

## Focusing the World's Gaze Toward God

### Introduction:

In **John 17:20-21**, Jesus prayed that all Christians will be united. Take note of His reason. "That the world may believe that You [God] have sent Me [Jesus]." The unity of Christ's church focuses the world on God and His Son. The only way to have this unity is to learn how to handle potentially divisive problems. Satan is constantly seeking ways to divide us. We must be on guard against him. To help with this, let us examine a circumstance in Israel's history in **Joshua 22:10-34**. The men of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh had received their land inheritance on the east side of the Jordan. However, they had made a covenant to help their brethren conquer the land west of the Jordan. When they fulfilled their covenant, they returned to their land across the Jordan. When they crossed to the other side, they built an altar. Then the trouble began. Take note of five lessons from this circumstance.

### Discussion:

- I. Acts of rebellion must be disciplined.
  - A. We should not condemn the Israelites from West of the Jordan for taking up arms to go to war with their brethren. They were doing exactly what should be done, if their brethren were being unfaithful. The fact is, despite our desire for unity, we cannot be united with those who rebel against the will of God.
  - B. Even the 2½ tribes recognized that if they had really rebelled from God, they deserved discipline. In **Joshua 22:22-23**. The unity which God demands is not a unity at the expense of truth.
  - C. Granted, we do not take up physical arms against those who rebel, but we must discipline them as God has mandated. **Matthew 18:15-17**; **I Corinthians 5:4-11**; **II Thessalonians 3:6-15** all speak of the discipline mandated by God when a brother rebels. We must desire unity, but not at the expense of truth.
  - D. In fact, as the Israelites recognized, disciplining the rebellious is a matter of self-preservation. They recalled the incident at Peor. That incident of idolatry caused a plague in **Numbers 25** killing 24,000 people (**25:9**). They also recalled the sin of Achan in **Joshua 7** which caused the Israelites' defeat at Ai. They knew what disobedience in the ranks meant. It meant judgment from God. The same is true today. Discipline of the rebellious is a matter of self-preservation. **Revelation 2:12-17** demonstrates that unity with the rebellious causes the removal of a church's lampstand. It is no longer considered a church of God in God's eyes. If we desire to be Christ's church, we must discipline the rebellious and unruly.
- II. Things are not always what they appear.
  - A. Things looked bad from the western Israelite point of view. The altar of God was in Shiloh with the tabernacle (**Joshua 18:1**). But, there it was, as plain as day, another altar in a place not chosen by God. What else do you do with an altar but have sacrifices on it? What else could these Israelites be doing but rebelling against God?
  - B. Despite appearances, this altar was not for sacrifices. Rather, it was a memorial. It was built to remind the Israelites on the west side of the Jordan that the inhabitants east of the Jordan were Israelites and had a part in the sacrifices offered at Shiloh. The easterners were afraid that after a generation or two the westerners would no longer allow them to come over and worship God at the tabernacle. The sole cause of this potentially divisive problem was that the westerners were ignorant of the real reasons the eastern tribes had built this altar.
  - C. The same is true today. Things are not always as they appear. Generally, major problems come out of trivial misunderstandings because of ignorance on the part of one or more persons. We see someone exiting an establishment that is not appropriate for a Christian, we must not jump to conclusions. We hear a bit of information second hand, we must not try and convict our brother or sister in our own minds. Somebody seems to have ignored us, that may not be the case at all. When we have a problem with someone, we must recognize that we may not have all the facts.
- III. We need to question before we assume and accuse.
  - A. Wisely, the western Israelites did not just attack the eastern tribes for their seeming rebellion. They sent Phinehas, the priest, along with a man from each tribe west of the Jordan to question the eastern tribes about this seeming rebellion (**Joshua 22:13ff**).
  - B. We need to do the same. Since things are not always as they seem, we need to question the seemingly guilty parties, before we take disciplinary action. Let me also say, because things are sometimes exactly as they seem, we should not push problems under a rug. Rather, we should question them. Since ignorance is the cause of problems, questioning those with whom we have a problem is the only solution.
  - C. Regrettably, many Christians do not attack problems in this manner. Instead of questioning the one that appears to be guilty, they get together with others and talk about the supposed sinner. They try and

convict the seemingly guilty before getting all the facts, but they never do anything about it except gossip. Of course, they might tell one of the elders about the sins of another person. Or they might even ask the preacher to preach a sermon on the problem. Then their consciences are salvaged. They believe they have done something when they have not.

