

Copyright October 19 -20, 2019. All Rights Reserved. Geist Christian Church

Title: We Believe in Unity

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Psalm 133](#)

Text: [John 17:20-24](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



I am not a bumper sticker kind of guy. Some people love bumper stickers. CarMax has a commercial playing on bumper stickers and the sticker which they put on every car that they sell. The point is right on. You don't put a sticker on your car if it doesn't mean something to you. I like some of the religious stickers. Like, "Get Right with

God." Or "Do you follow Jesus this close?" I always want to roll down my window and say, "Yes, as a matter of fact, I do." But sometimes, a bumper sticker can get you in trouble. A few years ago, a fellow in a truck had one of those bumper stickers that read, "My Boss is a Jewish Carpenter." Someone needed to get in touch with his boss and report his behavior. He was driving aggressively, honking his horn, red-faced mad, waving his hand in a way that I'm confident his boss wouldn't approve of.

Imagine if you can, bumper stickers attached to wagons and buggies in the 19th century. You must imagine it because the first adhesive bumper stickers were invented for the 1952 Presidential election between Adlai Stevenson and Dwight Eisenhower. These buggies and wagons show up at a revival. But not just any old rival. It was the king of all revivals. It happened during the second "Great Awakening." America had three. Great awakenings are a cultural phenomenon where it appears that everyone is spiritually awakened to the need to get right with God, to follow Jesus closely, to make the boss a Jewish carpenter. Worship attendance and church growth explode.

Our church was born out of the second great awakening and since we are talking about what we believe, we need to go to a camp meeting, the mother of all revivals at a place call Cane Ridge. Cane Ridge is near Paris, Kentucky, about twenty miles northeast of Lexington. According to American Church historians, the Cane Ridge revival of 1801 was the biggest revival of "The Second Great Awakening." Ministers from many different denominations preached to a crowd estimated at 20,000 people. To put that in context, nearby Lexington had a population of 2,000. People came from

all the surrounding states. There were so many people that tree stumps became pulpits. Something impressive happened. The Holy Spirit was poured out on everyone present and it didn't matter what church you were from, what creeds you followed, or how you were baptized. The Holy Spirit united everyone.

This experience left a deep and abiding impression on one of our founding fathers, Barton Stone. The revival validated a conviction of Stone and other Presbyterian ministers in the area of the Calvinist doctrine that Christ died only for the "elect" was faulty. They left that revival with a commitment to "sink into union with the Body of Christ at large." They believed that Cane Ridge "would ever be memorable" not only because of the large attendance ... but because the spirit of love, peace, and union, were revived."¹

If you could see the bumper sticker on the back of their wagons, it would read, "Not the only Christians but Christians only." Later they would add another bumper sticker which read, "Let unity be our polar star." These were Stone's catchphrases used to describe our movement and it is why we believe in unity.

Now if you were here a couple of weeks ago, you might raise your hand and say, I thought the founding father was Alexander Campbell. We are called the Stone-Campbell movement and their union, which took place in 1832, is another reason we believe in unity. But you are right. Our first "We Believe" sermon was based on a powerful experience which caused Alexander Campbell to see the table as a place for all Christians, not just the elect or those deemed worthy. It's why we believe in the table which is open and inclusive, celebrated weekly and is available to all who confess Jesus as the Christ.

Our second we belief was also heavily influenced by Campbell. We believe in reconciliation. We are called to love all of God's people, serving the marginalized and distressed in our community and around the world. God sent Jesus to reconcile our brokenness, to get our relationship right with God, to end our alienation and bring the Good News.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we not only receive this Good News, but we are charged with being ambassadors of this Good News. Wherever there is brokenness, we are to bring reconciliation because this was the assignment that God gave us.

We believe in the table. We believe in reconciliation. Both were influenced by Alexander Campbell.

We also believe in unity. Unity was heavily influenced by Barton Stone, but it wasn't without participation by Alexander Campbell and his father Thomas. Just a few years after Cane Ridge, the Campbells left the Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterian Church because of their frustration over the division in the church and closed communion. They wrote and published an important document called the "*Declaration and Address*." Its opening statement proclaims: *The church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ.* Sounds like a statement about unity, doesn't it? Almost like, "not the only Christians but Christians only." They didn't print up that bumper sticker for their buggies and wagons. But they did have their own slogans. "No creed but Christ and no book but the Bible." And another one that goes like this. "Where the scriptures speak, we speak; where the scriptures are silent, we are silent."

