



THE  
HEART  
OF  
UNITY

An Urgent Plea for Christians

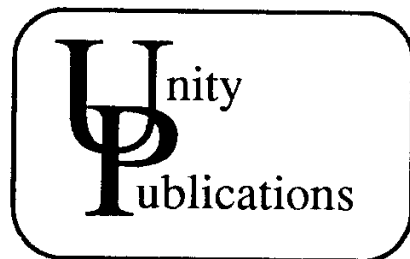
Jeff Gardner

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An Urgent Plea for Christians

Jeff Gardner



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# Foreword

Jeff Gardner is a diligent, devoted young man who longs to see division banished from among God's people. He is a preacher and writer of considerable ability. With a perception beyond his years, he has pinpointed one of the most pressing problems to plague the Restoration Movement.

He calls us back to one of the earliest emphases of those who made "the search for the ancient order." Unity based on divine revelation and fostered in a spirit of charity was at the heart of the restorers' plea. The well-worn motto of the past still has merit: "In matters of faith—unity; in matters of opinion—liberty; in all things—charity."

Without trying to define matters of faith and matters of expediency, brother Gardner makes an impressive and impassioned appeal for a spirit of oneness. With a heart that has felt the pain of foolish and unwarranted divisiveness, the writer calls us back to one of the great essentials. Since Jew and Gentile were "reconciled unto God in one body by the cross" (Ephesians 2:16; 4:4), this unity is no mere option for God's children.

This work calls for the selfless love of 1 Corinthians 13; for the self-emptying mind of Philippians 2; for the unifying attitudes of Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 3. The call is biblical and basic. We must be *one* if the world is to be *won*.

My first contact with Jeff was during the time that he was a student preparing to preach in Harding University's School of Biblical Studies. Jeff was and is a splendid student and, I found, an able coworker. He is a fine preacher, an excellent song leader, and, most important, a dedicated follower of our Lord. In addition to active ministry during his school days, he has served well in Louisiana, Pennsylvania, and, now, in Shawnee, Oklahoma. He was chosen as one of the "Outstanding Young Men of America" for 1988.

I recommend his challenging work, *The Heart of Unity*, to all who value our restoration heritage and to all who long to see us "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

—Avon Malone  
Associate Professor of Bible  
Oklahoma Christian College

# Preface:

## A Statement of Purpose

Proper communication is one of the most difficult tasks. Communication is only complete when the receptor has received and understood the thoughts and intents of the sender. In the case of this work, I am the sender. You are the receptor. There is always the risk of being misunderstood. To guard against that possibility, let me begin with a definitive statement of purpose.

### *My Purpose Is Not . . .*

It is not to explore and define what is a matter of faith and what is a matter of expediency. It is not to try to settle any arguments over what is a matter of doctrine and what is a matter of opinion. It is not to produce a simplistic solution to a complex problem. It is not to stand in judgment over the convictions of sincere Christians.

### *My Purpose Is . . .*

It is to place the need for unity in the forefront of the minds of all believers. It is to encourage an attitude that will create practical unity. It is to strike that nerve which will resurrect champions for unity on the congregational level. It is to cause all believers to be dissatisfied concerning our current progress toward unity, thus creating the desire to excel in this area too. And most of all, it is to bring glory, honor, and praise to the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and Their church.



Human, uninspired words are often feeble in their attempt to communicate even the most noble of purposes. But knowing the purpose can sometimes aid in giving the benefit of the doubt to the one trying to communicate. As I try to communicate through this book, keep this statement of purpose in mind. Measure every word by it. Thus, you can be challenged. And perhaps God can use this book to glorify Himself through you. It is my earnest desire and prayer that this book will be a window through which we can all catch a glimpse of the beauty, power, and glory of true unity in Christ!

—Jeff Gardner  
Shawnee, Oklahoma

# Acknowledgments

I want to gratefully acknowledge the following men for their expertise, encouragement, and advice, which have served as great polishing agents for this writing: Eddie Cloer, Associate Professor of Bible, Harding University; Norman Gipson, Sunset School of Preaching; Mac Layton, North MacArthur church of Christ, Oklahoma City; Dr. Howard Norton, Chairman of the Bible Division, OCC; Bobby Parks, Assistant Director of Harding's School of Biblical Studies; and Dr. Neale Pryor, Vice President of Academic Affairs, Harding University.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Avon Malone, Associate Professor of Bible at OCC, and Dr. Don Shackelford, Professor of Bible at Harding University and Director of Harding University at Florence, Italy, for their going a second and third mile in assisting me in the refinement process of this work.

Great gratitude is given to five private investors, who shall remain nameless, without whom the printing of this publication would not have been possible.

A special thanks to Susan Cloer, of Typesetting, Etc., Searcy, Arkansas, and her fine staff of ladies who gave this work top priority in order to effect its timely publication.

Most of all, I acknowledge my appreciation to the Father, Son, and Spirit, who have given me this book through a study of *the Book*. May the writings of men never replace a fervent study of the Word of God!

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## Developing the Need

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Churches of Christ have traditionally been champions of the truth. Great strides have been made toward that end. Great pains have been taken to ensure the correctness of our approach in religious practice. We have many noble scholars who have committed themselves to the ferreting out of every possible desire of God for His church. I believe our approach is correct and to be commended.

But certainly we are not perfect. And I know we do not intend to claim perfection. Someone once said, "The biggest room in anyone's house is the room for improvement." There is always room for improvement, regardless of what success we may already enjoy. As I see it, we have a great need for improvement in our *practice* of unity. In our infancy as a movement in North America, that doctrine was maintained as a chief goal. And we have had some measure of success in reaching that goal. But in my

lifetime, I have seen us drift away from this all-important doctrine. Perhaps I can illustrate it.

Pick "Anytown, USA." It matters not where, for the story is often the same. The town is only large enough to support one or two strong congregations, yet therein one can find seven or eight. At first, there was only one. But one by one, for various but similar reasons, they began to divide. And there may not have been any real "knockdown-dragout" fights, but division occurred just the same. Some split off for racial reasons. Others left over "cooperation" issues. And still others began simply because someone became disgruntled with the way things were being done. And now, anytime someone gets bent out of shape a little, he will run and change his membership to congregation "A," "B," "C," or "D." And each time this happens a few are lost through the cracks.

Where is the unity in all of that? How much more could be done to glorify the Father if all could just get together and stay together and pool their resources? But brother "A" did not like what brother "B" did, so instead of staying and working it out, he decided to take his ball and go home. And because of the different splinter groups, he had somewhere to go. And brother "A" is happy for the moment. I suppose there is some consolation in that.

This happens in town after town. Some are well known. Others are obscure. And I understand that sometimes it is necessary to have some divisions in order to differentiate between those approved of God and those not. "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have

God's approval."<sup>1</sup> But this is the exception rather than the rule. Most of our divisions are because of attitudes, not real scriptural differences. And if we are to reach a world that is lost and dying at the hand of the devil, we must get together. "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."<sup>2</sup> Unity is essential to the spreading of a pure message. It is part of its purity. Without it, people may say, "We cannot hear what you say for what you are doing deafens us."

As I see it, the greatest need of the twentieth-century church is *unity*. It is not more liberal giving. It is not more soul saving. It is not more church attendance. It is not more membership involvement. It is not even more preachers and elders and deacons. These are real needs, but they are simply symptoms of a greater underlying need. *Unity*. When we have unity, the kind God wants, the kind Jesus prayed for, these other needs will be met.

My prayer is that this book will serve to motivate godly men and women to revive the plea for unity. To cause divine dissatisfaction with the present condition of the church. To raise up champions for unity who will lead us beside the still waters of peace. We have plenty of *pacemakers*. Where are the *peacemakers*? It will not be easy. Nor will it be cheap. But nothing worthwhile ever is. Every Christian has the potential to be a champion for Christ. Rise up and be a champion!

<sup>1</sup>1 Corinthians 11:19.

<sup>2</sup>John 17:23.

# 1

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## Unity Defined

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# 1

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## Introducing . . . *Unity!*

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### A SIMPLE DEFINITION

*Unity.* A beautiful sounding word. Everybody wants it. Churches of Christ claim it. Just what is it?

It is not just simply the opposite of being multiple. It is not just being connected at one point, tolerantly coexisting with another. Though a man and a woman are said to be united in marriage on their wedding day, they are not necessarily united. They can live in the same house, sleep in the same bed, eat together, raise children, and go to church together, yet not be united. The home can be shell-shocked with barrages of arguments. They may tolerate one another "for the kids' sakes," but they are not united. Therein is *union*, not *unity*.

Two tomcats can have their tails tied together, and some might say they are united. But what do they do? Fuss. Fight. Claw. And scratch. Therein is *union*,



not *unity*.

Look at the United States of America. Fifty states are all under one government. A great picture of unity, right? Wrong! One group of citizens is fussing about this. Another is fussing about that. Democrats. Republicans. Independents. They all want to rule. They all have different ideas. The majority will win. The rest will sit back and gripe. This is a country of *union*, not *unity*.

Real unity, the kind God wants for His church, is more than just tolerating one another. It is working together with the same sentiment, aim, and purpose. It does not mean that we will all agree on every issue and "ism." One who thinks we will ever do that is living in a dream world. As long as people are people, there will be disagreements. Even in areas that I may believe are clearly "cut-and-dried." What it does mean is that we will all divorce our pride for the sake of the "unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."<sup>1</sup> Our purpose is to save hell-bound people. Working together to that end is a practical picture of unity. Not for self-glorification. Not to make ourselves a name. But to elevate Jesus, the Christ. Therein is *unity*.

## RESTORATION REVISITED

The "Restoration Movement." Sounds nice. But what is it? What was its original intent? Has it become what its name implies? These are critical questions. Honest answers must be found.

<sup>1</sup>Ephesians 4:3.

The average church member would probably say our goal was to restore New Testament Christianity. To speak where the Bible speaks and to be silent where it is silent. To call Bible things by Bible names. To be Christians only, nothing more and nothing less. These are all good answers. And they are all right answers. But a key ingredient is often overlooked. *That ingredient is unity!*

I believe we, the heirs of the "Restoration Movement," are pursuing the right goals, but we are not pursuing all of them. Somewhere along the way, the pursuit of pure doctrine has been separated from the pursuit of pure unity. They cannot be separated, for pure unity is a part of the pure doctrine. And without it you do not have pure doctrine.

*Unity.* That was the original plan. That was the goal. In 1809, when Thomas Campbell made that famous statement, "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where they are silent, we are silent," he was thinking *unity*. Unity was the dream. "Back to the Bible" was the scheme. He was not wanting to start a church of Pharisees. He was wanting to unite all churches based upon the death of human creeds and the resurrection of the Great Heavenly Creed. In our straining of gnats, we have swallowed camels. In our striving after jots and tittles, we have lost the dream.

This dream was shared by some of Campbell's contemporaries. At a unity meeting in 1831, "Raccoon" John Smith said, "Let us, then, my brethren, be no longer Campbellites or Stonites, New Lights or Old Lights, or any other kind of lights, but let us come to the Bible, and the Bible alone, as the only book in the

world that can give us all the light we need.”<sup>2</sup> At that same unity meeting, Barton W. Stone confirmed that speculations destroy the unity of the church. Smith called for an end to division. Stone called for Christian unity by extending Smith his heart and his hand. *Unity was the battle-cry of the Restoration!* Not uniqueness. Not exclusiveness. Not “holier-than-thou”-ness. But *unity*.

Am I suggesting unity at the expense of truth? Not at all. The pursuit of unity can only be based on the standard of truth. Thus pure truth will result in unity. So if unity is not apparent, perhaps our truth is not pure.

What I am suggesting is that we revisit the restoration ideal. Rediscover its intent. It makes sense. And I believe it will work if we do not forget the dream: *Unity*. Jesus prayed for it.<sup>3</sup> The early church practiced it.<sup>4</sup> Paul preached it.<sup>5</sup> It warrants our *undivided* attention.

<sup>2</sup>John Augustus Williams, *Life of Elder John Smith* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Religious Book Service, n.d.), 454.

<sup>3</sup>John 17:20-23.

<sup>4</sup>Acts 4:32.

<sup>5</sup>1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1ff.

**THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How would *you* define *unity*?

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2. Discuss the difference between *union* and *unity*.

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3. What is our purpose as the people of God?

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4. What is our *traditional* goal in churches of Christ?

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5. How does that compare to the goal of the *Restoration* leaders?

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6. How can the pursuit of pure doctrine become separated from the pursuit of pure unity?

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## THE HEART OF UNITY

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7. Discuss the statement, "The pursuit of unity can only be based on the standard of truth."

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8. Study and discuss Christ's prayer for unity found in John 17:20-23.

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**Unity  
Demanded**

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# 2

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## Deity's Dream

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### "LET THERE BE ONE . . ."

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."<sup>1</sup> The creation unfolded through six magnificent days. Though from nothing He made everything, it was just all in a day's work. By His Word it happened. Chaos turned into cosmos. Ugliness became utopia. And then on the seventh day, He rested. It was a well deserved rest, for He had accomplished what no other could. And it was good. No, make that *very good*.

I wish I could have been there. To witness such awesomeness in action would be unforgettable. The

<sup>1</sup>Genesis 1:1-3.

tone of His voice. The twinkle in His eye. The expression on His face. *Think of it.* Perfect unity. Perfect harmony. Perfect peace.

In all this, I somehow sense God's dream for His church. Somewhere in His infinite nature I know He planned for His church to turn out like His creation. Chaos to cosmos. Ugliness to utopia. Perfect unity. Perfect harmony. Perfect peace. His eyes must have twinkled. His countenance must have lifted. He *must* have said, "Let there be one—body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, God, and Father," and there was one. I say that because the inspired apostle wrote, "*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*"<sup>2</sup> And prior to that, Paul proclaimed that a united church was in the eternal purpose of God. "His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this *one body* to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."<sup>3</sup>

The very nature of God demands that His church be one. "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace."<sup>4</sup> A divided church does not come from God. What God created *was one!* He delivered it to us in perfect condition. He has given us the keys of how to keep it that way. If the body of Christ is not united as the nature of God demands, the responsibility (or

<sup>2</sup>Ephesians 4:4-6; emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup>Ephesians 2:15-16; emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup>1 Corinthians 14:33.



irresponsibility) is ours. We have messed it up. Not God. He demands unity, and His demands are not unreasonable. "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome."<sup>5</sup>

So we teach it. One body. One Spirit. One hope. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God. And we *must* teach it. We cannot waver on one single grain of these truths. And, for the most part, we have succeeded in oneness. But there is one major failing. *The body is not one!* This demand, this command of God has not been heeded. The church has splintered. She has been brutally dismembered. We gasp in horror at the violence in the world. In Philadelphia, a man using the facade of Christianity abducted, tortured, and mutilated several beautiful women. He even ate some of them. He made them eat some of each other. The details are too gruesome to continue. Yet, do we not do the same thing? Labeling. Gossiping. Fussing. Fighting. Dividing. Often over pettiness. Paul warned the church in Galatia of what would happen. "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."<sup>6</sup> Speaking of the dominion of Satan, Jesus said, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand."<sup>7</sup> The same thing applies to the church. We are God's kingdom. His city. His household. If we stay divided, we will be ruined. If we do not repent of divisive propagation,

<sup>5</sup>1 John 5:3.

