



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“IS CHURCH UNION GOD'S WILL?”

John Galbreath
Bible Study Series

Text: John 17:13
Date: April 30, 1961

About Westminster's Galbreath Bible Study Series:

This lesson is one taken from a sermon preached by John Galbreath at Westminster Presbyterian Church on April 30, 1961.

To complete the lesson, we suggest that you begin by reading the designated Bible passage (John 17:23).

Next, review the outline of the sermon. Reflect on the chosen scripture and how you would “fill in” the remainder of the message from the chosen passage.

Then, review the study questions posed about the lesson — whether by yourself or in your small group.

Finally, share your thoughts on the Galbreath Bible Study blog on the Westminster Intranet.

"The glory which Thou has given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one . . . I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou has sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me."

I. Introduction

A. Unity is an ideal universally accepted in the Church.

- 1. Christ could not be more explicit in his demand -- we find it repeated over and over**
- 2. Our historic creeds reaffirm the ideal**
 - a) "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church" -- the historic creedal statement of the church -- the affirmation that there is and can be only one universal church in Christ*
- 3. Within Protestant and Roman Catholic circles, our generation has become vitally aware of our disorder**

II. Can Unity Best Be Expressed Through Church Union?

A. Tying two cats together by the tail may produce union, but it does not produce unity.

1. Under present circumstances, the forcible union of Roman Catholic and Presbyterian churches would not produce unity

B. Bishop Gerald Kennedy of the Methodist Church points out the vitality of the American churches as against the one-church nations.

1. He sees no virtue in bigness in itself
2. Whenever the church has been expressed in one single monolithic structure, it becomes introspective and fat
3. Our competition is a source of strength

C. This is no time to rock the boat with machinery dislocation

D. To witness to the Grace of God in Christ, and to call the world to oneness in him, while the church itself is torn in shreds is to give the lie to our own witness

1. To proclaim that we are for unity in Christ, so long as we don't have to live together, some would reply, is sheer hypocrisy
2. The scandalous disunity in local communities

III. Blake's Proposal

A. This whole issue was lifted out of the academic realm by a proposal of Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, voiced in Grace Episcopal Cathedral, San Francisco, December 4, 1960

1. An unofficial proposal

a) It was not in his capacity that he proposed it.

b) Overtures have been sent to General Assembly to implement the proposal.

c) Even if approved by General Assembly, Dr. Blake has estimated that it would take ten years to effectuate such a merger.

d) We are not faced with an imminent resolution of issues that were centuries in the making.

2. He proposes that the Protestant Episcopal and United Presbyterian Churches join to invite the Methodist and United Church of Christ into a plan of union, that would thereafter be open to any other denominational bodies that would care to join.

B. Two strains of tradition

1. Among the four denominations, there are some relatively wide differences and traditions.

a) Within the Methodist and Episcopalian churches, we have the hierarchical form of church government with its bishops

b) Within the Presbyterian and United Church traditions, one sees the reformed traditions of Scripture, theology and government

2. Is it possible to share the genius of each denominational tradition without diluting those factors which have given them their unique tradition and witness?

C. The specifics

1. Polity

a) The Episcopalian contribution

- (1) Office of Bishop would be maintained
- (2) It has been a "scare" word in Presbyterian tradition because of old-world persecutions
- (3) It is a word and concept of New Testament origin
- (4) In practice, the pastor holds certain functions of the bishop
- (5) Most presbyteries have "Presbytery Executives" or "General Presbyters" who have functions as overseers
- (6) Laying on of hands
 - (a) *"Apostolic succession" -- through which the traditions of the New Testament Church have been maintained*
 - (b) *Episcopalians differ among themselves as to interpretation of this, some see it as a matter of "decency and order". Other as a process of unction.*
 - (c) *Mutuality, for we would lay hands upon one another, that the symbolism of our various traditions may be unified*

b) Reformed tradition

- (1) The role of bishop would be one of service, not of status
- (2) His authority would be delegated to him, and not arise from the office he held
- (3) This is not a radical change from the present Episcopalian position
- (4) Ordination and formation of presbyteries
 - (a) *This, too, has already become a reality in a certain diocese*

