



Perfectly Joined Together

by Ronald L. Dart

The apostle Paul laid a heavy burden upon us which none of us have really borne very well. The statement is made in First Corinthians 1, and verse 10, and it really doesn't cut anybody very much slack. He says,

1 Corinthians 1

KJ2000

¹⁰ Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Like I said, it's a heavy burden, and one that *none* of us have borne very well at all. Now, the context of Paul's statement in First Corinthians is that the Corinthian church was tending to dissolve into a bunch of personality cults. One was saying,

1 Corinthians 1

AKJV

¹² [...] I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.

But the statement is really all-inclusive. Think of what he said. He said: speak the same thing, *no* divisions, *perfectly joined together*, *same* mind, *same* judgment. That's *very* extreme in its demand that it makes upon us.

Now, speaking the same thing is achievable at some level if you have a cohesive organization, and one that has a form of coercive discipline connected with it, so that if you get a branch that's going off in the wrong direction, you can just cut it off. That's the way I handle my Don Juan Climbing Rose, you know. If it's going in the wrong direction, I just cut it off; and therefore the ones that are going in the direction that I want it to do, they grow just fine, leave them alone. So you can do that. You can cut off the branches you don't want, you can get rid of those people who don't say the same thing, and pretty soon you've got an organization that says...the same thing. But to be of the *same mind* and the *same judgment*, now there's the rub. That's a different matter entirely—so that when we sit alongside one another, not only will we *say* the same thing (because somebody is going to slap the cuffs on us if we don't), but that we are really of the same mind, and that we would exercise the same judgment when we come up against some question that may be given to us.

Now, I know of no church, past or present, that has really gotten close to that ideal that Paul lays out in that verse. Do you? I mean, that's a lot to ask of anybody. Even the Roman Catholic Church, at its *most disciplined*, never made that; because while they could discipline what this priest or that bishop might say, they could do nothing about his mind, and his thoughts, and the way he looked at things, and the judgments that he might make privately for himself. But I don't think Paul...as I said, the Catholic Church may have maintained an *illusion* of unity, but the apostle Paul does not seem to be talking about

an *illusion* of unity. He seems to be laying out specific *behaviors* and *attitudes*, and is calling upon the Corinthians to strive for these behaviors and these attitudes.

Now, when I think about this, I've got a few observations about the New Testament church and how this worked. And the first observation is that it didn't work very well at all. Right at the very heart and core of everything was the Jerusalem church, but the Jerusalem church was badly divided over the question of circumcision and how to deal with new converts who were not Jewish in nature. That controversy was there *before* the Jerusalem conference of Acts 15. It broke into the open when some individuals from Jerusalem of "the circumcision party" (and there were parties, there were political parties in the Jerusalem church in the first century), those of the circumcision party went all the way to Antioch to try to drum up support for their position and to make converts into their political party. And their party was exclusionary—it would exclude anybody who did not meet their standards, and that was not a really healthy situation for the church. And Paul and Barnabas... we all know what happened to Paul and Barnabas not very long after the Jerusalem conference [Acts 15:36–41]. They go back to Antioch. They are getting ready to go out on another journey. They were very successful on the first one; they felt they should go back and see how these churches were doing. And Barnabas was determined that they would take with them on that particular journey John Mark, who had turned back from them on the previous journey. And Paul said, "No way. He let us down. We needed him and he wasn't there, and he could do it to us again." And we're told that the dissension was so sharp between them that they divided asunder, and Paul took Silas, and Barnabas took Mark, and they both went their separate directions.

And one might ask the question of Paul: "Physician, heal yourself. Why don't you practice what you preach? We're supposed to be perfectly joined together in the same mind and the same judgment." Well, Paul might very well answer, "Well, that's fine, but I couldn't do anything about Barnabas' judgment. You know, I couldn't make him be agreeable to me on this." And you might say, "Well, why didn't you agree with Barnabas?" And he would say, "Well, he was *wrong*." But, of course, that's what *all of us* say in these matters of division. You know, we say, "Well, I can't help *his* attitude." "Well, why don't you look at things *his* way?" "Well, he's *wrong*, and I'm right!" So therefore we just go right ahead and maintain our divisions. So here's the apostle Paul, who urges us to all speak the same thing, and to be of the same mind, and the same judgment... who wasn't. That doesn't really surprise me all that much.

