

DIVIDING TO UNITE (John 13:18-30 February 6, 2005)

Brothers and sisters, our unity is our birthright as Christians and one of the most powerful weapons we have in the spiritual war.

Our unity is one of the great tools for reaching a lost world.

So we must fight to preserve our unity and we must never confuse the true nature of our unity.

We may unite with Jews and Catholics and Muslims to fight social injustice. To declare the evils of abortion and the oppression of the poor and the destruction of our environment.

But we must *never* think that this is the unity that is our birthright as Christians.

There is **only one** true unity. The unity that has its *source* in being made one with Christ by being washed in His blood and has as its *sign* the love and service shown to other Christians.

Brothers and sisters, we may welcome the lost and dispossessed among us.

In the world the unsaved see hatred and self-glorification. But like a moth drawn to the light they come to the church where they see love and sacrifice. They may unite with us in social activities and the life of the church.

But, unless they repent and turn to Christ, we must *never* think that this is the unity that is our birthright as Christians.

There is **only one** true unity. The unity that has its *source* in being made one with Christ by being washed in His blood and has as its *sign* the love and service shown to other Christians.

Brothers and sisters, the church may show a façade of unity to the world.

We may choose to ignore the sin and rebellion and factions and heresy among us and show a united front to the world.

But we must *never* think that this is the unity that is our birthright as Christians.

There is **only one** true unity. The unity that has its *source* in being made one with Christ by being washed in His blood and has as its *sign* the love and service shown to other Christians.

True Christian unity is not an option but a necessity if we are to fulfil the Great Commission.

Jesus knew this. In John chapters 13-17 – Jesus turned from His ministry to the world to minister to His own. He was leaving them to take the gospel into a world that hated them.

So in His final hours – **Jesus passes *His* consuming passion – *Glorifying God* – as a sacred legacy to the church to continue.**

Last week, I said that **before** Jesus can pass on the baton to the church – He has one task to perform.

He must unify His Own.

I have called this:

The essential foundation – *Unity*

The disciples were not fully united and there was a traitor in their midst.

This is found in John 13:6-30. There Jesus shows that true unity in the church is achieved in *three* steps.

- *First*, He will unite us *with Himself through spiritual cleansing* – verses 6-11.
- *Second*, He will unite us *with each other through love and service* – verses 12-17.
- And then *third*, He will unite us *through cleansing the false brethren* – verses 18-30.

Jesus knew the church *must* be united. We cannot move forward *without* such unity. But *with* such unity – we cannot be stopped.

This week I have read a great deal, thought a great deal and prayed much about unity.

In Ephesians 4:1-3 Paul wrote:

I implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to *preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*.

The more I meditated, the more convinced I became of how **urgent** the need was to *preserve our unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* and yet how **difficult** the task was to *preserve our unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*.

I want to spend a moment outlining the difficulty of the task the Lord left to the church.

Jesus taught that He would unite us *with each other through love and service* – **and** that He would unite us *through cleansing the false brethren*.

What this implies is that a decision has to be made. When do you love and when do you cleanse?

In His wisdom, we must decide – is the source of disunity a disagreement among *true* brothers that is resolved through humble love and service **or** is the source of the disunity the fact that the church is dealing with a *false* brother with whom there can be no true unity?

As I have read books and heard the words of their authors – I have become convinced that the church has often done an incredibly poor job of drawing the right line in determining whether this is a brother to reach out to in love or a false brother to remove from fellowship.

Yet if we draw the line in the wrong place – the result is not true unity – it actually leads to further *disunity*.

Here is the problem. Some have heard the words of Jesus to love one another. To preference one another. To serve one another.

And in a spirit of love – often with the very best of motives – they have allowed love to cover *too* great a multitude of sins. Their love has meant that they have not dealt with the sinning brother, the heretical brother or the factious brother.

They have drawn the circle of love too wide and have not realised that true love and service means urging a sinning brother to repent, showing a heretical brother the error of his teaching and insisting that a factious brother cease his divisions.

To keep a false brother in the church is a recipe for division.

But on the other hand others have heard the words of Jesus to cleanse the sinning brother and have drawn the circle of true fellowship far too narrowly.

Minor points of doctrine become the denominator of fellowship.

Honest disagreement is greeted with charges of heresy.

Preference issues get treated like major sin issues.

And by driving away true brothers – they foster division and rancour and questions among the flock that remains.

Yet, while the line is not always easy to find, the New Testament repeatedly insists that we *must* find this line – true unity is at stake.

