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THE BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Ephesians 4:4-6

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Ephesians Lesson 26

The Basis for Christian Unity Ephesians 4:4-6

The subject of unity among professing Christians is a difficult issue for conscientious pastors. From time to time I have been asked why I do not promote and lead the church to participate in some of the ecumenical events in town. I have also heard via the grapevine that I am labeled a separatist because I do not join in most of these events. I assure you that it is *not* because I do not care about Christian unity. I am very concerned about unity, but I also am very concerned that those who promote unity often do so with scant concern for sound doctrine. In the heat of the Downgrade Controversy, C. H. Spurgeon wrote, "*Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin*" (cited by John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* [Crossway Books], p. 212). I agree!

In the 1990's, evangelical leaders Chuck Colson, Bill Bright, J. I. Packer, and others signed the Evangelicals and Catholics Together document. It called on Protestants to come together with the Catholic Church in the many areas where we agree, setting aside our differences over matters like justification by faith alone. For many years before that, the Billy Graham crusades have worked in cooperation with the Catholic Church.

The popular Promise Keepers movement added pressure in the same direction. At their national pastors' conference in 1996, popular author Max Lucado called on 40,000 pastors in attendance to set aside the labels of Catholic and Protestant and to recognize that we're all sailing on the same ship with Jesus as our captain (tape, "Fan into Flame," copyright Promise Keepers). Before serving communion, Lucado urged the pastors who had ever criticized another "denomination" (he clearly meant the Catholic Church) to find a pastor from that denomination and ask his forgiveness. (Presumably, the way that you could find such a pastor would be by his priestly collar.) If Luther and Calvin had been present, Lucado would have urged them to apologize to the pope!

In addition to these strong forces urging us to set aside doctrinal differences for the sake of unity, we now have the emerging

church movement, strongly influenced by the postmodern philosophy that there is no absolute truth, or if there is, we cannot know it with certainty. Thus we are being urged to be tolerant of all that claim to be Christian and even of non-Christian religions. They claim that doctrine is divisive and that those who claim to know the truth are arrogant. Thus for the sake of love and unity, we should set aside our doctrinal convictions and accept one another, without criticizing doctrinal beliefs (see D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* [Zondervan] and John MacArthur, *The Truth War* [Thomas Nelson]).

I hope that this message will help clarify what I believe on this important, practical subject and why I believe it. (To read more of my thinking, see my articles on the church web site, "Separation vs. Cooperation"; and, "The Basis for Christian Unity." For more on Spurgeon and the Downgrade Controversy, see MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, pp. 197-225; and, Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* [Banner of Truth].)

The foundation for our text is verse 3, where Paul exhorts us to be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." In 4:4-6, Paul describes the basis or elements that make up this foundational unity of the Spirit. As we saw last week, this unity already exists. We must be diligent to preserve it. Paul sets forth seven elements that form the biblical basis for unity, all prefaced by the word *one*. Three elements are in verse 4; three in verse 5; and one in verse 6. Seven, of course, is the biblical number of perfection. It may be that Paul structured this section in this way to show "that the unity of the Church is a manifestation of the perfection of the Godhead" (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity* [Baker], p. 49).

These seven elements of Christian unity are arranged around each member of the Trinity. Since Paul has just mentioned the Spirit in 4:3, he begins with the Spirit (4:4), moves to the Son ("one Lord," 4:5), and ends with "one God and Father" (4:6). In verse 6, he repeats "all" four times. God is "the Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." Lloyd-Jones (*ibid.*) says that Paul's principle for unity is, "that we should see ourselves as members of the Church, and see the Church as a reflection on earth of the oneness of the Triune God—Three in One, One in Three...."

He also points out (*Knowing the Times* [Banner of Truth], p. 134) that the unity Paul is describing is not a question of friendliness or fellowship or doing good together. Rather, "It is something ... which lifts us up into the realm of the blessed Holy Trinity...!" So we must always think of unity in this exalted way. True Christian unity isn't sharing a cup of coffee and discussing football scores! Rather, it is bound up with our common relationship with the Triune God. In our text, Paul is saying,

To preserve Christian unity, we must make sure that we all are founded on the biblical basis for unity.

Let's look at each of these seven elements of Christian unity:

1. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one body.

This is one of Paul's favorite analogies to describe the church. It is the body of which Jesus Christ is the head. He has already used this expression twice in this letter and will develop it further (1:23; 2:16; 4:25 5:23-32). Even in Ephesians, Paul uses other analogies to bring out other aspects of the church. In chapter 2, he refers to it as God's kingdom of which we are fellow citizens, God's household of which we are family members, and God's temple of which we are His dwelling place in the Spirit. In chapter 5, he will refer to the church as the bride of Christ. But here, he says that unity is built on the fact that we are one body.

As you know, your body is an organic unit. You can't cut off a body part and have it function separately from the whole. It all has to work together. Although the parts are different, each part is necessary for the healthy function of the whole body. (Paul develops this idea in greater detail in 1 Cor. 12:12-31.) So although the body has this fundamental unity, it also necessarily has diversity. This means that we do not all need to look alike and act alike and do the same things. There is room for differing gifts, ministries, and personalities in this one body.