The Galatian churches were *badly* split over questions of legalism, not totally unrelated to the Jerusalem conference brouhaha. And the Corinthian church... oh, well, the Corinthian church was divided in more ways than I can count; because not only were they divided up into groups as to which man they would follow, they were also divided (if you make your way through the epistle) on *several other issues* about how things might happen; and I expect there were people who were "of Peter" who believed that women could have short hair and others who believed that they couldn't. And there were people who were "of Paul" who had one point of view on Christians going to law, and people who felt they shouldn't. You know, it just went on and on. And the numbers of divisions, and the *ways* in which they could divide, and the *combinations* of peculiar beliefs could have easily created a dozen or two dozen different sects and parties in the Corinthian church. Paul was *alarmed*, frankly, by what he saw among them. And then very late in his ministry he comes to Ephesus... he didn't actually come to Ephesus; he came to a little sea coast city not far from Ephesus [Miletus]. He sent for the Ephesian elders and had them come down to see him; and he warned them very strictly about what was going to happen in the future. But his approach in this is somewhat different from what it was in the Corinthian letter. Listen to how he approaches them (this is Acts 20, and verse 28):

Acts 20

KJ2000

²⁸ Take heed [*pay attention*] therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood.

²⁹ For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

³⁰ Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

Now, he just simply says, “Division is coming your way and you will not be able to head it off. It’s going to happen. *Your* job is to feed the flock, feed the flock, feed the flock.” And he offered them no other remedy. He didn’t give them any methodology. He didn’t give them any governmental structure that would stop it. He didn’t give them the authority to use coercive discipline in the church to stop it. He said the only thing you can do is to feed the flock, feed the flock, feed the flock. Teach them, teach them. Try to put their feet in the right way, so that they will survive when these wolves and these false teachers rise up among them to draw away disciples after themselves.

Acts 20

KJ2000

³¹ Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn everyone night and day with tears.

³² And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them who are sanctified.

He says, “Basically, I am turning you over to God. I won’t be back. And you’re going to have to be very careful because division is headed your way.” And, of course, we all *know* that he was right: division was rife *throughout* the early church. We see hints of it here and there in all these early epistles, and they’re still there in the later epistles. If anything, in the later epistles it’s gotten worse.

The churches, then, did not live up to Paul’s admonition. He and Barnabas *spectacularly* failed to live up to it. So what is Paul driving at when he says,

1 Corinthians 1

KJ2000

¹⁰ Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

What’s he driving at? Well, first note his choice of words. He was not *ordering* them to maintain unity by some means or methodology. He was *beseeking* them. To beseech someone is to *beg* someone to be a certain way. What does that mean to you? Well, to me it means that Paul was holding up before the Corinthian church *a goal* toward which they should work. The goal was that they should speak the same thing, there would be no divisions, they would be of the same mind, they would be of the same judgment. As far as I can tell no church or collection of churches has achieved that goal in 2000 years of trying. That does not mean there is anything wrong with the goal. It just means there is something wrong with us. And I would have to say, I don’t think we are doing very well on it in the Church of God today—any of the churches today. In some ways, it is almost as though we have given up. We just say, “Well, we’re not going to get it, so maybe we should not even try.” It may be because we don’t have someone to tell us what to say, and because we don’t have someone to tell us what to think. “Well, there’s no point in us trying, because since we don’t have anybody to tell us what we should think or tell us what we should say, it’s just not going to work.”

