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PRESERVING UNITY

Ephesians 4:1-3

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Ephesians Lesson 25

Preserving Unity Ephesians 4:1-3

In coming to the subject of Christian unity, I am reminded of the familiar story of two old Quakers who were chatting. The one said to the other, "You know, sometimes I think that everyone in the world is a bit off except for me and thee. And, sometimes I wonder about thee!"

We smile at that story because we recognize ourselves in it. We all are prone to think, "I alone see things clearly and everyone else is a bit off." I wonder how people can be so blind as not to see things my way! As comedienne Merrill Markoe observed, "It's just like magic. When you live by yourself, all of your annoying habits are gone" (*Reader's Digest* [2/07], p. 107).

As all of us who are married know, when you put into close contact two individuals from different backgrounds, different personalities, and different genders, sooner or later there will be misunderstandings and conflict. If you add children, the potential for problems increases. If you expand the numbers to 100 or 200 or more in a local church, it doesn't take a statistician to figure out that the potential for conflict is at the alert stage!

Unity among believers is a big deal in the Bible. Jesus prayed for it just before He went to the cross (John 17). Paul has just spent the first three chapters of Ephesians arguing that God's eternal purpose is to sum up all things in Christ (1:10). He has shown that the mystery of the gospel includes God bringing together two formerly alienated and hostile groups, the Jews and the Gentiles. He has made them into one new man, establishing peace (2:14-16). In Christ, both groups have access in one Spirit to the Father (2:18). Together, we are being built into a holy temple or dwelling place of God in the Spirit (2:21-22).

Paul's insight into the mystery of Christ was that the Gentiles now are fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (3:6). Thus Paul ends the third chapter by praying that the Ephesian Christians

would be rooted and grounded in love, so that they could comprehend with all the saints the infinite love of Christ (3:17-19).

So, in chapters 1-3 Paul lays the solid doctrinal foundation that he builds upon with practical application in chapters 4-6. "Therefore" (4:1) shows that what follows is inextricably linked to what went before. Chapters 4-6 show specifically how the church brings glory to God and to Christ Jesus (3:21). This is to say that sound doctrine always must undergird godly living. If you focus on doctrine to the exclusion of practical application, you have aborted the process and will become arrogant. On the other hand, if you focus on practical application without the doctrinal foundation, you will easily fall into legalism or superficial Christianity. And so in almost all of Paul's letters, he first lays the doctrinal foundation and then he applies it to the problems of everyday life. What you believe affects how you behave.

It is also significant to note what Paul emphasizes first in this practical section. After discussing the lofty truths of God's choosing us before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless, we might have expected Paul to emphasize the need for holiness. He will do that (4:17-5:18), but first he emphasizes Christian unity (4:1-16). Of course, genuine unity always is closely tied in with holy living, so we shouldn't make a false distinction.

But the point is, instead of appealing to us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling, with all holiness and purity, Paul immediately states that a worthy walk involves all humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, and love. These are relational words. As you read through Ephesians 4-6, you can't help but notice the importance of interpersonal relationships in the church and home. The call to follow Christ through the gospel is also a call to grow in loving relationships with one another. The first and the second great commandments are linked. As John tells us (1 John 4:20), "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."

So Paul begins with this appeal to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel by relating to one another in ways that preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. He makes three points:

To preserve the unity of the Spirit we need to understand its importance, practice the qualities that preserve it, and exert the effort to preserve it.

To understand Paul here, we need to notice an important distinction that he makes regarding Christian unity. In verse 3 he says that we are to *preserve the unity of the Spirit*. This unity is not something that we must work to achieve or attain to. It already exists. It does *not* refer to *organizational* unity, but rather to the *organic* unity which the Holy Spirit produces when He baptizes us all into the one body of Christ through the new birth. In 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul states, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” So the unity of the Spirit is the organic unity of the one body of Christ, consisting of all believers everywhere who have been regenerated by God’s Spirit.

But, in Ephesians 4:13, Paul talks about *the unity of the faith*, which we must *attain to* as we grow to maturity in Jesus Christ. It does not yet exist. This is an experiential unity that grows stronger as we grow in the faith. It will not be perfectly attained to until we are all in His presence, free from all selfishness and sin, complete in our knowledge of Jesus Christ and the truth of His Word.

In our text for today, we are looking at the organic unity that already exists among all true believers in Christ. How can we preserve it, as Paul tells us to do?

1. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we must understand its importance.

Verse 1 is a topic sentence that governs the rest of this epistle. Paul will spell out in detail how we can walk in a manner worthy of our calling. The importance of preserving the unity of the Spirit is implied, as I have already stated, by the fact that Paul puts it first. But, beyond that, we can specify three reasons that the unity of the Spirit is important:

- A. The unity of the Spirit is important because Paul suffered for it.

After “therefore,” which shows the connection with chapters 1-3, Paul refers to himself as “the prisoner in the Lord” (literal translation). Paul didn’t see himself first as the prisoner of the Jews

or the prisoner of Rome, but rather as the prisoner in the Lord. His identity in Christ mattered more than his external circumstances.