Jesus commanded the church to remove a false brother in Matthew 18. Paul insists we remove the sinful man from our midst in 1 Corinthians 5. In Galatians 1 Paul says anyone who preaches a false gospel is accursed. And in Titus he commands us to remove a factious man after a first and second warning.

But, even the most committed of Christians have their times of weakness. Even the godliest of men and women will struggle from time to time. That is why in Galatians 6:1-2 Paul cries out to us:

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, *restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness*; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfil the law of Christ.

Unity is so precious. We must **not** summarily dismiss the weak brother. If he is a true brother, we **must** restore him through love.

But because unity is so precious. We dare **not** embrace the false brother.

So, how are we to tread this crucial line between love covering a multitude of sins and the need to preserve unity by cleansing the false brother?

In our passage this morning – Jesus is teaching His men – the men who will become the Apostles – the foundation upon which the church would be built.

Jesus wants them and us to understand where to draw this line.

These men were the original leaders of the church. But Scripture indicates that the responsibility for discerning these principles was then passed on to the elders of each church.

When the Apostle Paul addressed the elders of the church in Ephesus. This is what he said in Acts 20:28-35:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert. ...

They had a responsibility to remove the savage wolves who would seek to come in and destroy the flock. But as well, Paul said this to them:

I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ... I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

They had to help the weak through love and service.

And in the great passage on unity – Ephesians 4 – Paul wrote this:

[The Lord] gave [gifted men to the church], some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-13.

We understand these passages to indicate that the task of building up the church in unity has been entrusted to the gifted men given by God to lead the church. And the principles for how we do this are found in our passage.

- *First*, He will unite us *with Himself through spiritual cleansing*. The *source* of all true unity is that we are one in Christ.

If the one we are dealing with is cleansed by Christ then they are a true brother or sister.

- *Second*, He will unite us *with each other through love and service*. The *sign* of all true unity is our love and service for one another.

If the one we are dealing with is a true brother or sister – we reach out in love and service and they will respond with love and service.

- And *third*, He will unite us *through cleansing the false brethren*. The *safeguarding* of all true unity is the removal of false brethren. This is found in verses 18-30.

If the one we are dealing with is *not* a true brother or sister – then they must be removed from the fellowship of the flock.

In our study of John, we have reached this third point. So look with me at John 13:18.

In the first three verses – Jesus deals with two *why* questions. *Why* did God allow a wolf among the sheep and *why* it is so necessary to remove a wolf.

First, *why* allow a wolf among the sheep?

Jesus had known from the first that one of the disciples – Judas – was not truly one of them. In John 6:70-71, Jesus said:

“Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?” Now He meant Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him.

The question comes – if Jesus *knew* that Judas would betray Him – *why* choose him as one of the twelve?

And here in verses 18-19 of John 13 we have the answer:

You must trust that God is sovereign even over the presence of false brethren.

Jesus said:

I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.' From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that *I Am*.

Jesus chose all twelve disciples – **even** the one who would betray Him.

He quotes Psalm 41. To eat bread together was regarded as a pledge of loyalty and breaking that pledge is a severe betrayal.

Here, the betrayer of David foreshadows the betrayer of the greater Son of David – Jesus.

But – and this is what Jesus wanted us to understand – the coming of Judas among the twelve was *not* some cruel twist of fate. It was all a part of the plan of God. Without Judas there would be no betrayal and therefore no cross.

The choosing of the betrayer was a part of the plan of God to save the world.

Again we see these two truths. Judas *chose* to betray Christ. It was his decision to betray the Lord.

But this was all a part of the *plan* of God.

And when Jesus died and rose again – then the disciples would see that Jesus was not the victim of circumstance but the master of circumstance. And they would come to believe that He is the great *I Am* – God Himself.

Brothers and sisters – the presence of wolves among the sheep is one of the most unpleasant and dangerous times in the life of a church.

But we are a people who trust in the sovereignty of God. God uses *all* things together for good – even wolves.

The resolve needed to remove a false brother can unite a church in ways that nothing else can. It causes us to examine our own hearts. It shows us the preciousness of unity. It reminds us of the basis and necessity of unity.

Nothing – not even apostates in the church – happens apart from the sovereign plan of God.

Then in verse 20, Jesus states *why* it is so necessary to remove a wolf. *Why* the cleansing of the false brethren is so crucial.

Here is His answer:

You must understand that you are ambassadors of Christ and false brethren will blunt your message.

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.

Jesus is commissioning His church. He is giving them a great task.

