

Towards the Unity of God's People

by A.R. Main

The speaker emphasizes the importance of unity among God's people and the need to return to the simplicity of the New Testament in our faith and practice.

Scripture: Psalm 42:10, Psalm 69:9, Psalm 119:42, Matthew 5:11, Mark 16:14, Luke 6:22, Romans 15:3, James 1:5, 1 Peter 4:14

Topics: "Christian Persecution", "Verbal Abuse"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher delves into the meaning of 'insult' (oneidizo) in the Bible, which involves abusive words, slander, reviling, and unjustly finding fault in a way that demeans others. The message highlights how enemies reviled God, Israel, and the righteous in the Psalms, and how Jesus reproached cities and His disciples. The sermon emphasizes that Christians may face insults and ridicule for their faith, but they are blessed when reviled for the name of Christ. The preacher also explores the serious consequences of verbal abuse in Jewish culture and how insults were viewed as extremely harmful.

Transcript

WHILE I felt that one who knew better our N.S.W. Baptist brethren and was better known by them might well have been chosen to represent preachers of the Churches of Christ Fraternal, I gladly acceded to the request that I be one of two speakers to deal with the matter of unity as it affects our respective peoples. The themes of the speakers were chosen for us, each having been asked to give an independent statement. It was later suggested that I alone give an address which would be followed by a general discussion.

This, however, I did not approve; hence the original arrangement stands. There is a better approach than discussion, and I do not wish this afternoon's gathering to descend to the level of a debate. I desire closer co-operation and union. We should first get to know and appreciate one another, and to co-operate in ways easily possible now. Later we may talk over matters on which at present we may not be fully in agreement, and which stand in the way of closer union.

May I preface my remarks by saying I always think and generally speak of you as "our Baptist brethren"? That indicates my attitude. We have so very much in common that we should have much more. We have rejoiced at the coming together of communions of kindred faith and polity. Surely it is appropriate that we consider the question of unity. What a powerful witness we could give to scriptural truths generally ignored if we gave a united witness!

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It was asked that the addresses today deal with the subject of unity, and I was particularly requested by our Baptist brethren to, include references to three matters.

Churches of Christ have always been vitally interested in the subject of Christian union. The movement of the early nineteenth century arose primarily out of a desire for unity one of our watchwords has been that we are prepared to unite with any people at any time on the Scriptures (or a scriptural basis). We rejoice at the numerous indications in recent years of a desire on the part of Christian people to unite and so remove a reproach and hindrance to the progress of the Gospel.

We have stressed that union must be sought not merely because of the subsidiary (though important) reasons often put in the forefront, but because of the expressed will of our Lord.

I trust that we have all come to the realisation that divisions are opposed to the will of God and contrary to the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ. The same will of God which constitutes the primary reason for union must be allowed to settle our faith and practice throughout.

Those whom I specially represent plead for a return not only to the faith and order of the New Testament but, very specially, to the life and spirit which animated the early church and was inculcated by our Lord and his apostles.

I should like to quote some words of B. A. Abbott, one of our much loved editors and preachers in America: "The proposal of the Disciples. is their plea for the union of all God's people on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone. It is a call to God's people to come out of their separate and isolated

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existence and become one in Jesus Christ with his doctrine, work, word, hope and worship as guides in the way of life. It is, therefore, a plea for large friendships and all-inclusive fellowships. It is the plea to all God's people to take the Word of God as their only rule of faith and practice."

Members of churches of Christ are at one with believers in practically all communions regarding fundamental truth. We believe in God the Father, the Lord Jesus as the only begotten Son of God, and the Holy Spirit; in the universality of sin and the necessity of the atoning death of Christ; in the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture; in the necessity of a life of godliness and charity; in the coming again of our Lord to be the Judge of the quick and the dead.

We are at one with Protestants in acceptance of the great Reformation principles: (1) The common priesthood of all believers; (2) The authority of Scripture as opposed to the authority of the church or a supposedly infallible pope; (3) Justification by faith as opposed to a doctrine of meritorious works or a justification by works of law.

Not all Protestants hold to Protestant principles with equal firmness. We are much closer to our Baptist brethren than to others in our stand for the priesthood of believers and for the authority of Christ and of the New Testament given to us by men inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is not merely our agreement as to the subjects and action of baptism that indicates our closer unity--though the stand for a converted church membership (a membership of those who have made a personal surrender to Christ) is a great thing. We,

as you, have no human creed. We stand

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for the liberty which is in Christ. We are alike congregational in polity (one perhaps a little more so than the other). With all the present agreements, it would be a pity if we could not co-operate more and eventually come to the closest of unions.

