

“Be United!”

Daniel B. Clendenin wrote for January 23, 2005, “Exactly 500 years ago this week Jaime de Casafranca, a Deputy to the Treasurer of the Spanish Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabel, was burned at the stake during the Inquisition (January 17, 1505). His wife was burned to death a few months later (June 23), and his mother died in a secret prison. Christians killing Christians.”

Clendenin continued, **“Christianity had turned so deadly in the sixteenth century that the English Protestant John Foxe (1516–1587) compiled a history of Protestant martyrs called *Acts and Monuments*, popularly known as *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*.** Published in 1563, the book was hugely successful, and went through four editions in Foxe’s lifetime. He himself fled England to Frankfurt and Basel when the Catholic Mary came to power in 1554. By the time he was an old man Foxe had experienced the good, the bad, and the ugly of the first fifty years of the Protestant Reformation. In a sermon delivered outside Saint Paul’s Cathedral, London, on Good Friday, 1570, Foxe lamented the chronic bloodshed: ‘But here (alack) cometh another mischief, as great, or greater than the other [i.e., the Turkish invasion of Hungary and Austria]. For the Turk with his sword is not so cruel, but the bishop of Rome on the other side is more fierce and bitter against us; stirring up his bishops to burn us, his confederates to conspire our destruction, setting kings against their subjects, and subjects disloyally to rebel against their princes, and all for thy name.’” Foxe continued, “Such dissension and hostility Satan hath sent among us, that Turks be not more enemies to Christians, than Christians to Christians, papists to protestants; yea, protestants with protestants do not agree, but fall out for trifles.” [Cited by Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Viking, 2004), p. 335.]

Clendenin noted, “Christians have excluded, persecuted and killed those they deemed to be different — Jews, Muslims, gays, witches, heretics and so on.” **“But what dispirited Foxe so much was that the bitterest enemies were Christians against Christians, persecuting each other over the slightest differences.”** And all, he observed with biting irony, ‘for thy name.’ With less than a decade or so of genuine peace, Europe of the Protestant Reformation endured almost two centuries of constant warfare.” [sited by MacCulloch, p. 648] (Falling Out for Trifles posted on The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself by Daniel B. Clendenin, Journey with Jesus Foundation for Sunday January 23, 2005)

Conflict has crept in among Christians, just like anyone else. Division and fighting is not inevitable among the followers of Jesus but it is extremely easy to fall into such behavior and selfish actions. Yes, it even happened in the early Corinthian Church as indicated by the Apostle Paul in our Scripture. He was so concerned about their lack of unity that he began our Reading by writing in **verse 10, “By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ I appeal to all of you, my friends, to agree in what you say, so that there will be no divisions among you. Be completely united, with only one thought and one purpose.”**

The topic of Christian Unity is not important merely because the Apostle Paul thought it was. On the last night before his death, Jesus also raise the issue of Christian Unity several times. In our Call To Worship from John 15, he shared his concern as a call to his disciples. He framed this call for unity as a crucial aspect of his relationship with his followers. Jesus used the metaphor of the Vine and the Branches. Specifically, Christ pointed out in **verse 4, “Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine.”**

Additionally, on the topic of Christian Unity, after his Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus discussed the importance of the relationships among church members as he said in **John 13:35, “If you have agape love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.”**

Indeed, Jesus recognized it was in the best interest of the welfare of Christians for us to be united. He prayed in **John 17:21, “I pray that they may all be one Father! May they be in us, just as You are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world will believe that You sent me.”** By the way, that verse is the basis for the “That They May All Be One” slogan of the United Church of Christ denomination. We are the last church union among unrelated denominations in the United States. Most denominational unions prior to our

denomination's 1957 and other unions were the reuniting of denominations, which had been torn apart because of the Civil War in the 1800s.

As I was composing this message, the last sentence of that verse seemed to reveal a major calling or purpose for the Church – the Believers. It is for us to demonstrate the Truth – God sent Jesus! In a similar fashion, a major aspect of Jesus' tasks was to prove God Agape Loves and Forgives Us because this Agape Love was manifested in the Death of God's Son on the Cross. Therefore, we know, because of that demonstration of the Grace of our Divine Parent, we are Invited and Welcomed into the New Faith Relationship with the Almighty – we are already citizens of the partially revealed Kingdom of God! So, our Christian Unity is also a demonstration – of God having sent Jesus! It becomes a new way leading to the same result – people welcoming and living out God's Invitation and Welcome into the New Faith Relationship with our Divine Parent and one another – the New Life in Jesus Christ.

Samuel G. Candler described this Christian Unity and New Life in Christ in a slightly different fashion. Candler said, **“Being a Christian is about taking a particular angle towards life. It is the angle of grace. Each of us - every one of us - perceives reality and the world in a different way; yes, but Jesus teaches us to see the world from the angle of grace.”** Candler asked, “Wouldn't our Christianity be richer if we accepted angles more easily? Wouldn't our Christianity be more beautiful if we bent toward the angle of grace?” (Samuel G. Candler, Follow Me, and I Will Make You Go Fishing)

Unfortunately, many Christians have succumb frequently to demanding everyone else in the Community of Believers be from the same angle – be just like them – same theology – same practices – same economic class – same ethnicity – same race – same sexual practices. “Alan Paton told this true story about a South African judge in his book, Ah But Your Land is Beautiful: ‘A black pastor invited the judge, Ian Christiaan Oliver, to attend his church on Maundy Thursday. It was during the worst period of apartheid, and he knew that he was risking his career if he went.’ **“The judge meant to be a good man, so he accepted the invitation.”** He learned on his arrival that it was a service of footwashing and he was urged to participate. He was called forward to wash the feet of a woman named Martha Fortuin, who as it happened, had been a servant in his own house for thirty years. Kneeling at her feet, he was struck by how weary they looked from so many years of serving him. Greatly moved, he held her feet with his gentle hands and kissed them. Martha fell to weeping as did many others in the room. **“The newspapers got word of it and Judge Oliver lost his political career.”**

“Paton added, ‘Perhaps he found his soul.’” (As told by Rev. Dr. James D. Kegel in “Same Mind, Same Purpose”)

Among the sources of conflict included in the Corinthian Church was who baptized them. Paul didn't compose his letter to them on a typewriter or a computer where white-out or a delete key could have corrected his mistakes in his writing. Unfortunately for him, he was all too human and incorrectly stated he hadn't baptized anyone there. After recognizing his mistake, he made new correcting statements, the Apostle then went on to write in verse 17, **“Christ did not send me to baptize. He sent me to tell the Good News, and to tell it without using the language of human wisdom, in order to make sure that Christ's death on the cross is not robbed of its power.”** Friends, many Christians have failed to manifest Unity and have, instead, demonstrated selfish division and conflict, which has led many people to doubt the Divine Parent sent Jesus Christ – God's Son to die on the Cross.

So, that brings us back to Paul's call to the Corinthians and us in the last part of **verse 10, “Be completely united, with only one thought and one purpose.”** Or as Jesus indicated, let us show through our relationships of agape love – our unity that God sent Jesus to be the ultimate manifestation of that same Agape Love, of God's Forgiveness, of the Almighty's Invitation into the New Faith Relationship with God and all people, and of the Creator's Welcome of us as New Creatures in Christ – Citizens of the partially revealed Kingdom of God. **Will you and I have this common purpose of being united, communicating God's Invitation and Welcome, and living God's Agape Love shown in the Son of the Almighty, Jesus Christ? Yes! Be United! Amen.**