- D. In **Matthew 18:15**, we are told to reprove our brother in private before bringing others into the picture. There is a two-fold purpose to this. In the scenario this verse represents, the brother has actually sinned. Going to him in private first allows him the opportunity to overcome his sin without the embarrassment of getting others involved. But in a situation like **Joshua 22**, it also allows misunderstandings to be cleared up before they are passed on to other people. What often happens in friendships, families and churches is Fred will have a problem with Barney. Fred tells Wilma about this problem. Later, Fred finds out things weren't what they appeared. The problem is worked out between Fred and Barney, but Wilma and everyone else Fred told still have problems with Barney. We need to follow the example of the Israelites and question before convicting and disciplining.

IV. We need to have the proper attitude when questioned and when questioning.

- A. One of the great things about this Bible story is the attitude both sides had during the questioning process. When potentially divisive issues come up, we must have the proper attitude. Otherwise, a circumstance that should not divide us, will wedge a chasm so great we may never overcome it.
- B. Notice the attitude of the 2½ eastern tribes when questioned.
1. They did not make countercharges. They did not respond with harsh angry words. They did not get defensive, closing their ears to their brothers' question. They did not deny having built the altar. They did not question the right of their brethren to ask them about this altar. They did not try to get even, drumming up reasons to go to war with their brethren too.
  2. Instead, they freely admitted what they had done. They freely admitted that if they had done what their brethren thought they would have been wrong. And they freely explained what really happened.
  3. When someone comes to us questioning our actions or accusing us of sin. Our reaction should be like these Israelites. We need to appreciate their courage and the love that motivated them to speak to us. We should listen objectively and carefully. Then we should respond in truth.
- C. Notice the attitude of the 9½ tribes during the questioning.
1. Even though they thought the 2½ tribes were guilty, they gave them opportunity to repent. They did not make up fake charges to add to the supposed guilt of their brethren. When their brethren spoke truthfully, they did not try to make up more charges to justify their accusations. They did not question their brethren, receive an explanation, go home and still talk about how wrong their brethren were.
  2. Instead, they accepted their brothers' explanation with joy. They were glad that no sin had been committed. They were not in this to justify themselves, but to get rid of sin. Since there was no sin, they were ready to put this misunderstanding behind them.
  3. When we have questioned somebody, we should not feel we need to be justified in our questioning at all costs. If the truth is revealed, resolving the misunderstanding, we should let it go. If the truth is revealed and does in fact demonstrate that our brethren are sinning, then we must deal with the sin. But we must deal with it out of love and a desire to help others go to heaven.

V. Unity focuses the world's gaze to God not to us.

- A. At the end of this situation the 2½ tribes named the altar "Ed" meaning "Witness." This name signified that Jehovah is God. This altar, a symbol of their unity did not say as much about them as it did about their God. You see the division of this people against itself would give rise to blasphemy among the Gentiles. The unity of God's people causes them to focus on God and not on their own problems. In addition to that, this unity causes others to see God is with them. It focuses the world's gaze on God.
- B. As we began this lesson, we noted **John 17:20-21**. Our unity focuses the world around us on Christ. It allows the people to see that God is with us. If we are constantly bickering, backbiting and dividing, they will not believe God is with us. If they see our love and unity with one another, working together to a common goal, working through problems they will know Christ is with us (**John 13:35**).

**Conclusion:**

Satan is constantly seeking to divide us. We must be careful not to allow him to get his foot in the door of this church. Instead, let us make sure we follow the example of the Israelites and their altar whenever problems arise. Then we can focus middle Tennessee's gaze on God.