

That They May Be One

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, at the Foursquare Gospel Church, Oxford, PA on May 7, 1995, the fourth Sunday of Easter. Scripture Lessons: John 17:11-26; 1 Corinthians 12:4-31.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I feel honored being here today. It's a risky thing to allow someone from another tradition to stand in your pulpit and preach; someone you don't know very well. Who knows what I'll say? Will I truly preach the Word of God? So I'm honored that you allow me to preach.

I'm also anxious about how my preaching style will be accepted. I'm not sure what kind of preaching you're use to. I nearly always preach from a manuscript. Jesus once told his apostles, "every idle (careless) word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment." (Matthew 12:36). That's a warning to me to choose my words very carefully. My style is to trust the Holy Spirit in my preparation to choose words which may become God's words to you.

So, with that, I direct you to the words of Jesus in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. Notice the context beginning in chapter 13! Jesus speaks to his disciples on the evening he was betrayed. He knows his death is near. He meets with the apostles in an upper room in Jerusalem. They eat supper together. Jesus washes their feet. He commands them to love one another. He promises to send them the Holy Spirit. He tells them to maintain a close relationship with him. He warns them that they'll be persecuted. Then he prays for them. This brings us to our Scripture lesson. In this prayer, Jesus asks, ^{four}~~three~~ times, for the unity of those who belong to him. Four times he prays for unity.

Jesus prays for three different kinds of unity.

First, Jesus wants us to have unity with Christians in former ages. Jesus says in verse 20 and 21, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." Jesus wants Christians who have believed since the death of the apostles to be united with one another and with the apostles.

Sometimes we mistakenly think that we can bypass the faith of saints in former times and go directly to the Bible. But that's like a child ignoring the instructions of parents and grandparents and going directly to the Bible. We are like children. We need the wisdom that our fathers and mothers in the faith have handed on to us. We have so much to learn from them. Can we truly be united to Christ without being united to men and women of long ago who belonged to Christ?

One of the ways we stay united with Christians of past ages is through the singing of old hymns, hymns written and sung hundreds of years ago. "O Splendor of God's Glory Bright", by St. Ambrose written in the fourth century after the birth of Jesus. "Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Heart", by St. Bernard of Clairvaux writing in the 12th century. "I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art", by John Calvin written in the sixteenth century. Of course we need to sing a new song to the Lord. But don't forget the old. The old hymns keep us united with Christians of the past.

Another way we become united with Christians of long ago is through the great creeds of the Church: The Apostles' Creed (which we recite every week in our worship service), The Nicene Creed (which we recite when we celebrate Holy

Communion), as well as the creeds and confessions of the Reformation and contemporary Christians. How can I claim to be one with the apostles and with Christians in former ages if I can't confess what they confessed.

Many churches encourage Christians to give testimonies during the worship service. When we recite the creeds it's like hearing the testimony of great Christians in the past; the testimony of men and women who died as martyrs; the testimony of men and women who lived as a despised religious in an ocean of paganism. We can learn from these ancient Christians how to confess our faith today. Christian unity, then, requires that we remain united with Christians of the past through the historic creeds and confessions of the Christian church.

Secondly, Jesus prays that we might be one with contemporary Christians. I'm the partial answer to Christ's prayer. This morning in Oxford the prayers of Christ for Christian unity are being partially answered in at least eight congregations. Through the ministerium's pulpit exchange we're demonstrating our unity in Christ.

In my experience Christians aren't divided along denominational lines. Presbyterians and Foursquare Gospel church members and Methodists and Baptists and Roman Catholics get along well in Oxford. We're not divided along denominational lines. Rather, we're divided by conflicts that cut through nearly all the denominations. Pro-life Christians deny that pro-choice Christians are real Christians. Presbyterians are divided between those who believe homosexual acts are sin and those who believe that homosexuals aren't necessarily sinful.

Episcopalians are divided between those who believe that women should not be ordained and those who do. Christians are divided about the use of inclusive language with respect to God. Both sides of this liberal-conservative debate claim the Bible for their authority. Both sides seek Christ's endorsement for their views. I don't know enough about the Foursquare Gospel Church to know what's dividing you - but I'm sure there are divisions both here on the local level and on the national level. But Christ prays that we might be one.

The easiest way to deal with this kind of diversity is to ignore it (which I have tried to do at times). Another way is to "caricature, slander and condemn." Opponents of abortion call the other side pro-abortionists, not pro-choicers. Supporters of abortion call the other side anti-choice not pro-life. Both sides select terms that shed the worst possible light on the other.

How can we remain one in Christ when Christians are so divided on these issues? We could try to accept diversity in the church without reservation and to embrace tolerance as an absolute good. But that option smacks of relativism. The Christian faith is not a private faith. It's not simply a matter of personal opinions. We have definite beliefs and morals. An easy tolerance, an anything goes attitude in the church gives the impression that there's no truth, that everything's a matter of opinion, that the truth doesn't matter, that Christians are free to do whatever they feel like doing. This is relativism. This is no way to Christian unity.

Another option is to try to create unity by eliminating diversity. Erase the

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differences among us. Kick out everybody who's pro-choice (or pro-life). Kick out everybody who advocates on behalf of homosexuals (or anyone who believes that homosexuals are an abomination). Withdraw from those with whom you disagree. But this is no way to unity. It simply creates deeper and deeper divisions. It's the way of judgmentalism. If we must reject the first option because it leads to relativism, we must reject this second option because it leads to judgmentalism. We end up identifying our interpretations of the Word of God with the Word of God itself.

A third option is more in keeping with Christ's prayer for all of us to be one. We can strive for unity in our diversity. This is the most difficult option. It's the most demanding of the three options. It requires sacrifice. It requires painful compromise. It requires struggle. It requires study. It requires listening and speaking to people who believe differently than we do. This is the way of love. It's not relativistic. It believes that there's a true answer to our divisions. It encourages us to study the Bible together and to pray together and, together, to seek to commend and defend our views rather than impose them on others. It refuses to absolutise our present understanding of Scripture. It recognizes that Christians have been in error in times past with regard to their interpretation of Scripture. It recognizes that we could be in error today. This way avoids relativism. It also avoids judgmentalism. It follows the way of love.

So, Christ prays for us to be one with Christians in ages past; he prays that we be one with Christians today; and, thirdly, he prays that we enjoy the same

kind of unity which he enjoys with his father. He prays to the Father, "That they may be one as we are one." Christian unity should be a visible and outward expression of the unity we see in the Holy Trinity. We believe in one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe there's is diversity within God. This is a unique Christian belief. Moslems believe that there's no diversity within God. Christians do. God has revealed himself In Scripture to be One God In three persons. The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Holy Spirit. There is diversity. But there are not three Gods. There is only one God.

Christ wants Christians, with all our diversity, to be one as God is One. Presbyterian Christians are not Foursquare Gospel Christians. But we're one church. Neither of us is better than the other. Neither of us is greater than the other. We're different yet we're one church. The Foursquare Gospel Church can win people to Christ that Presbyterians can't or won't. And we Presbyterians can win to Christ people whom you can't or won't. Yet we are One church. The unity for which Christ prays is a unity with diversity. He prays that we might be one, as He and His Father are One.

In conclusion I challenge you to pray. I urge you to pray for what Christ prayed for. I urge us all to seek what he prayed for - a united church - a church united with the apostles and Christians in every age, a church united in all our vast diversity, a church which is an outward and visible sign of Holy Trinity.

Let us pray: Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in him whom you have sent, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.