

A PLEA FOR UNITY IN A WORLD OF DIVERSITY

John 17:20-21

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Religious division is a terrible blemish on the face of RELIGIOUS HISTORICITY/church history.
- B. Even in the church, the disastrous affects of division can be seen around us.
- C. Our challenge is double-sided.
 - 1. On the one hand, we must not allow ourselves to get caught up in a spirit of contention and controversy so that we contribute to the problem of division.
 - 2. On the other hand, we must guard against well-intentioned efforts to promote the joining together of religious people without resolving the problems that divide us in a biblical way.
- D. Let us begin by looking at what Jesus said about unity.

I. JESUS FERVENTLY WANTED ALL WHO BELIEVED IN HIM TO BE UNITED.

- A. He prayed for unity in our text today: John 17:20-21 (NKJV) *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 21 "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."*
- B. Jesus taught several principles and attitudes that make unity possible.
 - 1. HUMILITY -- Much conflict has come because people were seeking power and control over others.
 - a) After the mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked Him to give them places of honor in His kingdom, Jesus taught that being a servant was a requirement for those who would be great! Matt.20:25-28 (NASB), *"But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. 26 "It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."*
 - b) Real conversion requires this understanding of true greatness. Matt.18:1-4 (NKJV), *"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, 3 and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*
 - 2. LOYALTY TO CHRIST'S WORD
 - a) There are real doctrinal disagreements among religious people.
 - b) Some of these disagreements come about because people appeal to different sources of authority.
 - 1) Some look to church officials as the source of what to believe. Catholics say, "The pope says..." or "The church teaches. . ." Many Protestants say, "My pastor says...." which is essentially the same appeal. A newer approach is to appeal to the writings of a popular author as a kind of "unofficial creed."
 - 2) Others govern their thinking by their feelings. Preaching among some religious groups is designed to create an emotional atmosphere rather than to teach gospel truth.
 - c) Jesus pointed disciples to the word of God as a sure standard.
 - 1) Those who continue in the word of Christ will be true disciples. Jno.8:31-32- *"Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word,*

then you are truly disciples of Mine; 32 and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

- 2) God's word is truth – so THAT'S WHAT we need to know in order to be FREE from slavery to SIN! **Jno.17:17**.
- 3) Since we will be **JUDGED BY THE WORD SPOKEN BY CHRIST**, THAT is what we must KNOW and FOLLOW in our lives of service to God! **Jno.12:48** (NASB)- *"He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day."*

II. DIVISION IS A REAL PROBLEM AMONG BELIEVERS TODAY.

- A. The Yellow Pages of our telephone book lists approximately 101 denominational classifications under the listing "Churches" in the Sacramento area. These people profess to believe in Christ. . . yet they disagree on a great many issues. Some of the divisive issues might seem like major problems to many; others might seem relatively minor to some of us. Still, the present situation is a far cry from all believers being one, as Jesus prayed in **John 17:21**.
- B. Among many members of churches of Christ we have unity/division problems as well. The fundamental aim of those involved in "our" Restoration Movement has been to restore all aspects of first century, New Testament Christianity.
 1. In the early years of the movement, many independent groups joined together when they recognized they were striving to accomplish the same thing – uniting all believers on the common standard of New Testament authority.
 2. Unfortunately, *the last 100 years has brought about more division than unity*.
 - a) Divisions over ***instrumental music*** and ***missionary societies*** in the last century led to the formal recognition of two fellowships in the Federal Religious Census in 1906.
 - 1) The churches of Christ did not use instrumental music in worship and did not support the UCMS to do the work of the church in evangelism.
 - 2) The Christian church did use the instrument and supported missionary societies.
 - 3) As years passed, the Christian church split into two groups, the independent Christian churches and the Disciples of Christ.
 - (a) The "Disciples of Christ" segment has taken the form of an organized Protestant denomination and in recent years has moved toward union with several other denominations.
 - (b) In reaction against some of these moves, a group called Disciples' Heritage Fellowship seems to be in the process of splitting off from the main Disciples denomination.
 - b) Among churches of Christ, we have had breaks in fellowship among ourselves over many issues. In the 1997 edition of Churches of Christ in the United States, Mac Lynn provides some interesting information in his ***"Profile of the Churches"*** section.
 - 1) He lists 13,080 congregations. 86% of the members of those congregations fall into what brother Lynn calls "mainstream" -- members who have ***differences over various issues***, but who remain in fellowship with one another.
 - 2) The other 14% of members [24% of congregations] fall into five "fellowship groups" -- non-institutional, non-class, one cup, no-located-preacher, and premillennial]. Various sub-divisions exist among some of these groups but these divisions are minor in their effect on the whole brotherhood. ["One-cuppers," for example, fall into four different sub-groups, but the total membership of all four groups is only a little over 1% of membership of churches of Christ in the U.S.] So the picture of disunity often presented by those who have been critical of us is somewhat overstated.

