

The Harvest Is Great But The Laborers Are Grumbling By Donald L. Bubna

Classic Christian Writings:

I was the new pastor. I was young and not very experienced. It was my first midweek prayer service. The church was 45 years old and already had been served by 15 pastors. This seemed to tell me something. I had served my first church nine years and had now moved a thousand miles with my young family. I didn't want to move again in another three years.

Like any new pastor, I had heard a few stories about my predecessors. Also, three different parties had come to warn me about a divisive lay leader. Neither the church nor I needed a repeat of history. How could this first prayer meeting make some difference?

After some praise and Bible study, I began to write prayer requests on the chalkboard. In rather large letters I wrote, "Love and Unity." Folks seemed a little surprised. Who ever heard of a prayer request like that? Remembering to pray for our sick and sorrowing is right and proper. And don't forget our missionaries; they are counting on us. And let's pray for our Sunday services. But praying for love and unity in the congregation? Is something wrong?

This signaled a new beginning in our church. We began to pray weekly that our relationships in the church would be marked by these two words. And we all began to change.

God Is Pleased

When love and unity mark the church the Father is glorified. Jesus' prayer in John 17 makes this clear, especially verses 20-26. In Gethsemane just prior to His arrest, trial and crucifixion, Jesus prayed for us. "For those who will believe" (v. 20, NIV)—this includes all Christians today.

What did He ask the Father on our behalf? He didn't pray that we would be happy or healthy or go unhurt. He prayed that we would get along with one another, that we would be one. "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you have sent me" (v. 23).

When we are one, we reflect the unity of the Trinity. The glory of God is thus seen in His people, and the Father is pleased.

Disunity Is the Devil's Delight

Anything that pleases God is a target of the enemy. Satan, our adversary, promotes disunity. He is out to destroy the church. He specializes in using church people to accomplish this. These are not demon-possessed people. These are true believers, well-meaning saints. Often they are pillars of the community with strong personalities, deserving respect, but they are sometimes used to divide the church.

Satan can use us by filling our hearts with self-seeking motives. He is an expert at taking our unresolved anger and causing great pain. We easily become blinded to what we are doing, and soon we become his instruments for division in the Body.

The real enemy is not the person we are reacting against because of his disruptive behavior in the church. "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world" (Ephesians 6:12). The enemy is the devil, who delights in disunity. He hides in the background, preferring we not recognize his role in our conflict. Riding on our selfishness, he can work through well-meaning folks like us.

He can even encourage us to quote Bible verses to prove our point and in the process widen the schism. He comes as "an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). He enjoys our sanctimoniously asking special prayer for the "terrible things that are going on." This raises suspicions that weaken the church and destroy its testimony before the watching world.

Paul rightly warned the church to "watch out for those who cause divisions" (Romans 16:17). He also appealed "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Division Today

I hate sin in the church. I deplore the inroads the world has made into it. The obvious ones make us look like we've cloned the world's values: materialism, pride, the sins of the flesh.

But the one most prevalent in the church today is the one that cripples the local church most—division. This sin concerns most of the letters in the New Testament. Divisiveness is what the false teachers brought to the Early Church, and divisiveness is having a heyday in the North American church today.

In the past five years my wife and I have crisscrossed the continent from the Maritimes to California and from Florida to the Pacific Northwest and have seen divisiveness in most of the 75 churches we have served in Vision Building Weekends. We see it most often in:

• The worship wars: "Why don't they sing the right kind of music?" (Translation: "My kind.")

• Who really leads the church: The pastor? Board? "We don't like the pastor's leadership style."

• Wrestling with change: "We've always done it this way."

Acts of the Sinful Nature

Usually the real issue is power. Each person wants a rightful place as one who knows what needs to be done. After all, we often think we have been around long enough to have some influence with others. So we create an issue, if not a crisis. Paul, in Galatians 5:19-20, reminds us that the acts of the sinful nature include, "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like" (emphasis added). A divisive spirit is listed with sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft. What company dissension keeps!

Jude describes these people in verse 16 as "grumblers" who are governed by their own evil desires. They "boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage."

When I ask people to write down words or phrases that describe their church, "grumbling" is mentioned far too often. We seem to think it is all right to complain. After all, ours is a free country with the right to free expression. But the Bible does not teach this about the Church.

"Acceptable Sins"

"There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers" (Proverbs 6:16-19, emphasis added).

God hates the actions and attitudes that stir up dissension among brothers. Yet when was the last time elders in your church have personally addressed people who sowed dissension through grumbling?

More is said in the New Testament about love and unity in the church than about divorce or even adultery. Yet we tend to let the grumblers and gossips get away with their remarks. Are these "acceptable sins"?

As laborers in the Kingdom, we work hard to bring the good news to all people. The world sees us and asks, "Why can't you get along with one another?" No wonder Paul was always exhorting the New Testament churches to unity. Perhaps godliness is best demonstrated when we speak the truth in love.

The Revival We Need

Some people pray a lot about revival. I'm for that. But I believe the revival that God wants us to have requires:

• Humbling ourselves before God. Not waiting for someone else to lead the way. Each one must choose to deal with his or her pride.

• Confessing and telling God what He already knows about the sinfulness of our hearts and our selfish

ways. We need to ask God and others to forgive us for our critical spirit. Whether we think it's major or minor, we need to voice it in prayer in the church. We tend not to confess our sins where people would hear them and think less of us. This is pride.

• Protecting our leaders. This means not hiding their shortcomings but also not allowing them to be criticized when not present. Support them in their roles and work. When we cannot endorse what they are doing, we need to go and tell them, not someone else.

• Making a commitment not to speak negative things about people. Our goal should be to speak to people. We need a return to Jesus' statement on this in Matthew 18:15-18.

It's been nearly 35 years since I first wrote that strange prayer request for love and unity on the blackboard of Salem Alliance Church. Eunice Thompson, who was there that night and is still active in the congregation, said, "I had never seen those words on a prayer request list before. That started something that Pastor Bubna continued all his 23 years with us." The church has known the continuous blessing of God ever since.

Jesus' reputation depends on our unity. John 17:20-23 makes this clear. Together, let us guard the reputation of His Body, the Church. "Lord, point out the critical spirit in our own lives. We confess it to You. Enable us to confess it to others. Then enable us to help others talk to those they may differ with. Give us the courage to both model and point out to them the better way. Lord, we want the world to see that we are one so that they too will believe. Amen."