On the other hand, maybe we have not in years gone by really accepted *our personal responsibility* in the maintenance of unity. Think about that. It’s not just a question of having...can you maintain unity when you don’t have someone to tell you what to say and to tell you what to think? To *tell* you what to

speaking, to *tell* you what your judgment ought to be, to *tell* you what you ought to have in your mind and what you ought to be thinking about? Well, I think maybe we need to consider this. Paul and Barnabas—I've already mentioned the fact that... what if one of them thought the other one was just simply wrong, and he *couldn't bend* to make that particular adjustment. You know, sometime division is not your fault. But that is not the same as saying that you don't have any responsibility.

So, I think the first thing we should do, if we want to achieve any kind of unity in the church, is to *accept Paul's statement as a goal*—not as some kind of a set of handcuffs, or a coercive instruction from an apostle that you're going to have to do something today that will bring this about tomorrow. That's not going to happen. It's a goal, and we should accept it as a goal. And the next thing we should do is to consider the *actions* and the *attitudes* and the *decisions* that we make that might contribute toward that goal or that might detract from it. And today I'm going to talk to you about five *very specific* things that you can do (or not do) that will have an effect on the unity of the church around you—where you are—that have to do with your *personal responsibility*. Because after all, this is not something that someone can *impose* on us; it is something that we have to achieve and work for as a goal. So here is going to be five things that you can do to work for it.

Number 1: Do not exalt yourself. There's a *powerful* passage in Romans 12; I often have read it, and read it with a certain amount of pain. Romans 12, verse 1:

Romans 12

KJ2000

¹ I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

² And be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

³ For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God has dealt to every man the measure of faith.

One time, when I was a young minister, I was called on the carpet by a much older minister who felt that I had a couple of things I needed to get straight. One of the things he told me was that I did not show the proper respect to other ministers. I did not even show the proper respect to my superiors. Now, he was a kind man, and he took quite a bit of time before he told me that to tell me that I had made a lot of contributions, and that I had a lot to offer, and that he really approved of my ministry and the approach that I was taking to many things. He said, "This is one thing, though, that you need to change on. You do not show the proper respect towards your fellow ministers and toward your superiors." Well, I went away, and I gave that a lot of thought; and I concluded that the minister that called me in was right, but that he missed one *very important angle* about what was wrong with me. I could see it clearly once I stopped and once I thought about it. My problem was not so much a lack of respect for others, but *much too high a respect for my own opinions*. I almost said too high a respect for *myself*, but self-respect is a good thing in that regard; I don't mean that in that line. What I am talking about is that I had *far too high* a value on my *own* ideas and my *own* opinions, and I didn't really... well, it gave me the luxury, actually, of looking down my nose at the thoughts and the opinions of others. I was right... a lot. And I began to assume from the fact that I was right a lot that I was right all the time. And it began to be reflected in my behavior toward other people to such an extent that they did not feel that I respected them. And I had to sit down and take a good, hard look at that.

There's a proverb... it doesn't come through quite in the King James Version like it does in the Revised Standard Version. It says this:

Proverbs 18

RSV

² A fool takes no pleasure in understanding,
but only in expressing his opinion.

A fool takes no delight in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion. The King James is probably closer to the Hebrew. It says,

Proverbs 18

AKJV

² A fool has no delight in understanding, but [only] that his heart may discover [or uncover] itself.

And there is, I think, a really important approach towards the ideas, doctrines, theories—whatever they may be of the Bible that float around amongst us all the time...that I really feel too often we are quick to express our own opinions or our doctrinal beliefs, and we *really don't delight* in understanding what's actually going on here. What is the issue? What is the point? What does this man believe and why does he feel that way? In Proverbs 4, verse 5 comes an admonition from a very wise man. He says,

Proverbs 4

AKJV

⁵ Get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth.

⁶ Forsake her not, and she shall preserve you: love her, and she shall keep you.

⁷ Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all your getting get understanding.

Now, when you respect your own opinions too highly, you're not interested in understanding what somebody else has to say. What have they to offer *you*? You already know. And frankly, in some church traditions you can get to the place that you know *so much* that you just don't think anybody else has *anything* to offer you at all. And when I put it that way, you *know* that's an arrogant attitude. You *know* that's the kind of an approach to people and things that makes you look like you've got a head that's made of solid brick, and that there's no more chance of changing your shape than there is in changing the shape of a brick. You can't grow, you can't learn, you can't develop because *you already know*. You already know the things that are important. And this to me is one of the greatest problems that we have—that is, the thinking of oneself more highly than we ought to think. And that's where a lot of the problems of division come.