<sup>6</sup>Galatians 5:15.

<sup>7</sup>Matthew 12:25.

what Jesus said He would do to the church at Ephesus, He will do to us. "If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."<sup>8</sup> That can only mean we will fall from grace.

Notice that before Paul ever said there was one body, he discussed the ingredients of oneness. A worthy walk. Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Forbearance. Love. Effort.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps that is what we have forgotten. Perhaps we have tried to be one without including the ingredients of oneness. When they are included, unity will result. I know that because God said it. And He is the Father of truth, not lies. When unity exists, we will be able to spread the pure message like in the first century.<sup>10</sup> Until then, we are trying to spread a message which is not real in our lives. The world looks at us and laughs. People mock us. And the cross. And it is our fault. Do you want to see the kingdom prosper? Do you want to see the church grow? Do you want to see her last for generations to come? Then you must personally include the ingredients of oneness in your life.

Think of the twinkle in His eyes. The expression on His face. Think of the joy in His heart as He says, "Let there be one church, . . ." and it is so.

## HAPPY PEACEMAKERS

The greatest preacher who ever preached began

<sup>8</sup>Revelation 2:5.

<sup>9</sup>Ephesians 4:1-3.

<sup>10</sup>Colossians 1:6, 23.

the greatest sermon ever delivered by telling folks how to find genuine happiness.<sup>11</sup> The pursuit of happiness is the American dream. It was also the dream of first-century Jews. It has been the dream of mankind ever since he was banned from the utopia of Eden.

So the Master shares the keys of happiness. Poor-ness of spirit. Godly mourning. Meekness. Insatiable appetite for right. Mercifulness. Purity of heart. Maker of peace. Persecuted for rightness. Insulted for Christ. That is hardly the list compiled by the god of this world, but what does *he* know about happiness?! The Creator of all knows how His creation can be happy. *Truly* happy. All of these keys are important and necessary. Volumes could and have been written about each one. Such is not my purpose. I want you to notice just one key. "Blessed [a holy way of saying happy, JG] are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."<sup>12</sup> I like the way another translation words it: "People who make peace will be happy, because **they** will be called the sons of God."<sup>13</sup> Do you ever wonder why there are not *more* happy Christians? Maybe it is because there are not *more* makers and keepers of peace.

We need men and women who will pursue true happiness by being peacemakers! Have you ever wondered why Jesus said that peacemakers will be called "sons of God"? Because the primary mission of

<sup>11</sup>Matthew 5:3-12.

<sup>12</sup>Matthew 5:9.

<sup>13</sup>The Simple English™ Bible New Testament (Dallas, Tex.: International Bible Translators, Inc., 1981). Permission secured.

the Son of God was to be a peacemaker. For me to be a peacemaker means I take on one of the primary characteristics of Christ-likeness. Someone says, "Wait a minute! I remember a verse somewhere that says Jesus did not come to bring peace, but a sword. What about that?" In the context of that verse, Jesus was talking about being a source of division between those who chose to follow Him and those who chose not to. He was not advocating division among followers.<sup>14</sup>

From man's first brush with the devil, there was a dividing barrier between man and his God. It is called sin. "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you."<sup>15</sup> *We were God's enemies!* Jesus came to change all that by bringing peace. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>16</sup> Read that again. *Because of Jesus we now have peace with God!* "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. . . . When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son."<sup>17</sup> That is why Jesus came, to restore peace to our relationship with God. "He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near."<sup>18</sup>

Now, think about your own life. Your *own* sins.

<sup>14</sup>Matthew 10:34-38.

<sup>15</sup>Isaiah 59:2.

<sup>16</sup>Romans 5:1.

<sup>17</sup>Romans 5:6, 10.

<sup>18</sup>Ephesians 2:17.

What all have you done to God to push Him away? What have you said that offended Him? What have you failed to do that alienated Him? Yet, you have peace with Him. Why? Because of the Prince of Peace. If we can live at peace with God with all of our faults, *why in the name of common sense can't we live at peace with one another?!*

I believe we can. But you are going to have to be a peacemaker. It will take work. Selflessness. Laying down our lives for the sake of one another. Killing our pride, plans, and preconceived ideas. That is the way Jesus did it. It hurt. But the end result was worth it to Him. At times, being a peacemaker will hurt you too. But the end result will be worth it. You will be truly happy. You will be a prince (or princess) of peace. You will be called a son of God. Be a happy peacemaker! "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Romans 12:18.

**THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What is God's dream for His church?

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2. Is the church where you live fulfilling this dream of God? Why or why not?

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3. How can Christians be involved in spiritual cannibalism?

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4. Discuss the ingredients of oneness and how you can practice them.

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5. Define true happiness.

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6. Why will peacemakers be happy? Why will they be called "sons of God"?

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DEITY'S DREAM

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7. Discuss why we cannot seem to live at peace with one another.

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8. List eight positive actions you can take to be a better peacemaker, thus helping to fulfill the dream of God for oneness in His church.

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# 3

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## The Heart of Unity

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There are a few texts in the Bible that cut right to the heart of a matter. Such is the case of this text: “Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind.”<sup>1</sup> This is not a suggestion. It is a demand! It is a demand made to *all of you*. Live in harmony!<sup>2</sup>

In our pursuit of unity, we have focused on the external. “Get uniformity in the externals and we will be united.” History has shown us that does not work. It creates a society of legalists. Modern day Pharisees. Jesus was opposed to legalism. He scathingly rebuked the Pharisees on numerous occasions. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more

<sup>1</sup>1 Peter 3:8, RSV.

<sup>2</sup>NIV.



## THE HEART OF UNITY

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important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”<sup>3</sup> The Pharisees and the teachers of the law may have been right in their external religion. But they had forgotten the matters of the *heart*—justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

If we are ever going to restore the New Testament church, we *must* get back to their pattern. Not just the pattern of Campbell and Stone (though that is noble and good), but the pattern of Peter and Paul. And it includes more than the legal side. It also includes a certain kind of *heart*.

In 1 Peter 3:8, the Holy Spirit reveals to us the *heart of unity*. Peter lists three kinds of *heart* we must have in order to produce the kind of unity God wants in His church.

### A LOVING HEART

It is not easy. It is often quite hard. Sometimes it seems downright impossible! But we must love our brethren. With all their warts and worries, hangnails and halitosis, insults and idiosyncrasies. True biblical love is a decision. It is a decision to seek the best in and for another person. We may not always *feel* warm and fuzzy about them. But we must still always love them.

Love empowers one to overlook matters of opinion. Love does not take issue with every point of

<sup>3</sup>Matthew 23:23.

difference. Love even enables one to ignore personal offenses from others. "Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers all wrongs."<sup>4</sup> "Love covers over a multitude of sins."<sup>5</sup> *We must be in the sin-covering business!* And all that means is we have learned how to love Christians. I am not suggesting we should ignore sin. Deal with sin, but then cover it up and forget it. Bury the hatchet *and* the handle. Never bring it to remembrance again. Two men were discussing their likes and dislikes concerning their respective wives. "When my wife and I get into an argument," said one, "she gets so historical I can't do a thing with her!" "Don't you mean she gets *hysterical*?" asked the other. "No! She gets *historical*—she brings up everything I ever did!"

How often we do that today! Love keeps no record of wrongs.<sup>6</sup> Love bears and endures *all things*.<sup>7</sup> And we must have this kind of love for our fellow Christians if we are ever going to have the *heart of unity*.

Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell were two great pioneers in the American Restoration Movement. They had this kind of love for one another. Stone recorded this statement about Campbell in his autobiography: "I will not say there are no faults in brother Campbell; but, that there are fewer, perhaps, in him, than any man I know on earth; and over these few my love would throw a veil, and hide

<sup>4</sup>Proverbs 10:12.

<sup>5</sup>1 Peter 4:8.

<sup>6</sup>1 Corinthians 13:5.

<sup>7</sup>1 Corinthians 13:7.

## THE HEART OF UNITY

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them from view forever.”<sup>8</sup> What a tremendous attitude! Would to God that we would all say that of one another!

Let me tell you a beautiful story about *loving hearts*. This story took place in the Central States. He was a talented preacher of the good news (let’s call him Sam). Sam loved the lost with a passion I have rarely seen. You could not even carry on a conversation with him without it being centered on Christ, the church, sermonizing, or teaching the lost. But then, out of the clear blue, the devil grabbed him and sifted him like wheat. It was another woman. He shortly realized his sin and repented. There was talk of divorce. He lost his position with that congregation. His world was collapsing. But then love took over. His family was reunited. The church forgave. He began preaching occasionally for the same church. A few weeks ago, he went back to work for them full-time. And it is all because those Christians had learned to have *a loving heart*. The sin was not condoned! It was dealt with severely. But then, it was covered up. Praise God for the church of *loving hearts*!

When, free from envy, scorn, and pride,  
Our wishes all above,  
Each can his brother’s failings hide,  
And show a brother’s love.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Earl I. West, *The Search for the Ancient Order*, Vol. 1 (Nashville, Tenn.: Gospel Advocate Publishing Co., 1974), 32.

<sup>9</sup>J. Swain, *How Sweet, How Heavenly, is the Sight*, stanza 3.

## A SYMPATHETIC AND TENDER HEART

Sharing another's load. That is sympathy and tenderness. One word for the whole concept is *compassion*. Sympathy just means to feel their joy and pain. Compassion puts flesh on the feeling. It does something to help.

Our sympathy and compassion *must* be displayed with *action*. We understand that faith without works is dead. We have just about worn that one out in our arguments. The Spirit says, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."<sup>10</sup> Just as faith without action is dead, feeling sorry for someone without doing something to help is dead. Meaningless. Worthless. Hypocritical.

In our fast-paced society, people are showing less and less compassion for others. We hustle. We bustle. Perhaps someone else will do it. Don't have time right now. Here's an old one we have all heard. Once upon a time, there were four men named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was a brother in need. There was a sister who was hurting. Everybody was asked to take care of it. But Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it. But Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about it because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought that Anybody could do it, and Nobody

<sup>10</sup>James 2:15-17.

realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody and Nobody did the job that Anybody could have done in the first place. And the brother was still in need. The sister was still hurting.

I am not sure where in Texas it was. I just know it is a true story. One of those horrendous downpours was at its peak. Streets were flooded. Cars were stalling. The folks with the four-wheel drives were doing okay. She must have been in her eighties. Her car had stalled in the middle of about three feet of water. Not knowing what to do, she knew she could not stay there. So she got out in the downpour, hiked her dress up above her knees, and tried to make it to dry ground. About that time, a brother in Christ in a nice, dry four-wheel drive was driving by. He had other things to do. Places he needed to be. But conscience stabbed his heart. So he made the block and came back. Cracking his window, he shouted to the little old lady, "Can I help you with anything?" She quickly retorted, "Not from in there!" He learned a lesson in real compassion. If he was going to be like his Master he claimed to love and serve, he was going to have to get wet. And he did.

In the rat-race, we often forget about others. Maybe they are not as productive. Perhaps they become a burden. They may even be just downright annoying. But that is no reason to put them on a shelf and forget. The following poem appeared in *Grey's Hospital Gazette*, the newsletter of the Greenwich District Hospital, London, England. It was written by a woman in a geriatric ward and found in her locker after her death by staff persons who

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did not even know she was capable of writing.  
Listen to the words of a woman who had been forgotten.

What do you see, nurses, what do you see?  
Are you thinking when you are looking  
at me—

A crabbed old woman, not very wise,  
Uncertain of habit with far away eyes.  
Who dribbles her food and makes no reply  
When you say in a loud voice,  
“I do wish you’d try.”

I’ll tell you who I am, as I sit here so still,  
As I rise at your bidding, as I eat  
at your will.

I’m a small child of 10 with a father  
and mother,  
Brothers and sisters who love one another.  
A bride soon at 20 my heart gives a leap  
Remembering the vows that I promised  
to keep.

At 25 now I have young of my own  
Who need me to build a secure happy home.  
At 50 once more babies play around  
my knee,  
Again we know children, my loved one  
and me.

Dark days are upon me, my husband  
is dead;  
I look to the future, I shudder with dread.  
My young are all busy rearing young  
of their own  
And I think of the years and the love  
that I’ve known.

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I'm an old woman now and nature is cruel,  
'Tis her jest to make old age look like a fool.  
The body it crumbles, grace and vigor  
    depart,  
There is now a stone where I once had  
    a heart.  
But inside this old carcass a young girl  
    still dwells  
And now and again my battered heart  
    swells.

I remember the joys, I remember the pain,  
And I'm loving and living all over again.  
And I think of the years all too few—  
    gone too fast,  
And accept the stark fact that nothing  
    will last.  
So open your eyes, nurses, open and see,  
Not a crabbed old woman, look closer—  
    see me!

There are people all around us with hurts and needs that we need to be soothing and helping. What does all this have to do with unity? If we busy ourselves with compassion for others, we will be too busy to fuss and fight over our differences. When we help those who don't know Jesus yet, we will be able to introduce Him to them. Thus, we will have unity, and the world will be won for Christ. That is the way Jesus did it. He helped; then He taught.

The compassion of Heaven is what put Christ on the cross. We were lost. Undone. Helpless. Satan was tormenting us relentlessly. We could not help our-

selves. God could have said, "That's too bad! I'll pray for them and hope it works out." But that is not what He did. He took the initiative and decided to do something about it. The Godhead worked out a plan. The plan needed a volunteer. Jesus said, "Here I am— . . . I have come to do your will, O God."<sup>11</sup> So He came. He lived. He loved. He hurt. He helped. He died. For you. For me. That is compassion. That is the *heart of unity*.

### A HUMBLE HEART

*Humility!* How I long for it! How it eludes me! That is the way it works. The more you pursue it, the more it eludes. When you think you finally have it, that is when you don't. Once there was a very humble gentleman in a local congregation. The Christians there wanted to honor him for his humility. What an example he was! They presented him one Sunday morning with a button which read, "The Humblest Member of the Church." The problem was he wore it and they had to take it back. When we acknowledge our humility we are in fact bursting with pride. One preacher was heard introducing himself as "just a humble gospel preacher." He may have meant well, but he had missed the point.

