

SCRIPTURAL BASIS
OF
CHRISTIAN UNITY

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WHILE there is much being said about Christian unity, and while there is an increasing general conviction that unity should be brought about, the chief concern of many seems to be to devise a human method instead of adopting the method given in the teachings of Christ and His apostles.

Mr. Walker, with clearness and simplicity, directs our minds to the only possible solution of this great problem. This tract should be in the hands of every follower of Jesus Christ in every community.

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THE Scriptural basis of Christian unity is identical with the terms of membership in the New Testament church. This, in turn, is identical with the law of induction into Christ.

In the first century the church was one. All were one in Christ, in full fellowship with one another, having been admitted to that fellowship by obedience to the commands of Jesus and His apostles, and by that obedience coming into covenant relationship with Jesus Christ.

To the twelve was given the authority to state and impose the terms of forgiveness which inducted into Christ:

Matt. 10:40: "Whosoever receiveth you, receiveth me; and whosoever receiveth me, receiveth him that sent me."

Mark 16:15, 16: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; and he that disbelieveth shall be condemned."

John 20:22, 23: "And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said unto

them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit: whose-soever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

The teaching and practice of the apostles in this matter are narrated in the Book of Acts. Here the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is asked by every conceivable class of sinners, and answered by inspired men. It is surprising, but consoling, to discover that *the demands made of all are the same.*

If there be classes of sinners, the New Testament is indifferent to the fact, and treats all with the same impartiality shown by God in sending His rain on the just and the unjust.

The terms of membership and fellowship in the New Testament church may be learned from the following passages:

Acts 16:30-34. In this Scripture a man, evidently ignorant of Jesus, asks, "What must I do to be saved?"

He is told to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul then preaches the Word to him, which he obeys, being baptized, with all his house, "having believed in God."

Acts 2:37, 38: Here is an audience convinced of the Messiahship of Jesus by Peter's Pentecostal sermon, and thereby convicted of sin, asking the same question. Starting with them at the point then reached in their conversion, Peter replies: "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins." They obey, and are added to the saved.

In Acts 22:10, Paul asks the same question of the Lord.

Jesus replies: "Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things that are appointed for thee to do."

In Damascus, Ananias, finding him a believing penitent, tells him not to tarry, but "be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name."

Further study of the New Testament merely adds other instances of similar teaching, but reveals nothing else being required, nor is a single instance found where believers were added without obedience to all these commands. It is thus clear that, under the ministry of inspired men, souls were brought into Christ by believing through hearing, repenting and being baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Their obedience made them Christians.

They were united in the new-found brotherhood in Christ.

This law of induction has neither been changed nor abrogated.

Membership in the New Testament church was limited to those who had obeyed all these divinely authorized commands.

A Scriptural basis of unity will *include* all that was obligatory when the New Testament was written, and *exclude* everything not then imposed. So much for the plan whereby Christians *entered the common fellowship*.

The Scriptural basis for the *practice or maintenance of Christian unity* will be found in the practices or customs of the New Testament church which were authorized by express command or approved precedent of the apostles.

The most extended discussion of the subject is in 1 Corinthians.

1 Cor. 1:10 has this rule: "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 the same judgment."

What did Paul mean by all speaking the same thing? Not that uniformity was to be insisted on in everything. He himself recognized spheres where Christians may differ, when he says with reference to keeping certain days: "Let each man be fully assured in his own mind."

They could have the same mind and judgment, and speak the same thing only by all obtaining their facts from the same teachers.

The teaching of the apostles and practice of the early church were uniform in the following particulars:

First, the church had the *same creed*. It was the divine one, first stated by Peter at Cæsarea Philippi, with the help of God:

"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

This was a simple, plain declaration of the fact of the deity of Jesus. That it was fundamental to unity appears from what John says in 1 John 4:2: "Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is of God." Verse 15, same chapter: "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abideth in him, and he in God."

This teaching from an apostle in the last part of the first century demands that open confession of the deity of Jesus was essen-

tial to fellowship. This simple creed, with its necessary inclusions, was the only one required then, and is the only one that may be imposed lawfully now.