I'm going to tell you one thing that can make an *enormous* contribution, not only to the unity of the church, but to your own reputation, your own growth, and how people look at you. It is simply this: Keep your opinions to yourself until you are certain you *understand* what your brother is saying. Want me to tell it to you again? I can't tell you how important this is, in all aspects of life. Keep your opinions to yourself until you understand, you're *certain* you understand, what your brother is saying; and then you can address what he is saying and what he is feeling, and you can go together toward whatever it is you're trying to understand. Never confuse your own opinions (or anybody else's, for that matter) with the truth. Your opinions are *not* the truth. Have a little humility. Recognize that you might be wrong, no matter how *right* you think you are. It's okay to have the *courage* of your convictions, not the *obstinacy* of your convictions. It is never right to look scornfully upon another man, no matter how foolish you think he is. And this is where a lot of the problem comes about among the people of God, who look scornfully at one another, who look down their noses at one another, and think of themselves more highly than they ought to think.

There is a marvelous passage in Titus that I think all of us should try to remember. Paul said to Titus,

Titus 3

AKJV

¹ Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work,

And then he says this:

Titus 3

AKJV

² To speak evil of no man, [...]

“To speak evil of **no** man.” He doesn’t give you any slack. He doesn’t give you any exceptions. He doesn’t talk about “most of the time”, “part of the time”, “usually”. He just categorically says, “Speak evil of no man.” Which is why Michael the archangel, when he was arguing with the Devil about the body of Moses, did not bring railing accusations against the Devil himself [**Jude 1:9**]. I’ve seen preachers who did not have enough fear that they would do exactly that—something Michael the archangel would not do. Well, in this particular situation, you need to understand: We are told not to speak evil of any man.

Titus 3

AKJV

² To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, showing all meekness to all men.

Don’t get involved in arguments, bickering, strifes, and what have you. Be *meek* in your approach to people. Now, the question is: *Why should you be that way?* He answers it. He says,

Titus 3

AKJV

³ For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, [...]

Were you? *I* was.

Titus 3

AKJV

³ [...] disobedient, [...]

Yeah, I guess so. I’d have to own up to being disobedient at times in my life.

Titus 3

AKJV

³ [...] deceived [*Yeah.*], serving divers lusts and pleasures [*I’m afraid so.*],

Titus 3

AKJV

³ [...] living in malice and envy, [...]

Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. (Do you notice the little ameliorations in here. I *guess* so. I *sort of think* so. I am reserving a little bit.)

Titus 3

AKJV

³ [...] hateful, and hating one another.

Well, I have to say that I honestly think that attitude has not entirely gone away. It hasn't gone away from the church or we would not face...and by "the church", I want to explain one thing: When I say "the church", I mean all of those people in whom God's Spirit dwells, who are the invisible body of Christ wherever they may be. And when I speak of "the churches of God", I mean all of the individual congregations, groups, house churches, large churches, church organizations that have put themselves together—over all of the years, and over all time, and wherever they may be. So I'm including everybody in all of this. He is writing and saying that people need to be put in mind in this, and to speak evil of no man *because you are not any better than they are*. You have been there and done that yourself. So let's just face up to this. Therefore, we have no business looking down our nose at anyone else. He said,

Titus 3

KJ2000

⁴ But after the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared,

⁵ Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit;

How did we get where we are? Through his mercy, through his kindness, through his forgiveness. Not because we are better than anybody else, more righteous than anybody else, or smarter than anybody else, or anything else. He continued to say,

Titus 3

AKJV

⁶ Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior;

⁷ That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

⁸ This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that you affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men.

We want to really exhort one another on this regard. But notice what we are supposed to stay away from:

Titus 3

AKJV

⁹ But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; [...]

