

Distinct but Inseparable Series, No. 6

“Unity and Purity”

John 17:20-26; Jude 17-23

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In this series of morning sermons, we have been dealing with famous pairs of biblical truth; teachings that form, as it were, a matched set. They are different truths and different existential realities, but they must be kept together. If not, each teaching is corrupted and becomes something different in Christian thinking and living than it should be. Together they preserve both the truth in each and the proper balance between them. We have considered so far, such things as law and gospel and justification and sanctification. This morning our matched pair is not of theological truths but of ethical ones; they concern not what we are to believe but how we are to live, in particular that we are to practice *at one and the same time* the unity of the church and the purity of the church. I have chosen two separate texts out of a great many that would have served the purpose. But these two pose the issue as sharply as any others.

Text Comment

The verses we are about to read from John 17 are part of what has long been known as the Lord’s “high-priestly prayer.” He was praying for his disciples, not only the Twelve before him in the Upper Room that night, but for all those who would become his disciples in the future, which is to say, he was praying for us!

v.21 The unity of Christian believers is analogous to the unity that exists between the Father and the Son: a unity of love, of purpose, of life itself, sustained by our own connection to the Father and the Son. All being united to God, we are united to one another. What is more, this unity is so other-worldly, so abnormal in character, that it powerfully testifies to its supernatural origin and to the reality of the Christian faith. Men and women drawn together this completely, a unity that surmounts all the obstacles that keep people apart in the world, is proof that Jesus Christ really is the Son of God sent from the Father and that he really has transformed the lives of human beings who trust in him.

v.23 The Lord wants “complete unity,” not some lesser measure.

Jude 19 If we had time we would read the whole of this short letter, a letter that is all about “contending for the faith,” as we read in v.3, a contending made necessary by the denial of biblical truth *in the church* and the effort by some to persuade other Christians to join in that denial.

It is not too much to say that the story of the church in the world is the story of two great struggles: the first to evangelize the world and the second to preserve gospel truth from its enemies within the church. It is hard enough to have opposition from the world, but we understand and expect that. The world hated our master; it will hate his followers too. But to find it springing up like dragon’s teeth in the church, in every age, in every place is the true tragedy of Christian history. But from the beginning the church has been a

mixture of believers and unbelievers and not unbelievers only, but some unbelievers who act aggressively to undermine the teaching of the Word of God and it will be such a mixture to the end.

Now there is nothing particularly controversial in the text from John that we read. Very clearly, we have an appeal on the Savior's part to his heavenly Father on behalf of the unity of his followers, their oneness before the world. He desires such a unity as will be founded on a shared faith and a shared experience of the love of God and the glory of God. And, clearly, the Lord was speaking of a visible unity, a unity that, as in vv. 21 and 23, the world will witness and draw conclusions from. I say, there is nothing particularly controversial here. Everyone knows what he meant. And this is hardly the only place where great emphasis is placed on the importance of the loving unity of the people of God.

The Apostle Paul made a point of commending to us his own practice of bearing charitably a large number of differences of opinion between Christians, of refusing to allow them to become the basis for division in the body of Christ. Indeed, he said that those who maintain one position must often bend over so far backward to accommodate the different opinions of other brethren as virtually to leave the impression that they agree with positions they do not agree with. Paul was accused of holding views he did not hold, because he was so careful not to make an issue of things that might divide believers from one another.

Paul himself says that he became all things to all men – overlooking some significant differences of opinion between Christian brothers that more than once threatened the unity of the fledgling church – in order not to let differences of viewpoint interfere with his gospel witness. Why, the Apostle Paul was anyone's doormat regarding issues where he felt he could be flexible, even when those issues were clearly matters concerning which Paul felt one position was right and the other was wrong. In this same spirit, John Calvin, for example, wrote that though he disagreed with the Lutherans touching matters of Christian worship, he did not regard those matters as sufficient to justify a separation. *A separation occurred, but according to Calvin it should not have. Those were matters of obvious importance and certainly of sharp controversy – differing views of the Lord's Supper, the use of images in the worship of the church, and the continuation of certain features of the Roman mass – but Calvin did not feel it right to separate on the basis of them. In this way he was a true disciple of the Apostle Paul.*

But notwithstanding this impressive emphasis on the importance of Christian unity and the self-sacrifice that we must be willing to endure on its behalf, the matter that the Lord raised in his prayer has, alas, often not been a matter of real commitment for many Christians. For, the fact of the matter is that often one does not see in the history of the Christian church the sort of unity, the kind of other-worldly, supernatural, witness-bearing unity that Jesus prayed for here. Everyone is aware that the Christian church today is deeply and historically divided into three great sections: the Orthodox or Eastern Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Protestant Church. And everyone is further aware that the Protestant world is further divided into virtually innumerable churches, and that the major divisions, such as, for example, the Presbyterian Church, are further divided into still smaller segments. Anyone familiar with Church history at all and with the history of his or her own church, knows that the divisions that separate

Christians from one another often were born in bitter controversy and continue in studied antagonism, the one group of Christians holding themselves apart from the other.

