GENERAL CONFERENCE

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

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**“THE SPIRITUAL NECESSITY OF CHURCH UNITY AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY**

**TO ACCOMPLISH GOD’S MISSION”**

What a privilege for us, in this Global Leadership Summit, to be focusing on the one thing that Jesus longed for recorded in John 17---unity in His church to accomplish His mission. The theme that has been chosen, “The Spiritual Necessity of Church Unity and Biblical Authority to Accomplish God’s Mission,” is a strong reminder of Christ’s desire that His church might be one just as He and His Father are one.

The sense of unity emanating from the Godhead is overwhelming. God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit, are always in unity and accomplish their work together without any difference of opinion------they are One. They were in unity at creation (Genesis 1:26); at Christ’s baptism (Matthew 3:16-17); at the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5); at the cross (Matthew 27:50-54); and on and on. The three persons of the Godhead are always in unity on all decisions they make.

That is why God intends for His church to be in harmony with His will and directions. Psalm 133 shares this hope for God’s people: “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard. The beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing---life forevermore.” Obviously, God speaking through David expressed His enormous desire that God’s people be in unity. This unity was not some symbolic manifestation of “togetherness” but rather a truly merging of purpose, mission, and duty which comes only from focusing on God’s will. Whenever we depart from this formula, our “unity” will be incomplete and will become disunity.

Our true heavenly unity can be accomplished only as we humbly submit to the instruction of God through the Holy Spirit’s promptings and our understanding of His will through the Holy Writings of the Bible and the inspired counsel of the Spirit of Prophecy. Through prayer and study, God opens the doors for prayerful discussion and heavenly direction helping His church to know how to move ahead in the greatest task ever entrusted to humans living at the end of time----proclaiming Christ and His three angels’ messages thus uniting us in heaven’s mandate for the Lord’s church on earth.

We read in Testimonies for the Church, Vol 9, page 19, “In a special sense Seventh-day Adventists have been set in the world as watchmen and light bearers. To them has been entrusted the last warning for a perishing world. On them is shining wonderful light from the Word of God. They have been given a work of the most solemn import----the proclamation of the first, second, and third angels’ messages. There is no other work of so great importance. They are to allow nothing else to absorb their attention.”

Our greatest need is to be still and know our God and His wishes. Many times, in our attempts to accomplish our concepts of what God’s wishes are for us, we fail to “Be still, and know that I am God….” (Psalm 46:10). By attempting to find our own way to unity without being still and listening to God’s leading, we end up in disarray and dysfunction. In the process of listening to God’s will, we must have great respect for Him and His Word, respect for the church organization He has established, and humility to be still and know God’s instructions. Humility is a huge key to unity.

God’s Holy Word in II Corinthians 13:11 reminds us, “….Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace: and the God of love and peace will be with you.” How important it is to “be of one mind.” This is also reflected in Philippians 2:1-4, “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.”

This “like-mindedness” or “being in one accord” is predicated on the “lowliness of mind” and humility that is so necessary for unity…..a submission to the entire church as it makes decisions. Of course, that humility can only come about when we accept Christ’s spirit in us fulfilling the injunction of Philippians 2:5 which urges us, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”

The early Christian church took all of this with complete seriousness and humility of spirit allowing the Holy Spirit to take full control. The result was found in Act 2:46 which describes the setting in this way, “So continuing daily with one accord in temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart.” Because of their dedication to God and their humility and simplicity of heart, they were in one accord. This is the result of true submission to God and it is what His church will possess as it finishes His great proclamation of the three angels’ messages.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual has some marvelous counsel for each of us about unity (see pages 23, 59, 71, 120, 127, and 167). A wonderful statement is made on page 59: “Christians should make every effort to avoid tendencies that would divide them and bring dishonor to their cause. ‘It is the purpose of God that His children shall blend in unity. Do they not expect to live together in the same heaven?......Those who refuse to work in harmony greatly dishonor God.’---8T 240. The church should discourage actions that threaten harmony among its members and should consistently encourage unity.”

When the Word of God is held paramount and the humility described in the early Christian church is found in our hearts today through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the result will be real unity. What is real unity? It is something which comes from a heart-felt submission to God and to our fellow church members as we work together being instructed by the Holy Word, the Spirit of Prophecy, and the Holy Spirit. The resulting unity far supersedes any privately held convictions after items have been carefully reviewed by the world church and decisions have been taken. It far supersedes any legal “rights” that might be exercised. Moral and spiritual obligations to God, to His church, and to His united mission far outweigh any legal or independent opinions of a member or an organization within the general church body. There may be a contention that a church organization that is duly registered as a legal entity is beyond the purview of general worldwide church decisions, the General Conference or division working policies, or model constitutions as outlined in the General Conference Working Policy. The General Conference Working Policy does indicate in B 15 10, voted by the General Conference Executive Committee with worldwide representation that, “The General Conference Working Policy shall be strictly adhered to by all organizations in every part of the world field. The work in every organization shall be administered in full harmony with the policies of the General Conference and of the divisions respectively.” While certain legal rights are peculiar to a duly registered legal entity, in the church organization and general working activities, there is a power that supersedes any legal application and that is the moral and spiritual obligation incumbent on all units of the worldwide church that the Holy Spirit is the guiding force that keeps the church focused on its heaven-born mission.

