

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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**Series:** Special Messages  
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### CULTIVATING REMEMBRANCE

**T**he English Reformer, Hugh Latimer, once remarked, “We ought never to regard unity so much that we would or should forsake God’s Word for her sake.” Wise words from a man who went to the stake, rather than compromise the truth of the gospel.

To those whose only concern is the appearance of visible unity among all who call themselves Christians, Latimer’s resolve appears most unattractive. We are repeatedly told by those of this persuasion that the church’s major fault is its deplorable lack of visible unity. Appeal is constantly made to the words of Jesus in John 17, and those who do not join this effort are portrayed as being in serious disagreement with Jesus! This abominable lack of visible unity, they claim, is our greatest sin—and what is chiefly to be blamed for this heinous state of affairs? Doctrine—or to be more precise—doctrinal distinctives. Nowadays we are told that things like the Reformation’s understanding of *Sola Fide*, the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, Biblical inerrancy and particularly the distasteful notion of endless punishment and the exclusivity of salvation through Christ alone are an encumbrance to establishing visible Christian unity. But is this notion of visible unity what Jesus intended in his high priestly prayer in John 17? Our Lord’s concern, as Robert Lewis Dabney pointed out last century, is for spiritual unity. The demand for visible unity is not only quite foreign to the text, it constitutes, in the words of Dabney, an enormous blunder. It is, in fact, an idol that is used to stifle any legitimate dissent, and, let me add, it is positively deadly to the health and welfare of the church. I am reminded of the remark of Francis Bacon, the noted English philosopher and statesman of a bygone era. “Unity that is formed on expedience is, in reality, grounded upon an implicit ignorance. As everyone knows, all colors will look the same in the dark.” Times have changed and we are frequently reminded that we need to change with them. If we don’t, we’re going to be perceived as backward and outdated.

In our postmodern times, tolerance is valued over truth, and truth, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder and as such must be extended to everyone, except those disagreeable and critical exponents of truth who hold to absolutes, or, to put it into theological language, those who seek to maintain historical orthodoxy. Tragically, many professing Evangelicals are embracing in celebratory fashion a distinctively non-doctrinal mentality when it comes to defining their faith. In part, this sad state of affairs is traceable to the gullible and blatantly naïve assumption that the surrounding culture is value-neutral, and as such, harmless. This manifests itself in the notion that since all things are primarily a matter of personal preferences, i.e., different life-styles, then we should celebrate diversity by suspending judgment and live and let live. Christians who end up buying into this mentality fail to recognize that by doing so they are violating the Apostle Paul’s admonition in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world.” Despite the fact that this kind of neutralism accents diversity, it does so in name only. Conformity is actually what drives it. The standard around which neutralism seeks conformity is human autonomy pure and simple. Not surprisingly, this desire for conformity has a noticeable parallel in Christian circles—the demand for visible unity.

Recently, the high profile Evangelical figure Rick Warren, urged all Christians to march under the banner of a new reformation, one whose motto is “Deeds over Creeds.” As attractive as this may sound, there is a very steep price to be paid here. How so? According to Warren, it really doesn’t matter what your label is. [He mentioned by name Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostal and Baptist.] All that matters, he

declared, was if you love Jesus, we're on the same team. This is not the first time we've heard this appeal. Over a decade ago, the Promise Keepers marched down this same path. Listen to the words of Bill McCartney, the founder of Promise Keepers: "Promise Keepers doesn't care if you're Catholic. Do you love Jesus? Are you born of the Spirit of God?" The very same note was struck by Randy Phillips, one-time president of Promise Keepers, who stated that doctrine does not matter when it comes to the differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants: "What we care about is do you love Jesus, and are you born again by the Spirit of God? And so, if you have been born again by the Spirit of God, then whatever the labels are should not divide us. So from that standpoint, all men are welcome, whether you're Baptist, Pentecostal, or Roman Catholic. If you are in the Body of Christ, then you should certainly be welcome." But it was not simply a question of labels. If that is the case, then the official position of the Church of Latter-day Saints should not be a concern. If individual Mormons claim they love Jesus and are born of the Spirit, why should they be excluded?