Why are we supposed to stay away from them?

Titus 3

AKJV

⁹ [...] for they are unprofitable and vain.

(And, I might add, they create division on top of division, split on top of split, and turn brother against brother—as everyone thinks he knows exactly what is right, and nobody else sees it with his incredible

vision.) He does say that...

Titus 3

AKJV

¹⁰ A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject;

¹¹ Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sins, being condemned of himself.

So you don't have to worry about that.

Number 2 (of the five things that *you* can do toward the goal that Paul laid before us): **Never argue religion with anyone.** “Never” and “anyone”. Never argue religion with anyone. It is an exercise in futility, and it tends to *demean* your faith. You know, the natural thing that happens in an argument or a debate is that you adopt a position, and then you defend that position or that proposition. And once you have staked out your defensive position, you are not very likely to leave it. And the other guy who has staked out his position is not very likely to leave his. And so what you are going to do is you are going to sit there arguing back and forth, because for this thing to reach some kind of termination someone has to win and someone has to lose. And as long as the argument is in that win-lose relationship, nothing is going anywhere, anyhow. I think all of us really ought to know that; I shouldn't have to even explain it. Frankly, it is best to assume, going into a discussion of this type, that the truth is probably somewhat different from the position *either of you* hold. And the object of the conversation is what? A mutual seeking of understanding—not the winning or the losing of an argument. Proverbs 14, verse 6:

Proverbs 14

AKJV

⁶ A scorner seeks wisdom, and finds it not: but knowledge is easy to him that understands.

The scorner keeps looking, never gets anywhere as long as he is scornful. And that's the attitude that is *inevitable* when you start arguing with religions—a certain amount of scorn starts to develop towards the person who is on the other side of this issue, and you will never get anywhere with that attitude. Knowledge is *easy* to the person who *understands*, whose goal is understanding, and says, “Yeah, I want to understand what's going on here.” Knowledge comes relatively easy. Then he says this:

Proverbs 14

AKJV

⁷ Go from the presence of a foolish man, when you perceive not in him the lips of knowledge.

Just *get away from him*. Leave him alone. Don't argue with him. Don't bicker with him. Don't try to take him anywhere. When you see or understand that someone has dug himself in—put up the barricades around him, sandbagged everything in, and is there to stay—go away, leave him alone. You're wasting your time. And one of the worst things you do in that kind of situation is also... (and this is something I don't know if you've ever thought about)... When you perceive that someone is getting into this frame of mind, and you persist in your argumentation, you will cause that person to dig in deeper, and to put up more and more sandbags, which will make it forever more and more difficult for him to *ever* admit, realize, or come to understand that he was *wrong*. All you do when you argue religion with someone is create *more* barriers and make it much more difficult. That's why Paul wrote to Timothy and said (in Second Timothy 2, verse 23),

2 Timothy 2

AKJV

²³ But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do engender strifes.

That's all they do. They just engender strifes—strife, arguments. Then he says this:

2 Timothy 2

AKJV

²⁴ And the servant of the Lord must not strive; [...]

Okay, folks, are you a servant of God? Well, here's the instruction for you.

2 Timothy 2

AKJV

²⁴ And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle to all men, apt to teach, patient,

²⁵ In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves[....]

Not a bad description, frankly, in some ways, for some of the people who really want to do that kind of arguing.

Number 3: Abandon proselyting. Abandon proselyting. You will *never* accomplish Paul's goal by proselyting. Listen to what Jesus says to the Pharisees about this particular subject. He said,

Matthew 23

AKJV

¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, you make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.

Now, why do you think that would be? Why would making one proselyte make him twofold more the child of hell than you are (or even as much as you are)? Okay, here's the definition for the word proselyte (this is the noun). It is...

a person who has changed from one opinion, religious belief, sect, or the like to another; convert.