It was said that our Baptist brethren desired me to make a special reference today to three points in the teaching or practice of our people--

I. The use of the name "Churches of Christ";

II. The relation of baptism to salvation;

III. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

If I specialise on these things, you will understand that I do so in deference to an expressed wish, and not because I desire to obtrude these into our programme to-day.

I.

MAY I first ask, What is the church?

In its widest sense the church is the whole company of the redeemed, of all those who have accepted Christ as Saviour and are striving to follow him. No one here imagines that when our Lord said, "I will build my church," he referred to any special denomination. The church, which Christ called "my church," includes all Christians and excludes none. There is, and can be, only "one body" of Christ, which is declared to be the church, the fulness of him that filleth all in all. Yet the Scriptures speak of local congregations as "churches of Christ." There is a third sense in which the church refers to the Christians of a district or province (see Acts 9:31, R.V.). But no body of Christians as distinct from other

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communities of believers is ever in the New Testament referred to as the church of any land.

You asked me to deal with our use of the name "Churches of Christ." May I remind you that party names are condemned in scripture, and that they tend to perpetuate division? We have rejected the use of human names in order to honor our Lord and to return to the simplicity of the New Testament. We are prepared to use and are willing to have used of us any names which our Lord or his apostles employed or sanctioned as designations of the church or individual members thereof. It so happens that with us the names in most common use are churches of Christ for the congregations, and Christians or disciples for the individuals.

May I emphasise that we do not employ the scriptural names in an exclusive sense? We cherish the hope that the time will come when all the Lord's people will wear these names, instead of names which mark or perpetuate division. We do not desire to be distinguished from other members of the church for which our Lord gave himself. We do not wish to be Christians first and something else after. We wish to be, and want all others to be, Christians first and Christians last. We claim to be Christians only, but repudiate with horror the Pharisaic thought that we who are associated with congregations wearing no sectarian name are the only Christians.

Some of you may remember the words of Bishop C. P. Anderson, of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in U.S.A., in his charge published by the Joint Commission of the Protestant Episcopal Church appointed to arrange for a World Conference of Faith and Order. These

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two sentences from it sum up our attitude very well: "God never made Protestant Episcopalians--nor Presbyterians, nor Congregationalists, nor any of sectarian name. He made Christians, and they chose to call themselves by less lovely names."

Party names were condemned by the Apostle Paul. It is, of course, possible to use even the name of Christ in a party or sectarian sense; and that would be most reprehensible. But the argument advanced by Paul in 1 Corinthians against the use of his or any human name implies the right to use Christ's name; and elsewhere we read of the church of God and churches of Christ.

We cannot consent to wear a human name. We would honor the Lord, the Head of the church, who purchased it with his own blood.

II.

AGAIN I am asked to refer to the relation of baptism to salvation. Regarding action

and subjects of baptism, we are at one. There are differences as to import.

Permit me to offer a few preparatory thoughts:

1. There is but one ground of human hope the atoning death of our Lord Jesus Christ.
2. There is no such thing as justification by works of law. If men are justified, it must be by faith in Christ.
3. All that God asks us to do has nothing to do with the procuring of salvation (that has been done once for all), but with the appropriation of it; all falls to the side of justification by faith. Salvation is God's free gift; all he asks us to do is in the way of acceptance of that. This applies to faith and

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repentance, as well as to baptism. All the merit is in Christ--the Christ in whom we believe, to whom we turn in loving acceptance and submission, and into whom we are baptised.

4. We do not believe in baptismal regeneration. We reject any thought of an intrinsic efficacy in the rite (Rome's *ex opere operato*.)
5. No person in all the world knows anything more about the place and significance of baptism than is revealed in the pages of the New Testament.

Regarding the significance of baptism: We should note the following simple truths. Baptism is--

1. A confessional act expressive of a person's faith in Christ.
2. A symbolical act picturing the great facts of our redemption. Ordinary pædobaptist practice destroys the symbolism.

3. It is an act of obedience to which God has attached certain promises.

(a) It is an act of obedience, and all Christ's commands ought to be obeyed. A refusal to obey a known command of our Lord's, whatever that command might be, would be a serious thing.

(b) Baptism, however, is not in the scriptures merely put on a level with all other acts of obedience. There are definite promises attached to it. These promises, however, are not attached to the mere physical act of baptism, but always to the baptism of a genuine believer who is accepting God's mercy in Christ and making submission to his Lord. We have often said that a person might be baptised till he is drowned and the action have no greater spiritual benefit than physical.

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Let me briefly refer to a few of the New Testament statements regarding baptism. According to our Lord's commission candidates were to be baptised "into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In the first preaching of the Gospel of the crucified and risen Messiah the Apostle Peter instructed believing inquirers: "Repent ye, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." This promise, the next verse says, was to "as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him." Ananias, the Lord's chosen messenger, said to Saul: "Why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptised, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name." In Romans 6 Paul writes that "all we who were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into his death." "We were buried with him through baptism into death; . . . united with him by the likeness of his death."