Rick Warren is now banging the same drum: Deeds over Creeds. But as it turns out, creeds really do matter. Any unity like the kind now being urged on us that is formed apart from Creeds and the need for them, is doomed to produce the kind of unity that is polluted by doctrinal impurity. It is the kind of impurity that in the final analysis ends up compromising the truth of the gospel. Too steep a price to be paid for the sake of visible unity. But there is more going on here than meets the eye. This mentality, which characterizes much of contemporary Evangelicalism, reflects a very troubling lack of theological discernment.<sup>1</sup>

What the Evangelical Church has lost is a distinctive Christian mind, or to put it more bluntly, we lack *wisdom*. Oliver Barclay defines the Christian mind as "The ability to see the true nature of things and how, in the light of that, we should live. In the Book of Proverbs, for instance, it has three main strands: knowledge, understanding and practical know-how (in the light of the knowledge and understanding). Words like understanding, insight and prudence rub shoulders in its definitions with knowledge and instruction on the one hand and with wise dealings, righteousness, and justice on the other. Understanding depends on knowledge, but it has to lead in turn to wise action."<sup>2</sup> Failure to develop a Christian mind will hinder and harm in ways we cannot begin to imagine. In fact, it will lead to foolishness. Our text in Psalms 106:7 illustrates this very point. Failure of memory follows upon a want of understanding. This, in the case of Israel of old, readily led on to the sad consummation of rebellion. Provocation follows upon "FORGETFULNESS," a failure to remember where inward faults displayed themselves in outward offences.

#### **I. WANT OF UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S WONDERS IS A SOURCE OF SIN.**

God's great display in bringing Israel out of Egypt – what was the people's response to Moses? One of complaint.

#### **II. WANT OF UNDERSTANDING LEADS TO FAILURE OF MEMORY.**

Mercies should be remembered – and multiplied mercies should never be forgotten. How quickly did Israel forget! Note their actions at Marah.

#### **III. GRIEVOUS PROVOCATION FOLLOWED THEIR FORGETFULNESS OF GOD.**

Note they challenged God with an evil intent. How great is the sin when it follows such a great display of mercy! This failing followed *after* a time when they sang of God's great deliverance (cf. Exodus 15:15ff).

#### **IV. THE CALL TO REMEMBRANCE.**

Old Bishop Ryle wisely wrote, "Half our doubts and fears arise from dim perceptions of the real nature of Christ's Gospel...The root of a happy religion is a clear, distinct, well-defined knowledge of Jesus Christ."<sup>3</sup>

##### **A. REMEMBER WHO GOD IS AND WHAT HE HAS DONE.**

Deut. 8:2 – Remember how the LORD your God led you.

Deut. 24:9 – Remember what the LORD your God did to Miriam (leprous disease).

I Chron. 16:12 – Remember the wonders He has done; His miracles, and the judgments He pronounced.

Neh. 4:14 – Remember the LORD, who is great.

Job 36:24 – Remember to extol His work.

Psalms 77:11 – I will remember the deeds of the LORD. I will remember your miracles of long ago.

Psalms 105:5 – Remember the wonder He has done.

Psalms 119:55 – In the night I remember your name.

Ecc. 12:1 – Remember your Creator in the day of your youth.

Ecc. 12:6 – Remember Him – before the silver cord is severed or the golden bowl is broken.

Note: Ps. 78:42 – They did not remember His power;  
Ps. 106:7 – They did not remember your many kindnesses.

## B. REMEMBER PAST CONDUCT AND LESSONS OF LIFE

Lam. 3:19 – I remember my affliction and my wandering.

Luke 17:32 – Remember Lot's wife.

Eph. 2:11, 12 – Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth...remember that at that time you were separate from Christ.

Heb. 10:32 – Remember those earlier days after you had received Light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the fire of suffering.

## C. REMEMBER THE TEACHINGS OF SCRIPTURE.

Acts 20:31 – Remember that for three years I have never stopped warning each of you day and night with tears.

II Tim. 2:8 – Remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead. (Luke 24:6)

Jude 17 – Remember what the Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold (about scoffers and false teachers).

I Cor. 11:24, 25 – Do this (Lord's Supper) in remembrance of me.