What is more, the better one learns the history of Christianity, the more division and disunity one finds. We tend to look back on the early centuries of Christianity, the three centuries following Pentecost, as a kind of golden age of Christian unity. We remember Tertullian's famous statement, which he puts into the mouth of the pagan observer of Christianity, "My how those Christians love one another." And there was such brotherly love and impressively so. But there were, within the church at the same time, bitter divisions as well: schisms and mutual animosity. Tertullian himself apparently became a member of the Montanist sect, a movement of Christians not so dissimilar to the charismatic movement of more recent times, especially a charismatic church that was also fundamentalist in its approach to Christian ethics and the Christian life. Montanists practiced what they held to be a continuing gift of prophecy, they had female clergy, and were rigorists in Christian ethics, even determining the exact length of the veil that their women had to wear to worship. The very first regional synod known to Christian history excommunicated the Montanists and it was a movement often spoken against, though, so far as we know, Montanists held, and sincerely, to all the main points of the orthodox Christian faith.

And so, it continued through one schism after another, one set of antagonisms after another. Think of the antipathy that characterized the relations between the Dominicans and Franciscans in later Medieval Christianity and, of course, and on a still grander and more public scale, in the Protestant world. It was very early on in the Protestant Reformation that the new movement began splitting apart. At Marburg, in 1529, an effort to hold it together was torpedoed by Martin Luther, who insisted that his view of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper was non-negotiable. And so, it continued as larger groups of Christians fractured into smaller groups. I'm reading a fascinating new biography of John Owen, the great Puritan theologian of the 17th century. I have been reminded how ferocious were the antagonisms between godly men who agreed about almost everything in the Christian faith but disagreed about church government or English politics. We tend to forget that it was an English Calvinist army that invaded and defeated Calvinist Scotland in the 1650s. Our own PCA has experienced divisions of one kind or another, churches leaving for one reason or another, churches joining us from other Christian communions for one reason or another. It hasn't ordinarily been the case and isn't now that the world stands back to marvel at the supernatural unity of the followers of Jesus Christ! So much for the unity of the church!

On the other hand, Jude is hardly the only place in the New Testament in which we learn that false teaching was already posing an existential threat to the Christian faith; hardly the only place where we are taught to contend for the faith, to contend for the doctrinal purity of the church. If preserving the unity of the church is a divine command that Christians have far too often disobeyed, so too is this command to preserve the faith inviolate, to refuse to allow it to be compromised by addition, by subtraction, or by redefinition.

Throughout the history of Israel, we are given to see the prophets condemning the people of God for their accommodations – in doctrine and in life and worship – to the thinking and the practice of the world around them. Paul in his letter to the Galatians uses the strongest conceivable language to abominate those who tamper with the gospel of Christ. "Let them be cursed!" he

says. And lest there be any misunderstanding here, Paul was stridently condemning views that have long circulated as the official teaching of some Christian churches or have silently surfaced as the actual belief of many supposedly Christian churches. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul orders us not to associate with professing Christians who are unfaithful in doctrine or in life. In the letters of John, we are taught this means not even to greet a person bringing false teaching, to discipline those who have given an ear to such false teaching, and to publicize the errors of those whose teaching was undermining the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.

We know from the New Testament that the struggle to keep the church faithful to the truth began virtually as soon as the gospel began to be preached after Pentecost. Paul battled antinomianism, as Jude did, the idea that free grace makes a Christian's way of life immaterial. Paul battled legalism, or earning one's salvation by obedience, in a number of his letters. There were those who began to teach that the Second Coming had already occurred, others who taught that marriage was improper for Christians. Paul had his hands full all his apostolic life beating back false teaching that seemed to arise everywhere in the church. John had to battle lethal errors regarding the person of Jesus Christ and so on.