Also, while a human body is highly organized, it's distinguishing characteristic is that it is living. A complex machine is highly organized, but it lacks life. The church differs from human organizations in that it has this extra essential of new life from God. Each member of the body has experienced the new birth. Once we were dead in our sins, but God in His rich mercy made us

alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:1, 5). The Holy Spirit baptizes every believer into the one body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), so that we become “members of one another” (Eph. 4:25).

There are some profound implications of this truth of the one body of Christ. *First, Paul is not referring to the visible church, but rather to the unseen, spiritual body of Christ, composed of all genuine believers in every time and place since the Day of Pentecost.* These believers worship in a multitude of local churches, but corporately they and the saints in heaven compose this one spiritual body of Christ. Even though a local church seeks to screen its membership (as we do here), every local church no doubt has some people on the membership rolls who are not members of the one body of Christ, because they have not been born again. So this isn't an organizational unity or a unity based on belonging to the same church or denomination. It is a unity of the Spirit.

Stemming from this, a *second* implication is that *true Christian unity is always based on this principle of new life in Christ, not on an organizational basis.* True believers may come together and form organizations for evangelism or missions or other cooperative ministries. But if we form or join with an organization composed of those who profess to know Christ, but deny the gospel or other core Christian truths, we do not have biblical unity. It is not the kind of unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17. It is not the unity of the Spirit that Paul talks about here. Genuine unity exists among all that are born again by God's Spirit.

Whenever you meet someone who has experienced the new birth, you have the basis for genuine fellowship, because you are both members of the one body of Christ. The person may be from a different background or denomination or even from a different country, but when you meet, you sense the unity because you both have been born again. It is unity based on shared life in Christ.

A *third* implication is that *if other individuals or other local churches are members of this one body of Christ, we should rejoice when they do well.* There should not be competition or rivalry between members of the one body. If another church preaches the gospel and believes in and teaches God's Word as the truth, and it is growing and healthy, praise the Lord! It would be ludicrous for my kidneys to be jealous of my liver because my liver is healthy! They're all part of this one

body, and so the individual members should rejoice when the other members are doing well.

2. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one Spirit.

Paul means, of course, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the agent of regeneration or the new birth. In John 3:6-7, Jesus explained to Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"

It is ironic that although Paul mentions the Holy Spirit as a primary element in Christian unity, believers have often divided over the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Based upon some of the transitional passages in Acts (8, 19), some argue that you must receive the Holy Spirit subsequent to conversion, accompanied by speaking in tongues. But in Romans 8:9, Paul clearly states, "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." In Galatians 3:2, Paul asks, "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" It is clear in the context that he is talking about receiving salvation. At the moment of salvation, we receive the Holy Spirit.

Christians are also divided over whether we must be baptized with the Spirit subsequent to salvation. Some mistakenly use the terms, "the baptism of the Spirit" and "the filling of the Spirit" interchangeably (sadly, Martyn Lloyd-Jones does this). But the terms are distinct in Scripture. The Holy Spirit baptizes all believers into the one body of Christ at the moment of conversion (1 Cor. 12:13). Subsequently, we must learn to walk by the Spirit and be filled with the Spirit (Gal. 5:16; Eph. 5:18). But in spite of these differences among believers, Paul's point in our text is that true biblical unity rests on the truth that there is one Spirit of God and that He alone imparts the new birth to us.

3. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one hope of your calling.

This takes us back to 4:1, where Paul implores us to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which we have been called. There is a general call of the gospel that goes out to all (Matt. 22:14), but there is the effectual call of God that opens our hearts

to respond to the gospel with saving faith (Acts 16:14; see Rom. 8:30; 2 Tim. 1:9; 2 Pet. 1:10; Rev. 17:14). It is that call that saves us that unites us into the one body through the one Spirit.

When Paul mentions “the hope of your calling” (see 1:18, “the hope of His calling”), he is referring to the yet future aspect of our salvation, the second coming of Jesus Christ, when we will be changed totally to be like Christ and share His glory. Paul refers to Christ’s coming as “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). John says that when we see Jesus at His return, we will be changed into His likeness. Then he adds (1 John 3:3), “And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

In the Bible, hope is not uncertain, as we often use the term. We say, “I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow,” but it is just a wish. But biblical hope is absolutely certain, but not yet realized. It is certain because God has promised it and He never fails to keep His promises. We just haven’t experienced it yet at this point in time. Although mockers may scoff at the promise of Christ’s coming, God is not slow about His promise (2 Pet. 3:3-4, 9). When He comes, we will be caught up to be with Him forever. Those who reject Him will face His wrath and judgment. As with the doctrine of the Spirit, so with matters of prophecy, there is division among Christians. But all genuine Christians are united on this one fact, that Jesus is coming back bodily in power and glory. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us hope as we believe in the promise of His coming (Rom. 15:13). This is the hope of our calling.

4. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one Lord.