I have quoted some sample passages. There is no necessity for absolute agreement on our part as to the interpretation of each phrase in these or other verses. Would any two of us in the room, be in absolute agreement regarding the meaning of every phrase? But I think that it is but reasonable to expect that in any united witness the words of inspired men be passed on to seekers of salvation. If the inquirer be an uninstructed man such as the jailer (the man who was a pagan at sunset and a Christian at sunrise), then to his question, "What must I do to be saved?" we shall give the unhesitant and definite reply, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." Such an answer has behind it all the authority of the Word of God. Should the inquirers be already believers in the exalted

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Lord and Christ, the answer ought to be "Repent ye, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins"; such a reply has behind it all the authority of an inspired apostle of the Lord. To a penitent believer such as was Saul, we should repeat the answer of Ananias. These replies were all harmonious, the jailer, the three thousand on Pentecost and Saul of Tarsus all did the same things. The apparently differing answers were due to the fact that the inquirers were at different stages along the road.

A quarter of a century ago, at a conference such as this between preachers of Baptist churches and those of churches known simply as churches of Christ, I urged, as I do now, that we all, without presuming to settle the last point of interpretation, could and should pass on to inquirers, in the words of the Holy Spirit through inspired men, the message given by Christ's representatives in apostolic days.

This is in no sense a plea for justification by works of merit (there is none such) rather than justification by faith. In Galatians 3:26, 27 the Apostle Paul, after declaring that the Christians to whom he wrote were "all

sons of God, through faith, in Christ," added the supporting word: "For"--not "but" or nevertheless, but "for" as many of you as were baptised into Christ did put on Christ." We may recall the comment of Martin Luther on putting on Christ. He wrote: "This is not done by changing of a garment, or by any laws or works, but by a new birth, and by the renewing of the inward man, which is done in baptism, as Paul saith, 'All ye that are baptised have put on Christ.' Also, 'According to his mercy he saved us by the washing of regeneration

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and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 3:5) . . . Therefore the righteousness of the law, or of our own works, is not given unto us in baptism; but Christ himself is our garment. Now Christ is no law-giver, no works, but a divine and inestimable gift, whom God hath given unto us, that he might be our justifier, our Saviour and our Redeemer. Wherefore, to be apparelled with Christ according to the Gospel is not to be apparelled with the law or with works, but with an incomparable gift; that is with remission of sins, righteousness, peace, consolation, joy of spirit, salvation, life, and Christ. himself."

Loyalty to Christ is the reason for our passing on to men the promises which the New Testament shows to have been associated with baptism. May I add that the maintenance of a catholic position (to use a word very common to-day) also requires us to do so? Practically all church formularies and confessions, as well as union or reunion schemes, attach very great importance to baptism. I need not now refer to the views of the Roman Catholic, Greek and Anglican churches. The proposed Basis of Union for the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches of Australia, prepared by a joint committee of these churches, contained the following words: "We acknowledge baptism and the Lord's Supper, the two sacraments instituted by Christ to be of perpetual obligation as signs and seals of the blessings of the new covenant, and as means of grace, made effectual only by the operation of the Holy Spirit, and always to be used by Christians with prayer and praise to God. Baptism with water into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the rite of initiation into the visible church of Christ."

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The "Outline of a Reunion Scheme for the Church of England and the Evangelical Free Churches of England," drawn up by a committee of the Joint Conference of Anglicans and Free Churchmen, contains this sentence: "Those only shall be members of the united Church of England who have by baptism been admitted to Christ's church visible on earth."

At the World Conference on Faith and Order held at Lausanne in 1927, the report on "The Sacraments" received by the full conference, *nem con*, contained the following sentence:--"We believe that in baptism administered with water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for the remission of sins, we are baptised by one Spirit into one body."

The World Conference on Faith and Order held at Edinburgh in 1937 declared that baptism was the rite of admission into the church.

It will make for a higher degree of completeness if I quote some Baptist testimony. (a) I need do no more than remind you of the comment of Hackett, the great Baptist commentator, on Acts 2:38: "'In order to the forgiveness of sin' . . . This clause states the motive or object which should induce them to repent and be baptised." (b) The report of the "Commission on Baptism" presented to the Victorian Baptist Union in 1918 contained the following sentences: "So far as the New Testament tells us, no one joined any of the

apostolic churches without baptism. Baptism followed almost immediately on belief in Christ, and was its recognised confession." "We have no record of anyone joining the Christian assemblies without baptism." The report also