2. Doctrine

- a) *The Episcopalian tradition -- Apostles and Nicene Creed*
- b) *The Reformed contribution -- the urgency of the constant reappraisal and judgment of the church under the Holy Spirit, speaking through Scripture*

3. Liturgy

- a) *Two sacraments -- Holy Communion and Baptism*
- b) *Freedom of liturgy -- as decided by the individual congregation*

IV. The Prospects

A. We may assume the opposition of the anglo-catholic wing of the Protestant-Episcopal, for they are already very much at odds with those within their own communion who do not accept an authoritarian concept of the bishopric, a highly liturgical interpretation of worship, and a traditional form of theology.

B. We may assume opposition from those of congregational background in the United Church of Christ, those in presbyterianism who have never emerged from the congregational concept of authority.

C. Among the denominations, there are broad bases of common practice that would make this feasible.

V. Conclusion

This whole issue is secondary to the issue of unity on the local level. No manipulation of machinery at the top can bring a united witness if within the community, and in the congregation there is no accord. Nor is union in the home office very important if in the community there is a genuine spirit of respect and mutual honor across lines.

Study Questions -- Part I

Bible Reading: John 17:23

John 17:23 says: "I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

- In this verse, we see a sharing between God and Jesus. What do you think "complete unity" means in the context of this verse?
- How does it impact your relationship with God to know that He has loved you even as He loved Jesus?

Study Questions -- Part II

Sermon :

The bulletin that week noted that Rev. Kelso was undergoing a cornea transplant in New York that week. Does it surprise you that cornea transplants were being performed in 1961?

I.A. Dr. Galbreath notes that unity is an ideal universally accepted in the Church. Do you believe that is true today?

I.A. 3. He notes that within Christian circles, we had become aware of our disorder. Do you think we are more or less unified than we were in 1961?

I.A.3. Dr. Galbreath hand wrote the word ecumenical. Why do you think he wanted to emphasize that term?

II.B. 1. He discusses that Bishop Kennedy doesn't see any virtue in bigness in itself. When it comes to the church, how do you feel about the virtues or challenges of bigness? Do you think bigness has played any role in some Presbyterian congregations leaving the PC(USA)?

II.B. 2. How do you feel about the size of the church as a denomination? Do you think there is a size beyond which a particular congregation should not grow?

II.B.2. How can a large church continue to serve and remain as relationship driven as a small one?

II.D. Dr. Galbreath seems to be indicating that the church was torn in shreds at that time. Are there things you worry may tear the church apart today?

II.D.2. Do you see disunity in local communities? If so, what causes it? What can individual Christians do to mend that disunity?

III.A.1.d. Dr. Galbreath added a handwritten note "No precipitous action". Why do you think he inserted that after his initial writing?

III.A.2. He refers to a proposal to unite Protestant Episcopalians, United Presbyterians, Methodists and United Church of Christ into a plan of union that would be open to others to join. Are there any unions that you could see happening today?

III.B. and C. Dr. Galbreath talks about denominational factors in terms of polity and structure. What role does the structure have in your commitment as a Presbyterian?

III.C.2. What doctrines of the church are most significant for you?

III.C.3. Do you think the view of sacraments has changed since 1961? If so, how?

IV.C. He indicates that the union he spoke of was feasible. Why do you think it never came to pass? Do you think there ever will be the kinds of union of which he spoke?

V. He speaks about the importance of respect and mutual honor across lines. What is your assessment of where things stand on that issue today?

Following the conclusion, there is a handwritten addition saying "This cannot be artificially cranked up. We grow in Christ." Why do you think he chose to add this after his outline was complete?