We may wish that false teachers would simply leave us alone, but they will not. They are doing the devil's work and he will not let them rest. As soon as the church has righted itself from the influence of one heresy, nothing is as certain as that another will soon appear on the horizon. If there is a faith that has been once-for-all delivered to the saints, it is a faith for which Christians will have to contend as Jude orders us to do. This is truth worth fighting for, but it is also truth that has to be fought for, in every generation, in every family, in every Christian heart.

So, there is little difficulty appreciating *the tremendous emphasis the Bible places on both the unity of the church and its purity*, on keeping all Christian believers united in love *and* taking steps to maintain the church's fidelity to the apostolic faith. But holding these two obligations together at one and the same time, being faithful to the one as to the other, refusing to allow the one to compromise the other, *this is the challenge, and this has always been the church's challenge*. As John Newton reminds us, there is a principle of pride in the human heart that inclines us to despise people with whom we disagree, and that principle has raised its ugly head times without number in the history of the church. We find it easy to love those who agree with us and to maintain unity with them; loving those with whom we disagree is another matter entirely. In the same way we find it easy enough to contend for the faith in respect to certain matters, but often find it much more difficult to do so when the faith puts us at odds with our culture, or with people whose opinions we value, is likely to separate us from folk we love and enjoy, or when contending for the faith is likely to cost us prestige or position. Simply put, we find both unity and purity, togetherness and fidelity hard enough to manage in their own right, but much more difficult to manage at one and the same time.

I grew up in a spiritual culture in which the obligation to contend for the faith was considered to be much more important than the obligation to maintain the unity of the church. Doctrinal purity was a virtue clearly superior to that of Christian unity. Indeed, schism was a sin so far down on the order of transgressions, something akin to driving 60 in a 55 mph zone, that we did not imagine, really couldn't imagine that we were openly defying God's Word, which, of course, we were: in our sectarianism, in our divisiveness, and in our too ready criticism of other believers for their not

thinking about things as we did. And the result in our circles and in all circles like them, was too often a proud, censorious, and schismatic spirit. I can say that because that is *my* past, *my* tradition, *my* church. But I can say it as well because some important voices who were representatives of that movement have said it before me with much more authority and much more right.

Dr. Francis Schaeffer used to say that the great sin of the separatists in 1936 – of which he was one – was that they did not leave the *Presbyterian Church USA* in tears. He did not doubt that that separation was necessary. The 18th century Scot theologian and pastor, John Brown of Haddington, once wrote, “Providence often points out the duty of separation by permitting some faithful ministers to be tyrannously thrust out of [a church’s] communion.” So, it was in 1936. The faithful men who lead the protest against growing unbelief in the church didn’t leave; they were thrown out. But, said Dr. Schaeffer, that fact did not mean that, even in that moment, the obligation of unity did not have to be served. I would put it this way: the sin was that in standing for the purity of the faith we had too little thought for the unity of Christ’s body.

Still more interesting, Dr. Buswell, the first professor of theology at our Covenant Theological Seminary, acknowledged later in his life that the second division, the split that occurred a year later, in 1937, the split that divided the conservative Presbyterians from one another, was not only sinful, but a major catastrophe to the cause of biblical Presbyterianism in modern America. That separation was over such issues as whether the church should condemn all use of alcoholic beverages and the smoking of cigarettes and cigars, what particular eschatological position the church should adopt (a-, pre- or post-millennialism), and what view should be taken on the question -- the very arcane question -- of apologetic method (were we to be followers of Prof. Van Til or Prof. Warfield). Dr. Buswell’s verdict on the entire affair, in which he had unfortunately played a pivotal role, expressed years later was simply: “After the death of Dr. Machen [the leader of the faithful element in the PCUSA] the church fell into the hands of lesser men.” That was a noble confession for him to make, but it was an admission that the church had divided – in some significant part as a result of his own influence – over issues that did not justify division. They loved what they then imagined to be the purity of the church much more than they loved the unity of the church.

So, how are we to keep these very distinct obligations – unity and purity – together in our hearts and, still more, in our practice? How do we love every Christian while struggling to keep out of the church every killing error? How do we love unity and hate separation while, at the same time, separating ourselves from and refusing unity with those who are undermining our holy faith?

I think this is one of the most difficult of all questions of Christian practice to answer. There is certainly no formula. And in our actual experience it has proved easy enough to do one thing or the other, but to do both at the same time has seemed very difficult.

