearly we can unite on everything. He who knowingly causes divisions and factions in the church contrary to the doctrine of God will be lost unless he [158] repents. Every Christian ought to feel as much as he can feel the obligation resting upon him to bring about union. The more he knows of Bible teaching, the more he can agree with other Bible students. My purpose in writing this is to help all to get a full benefit from discussions that occur in the papers. Study them; be interested in them; weigh every argument; watch for the "think so's" and "maybe's," and don't count them much; study carefully the Scriptures relied on by the different writers; see if the position occupied by the writer is held by the Holy Spirit; then study all the Scriptures that you can find bearing on the subject being discussed. This course will bring union, and bring it fast.

The only way for loyal, conscientious brethren who disagree to come together is to gain more light.