What is a *humble heart*? The Greek word translated in this text as *humble* was used in some first century papyri to refer to the Nile River at its lowest point

<sup>11</sup>Hebrews 10:7.



during the year.<sup>12</sup> The root of this word is used in Luke 3:5, which quotes the prophet Isaiah, “. . . every mountain and hill made low.”<sup>13</sup> The context of that quotation painted the picture of a servant preparing the road ahead for his coming master. Thus, he would level every mountain and hill at their base so as to remove any possible obstacle from the path. To have a humble heart means we are at our lowest point in our own eyes, much like the Nile. It means we must “level” ourselves. We must empty ourselves of pride and wanting our own way. Paul stated it like this: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”<sup>14</sup> Humility is not to think meanly of oneself. It is not thinking of self at all. It is this kind of humility that will promote the *heart of unity*.

Healthy Christian humility comes from the recognition of two facts. Number one is our *sense of creatureliness*. We are totally dependent upon God for everything. Life. Air. Water. Food. Jobs. Clothing. Shelter. The list is endless. If God did not provide these things for us, we would not be. That’s a humbling thought. Number two is our *standard of comparison*.

<sup>12</sup>James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 454.

<sup>13</sup>“Humble,” in *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, ed. W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr. (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1984), 568.

<sup>14</sup>Philippians 2:3-4.

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Sometimes we can look at "brother Barely-makes-it-to-church" and feel pretty good about ourselves. After all, we may be there every time the doors open. Or teach Bible classes. Or conduct Bible studies. Or preach. Or "Eld." Or "Deac." Or do a host of other "spiritual" things. Compared to him we may feel pretty great. But wait a minute! Our standard of comparison is *Jesus the Christ!* Not "brother Barely." But sinless perfection. The Prince of Peace. The Mighty God. The Redeemer of man. The Pioneer of faith. How do you measure up to Him? Another humbling thought! When these two facts are recognized, we are *compelled* to humble ourselves.

To become fully united, we must put on the *heart of unity*. A loving heart. A sympathetic and tender heart. A humble heart. It is a difficult task, but not impossible. We can do it. It starts with you. It starts with me. Make the decision. Make that commitment. Be committed to the pure doctrine of Christ, but don't forget the *heart of unity*.

**THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Memorize 1 Peter 3:8, and pray daily that God will help you do what it says.

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2. Discuss the shortcomings of the way we have tried to pursue unity in the past.

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3. Why is there no future in digging up the past?

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4. Discuss some practical applications to Proverbs 10:12 and 1 Peter 4:8.

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5. What is the difference between *sympathy* and *compassion*?

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6. Discuss ways you can show more compassion to others. How will that enhance the unity of the body of Christ?

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7. Define *humility*. When can one know he/she is humble? How can humility cause greater unity?

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8. Write yourself a contract stating that you will put on the "heart of unity," and then write out specific ways you will do it. Keep this and read it often.

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# 4

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## Lift Up the Christ

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### A SNAKE ON A STICK

They were grumbling and griping. They were mad at God. They were mad at Moses. They were basically mad at the world. "No water!" "No bread!" They detested that angel food.<sup>1</sup> The camp of Israel was divided and in disarray. Then came the snakes. *Venomous snakes!* And they were biting everybody. That was the reward for grumbling and griping. Sure and sudden death! So they cried out to Moses for mercy, confessing their sin. And Moses prayed for the people.

God told him to make a snake and put it on a stick. And those who had been bitten by the snakes could focus their attention on the snake on the stick and live. If they had continued to grumble and gripe, they

<sup>1</sup>Psalm 78:25.

would not have noticed the snake on the stick, and they would have continued to die. Healing and life came only when they swallowed their pride and gazed at the giver of healing and life.<sup>2</sup>

*A snake on a stick.* It sounds like a medieval shish kebab. But in reality it is a picture of the Christian's source of healing and life. And it demands unity of those who would be healed and live. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."<sup>3</sup> "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."<sup>4</sup> Jesus is talking about His death on the cross. He is saying that He is going to be the "snake on a stick" by which all men can be healed of the venomous bite of sin and Satan. Everyone who truly believes in Christ crucified will live. And it is this central truth, Christ on the cross, which is to be God's drawing power for all men.

Christians divide because, as they forge through the wilderness of life, they begin to grumble and gripe. Sometimes it is at one another. Sometimes it is at God. "Why did this happen to me?" "What did I do to deserve this?" They become dissatisfied with the church. They get mad at God and one another. And the distraction of it all causes them to lose sight of the giver of healing and life: *Jesus Christ and Him crucified!* Through His Word, Jesus is telling you and me to refocus our attention on Him and the cross. A

<sup>2</sup>Numbers 21:4-9.

<sup>3</sup>John 3:14-15.

<sup>4</sup>John 12:32.

divided church has forgotten the cross. A divided brotherhood has lost sight of the great Spiritual Magnet. Look at Christ crucified, and we will all be drawn simultaneously to *Him!* And the closer we get to Him, the closer we will be to one another. Brothers and sisters who are gazing at the cross *cannot* divide. It is a spiritual impossibility!

The divided church at Corinth had forgotten the cross, so Paul wrote, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I *resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*"<sup>5</sup> Why didn't Paul emphasize the necessity of fancy arguments and human logic? Why didn't he teach them to contend earnestly for the issues? Because he knew those things would divide. He knew they would destroy the church. So he taught them to focus on the cross. "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup>

Manmade solutions to sin do not work. When the devil penetrates our lives with his venom, our only hope is to look to the cross for healing and eternal life. Manmade solutions to division will not work either. Roman Catholicism said to make everyone subject to one man or one congregation and the problem of division would be solved. It didn't work. Protestantism said to formulate a creed and unity would result. That didn't work. Churches of Christ came along and said to simply follow the Bible and

<sup>5</sup>1 Corinthians 2:1-2; emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup>1 Corinthians 3:11.

you will have unity. That has not worked either because it has not been truly followed. We must first and foremost establish in the hearts and minds of every believer that Jesus Christ lifted up from the earth is God's drawing and uniting power! When the devil penetrates Christ's church with his venom of division, our only hope is to look to the cross for healing and eternal life. Focus on Him. Elevate Him. Study Him. Commit to Him. He is the barrier breaker.

Some today say churches are not growing and are dying because of a lack of commitment. I beg to differ. There is plenty of commitment in the Lord's church; it is just misplaced. I recently read an article by Pat Peck, a Lambda graduate of Harding University's School of Biblical Studies, entitled, "Whatever Happened to Commitment?" Brother Peck wrote, "No shortage of commitment exists. The problem is misplaced commitment. . . . For many, . . . our primary commitment is to self. When this is the case, all other commitments take the rumble seat. It manifests itself in Hedonism, Materialism, Humanism, Skepticism, and Schism." Notice that last "ism." *Sch-ism*. That is another word for *division*. When we focus our commitment upon ourselves and fail to focus on the cross, there will be division. *Self* must be dethroned and *Christ* enthroned.

I know of a church which has just divided. Actually, they have been divided for years, but they maintained residence together. This church is a very "cause"-oriented bunch. For the last several years, they have united for various "causes." Renovating of their building. Padding the pews. Firing preachers.



The last "cause" was the settling of the "marriage, divorce, and remarriage" question. This served as a catalyst for the final division. These are not bad people. I know them all and love them every one. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They *have* commitment. And usually it is focused on a "good cause." But they have never grasped the importance of the "greatest cause": *sharing Jesus Christ crucified with their friends and neighbors*. Their commitment is not focused on the cross. The result? In the mid-sixties, they were a growing congregation in a small town approaching two hundred in membership. Today an attendance of fifty is an accomplishment. Why? Misplaced commitment.

Someone once said, "Give me a hundred men who fear nothing but God, who hate nothing but sin, and who know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and I will shake the world." I would say, "Amen," except for the phrase, "and I will shake the world." *God* will shake the world. He may use you and me in the process, but the power is in the cross.

A snake on a stick. It seems kind of foolish, doesn't it? But that is the beauty of the wisdom of God. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."<sup>7</sup> Some time ago, John Banister wrote these words:

The cross of Christ is the greatest of all paradoxes. It was the most tragic event in the history of the world, yet the most

<sup>7</sup>1 Corinthians 1:18.

wonderful thing that ever happened. It was the saddest spectacle man ever beheld, yet out of it came the greatest joy. The cross was Satan's greatest victory and Christ's most stunning defeat; (but at the same time) the greatest defeat Satan ever suffered and the most glorious victory Christ ever won . . . . The cross was the darkest hour in history, yet it . . . was the means by which Christ really became the "light of the world." . . . The cross, from the human standpoint, is foolishness, yet it is a revelation of the highest wisdom of God.<sup>8</sup>

Christ is truly the light of the world. But have we placed Him under a bushel in our lives and in our faith? Place Him on a stand, that He may give light to all the world, and so that the world may know that God sent Him and loves them even as He loves the Christ.<sup>9</sup> Satan is destroying this world. He is crumbling our nation. He has divided the church. Our only hope is to swallow our pride and fix our gaze upon "a snake on a stick."

### A CASE OF PREACHERITIS

"Preacheritis" is a spiritual disease caused by a failure to focus on the cross. Consider the following scenarios.

<sup>8</sup>David Roper, *Jesus Christ and Him Crucified* (Broken Arrow, Okla.: Christian Communications, Inc., 1976), 57-58.

<sup>9</sup>Read Matthew 5:14-16; John 17:20-23.

***A Scenario***

A new preacher moves into a town. The church he works with falls deeply in love with him. His converts are dedicated to him. He works hard and really tries to serve those around him. Then comes the day he decides he must relocate. After he is gone, church attendance drops sharply. New converts are lost to the wind. What is the problem? *A case of preacheritis.*

***Another Scenario***

The preacher must be away next Sunday. Great care has been taken to secure the services of a guest preacher. When Sunday arrives, several of the regular members are absent. Where are they? On vacation? Are they ill? What is the problem? *Another case of preacheritis.*

***Yet Another Scenario***

This town has three or four congregations. A new, dynamic evangelist comes to one of them. Word spreads concerning his ability to expound the Word and captivate the audience. Slowly but surely, the other congregations begin to lose members. Do they die? Are they turning "Benedict Arnold" on God? No, they are moving their membership to the congregation with the new, dynamic evangelist. What is the problem? Are "their" preachers teaching error? What is the *real* problem? *Yet another case of preacheritis.*

***Still Yet Another Scenario***

This town is like the previous town—several congregations. A few families get mad at the preacher of one congregation. Suddenly, that congregation shrinks and the others begin to swell. Are the others gaining evangelistic momentum? Have new lost

souls been found? Are they doing more to seek and save than the one that has shrunk? Not likely. What is the problem? *Still yet another case of preacheritis.*

### ***A Final Scenario***

An issue arises in a congregation which defies solution. People begin to choose sides. "I think the preacher is right." "But brother 'Solve-it-all' says *this*, and I believe him!" "I disagree with both of you. I read after brother 'Contender-for-the-issues,' and this is what he says. . . !" "You are all three wrong! I speak where the Bible speaks, and it says \_\_\_\_\_." Shortly after this heated debate, there is a church split. Who is right? Who is wrong? That depends upon whom you ask. Why did they divide? What is the problem? *A final case of preacheritis.*

### ***Preacheritis***

It is a deadly spiritual disease which infects many disciples of Christ. It manifests itself in many devilish ways. To my scenarios you could no doubt add many more. And the conclusion of them all would be the same—the dividing and destroying of the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

What is the cure for preacheritis? How can we conquer this devastating spiritual disease? The apostle Paul shares through inspiration a first-century scenario wherein I believe we can find a solution.

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. My brothers, some from Chloe's household

have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: 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?<sup>10</sup>

The obvious answer to those questions is, "No!" What was the problem? *They had a case of preacheritis.*

Notice the *demand* for unity that Paul made. "I appeal to you in the *name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" An appeal cannot get any stronger than that. Notice that the text implies that even claiming to follow *Christ* can be wrong if the attitude of the "self-claimed" followers is quarrelsome. "The Lord's servant must not quarrel."<sup>11</sup>

In a word, the solution to preacheritis is the cross of Christ. I cannot expound on this truth any more eloquently than Paul, so listen to his grounding of this truth:

... For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, *lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were in-

<sup>10</sup>1 Corinthians 1:10-13.

<sup>11</sup>2 Timothy 2:24.

fluent; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. . . . Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know *nothing* while I was with you *except Jesus Christ and him crucified*. . . . so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. *Indeed, you are still not ready*. You are still worldly. For since there is *jealousy and quarreling* among you, are you not *worldly*? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? *Only servants*, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but *God made it grow*. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is *anything*, but only God, who makes things grow.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a

foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? *If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.*

. . . So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "Do not go beyond what is written." *Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.*<sup>12</sup>

Preacheritis can be cured by properly applying the cross of Jesus Christ. A preacher is just a servant. Nothing more! What good he is able to do comes from God's power, not his own. Faith must be in the word of the cross, *not the preacher!* Jealousy and quarreling are simply signs of worldliness and immaturity. If anyone destroys God's temple (His church in this context), God will destroy him. Such is the end

<sup>12</sup>1 Corinthians 1:17, 26-27, 31; 2:1-2, 5; 3:1-7, 10-11, 16-17, 21-23; 4:6; emphasis mine.

of those caught up in the disease of preacheritis. To practice preacheritis is to "go beyond what is written." When the cross is understood and applied to my life, I will not choose sides with men, but with God.

Let us kill this dreaded spiritual disease before it destroys what is left of the temple of God. Resolve to be no disciple of any man, save *the man Christ Jesus*. Lift up the "snake on a stick." *Death* to the scenarios of division!



**THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss the similarities between the "snake on a stick" and the "Son on the stick."

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2. What is a major cause of division in our churches?

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3. Discuss ways we can have misguided commitment.

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4. What is our only hope for a cure of division?

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5. Define and discuss the spiritual disease of "preacheritis."

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6. What are the symptoms of preacheritis?

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7. What can you do in a practical way to prevent preacheritis from spreading?

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8. What is the only way this spiritual virus can be destroyed?

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# 5

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## Keep Your Opinions To Yourself!

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That seems to be the gist of Romans 14. "As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, *but not for disputes over opinions*. . . . The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God."<sup>1</sup> One sure-fire way to divide a church is to impose your opinions on another. *Sharing* of opinions is fine. *Binding* of opinions is a whole different subject. It is closely akin to *legalism*.

Many of us are like the bumper sticker, "When I want your opinion I'll give it to you!" For some reason, most are not content with just *sharing* an opinion. The other person is expected to agree. And if he doesn't . . . look out! Our opinions are diverse. And the list is endless. No one congregation can totally agree on every area of opinion. You might say they have some "gray" areas. They are not all cut-and-

<sup>1</sup>Romans 14:1, 22; RSV; emphasis mine.

dried. All questions have not been answered. That makes some nervous. And *that* is when they begin to bind *their* personal opinion. And *that* is when *division* begins.

The problem in the Roman church was brethren with diverse opinions. And why shouldn't they be diverse? After all, they came from diverse backgrounds. The church basically consisted of two groups—Jew and Greek. One was converted from Judaism, the other from paganism. Each had personal convictions and opinions which they brought into Christianity from their prior beliefs. This caused friction because each thought the other was wrong in what he was doing. "If you don't do it my way, it is unscriptural!"