But take your cue from Jude and his admonition to us in the verses we read. His words are really extraordinary, I think, given the strong words he had already written about the false teachers. We might have expected Jude to say, as John does, “have nothing to do with these false teachers.” We would not have been surprised if Jude had said, as Paul does, “Drive them out of your church services.” And perhaps he intends for them to do just that. *After all, contending for the faith*

doesn't sound like meekly standing by while it is contradicted in one's own church! I remember the touching story of a Sunday School teacher in Holy Trinity Church, the church the great Charles Simeon had pastored for fifty years in Cambridge, England. This old man had come to the parsonage one Monday morning to resign his post. He had learned the faith at Simeon's feet, but the great man was gone and that Sunday he had sat and listened to gospel truth being belittled in Simeon's old pulpit. There was little he could do as an old man and just a Sunday School teacher to contend for the faith except to submit his resignation. The pastor – his diary gives us the record of this incident – thought it amusing, but Jude would not have.

But Jude contents himself with identifying and describing these heretics and telling his Christian friends to contend for the faith. What he orders them to do explicitly is to keep themselves in the love of God and to practice mercy toward others, particularly others who might be susceptible to the false teaching that was making the rounds. I have come to think that this is immensely wise and very helpful counsel. None of us is likely to contend for the faith as a great Christian controversialist: an Augustine or a Luther or a C.S. Lewis or a Francis Schaeffer. We are not likely to nail 95 theses on some door and ignite a great movement of renewed loyalty to the teaching of the Word of God. The sort of contending for the faith that we are likely to do is simply to live a faithful life, to adorn the faith by our words and our deeds, and to help others to do the same.

And if, in the spirit of love, we attempt to protect others from the influence of false doctrine we will protect the church's purity and unity *at the same time*. Similarly, if we take from the Lord's prayer in the Upper Room the night of his betrayal the conviction that nothing is so likely to empower the witness of the Christian church as the loving unity of believers, then we will strive with might and main to protect that unity and will be willing to make, as Paul was willing to make, any number of sacrifices to preserve that unity. After all it is gospel truth that we are serving in both cases: bearing witness to it before the world by practicing our unity and preserving it by contending for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.

A man who understood this and practiced both unity and purity and, in so doing set a wonderful example for us, was John Bunyan, the celebrated author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, one the greatest and one of the most influential and widely read books in the history of the world.

Bunyan was sufficiently willing to contend for the evangelical faith that he went to prison for it; years on end. But, did you know that in regard to what we might call today his denominational convictions, search Bunyan's writings – three very thick folio volumes – and you will not be able to tell what Christian party Bunyan belonged to. He admitted once that he belonged to the Anabaptist party, but the sharpest theological controversy of his ministry was with other Baptists because he refused to make one's position on baptism a test of fellowship or of fitness for the Lord's Supper. In other words, Christians who disagreed with him about baptism were still warmly welcome to worship in his church.

As Augustine said of himself and his Christian friend Alypius, "We were washed in the same blood!" That is true of you and every other Christian. Let your behavior demonstrate that – the words you speak, the affection, interest, respect, good will you show even to believers with whom you are in substantial disagreement – and the world will notice. It never sees that kind of

unity. Never! No Sunnis vs. Shiites here! Stand up for the faith, make clear your loyalty to it and, at the same time, prove to any observer that you love every follower of Jesus Christ no matter how screwy his or her doctrine might be!

Our best men have always thought this way and lived this way. Here is John Duncan, the justly celebrated Rabbi Duncan of the 19th century Scottish Free Church: "I am first a Christian, next a Catholic, then a Calvinist, fourth a paedobaptist, and fifth a Presbyterian. I cannot reverse this order." Well said! And what does that mean for you and for me?

We are surrounded by other Christians who have, in many respects, quite different theological convictions than our own. We have brethren who are Lutheran and Methodist and Baptist and Pentecostal and on and on. Even we Presbyterians do not think alike in every way. You disagree with some in one way, with others in another. Some of those disagreements are substantial. But they are Christians, they love the Lord Jesus and desire to serve him. They confess him as Lord and are living for him as they think right. You will soon be with them in heaven, enjoying the life of perfect unity and love. What the church in our land is going to need desperately in coming years is not leaders and Christians who love the truth of God and are willing to fight for it *or* leaders who love the unity of Christ's body and are willing to bend over backwards to foster that unity as Paul so nobly did. What we are going to need is leaders and Christians in great numbers who are *both at the same time*: lovers of truth and lovers of unity. We are going to need churches full of Christians who are ready with equal determination to fight for the unity of the church as they fight for the truth of God's Word. The world *will have to* notice that! And it will.