

That They May Be One

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, at the Foursquare Gospel Church, Oxford, PA on May 28, 1995, the seventh Sunday of Easter. Scripture Lessons: Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26.

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

Jesus prayed for our unity.

"I ask... on behalf of those who will believe in me... that they may all be one."

He wanted His church to be united so that the world might know that God the Father sent him.

In my experience Christians aren't divided along denominational lines.

Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Moravians, Baptists,
Foursquare Gospel Church members

~~We're divided by conflicts that cut through denominations.~~

We're divided by controversial social issues.

Pro-life Christians and pro-choice.

Those who believe homosexual acts are sin ^{always} and those who ^{feel}

believe that homosexual acts between two people

mutually committed to one another is not necessarily

sin.

Just last year one nearby Presbyterian church was divided

over the ordination of a woman

Christians aren't divided along denominational lines. We're so often divided internally.

In building a new church people have been divided over -

- where to build
- how to build
- where to place furniture
- the color of carpeting and trim.
- the kind of music for the worship service

How do we achieve the unity into which we've all been baptized? How do we preserve the unity we already have? How do we restore unity when the bonds of trust have been broken. Jesus prayed that we might all be one. How do we achieve that unity?

1. One way: be quiet when we have differences. Mr. Green was participating in his Sunday School class one morning. The topic of abortion came up. Mrs. White said, "I believe that all abortion is murder. It's down right murder. It should be outlawed. Why doesn't our church take a stand against abortion? Why is it so wishy-washy?" Mr. Green disagreed with Mrs. White but he didn't say anything. Mr. Green was for abortion but he believed there were times when it might be a morally justified choice - but he kept quiet. He kept quiet because he said to himself, "This is a pluralistic church. We all have different opinions. We need to keep unity. If I speak up I will cause division and hostility. I'll just keep quiet."

Mr. Green's intentions are good but I don't believe this is the kind of unity Jesus prayed for. Mr. Green's attitude simply leads us to privatise our faith. It leads us to believe that all opinions about ethical issues are merely personal

opinions - there is no right answer - there is no right and wrong. The Christian faith is not merely a private faith. It's not simply a matter of personal opinions. An easy tolerance in the church gives the impression that there is no truth - there are no right and wrong answers. I don't believe this is the way to Christian unity.

2. Here's another way: Try to create unity by eliminating diversity. Kick out of the church everybody who's pro-choice or pro-life. Withdraw from those with whom you disagree. Mrs. Purple belonged to a church that discussed whether ~~if~~ homosexuals may be devout Christians. She was so opposed to the discussion that, first, she tried to eliminate the discussion altogether. When she was unsuccessful, she left the church and joined another church where everybody believes the same way about this issue. Unity is achieved by eliminating diversity.

I don't think this is the answer to the prayer of Jesus for all Christians to be one. Some people believe that one reason communism failed was because communist leaders did not allow their communist ideology to be tested by competing ideas. Unity was maintained by force. This is not the kind of unity Jesus prayed for.

Read the New Testament. You'll find all kinds of diversity. But the diversity finds unity in the confession that Jesus is Lord.

3. 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. Jesus prayed that we might be one as we are one (i.e., as the Father and Son are one). Christians believe that God is

one but we believe there is diversity in God. God is one - But God has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father is not the Son. And the Holy Spirit is not the Father. There is one God in three persons. There is unity in diversity. That's the kind of unity I believe Jesus prayed for us to enjoy and strive for.

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.

This is the kind of unity I believe Jesus prayed for. I must confess that I have sought unity in the first and second ways at time but I think I've been wrong when I do that. I do believe there are right and wrong answers to controversial issues that divide the church - but I don't believe that Christians will be united by keeping quiet when we have differences - and I don't believe that Christians will be united by driving out diversity. The unity for which Jesus prayed is unity

within diversity - the kind of unity that exists within the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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.