Let us never forget that we bear the message of salvation to a lost and dying world. We bear the one hope for the saving of souls.

But we bear our message to a world that is dark – a world that does not want to hear our gospel.

Only the power of the Holy Spirit can open the hearts and minds of men. And one way the Spirit of God does this is by showing the power of Christ in uniting sinful men and women in love.

Look at John 13:35:

By this – by loving one another as Christ loved us – shall all men will know that you are My disciples, *if* you have love for one another.

And John 17:21 and 23 – in the great prayer of Christ:

[I ask] that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, *so that the world may believe that You sent Me*. ... I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, *so that the world may know that You sent Me*, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

One great purpose of our unity is that the world may believe our message and live.

After the fall – all men and women were corrupted. We are inherently selfish. We want power and position and prestige.

And again and again we have seen men unite in a common cause – only to have sin fracture that unity.

We see it in business and politics and sport and every walk of life.

Unity and humility and preferring one another is so *unnatural* – that when the world sees *true* unity – it becomes a beacon of the power of Christ to transform our hearts.

That is why this subject is so crucial. It is why so much of Jesus' final address and prayer to His own centres around unity.

I remember some time ago speaking with an elder at another church. He told me that for the best part of a year his church had been racked by divisions that were threatening to tear the body apart. Not only had it paralysed their outreach but many

non-Christians who came into the church saw the disunity and walked away. And for a time there was a good chance that some involved in the problems would take the fight to the press, shattering what remained of their testimony.

Jesus came to unite the divided – Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female into one – through His blood. We are ambassadors of that gospel. Our unity declares the power of our gospel. We *must* be diligent to preserve our bond of unity.

Now Jesus moves from the *why* to the *how*. *How* do you remove a false brother?

First, you must identify the false brethren – even though this task may be difficult. vv. 21-25

When Jesus had said this, He became troubled in spirit, and testified and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me.” The disciples began looking at one another, at a loss to know of which one He was speaking. There was reclining on Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. So Simon Peter gestured to him, and said to him, “Tell us who it is of whom He is speaking.” He, leaning back thus on Jesus’ bosom, said to Him, “Lord, who is it?”

Identifying the false brother is often an incredibly difficult task.

Judas was selfish. Judas loved money and power. Judas was a thief. Judas was more interested in a political than a spiritual kingdom.

You would think that when Jesus dropped the bombshell that one of the twelve would betray Him that every eye would settle on Judas.

It didn’t!

I am sure that Judas initially followed Jesus with good motives. He sincerely hoped this Nazarene was the Messiah. He had been astounded by the miracles.

But He could never come to accept the gospel of a crucified Messiah.

But the veneer, the mask he put up was so good no one immediately thought of Judas.

Satan comes as an angel of light.

The wolves come in sheep’s clothing.

And what is more, often they are unaware that they are wolves. They sincerely believe that Jesus couldn’t be God. They truly think the church would be better off with leadership that follows the trends of the world. They find ways to excuse the heinousness of their sin.

Six years ago – we had to remove a wolf from our midst. But until she showed her true colours – none of us would have seen her apostasy coming. It shocked us to the core.

Here Jesus is troubled in spirit. The word speaks of Him being in a state of turmoil that one of His own would betray Him.

The disciples are puzzled. They can't conceive that the betrayer could come from within.

Peter gestures to the 'one Jesus loved'. Most likely this refers to the Apostle John – the author of this gospel.

The 'one Jesus loved' is not meant to say that Jesus loved John more than the others – it is John's way of saying I needed the special love of God because I was so sinful. I needed to have this special love to have fellowship with Jesus.

John felt the depth of his sin. He knew it was only the grace and love of Christ that redeemed Him.

He is reclining on Jesus' bosom so Peter – who is seated further away – gestures to him to ask the Lord who it could possibly be.

None of the disciples could imagine that there was a traitor in their ranks.

What we have to understand is that the process of church discipline – cleansing the church – is a difficult and painful process.

Church discipline is reserved for those who come into the church, are accepted as Christians – and only later reveal themselves to be false brothers.

Scripture indicates that this process is to be reserved *exclusively* for serious and unrepentant offences which shows that the one concerned is in fact not a true brother – he is not a Christian – he has not been cleansed by Christ – he must be removed.

Unfortunately, the process of church discipline has been abused. It has been used as a tool to silence debate, to impose dictatorial rule, to stop review of poor doctrine and practices.

This must never be so.

It is reserved for serious issues – issues that are markers which indicate the person involved is *not* a true Christian.