Second, the New Testament church everywhere had the same ordinances: Baptism, which was the immersion in water of a penitent believer in Jesus as God's Son; the Lord's Supper, a memorial institution, observed every Lord's Day in memory of the risen and ascended Christ.

Third, the New Testament church had a uniform plan of organization for training Christians and maintaining the local work of the congregations. Believers were associated together in groups under elders (also called bishops) and deacons (in both genders), to whose oversight and administration were entrusted the common spiritual interests of the congregation.

Fourth, the church had a common task—preaching the gospel to the world and cultivating Christian graces and virtues in the lives of believers.

Fifth, the apostle taught that there should be no schism in the local congregation. A factious man was to be refused after a second admonition. Paul denounces church splitting as sin.

He devotes four chapters of 1 Corinthians to the threatened division, over men, in that congregation. The essence of denominationalism is division, or Scriptural heresy, originating among individuals or in congregations. Divisions, personal and congregational, can be avoided only by all "keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

I think it can be successfully maintained

that the essentials of Christian unity in the early church have herein been set forth.

Let us next turn to a practical application of these truths to the religious situation we face to-day.

The divided state of Christendom must grieve the heart of our Lord, and should bring a blush of shame to the face of every one who is in any degree responsible for its continuance.

The flock of Christ is scattered throughout a couple of hundred denominational bodies, each of which is more or less bigoted, prejudiced, arrogant, or heedless of the authority of Christ.

Godly men, heart-sick because of this unholy situation, have set themselves to the task of uniting these scattered sheep.

Ambitious men, anxious for personal pre-eminence, or an opportunity to shear the flock, have set themselves to the same task, with less worthy motives. As a result, we are confronted to-day by at least a score of schemes for reuniting Christians, each of which has its own peculiar aim or end. Some have much to commend them, others little.

Religious hucksters are offering many patented brands of Christian union, guaranteed by the vendor to heal the open sore of Protestantism.

Good people are sampling the remedies, some approving this because they like its flavor, others recommending that because they think it may be a palliative.

But why experiment with quack nostrums when the great Physician Himself has left a prescription both preventive and curative?

The writer is grateful for this opportu-

nity to discuss the Scriptural basis of Christian unity. Thousands of addresses are being delivered and scores of volumes written on it, but rarely do we hear or read appeals "to the law and the testimony."

Even certain groups in the ranks of those to whom has descended the honor of propagating the principles of the nineteenth-century Restoration movement are ignoring Scripture, boldly asserting that it has no solution for the problem. A humiliating fact.

This movement began with the assumption that the problem could be Scripturally solved, and from the beginning has sought the basis therein presented. Most of us believe we have found it.

Just here it is necessary to raise the question as to what is meant by Christian unity. Much confusion exists on this matter.

All agree that division is found where unity should obtain.

But what is to be united—*Christians, congregations or denominations?* All three conceptions have their champions.

The remedy offered will inform us what the ideal of its advocate is.

All our thinking on the problem of unity must be in terms of *some unit* of which the desired *unity is to consist.*

What is this unit?

Current discussion unquestionably indicates that most people are thinking in terms of organization. *The denomination is the unit.*

Such conceive of Christian unity as a mere problem of denominational union, or, perhaps, of frictionless comity among different bodies.

Consciously or unconsciously, the dogma that *the organization is the church* rules their thought and directs the procedure for attaining the desired goal. It seems almost impossible, under present conditions, for people to think of Christianity in other than denominational terms.

If the denomination should be the unit, if the prayer of Jesus will be answered when all denominations are united in one organization, of whatever sort it may be, then we should do everything in our power to hasten such a consummation. We should federate, compromise, broaden terms of fellowship, all agree to submit to majority rule, or bureaucratic control—in short, make any and every sacrifice to perfect a visible corporate organization, embracing all Christians in its membership, from which none could withhold himself, or withdraw, without schismatic guilt. Perhaps 90 per cent. of present thought is directed toward the accomplishment of such an arrangement.