Paul opened chapter 3 in a similar manner, by identifying himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.” Paul was in prison because the Jews in the temple in Jerusalem had started a riot by falsely accusing Paul of bringing a Gentile (from Ephesus) into the Jewish section of the temple (Acts 21:27-30). But Paul was willing to suffer for the truth that the Gentiles were fellow members of the body of Christ because he understood that truth to be tied up with God’s eternal purpose of summing up all things in Christ. Through the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free men, God is demonstrating His manifold wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (3:10). So this unity of the Spirit is a big deal!

Sadly, down through history the church has remained unified when it should have divided and it has divided when it should have remained unified. It has remained unified when it should have divided because when professing Christians deny the gospel, deny cardinal doctrines of the faith, or tolerate sins that the Bible condemns, there needs to be division, not unity. When denominations debate homosexual marriage or whether clergy can be practicing homosexuals, true believers need to separate themselves, because such matters are not up for debate if you believe the Bible.

On the other hand, there have been many sad divisions among Protestant churches over minor matters where unity should have been preserved. Often these divisions stem from personality conflicts or matters of opinion on which Scripture is not precisely clear. For the church to divide along racial lines is to violate the core principle of unity between the Jews and Gentiles for which Paul was imprisoned. I realize that there are difficult issues, such as the doctrine of baptism or charismatic gifts or prophetic views, where godly Christians differ. Sometimes, even godly men like Paul and Barnabas must decide to work separately because they cannot agree on how to carry out the ministry. But, unity among true Christians is a big deal. We should not divide over minor issues.

- B. The unity of the Spirit is important because Christ died to secure it.

Just before He went to the cross, Jesus prayed for all who know Him to be one (John 17). As Paul has spelled out in Ephesians 2:13-18, it was through the cross that Christ broke down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles and brought them together in the one new man, thus establishing peace. Christ died to create the one new man, His church. Preserving this unity is crucial.

C. The unity of the Spirit is important because we are called unto it.

Paul directs us (4:1) to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.” He is referring to the effectual call of the gospel that saved us. He refers to this in Romans 8:30, “and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.” Or, in 2 Timothy 1:9, Paul says that God “has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.”

The word “worthy” has the idea of weight balanced on a scale. The idea is, on the one side is the glorious gospel of God’s grace towards us in Christ Jesus. On the other side, our godly conduct should match this high calling, especially in loving behavior that preserves the unity of the Spirit. Have you ever had your picture taken at an amusement park where you put your head through an opening above a body that doesn’t fit? Maybe you look like a muscle-bound weight lifter. The head doesn’t fit the body. Christ is our head. As His body, we shouldn’t make Him look ridiculous. We should walk worthily of our calling as His body. Foremost, Paul says, is that we preserve the unity of the Spirit. But, how?

2. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we need to practice the qualities that preserve unity.

Walking in a manner worthy of the gospel call implies a life-long process. There will be setbacks, but the overall pattern should be one of growth in these godly character qualities. Also, note that you do not need these qualities when others treat you well. You only need patience and tolerance when someone is irritating you or being difficult to get along with. While it is easier just to avoid such difficult people, Paul’s appeal that we practice these qualities im-

plies that we are seeking to work through relational differences. Several of these qualities—love, peace, patience, and gentleness—are listed as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), showing that we must walk in the Spirit in order to grow in these graces. There are five listed in verse 2:

A. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we need humility.

Paul says “*all* humility and gentleness” to show that we can’t be half-hearted about it. Humility is literally, “lowliness of mind.” The Greeks did not regard it as a virtue. It is, of course, the opposite of pride, which is at the root of every sin. Pride is the number one enemy of harmonious relationships. Humility is the recognition that all that we are and have are due to God’s grace. As Paul wrote (1 Cor. 4:7), “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?”

Often I have read that if you think that you’re humble, you’re not. But that is neither helpful nor correct. It’s not helpful, because how am I supposed to get it if I can’t know when I have it? There are many verses that exhort us to be humble (Phil. 2:3; Col. 3:12; 1 Pet. 5:5). It would be very puzzling to attempt to become what we can’t know if we’ve got it! And, it’s not correct because Paul had told the Ephesian elders that he had served the Lord in Ephesus with all humility (Acts 20:19). So, apparently Paul knew that he had it and he didn’t lose it by saying so!

Briefly note two things. First, humility means being Christ-sufficient, not self-sufficient. The proud person trusts in himself. He thinks that he can do it. You often hear, “you’ve got to believe in yourself.” No, the humble Christian trusts in Jesus. He knows that if he believes in himself, he will fail big-time!

Second, humility does not mean dumping on yourself. Rather, the humble person recognizes that God has graciously given him certain abilities that he is to use for God’s glory and purposes. So, with Paul we can say, “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God” (2 Cor. 3:5; see, also, Rom. 12:3).

B. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we need gentleness.