The Greeks refused to eat certain meats. Particularly, meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. To them, it indicated participation in and approval of idolatry. The Jews did not see it that way. They had no problem, for they knew the idol really was not a god, and the meat had not been desecrated.<sup>2</sup> Besides, it was about half the price of the other meat in the market. So, apparently, a brotherhood crisis existed over whether or not it was acceptable to eat a pagan's meat.

It did not stop there. The Jews wanted to continue to reverence the Passover. This was a sacred and historical day. It reminded them of the grand day when God delivered them from Egyptian bondage

<sup>2</sup>Read 1 Corinthians 8 for more information on this problem.

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and spared their firstborn. But to the Greeks, the Passover was just like any other day. They probably even went to work on that day. This incensed the Jews, for they could not understand how anyone who was "spiritually minded" would fail to consider this day sacred. So we see the first-century church divided over two opinions that did not even originate from Christianity in the first place. And it was a major crisis.

What was the solution? What wise answer did the inspired apostle write? In a nutshell, he said, "Keep your opinions to yourself!" I'm serious. It is in Romans 14. Look it up. If you don't want to look it up, read it here.

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, . . .

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord, and gives thanks to God.

. . . For the kingdom of God is not a mat-

ter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, . . .

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food [opinion, JG]. . . .

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.<sup>3</sup>

Is Paul saying there is no absolute truth? Absolutely not! Here is his point: Allow diversity in matters of opinion! It is totally acceptable on some subjects if we do not see everything eye to eye. If it is not a matter of salvation and condemnation, give it a rest. Do not divide the body over it, for the kingdom of God is not a matter of opinions, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let us then make every effort to do what leads to *peace* and *mutual edification*. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of opinions!<sup>4</sup>

I never cease to be amazed at some of the silly arguments we get into. One brother was telling me about visiting a sister congregation during their gospel meeting. I asked, "How was it?" He replied, "Fine, except they sang unscripturally." I was astonished! I had been there the night before, and it seemed perfectly biblical to me. No pianos or anything! I asked him to explain what he meant. He explained, "They did not use song books." He was serious! I could not believe it.

<sup>3</sup>Romans 14:1-3, 5-6, 17, 19-20, 22.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Romans 14:17-20.

## KEEP YOUR OPINIONS TO YOURSELF!

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Just a few months ago, a fine, hard-working, lost-seeking, soul-saving brother called me with a question. He wanted to know if there was any biblical precedent for private baptisms, meaning at a time other than the public assembly. I instantly referred him to Acts 8 and the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch. When I asked him why, this is what I learned: Some of his local brethren were upset with him for baptizing five people on different occasions at a time other than the regular assembly! They claimed it was unscriptural and that those baptisms *were not valid!*

Christian friends, when will we ever stop this silliness?!? There is nothing to be gained by such irresponsible opinion pushing. Paul had some good advice for Timothy which we all need to heed:

Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. . . . Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.<sup>5</sup>

May God help us all to come to *our* senses and

<sup>5</sup>2 Timothy 2:14, 23-26.

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repent of "opinionitis." It is a trap of the devil we must escape if we are ever going to pronounce death to division. When we quarrel over opinions, we are in essence doing the devil's will by destroying and ruining the church. My challenge to you is to do your part to make peace, not war, in the kingdom of God. Focus not on our differences of opinion, but on what we know is right beyond a shadow of a doubt. Maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace by simply *keeping your opinions to yourself!* This is demanded by the Scriptures. Only a united church will save a divided world.



**THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss the differences between opinions and matters of truth.

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2. Why does it seem to be so hard to distinguish between the two?

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3. What is it about human nature that makes us want everyone to agree with *us*?

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4. What can you do to develop more tolerance for others in areas of diversity?

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5. Discuss the fact that having opinions is okay, but it is the binding of those opinions on others that is wrong.

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6. What is "opinionitis"?

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7. Do you suffer from it?

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8. Discuss some matters of opinion you have been guilty of trying to bind on others. Decide to repent of it today.

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# 6

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## Synchronization Therapy

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It was a most important mission. The twelve brave men had been on many missions before, but they all paled in comparison. Many months of planning had led to this moment. Just two hours ago they had parachuted behind enemy lines. Their stomachs were queasy with excitement. It would not be much longer before the daring rescue attempt would take place. The silence was deafening. Their hearts throbbed in their ears so loudly they were sure the enemy could hear. The commander summoned the other eleven men. "At exactly 2100 hours you must all be in your positions. The explosives will detonate at 2110. That gives us exactly 10 minutes to scale the walls and achieve the objective. Any questions? Good! Synchronize your watches. It is exactly 2030 hours. Let's go!"

Our twelve heroes move with the precision and timing of a well-oiled machine. Six POW's are res-

cued and reunited with their country and families. No lives are lost. The mission is an overwhelming success.

Sounds a bit like the late show, doesn't it? What do you suppose was the secret of their success? The men? The planning? An easy mission? A weaponless enemy? None of the above! The secret of their success was their *synchronization*. The timing was right. All the planning in the world would have been futile if they had not worked together. Experienced men or not would have made little difference if the timing had been off. At the heart of this imaginary rescue is a lesson that will rescue the Lord's church from failure.

*We must get synchronized!* Our mission is the greatest the world has ever known. We are not just rescuing men from perishing from the earth. We are rescuing them from eternal death. Our enemy is a most formidable foe. His power, cleverness, and alertness are not to be underestimated, else the mission will surely fail. We have many men and women who are candidates for the rescue mission. They are some of the most talented in the world. Many reside in each and every congregation. God has promised to never fail or forsake us.<sup>1</sup> Jesus has promised to be with us always.<sup>2</sup> The Holy Spirit has given us the greatest arsenal of weaponry.<sup>3</sup> The odds of victory are totally in our favor. Yet we are failing to fulfill our mission. Why? Because we have failed to *synchronize!*

<sup>1</sup>Hebrews 13:5.

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 28:20.

<sup>3</sup>Ephesians 6:13-18.

We must learn to cooperate. None of us can accomplish our God-given task alone. It takes teamwork. A lack of congregational cooperation is one of Satan's most powerful weapons in his fight against the kingdom of Christ. He knows that if he can cause some to be uncooperative in congregational pursuits, he can paralyze the body. What if our imaginary heroes had decided they would each go it alone, work their own plans, and do it according to their own timetable? Death would have overtaken them, and the mission would have failed.

The human body illustrates this point well. What would happen if your hand said to your mouth, "I don't like your taste in food. And besides that, all I do is get messy and watch you enjoy each bite. From now on, you'll have to feed yourself"? You would soon starve. What if your legs said to your head, "We are tired of giving you a free ride. All you do is sit up there and enjoy the view. From now on, we don't walk"? You would be crippled. What if your eyelids said to your eyes, "We are tired of blinking at your every beck and call, so from now on, between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. we will not blink"? You would have a terrible case of sore eyes and maybe even go blind. Well, what if you refuse to cooperate with the rest of the body of Christ? You will hinder it in every way. You will starve spiritually. The body will be crippled. It will cause some to be spiritually blind. You will be a stumbling block. You will make the kingdom fail and fall, and you will break the heart of Jesus.

This analogy of the church to your body is very biblical. In fact, it is the very point Paul was trying to

stress to the Romans and the Corinthians. Read what he said to them:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. . . . Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. . . . Live in harmony with one another.<sup>4</sup>

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. . . . As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” . . . God has combined the members of the body . . . so that

<sup>4</sup>Romans 12:4-5, 10, 16.

there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. . . .

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.<sup>5</sup>

I understand that the major emphasis in the above passages had to do with some members of the body of Christ thinking they were superior to others due to their “showy” talents. And some felt inferior due to their “modest” talents. Paul is telling them to quit dividing over who is more important. However, the bottom line seems to be about cooperation, *synchronization*. Everybody has their job to do. Each one must cooperate with the other in order to accomplish the big job—*saving hell-bound sinners*. If we are fussing and fighting or grumbling and griping, a world will go to hell, and we won’t even notice.

Why aren’t we more cooperative? Why can’t we seem to get synchronized? Do you want me to be honest and blunt? It is because of pride. Pride causes some people to get their noses out of joint over anything and everything that is ever done or planned. Nothing ever pleases them. They grumble and gripe and complain about it all. That is, unless it was *their* plan or idea. What ever happened to Philippians 2:14-16? It is still there.

Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which

<sup>5</sup>1 Corinthians 12:12-16, 20-21, 24-25, 27.

you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.

Do you want to be blameless and pure? A child of God without fault? A shining star for the Word of life? Quit *griping*, and start *grouping*. Quit *separating*, and start *synchronizing*.

We need to learn the meaning of consensus and practice it. Consensus is when the majority wants to do it one way (plainly scriptural) and you want to do it another way. But being the unselfish and humble person that you are, you concede to do it their way. “Brethren, I think this is the wrong approach, but I concede to do it your way, and you can count on my full cooperation for the sake of unity.” That’s consensus—killing my pride today for you, and you killing your pride tomorrow for me. And we must do it *joyfully*. In other words, don’t pout. Be mature in Christ.

Our commander has summoned us. He has briefed us on the importance of our mission. He has provided us with the best state-of-the-art weaponry for the enemy we must face. The urgency of our full cooperation has been driven in hard. The time we have left to succeed in our mission is an indeterminate variable. “Any questions? Good! Now, let’s get synchronized and *go to it!*”



**THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Why are we failing to fulfill our mission of seeking and saving the lost?

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2. What does it mean to get synchronized?

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3. Discuss the analogy between the body of Christ and the human body.

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4. List what you can do to save hell-bound sinners.

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5. How can your abilities be synchronized with those of other Christians?

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6. What is the number one cause of synchronization failure?

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7. What can be done to encourage *separating* Christians to become *synchronized* Christians?

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8. Discuss the concept of consensus and its practical application.

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# 7

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## Just Quit Fussing!

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“We just had a personality clash.” How many times have you heard that? Two people cannot seem to get along, and the whole problem is solved by saying they have a personality clash. Do you know what a personality clash is? *A failure to love!* It is the cop-out of cop-outs. It is skirting the real issue. And the real issue is that they just don’t like each other.

Have you ever had one of those subjectless arguments with your spouse? You come home at the end of a hard day. You are both tired and hungry and . . . irritable. The children are just being themselves, but it seems as if they are going out of their way to get on your nerves. You are trying your best to maintain control. Then all of a sudden it happens. You explode and begin verbally attacking your spouse for virtually nothing. Maybe he/she didn’t greet you right at the door. Maybe you didn’t like the tone of his/her voice. Maybe it was something else. The problem is,

you cannot remember what the problem is. And you end up fussing for thirty minutes about nothing. Do you know what the solution is? *Just quit fussing!*

The same thing often happens in the church. Two Christians or two groups of Christians begin fussing over some little petty nothing. It starts out slow, but quickly builds momentum. The next thing you know, there is a major feud. It is hashed and rehashed. A solution is sought, but the problem is that no one can really remember what the problem is. And a church is nearly destroyed over nothing. Some say it was just a personality clash. So one side decides to leave, to go their separate way. But that is no solution! Do you know what the solution is? *Just quit fussing!* Period.

When there is no doctrinal detriment and when you cannot remember what the problem is, *just quit fussing!* That seems to be what Paul was trying to tell two women in Philippi. They were having some kind of fuss. "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord."<sup>1</sup> We do not know what the problem really was. They probably didn't either. Paul makes no doctrinal stand. "All right, Syntyche, I hate to hurt your feelings, but Euodia is right about this, and you need to repent." Surely, if it had been over anything of importance, Paul would have corrected the one in error and commended the righteous one for contending earnestly for the right issue. Such a commendation was not there. He simply begged them to get along. *To just quit fussing.*

<sup>1</sup>Philippians 4:2.

## JUST QUIT FUSSING!

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Someone has said that Philippi was Paul's sweetheart church. I believe that to be an accurate statement. Terms of endearment are all through the letter: "I thank my God every time I remember you."<sup>2</sup> "I have you in my heart."<sup>3</sup> "I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."<sup>4</sup> "Therefore, my dear friends, . . ."<sup>5</sup> "Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, . . ."<sup>6</sup> How his heart must have broken at the prospect of two of his co-laborers getting bogged down in a fuss over nothing! "Please, please, please, just quit fussing!"

An unchecked, subjectless fuss can grow and grow until it is bigger than a church. It is like cancer. If it gets nipped in the bud, recovery is virtually guaranteed. If it is left alone to fester and grow, it could overpower and destroy. It happened in Fort Worth, Texas. Her name was Barbara. She was 5 feet 1½ inches tall and weighed 130 pounds. She began to put on weight and didn't really know why. Her stomach grew and grew. Her weight increased until she weighed 260 pounds! She finally went to the doctor and in December, 1987, had surgery to remove a 130-pound ovarian tumor. It took a 4½-foot incision, but they got that thing out and saved her life.<sup>7</sup> That sounds like a bad "April Fool's" joke, but it is true. She was fortunate to recover. Some churches are not so fortunate.

<sup>2</sup>Philippians 1:3.

<sup>3</sup>Philippians 1:7.

<sup>4</sup>Philippians 1:8.

<sup>5</sup>Philippians 2:12.

<sup>6</sup>Philippians 4:1.

<sup>7</sup>*Shawnee (Okla.) News-Star*, 1 April 1988.

We need to be alert to the potentially deadly church fusses. Nip them in the bud by applying the Holy Spirit's surgery.

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.<sup>8</sup>

A practical application of this demand for unity would eliminate church fusses. You cannot have a personality clash with someone when you are putting their interests above your own. If we all would humbly consider our brothers and sisters more worthy than ourselves, fussing would be eliminated from the Christian experience. Paul's joy would be made complete. Christ's church would be united.

"Yeah, but do you *really* think that is ever going to happen?" It matters not what I think. The Holy Spirit would not inspire empty words. *It is possible!* We have studied demand after demand for unity. We alone bear the blame for the lack of it. It is not for us to question the feasibility of unity. Our job is to continue to strive for it. God has demanded it. Ours is not to question why, ours is but to do or die. What will you do with the demands?

<sup>8</sup>Philippians 2:1-4.

**THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss the concept of a personality clash. What is it?

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2. What is the best solution to many church fusses?

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3. Why do you think it is so hard to just quit fussing?

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4. What is accomplished by running away from a church problem?

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5. Who was right, Euodia or Syntyche? What was Paul's solution for them?

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6. What will be the inevitable result of a subjectless church fuss?

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7. Discuss the practical implications of Philippians 2:1-4.

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8. What are you going to do with the demands made in the Scriptures for church unity?

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# 3

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## Unity Demonstrated

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# 8

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## On a Hill Far Away . . .

