

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In 1933, a Lutheran Pastor by the name of H. C. Steinhoff wrote a sermon titled "The Unity of the Christian Church." It was based upon our epistle lesson for this morning (Ephesians 4:1-6). I hope you don't mind me setting in front of you a couple of quotes from his introduction. At the beginning he writes:

In December 1931, the Pope published a letter inviting Protestants to return to the one fold, stressing particularly the wonderful privilege offered in his church to venerate (worship) the Virgin Mary. He had extended the same invitation many times before, but always without it being accepted by the Protestants. We regard his invitation as ridiculous, as ridiculous as it would be if a crocodile, swimming in murky waters with gaping mouth, said to children playing on the shore: "Come on in; the water is fine." We marvel at the audacity of the proposal for unity, coming as it does, from one who has done more to disrupt the Church than any other agency on earth.

Things haven't changed. The Pope continues to promote his agenda and, regardless of the fact that much of it is totally opposed to what we believe, teach, and confess, he continues to apply pressure on us by appealing to what appears to be an overwhelming consensus. In our day, he takes positions that are contrary to what many Protestants and Lutherans believe, and even what many believe in his own church, and then tries to force them on people who disagree through a call for unity using the overwhelming consensus and pressure of society and nations. And those who stand against what appears to be noble invitations for unity are demonized because they will have nothing to do with compromising the truth. Still, many expect us to sacrifice the truths of Scripture at the invitation of those who appear to be in the majority. Pastor Steinhoff then says:

Also from other sources besides the Papacy the cry goes up for the union of all Christendom. We, too, sigh for it; but the unity which we desire and insist upon is not a mere union, just for the sake of being one, not an agreement to disagree, but real unity in all the doctrine of Holy Scripture, the unity that bound together the early Christians, of who we read in Acts 2:43 and 4:32; for "Blest be the tie that binds Our hearts in Christian love; The fellowship of kindred minds Is like to that above." Divisions and dissensions among Christians are most deplorable.

It's the quote from the hymn that really hits the nail on the head: "the fellowship (unity) of kindred minds Is like to that above." In other words, unity is *not* based on what the Pope or anyone else says. It is based upon the one who is above, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Unity is what is revealed about him - his person and his work. What binds our hearts in Christian love is the one doctrine of Jesus with all of its various articles as found in the Bible.

When Paul wrote the words of our epistle lesson for this morning he was in prison, or as our text states "a prisoner for the Lord." He got under the skin of Jewish leaders, telling them that their

understanding of the law and their traditions were an offense to the Lord and his people. He told them that their teachings were contrary to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Consequently, the Jewish leaders turned to the consensus of a society and nation that would not tolerate people claiming to have absolute truth. Paul was demonized and put in prison. It's under these conditions that Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus, and talks to them about the unity or oneness of the Christian Church. We are to learn from what Paul said to them. He writes that there is but one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all who is all and through all.

Christ's church is one. There is unity in what we call the invisible church. The church is invisible because the church consists of all those who believe in Jesus Christ. No one can look into the heart and know for sure if that person believes, and that is why we call it the invisible church. The tie that binds all Christians together and binds them to Christ is faith in his person, life, sufferings, death, and resurrection. The broken condition of what we call "Christianity" and the divisions into denominational groupings does not destroy the unity and oneness of Christ's church. The oneness of the church transcends denominations or labels. It is a holy church.

This concept - that the church is holy - is a very important one. Our holiness only comes by faith in the holiness of Jesus who lived a holy life and sacrificed himself that we might be declared holy in him. He took our unholiness, our sins, went to the cross so that we might be declared holy and one day made holy. Again, the church consists of all true believers regardless of what denomination they are found. This one holy church is apostolic and is unified in the teachings concerning Christ who is the heart and center of both the Old Testament and New Testament (apostolic) Scripture. This a glorious church that does not have any spot or wrinkle for she is in Christ. Once again Paul says one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all who is all and through all.

At the same time, the Scriptures talk about the visible church. By making this distinction we are not saying that there is a second church. Rather we are talking about the fact that when we look at the church we can only see that which is right before our very eyes. We see a church where hypocrites and unbelievers are present, as also churches that have false teachers and false teachings. The visible church is a church that is at war. There are divisions and disunity in the church that we see on earth. God wants even the visible church to be united, but not at the cost of forsaking the truth of his Word. In our lesson the apostle Paul lifts up his voice for unity. He implores the Christians at Ephesus (and us) to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. It is not an option.

God gives to his people the responsibility to retain God's Word in its truth and purity and administer the Sacraments according to Christ's institution. It says in the book of Acts that the church continued "steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and to the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42)." The unity of the visible church can only be served and advanced by genuine devotion to purity of teaching and maintaining the "one faith." Listen to what Eugene F. A. Klug writes in his book on *Church and Ministry*:

Differences in doctrine, therefore, between Christian church bodies on earth cannot be a God-pleasing thing, nor is the church's splintered condition into many denominations. The

solution for this disunity and division does not, however, lie in the direction of indifferentism, tolerance, or so-called loving forbearance toward heterodoxy [allowing false teaching in the church] - all of it is misguided and wrong - but in humble listening and obedient bowing before God's Word of truth, Sacred Scriptures. This is the posture demanded by God of every devout follower of His and of every church, be it a congregation or a larger fellowship of congregations bearing Christ's name.

It is the responsibility of every child of God to find a church where God's Word and Sacraments are pure, and if you can't find one you become a missionary. Paul tells us in our epistle less that we not to be children who are tossed about by the waves of and carried by every wind of doctrine. We are not to be deceived by human cunning or craftiness in deceitful schemes. He writes (4:15-16): "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

It would be a wonderful thing if the visible church were to have complete unity - that all hypocrites and unbelievers in the church would be converted and made one (no more goats), but we need to understand that such will never be the case down here. The church will always be a militant church. It will always be a church at war. Jesus himself remarks that there will always be sheep and goats until the last day. Paul tells us that there will be divisions among us to discern who has the truth. On this side of heaven we can never hope to unite visible "Christianity." Nevertheless, our part is to preach the word in truth and purity, administer the sacraments rightly, and follow Christ in our lives regardless of the price that comes when we have to point out untruth and mark those who cause divisions and avoid them. As our post-sermon hymn states:

Through toil and tribulations
And tumult of her war
She waits the consummation
Of peace forevermore
Till with the vision glorious
Her longing eyes are blest,
And the great Church victorious
Shall be the Church at Rest.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott