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ONE...that they may be WON!
Christian UNITY as it relates to World EVANGELISM

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Introduction

Two little boys were sitting on a curb in front of a church. One asked the other, "And to what *abomination* do you belong?"

Division in the church is an abomination to God. His people, of all people, should be one. The Bible says, "There is one body" (Eph. 4:4).

Thomas Campbell said division among Christians was a "*horrid evil, fraught with many evils.*" He said (Proposition 10 of the Declaration and Address) that division was evil for three reasons – it is *anti-Christian*, because it destroys the visible unity of the body of Christ; it is *anti-Scriptural*, because it is a direct violation of Christ's express command; and it is *anti-natural*, in that it causes Christians to condemn, hate, and oppose one another.

In a little tract called "The Greatest Tragedy of a Thousand Years!" Walter Stram wrote, "The last two World Wars, with their terrible loss, were not as disastrous in their total results as has been the influence of the division, sectarianism, confusion and hatred in the church world. A life lost in war is a temporal loss, but a soul lost through sin brings eternal loss Division in the church world today is *treason against Christ*, and presents a tragic stumbling-block to the non-Christian."

Abomination. Evil. Treason. Those are strong words. They will rise up and condemn us all in the Judgment – unless we do something about them.

Proposition

The theme of this convention is "With One Heart...Glorify!" The world needs Christ. The church is the bridge between Christ and the world. We are His hands, His feet, His heart. *The world at its worst needs the church at its best!* Can we expect the world to be won to Christ if the church is not one in Christ? It is my conviction that the unity of believers -- based upon the deity of Christ and the authority of God's Word -- is essential to the evangelization of the world. Let's see how Christian unity relates to world evangelism.

- 1. A PICTURE OF UNITY.** Psalm 133 gives us a beautiful picture of unity. *“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down on the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.”* (Ps. 133:1-3 NIV).

God calls unity “good.” When God calls something “good,” that’s good enough for me! The person who works for unity is doing a good work. The person who divides brothers is doing an evil work.

Unity is also described as “pleasant.” Everything that God made was “pleasant to the sight.” He is pleased when He sees brothers living together in harmony. Wherever God has a son or a daughter, there I have a brother or a sister.

The Psalmist likens unity to “precious oil” – the oil of consecration that ran down on the collar of Aaron’s robes when he was anointed High Priest of Israel. According to Exodus 28, Aaron wore the ephod. It was a unique contraption with shoulder straps adorned with stones, engraved with the names of the 12 sons of Israel. He might have said, “They ain’t heavy – they’re my brothers!”

Aaron also wore the breastplate containing 12 beautiful stones also bearing the names of Israel’s 12 sons. So when the Bible says the precious oil ran down on his robes, it covered the names of Israel’s sons he was carrying on his shoulders and over his heart. Unity should be like that.

The Psalmist also likens unity to something else that ran down – the dew that descended from the mountains to bless the fields of the people who lived below. Notice that *there* the Lord bestows His blessing. Where? Wherever brothers live together in unity! And we are blessed to be a blessing to others!

- 2. A PRAYER FOR UNITY.** The greatest prayer ever prayed is found in John 17. Here, just 12 hours from the cross, Jesus prayed:

“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.”
(John 17:20,21 NKJV)

Why did Jesus pray for unity? Because the visible unity of believers is the catalyst to the conversion of seekers in the world! “I’d rather see a sermon, than hear one any day. I’d rather someone show me, than merely point the way” (Ogden Nash). What we do speaks louder than what we say. We cannot preach unity and practice division and expect the world to be won.

Jesus prayed for a three-fold unity. First, for those who would *believe in Him*. Walter Scott said, “The Bible contains one truth which is the sun to which all other Christian truths are planets in the spiritual solar system.” For Scott that one truth was expressed in Peter’s confession, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Millions of martyrs and legions now living have made that Good Confession. I made it myself on June 22, 1958, just before I was baptized into Christ.

For unity to be Christian, it must be centered in Christ. Paul determined not to know anything among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ . . . and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). What would happen if we made that same determination? Jesus said if He was lifted up, He would draw all men unto Him. The world needs to know that Christ died on the cross for their sins. When I was preaching in Australia I saw “The Southern Cross.” It is a unique grouping of stars, seen only in the southern hemisphere, which is formed in the shape of the cross. If you ever get lost in the Outback, look to the heavens for help. The way of the cross leads home!