The King James Bible translates it as meekness, which we often associate with weakness. But that is not the idea of this Greek word, which is difficult to translate with a single word. It has the idea of "strength under control." It pictures a person who controls his temper and does not retaliate or seek revenge. Secular writers used it of tamed animals. A tame horse is a powerful animal, but it is completely obedient to the tug of the master on the reins. It is gentle towards children. It is significant that Jesus used both humility and gentleness to describe Himself (Matt. 11:29): "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Jesus was tender with the bruised and broken soul, but strong and forceful with the proud, self-righteous Pharisees.

C. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we need patience.

The word literally means, "long-tempered." It is the opposite of a person with a short fuse. Thankfully, God is patient towards us (Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). It is the first-listed quality of love (1 Cor. 13:4). To preserve unity, we must be patient with one another.

D. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we need tolerance.

I prefer the older NASB translation, "forbearance," because tolerance has come to mean throwing out all absolute moral standards and not judging anyone for any sin. Clearly, the Bible spells out absolute standards of right and wrong and calls on us lovingly to confront or correct those who persist in evil or serious doctrinal error. But "forbearance" or "tolerance" in the right sense means bearing with someone's shortcomings or quirks. It means giving the other person room to be different in non-moral areas. Pride makes us think, "Anyone with half a brain could see that my way is the best way to do this." Tolerance says, "That's not my preference, but it's okay." Finally,

E. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we need love.

Don't just "tolerate someone." Do it "in love." Love seeks the highest good of the other person. This keeps tolerance from turning into a grit your teeth and seethe on the inside kind of endurance. It also prevents tolerance from becoming indifference, where you think (or say!), "I don't care what you do! Just leave me alone!" If you see someone doing something that will lead to spiritual

harm, love cares enough to try to help him. Tolerance means that you wait and pray for the right time, but love motivates you to get involved if the other person will let you.

Thus, to preserve the unity of the Spirit, we need to understand how important unity is and practice these qualities. Finally,

3. To preserve the unity of the Spirit, we need to exert the effort to preserve unity.

“Being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3). *Diligence* implies deliberate effort. It has the nuance of haste or speed, which suggests that we are not to allow disunity to fester. We are to go after it quickly. As Paul says (Rom. 14:19), “So then, we pursue the things that make for peace and the building up of one another.” Diligence and pursuing both imply exerting the effort to preserve this unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It won’t happen automatically while we’re passive.

Peace is the quality that binds us all together. Jesus said (Matt. 5:9), “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” “Bond” is used (Col. 2:19) to refer to the ligaments in the body, that hold the bones together. Paul uses it to refer also to love as “the perfect bond of unity” (Col. 3:14). As Paul has already stated (Eph. 2:14), Jesus Christ Himself is our peace. When He rules as Lord of your life and as Lord of my life, we will enjoy peace between us.

But the point is, although true unity among believers already exists because of the mighty work of the Sovereign Spirit, we must work hard to preserve it. Harmonious relationships in our homes and in the church will not happen automatically. At some point, your feelings will get hurt or you will hurt someone else’s feelings. There will be disagreements, sometimes over difficult issues. There will be personality clashes, when someone gets on your nerves. There will be different preferences, sometimes over minor matters, but sometimes over important things. To resolve these problems, we must understand how important unity is to our Lord. He calls us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling as saints. We must practice these qualities that preserve unity. And, we must exert a lot of effort to work through problems in a godly manner.

Conclusion

Rebecca Manley Pippert concludes her book, *Out of the Salt Shaker & into the World* [IVP, 1979], pp. 177-178) with an unforgettable story. When she first went to Portland, Oregon, to work with a campus ministry, she met a student named Bill. He was always disheveled in his appearance and he never wore shoes. Rain, sleet, or snow, Bill was always barefoot.

Bill became a Christian, but his appearance didn't change. Near the campus was a church made up of mostly well-dressed, middle-class people. One Sunday, Bill decided to worship there. He walked into church with his messy hair, blue jeans, tee shirt, and barefoot. People looked a bit uncomfortable, but no one said anything. Bill began walking down the aisle, looking for a seat. But the church was quite crowded that day, so he got all the way down front without finding a seat. So he just plopped on the carpet, which was fine for a college Bible study, but a bit unnerving for this rather formal church. You could feel the tension in the air.

Suddenly, an elderly man began walking down the aisle toward Bill. Was he going to scold him about how you're supposed to look when you come to church? People thought, "You can't blame him for what he's going to do. His world is far removed from that boy's world for him to understand."

As the man kept walking slowly down the aisle, all eyes were on him. You could hear a pin drop. When the man reached Bill, with some difficulty he lowered himself and sat down next to Bill on the carpet. He and Bill worshiped together on the carpet that day. There was not a dry eye in that church.

That elderly man was practicing what Paul is talking about here. He was walking in a manner worthy of his calling, demonstrating humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance in love. He was being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. May we imitate his obedient faith!

Application Questions

1. If unity among believers is so important, how can we know when (if ever) we should divide?
2. What's wrong with the common view, that if you think you're humble, you're not? What is biblical humility? How can we cultivate it?
3. Since God's patience sometimes runs out, is it ever right for us to be impatient? Think carefully before you answer!
4. Why do loving relationships in the home and the church require effort? Isn't love supposed to be spontaneous?

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