It is not surprising that the two groups discovered each other. They had much in common. There were differences. The Christians, Stone's group, believed in paid permanent ministers, the Disciples did not. The Disciples, the Campbellites, celebrated the Lord's Supper weekly, the Christians did not. But in the end, their commitment to unity was too deep for them to stay apart.²

So, on New Year's Day, 1832, the Christians, estimated to be around 10,000 in number, united with the Disciples who numbered around 12,000. From that day, the movement to unite the church on the American frontier spread like wildfire: By 1900, it boasted over 1.1 million in adult membership making it the largest church indigenous to the United States.

After their union, they added one more slogan. "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love." It's a wonderful vision of the church but sadly, wonderful visions are sometimes hard to pull off. Today there are three distinct branches from this original movement: the Church of Christ, sometimes called "acapella" because they don't have musical instruments in worship and "independent Christian Churches" who differ on issues of baptism and allow women to be deacons, elders, or ministers. All three believe in unity even though the expressions might be different.

So, why tell these stories. Why is this history lesson so important to you and what you believe? At the very least, it is because "we" always includes you which begs a question. Does it include you? Does unity reflect who you are?

It is an important question because we live in a fractured world. Partisan spirit, division, and animosity have deepened in our country over the past

decade and a half. Of late, it is far worse. People say things now in public or on social media that would have never been allowed to say in private a generation ago. It infects us and what we believe, sometimes in an overt way but too often subtly by our passive endorsement. That's not how God imagined us living nor what God wants for God's people.

The Psalmist reminds us of this in a little three verse Psalm saying, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1) It described it as an anointing or like the dew over the land, refreshing. And then adds, when there is unity, "...the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore." (Psalm 133:3b)

Unity is what Jesus prayed for on the night before he died. In John, we have a record of that prayer after the Last Supper. He prays about the joy of being at one with God the Father and with deep longing, Jesus prays that we might experience the same thing.

Jesus prays, "I'm not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us so that the world will believe that you sent me... so that they can be one just as we are one (John 17:20-21)

Did you catch that? Jesus knows that there is a lot at stake in our unity, our oneness. Without it, we can't be a credible witness for Christ. When we aren't united in Christ, when we parrot the language of our culture, when we give support to rancorous behavior, when we conflict with one another whether it personal, or political or theological, we do damage to the cause of Christ. Unity is essential which is why we must have "in essentials unity. That essential is God's love of humanity through the gift of Jesus. It is the bedrock truth of what we believe, our essential truth in which we have unity. In essentials-unity.

But for unity to be realized, there must be freedom. "In non-essentials-liberty." Unity is not uniformity. It welcomes our differences, our diversity. Liberty not only invites us to be different, but it also gives us the freedom to be so, in the way we look, in what we think, in how we believe, even in how we act.

This too is one of the challenges that we are facing in our world today. As we become more and more diverse, instead of embracing the richness of humanity, we are threatened. We withdraw and become protective. The result is conflict about who and what we want to look like and how we want to act.

This isn't new. Tensions arising from diversity of belief and practice among Christians are already apparent in the pages of the New Testament. For instance, I know this will surprise you but there was a thriving vegetarian faction within the church in Rome. And there was also a group that wanted to eat meat offered to pagan idols. Both were the cause of disagreements. The vegetarians were fusing with the carnivores. Can you imagine? Paul says, "Those who eat must not look down on the ones who don't, and the ones who don't eat must not judge the ones who do, because God has accepted them. Who are you to judge...?" (Romans 14:3-4a) Do you hear that? Who made you judge? People should be welcomed, without quarrels because, "Each person must have their own convictions. (Romans 14:5b). That sounds a lot like "In non-essentials, liberty." We have forgotten how important diversity is to the gift of freedom.

We need a diversity of ideas, talents, origin, and expression of faith. We need to be reminded liberty isn't just simple tolerance of one another's differences, it is an invitation to live your faith and that is most easily accomplished with love. So, "In all things, love."

I have something to confess. The original phrase in the 19th century was charity. In all things, charity. It was from the Latin, "caritas" meaning human love and compassion.

Our love of Christ must include not just a love for God, Jesus, and God's Word. It requires a love for all of God's children, not just a few. We can't reduce what we believe into doctrines, creeds or rules for daily living. What we believe must be reflected in action. Love is the foundation of being a person in Christ. In so far that God sent Jesus to reflect God's love for us, we too must reflect that very love for others, whether we agree with them or not, whether we like them or not, whether we trust them or not. Or as Paul said "...over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." (Colossians 3:14)

"In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, love." It's a good rule of thumb. In fact, it would make a great bumper sticker. Would you put it on your car? Would it reflect who you are?

I hope so because unity is our polar star. It's not just an opinion. It's what God wants, what Jesus prayed for, what scripture teaches. It's why we believe in unity.

¹ Williams, Newell. From Cain Ridge to Kansas City.

² Christian History Magazine—Issue 106: The Church to End All Churches? The Unifying Vision of the Stone-Campbell Movement