A typical attempt along these lines in Philadelphia a few months since will illustrate the tendency. It is perhaps the most pretentious of recent plans, heralded by its sponsors as furnishing a working basis for further procedure.

It is modeled largely after the Federal Constitution of the United States.

Its aim is to provide for the co-operation of all denominations, leaving each free to manage its own denominational affairs in its own way, retaining any polity, employing any form of worship, teaching any doctrine it may desire. Each co-operating body would choose representatives to sit with similar delegates from other bodies in directing or

managing the so-called larger interests of all. We are assured that the utmost individual and congregational liberty will be preserved.

The supervising body over the union merely asks to be entrusted with "advisory authority" in legislative matters, and executive authority in all common undertakings.

Those originating this benevolent plan are doubtless willing to "serve the churches" by generously constituting themselves the first "advisory body." If supervision in the "larger field" is granted, how can there be either congregational or personal liberty?

Every activity of both individual and congregation must be subordinated to the greater program of the united body.

He who believes that any organization with such power will function without being meddlesome and oppressive has been a poor student of history. It is absurd to believe that authority can be yielded, and still retained.

To me it is passing strange that certain men connected with the movement to restore the New Testament church could have participated in the formation of so pretentious a scheme. It is another illustration of the ease with which some can be diverted from the main issue.

The restoration of the New Testament church, as a means of uniting Christians, was the ideal of the great thinkers who challenged denominationalism in the beginning of the past century, not the preservation of sectism. Despite the superior wisdom of our sages, there is one thing they can not do—destroy a thing and save it at the same time.

A few of our brethren who humbly plead

guilty to being "men of light and leading," "spiritually minded," "forward-looking ministers," etc., announce they have made a new study of our historic plea, and demand a restatement to meet the new conditions.

What is this wonderful discovery? That we are merely a denomination, should recognize the validity of denominationalism by federating with it, grant full membership privileges to all who have made any profession of Christ, and be the first to enter any movement with organic, objective union as its aim.

Is this a forward look to the unity for which Jesus prayed, or a backward step into the mire from which we have escaped?

In a recent Year Book is a sort of editorial, entitled "Organic Union," in which is the following strange statement: "Organic union is proposed. There can be no middle ground. Either we are for organic union or for denominational separateness. We must go in or stay out."

When did "we" become a denomination?

I humbly ask, What must we enter—a pact or federation of denominations or a super-ecclesiasticism? Some of us have had enough of organized meddling already. Such a union will not remove denominationalism. To do so, it must embrace every Christian in the world.

If a single follower of Christ is left out, the organization can not call itself catholic truthfully. A big denomination is no more Scriptural than a small one. Then, since it can not solve the problem of Christian unity, even from a worldly standpoint, why should we feel obligated to enter it? We entered

Christ's church when we obeyed Him, and that is all I, for one, shall ever enter.

We have gone over the road to Christian unity for ourselves.

Hundreds of thousands are Scripturally united with Christ, without denominational affiliation, having abandoned the unscriptural parties in the church, and rejoice in the freedom we have in Christ. Why should we go back to some way-station passed long ago simply to get in the company of others seeking the trail in which we have been traveling? We can encourage them on the way from where we are and welcome them when they arrive.

What may we hope to gain by becoming a part of this proposed union? Has it any truth not in our Bible? Can we be more loyal to Christ in a faction than in the church He built? Must we enter to be saved or be damned if we stay out? These are pertinent questions.

So far as I can see, the only advantage claimed is that we shall be sufficiently like others that their hostile criticism will be reduced to the vanishing-point. Even friction can not be removed by the scheme. Friction arises in men's hearts, and is as evident in the ranks of the most highly organized denominations as among free churches of Christ.

"It is the only way to secure union," we are told.

Even so, will the Lord love us more for compromising with His commandments, altering or ignoring some of them, to bring all into one big union, than He will for remaining loyal to Him, and Him alone?

Personally, I prefer to stand alone with

my Lord than to stand with ten millions who break some of His commandments and teach men to do likewise.

Brethren, no compromise measure has any hope of success.