Webster's College Dictionary - "proselyte"

Or, the verb form of it is "to get someone to change from one opinion, religious belief, sect, or the like to another". "What's wrong with that?", you might ask. Well, what has happened to the person when you have transferred him from one sect to another? Because what the Pharisees did was to transfer a person from wherever they came from *into another sect*, and sects are by the nature of things closed. They are closed systems. They are right; people who are outside of the sect are wrong. And so you bring this person in, you make them one of the members of your political party. He adopts the positions, and so in order to maintain unity within your organization or within your party everybody has to speak the same thing. So the group pressure begins to build up on the individual, and he tends to conform, and pretty soon you have a bunch of people marching around in the same direction—with the *illusion* of unity that exists among them. Actually, proselyting does nothing but reinforce and build up sect-building; and sect-building, well... Actually what you have done, when you change a person from one sect to another, you have not set that person free. You have moved him from one closed-minded society to another closed-minded society.

Now, there is a fundamental difference between *evangelism* and *proselyting*. I wonder if you know what it is. Do you grasp it? In evangelizing, your goal is to set men free. In proselyting, your objective is to win them over to *your sect*, and to make them a member of *your sect*.

Now, how does it work? Proselyting uses *wedge issues* like a politician would use wedge issues to separate people from *their* party to support his own. I never really thought much about it until this last political campaign; and Bob Dole, right in front of God and everybody, stands up and says, “In Southern California, we’re going to use this immigration thing as a wedge issue in the polls here in Southern California.” Well, “wedge issue” is an insider’s term; he wasn’t supposed to say that in public. Because the idea of a wedge issue is: you find a group of people who are members of a party, and you find something that the people in that party differ over; and you then decide that you take one side or the other of that issue, and you argue it strenuously; and you drive a wedge between the Democrats in Southern California on the issue of immigration (because it’s a *big* problem out there). And the theory is that, if we can drive a wedge between them, some of those people will vote for us and that will move the electorate in our direction. That is what a wedge issue is. Religious proselyting uses wedge issues just like a politician uses wedge issues: to drive a wedge between people and their party (whatever their party may be). Some of those issues could be the “born again” doctrine; some of them could be the doctrines of heaven and hell; some of them could be the immortality of the soul; some of them could be Christmas, and Easter, and so forth.

Now, I know what you’re thinking. Never mind the truth or error of the position for the moment, I am talking about the *objective* and the *method*—not the doctrine. If you go to a person using *the truth* as a wedge issue in that way, you are going to be proselyting; and you will tend to use this narrow end of the wedge to split a person off from whatever he is in, to make him a member of your group or your whatever it is you’ve got. But there is a problem with that.

Some evangelists are *masters* of the wedge issue; but I want to show you the approach of a *master evangelist*, and how a master evangelist approached a crowd of pagans—rank, absolute pagans. You and I have never met pagans as pagan as the gang of people that the apostle Paul (who I think we all would agree is a master evangelist) met on this occasion.

The apostle Paul was in Athens, where the Jewish community was really very limited, and he had a little bit he could do with them; but on this occasion he was up in the area where all of the philosophers were. And they found out that he had some new ideas—new religious ideas—and the Athenians loved nothing more than to hear or talk about some new thing. Boy, they were philosophers, and just had an absolute ball. (They were the original idea behind the Internet, I think.) So Paul...they got him up and took him up there:

Acts 17

NRSV

²² Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.

²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god’. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

What an *astonishing* thing to say—for the apostle Paul did not brand the altar as pagan. (I don’t know for sure that they would have even considered that an insult, these particular people.) He did not brand it as pagan. He didn’t tell them that you should not have an altar here. He didn’t address any of the wedge issues. There is no wedge issue *anywhere* in this entire discussion. He starts with them *where they are* and he says this, “What you worship, *this* I proclaim to you.” I want you to think about this a moment. He actually said, and acknowledged the possibility that the Athenians, in putting up an altar “to the unknown god” were worshiping *the real thing* and just didn’t know it. That is something that I know certain preachers would just simply not allow. “No sir, they were worshiping Baal, or Zeus, or one of these pagan Gods out here. They were not worshiping the real God.” Paul said, “No, no. Whom you worship as an *unknown* God, that’s the one that I am going to declare to you.”