**CONCLUSION:** “Our walk,” said John R. W. Stott, “depends on our mind, our conduct and on our outlook. As a man ‘thinketh in his heart (or mind) so is he’ (Prov. 23:6, AV) and so he behaves. It is our thoughts, ultimately, which govern our behavior . . . It is a question of our preoccupation, the ambitions which compel us and interests which engross us; how we spend our time, money and energy: what we give ourselves up to. This is what we set our minds on.”<sup>4</sup> Failure to do so will result in the sin of forgetfulness of God's character and acts. It was the fear of this that prompted the Psalmist to pray, “Give me understanding, and I shall live” (Psalm 119:144). Five times between verses 144 and 159, the theme of life is accented. The Hebrew word translated life is CHAYAH. It means not merely staying alive, but enjoying a rich and meaningful life, one that is strong and full of vitality.<sup>5</sup> This thought is echoed in the words of Jesus: “I have come that they might have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). What is the link between this kind of life and understanding? “The understanding,” wrote Thomas Manton, “is the great wheel of the soul, and guide of the whole man.”<sup>6</sup> It is true that the rest of our faculties follow the dictates and decisions of the understanding. The quality of our life is dependent then on how we think. How do we naturally think?<sup>7</sup> The Bible describes the *natural* condition of the human mind with terms like: *foolish* (Titus 3:3); *ignorant* (I Peter 1:14); *futile* (Ephesians 4:17); *depraved* (Romans 1:28); and likened to *darkness*<sup>8</sup> (Acts 26:18; Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:18; Colossians 1:13). This language is used to describe how men think in reference to the true God and spiritual realities. It is not simply a question of intelligence, for we recognize that fallen man can use his mind to accomplish anything. John Owen observed: “Be men otherwise and in other things never so wise, knowing, learned, and skillful, in spiritual things they are dark, blind, ignorant, unless they are renewed in the spirit of their minds by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> Psalm 10:4 says of the wicked, “in all his thoughts there is not room for God.” Who are these wicked people? The wicked are unbelievers, which is what we all once were. Wickedness is indeed a harsh word. We tend to think that word is reserved for a special class of people like Hitler or Stalin. If that is the way you think, then perhaps you have never considered how great is the weight of sin.<sup>10</sup> John Howe

captured the essence of the matter when he wrote, “a wicked man’s life is nothing else but a continual forsaking of God, of departing from Him.”<sup>11</sup> Having been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13; I Peter 2:9; Eph. 5:8), we are called upon to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23).

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This section will appear in an article I wrote for the Sept. 2009 issue of TableTalk.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Barclay, The Intellect and Beyond: Developing A Christian Mind (Zondervan 1985) p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> J. C. Ryle, Expository Thoughts On the Gospels IV, (rpt. Zondervan 1955) p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> J. R. W. Stott, Men Made New: An Exposition of Romans 5-8 (Baker, 1984) p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament IV, G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds. (Eerdmans, 1980) p. 334.

<sup>6</sup> The Complete Works of Thomas Manton III (rpt. Maranatha, N.D.).

<sup>7</sup> “The thoughts do most distinguish men’s hearts, because they are the freest acts of the mind, wherein the mind is most itself.” Work of Thomas Goodwin VI (rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), p. 476. C. H. Spurgeon warns, “Where there is much traffic of bad thinking, there will be much mire and dirt; every wave of wicked thought adds something to the corruption which rots upon the shore of life. It is dreadful to think, that a vile imagination, once indulged, gets the keys of our minds, and can get in again very easily, whether we will or no, and can so return as to bring seven other spirits with it more wicked than itself; and what may follow, no one knows.” John Ploughman’s Talks (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> “Spiritual darkness is spoken of in Scripture, not as a mere passive or negative thing, but as a *positive power*.” James Buchanan, The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966) p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> The Works of John Owen III (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972) p. 244.

<sup>10</sup> This is actually the response Anselm gave to the question: “Why could God not simply wipe out man’s sin without requiring atonement?” His actual words were ‘Nondum considerasti quanti ponderis sit peccatum.’ Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man). Book 1, Chapter 21.

<sup>11</sup> The Works of the Reverend John Howe I (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1990) p. 422.