

THE KEYNOTE SERMON

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Text: **I John 2:19**

In the Name of Jesus Christ, our precious Redeemer, the Savior and only Head of His Church, dearly beloved brethren and friends, grateful hearers of His Word:

*“Behold, how **good** and how **pleasant** it is for brethren to **dwell together in unity!**”* (Psalm 133:1). That is not just the **private opinion** of the psalmist who penned those exhilarating words, as Bible critics claim; for that holy writer did not put down, black on white, for our learning, admonition, exhortation and comfort, merely his own **personal observation** of “how it is” among those who enjoy genuine God-pleasing fellowship together. On the contrary, that exclamation came *“not by the will of man,”* Peter tells us in his second epistle (1:21); *“but holy men of God [including His psalmist] spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”* Yes, beloved brethren, this is **God’s own** perfect, inerrant, infallible, all-wise and all-knowing **evaluation** of the blessedness of true Christian fellowship— regardless of what gainsayers would have us believe who dare to **contradict** His Word, who **complain** about what they call the “restrictive environment” of Christian fellowship, and who **destroy for themselves** the “goodness” and the “pleasantness” that God Himself wants all true believers to have *“in unity”* with their brethren!

The “goodness” and the “pleasantness” do not exist, however, simply as the result of being members of an outward **group**, as if mere “membership” in a Christian congregation or in a conference of congregations, like membership in a social club or network, **automatically** carried with it the “perk” of **warmness** and **fuzziness** to which everybody “on the list” is entitled. Neither does the “goodness” and “pleasantness” emanate from “good and pleasant” **people**, who imagine that they are *entitled* to “feel good” about themselves and about their relationships with others —and even about their relationship with **God**— because of who **THEY ARE**.

Rather, it is the **“unity”** in which they *“dwell together”* — *“the unity of the **Spirit**,”* as St. Paul calls it in his letter to the Ephesians, and the *basis* of that unity, God’s precious Word and doctrine pure, which the Lord Himself graciously blesses with “goodness” and “pleasantness” *“in the bond of peace”* (Ephesians 4:3). The Prophet Jeremiah directs us to that blessed **unity** and to its **source** in the sixth chapter of his prophecy, saying to God’s people: *“Ask for the **old paths**, where is the **good way**, and walk **therein**;*” and what will be the **blessing** attached to it? *“...and ye shall find rest for your souls”* (v. 16). That same blessed **unity** is described by the Apostle Paul in words which **scoffers** have characterized as “the pipe-dream of the Holy Ghost,” —“unattainable in this life,” they say, namely: *“...that ye all speak the **same thing**, and that there be **no divisions** among you, but that ye be **perfectly joined together in the same mind** and in the **same judgment**”* (I Corinthians 1:10). To be sure, **such unity** is not the result of **perfect sanctification** on the part of believers (which sanctification will reach perfection only in heaven), but it **IS** the result of the **perfect norm and standard** of Christian unity and of the Spirit’s **perfect work** in our hearts through the **perfect means** of His grace. Therefore, the Lord Jesus Himself declares: *“If ye continue in **My Word**, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know **the truth**; and the truth shall make you **free**”* (John 8:31-32), free from **disunity**, free from **divisions**, free from the spiritual quicksand of rationalism, subjectivism, and emotionalism which many who call themselves “Christians” set up as the judge and arbiter of spiritual *“truth”*!

Now one would think that, having been singularly blessed by the Lord of the Church, according to the riches of His grace, with *“the unity of the Spirit”* in His precious Word and doctrine pure for now almost sixty years in our beloved Conference, all of our people would not only gratefully **recognize** it, but also **value**, **cherish** and desire to *“keep [it] in the bond of peace!”* Sadly,

however, “[our] adversary, the devil,” taking full advantage of our sinful flesh, “in which dwelleth no good thing” (Romans 7:18) has devised a vicious pitfall, whereby he seeks unceasingly to undermine and to destroy if possible even **our** precious unity, namely,

The Evil of Sinful Separatism.