“But,” object some, “you can not get everybody to unite on a Scriptural basis.” *Neither can you on an unscriptural one.*

The viewpoint I am criticizing is that we must have a supervising ecclesiastical machine to guarantee more uniformity.

If such an organization be the ideal, I wish to recommend Roman Catholicism.

Here is a plan of centralized authority, guaranteeing uniformity, functioning perfectly from the standpoint of efficiency.

It has been developed through centuries of experience, embodying the united wisdom of myriads of religious statesmen who think in terms of organization. It is probable that human wisdom can evolve nothing superior to this, if a great united organization is accepted as the ideal for Christ's church. It is the logical destination for those who think the kingdom comes with observation.

Centuries ago Romanism was where Protestantism is to-day in the matter of organization, its bishoprics and patriarchates being the units corresponding to the denominations of Protestantism.

Do we desire a Protestant Rome? If so, let us encourage present-day efforts to unite denominations. If this be not the ideal, it is high time to about face.

The “community church” experiment is being tried in a few places. Each member enrolls with the community church, but retains his denominational affiliation also. Of course, being released from denominational

responsibility, he is of no particular account to his party. Denominational affiliation is the sugarcoating on the pill of disloyalty to conviction.

Those entering by primary obedience are received on their own terms. Such organizations, not daring to stress loyalty to Christ and the New Testament, must find an outlet for their religion in social service. Deeper than this they can not go. They cease to be churches of Christ, and, at best, are nothing but altruistic clubs.

We hear of one such church that has Jews, Mormons and Catholics in its membership. As well include Mohammedans, Buddhists, Lenine and Trotsky. It requires no seventh son to foresee the disintegration of a church with no more real religious conviction than is necessary to membership therein.

For a score of years, churches of Christ have been exposed to a sort of theological itch, euphoniously called "open membership."

Most congregations keep disinfected by constant applications of divine truth. An occasional one, however, so unfortunate as to lose its Bible, or so dimmed in spiritual vision as to be compelled to read through higher-critic glasses, becomes a victim of the pesky parasite. The only remedy is to "dig," and apply New Testament doctrine lavishly—never-failing cure.

Brethren afflicted with the malady argue that those practicing affusion for baptism are sincere, and therefore should be received into full fellowship. Some only ask that they be admitted to the vestibule at first, postponing full membership rights till the

opposition of some be removed. But the New Testament nowhere makes sincerity the test of fellowship. If that is to be taken into account, Peter made a mistake in baptizing Cornelius. He should have assured this centurion that, since an angel had told him his prayers and alms were recorded in heaven, he should permit the church at Cæsarea to put his name on—would he say “*the roll*” or “*a roll*”?

If sincerity is the test, the Quaker with his Spirit baptism is surely as eligible as the sprinkled man. Likewise the Unitarian. So also the Mormon, Christian Scientist, Progressive Jew.

All these express a willingness to “follow Jesus”—when He goes their way. In short, there is no stopping-place when we once begin lowering the bars. As well take all away at once.

I am willing to help remove every bar erected by men, but will fight in defense of every bar placed by an inspired man.

If the church is a divine institution, woe to him who alters its terms of membership. Consistency demands that we make *every* New Testament command obligatory, or all, of whatever character, optional.

The newest offering is a certain Chicago-China product. Conceived in Chicago, but carried to a heathen land for birth. Nobody is quite sure of what it is like. It seems to be an infant born into the world without a cry, its nurses evidently fearing to let it be heard. Its birth is now proclaimed as premature by its god fathers, and it appears to be losing vitality.

It was pronounced a beautiful child by its parents, till less partial beholders called

it a monstrosity, when they shamelessly tried to abandon it on the steps of missionary societies and conventions.

Some debate is still on in these meetings about adopting it.

The advocates of this plan would evade criticism for lowering New Testament standards of church membership by not organizing local congregations, substituting committees for a Scriptural eldership and diaconate, giving practically full recognition to all professed Christians, camouflaging the real situation by giving a new content to such words as "membership" and "fellowship," doubtless hoping to secure sanction for an unscriptural union, in the resultant confusion.

