

Greater Baltimore Church of Christ



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Unity in the Spirit through the Bond of Peace

Throughout history, unity has been an essential component to success. As early as **Genesis 11** we find that the residents of Babel were determined to build "a tower that reaches the heavens" and God said "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, **then nothing will be impossible for them**". Jesus put a similar emphasis on unity when, in his final hours before the crucifixion, he prayed for the unity of believers explaining that the world would believe in him as the son of God if the disciples were united. Jesus also noted emphatically in **Mark 3:25** that a "house divided against itself cannot stand".

Our family of churches has had two decades of exceptional unity. Several years ago we went through a time of testing, brought on by sins, mistakes and misunderstandings in our churches' leaderships and memberships. While many vital and needed changes ensued, so did some unintended consequences and our close fellowship became troubled by mistrust and an exaggerated spirit of independence. These problems were caused by the sins of pride and a self-righteous spirit, both of which gave Satan an open door. For many months we have been "a house divided against itself". Much like in **Acts 15**, the church needed to confront the dangers of disunity head on and unite for the cause of Christ. Thankfully in the past year God has been moving to bring us back together. First, the Los Angeles church offered a **Unity Proposal** and then a group of men from across the world came together to offer a **Plan for United Cooperation**. This proposal was an effort to reaffirm our common beliefs and practices. The Baltimore church and its leadership quickly supported both of these efforts in order to do anything we could to promote unity. The **Plan for United Cooperation** has now received the support of over 300 of our sister congregations.

The International Leadership Conference was just held in Virginia Beach with over 1000 participants from around the world. The spirit of that meeting was extremely refreshing and faith building. Gone are the days of tentative leadership and damaged faith. They have been replaced with warm affirmation of fellowship and inspirational preaching. Clearly our best and brightest days are ahead as we reengage in winning our cities and this world for Christ.

Acts 15 is a chapter of good news and bad news. The good news was that the brothers agreed to welcome the Gentiles into fellowship without an expectation of observing the law. This was a milestone for the church in its earliest days. Sadly the chapter ends with Paul and Barnabas parting company over whether or not to take John Mark along on their next missionary journey. (*John Mark had struggled in his faith and abandoned the brothers on their previous journey.*) These great men had been instrumental in forging unity for the entire brotherhood and yet parted company over their

opinions about another brother.

Sadly, our fellowship is experiencing a similar bitter/sweet moment in time. As most of our congregations are regaining our commitment to unity and brotherhood one of our brothers has unilaterally decided that the fellowship generally is so damaged that we will neither stay united, nor see the world evangelized. I believe with all of my heart that he is absolutely wrong! Like Paul's judgment about John Mark, this brother feels the need to start all over.

This brother is Kip McKean. It profoundly saddens me that we have come to this moment in time. I love and appreciate all that Kip has done for me and many of our churches. He is a man of great vision and zeal, but **I couldn't disagree with him more adamantly. I believe all we need now is faith and victorious examples to inspire one another.** *(That is why I'm so proud of the Greater Baltimore Church . God has blessed our faith with inspiring progress .We have witnessed dozens of baptisms and restorations and a rapidly growing attendance and contribution.)*

I have been one of Kip's closest friends for more than 25 years and I have tried hard in the last year to avert this parting of the ways. Doug Lambert and I visited Portland in May of this year to call the leadership to repent of critical and condescending remarks that were constantly being made about Churches and Christians in other places. I even went so far as to offer help in editing the Portland bulletin in an attempt to minimize these offensive comments and characterizations. Though some changes were made and Kip apologized publicly and privately, the reconciliation I had hoped for as well as the consistent change in message from Portland has not occurred.

Tragically, in recent months it has become clear that these efforts were cosmetic in nature. The underlying conviction that Kip and the Portland leadership maintain is that our fellowship is collectively beyond hope and can best be used for 'spare parts' to be build a whole new "movement".

I told Kip privately last year in Seattle that if he went his own way and abandoned the brotherhood I would not go with him. *(In fairness, I know that Kip feels that many withdrew from him first.)* However, one year later I have a clear conscience that I have done all I could to be a peacemaker. I know my thoughts, energies and heart need to be devoted to building and strengthening the fellowship that I have served for the last 30 years.

On a very personal note I want to thank the leadership team of the Baltimore church who has respected the process that I needed to go through. They were not reactionary. They visited Portland personally and they never pressured me to do anything for 'political' reasons. They are men who have been "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry", they have supported unity at every opportunity and have truly been men of conviction and peace. I am proud to serve alongside them in this great congregation.

Whenever someone I know leaves the Lord or decides not to become a Christian I always pray that time and the hand of the Lord will bring them to their senses. The story of Paul's rejection of John Mark has a happy ending. In his final words shortly before his death Paul asks Timothy to bring John Mark. My prayer for this situation is the exactly same. I pray that we will all see the day when Kip will have a change of heart and be tearfully reunited with so many that he loves and that love him. **Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.**

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