On the basis of the text before us, let us explore and learn for our own warning and admonition: **I.** What “separatism” is; **II.** Why it is “sinful;” **III.** How it can be avoided; and **IV.** What benefit God Himself intends for **us** to reap from the “sinful separatism” of former brethren.

I.

It should come as no surprise to us, my dear hearers, that we have been charged —falsely, of course— with “creating” **SINFUL SEPARATISM** as a “*commandment of men*” (Matthew 15:9) intended to control, to coerce, and literally to imprison our people in our churches, making them fearful of leaving them, lest the penalty of “sin” be attached to them, and that therefore we are motivating membership in the Christian congregation by the Law. Nothing could be further from the truth, as we shall presently see.

There is, of course, a **separation** that is **MANDATED** by **God’s Word**, namely, separation from those who “[keep on causing] divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which [we] have learned” from Holy Scripture (Romans 16:17); the “[rejection]” of heretics, that is, of persistent false teachers, “after the first and second admonition[s]” fail in efforts to gain them (Titus 3:10); and “com[ing] out from among and be[ing] separate” from “unbelievers” (II Corinthians 6:17), that is, from all those who espouse, preach, practice and tolerate doctrine which is **contrary** to “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3), **contrary** to “the doctrine which is according to Godliness” (I Timothy 6:3). “From such **withdraw thyself**,” Paul writes to Timothy (v. 5b).

But there is **NO** command, admonition, exhortation or even suggestion that Christians should avoid, withdraw from, reject, or be separate from those whose profession, preaching, and practice are **in full accord** with Holy Scripture! The word “**SEPARATISM**” (like other words we commonly use which are not themselves found in Scripture but connote a Scriptural truth or position — words like “Sacrament,” “Trinity,” “vicarious,” and “unionism”) —the word “**SEPARATISM**” indicates **leaving** or **standing aside** from those whose position is **orthodox**, truly **Scriptural**, and Biblically **unassailable**, those to whom we should **adhere** in a fellowship of true unity, as we use the doctrine of the church properly (Cat. Q/A. 186B).

This descriptive text is not merely of historical interest, as some claim, as if the apostle is speaking only of the “*antichrists*” (v. 18) of his day and their separatism from him and the early Christians in Asia Minor (as the immediate context might suggest); but he references them for **our** learning and admonition as typical in this regard of **all such** as at any time left the fellowship of the truth **without Scriptural cause**. “*They went out from us*,” he says, just as Demas forsook the Apostle Paul (II Timothy 4:10), and as “*many*” erstwhile disciples forsook the Lord Jesus Himself in John chapter six. And since John includes *himself* in the word “*us*,” the “**us**” quite obviously means those who, together with him, **held fast** to the truth of God’s Word in doctrine and practice (I John 1:3) — and, by legitimate extension, **all those** who at any time “*continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship*” (Acts 2:42) and yet were suddenly, often without warning, **deserted** by those whom they all along had regarded as their faithful and committed brethren and had trusted to stay the course of sound doctrine.

II.

And why is such “**SEPARATISM**” **SINFUL**? John says in our text: “*They were not of us*.” They were **not** in “*the unity of the Spirit*” with those whom they had previously recognized and openly confessed as true brethren. Perhaps they had never truly been “*of [them]*,” and their confession (however long it lasted) was a hypocritical **pretense** and a blatant **lie**, OR they suddenly decided, deliberately, to **disavow** the truth of God’s Word, which many of them, like Timothy, had known since childhood (II Timothy 3:15), to **leave** their *orthodox* fellowship, and either to “**go it alone**”

OR to join a *heterodox* fellowship in which they would be “free” of the “*sound doctrine*” that they could no longer tolerate (II Timothy 4:3). In either case, whether their separatism resulted from an erring conscience or from a deliberate denial of the **TRUTH** for purely carnal reasons, the **SIN** is evident as a **violation of God’s Word**.