The unity Jesus prayed for is not only Christ-centered but is also Bible-based. Jesus prayed “for those who will believe in Me *through their word*.” That is, through the witness and word, the teaching and testimony, the preaching and proclamation of the apostles. On the Day of Pentecost Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and preached the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The audience was cut to the heart and cried out to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” The answer that came is the same we must give today. We are not to re-write the message – we are simply to deliver the mail! “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Where the Scriptures speak, *God* speaks. Period. I’m not great on the saying, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” God said it – that settles it (whether you and I believe it or not!). Don DeWelt told me he was going to write a book and call it “Agree With Me or Go to Hell!” But then he said he realized Someone had already written the Book!

The unity for which Jesus prayed was *people-pointed*. “That they all may be one.” Why? “That the world may believe that You sent Me . . . and have loved them as You have loved Me” (vs. 21, 23). The word “world” is used 17 times in the 17th chapter of John. This should not surprise us. “For God so loved *the world* that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). The world was on His heart the night Jesus prayed for the unity of believers. He knew that their unity would be crucial to the salvation of the world.

The world is still what it’s all about. It’s not about the 101 things we have divided over. It’s not about the past. It’s about the future – the future of the millions living and dying without Christ. When John Wesley was forbidden to preach in the pulpits of the established church in England, he declared, “The *world* is my parish!” The world is our parish because it is perishing! For their sake we must get our act together and become the visible and credible witnessing body of Jesus Christ on earth. We must embrace and live out the New Commandment: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Mahatma Gandhi is said to have rejected Christianity because of all the squabbling and quarrelling he had observed among Christians. When Joseph sent his brothers back to Canaan with the good news that he was alive, the last thing he told them was, “Don’t quarrel on the way!” (Gen. 45:24). Jesus has commissioned us to go into all the world with the good news that He is alive forevermore. The last thing we need to be doing is quarreling on the way!

3. THE PRACTICE OF UNITY. Unity is not ours to manufacture. Christ has already made us one. He destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, and made us one body in Him (Eph. 2:14-16). By one Spirit, the Holy Spirit, we were all baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). We are in the same body, the same family. Our duty, our sacred duty, is to make every effort to *maintain*, to keep the unity of that same Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).

It's our attitudes that have done us in. Before Paul mentions the seven "ones" of doctrinal unity in Ephesian 4, he describes five essential attitudes that must prevail: humility, gentleness, patience, love, and peace. Most churches don't divide over doctrinal differences. They are divided by awful attitudes that are ungodly, unbecoming, and unworthy of those who wear that name "Christian."

Carl Ketcherside told of a church that was killed by attitudes. "The little band of saints was under the leadership of a stern and inflexible elderly brother whose wife was as unbending as himself. The congregation grew smaller each passing year. The people of the community avoided the place as if the sign read 'Smallpox' instead of 'Church of Christ.' The work did not die. It was killed. And the murder weapon was an attitude."

We are not completely united because we are not completely humble. And Paul says, "Be completely humble" (Eph. 4:3). Humility is the starting point. It is also the sticking point. Some of us can't admit that we have been wrong. Ever. Or are wrong. Present tense. We are to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, but if I "know it all" how can I grow at all? We have not been gentle with each other. We need a kinder, gentler brotherhood. We have not practiced patience. Ulrike Ruffert said, "Patience is the ability to put up with people you'd like to put down." We have not loved one another as Jesus asked. Love is a "many splendored thing" but the absence of love makes a church a "many splintered thing." We have not been peacemakers. Adlai Stevenson said, "Making peace is harder than making war." God calls upon all of us to be peacemakers. Since 1984 some of us, Marvin Phillips, Calvin Warpula, Monroe Hawley, Dennis Randall, Douglas Foster, Rubel Shelly, and hundreds of others, have been making an effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in the annual unity meeting known as The Restoration Forum, now the longest running unity effort in the history of the Restoration Movement. Much good has been accomplished. Much more needs to be done.

There is a unity to *maintain* – the unity of the Spirit, but there is also a unity to *attain* – the unity of the faith. In verse 13 Paul writes, "Until we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." We are not there yet. Paul himself would later say, "Not that I have already attained." I haven't either. But it's my goal, my aim, to come to the unity of the faith.

Note that this unity we are to strive for is called a unity of *faith*. Our spiritual forefathers had a slogan: *In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, charity*. Our Achilles heel has been that we have not been able to distinguish between a matter of faith and a matter of opinion. A matter of faith must be of greater importance than a matter of opinion. Paul told the church in Corinth that what he received (by revelation) he passed on to them as matters "of first importance" – things like Christ dying for our sins according to the Scriptures, His burial, and His being raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3,4). Matters of faith are matters of fact. In these we should – we must – have unity.