We move here from the Spirit to Jesus Christ. It is significant that “Lord” is consistently used in the Old Testament to refer to Yahweh, the one true God, whereas in the New Testament, it most often refers to Jesus Christ. This one Lord, Jesus Christ Himself, “is our peace” (Eph. 2:14). Thus all true biblical unity centers in the person and work of Jesus Christ, our eternal Lord.

If a person or a religious group denies what the Bible teaches about the person of Jesus, that He is fully God and fully man, we are not in unity with them. If they deny His substitutionary death on the cross as the only means by which we can be reconciled to God, we are not one with them. If they deny the need to submit

everything to Jesus as Lord and to live so as to please Him, we are not one with them. He is our Lord both by virtue of who He is, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of the universe; and, by what He did, purchasing us with His blood on the cross. If someone claims to know Christ as Savior, but denies that He is their Lord, you need to challenge him on whether he truly knows Him as Savior. At best, you cannot enjoy true fellowship with a professing Christian who by a disobedient life denies the lordship of Jesus Christ.

5. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one faith.

Some reputable commentators interpret this to mean the faith that saves or justifies us (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans], p. 336; Harold Hoehner, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. by John Walvoord and Roy Zuck [Victor Books], 2:633). But I agree with most commentators that it refers to the Christian faith (in the sense of Eph. 4:13; Jude 3), especially to the core truths that are essential for the gospel. While godly believers may disagree over certain doctrines, there are some essential doctrines that every true believer affirms.

Every true believer holds that the eternal God sent His eternal Son, who took on human flesh through the virgin birth. This God-man lived a perfect life and offered Himself on the cross in the place of sinners, paying the debt that we owe. He was raised bodily from the dead, He ascended bodily into heaven, and He is coming back bodily to judge the world and to reign forever. We receive the salvation that He offers by grace alone through faith alone, apart from any merit or works on our part. If a person denies any of these core truths of the gospel, he does not hold to the one faith and there is no basis for unity with him and us.

6. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one baptism.

Some think that this refers to the baptism of the Spirit, which takes place at salvation. But it occurs here in the verse about God the Son, the one Lord. Thus I think it refers to the act of water baptism, where those who have trusted in Christ as Savior confess Him publicly in obedience to His command.

Again, as with the one Spirit and one hope, so there is controversy among Christians over the subjects and mode of baptism.

Some baptize infants by sprinkling. We baptize by immersion only those children or adults who confess Christ as Savior and Lord. These debates will probably go on until we're all with the Lord (at which point, we'll all be Baptists!). But here Paul is focusing on the basic meaning of baptism, namely, identification with Jesus Christ. When a person is baptized, it signifies that he or she is totally identified with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, so that now we walk in newness of life in Him (Rom. 6:3-6). The water signifies being cleansed from all our sins (Acts 2:38). Baptism in water is not necessary for salvation (to say so would be to commit the Galatian heresy), but it is the necessary result of salvation, which produces obedience to Christ in the hearts of His children. Finally,

7. Biblical unity is built on the truth that there is one God and Father of all.

Commentators differ over whether the four "all's" in this verse are masculine, referring to people, or neuter, referring to the cosmos. There is a sense in which both are true, but in the context, Paul is talking about the church. He means that God is the *Father* of all believers. He is *over* them in a personal sense as their Sovereign Lord. He is *through* all believers in the sense of working through them. He is *in* all in the sense of personally indwelling us. We are His dwelling place in the Spirit (Eph. 2:22; see, John 14:23).

Paul's fourfold use of "all" emphasizes the common unity that we share with all true believers. If God is the *Father of all* believers, we are brothers and sisters. If He is *over all*, then we all submit to Him as our Sovereign Lord. We hold His Word as the authority for faith and practice. If He is *through all*, I must trust that He is working through my brothers and sisters, as well as through me. I am not His only servant; He has many others. If He is *in all*, then I must respect my brother or sister's experience with God and I must see God in them. When I serve them, I am serving Him. When I love them, I am loving Him.

Conclusion

J. C. Ryle, the godly 19th century Anglican bishop, wrote (source unknown), "Unity and peace are very delightful; but they are bought too dear if they are bought at the expense of truth.... Controversy, in fact, is one of the conditions under which truth in

every age has to be defended and maintained, and it is nonsense to ignore it.”

To apply Paul’s words, we must be diligent to preserve the true unity that already exists among all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time, we must be careful not to water down, compromise, or set aside these fundamental elements that form the basis for true Christian unity. We are *not* one with those who deny or pervert the gospel. To act as if we are causes great confusion and harm. It causes undiscerning believers to fall into serious error. It causes unbelievers to be confused about the gospel, by which alone they might be saved. To preserve Christian unity, we must make sure that we are founded on the biblical basis for unity—these truths that Paul here sets forth.

Application Questions

1. Since error is always a matter of degree, how can we know when it crosses the line from “serious” into “heresy”? When must we break fellowship with a professing believer?
2. Are there different levels of unity or fellowship? Can we have fellowship on an individual level that might not be advisable on a church level?
3. Which is more important: love or truth? (Yes, this is a trick question!)
4. How can we hold firmly to sound doctrine without falling into the error of spiritual pride and wrongful divisiveness?

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