

## **UNITED WITNESS**

Luke 24:44-49

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### **SCRIPTURE**

Then [Jesus] said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you--that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." {45} Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, {46} and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, {47} and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. {48} You are witnesses of these things. {49} And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:44-49 NRSV).

### **INTRODUCTION**

Today marks a kind of beginning for the intersection of three different observances that share not only a coincidence in timing but are also related in meaning. The third Monday of January is set aside each year to remember the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition, this week in January is set aside each year for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Finally, 2010 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Edinburgh World Mission Conference that ushered in an unprecedented level of cooperation among churches that has not been known since the early centuries.

What do these three have in common? Witness. Each represents something that has a profound affect on our Christian witness.

Before his death, Jesus stressed the importance of unity when he prayed, "That all may be one ... so that the world may believe" (John 17:21). Before his ascension, Jesus stressed the importance of purpose when he said, "You are my witnesses" (Luke 24:48). So it follows that the effectiveness of our purpose depends on the level of our unity. In other words, our witness is affected by the attitudes, beliefs, and actions we share in common.

### **1. UNITED WITNESS BASED ON COMMON HUMANITY**

How we view people, especially those who are different from us, affects our witness. It is difficult to have a credible witness, for example, if we despise people because they are from a different ethnic background. It may be hard to believe, but this was a major conflict in the early days of the Church. The specific question was, "Does God accept Gentiles?" It took repeated interventions by God for the Church to realize that the answer is, "Yes."

In the Book of Acts (10) we read of the conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman soldier. This was a landmark event so significant that the account of it is presented not once but three times. It showed that anyone, no matter their ethnic background, could relate directly to God through faith in Jesus Christ. It made clear that all those who trust in Christ are to be one in the Lord. Paul would echo this in his letter to the Galatians:

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:26, 28 NRSV).

Yet 2,000 years later we still struggle. It has been over four decades since the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. cast a vision of the “beloved community” where we recognize and respect each other’s worth and dignity as persons made in the image of God. The dream is not yet a reality but we must strive to make it so if we want the world to take us seriously when we speak of the God who loves each and every person.

Myself and many others in the congregation have been encouraged by our participation in the Sacred Conversations on Race. This was a series of meetings this past year involving two predominantly African-American congregations and two predominantly European-American congregations. I must admit that first meeting was challenging. I left Second Missionary Baptist that night thinking, “This is never going to work!” But as the series continued, it became evident the Holy Spirit was not sleeping on the job. We had an amazing experience that can only be described as a “God thing.” Barriers went down, new friendships formed and new opportunities became available. We are now encouraging other congregations in the Battle Creek area to follow suit.

Related to this is the fact I will be one of the speakers at a Lenten series that starts next month at Second Missionary Baptist Church. I hope that many from First Presbyterian will be able to attend the series. Look for more details to be published soon.

Meanwhile, I want to point out that Luke makes it clear in his two books (Gospel of Luke, Acts of the Apostles) that the first witnesses for Jesus represented a diverse cross-section of humanity – men and women, young and old, Jew and Gentile. May this be said of our generation, also.

## **2. UNITED WITNESS BASED ON COMMON FAITH**

How we view people affects our witness. What we believe also affects our witness. If you believe that by putting a stewed tomato in your sneaker you can have peace with God and eternal life then you may find it difficult to convince anyone else this is so. But if you believe that through faith in Jesus Christ you can have peace with God and eternal life then two billion people on this planet already agree with you and the other four billion might be

willing to listen when they realize this is a historically based message that any earnest inquirer can investigate on his or her own.

A scholar by the name of C. H. Dodd has rightly pointed out that there is a consistent pattern to the preaching of the apostles as recorded in the New Testament (see *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, pp. 7-34). The pattern includes:

1. The fulfilment of the Old Testament promises;
2. The ministry of Jesus culminating in his death;
3. His resurrection and exaltation;
4. The gift of the Holy Spirit; and
5. The call to repentance and faith.

We see in Luke that this core teaching comes from Jesus himself:

[Jesus] opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed...(24: 45, 46, 47).

