



UNITY IN SYDNEY

PRESENTED

by

Oii. JOEL NEOEIIHOOO

on

*The  
Back to God  
Hour*

THE OENOMINATIONALIIOAOCAS<sup>T</sup> OF

THE REFORMED CHURCHES

OF

Australia and New Zealand

## UNITY IN SYDNEY

*I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in me through their word, that they may all be one: even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.*

John 17: 20, 21

Sydney, Australia., is a very striking city, and pilots, when they land after a long ocean flight from Christchurch or Fiji, some of its landmarkseven while they are making their landing approach. The practice of giving a running account of a city's attractions moments before touch-down is a little frightening for passengers who accustomed to the tight-lipped landing procedures that govern air traffic in North America and Europe. But Sydney is worth the risk, there is involved. Its statuary bridges and remarkable Opera house take on a special grandeur which is described while an airplane's sink rate quickens and the river, oceans, bridges, buildings, roads, and cars come rushing up to welcome the excited travelers.

Well, you may not have heard through the news, but right now there is something happening in Sydney that is adding to the city's beauty and excitement. I say you may not have heard because it's not exactly the kind of news that sets people on their car in astonishment. It's a church meeting. "Oh, no ...," you say. "You've got to be kidding. A church meeting- what's so big about that?"

Let me tell you a little bit about it. and, maybe, when I do, you will become somewhat more interested. Maybe you will even become a bit more interested in Jesus Christ, for, after all, that is what the church is about.

meeting is not a meeting of a single church; you know, like a single denominationally that's what church meetings are. They are not really church meetings at all. They are denominational meetings meetings of Presbyterians or Baptists or Anglicans or- you, use whatever name you want. And denominations are rather strange things.

On the one hand, if they are really true to the Word of God, they represent the true church, but let's be honest, denominations also develop a lot of residue over the years that has very little to do with the true church. Ways of doing things, ways of saying things and the bureaucracy ... all these are parts of denominational life. And much of this can be rather annoying. There is a certain amount of protectionism in denominational life, and a certain amount of stuffiness, and there is time wasted just keeping the machinery going. So, I can understand why you wouldn't be interested in this meeting in Sydney were just another denominational meeting.

But this is really a meeting of the church in a much broader expression of its nature than we generally see. The meeting I'm talking about is the meeting of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, and attending it are official delegates from Reformed churches all over the world. I have the privilege of representing my denomination, the Christian Reformed Church and I thought it would be appropriate to share some of the excitement of our meeting with you.

It is too early to tell the directions that this meeting of Reformed churches is going to take at this time, for the sessions will continue throughout this week. And the subjects that are up for discussion are extremely complex and

difficult. The Scriptural view of race, the authority of the Scripture, the sabbath question, and the Bible's teaching about the future are some of the subjects that will have to be dealt with carefully before this Synod is finished with its work. But quite apart from the material that is being handled it is extremely exciting to see delegates from all over the world here at our meetings, people of every color and background, meeting as brothers in Jesus Christ and carefully wrestling with deep problems that will influence the future of Reformed churches for years to come.

And all this drives us back into the Bible in order to fortify our vision of the great unity of the church which Jesus Himself thought about during His life on this earth. There is probably no place where this vision of the Lord is described more precisely than when He described it Himself in His so-called high priestly prayer, recorded in John 17. This is what He said, as He prayed to His Father, just before He was about to be crucified: do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. (vv. 20, 21)

Jesus had been praying for the small group of men who had followed Him and who were destined to be His apostles, who as such were going to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. Suddenly His viewpoint shifted in His prayer and He spoke of the world-wide results of this ministry of the Word, and He saw all who would believe the Word of the gospel and be saved. He prayed that they would be

drawn together in a unified body that would serve as a witness to all men that Jesus was sent by His Father into this world and that Jesus' work had been successfully accomplished.

Now there are many things that can be said about church union movements these days, and many of them are rather harsh. For sadly, there is a kind of interest in church union that is motivated by disregard for the teachings of the Scripture, a kind of easy acceptance of a common denominator religion. Furthermore, some of the major unity movements in our era have been encumbered by a brittle bureaucracy that has become an embarrassment to even the most enthusiastic ecumenists. And it must be said that the Reformed Ecumenical Synod that is meeting right now in Sydney is not immune to such dangers and may well have succumbed to some of them already in one degree or another.

In spite of all this, though, there is in the heart of every true Christian a yearning for a visible expression of the unity of believers. This yearning is being satisfied right here in Sydney at this time. So right now would be a good time to examine briefly what Jesus said when He expressed His prayer that His followers should be one.

It is clear from John 17 that Jesus envisioned the great expression of Christian unity to be something that would result from a great outgoing mission movement. For He talked about the fact that there were going to be many who would believe in Him through the apostles' proclamation of the good news of salvation. Those of us who are present at these meetings here in Sydney see this mission-born unity expressed before our eyes.