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The greatest demonstration of unity came to a climax on a hill far away. It was the "Old Rugged Cross." That "emblem of suffering and shame." Our God is great and good not because He makes great and good demands, but because He demonstrates them.

God does more than talk. He practices what He preaches. And when I speak of God, you must understand I am talking about the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Though I believe totally in the Godhead Three, I cannot say I totally understand Them. But here is one thing I do understand: They are united. Their unity has been demonstrated since the beginning of time. And through the church that unity must continue to be demonstrated. Notice four demonstrations of the unity of our God.

## CREATION

Where else could we start other than the beginning? "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."<sup>1</sup> That included all three. Speaking of Jesus, John wrote, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."<sup>2</sup> Paul affirms that truth: "For by him all things were created."<sup>3</sup> This was no "one-man show." It was a team effort which required the cooperation of every team member.

Do you suppose there was some heavenly debate over the order of creation? "What do you mean, 'Let there be light'?! How in the world can you have light before the sun, moon, and stars?" I hardly think so. That Almighty Three moved with power, precision, and unanimity. "Let there be light." "Let there be a firmament." "Let there be dry ground and seas." "Let there be vegetation." "Let there be the sun, moon, and stars." "Let there be birds and fish." "Let there be animals." And there was.<sup>4</sup>

When God said, "Let us make man in our image,"<sup>5</sup> do you suppose the Spirit raised His hand in objection? "I think We need to table it for later discussion." Or can you see the Son saying, "Let's appoint a committee of angels to look into it further"? Absolutely not! I know this sounds rather silly, and I don't

<sup>1</sup>Genesis 1:1.

<sup>2</sup>John 1:3.

<sup>3</sup>Colossians 1:16.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis 1.

<sup>5</sup>Genesis 1:26.

mean to bring the Godhead down to our level. I just want to emphasize the heavenly harmony that was demonstrated in the creation. Over and over They worked together to form each star and tree. Each blade of grass and mountain. Every fish in the sea and bird in the air. At first glance, the duckbill platypus looks like the result of a divine disagreement. But it is not. It is a grand testimony to Their great sense of humor.

In every thing and in every way, the Godhead worked together without argument or complaint to accomplish the magnificent masterpiece of creation.

## INCARNATION

The crowning touch of the creation did not glitter for long. Sin soon entered the picture. But that did not make the Godhead give up on mankind. None of the Three tried to blame the other for making a defective human. "Whose idea was it to make a man anyway?" Such a statement was never uttered. The Three went to work immediately to make a re-creation possible. The protevangelium<sup>6</sup> was proclaimed with great hope. "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."<sup>7</sup> This is the first indication that the Son would be incarnated to destroy the power Satan had over men.

<sup>6</sup>Meaning "first gospel."

<sup>7</sup>Genesis 3:15.

From that day forward, all the events of history were anticipating His coming. The flood. The calling of Abraham. The birth of Isaac. His near sacrifice. Jacob's thievery. The birth of Judah. Egyptian incarceration. Israelite freedom. Wilderness wanderings. Canaan conquering. The judges. The kings. The prophets. Bondage again. Freed again. And through it all, the people kept dreaming of the Messiah who would come and reestablish the throne of David on which to reign forever.

Finally, the fullness of time came. The Father sent Gabriel to announce it.<sup>8</sup> The Spirit impregnated the virgin Mary.<sup>9</sup> And on one cold night in Bethlehem, whose motels had no vacancy, the Son was born in a dingy, dirty, smelly, animal-shared barn, and laid in a hay trough. There were no "clean towels" and "hot water" to aid in His birthing. The first sounds He heard were the braying of donkeys and bleating of sheep. Barnyard inhabitants were His first visitors. The first ones to hear the news of the incarnation of God were a few shifting shepherds. This was hardly an incarnation fit for a King.

But in spite of His humble beginnings as a human, it was a great demonstration of the unity of the Godhead. Each cooperated with the other. It wasn't a vote of 2 against 1 for the Son to come. It was unanimous. Even though He was born to die in order to effect the re-creating of men, there was no last-minute rebellion. His coming was voluntary. And there was no jealousy on the part of either the

<sup>8</sup>Luke 1:26.

<sup>9</sup>Luke 1:35.

Father or the Spirit. After all, the Son was going to be the Redeemer of all men. He was going to receive endless gratitude from people for His vicarious suffering. He would be looked up to and admired. He was going to be given the preeminence in everything.<sup>10</sup> The temptation for us would be jealousy. Not so with the Father and the Spirit. Had you or I been the Son, pride might have been our undoing. After all, King of kings and Lord of lords, and all that kind of stuff. Not so with the Son. Why? Because They were perfectly united in mind and purpose. It was a mutual decision. And They were each determined to do Their part in making the mission succeed. It mattered not who got the credit.

The incarnation shames us. What a graphic example of unity, *which we lack!* Pray that we can be more like the Holy Three.

## COMMUNICATION

The Godhead communicated Their great love and perfect will through the personage of the Son. Communication is most commonly transmitted through words. The Son is God's eternal Word.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has

<sup>10</sup>Colossians 1:18.

made him known.<sup>11</sup>

The presence of the Son communicated a God who loved and cared for His children. He made God touchable and tangible to a skeptical people. When Jesus said He was "the Alpha and the Omega," He was not only referring to the beginning and the end. He was saying to us, "I am the alphabet of God. I make sense for God. I communicate for God."<sup>12</sup> He was truly God's final spokesman.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.<sup>13</sup>

Again we see the Son being given the supreme place of honor in the scheme of things, and again we can see the Father and the Spirit cooperating in perfect harmony. The Spirit filled John the Baptist even from birth and sent him ahead to prepare the way for the Son.<sup>14</sup> The Father and the Spirit came to the Son's baptism and voiced Their approval at the beginning of His ministry.<sup>15</sup> The Spirit then immediately sent the Son out to face the devil alone, but

<sup>11</sup>John 1:14, 18.

<sup>12</sup>Revelation 21:6.

<sup>13</sup>Hebrews 1:1-3.

<sup>14</sup>Luke 1:15; John 1:15ff.

<sup>15</sup>Mark 1:9-11.

the Son did not argue, even though He was the preeminent One.<sup>16</sup> The Son attributed His power to perform miracles and cast out demons to the Spirit, implying that without the Spirit He would be powerless.<sup>17</sup> The Son was dependent upon regular prayer to the Father.<sup>18</sup> Later, the Son claimed to be speaking for the Father: "For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it."<sup>19</sup> Over and over again, He claimed oneness with the Father.<sup>20</sup> He promised inspiration to the apostles after He was gone. This inspiration was to come from the Spirit, but the Spirit would only tell them what the Son told Him to tell them.<sup>21</sup> It was at the transfiguration that the Father again voiced His approval of the Son as His communicator.<sup>22</sup>

I have brought all this to your attention not to bore you, but to give a small sampling of how closely intertwined the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were throughout the Son's entire ministry as the communicator of the Godhead. They worked in total harmony with each other and never against each other. It was only through this massive cooperation that the full message of redemption was successfully brought to mankind. If they had not been united, we would still be lost. And if we don't get

<sup>16</sup>Mark 1:12-13.

<sup>17</sup>Mark 3:22-30.

<sup>18</sup>Mark 1:35.

<sup>19</sup>John 12:49.

<sup>20</sup>John 12:45; 14:9.

<sup>21</sup>John 16:13-14.

<sup>22</sup>Matthew 17:1ff.



united, the world will still be lost when the Son comes again.

### CRUCIFIXION

Life on earth was not so bad. It was definitely not heaven, but it was not unbearable. As long as there were a few friends, good food, and minimal persecution, one can imagine the God-man being content. However, what about when the going gets tough? I mean, if you have the power to put an end to personal pain and suffering, why endure it, right? If there was ever a time when division in the Godhead was tempting, it had to be when the looming cross grew larger and larger.

Things went from good to bad, from bad to worse, to the worst. The triumphal entry to Jerusalem was good. The Son's popularity had never been better. Loyal disciples were paving the road ahead of Him with palm branches and clothes. Even His arch-enemies said, "Look how the whole world has gone after him!"<sup>23</sup> But He had less than a week left. Did He waver? Did He rebel? Did He change the plan and take the easy way out of an earthly throne without a cross? Listen to His words: "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"<sup>24</sup> What a submissive spirit! Was fear a temptation? Abso-

<sup>23</sup>John 12:19.

<sup>24</sup>John 12:27-28.

lutely!<sup>25</sup> But His dedication to the Father and the Spirit gave Him the strength to resist yielding.

Then came the upper room. In the middle of the arrogant disciples' argument over who was supreme, He donned a towel, picked up a basin, and began to do what no man who was considered decent should have to do. He washed their filthy, smelly, calloused feet. That was bad. But it was good. For in this deed He demonstrated the attitude that would end all arguments over who was the greatest. This is the attitude the Godhead had throughout the entire process of redeeming fallen man. This is the attitude that will reap that perfect unity. Then He prayed for them. That they would have oneness. That they would be perfectly united just like the Father and Son. He prayed that prayer for us too.<sup>26</sup>

The garden was next. His loyal disciples began to be not so loyal. He needed someone just to watch with Him while He prayed. They could not even do that. The aloneness was beginning to be overwhelming. Shortly, in waltzed Judas with his betrayal kiss. It went from bad to worse. Even though Peter was ready to fight, his greatest fight was internal, and he lost. They all forsook Him and fled. Peter cursed and denied their relationship three times in a row. The trial was totally humiliating. The scourging was excruciatingly painful. Nothing grates on a man worse than ridicule. Yet, even through the mocking He maintained His dignity. He could have called it to a halt at any time. But that would have been divisive

<sup>25</sup>Hebrews 4:14-16.

<sup>26</sup>John 17:6ff.

to the Godhead. So He prayed, "Yet not as I will, but as you will."<sup>27</sup>

Then came the worst. The march up that hill. And how far away it must have seemed! The jeers continued. How He wished it was all just a bad nightmare! The nails were driven home. The thorny crown was re-crushed into His already raw and bleeding scalp. And for six long hours the trauma continued. "Come down from the cross!" they shouted. If they only knew. . . . I believe there were at least two factors that kept Him from coming down. His great love for us. And His great unity with the Father and the Spirit. This was all in the plan. This was agreed upon before He ever left heaven. But at this particular point in time, even the Father and the Spirit had to desert Him. How it must have crushed Them. It was the only time in the history of eternity that the Three were separated. But it was only through Their perfect unity up to this point that the re-creation of mankind was made possible.

All that I have said so far can be summed up by the following Scripture:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he

<sup>27</sup>Matthew 26:39.

## ON A HILL FAR AWAY . . .

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humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!<sup>28</sup>

The cross stands not only for salvation. It stands for the unity of the Godhead. With that in mind, is it really so hard for us to be united? Is it really so hard for us to swallow our pride and work together for one common goal, even if our part is somewhat “grungy”? Have any of us endured what the Son endured for the sake of unity? Hardly! The next time you think about dividing with a brother or sister, think about an old rugged cross on a hill far away. . . .

On a hill far away  
stood an old rugged cross,  
The emblem of suff'ring and shame;  
And I love that old cross  
where the dearest and best  
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

To the old rugged cross  
I will ever be true,  
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;  
Then He'll call me some day  
to my home far away,  
Where His glory for ever I'll share.

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,  
Till my trophies at last I lay down;  
I will cling to the old rugged cross,  
And exchange it some day for a crown.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Philippians 2:5-8.

<sup>29</sup>George Bennard, *The Old Rugged Cross*, stanzas 1 and 4 and chorus.

## THE HEART OF UNITY

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### THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Read the Creation account in Genesis 1, and discuss the unity demonstrated in Creation.

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2. What would have happened in the beginning if there had not been unity in the Godhead?

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3. Who blamed who for man's sin-failure? What should we learn from that?

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4. Discuss the attitudes demonstrated by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the Son's incarnation. What practical steps can you take to demonstrate those same attitudes?

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5. How did God communicate His will to mankind?

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ON A HILL FAR AWAY . . .

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6. What one characteristic was largely responsible for the successful communication of salvation for all men?

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7. Why do you think the temptation for division in the Godhead may have been greatest at the cross?

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8. What impresses you most about the Son's determination to fulfill His mission? Now consider the questions in the last paragraph.

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# 9

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## Beginning at Jerusalem

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His life. His death. His burial. His resurrection. His ascension. Such was the unfolding of the gospel. Throughout these events, His apostles experienced many emotions. Excitement. Disappointment. Courage. Fear. Amazement. Apathy. Faith. Skepticism. Joy. Sorrow. Then joy again. His resurrection was too good to be true. But it was true. Could it be that *now* He would establish that kingdom?<sup>1</sup> No, He was about to leave. And He gave them those orders that sent their butterflies into orbit. "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, *beginning at Jerusalem*. You are witnesses of these things."<sup>2</sup>

"Wait a minute, Lord! Do You mean *we* are going

<sup>1</sup>Acts 1:6.

<sup>2</sup>Luke 24:46-48; emphasis mine.

to do this? What methods should we use? How are we going to get to all nations? What should our strategy be?" The Scriptures do not indicate what the apostles were thinking at this time, but I imagine they were thinking along those lines. So Jesus gave them a strategy. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."<sup>3</sup> "But Jesus, is that all the plan You are going to give us? Could You help us get organized?" Too late. He was already gone. Taken up before their very eyes and hidden from view by a cloud. They were speechless. Didn't know *what* to do. Two angels had to snap them back to reality. So they journeyed back to Jerusalem to try to sort things out.

I do not know when, but somewhere along the way they had finally learned that the only way to fulfill this commission of Christ was to be *united*. Perhaps while waiting for the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem, they reminisced about that fateful night. That night when the Lord taught them so much in the upper room. About service. About love. About dedication. About humility. About fruit-bearing. Or maybe it was that prayer about unity.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of *when* it dawned on them, they demonstrated the fact that they had learned to be united over and over again. The first time was when they realized the need to find a replacement for Judas.<sup>5</sup> This could have really been a problem. The potential for division and politics was there. When Matthias was selected over Justus, Justus and his supporters could

<sup>3</sup>Acts 1:8.

<sup>4</sup>Read John 13—17 to get the whole picture.

<sup>5</sup>Acts 1:15-26.



## BEGINNING AT JERUSALEM

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have gotten mad and moved their membership. But thank God, they were all bigger than that. For from that day forward, the attitude of unity prevailed and spread throughout the whole church as it spread throughout the whole world. And ironically, that is the only reason it was able to spread. *Unity!*

This chapter will attempt to show the tremendous unity which was demonstrated by the early church and the inevitable result.

### AT JERUSALEM

After the fiery entrance of the Holy Spirit and that first gospel sermon delivered by Peter, about three thousand people were added to the church in Jerusalem. I understand they responded to the message, not the man delivering it. But had the apostles not been united, there may have been a battle over who preached first, and thus the first potential church split. Such did not occur. It mattered not to any of the twelve who delivered the predominant message, just as long as it got delivered. They had unity of purpose. The plan was to preach Jesus and not themselves, thus eliminating "preacheritis."