Jesus tells us: “*If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the TRUTH, and the truth shall make you free*” (John 8:31-32), free from soul-destroying error, free from the doubts and misgivings that Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44), cunningly plants in the minds of those who have no spiritual anchor for their souls, free from the lure of “easier religion” elsewhere. It is the “*TRUTH*,” to the knowledge of which it is God’s **primary will** that all men come for eternal salvation (I Timothy 2:4), for the knowledge and conviction of their sins from God’s Law in its fierceness and, from the Gospel, for the good news of their redemption by Christ Jesus and of their reconciliation to God by the perfect vicarious satisfaction of divine justice in Jesus’ active and passive obedience. **Continuance** in Christ’s saving Word of truth is therefore not **an option** for Christians; it is not merely **an ideal** to strive after; and it is not “a pipe-dream of the Holy Spirit” that “[we] all speak the *same thing*...that there be **no divisions among [us]**, but that [we] be **perfectly joined together** in the *same mind and in the same judgment*” on the basis of the only source and standard of spiritual truth, the only foundation of faith, and the only legitimate basis of true Christian unity.

Moreover, “SEPARATISM” is **SINFUL** because it militates against a whole host of still other passages of Holy Writ. Jesus said: “*He that is not with Me is against Me; and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth*” (Luke 11:23). We are to “**hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering**” (Hebrews 10:23), “**not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is**” (v. 25). Indeed, Scripture likens “SEPARATISM” to spiritual **adultery** —those purporting to be Christ’s bride “sleeping with the enemy”— or to spiritual **malicious desertion**, in which one who pledged fidelity to the other “*even unto death*” simply **walks out** of the relationship for no Godly cause, intending not to come back. Such separatists **walk out** on the heavenly Bridegroom and “*the household of faith*” and “*go a whoring after other gods*” (Judges 2:17) —the gods of indifference, accommodationism, ecumenism, and materialism —committing **idolatry** for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility and unity in the **family**, among worldly **friends**, among those who are “*not of us.*” Unity in the “**family**” trumps all of those, say the separatists, since “everybody knows” that “blood is thicker than water;” and the “separatist” values unity between spouses, parents and children **MORE** than unity with Christ, with His Word, and with His “family,” that is, His **true disciples** (Matthew 12:49-50). —And “separatists” also **walk out on and keep themselves and their children from** the ministration of the true **Means of Grace**, whereby the Holy Spirit not only creates faith in the unconverted but strengthens and preserves faith in those who are already God’s children by faith in Jesus (Galatians 3:26; I Peter 1:5; Romans 1:16). How self-destructive is **that**?

And, make no mistake about it, my dear hearers, for those who “*willfully*” commit this sin **contrary to better knowledge**, “*after that [they] have received the knowledge of the truth,*” after having not only **learned** the truth of God’s Word but having been **convinced of it** and having **embraced it** in their hearts, “*there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and of fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries!*” (Hebrews 10:26-27). They place their souls in imminent danger not only of **error** and of being **led away** from the **saving truth**, but in jeopardy of **damnation** because they trod underfoot their own Savior and despised His precious blood which had paid for all their sins (Hebrews 10:29)!

III.

Just how can **SINFUL SEPARATISM** be **avoided**? We read in our text about the separatists who **deserted** the fellowship of the truth in **John’s** day: “*If they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us.*” Why would the apostle have expected that outcome? Why indeed did the Holy Ghost inspire **those very words** for our learning and admonition? Simply because, as Jesus Himself points out in John chapter ten, His **true sheep hear His voice and follow Him** (v. 27). They “*continue in [His] Word*” (John 8:31) as their only source and standard of spiritual truth. And in Matthew 7:24, Jesus says: “*Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth*

them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock.” Our **confidence** in God’s good and gracious will for us and in His inerrant revelation of that will to us and to all mankind is **never misplaced** when we are *“built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets”* —the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments— *“Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief Cornerstone”* (Ephesians 2:20). It is **rock solid** and defies erosion (Matthew 7:25)!

