

E PLURIBUS UNUM

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on July 5, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

One hundred eighty-eight years ago our forefathers founded the United States of America. This has proved to be one of the most significant events in human history. Along the eastern seaboard of this continent there were thirteen weak, struggling colonies. They had different religious, social, and economic backgrounds and divergent interests in the new world. Many things they did not have in common, but they did have in common a resentment against domination from Europe. Particularly resented was "taxation without representation." Patrick Henry and others spoke out boldly for separation from the mother countries abroad. One of the slogans most effective in stirring the people to think of rebellion, and establishing a new nation was the expression "United we stand; divided we fall."

In the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, there was the publication of one of the most significant documents in history, the "Declaration of Independence." It began "When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation .We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..."

"We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by the Authority of the Good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States..." This document was then signed by such notables as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and a host of others.

Our National Motto

The Latin expression "E Pluribus Unum" was chosen as the motto for the newly established United States of America. Literally it means, "From many, one," or "Out of many into one." After trying a rather loose arrangement of working together under the "Articles of Confederation," it was realized that some stronger binding force was needed to keep the union together. Accordingly, the Constitutional Convention was held and after much discussion the delegates presented the new nation with the "Constitution" which has been used through almost two centuries.

During these years this nation has grown into the strongest nation on earth. In many respects it is also the finest nation on earth, for its representative form of government, its guarantee of a wide range of freedoms for all its people, its system of free enterprise which has produced the world's highest standard of living, and its respect for religion are unparalleled in human history.

In our day we think too exclusively of our national problems, and give too little attention to the fine qualities of our nation. The news, by its very nature, often deals with the problems of life rather than the areas that are working smoothly and effectively. News is not news unless it deals with the unusual, so many of the virtues of our American system, while very real, do not make the headlines. We need to pause regularly to see the whole picture, for unless we do, the problems seem out of all proportion and the nation appears to be one of chaotic weakness. On the contrary, in spite of all the problems, it is still the finest nation on earth.

The greatest achievement of our forefathers was not their separation from Great Britain, though that was a major decision which was costly in both lives and money. Far greater in the long sweep of history was the achievement of welding the thirteen independent colonies of divergent background and interests into one strong federal union. Most appropriately our forefathers choose the motto, "E Pluribus Unum," as the key emphasis for our nation. The ability to bring together in one workable force the divergent elements and to sustain that unity through generations of time are most impressive achievements indeed.

It Is Easy To Divide

A study of the history of man's behavior and of human nature indicates that it is easy to divide, but difficult to unite. This principle seems to be true in various fields. For example, it is quite easy to divide an apple into two parts, but it is extremely difficult to put the parts back together. It is easy to take a clock apart, but quite difficult to put it back together so it will operate effectively. More important than these, however, is the matter of sowing discord among men. This, too, is also easy, for a few careless words or a few thoughtless acts may leave a generation of bitter feeling. It is extremely difficult to ease tensions, remove barriers, and bring about unity.

The history of Christianity has been one of separation and division. The original church established by Christ and his apostles has been so divided and subdivided that there are now 256 different denominations. This is the result of different doctrines, different personal ambitions, and the presence of the party spirit. Even within the various churches there are often rifts and divisions among the members.

We are reminded of the divisions that began to appear even in the days of our Lord. On one occasion the mother of James and John came to ask positions of preferment for her sons when Christ established his kingdom. In Matt. 20:24-28 we read, "And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren. But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the rulers the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you, but whosoever shall become great among you shall be your minister, and whosoever shall be first among you shall be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."

In another familiar passage the apostle Paul warned the church at Corinth, "Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment." Then a moment later he warned of the tendency to say, "I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ." "Is Christ divided?" he asked. (I Cor. 1:10-13).

This divided state of Christendom is difficult to understand when one pauses to remember that the central principle of Christianity is love. In I Cor. 13:13 this great chapter on love comes to its climax in the words, "Now abideth faith, hope, love: these three and the greatest of these is love." In writing to the Philippians Paul said, "Make full my joy, that ye be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind, doing nothing through faction or through vainglory, but in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself, not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others." (Phil. 2:2-4).

In a passage which we find in the book of James, we find this principle further elaborated, "But if ye have bitter jealousy and factions in your heart, glory not and lie not against the truth. This wisdom is not a wisdom that cometh down from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where jealousy and faction are, there is confusion and every vile deed. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without variance, without hypocrisy." (James 3:14-17). How strange it seems that Christianity should have been so plagued by division and discord when its very center is love and fellowship.

Follow Their Example

We need to do in the religious world what our forefathers did in the political world. They tackled the seemingly impossible task of bringing a strong and virile federal union into being in place of the weak and divided condition of colonialism. We need to tackle, in the realm of religion, the same problem that they effectively handled in the political realm.

First of all, we must have a constitution to which all will give respect and allegiance. Does anyone doubt that the United States would have foundered on the rocks had they not forged a constitution which was then accepted by all and which became the authoritative law of the land? In the divided realm of Christendom there needs to be a constitution which all will accept. Only in this way can any semblance of unity be achieved. The only real possibility of such a constitution is the inspired word of God, the Bible.

Already, all of those who respect Christ have a reverence for this book. Because of it we already have a great many things in common. Faith in God, in Christ, and in the inspiration of the Bible are a result of our reading the scriptures. There is general agreement on moral and ethical principles, upon the basic principle of reward and punishment, upon the existence of heaven and hell, and many other matters. What is needed is to extend the respect for the Bible to the point that all will adhere to all of its teachings--even those that have to do with becoming Christians, worshipping the Lord in his church, and governing the church in his way.

A second need is to go back to the Lord's church as he gave it. Many have been the innovations, both additions to and subtractions from the original church. Yet, the fact remains that God gave the church to us as he wanted it to be, needing none of the modifications and changes that men have wrought. When men invent something, it is reasonably expected that there will need to be improvements, but when God produces an institution, it needs no improvement at the hands of men. Humbly, all of us need to return to the New Testament, discover the characteristics and qualities of the Lord's church, and then reproduce that church in our age.

In the third place, and more difficult than any of the others, men must discard the party spirit, for there is no place in Christianity for pride, personal ambitions, and rivalry. It is these attitudes of antagonism and animosity which have hindered the effective spread of Christianity throughout the centuries.

Finally, an attitude of cooperative concern for others must take the place of attitudes that have been long divisive and disruptive, preventing Christian unity. The best formula yet suggested is "In matters of faith (matters plainly taught in the scriptures), unity; in matters of opinion (things not specifically taught in the scriptures), liberty; in all things, love." This appealing statement comes out of restoration history and has the possibilities of helping to erase the tensions and barriers that exist among people who believe in Christ and who desire to be pleasing to him.

Conclusion

I have spoken today primarily for two reasons: (1) In appreciation for the great nation of which we are a part and for the great achievement in our history that brought thirteen divergent colonies into one strong union. (2) In the hope that we can apply the same uniting principles in the realm of religion that our forefathers achieved in the political world. Both of these are worthy objectives. Let us be thankful for the fortunate condition of the land in which we live, especially for its religious freedom and its encouragement toward spiritual things, and let us be much in prayer that we may achieve the second of these objectives. Toward that end let us work as well as pray while there is time and opportunity.