The result was three thousand new believers who devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to bread breaking and praying. They were all together and had everything in common. They sold their possessions (those treasured possessions) so the wealth could be shared with all. Every day they continued to meet together. They ate together. They praised God together. *They were truly*

## THE HEART OF UNITY

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*united!* And the Lord added to their number daily. Why? Because they were united.<sup>6</sup>

Persecution began to threaten the Jerusalem Christians. Peter and John were jailed and threatened with worse if they did not cease proclaiming the Christ. Because they did not cease their united proclamation of the Christ, many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.<sup>7</sup> When released, they immediately returned to the united fellowship of believers. There they were restrengthened. There they raised their voices *together* in prayer to God.<sup>8</sup> "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had."<sup>9</sup> The result? The apostles continued to preach the Word with great power.<sup>10</sup> And the church continued to grow.

They had their church disciplinary problems and petty fusses. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit about their gift. They were both killed. Though fear gripped the body, it only served to renew their dedication. The persecution intensified with the apostles being beaten for preaching Jesus.<sup>11</sup> Then a major problem threatened the unity of the church. The Grecian Jews didn't like the way food was being distributed. And complaining began. Thus was born

<sup>6</sup>Acts 2:42-47.

<sup>7</sup>Acts 4:4.

<sup>8</sup>Acts 4:24.

<sup>9</sup>Acts 4:32.

<sup>10</sup>Acts 4:33.

<sup>11</sup>Acts 5.

## BEGINNING AT JERUSALEM

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the first deaconship, consisting of seven godly, unselfish men. Their job was to oversee fair distribution. And the people were allowed to select them. This satisfied everyone, and unity was restored to the Jerusalem church. What was the consequence of this determination for unity? "So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem *increased rapidly*."<sup>12</sup>

## IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA

Things were going well in Jerusalem, but that was just the first stage of the strategy. The great message of salvation for all men needed to get out into Judea and Samaria. So after the martyrdom of Stephen, a great persecution broke out against the Jerusalem church which facilitated the spreading of the Word.<sup>13</sup> You would think that such terrorism would squelch the believers in their unity of purpose. Not so! "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went."<sup>14</sup> Even though they were forcibly divided physically, they were still united in spirit.

Philip went to Samaria and preached, amazing all the people with the great power of God, not only to heal disease and destroy demons, but to forgive even the slimiest of sinners. His efforts bore great fruit. "When they believed Philip as he preached the good

<sup>12</sup>Acts 6:7; emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup>Acts 8:1.

<sup>14</sup>Acts 8:4.

## THE HEART OF UNITY

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news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.”<sup>15</sup> From there he went to Judea and met the treasurer of Ethiopia in the most unusual place—on a desert road. Again, he preached Jesus. And again, the result was a complete conversion.<sup>16</sup> This sent the gospel to the African continent for the first time. All because one man taught one man. Difference of race never entered the picture. For in Christ Jesus all people from every tribe, tongue, and tint can be united at the foot of the cross. Jesus broke down the dividing barriers. And this message of unity in the cross spread throughout all of Judea and Samaria.

Peter learned this hard lesson well with his encounter with Cornelius, commonly referred to as the first Gentile convert. No longer did Jew and Gentile have to be separated. And the infant church finally outgrew the immaturity of prejudice. Prejudice of any kind will do more harm to the unity of the body of Christ than anything I know. May God grant us all the maturity to never allow such satanic sordidness to characterize our congregations.

## TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus, Christian enemy number one, opened the door for the gospel to go to the ends of the earth. He became the apostle to the Gentiles. But before he became a predominant leader

<sup>15</sup>Acts 8:12.

<sup>16</sup>Acts 8:26-39.

## BEGINNING AT JERUSALEM

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in this area, others paved the way.

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.<sup>17</sup>

Praise God the message was received! Christians at Antioch! Who would have ever thought it? No one but the Lord. Barnabas was sent to encourage. He went to get Saul, and together they stayed with the Antioch church for a year. A famine broke out, and the Christians in Antioch decided to take up a collection to send to the brothers in Judea. Isn't that amazing? All because there was peace and harmony in the Christian world. These were truly exciting times in the history of the church.

Barnabas and Saul set out together on their first missionary journey, which would lead to two more. They traveled throughout the Mediterranean world. I could go on and on with the good that was done and the way the kingdom grew. But you can read that in the Bible for yourself. I will just sum it all up in the words of the apostle Paul himself: "All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, . . . This is the gospel that you heard and that has been pro-

<sup>17</sup>Acts 11:19-21.

## THE HEART OF UNITY

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claimed to every creature under heaven.”<sup>18</sup> Whether every creature under heaven literally had heard the gospel has been debated by skeptics for years. All I know is what Inspiration says. That is enough for me.

I believe many try to discount the validity of Paul’s statement because of our own failure to do what the early church did. With today’s technology, I could preach in Japan in the morning and the U.S.A. that night. Yet less than one-tenth of one percent of our modern world shares our dream of being Christians only. The first-century spread of Christianity began with only twelve men. We have many times that many who are able to work together to teach the gospel of Christ to the whole world. Yet we have not. Who is to blame? Who is at fault? Certainly not the early church. They very adequately performed their duties and demonstrated for all time how it can be done. Who can we nail with our failure? Just us. One key factor for our failing in Christ’s commission is division. He warned us that a divided house will fail. We didn’t listen. We need to listen now. We need to do whatever it takes to imitate the unity of the early church.

The disciples did it *beginning at Jerusalem*. I can do it beginning at my town. You can do it beginning at your town. But we must begin. And we must do it. *And we must do it now!*

<sup>18</sup>Colossians 1:6, 23.

**THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. What was the plan Jesus left for His apostles to use to conquer the world with the gospel?

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2. What was the key ingredient necessary in order to fulfill the commission of Christ?

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3. What do you think church membership was like in the Jerusalem church?

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4. What can we learn from the way the apostles handled the first church fuss?

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5. Discuss the great unity demonstrated by the early church even in the face of overwhelming problems. Why couldn't they be stopped?

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## THE HEART OF UNITY

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6. Discuss prejudices that exist in your life and/or your congregation. Be open and honest so you can confess this terrible enemy of unity.

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7. Barnabas was a peacemaker. Discuss some practical ways you can be more like him. Get a concordance, and do some research on his character.

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8. Why were the apostles successful in spreading the gospel? Why aren't we experiencing that same success today? What are *you* going to do about it?

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# 10

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## Mission Possible

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Go back in your mind about fifteen or twenty years, and picture this scenario being acted out on television. A handsome, white-haired man glides across the screen. The background is a bus depot. He walks over to a row of lockers and opens one. After removing a mysterious package, he quickly leaves the depot to return to a secluded place. In the package is a tape recorder with a recorded message for his ears and his ears only. As the message unfolds, he looks at pictures of the sinister, the beautiful, the ugly, and the criminal. The message tells him of a "top-secret" mission which has so many odds against it that it appears to be impossible.

The message pleads with Mr. Phelps to accept this mission, and then, with the mysterious music growing louder, it says, "In five seconds this tape will self-destruct." 5-4-3-2-1-spsssssss. Mr. Phelps and his colleagues always accepted the "Mission Impossi-

ble," and before the hour was up, their *purpose, plans,* and *performance* turned the "mission impossible" into a "mission possible."<sup>1</sup>

Now go back in your mind about 4500 years, and picture this scenario being acted out on the plains of Shinar, later known as Babylon. Everybody alive on the earth spoke the same language and were together. As they grew in numbers, the desire to build a magnificent city occupied their minds. And what a great city it would be! It would accommodate them forever. None of them would ever have to leave and move to the other parts of the earth. They would build a tower that would reach up into the heavens. They would make a great name for *themselves*.

It sounded like a "mission impossible." They had no cranes, no equipment for constructing. They had no modern building materials like concrete and steel to reinforce the concrete. The odds were totally against them accomplishing this great feat. But they began. And they worked. They were united with the same *purpose*. They were united with the same *plan*. They turned the "mission impossible" into a "mission possible" by their united *performance*. God thwarted their project because they had forgotten all about Him and His decree for them to replenish the whole earth. But notice He paid them a great compliment: "Behold, they are *one people*, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now *nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them*."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This television series was revived in the fall of 1988.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis 11:6; NASV; emphasis mine.

## MISSION POSSIBLE

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The time is now, and the church of Jesus Christ is on the brink of great disaster or great success. Success is possible, but the odds *seem* to be against us. Congregations are stagnant and have experienced little or no growth for years. Thousands of lost people are dying every day, never acquainted with the Jesus who loves them so. Church splits and “moving memberships” happen far too frequently.

Evangelistic success is possible. It seems like a “mission impossible.” But it is not. It is a “mission possible,” for with God all things are possible because our God is able to do far more abundantly than we could ever ask or think!<sup>3</sup>

But just as Mr. Phelps and his cronies and the people on the plain of Shinar had to have unity of *purpose, plan, and performance, so must we!* The Tower of Babel people demonstrate for all time how to make a “mission impossible” possible. Notice three positive truths from their story that we must have in order to reap success.

### UNITY OF PURPOSE

Why are we here? What is the reason for the existence of the church where you attend? What is our purpose? Is it to sing sweet songs and pray pious prayers? Is it to eat the Lord’s Supper and hear loud sermons? Is it to go to church and give money? Is it to plan buildings and print bulletins? *Why are we here?*

<sup>3</sup>Ephesians 3:20.

Our purpose is to walk the same way Jesus walked.<sup>4</sup> We call ourselves the church of *Christ*, describing whose church we are. And the name we wear, *Christian*, means "like Christ." Well, how did Jesus walk? How did He live? What was He like? What was His purpose? "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."<sup>5</sup> Jesus actively sought out those who were lost in their sin and touched their lives with His saving presence. We must do the same, for that is our purpose. We have no other.

How did He do it? What methods did He use? Jule Miller films? Open Bible study? Bible correspondence courses? Those are all good and valuable methods. But notice Jesus fulfilled His purpose through two main veins of activity. The first was through *ministry*. *Ministry* means *service*. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve."<sup>6</sup> And ministry was always first with Jesus. Second, He succeeded through His *message*. His message was intended to free an oppressed people. Free them from religious bondage. Free them from sin. Free them from eternal death.

In the same way, regardless of our methods, we can fulfill our purpose of seeking and saving the lost through two veins of activity. First, through *ministry*. Serving others unselfishly in any way we can. Refuse to be inconvenienced. That does not mean refuse to let people put you out. It does mean to have the

<sup>4</sup>John 2:6.

<sup>5</sup>Luke 19:10.

<sup>6</sup>Matthew 20:28.

## MISSION POSSIBLE

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attitude which says, "Nothing you need me to do for you is any trouble. I will serve you, and do it gladly." Second, through our *message*. Ministry must precede message, then people will gladly sit up and hear with an open heart what it is we have to say. And our message should not elevate the church, a preacher, a program, or a plan. Our message should elevate the Christ. "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."<sup>7</sup>

Notice the people of Babel had a purpose, but they had *unity* in that purpose. Their purpose was to make a great name for themselves, *and they were one*. As a result, God said there was nothing they could not do. Our purpose is to make a great name for Christ, *and we must be one*. Then there will be nothing we cannot do. Determine in your heart today that you will be united in purpose with the Christians where you attend. Determine to be cooperative with other congregations. If you will, a great victory for God is just around the corner. And in our unity, may we never become selfish in our purpose, that is, trying to make a great name for ourselves. For if we do, God will thwart our plans just as He did the builders of Babel.

## UNITY OF PLAN

Here was the plan: Make bricks and harden them thoroughly with fire. Use tar for mortar. And build up. A simple plan, but it worked.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>John 12:32.

<sup>8</sup>Genesis 11:1-9.

In the same way, we must have a plan and be united in that plan. Understand I am talking about the congregational level. To fail to plan is to plan to fail. You know that! A church without plans is like a ship without a compass. A church without goals is like a blind man driving a car. A dreamless church is like a lifeless corpse. Plans, goals, and dreams *must* be a major part of any church that is going to do great things for God. An army colonel once told me the five P's of success: *Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance.*

And plans can be simple. They do not have to be complicated and earth-shattering. But they do have to be made. And each member of the congregation must have the attitude of unity toward the plans. Without unity, even the best of plans will fail. Choose to cooperate in every way that you can. Don't allow pride to puff you up into a useless member. Even if you think the plan is a bad idea, do your best to make it work. And don't withhold your contribution. All that does is hurt the body of Christ. It doesn't matter if you don't think it is being used right. You are not giving the money to the church. You are giving it to the Lord. And He will judge those who are poor stewards. Don't you be one too!

My plea to you is to choose to have unity of plan as a congregation, wherever you are. Choose to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem. *Together there is nothing we cannot do!*

## UNITY OF PERFORMANCE

This is where the rubber meets the road. All the purposes and plans in the world are meaningless unless they involve performance—performing that which you have planned to do.

Again, the Babel people demonstrate the unity of performance well. The plan was to make bricks and fire them, then build up. What if some did not want to work? What if some did not like the color of the bricks so they left to make their own? What if some wanted to build down instead of up? What if all the people just stood around talking about their dream without ever going to work? The answer to every question is *failure*. Failure to fulfill their purpose and plan.

The time has come in the Lord's church for the rubber to meet the road. The time has come for us all to commit to unitedly performing that which we have planned to do. To do so, every Christian must do their part. Every Christian must begin to work. It may mean some late nights. It may mean some favorite television shows left unwatched. It may mean some blood, sweat, and tears. It will mean the destruction of pride. To grow and reach the world for Christ is going to require some personal sacrifice of time, talents, and treasures. It will take 100% unadulterated commitment.

Sound like a "mission impossible"? *It is possible!* With God as our Helper, we can do it. But we must do our part. Unity of purpose. Unity of plan. Unity of performance. In every crowd, no matter how big or

small, there will always be those who say it cannot be done. Friend, let us not be a people who say it can't, but a people who say it can. May we all remember we are engaged in the most worthwhile pursuit, and nothing worthwhile comes easily. *Strive for excellence!* Our mission truly is possible.

### **If You Think You Can**

If you think you are beaten, you are;  
If you think you dare not, you don't;  
If you like to win, and don't think you can,  
It's almost a cinch you won't.

If you think you'll lose, you're lost,  
For out in the world we find  
Success begins with a fellow's will;  
It's all in the state of mind.

For many a race is lost  
Ere even a step is run,  
And many a coward fails,  
Ere even his work is begun.

Think big and your deeds will grow,  
Think small and you'll fall behind;  
Think that you can and you will—  
It's all in the state of mind.

If you think you're outclassed, you are;  
You've got to think high and rise;  
You've got to be sure of yourself before  
You can ever win a prize.

