

Unity, Not Division

INTRODUCTION

- A. This correction appeared in the Cambridge, Minnesota Star: “Isanti County Commissioner Tom Pagel has 100-percent support from his family, not 10 percent, as was stated in last week’s article on Pagel’s announcement to seek re-election.”
1. There is nothing like having your family united behind you!
 2. We live in a time when families are seldom united.
 - a. More than half of all new marriages end in divorce.
 - 1) Divorce greatly increases two- or three-fold the incidence of all kinds of bad effects on children of divorce, including psychological problems, juvenile delinquency, suicide, under-education, and teen motherhood.
 - 2) Marriage is better than divorce or bachelorhood for the health, wealth, and happiness of adults of all ages and genders.
 - b. Yet, we hear all the time of marriages ending in divorce, some for no reason at all. In April 1979, Romeo Bitencourt of Brazil was granted a divorce.
 - 1) Romeo was a Brazilian farmer. He was ninety year old, had been married sixty-five years, had twelve children, fifty grandchildren, and thirty-six great-grandchildren.
 - 2) The reason given for the divorce? Incompatibility.
 3. Oh, how God hates division in the family.
 - a. “‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD God of Israel, ‘and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,’ says the LORD Almighty” (Mal. 2:16).
 - b. Even when divorce is for adultery — the only authorized reason for divorce and remarriage — the Lord hates divorce. He hates broken promises, he hates what divorce does to the family, and he’d rather have unity than disunity.
- B. Unity in our physical families is important, and unity in the church is vital.
- a. Today’s church is terribly divided — The World Christian Database has over 9,000 denominations.
 - b. You may have thought it odd that I began an appeal for unity within Christianity by discussing unity in the family. But, that’s really not a stretch, for the church is often referred to as God’s family.
 - 1) Speaking of Christ, John wrote, “To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (Jn. 1:12).
 - 2) Addressing the unification of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, Paul addresses the Gentiles and says, “You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (Eph. 2:19).
 - 3) The common use of “brothers” throughout the NT epistles establishes that the church is God’s family.
- C. This morning, we want to make an appeal for unity within the Christian community. As we do so, we see AN APPEAL FOR UNITY & A BASIS FOR UNITY.

AN APPEAL FOR UNITY, NOT DIVISION

- A. Jesus prayed for unity among his disciples.
1. “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn. 17:20-21).
 2. This is an amazing prayer!
 - a. The Lord was moments away from being betrayed into sinful hands and standing trial, but he

- was concerned that his future disciples be united.
- b. The Lord was about to take our sins and die an extremely painful death to free us from them, but he was praying that we might be one.
3. Christian unity is based upon the unity of the Father and the Son — notice Jesus' words; "I pray . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."
 - a. The Trinity has a unity difficult to describe in human terms.
 - 1) The Trinity worked together for our salvation — We "have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood" (1 Pet. 1:2).
 - 2) The Trinity works together for the establishment of Christians — "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13: 14).
 - b. As the Trinity has worked for man's salvation and for the growth of Christians, Christians are to be unified.
 - 1) As the Trinity works together, as the Trinity thinks alike, we Christians are to work together and think alike.
 - 2) In essence, the Trinity provides an example for us Christians to work together and to think alike.
- B. We often hear that there were not denominations in the first century, that denominations are a fairly new concept in Christianity.
 1. Denominations as we know them didn't exist in the first century, but there were many even then who destroyed the church's unity and received rebukes from the apostles
 2. Notice what the inspired apostles had to say about the early divisions in the church:
 - a. "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor. 1:10).
 - 1) Paul wrote those words because the Corinthian church was anything but united in mind and thought.
 - a) "One of you says, 'I follow Paul', another, 'I follow Apollos': another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (1 Cor. 1:12-13).
 - b) That's basically denominationalism — the Corinthians had divided over which preacher was better — they were following men instead of Christ.
 - 2) Paul says, "No guys, that's not the right way to go. You follow Christ, don't follow these mortal men who didn't affect your salvation."
 - b. To Timothy, Paul wrote, "Keep reminding them [the brethren] of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen" (2 Tim. 2: 14).
 - 1) Paul had specific quarreling in mind when he wrote to Timothy: "Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some" (2 Tim. 2:17-18).
 - 2) The brethren in Ephesus needed to be on their guard that they not be carried away by the quarreling about words in which Hymenaeus and Philetus were involved.
- C. These words of Jesus and the apostles stand as important reminders for the modern church.
 1. We dare not condone the divisions so prevalent in the religious world — God calls us to unity, not division.
 2. We need to follow Christ and his teachings rather than some mortal man and his teachings.
 3. We need to be cautious lest we buy into a heresy which will shipwreck our faith.