- 3) However, this directory does not take into account the strong tensions which exist today between "DIVISIVE EXTREMISTS" within the "mainstream" group. Much greater potential for division exists over some of these issues than does over matters such as communion cups or segregated Bible classes.

III. WE NEED TO FOLLOW A WORKABLE STRATEGY FOR UNITY AMONG BELIEVERS – IN THIS CONGREGATION!.

A. Many within the body of Christ seem to have lost sight of the need for unity.

1. THAT'S what Paul was pleading for to the church in Corinth. **1 Cor.1:10** (KJV) *"Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."*
 - a) The apostle begged the brethren to be perfectly joined together.
 - b) They could not be "**OF CHRIST**" and follow different parties at the same time.
 - c) We become sectarian when we lose our desire for unity. Sectarianism is being carnally-minded instead of being spiritually-minded. **1 Cor.3:1-3** (NASB) *"And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. 2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, 3 for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?"*
2. Throughout the centuries, some have insisted in binding their opinions on others no matter what harm it did to the body of Christ. **3 Jno.1:9-10** (NASB), *"I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. 10 For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and he forbids those who desire to do so, and puts them out of the church."*
3. ANYTIME the church has preachers, or elders, or other members of influence with this spirit, the unity for which Jesus prayed will suffer.

B. Some, at the other extreme, want fellowship at any price!

1. Fellowship with all believers is a worthy goal.
 - a) However, that fellowship can be obtained only when those believers are following Christ. Not all who profess to believe in Christ are actually in Christ. **Rom.6:3; Gal.3:27**.
 - b) We can have spiritual fellowship only with those who have fellowship with the Lord! **1 John 1:3-7** (NASB) *"what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. 4 And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. 5 And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 7 but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin."*
2. We must treasure unity – **Eph.4:3** (NKJV)- *"endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*
 - a) We must always be ready to forego personal preferences and opinions for the sake of unity and peace. If we're divided over such matters, we're accountable to God for the sin of causing division! **Rom.16:17** (NKJV)- *"Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them."*
 - b) Never willing to forsake ("**abandon, leave in the lurch**") *"the doctrine which you learned"* - the truth of the gospel. Paul refused to give in to the false teachers in Galatia because the

truth had to be upheld! **Gal.2:4-5** (NASB) *"But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. 5 But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you."*

- C. The best hope for true unity is a strategy of pursuing peace and unity. **Psa.34:14** - *"seek peace and pursue it,"* **but never risking our peace with God for the sake of a false fellowship with men.**

CONCLUSION:

1. Why does this matter to us here in Carmichael? Because we do not live in complete isolation from the influence of what is happening with brethren who are in other congregations. Our aim must be to have a positive effect on behalf of biblical unity, according to the plea made by Jesus and His apostles!
2. Furthermore, we must not allow the "departures from the faith" evident in other places to adversely affect our determination to stay with the word of Christ.
3. Remember the two cautions Jesus warned against -- a **lack of humility in personal relationships** and a **lack of loyalty to the word of Christ**, especially in matters that pertain to our attaining to life and godliness. HUMILITY and LOYALTY TO CHRIST are great assets in the pursuit of UNITY IN CHRIST!