Life's battles don't always go  
To the stronger or faster man;  
But, sooner or later, the man who wins



## MISSION POSSIBLE

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Is the fellow who thinks he can!<sup>9</sup>

*“For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.”*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Author unknown.

<sup>10</sup>Proverbs 23:7; KJV.

THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why are we here?

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2. Discuss the concepts of *ministry* and *message* and how you can apply them.

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3. Discuss the statement, "Refuse to be inconvenienced."

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4. Is there anything a united people *cannot* do? How important is proper motivation?

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5. Is your congregation making plans for progress? Why or why not?

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6. What can you do to help the plans succeed?

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MISSION POSSIBLE

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7. What are you doing now to guarantee unity of performance in your congregation?

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8. Is our mission on earth impossible? Why or why not? What will guarantee our success?

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# 4

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**Unity**  
**Developed**

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# 11

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## Two Wrongs Do Not Make It Right

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Unity is something that must be developed. It won't just happen naturally. In this last section, I will suggest some right and wrong ways to develop unity in a divided house.

Let us start with the negative way so we can end on a positive note. Here it is: *Two wrongs do not make it right*. And this is what I mean. It seems to be human nature that when we have been offended by someone else, we want to fight or get as far away from them as possible or both. Argument ensues. Names are called. Lines are drawn. Division occurs. One party may take their "membership" and go home. And that solves the problem, right? Wrong! That only *compounds* the problem. The problem was you got offended. Or perhaps you did the offending. That is wrong number one. Wrong number two is to fight and squabble and then change churches. *Two wrongs do not make it right!* The right thing to do is to

stay put and resolve the problem. It may mean you have to swallow your pride. It may mean you have to let him do it his way. It may mean you have to take a back seat. But is that too high a price to pay for the unity which our Lord so greatly desires?

However, that is not the way we often do it, is it? What do we do? We quote the Paul and Barnabas episode as a proof text that two wrongs will make it right.<sup>1</sup> And by their example, we justify a division. It is spiritual "grasping for straws." Let us take a closer look at this sometimes abused episode in the history of the early church.

On the first missionary journey, John Mark was accompanying Paul and Barnabas.<sup>2</sup> He was Barnabas' cousin.<sup>3</sup> For some reason, which Paul obviously thought was absurd, he deserted the mission in Pamphylia and went back home to Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> When they were making plans to go on a second journey, Barnabas wanted Mark to come along again. But Paul said, "No way!" He had no patience for a deserter. Perhaps Mark grew fearful on the first journey as he saw the opposition that they were facing. Cowardice was appalling to Paul. Barnabas said yes. Paul said no. The Bible says, "They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company."<sup>5</sup> Why couldn't they come to terms? Why did the greatest missionary team ever to hit the Mediterranean world

<sup>1</sup>That text is Acts 15:36-40.

<sup>2</sup>Acts 13:5.

<sup>3</sup>Colossians 4:10.

<sup>4</sup>Acts 13:13, 38.

<sup>5</sup>Acts 15:39.

## TWO WRONGS DO NOT MAKE IT RIGHT

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have to divide? Why couldn't they work things out? The Bible does not say. To make a judgment here would be pure speculation. Who was right? Who was wrong? We want answers to these questions, but the answers are just not there.

Yes, Paul and Silas did pair up, while Barnabas took Mark. And yes, from one team was born two. And it is true, God was able to use them both to spread the Word of the cross and thus glorify His name. But all that shows is that God can turn apparent failure into success. He can take our feeble efforts and build a fortress for Himself. It does not prove that we should divide every time we butt heads with someone else. If Paul knew that later Christians would use this event as an excuse for division, I have no doubt he would be displeased. I know that from his own inspired writings. "I appeal to you to agree with one another with no divisions."<sup>6</sup> "Only spiritual babies and the worldly quarrel."<sup>7</sup> "Don't be judgmental of those with weak faith."<sup>8</sup> "Put on the selfless mind of Christ and put others above yourselves."<sup>9</sup> "And the Lord's servant *must not quarrel*."<sup>10</sup>

Do you see why this argument some use for division does not hold any water? The inspired apostle himself never used such an argument! He abhorred division. And so should we. Division should only be a last resort, never a first inclination. "If it is possible,

<sup>6</sup>1 Corinthians 1:10; my paraphrase.

<sup>7</sup>1 Corinthians 3:1-4; my paraphrase.

<sup>8</sup>Romans 14:1ff.; my paraphrase.

<sup>9</sup>Philippians 2:1-4; my paraphrase.

<sup>10</sup>2 Timothy 2:24a; emphasis mine.

as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."<sup>11</sup> I understand there may be some situations where division is desirable and even necessary for the health of the body of Christ. Much like division that must exist between the human body and a tumor or a dead organ or a gangrene-infected limb. Without that "division," the body would die. But this is the exception rather than the rule. One should never cease trying to be reconciled to his or her brother or sister. Listen to the words of Jesus: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."<sup>12</sup> Notice that our Lord places the burden of reconciliation on the one who knows another is offended with him. He says nothing about who is at fault. That is unimportant. Do what *you* can to fix things.

As Paul grew older, no doubt he mellowed. I am sure John Mark matured. And regardless of their differences, in later life they were reconciled. Their division was not permanent.<sup>13</sup> The next time Mark is mentioned in the Bible is when Paul mentioned him. He said the Colossians were to welcome him.<sup>14</sup> To Philemon, Paul called him a fellow worker.<sup>15</sup> And he

<sup>11</sup>Romans 12:18.

<sup>12</sup>Matthew 5:23-24.

<sup>13</sup>Nothing is said in the text of the relationship between Paul and Barnabas, but there is nothing to indicate they were not reconciled as well.

<sup>14</sup>Colossians 4:10.

<sup>15</sup>Philemon 24.



## TWO WRONGS DO NOT MAKE IT RIGHT

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requested Timothy to bring Mark with him when he came to Paul, “because he is helpful to me in my ministry.”<sup>16</sup>

*It is seldom right to divide.* It is always right to humble yourself. It is always right to swallow your pride. It is always right to put others and their wishes above your own. It is always right to admit it when you blow it. That is what we must learn to do. Don't change churches. Don't keep festering the wound. Put the salve of the Christ-like spirit on it. Bandage it up with godly love. Time will help it heal. Running away may only make it worse. Two wrongs do not make it right.

<sup>16</sup>2 Timothy 4:11.

**THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Discuss the concept of "two wrongs do not make it right."

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2. Why do you think we often want to divide rather than work out some kind of reconciliation?

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3. Discuss Matthew 5:23-24 in conjunction with Romans 12:18.

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4. Is it necessary for the offender to come to the offended first in order for reconciliation to take place? Why or why not?

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5. Think of a situation that divided you from another brother or sister. What could you have done differently to prevent the division?

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TWO WRONGS DO NOT MAKE IT RIGHT

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6. Can you think of an occasion when a division actually helped the body of Christ become stronger? List specific ways in which the division strengthened.

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7. Can you think of an occasion when a division weakened the body of Christ? List specific ways in which the division weakened.

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8. What can *you* do to thwart the tendency of humans to divide?

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# 12

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## When Brothers Collide

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The background to this chapter can be found in Joshua 22. I suggest you stop and read that right now. It was brother Doug Parsons, minister of the Golf Course Road church in Midland, Texas, who turned me on to the practical nature of the book of Joshua. He, through his writing in *The Preacher's Periodical*,<sup>1</sup> showed me that Joshua is not simply a record of the dry, dusty past of what God has done and said. It tells of how God's people went into a foreign and hostile land and reaped great victory. It shows how God gave the victory then, and how He will give it to His people now. It is an enriching book and a life-changing study. Brother Parsons did not deal with chapter 22 in his writing, but I am indebted to him for training my mind to be able to see the practical in

<sup>1</sup>*The Preacher's Periodical*, September 1983. Now called *Truth for Today* (202 S. Locust, Searcy, AR 72143).

this historical record.<sup>2</sup>

By the time recorded in Joshua 22, the conquest of Canaan was complete. The land had been divided up and all the people had received their inheritance. The time of rest had finally come. All their dreams and hopes had been fulfilled.

Moses had given the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh an inheritance on the east side of the Jordan River on the condition that they would not possess it until they had helped the rest of Israel defeat and possess Canaan. This they had faithfully done, and the time had come for them to go home and settle down. Joshua summoned them and sent them off with his blessing. Everything was peaceful. Life had never been better for the Israelites. *But it was too good to be true.*

All of a sudden we read, "The whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them [the transjordanian tribes]."<sup>3</sup> What happened? Why the sudden hostilities toward their brethren? They had what I call a "brotherly collision."

Brotherly collisions plague us still today. A church can be experiencing their Canaan land. The members are living as victors, not victims. Each fulfilling their purpose. Content with their portion. Praising God. Living at peace with one another. Then all of a sud-

<sup>2</sup>The writing of Doug Parsons on the book of Joshua is available in book form: *Victorious Christian Living*. It can be ordered directly from him at 3703 Casady Court, Midland, TX 79707, (915) 699-0100.

<sup>3</sup>Joshua 22:12.

den, the Civil War starts all over again. Brother fighting against brother. Victimizing one another. Destroying one another. Envyng one another. Failing to reach the lost. Causing the body to shrink into nothingness.

I have known of physical brothers and sisters who refused to speak to one another for fifty years or more. I have known of spiritual brothers and sisters who would walk around an entire auditorium to avoid having to speak and be civil to the other. We have brotherhood papers that thrive on the tearing down of other brethren. If there is one problem that will reduce the effectiveness of the church and the victory of the Christian to zero, I believe it is *brotherly collisions*. From Joshua 22 we can see the *cause* of and the *cure* for brotherly collisions.

### THE CAUSE

The pathway to brotherly collision contains three basic steps.

#### *Action*

The first step is *action*. "When they came to Geli-loth near the Jordan in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an imposing altar there by the Jordan."<sup>4</sup> Every collision, every conflict, every disagreement begins with an action. The two and one-half tribes built a large altar on the border between their land and the land of the other tribes, *and the nine and one-*

<sup>4</sup>Joshua 22:10.

*half tribes did not like it at all.* Isn't that the beginning of every dispute and disagreement? Brother "A" does something that brother "B" does not like, and the next thing you know there is a massive difficulty. People will always act in ways that other people do not like. To that extent, there will always be the potential for conflict, but collision could be avoided if the next step were eliminated.

***Assumption***

"And when the Israelites *heard* that they had built the altar on the border of Canaan at Geliloth near the Jordan on the Israelite side, the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them."<sup>5</sup> We should never assume anything. An assumption is a judgment based upon insufficient data. The tribes on the west side of the Jordan *heard* that those on the east side had constructed a large altar, and they just assumed the worst. They assumed they were turning from the Lord into paganism. They didn't bother to verify the facts or anything. They were ready to *kill* them. When it comes to our brothers and sisters in Christ, if we are going to be making assumptions, we need to assume the best. Believe the best about people, not the worst. That is what Paul meant when he said love "always trusts."<sup>6</sup> When you love someone as Christ loves them, you will always give them the benefit of the doubt. Things are not always as they appear. Make sure you have all the facts about a situation or a person *before* you formulate an opinion. This will help in avoiding a collision.

<sup>5</sup>Joshua 2:11-12; emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup>1 Corinthians 13:7.

### *Accusation*

*Accusation* is the straw that usually breaks the camel's back. And assumption usually gives way to an accusation. If you want to make sure you collide with somebody, accuse him of something. I guarantee you will have a collision. You will put him on the defensive immediately. Israel put together a delegation consisting of Phinehas, the son of the priest, and ten chiefs, one for each of the tribes on the west side of the Jordan. They were to carry the accusation to the tribes on the east side. Their accusation was strong and threefold. They accused them of unfaithfulness.<sup>7</sup> They accused them of immorality.<sup>8</sup> They accused them of hurting the whole nation of Israel.<sup>9</sup> It is amazing to me how inflated this accusation became, all from building a large altar without asking the permission of the nine and one-half tribes.

Do you know what I think was largely behind this inflated accusation? Second-guessing. We think we can read people's minds. We think we can read their motivations. The reason we do not go to them personally and *ask* instead of *accuse* is because we have it all figured out, so we think. And so off we head into a brotherly collision.

## THE CURE

As long as there is the human element, brotherly

<sup>7</sup>Joshua 22:16.

<sup>8</sup>Joshua 22:17; cf. Numbers 25:1-9 for an explanation of Peor.

<sup>9</sup>Joshua 22:18, 20.



collisions will happen. They are inevitable, but not irreparable. They can be cured by following three simple steps found in Joshua 22:21-33.

***Explanation***

First, there is *explanation*.<sup>10</sup> Most disagreements can be cleared up if the offender will allow the offender to make an *uninterrupted* explanation.

The tribes on the east side of the Jordan could have gotten defensive and told the tribes on the west side where to get off. "We are autonomous, and it is none of your business!" But thank God they did not. They began their explanation by reminding the tribes on the west side that it is only God who can make judgments of the heart. Then they gave credence to their explanation by calling a curse upon themselves if they had indeed acted unfaithfully. This altar they built was not meant to be a place of worship at all. It was not intended to be a replacement for Shiloh, where the tent of meeting was. This altar was simply a witness for future generations to remind them that the tribes on the east side were just as much God's people as the tribes on the west side. May this explanation serve to remind us that none of us is capable of judging the thoughts and intents of another person's heart. Only God has that prerogative and ability. When someone falsely accuses you, repair the collision by very patiently and lovingly explaining the real truth.

***Acceptation***

The second step to collision repair is *acceptation*.<sup>11</sup> If

<sup>10</sup>Joshua 22:21-29.

<sup>11</sup>Joshua 22:30-33a.

the collision is to be repaired, the accuser must be willing to accept the accused's explanation at face value. This goes back to believing the best about people. When Phinehas and his delegation heard the explanation, the Bible says they were pleased. When the tribes on the west side of the Jordan heard it, they were pleased and blessed God. They were wrong in the way they carried out their *accusation*, but they were right in the way they carried out their *acceptation*. They were willing to recognize they had been wrong. They rejoiced that they had been wrong, rather than feeling sorry about their bruised egos. You might say they killed their pride. That's what we must do so we can repair those collisions we experience.

### ***Exoneration***

Then there is *exoneration*.<sup>12</sup> It is not enough just to *accept* someone's explanation. We must totally *exonerate* them, clearing them of all guilt in our minds. That is the difference between a parole and a pardon. When someone is paroled from prison, he is released from his sentence prematurely, but he still has a record. When someone is pardoned, he is completely forgiven, and his record is wiped clean. He is *exonerated*.

The Bible says the tribes on the west side of the Jordan did not even *speak* of going to war against the tribes on the east side. The whole matter was totally forgotten. Sometimes today when we think someone is guilty of a crime, we will outwardly accept their explanation, but inwardly we are thinking, "Oh,

<sup>12</sup>Joshua 22:33b.

right! I'm just sure. . . ." That is not exoneration. We really believe they are guilty. And this is a major barrier to repairing brotherly collisions. So let us always exonerate one another, no matter what the circumstances, so our collisions can be repaired, and the kingdom of Christ can be united.