Jesus commanded the church to remove a false brother in Matthew 18. How is he recognised? He commits a serious sin – and refuses repeatedly to repent of that sin. And the sin is validated by witnesses and by the church.

A true Christian will repent. The Spirit of God will show him his sin. But the false brother will refuse to repent and will thus show his true nature.

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul urged the church to remove the wicked man from their midst. The sin was immorality so gross even the Gentiles found it revolting. The church

affirmed that this was a gross sin. The man was given the opportunity to repent. And was then removed from fellowship.

In Galatians 1 Paul warned about doctrinal heresy that led to a false gospel. This is not referring to minor theological debates – this is heresy.

It refers to such non-negotiables as the deity of Christ, salvation by grace through faith alone and so on.

Then in Titus 3 Paul commands us to remove a factious man after a first and second warning. This is not the man who has an honest disagreement or wants clarification on an issue.

This is the man who seeks to develop factions. He does not go the leadership but undermines from through whispers and half truths.

The true Christian will repent of such sin. The false brother will continue on his path of destruction. Remove such a man after a first and second warning.

The problem is that these wolves look like sheep. The problem is that some of the other sheep have trouble accepting this person is a wolf.

But their sin, their lack of love, their refusal to repent, their heresy – this identifies them.

I have to tell you that as an elder I feel the weight of this burden. When division arises – I feel the pressure – are we dealing with a weak brother who needs encouragement or a false brother who must be removed?

I don't want to get this wrong. But what I rest on is the fact that Scripture says that the true brother will respond to loving encouragement. The Spirit of God within will lead him to recognise his sin and repent.

And when there is true repentance, there must be a restoration to full fellowship – Galatians 6:1.

But the refusal to repent – to humble himself before Christ shows the true heart of the man.

Brethren, we have to follow the example of Christ. Subdue our pride. Put on the robe of humility.

If anyone comes to you and says – brother I have a concern about a serious sin in your life – factiousness in your heart – heresy in your teaching – then don't bristle with indignation – thank them for their concern and truly search your heart. Pray for God to show you the truth. And if there is truth there – respond in love and repentance.

So, *how* do you remove a false brother?

First, you must identify the false brethren – even though this task may be difficult.

Then, second, you must confirm the false brethren – by offering them a chance to repent. Verses 26-29.

Jesus then answered, “That is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him.” So when He had dipped the morsel, He took and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. After the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Therefore Jesus said to him, “What you do, do quickly.” Now no one of those reclining at the table knew for what purpose He had said this to him. For some were supposing, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to him, “Buy the things we have need of for the feast”; or else, that he should give something to the poor.

Picture what is going on here. Under the urging of Peter, John asks Jesus – who is it? Jesus says – it is the one I give the morsel to. He gives it to Judas.

Since our passage indicates that none of the other disciples heard this exchange – it seems it was done privately between Jesus, John and Judas.

But here is the remarkable point, John is leaning on Jesus’ breast, Jesus passes the morsel to Judas without the other disciples realising what is happening. So almost certainly Judas is on the *other* side of Jesus.

The places either side of Jesus – the places of honour – to His right and left – seem to have been occupied by John **and** Judas. Judas had a place of honour at the Last Supper.

As well – in Palestinian feasts – the host would honour a particular guest by choosing a tasty morsel and handing it to him.

Judas was shown love and trust and respect by Jesus. He looked after the finances. He sat in a position of privilege. He was offered the morsel. All this even though Jesus knew he was the traitor. This was an act of supreme love.

Even at the last – Jesus reached out to Judas in love.

Even at this late hour – Judas was offered the opportunity to repent.

But Judas was not filled with the Holy Spirit. Judas could not respond to this offer of love.

His choice to spurn that love and trust showed He was not one of Jesus’ own.

At this point, Satan entered into him.

Jesus told him to do what he was going to do and do it quickly – and Judas left.

None of the other disciples except John even understood the significance of what occurred. They thought he was sent for a task like buying supplies or helping the poor.

This was not easy for Jesus to send Judas away – but it had to be done.

George Herbert summed up Jesus' heart in poetic verse:

*Mine own Apostle, who the bag did bear,
Though he had all I had did not forbear
To sell me also, and to put Me there:
Was ever grief like Mine?*

*For thirty pence he did My death devise,
Who at three hundred did the ointment prize,
Not half so sweet as My sacrifice:
Was ever grief like Mine?*

Judas loved the things of this world more than the sacrifice of Christ.

Jesus' heart was broken by this betrayal.