Acts 17

NRSV

²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands,

And the Greeks knew that. They didn't have any problem with understanding that. They knew that the gods did not live in the things that they built. It's very logical. You know, Paul's expression is that they are logical people, and he approaches them with logic.

Acts 17

NRSV

²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, [...]

Oh yeah, we can all see that.

Acts 17

NRSV

²⁵ [...] since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.

The Athenians believed all that; and you could go around our community here, and most of the people you meet will believe all of that. They will believe that God gives us life, breath, and all things. They will tell you, "Oh, no, no. We don't believe that God dwells in temples that are made with human hands. We know that God made this world and everything in it." No problem with that at all.

Acts 17

NRSV

²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live,

²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him [...]

I love that. They will *feel* after God, and he says God has actually set this thing up so that men would *feel* after him and maybe find him. And yet there's an attitude that seems to exist out there that says, "Well, God can only be found *through us* and through *our way*." Israel felt that way, and yet God introduced himself to people who were not Israelites in history—demonstrated very simply, very quickly. Who were the "three Magi" who came from Persia? They were Persians; they weren't Israelites. Who was Balaam? He was a prophet. God talked to him; he doesn't talk to me. And he wasn't an Israelite. God spoke to people at different times and different parts of this world. You can relax and understand: he will talk to whomever he wants to whenever he chooses. (He is God, after all, you know.) Paul says God set this up...

Acts 17

NRSV

²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.

²⁸ For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

Aha! "Your poets have said, 'We are God's offspring.'" He found something that they *agreed* on, right off the bat. And then he says,

Acts 17

NRSV

²⁹ Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.

And I expect the Athenians said, "Well, yeah." That's the point. If we are God's offspring, then God isn't silver, because we're not.

Acts 17

NRSV

³⁰ While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent,

³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Now you've got a genuine, dyed in the wool, bona fide, card-carrying true evangelist—who is a master at his craft. What was the goal of his message? *Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, and God is going to judge the world by that man.* That was his objective; that's where he went. And he took them there, not by *opposing* them, but by *walking along with* them—recognizing their beliefs, acknowledging the fact that although they did not *know* enough, although they did not *know* the details, they were *groping after the true God who was there for them to find*, and who actually made it so they *would* grope for him and someday find him. I just think this is a *marvelous* example of all of this.

Acts 17

NRSV

³² When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, "We will hear you again about this."

³³ At that point Paul left them.

Now that, folks, is evangelism. It did not involve the use of wedge issues. It involved the understanding of where those people were, of appealing to them on their own ground, and then introducing them to the "Good News" about Jesus Christ—that he was dead, that he was raised from the dead, that he's going to come again, and he's going to judge the world—that God has not gone off and left us down here by ourselves.

Now, do you know what the worst thing about proselyting is? The worst thing about it is that it becomes a habit. Look what's happening to the churches nowadays. People are coming up with wedge issues that some of us never even imagined or thought about. And they're coming up with wedges inside the wedges—ways of splitting people who have already been wedged off into one issue, they are finding yet another issue. The problem with wedge issues is that *there is no end* to them. If we keep pursuing them, there is no end to the divisions that are possible.

I think one of the things that would help us all: if we would just realize that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with organizations as long as they don't become exclusivist, proselyting sects. If they are organized with the purpose of getting a job done, of ministering to God's people, of *evangelizing* the world as opposed to proselyting, there is not a thing in the world wrong with an organization and the structure of the organization... God doesn't even reveal which one we ought to do. We can judge them by their results. We can judge them by their fruits—by whether they work, or whether they don't work, or whether they cause more troubles than they solve. (And I think some of that stuff is becoming apparent to us as time goes on.) But there's nothing intrinsically wrong with them, and there is no reason why anyone should feel any need to drive a wedge issue into an organization, or a local church, or anything else of that nature. And there is no reason for anyone to get up and leave an organization, or

to try and convert members of another organization. That is not the road to unity, and we cannot achieve what Paul called upon us to do and set as our goal by following that route. We need to learn to *respect one another*—to respect our beliefs, to try to understand one another—and we will go a long way toward getting some right things done further than we have gone up until now.