### IN CONCLUSION . . .

The question is not *if* brothers collide or *will* brothers collide, but *when* brothers collide, what do we do? Try to avoid the collision by guarding your *actions*, never *assuming*, and never *accusing*. And when a collision occurs, listen to the *explanation*, *accept* it at face value, and completely *exonerate* your brother or sister.

We have all collided with God. We collide with Him when we sin. Isn't it grand that He allows us to explain without interruption (through confession)? And He accepts us at our word and forgives us.<sup>13</sup> Then comes complete and total exoneration. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."<sup>14</sup>

Are you headed on a collision course with anyone? You *can* change your course. Collision does not have to be. Are there any unrepaired collisions in your life? Follow the pattern of the Israelites and fix those dented feelings and smashed egos. "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>1 John 1:9.

<sup>14</sup>Psalms 103:12.

<sup>15</sup>Romans 12:18.

## WHEN BROTHERS COLLIDE

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### THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the cause of brotherly collisions.

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2. What actions are there in your life that seem to put you on a collision course with others?

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3. How can negative assumptions destroy the unity of the church? Are you, or have you been, a spiritual mind reader?

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4. What is the usual result of accusing someone of something?

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5. In repairing brotherly collisions, how important is it to be a good listener?

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6. How does it make you feel when someone interrupts you or tries to finish your sentences?

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THE HEART OF UNITY

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7. What often hinders our acceptance of another's explanation?

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8. Fully discuss the concept of exoneration.

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# 13

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## The Excellent Way

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“There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.”<sup>1</sup> And division. Elvis Presley is a prime example. One of his last recorded songs was “I Did It My Way.” And he did. The end result? Death. Divided family. We must learn the *excellent way*. The excellent way is God’s way, and His way is always right. It leads to life, liberty, and happiness. Man’s way leads to death, slavery, and misery.

First Corinthians 13 has been called “the love chapter.” I believe it could just as accurately be called “the unity chapter.” Love is about unity. Love breeds unity. Love as described in this chapter will unite a divided marriage. It will unite divided friends. It will unite a divided church. Love and unity fit hand-in-glove. Love is the *excellent way*.

Prior to chapter 13, Paul exhorted the Corinthians

<sup>1</sup>Proverbs 14:12.

to be united. It seems as if they were the first-century experts on division. In chapter 1 they had “preacheritis.” Chapter 3 too. In chapter 11 they were apparently having division between the men and the women. Also between the rich and the poor. In chapter 12 there was a dispute over who was more important than whom and who had the greatest spiritual gift. And so Paul introduced chapter 13 by saying, “And now I will show you the most excellent way.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, *it doesn't get any better than this!*

Do you want to develop perfect unity? Paul is about to tell us *what* the key is. Do you want to be able to love, *really* love? He is going to show us *how*. And just so you won't think you have a better way, he is also going to tell us *why* this is the most excellent way.

## WHAT?

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.<sup>3</sup>

*Love* is the most excellent way. All the language-

<sup>2</sup>1 Corinthians 12:31b.

<sup>3</sup>1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

learning and preaching, understanding and self-sacrificing in the world is meaningless unless it is motivated and regulated by love. And that applies to anything and everything you can possibly imagine.

An attitude of love will end, once and for all time, the argument over who has the greatest gift. The tongue speaker or the prophet? The understander or the full-of-faith? The liberal giver or the martyr? Who is the greatest? None of the above! The one who has learned to love as Christ loved is the greatest.

Do you want to be great? Do you want to go down in history as a guardian of the gospel? Let love regulate what you do. Let love be your motivation. Do everything with this thought in mind: "I am doing this because I love the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and Their children."

### HOW?

"How?" is a good question. We live in a crazy, mixed-up world, and most folks have forgotten how to love. Hollywood and Hugh tell us that love is sex, *and many believe them!* This is a problem particularly for our young people. On television, they see a couple who are "in love." What do they naturally do? Jump in bed to "make love." Then when they are out on a date with that "special" someone, the pressure is tremendous to "show their love" by having sex. That has nothing to do with love! That is simply lust disguised as love. Love is a whole lot more than just sex. Paul gives us the "how-to's" of love.



Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.<sup>4</sup>

### *Patience*

In the New Testament, there are two kinds of patience. There is patience with circumstances. Then there is patience with people. The one used here is patience with people. Even with all of their problems and hangups, worries and faults. It describes a person who has the power to avenge himself and retaliate, but will not. Some view this as weakness. In God's sight, it is a great strength. It is not defeat, but the only way to true victory.

This is God's attitude toward you and me. Don't you think God gets tired of our offending Him? Don't you imagine it disgusts Him when we do the same things over and over again? Yet, each time we fail, we go to Him for mercy, and He gladly showers us with His mercy and grace. That is the kind of attitude we must have toward one another. This patience will go a long way to develop greater unity in the body of Christ.

### *Kindness*

Just be sweet. To everyone. Too many folks are experts at "Christianity" but are unkind in their approach. We have the truth, but tend to share it in

<sup>4</sup>1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

an unkind way. Not only are we unkind at times to our denominational friends, but we are often that way toward one another. That is a lot of the reason why we are so splintered. And aren't we a critical bunch?! I am afraid there may be many of us who would have sided with the Jewish rulers rather than Christ when the woman caught in adultery was brought to Him.<sup>5</sup>

***Does Not Envy***

There are basically two kinds of envy. One is coveting what someone else has. The other is despising others who have more than you. The latter is malicious. That person does not want what another has, but he does not want him to have it either! When something good happens to another brother or sister, we need to be happy for him or her. We have learned well how to weep with those who weep. That kind of makes us feel good. But we need to learn to rejoice with those who rejoice.

***Does Not Boast***

Nobody likes a braggart. This is annoying. So maybe he *is* a success. Maybe he *is* smarter than anyone else. But love does not flaunt it. When reminded of one's own personal sinfulness and debt to God, it is readily apparent that one really has nothing to brag about. Except the cross of Christ, that is. "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup> We need to do more boasting about that.

<sup>5</sup>See John 8:1-11 for the details of that incident.

<sup>6</sup>Galatians 6:14.

***Is Not Proud***

This is another way of saying that someone who loves will not be arrogant. Napoleon always advocated the sanctity of the home and the obligation of public worship. For everyone but *himself*. As for himself, he said, "I am not a man like other men. The laws of morality do not apply to me." Give me a break!

***Is Not Rude***

"I just tell it like it is and let the chips fall where they may!" There may be a time for that kind of attitude, but most of the time it is just an excuse for rudeness. There is a graciousness in Christianity which never forgets that courtesy, tact, and politeness are lovely attributes.

***Is Not Self-Seeking***

Love does not insist on doing it "my way." "I have my rights!" True. But love voluntarily gives up those rights. There are two kinds of people in the world. There are those who always insist upon their privileges and those who remember their responsibilities. There are those who are always thinking of what life owes them and those who are always thinking of what they owe to life. How many church divisions could be avoided if brethren did not insist on their own way?

***Is Not Easily Angered***

That's a tough one. Maybe not for you, but it is for me. This means that if you really love, you will not be flying off the handle all the time. When we lose our tempers, we lose it all. The man who can master his temper can master anything. Someone once said, "If you can keep your head when everyone else is

losing theirs and blaming it on you, you understand Christ-like love.”

***Keeps No Record of Wrongs***

Love has no ROM. ROM is the memory in a computer that is permanently burned into a silicone chip. RAM is the static memory that erases itself every time the computer is turned off. Christians who love only have RAM when it comes to their brothers and sisters in Christ. As soon as a wrong occurs and is over with, the one who truly loves erases it from memory. Miserable is the person who stores it in ROM! One of the great arts in life is to learn what to forget and how to forget. May God grant us good forgetters!

***Does Not Delight in Evil***

Did you ever feel a little inner satisfaction when something evil or bad happened to another person who “had it coming”? That is not love.

***Rejoices With the Truth***

*Now* is the time to feel the inner satisfaction.

***Always Protects***

We need to be in the protecting business with one another. The Greek word in this text literally means to protect or preserve by covering. Love will never drag the mistakes and faults of others out into the open, but will do all that it can to protect and preserve by covering them up.

***Always Trusts***

It is hard to trust others sometimes. I admit that. Nonetheless, we must still give them the benefit of the doubt in all things. We often make people what

we believe them to be. What we expect is sometimes what we get.

*Always Hopes*

Love never ceases to hope. Never believe that anyone is a hopeless case. No one is “without a prayer” until he closes his eyes in death. Jesus never believed that any man or woman was hopeless. Even today, in the midst of all my faults and sins, Jesus looks down on me and says, “There is still hope!”

He's still working on me  
To make me what I ought to be.  
It took Him just a week  
To make the moon and the stars,  
The sun and the earth,  
And Jupiter and Mars.  
How loving and patient He must be,  
'Cause He's still working on me.<sup>7</sup>

*Always Perseveres*

This is the patience with circumstances. Intestinal fortitude. This is talking about bearing up under and triumphing over trials, knowing God will work everything out for our best good.<sup>8</sup> And that is love. Seeking the highest good for another.

All of these qualities of love as Paul describes them are realized in the life of Christ. They must also be realized in the lives of His disciples. That is you. That is me. That is our mark. That is what should distinguish us as His disciples. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must

<sup>7</sup>Author unknown.

<sup>8</sup>Romans 8:28.

## THE EXCELLENT WAY

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love one another. *By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*"<sup>9</sup>

### WHY?

We have seen *what* the excellent way is and *how* to do it. Now Paul will tell us *why* it is the most excellent way.

#### ***Because It Is Permanent***

"Love never fails."<sup>10</sup> Love is here from now on. It will not end. "Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away."<sup>11</sup> Love is the one force in the world that is unconquerable. Even the almighty dollar cannot touch it. It cannot be bought or sold. Not *real* love. Time cannot taint it. Death cannot destroy it. Love is omnipotent, for "God is love."<sup>12</sup> And if we will allow it to work, it will destroy division.

#### ***Because It Is Complete***

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know

<sup>9</sup>John 13:34-35; emphasis mine.

<sup>10</sup>1 Corinthians 13:8.

<sup>11</sup>Song of Solomon 8:7.

<sup>12</sup>1 John 4:8.

in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.<sup>13</sup>

Notice the mention of a mirror. That is significant because Corinth was famous for its manufacturing of mirrors. But, their mirrors did not give a perfect or complete reflection because they were only made of polished metal. In the same way, Paul is communicating that miraculous spiritual gifts are simply a dim reflection of God. The perfect reflection of God can be found in *love*. Again, because "God is love."

Paul alluded to their childish behavior. It is always childish to fuss and divide over petty things. He gave them (and us) a subtle hint to *grow up*. The word *perfect* literally can mean *mature*. One of our goals is maturity in Christ. And a characteristic of spiritual maturity is a life filled with the emphasis of Christ-like love. God is completely reflected through love, and we are considered complete (or mature) when we have love.

### ***Because It Is Supreme***

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."<sup>14</sup> Love is greater than faith because faith without love is cold. Love is greater than hope because hope without love does not exist. "Love is the fire which kindles faith and the light which turns hope into certainty."<sup>15</sup>

The excellent way. No, make that the *most* excellent way. If God's people would put this into practice,

<sup>13</sup>1 Corinthians 13:9-12.

<sup>14</sup>1 Corinthians 13:13.

<sup>15</sup>The origin of this quote is unknown.

## THE EXCELLENT WAY

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how could there ever be division? Greater unity will be developed in the kingdom as greater love is developed in its subjects. Reach out today, and really love someone. Not just the beautiful and suave. But the ugly and obnoxious. Love them in spite of themselves, not because of. Love the rank sinner. Love the outcast. Love the unlovely. Lay down your life for them. That's what our Master did.



**THOUGHTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Why is man's way wrong?

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2. How can love regulate us?

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3. Consider the fifteen characteristics of real love given by Paul's pen. Discuss each one and how they can enhance the unity of the church.

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4. Evaluate your own life by these love traits. How do you measure up? What can you do to improve? Write this down and pray about it regularly.

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5. Which of the love traits do you feel is the hardest to master?

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6. Discuss the concept of the permanence of love.

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THE EXCELLENT WAY

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7. If love is complete, would it be logical to say that it can accomplish complete unity? Why or why not?

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8. Write down the names of three people you have difficulty loving and commit to loving them as Christ does. Serve them. Pray for them. Befriend them.

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## Epilogue

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An epilogue is defined as “a short addition or concluding section at the end of any literary work, often dealing with the future of its characters.”<sup>1</sup> *We* are the characters of *this* literary work. By this time, you have read and hopefully studied the contents. You have seen unity defined, demanded, demonstrated, and developed. The future can only be determined by you. What will you do with this urgent plea for unity among believers?

To pursue it may put you at risk. Those satisfied with the status quo may resist and work against you. But nothing worthwhile is free of risk. The unity of the body of Christ is the most worthwhile cause I know. And whatever the risk, personal or otherwise, I am ready to take it. What about you?

<sup>1</sup>William Morris, ed., *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, New College Edition (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), 440.

Security is always a temptation that stands off against risk. Yet, in the purpose of God, the movement is always forward through open doors and into wider horizons. Christians who have stopped going and growing are the most miserable of creatures. They clog up churches with undue caution and infect the body of Christ with their own frustration. They are inventors of paralysis by analysis and the creators of strangulation by regulation. Thank God Jesus chooses risk over security.<sup>2</sup>

Many in churches of Christ have lost the vision of unity. They have ceased going and growing. They are clogging up churches. Be like Christ and choose risk over security! "Elton Trueblood puts it in terms of an eternal gamble when he writes, 'To be a Christian is to bet your life that Christ is right.' "<sup>3</sup> Bet your life that Christ is right when He says unity is possible. It really is. But you must renew your vision. The following historical information was gleaned from a church bulletin, source unknown. But it illustrates a people who lost their vision.

About 350 years ago, a shipload of travelers landed on the northeast coast of America. The first year they established a town. The second year they instituted the town government. The third year the town government planned to build a road five miles west-

<sup>2</sup>Lloyd J. Ogilvie, gen. ed., *The Communicator's Commentary* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1982), vol. 2, *Mark*, by David L. McKenna, 54.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

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ward into the wilderness. In the fourth year the people tried to impeach their town government because they thought it was a waste of public funds to build a road five miles into the wilderness. Who needed to go there anyway?

What happened to the dream to conquer a new land? They had crossed three thousand miles of ocean to get where they were, and now they could not even see past the noses on their faces. Many a church is plagued with this kind of myopic vision. Refuse to be satisfied with our current status. We are on the border of a great frontier. Don't impeach those who would build roads and bridges to tame the wilderness of division. Be a champion for Christ. Be a champion for unity.