One could refer to this departure with less heat if the Jesuitical processes responsible for its inception were not so evident.

Just now the defense in this matter seems to be that *they have not done anything*, but *they will not do it again so long as they are watched*.

Having briefly surveyed a few of the more annoying human efforts to effect a union *based on the organizational conception of the church*, let us again study the Scripture on the subject from a different angle of vision to learn just what Jesus desired to be one. What was the unit of which His ideal unity was to be composed? We begin with Jesus' own teaching. In John 17: 20-23, He prays:

"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. And the glory which thou hast given me I have given unto

them; that they may be one, even as we *are* one; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that thou didst send me, and lovedst them, as thou lovedst me.”

In John 15, He says:

“I am the vine, ye are the branches. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, so neither can ye, except ye abide in me.”

Passages of similar import might be indefinitely multiplied, but these are sufficient to show that the unit Jesus had in mind when He prayed for unity was *the individual disciple, not an organization.*

Paul teaches the same doctrine. In Gal. 3:28, he states: “*Now ye are the body of Christ, and severally members thereof.*”

Not one passage in the New Testament will justify any attempt to unite sects or denominations.

Now, if individual Christians are the units of which unity should be composed, our task and duty are rendered plain, and the program for its realization simple.

It is to restore the ideal New Testament church, making Christians only in our evangelism, and teaching the sin of forming or supporting denominations in any manner whatever.

The union between individuals was spiritual—“as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee.” There is no trace of ecclesiasticism among churches ministered to by apostles. Each disciple was a member of His body, working in harmony with every other member in obeying the behests of the Head; a branch, bearing fruit because of its vital connection with the vine.

It is a truth so self-evident as to be

almost axiomatic, that it is impossible to unite individual disciples, the units for which Jesus prayed, by uniting denominations, units that were condemned by Paul in 1 Corinthians. *Union of unscriptural units can not make a Scriptural whole.* If the Paul, Cephas and Apollos parties in Corinth had all agreed to work in amity, districted the city, and each respected the priority rights of the others, etc., yet remained partisans, they would have been heretics just the same.

The fundamental cause of denominationalism is lack of loyalty to Christ and respect for the authority of His word. The deepest need in the ranks of His professed followers is a new sense of His authority and absolute loyalty to Him. That will be the beginning of a return to His own teaching. So long as "conscience" and "inner consciousness" are accepted as divine authorities in religion, we may expect a continuation of divisions in the church.

I fear some worry too much concerning our responsibility in uniting Christians. My personal duty is to be one with Christ.

Being united with Him, I have a brotherly duty to all who are His, grouped together with me in congregational activities.

Our combined duty, with respect to the subject under discussion, is to prevent faction or heresy in the local church.

The New Testament authorizes nothing more in the line of organic union. Congregations were at liberty to co-operate in worthy enterprises, as we shall see, but they did it without an authoritative body to control. The unity taught in Scripture is such a state as would obtain if churches were all

loyal to apostolic teaching, no factions in the congregations, no parties in the church at large.

An organized Christian union will enslave and curse now, as it always has done.

This fact may as well be faced courageously and admitted. Denominationalism must pass before the unity of which Jesus prayed can come. It is the one thing above all others preventing such unity. In view of this fact, it is passing strange that many of our own people, with a passion for unity burning as a holy flame in their hearts, should be so friendly to denominationalism.

It is as impossible to serve two conflicting ideals as to serve two masters. The individual Christian in the denomination can not be made to see his error, or rescued from it, by co-operating with the organization we condemn.

Our task, as I see it, is to summon every disciple of Christ on whose heart rests the burden of Christian unity, to do as we have done already, abandon denominationalism, and become simply Christian.

Denominationalism will automatically pass when its adherents forsake it. This does not mean that we should assume an "I am holier than thou" attitude toward the Christian world. It does demand that we issue a clarion call to all who honestly desire to see denominationalism die, to unite with us in our program of restoring the lost unity of the church by restoring New Testament Christianity. We are worse than wasting time in flirting with denominations, as such. Naturally, leadership in any party will go into the hands of those who most ardently love it and work for it. These leaders will

be the last to forsake their beloved forms and dogmas, yet, since they are in positions of authority, all negotiations must be carried on through them.