With the end of persecution in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, Christians could speak openly to each other and the world. In a series of Church-wide meetings, with delegates from the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and Asia, an important document was produced that not only summarized the core teachings of Scripture but also clarified what Christians believed about Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the document was intended to foster unity among all Christians. The result is what is commonly referred to as the Nicene Creed, named after the location of the first meeting. The other two meetings were in Constantinople (Istanbul) and Chalcedon.

However, the form of the Nicene Creed used by Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians is not the form that was originally agreed upon. Christians in the West added three words not part of the original. In reference to the Holy Spirit, the original version said:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

But the Western Church added the words, "and the Son" so that the revised version says:

...who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*

This phrase has never been accepted by the Eastern (Orthodox) Church for at least three

reasons:

- 1) It does not have explicit scriptural support;
- 2) It seems to take away from the divinity of the Holy Spirit (something very important to the Eastern Church and that should be important to us); and
- 3) It was a unilateral change made by the West in violation of the original agreement.

In recent years there has been a trend in the West toward recognizing and using the original form. Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have recited the Nicene Creed jointly with Patriarchs from the Greek Orthodox Church (Demetrius I and Bartholomew I) without the “and the Son” clause.<sup>1</sup> The Anglican Church among others has encouraged the use of the original form.

The “three word” controversy notwithstanding, the Nicene Creed is the most widely accepted summary of the Christian faith outside the Bible. It is the only such summary accepted by all three major branches of Christianity including Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians. Often called “The Symbol of Faith” it is an enduring legacy of when the Church on earth still had visible unity – a unity based on common faith.

Some of you may be wondering about the Apostles’ Creed. The Apostles’ Creed is the second most widely accepted summary of the Christian faith in the world. Contrary to the popular legend, the creed was not written by the Apostles. Rather, it has its roots in apostolic times, and is a faithful summary of apostolic teaching. But it is a creation of the Western Church and in its present form dates to the 8<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **3. UNITED WITNESS BASED ON COMMON WORK**

How we view people affects our witness. What we believe affects our witness. How well we work together effects our witness.

This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Edinburgh World Mission Conference. Most of you have never heard of this conference but you have felt its impact. The organizers decided that instead of just bringing together Presbyterian missionaries to discuss the status of mission work in the world, that it would be most useful if several different communions participated. The result was the first major interdenominational conference in modern times. It consisted of delegates from the mission societies from several different denominations, joined by an Orthodox guest. They met during the summer of 1910 in the Scottish capital. The primary purpose of the Conference was to help missionaries to forge a

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<sup>1</sup> Referred to as "filioque" which is Latin for "and the Son."

common spirit and coordinate their work.

Missionaries have often been the first to recognize the tragedy of Christian division. Europe and North America had got used to divisions between churches but the scandal of disunity seemed dreadful to missionaries who were announcing the Gospel to people who had known nothing of Christ until then. How can you make others understand the reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ if the baptized themselves ignore or fight one another? How could Christian groups who lived in mutual hostility preach one Lord, one faith and one baptism in a credible way?

The Edinburgh World Mission Conference started a movement to overcome hostility and division in the mission of the Church. And while much work remains, much has been accomplished. Today we are more likely to see an effective ministry as representing the whole Church and not just one denomination.

A good example would be the Alpha Course. Over a dozen congregations in the Battle Creek/Kalamazoo area are now using the course as a tool to introduce people to the Christian Faith. Alpha aims to present the core truths of the Christian faith around which Christians of every affiliation can unite. It is currently running in 163 countries and in churches of all the major denominations - Anglican, Baptist, Episcopal, Free Church, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Salvation Army and United Reformed - as well as a large number of house churches and new churches. Alpha is living proof that Christians can work together in a united witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

## **CONCLUSION**

And so we see that the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration of the Edinburgh World Mission Conference all combine to give us an important message. If we respect the worth and dignity of each human being as someone made in the image of God, if we hold to the core beliefs passed on to us by Jesus, and if we learn to work together as brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of the names printed on our church buildings, we will not only present a united witness, but a life changing one as well.