It is a tremendous confirmation of the reality of the gospel to discover that one is really united with a person of entirely different background because of the Lord Jesus Christ. For example, we have delegates from Indonesia at our meetings. Now, you can understand that those of us from Europe and North America come from backgrounds that are quite different from our brothers in Indonesia. Some of them have come rather recently out of backgrounds that are dominated by non-Christian religions. Their customs and way of life are different from ours. Yet, we find that we are more like them than we are like North Americans and Europeans who are non-Christian. A Christian from Indonesia and a Christian from America or Britain are more brothers than a Christian from Britain and a non-Christian from Britain. Why is this? Why, it's because the Word of God changes men at the center of their existence. Through His Word, God remakes men's spirits and transforms them into the image of His dear Son. Thus as we sit down and talk together we feel we are one in the reality of Christ's salvation. And we know that the things that unite us are far more important than the things that divide us. And I tell you, that is a very humbling experience and an exalting one.

This oneness that we are experiencing here in Sydney is a direct result of what Jesus had in mind when He prayed His great prayer. He was talking about our Indonesian brothers a few moments ago. The Reformed churches in Indonesia are the results of many, many years of the mission activity in Indonesia on the part of the Reformed churches of Europe. The Reformed churches in Australia also have mission work there. Recently the Christian Reformed

Church has become involved in broadcasting in that great land. And over the years the Indonesian churches have developed a strong indigenous ministry. But the point is this, it was and is the ongoing power of the Word of God, transmitted through imperfect, but dedicated servants, that has caused the Indonesian church to grow. And now we sit down together, brothers in the Lord, each esteeming the other more than himself, learning and working together, trying to find our way in a world that is both fascinating and confusing.

Such unity that grows naturally among those who have responded to the proclamation of God's grace can mightily fortify those who participate, and raise a powerful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ in this age.

This is why it was so good, before we actually got down to our deliberations here in Sydney, to spend a week thinking about the mission of the church. A week-long Missions Conference at the Moore Theological College preceded our meetings. And I am sure that the discussions of those meetings will contribute greatly to continuing work this week.

But there is another important note sounded by Jesus in His prayer that should not escape us when we think about the unity of the church. Not only does Jesus speak about a unity that is going to arise because of the ongoing mission of His people, but He rather carefully describes the instrument that is going to be used to call the world-wide church into existence. He speaks of those "who believe in me through their word." That's the word of the disciples who later became apostles that He is talking about.

To put it a bit differently, the church is

called out of the world through a very specific and delimited mechanism for the word which the apostle spoke was a rather narrow word in certain respects. The apostles were not sennetists, they were not philosophers, nor did they have a lot of expertise regarding how the ills of the world might be eliminated. They talked of Christ, of Christ exclusively, and they talked about Jesus Christ in terms of very special elements of His life and death.

The apostle Paul, who later expressed the apostolic message in his work, described the message they were called to bring this way: "[Christ sent me] to preach the gospel, and with eloquent wisdom to test the power of Christ be emptied of its power. (1 Cor. 13:17) And then he continued and explained, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (vv. 23-25)

You see, the word which the apostle brought to the world is the word that reveals the significance of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the word that reveals Him as the one through whom God made all things. It is the word that reveals that Jesus of Nazareth is the second person of the Trinity incarnate. It is the word that makes all human hope hinge on the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. It is the word that announces that Jesus rose again on the third day. It is the word that tells that He is coming again.

There is a narrowness, if you will, a definite quality about this word that the apostles were

to bring. And part of the anguish of any unity movement within Christendom is that even those who are Christians have been influenced by the mammoth systems of doctrine that deny that Jesus and His cross must be the center of man's hope.

Today the word of the cross, the word that was preached initially by the men whom Jesus chose is a part of the Word of God expressed in the book we know as the Bible. It must be emphasized that the cross cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the Bible. For the Jesus who prayed for the apostolic word was the same Jesus who handled the entire Old Testament with reverence and who declared that the Old Testament Scriptures bore witness of Him. (John 5:39) Jesus and His great work are part of the history embracing movement of God from the beginning of time to its very end.

Thus the church finds its unity as its members meet around the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and together confess the significance and meaning of the cross in the light of the total Bible. For the church does not consist of many people who all believe that the cross is important, but who all believe in it in different ways. The message of Jesus' salvation accomplished through His effective death on Calvary is intimate; related to the Bible's message about creation and the structure of humanity itself. While the entire Biblical message is orchestrated so that the cross is the ultimate theme, every other element of the Bible is needed in order that the full power of the cross may be perceived and experienced.

So it is that the question of the authority of Scripture that is before this Synod is among



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