Number 4: Commit to evangelism. This is in contrast to...just abandon, give up proselyting, and *commit* to evangelism. Evangelism comes from the Greek form of “good message”. Basically the word *evangelion* [εὐαγγέλιον, G2098] means “good message”, and it’s the Greek word which is translated “gospel” nearly everywhere in the New Testament. To evangelize, then, is to spread the gospel far and wide. The gospel is the good message of Jesus Christ in all of its parts.

You know, it’s really been fascinating for me to have the opportunity of doing the broadcast on Matthew [*The Gospel of Matthew* series]. Now, I could have done as I did with the Book of John [*The Testimony of John* series]—I could have done a series of sermons and gone through the book *before the church*; but the challenge of going through Matthew *on the air, before the world* is a *very* different challenge. It’s a very different challenge, and it’s really fascinating to me; because I have had to consider what is there, and I have had to think about what is *not* there, and where the emphasis is, and where *Jesus* placed the emphasis. And *I* have to then place the emphasis where *he* put it. I have to cover the subjects that *he* covered. I have to address the issues that *he* addressed. And funnily enough, it’s not necessarily the thing that *I* might have otherwise done. For in doing this gospel, I think I have really learned to emphasize what Jesus emphasizes. It has taken me along different lines from the old-style evangelism of our tradition. It has enabled me to walk *alongside* of my audience instead of being vinegar in their teeth and smoke in their eyes. I think some people just don’t listen to you any longer because you are so confrontational or argumentative. And I try *never* to argue with my audience. I want to walk alongside of them and help them to grow; because if I can help my audiences *grow towards* Jesus Christ, what else will happen? They will *grow away from* the things they should grow away from. But it’s a positive approach of helping them grow *toward* Christ, *toward* Jesus of Nazareth, rather than *away* from something else.

Number 5: Commit yourself personally to Paul’s goal. Now, what do I mean by that? I mean we have got to realize that the only way that goal can be implemented *institutionally* is by some form or other of coercion. And there has been a tendency on our part down through generations, in churches of *our* faith, to look to our leadership somehow to create that kind of unity, and as a result the grassroots membership of the church have not accepted *their* responsibility in working toward that. I’m asking you to make a commitment to God (and before God) that you will drive no more wedges between people, and that we will humble ourselves, and that we will strive for *understanding* instead of trying to *win*, at all costs, over somebody else’s argument—to strive for understanding, rather than argument and bickering and so forth. It’s not that difficult. Paul said,

1 Corinthians 1

KJ2000

¹⁰ Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, [...]

“Brethren” (plural), that “you” (plural)...

1 Corinthians 1

KJ2000

¹⁰ [...] that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

I gotta tell you something: You can only *grow into* that. You can’t just take thought and implement it. What I am telling you today is *only* five things that you can do to start growing *toward* that goal.

Now, I'm going to close today by doing something different. I'm going to close with a prayer. I'm going to ask you to bow your head, listen carefully to this prayer as I make it, and decide whether or not at the end of this prayer you can say "Amen" to it or not.

Our Father in Heaven, our Great Creator, we covenant with you, and with one another, that we will do our best to work for a unity of the Spirit among your people.

We will not put down our brothers.

We will speak evil of no man.

We will not proselyte, but we will rather do our best to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the world by whatever means you put in our hands.

Those of us who say "Amen" to this prayer at the end commit ourselves to the gentleness of Jesus in finding the lost sheep and carrying them gently back to you.

We will not argue with them.

We will not bicker or strive.

We will avoid foolish questions.

We will be gentle to all men, patient, and will teach in meekness, and we will trust *you* to bring about the unity of the Spirit which need not be hindered by any boundaries that we or other men may erect.

We make this commitment and this promise before you, to keep as best we can, and we ask your strength in helping us to do it.

In Jesus' name, amen.

Transcript of
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