

OUR POLAR STAR

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was born out of a fiery passion for the unity of Christ's church. Thomas Campbell wrote "that the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." He passionately maintained that "division among Christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many evils."

His son, Alexander, the movement's most visible leader, said: "Next to our personal salvation, two objects constitute the supreme good, worthy of all sacrifice. The first is union," which he defined as "harmonious cooperation of Christians; the other the conversion of sinners to God."¹

Barton Stone stamped across the masthead of his magazine, *The Christian Messenger*, this passionate slogan: "Christian Union is my polar star." He wrote in that magazine's first issue, "If we oppose the union of believers, we oppose directly the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, the spirit of piety and the salvation of the world."²

Their movement that began as a venue for uniting all Christians and all churches is now divided into three separate, and too often feuding, denominations; indeed, prominent pastors and publishers within all three of those denominations regularly voice opposition to current efforts at Christian unity.

But for mainstream Disciples at every level, Christian Unity remains "Our Polar Star." It remains so because scripture reveals unity as the "Mystery of God's will"—"when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to unite all things in heaven and on earth under one head, even Christ." (EPHESIANS 1:10)

Christian unity remains "Our Polar Star" because it is the will of Christ, who prayed in the garden concerning all His followers, "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name... so that they may be one as we are one." (JOHN 17:11 NIV)

Christian unity remains "Our Polar Star" because it is the purpose of the Holy Spirit's work. The Spirit gives gifts of service to the church "so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and (unity) in the knowledge of the Son of God..." (EPHESIANS 4:12-13 NIV)

And so, one "Mark of a Faithful Church" is that it is a Model of Unity Before a Broken, Alienated World. You'd think unity is one of those things like Mom, the flag and Apple Pie: nobody could be against unity! But you'd think wrong. People want "unity", but too often they mean, "everybody's just like me." That's not unity; that's uniformity. In the Christian Church we talk about "unity with diversity". It sounds good. It's theologically and scripturally sound. But it's difficult to achieve.

(PROVERBS 6:16-19 NRSV) *There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: ¹⁷haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed inno-*

¹ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*. Christian Board of Publication, 1933, , p. 9.

² *The Christian Messenger*, November, 1826, pp. 15-16.

cent blood, ¹⁸a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, ¹⁹a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.

Adultery, murder and theft are not included in the list of things God hates. Homosexuality didn't make the list. But specific sins don't seem to be the issue. I think something deeper is intended by God's "Hate List."

Sometimes we understand something by examining its opposite. This whole series is about Unity. This last phrase jumped out at me—the seventh thing the LORD hates: one who sows discord in a family. Shall we split hairs: it's an abomination to sow discord in a family, but ok to do so outside the family? And, speaking of family, doesn't the NT call the church "the bride of Christ?"

Matthew 15 relates one of many confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees criticized, "Why do you and your disciples break the tradition of the elders and not wash your hands before eating?"

Jesus replied, "*It's not what goes into the mouth that makes one 'unclean', but rather what comes out of the mouth...because the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'* For out of the heart come evil thoughts, which result in evil actions." (MATTHEW 15:1-19)

God's first concern is the condition of our heart. The work of our hands is secondary, because it's but a reflection of what already is in our heart. Paul Tillich, the American theologian, said "Sin is a state before it is an act."

"Six things the Lord hates, and a seventh that is an abomination to God."

1. It starts with A heart that devises wicked plans. Everything we do or say is filtered through the heart: our yielding to temptation, our release of restraint, our impulsive urge to spend irresponsibly, our scheme to get even. May God cleanse our hearts from hurtful, ugly thoughts or wicked schemes we may be pondering!

2. Eventually the impulses of the heart effect perception. We see through Haughty eyes. Eyes convey so many unspoken emotions: anger, impatience, fear, sorrow, sarcasm, guilt, shame... But it's that last one God hates with intensity. Haughty eyes; arrogance. May God cleanse our eyes!

What the eyes see, the tongue proclaims. Of the seven things God hates, three relate to the tongue. 3. & 4. on God's "Hate List": a lying tongue and a false witness who utters lies. Not every lie is big and bold. Partial truth, half-truth, a slight bending of truth; hyperbole, false flattery. Sometimes the lie is the silence that allows deception to continue.

Proverbs deals a lot with what we say. "Tongue", "mouth," "lips," "words" are mentioned in Proverbs almost 150 times. That seems pretty important. But the root is not in the mouth, but in the heart. Jesus taught: "*The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for*

it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks." (LUKE 6: 45 NRSV)

Like a bucket drawing water from a well, the tongue dips down and pours out whatever is in the heart. If the source is clean, that's what the mouth speaks. The second biblical principle of unity in this series is "The Tools of Unity: Words that Build Up and Give Grace."

May God alert us to the destructive potential of our tongue and give us words that build up and give grace.

5. *Hands that shed innocent blood.* How timely today; but Take care. While we may feel the pain and fear of needless death in whatever form, until forgiveness replaces resentment, bitterness may grow into rage, and it could be we who end up "shedding innocent blood." Now, remember: forgiveness does not rule out accountability and justice. But accountability and justice don't equate with vengeance.

May God direct us to wholesome and healthy ways of resolving our bitterness, and thus keep us from the sin of shedding innocent blood.

6. *Feet that run rapidly to evil.* Old habits die hard. When we seem to "get away with it", the skids of sin are greased. Ecclesiastes proclaims, "*Because God does not punish sinners instantly, people feel it is safe to do wrong.*" (ECCL. 8:11 TLB)

7. Like a runaway train, the momentum of sin is virtually unstoppable. It begins in the heart—anger, resentment, fear... It moves to the eyes, effecting our perception. It moves to influence the words of our mouths, the work of our hands, and the direction of our feet. And the result is contagious. Not content simply to touch a life here and there, sin aims at bigger targets. The seventh thing God hates is *One who stirs up discord in a family.* How hard it is to be a peacemaker!

The mystery of God's Will for the fullness of time—the prayer of Christ—the purpose of the Holy Spirit—is the unity of all things in Christ. The ultimate contradiction to God's will is to "*stir up discord in a family*"—or in any other setting.

Unity is our Polar Star. There is no higher calling among humans. Dissension begins in the heart; and it makes sense that unity also begins in the heart.

"The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.

What have you stored up in your heart? Here's some solid advice:

(PHILIPPIANS 4:6-8 NIV) *Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*