The wise and successful plan is to go directly to the rank and file of denominational Christians, with a frank purpose of inviting all who conscientiously accept New Testament teaching, to stand together on a platform for Scriptural unity. Drop negotiations with denominational leaders and organizations, and go over their heads to the people. This would result in our being called "proselyters," of course.

It should not worry us to be called names by those who defend New Testament heresy. Jesus did not rebuke Pharisees for making proselytes, but for making them "twofold more children of hell" than they were themselves. Proselyting, *per se*, is not only permissible, but a positive duty. It is only by making proselytes that any reform may hope to succeed. Had our message to a divided church been preached in love by every minister in our ranks, with the courage and enthusiasm the cause merits, consternation in denominational circles would have reached the panic stage ere this. If division is sin, and we have the remedy, we are pitiable when we lack courage to present the truth as we see it, and God will not lightly judge us. If it is not sin, then let us become denominationalists at once.

The final phase of our subject relates to the so-called "practice of Christian unity" among ourselves.

In recent years we have listened to some cheap flings to the effect that "we preach Christian unity more, and practice it less,

than any religious body in the country." This is the criticism of those who insist that we must all use the missionary society of their own choice or direction. The argument is that if we do not all use the same missionary, educational or benevolent machinery, we are a divided brotherhood. Statements like this show that the one making them is unable to think of the church as other than an organization. With him, the machinery of the church is identical with the church itself.

Partisanship with reference to a society may be as factional in spirit as the denominationalism we exist to condemn.

A fellow-Christian is not necessarily less loyal to my Lord because he elects to support some other society than the one in which I am interested. Nor is he a "heretic" thereby.

It is axiomatic in law that the power that can legislate has the right to alter or annul. If I had a voice in creating a society, I have a right to insist on its doing the things I want done, or refusing it support. If I had no voice in creating it, I most certainly am under no divine obligation to support it, unless it is a divine institution.

To what have we come, when free churches of Christ have notice served upon them that they must support the society championed by a particular journal, or be called heretical! Are we ready to submit to such dictation without protest? Attempted coercion will only drive more away from the ranks of the organization demanding exclusive support. To charge well-informed, conscientious brethren with disloyalty to Christ, because they use their undoubted

freedom in electing what organizations they will aid, is a serious matter.

The saddest phase of this whole matter is that all the alienation of friends from the U. C. M. S. has been caused by disloyalty to Christ and the apostles on the part of certain officials or employees.

Had all connected therewith been content to do the work for which they were employed, and remained true to the New Testament teaching, we would all be enthusiastically honoring them and giving hilariously to increase the number of both fields and workers.

In the past, every department of our organized work has received the earnest support of all who believe in co-operative effort, and only those who are betraying the cause they pledged to advance are responsible for the present disaffection.

Co-operation in the larger affairs of Christian work is essential to the highest success. But every individual and congregation must be left entirely free to use or not use any particular agency.

Missionary leaders and their apologists need to be reminded that intolerance and arrogance may be as disastrous to their cause as disloyalty. It is not heresy to employ a variety of agencies. It may or may not be wise, but it is not schismatic.

No organization has a right to claim to represent the whole church. At best, it can represent only those creating or those using it. No one society can have a monopoly, unless every worker in the field served by that society voluntarily chooses to use it.

Every existing organization, created to serve the churches, might disband, but that

would not divide the church. Societies may be good servants of the churches, but they must not try to become masters.

I make no plea for a multiplicity of agencies. In the past, I have plead for the unification of our societies. I had great hopes when the U. C. M. S. was being planned.

Of late, however, such things as secretarial interference in local churches, attempted dictation concerning the employment of preachers, and unchristian intolerance on the part of some of its overzealous friends have led me to question the wisdom of my former convictions.

My heart bleeds that a condition has arisen in our society work which renders it impossible for devout, generous, missionary brethren to support it except under protest, or not at all.

Why should it be so? Whose is the fault?