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# Christian Disunity and Unity<sup>1</sup>

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*Text: Matthew 16:13-19*

I do not know how you reacted to the singing of the hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers", but I can guess. Is it the text of the hymn that troubled some of you, the text written by Sabine Baring-Gould, a curate, for the school children under his charge at Horbury Bridge, England, in 1864? He intended the hymn for use as a children's processional. Or is it the tune, "St. Gertrude", composed and imposed later upon the text by Arthur S. Sullivan in 1871? Is it the militaristic imagery? Or is it that you missed the now omitted original second stanza, which went as follows:

At the sign of triumph, Satan's host doth flee;  
On, then, Christian soldiers, on to victory.  
Hell's foundations quiver at the shout of praise;  
Brothers lift your voices, loud your anthems raise.

In the present second stanza we sing:

We are not divided, all one body we;  
One in hope and doctrine; one in charity.

It has been observed that a more honest version of this stanza might go:

We are all divided, not one body we;  
One lacks faith, another hope; and all lack charity!

This points up the problem before us. The problem is the lack of Christian unity. Today is designated as the "Day of the Beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity". The

solution lies in Peter's confession, at the heart of today's Gospel lesson: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Here in Peter's person and Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah lies the foundation of the church of Christ and the basis and hope for the oneness of all Christians throughout the world.

## The Problem

Our common problem, even as Christians, is sin, and sin is that which disturbs our oneness with God and with other people. Sin's essence, put negatively, is our unbelief, that is, our being controlled by something, someone, other than God; or put positively, our egocentricity, our tendency to turn in on ourselves, to see everything around us essentially from our own perspective, from what we want, need, desire, from the point of view of our agenda, not God's. Are God and Christ at the center of our lives or are we? That is the question.

How subtle we are at declaring our own self-sufficiency and independence from God! How often we parade as our own little gods, relishing the fact that we all have been made and stamped with the image of God! The one country rejoices that it is not like the other country; we are so different and better, we think. One group stereotypes the other group so as to distance itself from the other. One ethnic group or political party affirms its superiority; one culture and context deplores the shortcomings and shortsightedness of another, holding it up to ridicule and derision in cartoons and jokes.

The Christian church itself, as an institution, has not escaped this malady. One group defines the Gospel differently than another group. One uses different methods of interpreting the Bible. One insists that the truth of the Gospel demands withdrawal and separation lest the syncretistic dangers of modern Baalism envelop and corrupt the children of God; another group insists upon an openness to contemporary culture and the need for relevance. One group insists that there must be agreement on every little thing before one can pray, preach, commune, or even learn and teach together; another group insists that agreement in the essentials, the Gospel and the creedal affirmations, is enough.

With regard to the text itself, one Christian group holds that not only Peter's confession, but Peter himself as the foremost apostle, is the foundation of the church; another group

holds that it is not Peter himself but his confession, as a first among equals, that alone is important, and that the same keys to the Kingdom of Heaven given to Peter (Matthew 16) are given to all the disciples (Matthew 18). Problems, problems, problems!

## The Solution

The solution to the problem obviously does not lie in human effort and machinations. As the Lord notes, in the text, Peter's confession is not his own, but was revealed to him by God. We here today indeed enjoy a rich measure of this same divine grace in that we as Gentiles, outsiders, are privy to a conversation between Jews about the identity of the Son of Man and the foundation of the Christian church. Indeed, Peter in Acts plays a prominent role at Pentecost, speaking to Jews and proselytes from many lands, and going on to become an apostle to the Gentiles, as we hear in his address to the Jerusalem convention:

Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the Gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (Acts 15:7-11).

When we read the Bible we see ourselves as so much in the theological mainstream that when we read the stories of the Old and New Testaments we instinctively identify with the Abrahams and Sarahs, Jacobs, Rachels, Hannahs, John the Baptists, Marys and Marthas. In reality, we are the outsiders, the Gentiles, those grafted in later. We should be identifying with the Rahabs, the Naamans, and dining with the wise men at Epiphanies. But *what we should not be doing is reviving today the Jewish-Christian/Gentile-Christian debate of the early church* by pitting Gentile Christians against Gentile Christians over issues which are not worthy of our common high calling in Christ. Like the Jewish Christians of old, dare we insist that every other Gentile Christian must be exactly like us?

Today's text is more than a post-resurrection document from the past; it is God's Word alive in the present. It asks

each of us, "Who do you say that I am?" and it entrusts to us who confess Christ as our living center, as our sole sufficiency and our reason for living, an unassailable and unconquerable Divine Realm.

As we began with a hymn, so let us close with a hymn, one written in 1866 by Samuel J. Stone to the tune "Aurelia" composed by Samuel S. Wesley in 1864:

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;  
She is his new creation by water and the Word....

Though with a scornful wonder this world sees her oppressed,

By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed;  
Yet saints their watch are keeping;  
their cry goes up, "How long?"

And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.

Amen.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Preached at Lutheran Theological Seminary, 18 January 1989, at the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.