But then there are other matters. Our brethren in Russia, as early as 1906, were saying: *In essential things, unity; in secondary things, freedom; in all things, charity.* We can learn from their interesting choice of words. Some things are “of first importance.” Other things are “secondary.” That doesn’t mean they aren’t important – especially to the one who holds the opinion. But they are “secondary” – a matter of opinion. And we will never unite on opinions! In Romans 14, Paul writes, “Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (v. 22). This would put an end to the food fights between the Ministers of Meat and the Broccoli Brothers! In Romans 15, Paul admonishes us to accept one another in spite of our differences of opinion. You don’t have to be my twin to be my brother. Someone has said, “If a man is good enough for God to receive, he is not too bad for me to accept.”

The Bible describes the church as a family. And in the family we are bound to have differences of opinion. We certainly did in our family! Dad liked classical music. My brother and I liked rock and roll. Dad liked Silent Night. We liked Three Dog Night. Dad preached that Jeremiah was a prophet – but we knew he was a bullfrog, was a good friend of ours! But we stayed together singing “Joy to the World” (even to the fishes in the deep blue sea) because we were family.

We had differences around the table. Mom liked beets. I hated beets! My mother had this rule: clean up your plate or no dessert! Incredibly, every night she would fix my favorite dessert (cherry pie or cherry cobbler) we would have these dreaded things called diced beets! I would rather eat a pair of dice than try to eat diced beets! But I learned to beat the system. I would take a piece of Wonder bread, cut off the crusts, put the offending beets in the middle, roll it up in a ball, wash it down with milk, smile at my mother, and say, “Please pass the pie!” And my mother, recognizing remarkable ingenuity in her eldest son, would pass me the pie because I had beaten the system, “eaten” my beets, and best of all, had stayed in her good graces – because we were family – and families, though they have differences around the table, don’t divide!

Our family vacation, taken each year in our non-air conditioned green Rambler station wagon, complete with luggage rack on top, is another example of our family togetherness. There were five of us kids, each of us protecting our private space for all it was worth. The minute one sweaty arm touched another it was, “Mom! He touched me!” That was our favorite song, “He touched me! O, he touched me!” Mom kept a fly swatter under the front seat. One time she went five for five before we were fifty-five miles from home. Why do you suppose my loving and longsuffering parents put up with all that nonsense in the back seat? Was it because they enjoyed hearing our constant cries for conflict resolution, bathroom breaks, and ice cream cones? No. It was because they wanted us to be together when we got to Grandma’s house for that family reunion. And if we can just keep that point in mind, we will put up with an awful lot as we travel together to our heavenly destination.

Conclusion

Thomas Campbell made an impassioned plea for unity in the Declaration and Address. He said, "Oh, that ministers and people would but consider that there are no divisions in the grave, nor in that world that lies beyond it! There our divisions must come to an end! We must all unite there! Would to God we could find in our hearts to put an end to our short-lived divisions here; that we might leave a blessing behind us; even a happy and united church."

On September 11, 2001, our world was changed forever. Terrorists hijacked four airplanes. One was flown into the Pentagon. Two were flown into the World Trade Center. The fourth plane, United Flight 93, was headed for either the Capitol or the White House when something happened. At least four passengers, Thomas E. Burnett Jr., Todd Beamer, Jeremy Glick, and Mark Bingham, somehow banded together to heroically divert the plane from its intended target and brought it down in the quiet countryside of Pennsylvania. There were no survivors.

The October issue of *The Christian Chronicle*, a monthly journal published for members of churches of Christ (a cappella), carried Burnett's story. Thomas Burnett was a 1992 graduate of Pepperdine University. He managed to call his wife Deena on his cell phone. He told her that he and some other passengers were going to try and stop the hijackers. He said, "*I know we're all going to die. But some of us are going to do something about it.*" Deena later told a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*, "I know without a doubt that that plane was bound for some landmark and they saved many, many more lives than were lost on that plane."

The December 30 issue of *The Christian Standard*, a weekly paper published for members of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, carried a story about Todd Beamer. It was called "Leaving a Legacy" and was written by Todd's father, David Beamer, a member of the Manor Woods Church of Christ in Rockville, Maryland. (Manor Woods is one of the "Independent" Christian Churches and Churches of Christ). Todd Beamer's words, spoken to a GTE phone supervisor, were caught on tape. After asking her to recite the Lord's prayer with him, Beamer spoke to his fellow passengers: "*Are you guys ready? Jesus, help me. Let's roll!*" The rest is now history.

So here were two men who had some connection with our Restoration Movement who came together with some others (whose religious affiliations are unknown to me) in a selfless, redemptive manner. And I have thought since: wouldn't it be wonderful if we who call ourselves Christians could unite in an equally selfless, redemptive manner to save souls who have been hijacked by Satan and are hurtling for eternal doom?

Brothers and sisters, we are all going to die some day. But some of us are going to do something about it. Are you ready? Jesus, help us! Let's roll!