Some may argue that the world church has no legal standing to force compliance. Let’s be very clear, the church as a whole, including its individual units, operates on eternal truths, biblical principles, spiritual values, and heavenly ethics far beyond any earthly legal aspects. The church is governed by the leading of the Holy Spirit and the biblical beliefs and mission we accept from God’s hand. As a result of the power of the Holy Spirit’s leading, the church, its leaders, its institutions, its organizations, and its members, are motivated by heaven-blessed collegial goodwill engendered by the mission for the Advent movement outlined in God’s Holy Word and the Spirit of Prophecy. This binds us together and trumps any reference to legal application. Regardless of opinions, there is a submissiveness to God’s overall leading as expressed in His worldwide church and its deliberations as a representative body from all parts of the earth.

When any organization, as a part of the body of Christ, His church, demands its own way contrary to the will of the entire body, that willful and independent organization is working against God’s wishes for a united church in mission based on John 17. Christ’s amazing plea encapsulated in John 17:20-23, beseeches us with the following heart-rendering words, “’I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as you have loved Me.”

What an amazing request on the part of Christ for us today in His last-day Advent movement coming from cultures and people groups across the globe-----a diverse group that is united in Christ and His mission for the church. The supposition that there can be unity in diversity can be misused to mask true intentions to embark on a path of disunity in the name of diversity. John 17, II Corinthians 13:11, Philippians 2:1-4, and Acts 2:46 do not model or advocate a “mock” unity allowing the various parts of the body to do as they wish with a pretense and veneer of professed unity but no substance relating to a united mission and spirit controlled and motivated by the Holy Spirit. Testimonies for the Church, Vol 9, page 145, under a section entitled, “Unity in Diversity,” indicates, “It may seem to some that the contrast between their gifts and the gifts of a fellow laborer is too great to allow them to unite in harmonious effort……Their talents, however diverse, may all be under the control of the same Spirit. In every word and act, kindness and love will be revealed; and as each worker fills his appointed place faithfully, the prayer of Christ for the unity of His followers will be answered, and the world will know that these are His disciples. In loving sympathy and confidence God’s workers are to unite with one another. He who says or does anything that tends to separate the members of Christ’s church is counterworking the Lord’s purpose. Wrangling and dissention in the church, the encouragement of suspicion and unbelief, are dishonoring to Christ. God desires His servants to cultivate Christian affection for one another. True religion unites hearts not only with Christ, but with one another in a most tender union. When we know what it means to be thus united with Christ and with our brethren, a fragrant influence will attend our work wherever we go.” Further in that chapter on page 147, it simply says, “Those who are truly converted will press together in Christian unity……To the end of time Christ is to be first. He is the source of life and strength, of righteousness and holiness. And He is all this to those who wear His yoke and learn of Him how to be meek and lowly. The duty and delight of all service is to uplift Christ before the people. This is the end of all true labor. Let Christ appear; let self be hidden behind Him. This is self-sacrifice that is of worth. Such self-sacrifice God accepts.”

This self-sacrificing spirit and genuine humility born out of connection with Christ is what every one of us need today to diminish the tendency in all of us to champion our own opinions and convictions in the face of the general church’s voted actions…….God’s remnant church on earth. It would appear that opposition to compliance of the Seventh-day Adventist general body’s actions such as the General Conference in session or such as the General Conference Executive Committee functioning as God’s remnant church, on the grounds of “conscience” would come face to face with a wall of evidence from Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy indicating that independent thinking must be submitted to the larger body’s decisions. In counsel for all of us, we are told in Mind, Character, and Personality, Vol 1, page 323, that “…….when the conscience is guided by human perceptions, which are not subdued and softened by the grace of Christ, the mind is in a diseased condition. Things are not seen in their true bearings. The imagination is wrought upon, and the eye of the mind sees things in a false, distorted light.”

In The Acts of the Apostles, pages 163-164, we read counsel for each of us to ponder, “There have ever been in the church those who are constantly inclined toward individual independence. They seem unable to realize that independence of spirit is liable to lead the human agent to have too much confidence in himself and to trust in his own judgment rather than to respect the counsel and highly esteem the judgment of his brethren, especially of those in the offices that God has appointed for the leadership of His people. God has invested His church with special authority and power, which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising; for he who does this despises the voice of God.”

Testimonies for the Church, Vol 9, pages 260-261 indicate profound instructions for all of us, “……when, in a General Conference, the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence, contrary to the decision of the general body………God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority…….God has vested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work.”

Let us never forget the true mission of the church as we engage in Reach the World through Revival and Reformation, Mission to the Cities, Comprehensive Health Ministry, Total Member Involvement, and so many other opportunities to finish God’s work through His power. We are to be united in our mission to accomplish our heaven-entrusted task. Steps to Christ, page 81, indicates, “The church of Christ is God’s appointed agency for the salvation of men. Its mission is to carry the gospel to the world.” Let us be united in this mission and our approach to carrying out this mandate from heaven.

Let us always be reminded of God’s objective of unity in His church as we lift up Christ and His three angels’ messages..…all based on Him and Him alone and as described in Ephesians 4:1-4: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” Certainly, Christ’s power over each of us and His church and our submission to that power is of utmost importance in realizing the spiritual necessity of church unity and biblical authority to accomplish God’s mission of proclaiming Jesus’ soon, second coming when the culmination of complete unity takes place. May God guide us in this Global Leadership Summit to this end.