But just as Jesus offered Judas the choice morsel – an act of love – an opportunity for him to turn aside from the path of betrayal – so in church discipline – you seek the repentance of the sinning brother. You urge the heretic to accept the truth. You encourage a factious man to seek unity.

In Matthew 18:5, Jesus says that if the sinning brother repents – you have won your brother.

In Galatians 6:1 Paul says the goal of discipline is that the sinner is restored to full fellowship.

If they are a true brother – they will repent.

We are a loving and forgiving community. As Christ forgave us – so we forgive those who respond in love.

But, if they are like Judas – a false brother – they will spurn that offer of love.

They confirm the church's belief that they are a false brother by choosing not to repent.

If there is no repentance. If the man is not saved. Then there can be no unity. We must move to the final step.

You must cleanse the false brethren from fellowship. Verse 30.

So after receiving the morsel [Judas] went out immediately; and it was night.

Throughout the whole Gospel of John we have seen that night does not just mean the dark hours. It refers to spiritual darkness – away from the light – away from salvation.

Judas left the only place where his soul could find rest. He left the only One who could save Him.

When Paul spoke to the Corinthians in his first letter about disciplining the immoral man, in Chapter 5 verse 5 he commanded:

Deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, *so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

Hand him over to Satan with the purpose that *he **might** finally be saved.*

Church discipline is *not* a condemnation of a man to hell.

Church discipline is in fact one of the *greatest acts of love.*

If a man thinks he is saved, but he is not cleansed by the blood of Christ and this is shown by his refusal to repent and show love and service – then the greatest disservice we can do to that man is to allow him to continue in his delusion.

For most assuredly on the final day he will hear from the lips of Jesus Himself – **Depart from Me – I never knew you!**

But to send an unrepentant sinner from the cocoon of the church out into the world where Satan has sway – *may* cause such a one to realise he truly needs Christ and repent.

To hand a man or woman over to Satan is to cast that person out from the protection of the church. To expose him to the world as it really is. It is to recognise that he was never truly saved. He is removed from the fellowship and support that he once found so sweet. He is now in the domain of Satan.

He will find that the world is a bitter place. Its pleasures do not truly satisfy. There is no honour among thieves. It is a hard place out there with no hope for the future and the prospect of hell can loom ever more real.

His own resources will amount to little. He will not find true joy. He will not be at peace. His conscience will plague him. His flesh, his self reliant attitude will be destroyed with the result that his spirit *may* be saved in the day of the Lord.

Church discipline is NOT vindictive. While the unsaved remain in the church it is easy to deceive themselves that they are saved. But when they wake up cut off from the church and its privileges, removed by the leaders in the power of Jesus Christ it is much more difficult for them to believe that they are saved.

Many will stay cold to the things of Christ – like Judas. But some – under the power of the Holy Spirit – may come to true repentance.

Cleansing the flock is necessary to safeguard the unity of the flock.

Brothers and sisters – when Jesus turned to address His own – His first act was **unity**. Unity is **not** an optional extra. It is essential.

When Jesus left this world and entrusted the task of manifesting the glory of God to us – He knew the daunting nature of the task before us.

We face the inbuilt resistance of man to the truth that flows from the fall.

We face a world deceived by materialism and secularism and Islam and New Age philosophies.

Our message is foolishness to the world.

But the weapons of our warfare are powerful to the destruction of fortresses. And one of the greatest weapons we possess is our unity. **True unity in Christ.**

The *source* of our true unity is that we are one in Christ.

The *sign* of our true unity is our love and service for one another.

And the *safeguarding* of our true unity is the removal of false brethren.

If we unite on any other basis – it is not the true unity that is our birthright as sons of God.

If our unity is merely a social gathering – we are no different than Rotary.

If our unity is merely social activism – we are no different than Right to Life.

If our unity is merely a veneer to show the world – we are bereft of true power.

If our unity comes at the expense of purity – we are bereft of true power.

But when we have the true unity that Jesus left us as our birthright it will empower us and sustain us in our great task of taking the gospel of salvation to a lost world.

Yet I tell you – *disunity* comes naturally. Unity requires us the hard yards of love and service and if necessary cleansing the false brother.

We must be diligent to *preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*.

Jesus prized unity. We must prize it.

When the scourge of disunity rises – humble yourself – show love and service. Sacrifice to declare our union in Christ.

And then we will know the truth of the words of Jesus – if you do these things – if you seek this unity – you **will** be blessed!

Unite children of God – for the task ahead is great – but our God is greater!

And together we will face the challenge of taking this gospel to the world.