- D. How closely do we follow these words?
1. We often call for the unity of Christians, and it's absolutely essential that we do so. The Lord prayed for such unity, the apostle called for such unity, and if we want to be the New Testament church, we must plead for such unity.
 2. However, we need to follow these instructions at a more personal level as well.
 - a. Do we seek unity with the brethren with whom we worship?
 - b. How unified are we as brethren in Christ?

THE BASIS FOR UNITY, NOT DIVISION

- A. With such different doctrines in the modern world, how is unity within the Christian community possible?
- B. The only way I know to seek unity is the same way the early church sought unity.
1. A problem arose at Antioch over whether or not Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised.
 - a. "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers; 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1).
 - 1) I really wonder if it's not fair to refer to these Judaizers as an ancient denomination.
 - 2) We know that they had leaders, had people who went around and taught their heresy, and there were many people who ascribed to this doctrine — in many respects, quite like denominations we know.
 - b. How did the early church seek unity on the question of circumcision?
 - 1) Paul and Barnabas attempted to reason with them: "This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them" (Acts 15:2).
 - 2) After Paul and Barnabas disputed with them, the church at Antioch appointed Paul and Barnabas to go up to Jerusalem to see the elders and apostles about this matter.
 - a) These false teachers came from Jerusalem, and Paul and Barnabas apparently went to Jerusalem to see if these Judaizers had the support of the elders and apostles at Jerusalem.
 - b) Notice what the brethren at Antioch are doing — they're investigating to see if what they heard was authoritative, and they went to the apostles, God's authorities, to settle the matter.
 - 3) Notice how they settled the matter; The brethren at Jerusalem sent a letter and here's what the letter said: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements; You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:28-29).
 - a) They settled the matter with the word of the Holy Spirit. Can we do anything less?
 - b) You know we have only one way to settle matters with the word of the Holy Spirit, and that's through Scripture.
 - i. Jesus told the apostles, "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own, he will speak only what he hears, and he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (Jn. 16:13).
 - ii. All that truth in which the Spirit would guide the apostles is revealed in Scripture.
 - i) In praying to the Father, the apostles declared. "You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David" (Acts 4; 25).
 - ii) "Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21).
 2. Paul dealt with heretics much the same way that the apostles in Jerusalem dealt with them.
 - a. The churches of Galatia were dealing with heretics, and Paul wrote to them, "Even if we or an

angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal. 1:8).

- 1) Where did Paul get the gospel he proclaimed in Galatia? "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation by Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1; 11-12).
- 2) The reason the Galatians couldn't turn away from Paul's earlier preaching was that it was the Word of God, revealed by Christ, not by man.

b. Paul urged Timothy to defend truth based upon Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-4:5).

- 1) Before we look at this passage in depth, we need to remember that the chapter and verse divisions were placed by man many years after the writing of Scripture.
- 2) Let's look at Paul's argument;
 - a) His argument begins at v. 10. Paul reminds Timothy of what he taught — "You, however, know all about my teaching."
 - b) False doctrine will increase, so that Timothy needs to remain in truth — "Evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of" (v. 13).
 - c) Scripture came from God and is useful for rebuking and correcting (v. 16).
 - d) Timothy needs to preach the Word (v. 2).
 - e) Timothy needs to preach the Word because the time is coming when men will not endure sound doctrine (vv. 3-4).
 - f) Here's Paul's point in a nutshell: Timothy, you preach the Word, because people are going to put up with false doctrine. That Word is the way to overcome false doctrine, that Word is the way to have unity.

C. Brethren, if we want unity we must appeal to Scripture.

1. If we want unity in this congregation of God's people, we must have unity based on Scripture.
 - a. Let's suppose someone comes in here and says. "You can divorce your wife and marry another if you just get tired of her."
 - 1) Some of you say, "Makes sense to me. Sometimes you just have to trade your wife in and get a new model." Others of you say. "Wait a minute. Jesus said the only way you can divorce and remarry is if your spouse commits fornication."
 - 2) How shall we decide who is right and who is wrong? Will we not have to turn to Jesus' words for the final say?
 - b. Let's suppose someone else comes in and says, "Let's start using a piano in our worship" or "Let's start baptizing infants" or "Are you sure baptism is essential to salvation?"
 - 1) How can we decide what is right and what is wrong?
 - 2) Can we do anything but appeal to the Word of God to decide spiritual matters?
2. There are some who argue for unity at any costs.
 - a. This year marks a century since our fellowship with some brethren was shattered over the use of instrumental music.
 - 1) There are some who appeal for unity with the Christian Church even if they continue to use the instrument.
 - 2) I would love to see unity with the Christian Church; my father came from that group.
 - b. But, we cannot ignore the Word of God to have unity.
 - 1) That's not the unity for which Paul appealed in Corinth: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor. 1:10).
 - 2) If we don't have some objective standard, how can we be "perfectly united in mind and thought"?

- c. Do you need to come and have unity with your brethren this morning? Do you need to come and obey the Word of God to have that unity?