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PRESIDENT'S LETTER - MAY 08

“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Dear Fellow Laborers in God's Fields:

The theme for our upcoming convention is taken from Paul's plea that ministers of the Word are to be regarded as "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." What is not often realized is that Paul was writing these words because his ministry was being challenged by personality divisions and quarreling among the church of God in Corinth. So the Apostle pleads that God's "saints" speak the same thing and that there be no divisions, but that you be perfectly joined together. These words were written not specifically in response to doctrinal problems but in response to self-destructive personal divisions and power struggles.

I occasionally talk to pastors from other church bodies. They express a great deal of frustration because there is no semblance of doctrinal unity in their church. In many churches anything goes. These pastors express a feeling of alienation from other pastors and sometimes from their own congregation. I am struck by how often we take for granted the doctrinal unity that has bound us together for fifty years. There has been a sincere love for Jesus and a bowing to the authority of His Word. It is a blessed thing for brethren to dwell together in unity.

However, the trust we have for each other in our ministries is essential for our unity. This trust is a fragile thing and once broken is not easily restored. The Devil would love to separate us and defuse our efforts to spread the Gospel by using personal differences and fleshly weaknesses to dilute our witness to Christ and His Cross. All of us have our special interests and our large egos.

It is often in times of financial difficulty that cracks in the fellowship began to show. We face legitimate concerns about how best to allocate the resources the Lord has entrusted to us. There is a tension between committing resources to ILC and committing them to the mission program. There is a growing struggle for financial resources between home and foreign needs. Setting the direction we take will not be easy as we seek to establish a God-pleasing balance in our work.

The problem is that our pride gets in the way of listening to others and understanding where they are coming from. One of the post-Easter readings reminded us, "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20). It is very easy for our tone to become accusatory, judgmental, and condescending. Jokes

are made which have an edge to them. We can be so sure that we are right, that we become wrong.

Decisions are made by boards of the CLC that will not please everyone. It is tempting to criticize these decisions if they do not reflect what we think is best. We do not want to make our conventions subject to human manipulations in order to reach our personal objectives. We all serve Christ. The essential thing is that Jesus finds us "faithful" at His return.

We work at applying God's injunction to "avoid" those teaching contrary to the doctrine which Scripture has taught. There are many different areas of application in our personal lives and our ministries. It is a temptation to want to impose our application on others and their ministries in order to preserve the unity of the Spirit. We need to be careful that we do not make the external applications more important than the individual's understanding of the principle. In our ministries it is much easier to deal with the "what" rather than the "why". We lose sight of the difference between a weak brother (Romans 14) and a false teacher (Romans 16).

Paul summed this up in his introduction to the Palm Sunday epistle reading, "Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:1-5). This is my prayer for the CLC and you as pastors as we approach our convention.

Having realized that I am getting old, at least in terms of Social Security retirement age, my weaknesses were exposed by a poem in the April 2008 issue of "The Branches" entitled "A Prayer for Those Growing Old." It also reminds me to be slow to speak at convention and to listen especially to our lay delegates.

Lord, you know that I am growing older.
Keep me from becoming talkative and possessed with the idea
that I must express myself on every subject.
Release me from the craving to straighten out everyone's affairs.
Keep me from the recital of endless detail. Give me wings to get to the point.
Seal my lips when I am inclined to tell of my aches and pains. They are increasing
with the years and my love to speak of them grows sweeter as the time goes by.
Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be wrong.
Make me thoughtful but not nosey; helpful but not bossy.
With my vast store of wisdom and experience, it does seem a pity not to use it at all.
But You know, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end.
—Author Unknown---

Your Servant in Christ,

John Schierenbeck