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spoke of "church membership without baptism" as "a departure from, what appears to have been the uniform apostolic practice." So do we also think, and hence we feel compelled, with charity in our hearts towards all, to abide by the admitted practice of apostolic churches. (c) From the pages of "The Australian Baptist" for December 15, 1914, I culled the following statement from the pen of an honored Baptist leader, Dr. E. Y. Mullins: "We must preserve the relation of baptism to the corporate life of believers in the church if we would maintain its true use and value. Baptism admits to church membership. It is not an isolated individual act merely, with no relation to church membership. In Ephesians 4:3-6 Paul gives the true basis of Christian union." (d) In 1921 Baptists of the Northern Baptist Convention, U.S.A., issued a restatement of the foundation doctrines of their faith. The opening sentences of Article 6 read as follow: "We believe in the church--a living spiritual body of which Christ is the Head, and of which all regenerated people are members. We believe that a visible church is a company of believers in Jesus Christ, baptised on a credible confession of faith, and associated for worship, work and fellowship." (c) Principal H. Wheeler Robinson, in his "Life and Faith of the Baptists," writes: "Believers' baptism seems to have been an invariable accompaniment, if not a definite sign, of entry into the Christian society" (p. 79). "Christian baptism in the New Testament certainly means four great things, in the sense that these are its normal accompaniments. It implies a cleansing from sin; it is associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit; it is administered to believers and no others; and for Paul, at any rate, it meant an experimental union with Christ in his redeeming

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acts, deeper in meaning than words can express" (pp. 79, 80).

While we should have great difficulty in finding a basis of union with "open-membership" Baptist churches, there should not, I think, be any insuperable difficulty in finding a scriptural basis of union with the great bulk of our Baptist brethren. We all alike need to approach the question with the supreme desire to find the mind and do the will of our Lord. That thus we might come to a true Christian union is one of my dearest wishes.

III.

I WAS requested also to refer to our doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

I do not know the reason for this request. I was shocked, years ago, to hear a statement from one of our preachers that some person, probably in all sincerity, had suggested that members of churches of Christ were not believers in the work of the Holy Spirit, or even in his divine personality. The objector must surely have been very ignorant of our position. He may, of course, have been misled by remarks made by some extremists on the circumference of our movement. I should not wish to judge our Baptist brethren by some of the strange utterances of some unrepresentative Baptists. If any of you present here to-day have ever imagined that we do not believe from the heart in the Holy Spirit and his work, will you please cleanse your minds, once and for all?

Of course we believe in the Holy Spirit as a divine Person. Of course we believe in his agency both in the conversion of the sinner

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and in the sanctification of the believer. We sing, and mean, that--

"Every virtue we possess

And every victory won,

And every thought of holiness

Are his, and his alone."

It is he who convicts the world of sin, and righteousness, and judgment. He indwells the Christian. "No one can say that Jesus is Lord but in (or by) the Holy Spirit." "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."

Now, that is not new teaching of members of churches of Christ to-day as distinct from the doctrine of their spiritual fathers. I venture to quote the following sentences from the writings of Alexander Campbell, one whose name we honor but to whom we do not ascribe any authority. Campbell wrote: "No one believes more firmly than I do, and no one, I presume, endeavors to teach more distinctly and comprehensively than I, this mysterious, sublime and incomprehensible plurality and unity in the Godhead . . . And, indeed, I have no more faith in any man's profession of religion than I have in the sincerity of Mahomet, who does not believe in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit, as co-operating in the illumination, pardon and sanctification of fallen, sinful and degraded man . . . I could not, indeed, esteem as of any value the religion of any man, as respects the grand affair of eternal life, whose religion is not begun, carried on and completed by the personal agency of the Holy Spirit. Nay, I esteem it the peculiar excellence and glory of our religion that it is spiritual; that the soul of man is quickened, enlightened, sanctified and consoled by the indwelling presence of the Spirit of the eternal God."

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This is a very fragmentary and therefore inadequate statement. It generally represents the position held by members of churches of Christ, I feel sure.

I have spoken frankly, for I have no fear that you will misunderstand my motive. We wish you to know that we appreciate all that is Christlike and good in believers who differ from us even in many points. We thank God for the devotion, piety, Christian character and good works of lovers of our Lord Jesus Christ who are associated with all the churches. We would recognise the fruit of the Spirit wherever manifested. We especially desire you, our Baptist brethren, to know of our great interest in your work for the Master, for we have so very much in common with you. From the heart we would say with Paul and to you: "Peace be to the brethren, and love combined with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. May grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with perfect sincerity." Amen.

NOTE--This pamphlet contains, for the most part almost verbatim, the subject matter of the address given by me on 3rd December, 1942. There are a few minor alterations. The introductory remarks have been

abbreviated, the reference to Dr. H. Wheeler Robinson has been slightly expanded, and the comments of Martin Luther on Gal. 3:26, 27 (included in the original script, but for brevity's sake omitted from the address as delivered) have been reinstated.--A. R. Main.

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