And since *“it is **God** which worketh in [us] both to will and to do of His good pleasure”* (Philippians 2:13) in and through the means of **His Word**, we can be **assured** of being and remaining members of His Church by faith in Jesus as our Savior when we **continue in His Word**; and being **motivated** and **constrained** by *His love* (II Corinthians 5:14) — the love according to which He took our place under the Law, earned righteousness to cover our unrighteousness, and suffered and died to pay the penalty of our guilt — we will cheerfully and diligently **adhere** (that is, **stick to**) to an **orthodox** local church and fellowship which has, teaches, professes, and practices His Word in its truth and purity and administers His holy sacraments according to His divine institution. If we are truly *“of them,”* we will *“no doubt **continue with**”* those who, by God’s grace and with His help, *“continue steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship,”* as did the early Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42). And when Satan tempts **us**, as he has tempted and continues to tempt so many **others**, to **SINFUL SEPARATISM** — to leaving our orthodox churches and fellowship contrary to God’s Word — and when our precious Savior asks **us**, as He asked His **true disciples** in John chapter six, *“Will ye also go away??”* (v. 67), we shall boldly declare, as it is written of **them**: *“Lord, to whom shall we go?? Thou hast the words of eternal life”* (v. 68). Indeed, ‘we have no intention of yielding aught of the eternal, immutable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility or unity!’ (Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration XI, 95, *Triglotta*, p. 1095). So help us God!”

IV.

And yet, when, in our various congregations, we even casually examine the church record books to see why, after almost sixty years, some of our flocks are in their net size —according to raw numbers— not much larger **now** than they were **then**, and may be even smaller than when they were founded, the devastating results of Satan’s vicious ploy are shocking! The **evil** of **SINFUL SEPARATISM** indeed **took its toll**; and we find, much to our dismay and discouragement, that *“[many] went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have **continued with us.**”* But *“the Lord knoweth them that are His”* (II Timothy 2:19), the Scripture assures us; and our precious Savior exhorts us: *“Fear not, **little flock**, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give **you** the kingdom”* (Luke 12:32). **For what benefit** then does God **permit us** to **suffer these reverses** as the result of **SINFUL SEPARATISM**? John addresses that question yet in our text, saying: *“They went out, that **they might be made manifest** that they were not all of us.”* We have the comfort of knowing **who they are**, so that we are now no longer plagued by their infidelity, by their cavil and partisan complaining, by their gainsaying contrary to God’s Word, by their divisiveness in the congregation, and by their efforts to *“deceive **us** and seduce **us** into misbelief, despair, and other great shame and vice!”* (Luther, *Sixth Petition*). Thus the Lord graciously turns even this seeming misfortune among us, this grievous sin of former and unfaithful brethren, **into good** for **us** according to His promise in Romans 8 verse 28!

My dearly-beloved brethren, knowing as we do from the Scriptures that it is our adversary, the devil, the liar and the father of lies, who is the author of all disunity, *“let us **hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering**, for He is faithful that promised”* (Hebrews 10:23) that the very gates of hell shall not prevail against His Church (Matthew 16:18). Let us resist Satan steadfast in the faith (I Peter 5:9), that he may flee from us (James 4:7) whose faith rests solidly upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets! Let us cling in childlike confidence to the merits of our precious Redeemer, for whose sake our sins have been forgiven from the foundation of the world and in whom we have been begotten unto a living hope or expectation of life everlasting in heaven as the gift of His free grace (I Peter 1:3-4)! And may He, through His powerful, efficacious and never-failing Word strengthen and preserve us steadfast in His Word and faith unto our end. For this is His gracious and good will! Amen.

Soli Deo gloria!