

Sermon – 17/08/2008 am

Maintain Unity

Study Text: Ephesians 4:3-6

Jesus had much to tell his disciples in his final hours with them in the upper room. He began by washing their feet, a lesson in humility for them. He gave them a new commandment – love one another as I have loved you saying *by this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another* (John 13:35). Jesus knew how quickly sinful pride could raise its ugly head even among his disciples. Pride is the opposite of humility; pride smothers love and destroys unity. Unity and the glory of God was the focus of Jesus' closing prayer.

In this chapter of Ephesians Paul calls upon believers to walk worthy of their calling in Jesus Christ. From the word translated as 'worthy' we derive the word 'axiom' or 'axiomatic'. In mathematics we have axioms or accepted rules. If something is axiomatic it is an accepted truth or a given. Unity among followers of Christ is a given, as is explained in this passage. Paul calls upon the church to **keep** the unity of the Spirit. *Endeavour/strive /spare no effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (4:3).

Keep the unity indicates the unity already exists. It is not something we create or establish. But we must be diligent to maintain this unity. Followers of Jesus Christ by definition have a unity in Christ, but we are still prone to sin as we live in this body and in this fallen world.

We must remind ourselves through reading the Bible and through prayer of whose we are and whom we serve. We must humble ourselves before the Lord; accept who we are in Christ and who our brothers and sisters are in Christ. The love of Christ constrains us to love one another and keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

One Spirit

Unity means 'oneness' and there are a lot of 'ones' in this passage – seven to be exact. Seven is the perfect number in the Bible, but more clearly seen in this passage is the Trinity. There is one Spirit, one Lord Jesus, and one God and Father. In his appeal to maintain unity Paul points to the Trinity and to the truth that there is one and only one God, and one and only one way of salvation.

Paul begins with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. When Jesus ascended into heaven he sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in the heart of every believer (Romans 8:9). We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our inheritance (1:14). When God looks upon us he sees the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts.

God does not look on the outside but on the heart. We also should look beyond the externals, beyond what a person looks like or what they are wearing, and to the heart. Paul wrote *from now on we regard no one according to the flesh...for if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation* (II Corinthians 5:16, 17).

This world is torn apart by divisions in the human race. Wars continue till today on the basis of ethnic differences. Africa is torn apart by tribal differences, like England was once torn apart by class differences. The vast population of India is divided by caste and religion. Our own society is divided by generation, gender, financial and political differences. If we are not careful such differences can easily enter the church.

Paul rejoiced that in Jesus Christ the great wall that divided Jew and Gentile had collapsed. *For through him (Jesus) we both have access by one Spirit to the Father (2:18)*. But he remained alert lest this wall be rebuilt. Spare not effort to keep the unity of the Spirit he wrote.

From the indwelling Holy Spirit fruits appear in the life of the believer. There are individual gifts of the Spirit which are dealt with in the next section but the fruits of the Spirit are common to all who have the Holy Spirit. Look at these fruits in Galatians 5:22 – *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. Do any of these promote disunity? If we stop quenching the Holy Spirit in our hearts these fruits will become more evident in our lives and we will keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

One hope of your calling (4:4). In the Spirit we are sealed for the day of redemption. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance. These works of the Holy Spirit speak of hope and future glory. Paul prayed that our eyes would be opened to know the hope of his calling and what are the riches of our inheritance (1:18).

Lloyd-Jones in his sermon on this passage has some words to say about giving testimonies. He once found two Christians trying to outdo one another with regard to the sinfulness of their former life. Some Christians are given prominence because of their ‘wonderful testimony’. They write books and are asked to speak about their life on drugs or in crime. Martin Lloyd-Jones says that such testimonies bring division, but if we focus on what we are saved unto there will be no such division for there is one hope of our calling. If we focus on Jesus, his cross and his coming again, and not on ourselves we will keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

One Lord Jesus

There is one Lord and he is Jesus of Nazareth. *There is no other name given under heaven among men whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12)*. *I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6)*. The disciples called Jesus teacher and Lord, and Jesus accepted this title. Jesus claimed to be Lord of all.

Division arose in the church at Corinth. Why because they started looking at men rather than Jesus. Some said ‘I am of Paul’, others ‘I am of Apollos’ and others ‘I am of Peter’. Paul condemned such behaviour saying ‘is Christ divided?’ Was Paul crucified for you? Only Jesus was crucified for you. Only Jesus died and rose from the dead as your saviour and Lord. Do not look to a man as your lord. Many divisions in the church are still about men.

There is one body writes Paul in the previous verse, referring to the church as the body of Christ. Through this body analogy he gives us a picture of the unity of the church under the headship of Christ. True unity will only exist when Christ is worshipped and adored as the

head of the church. Powerful preachers can draw a large following, as can the Pope as the man-appointed head of the church. But such unity will not endure.

The true church is united under Christ and his teaching. It is united in *one faith and one baptism*. What is this faith? Is it a unity of all who say they have faith in Jesus? What about those who say they are saved by faith plus works? *One faith* must surely mean justification by faith alone through grace alone for this is what the Bible teaches (2:8). Those who add to faith works or traditions align themselves with the Jews who demanded that the Gentiles be circumcised. Such people are preaching another gospel according to Paul (Galatians 1:6). There is but one gospel and one faith.

Many criticise Luther for dividing the church, but it was the errors of Roman Catholicism that were responsible for the division. To faith they added works, including baptismal regeneration. They hold that baptism operates in and of itself. What does Paul mean by *one baptism*? Does he mean we must all be baptised as infants or all baptised as adults? Does he mean we all have to be baptised in a certain way? These externals of baptism have divided the church but this should not be. Baptism does not change the heart of an infant or an adult; only the Holy Spirit can do that. Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of regeneration and a changed heart. It is a sacrament given by the Lord to the church.

Baptism may not mean a great deal in our society but in some places it is undertaken very solemnly. In India converts often face persecution and even death after they are baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. They do not take this sacrament lightly. For such baptism clearly signals a change of identity, and incorporation into the community of Christ.

The Reformers pointed out that the unity of believers, the unity of the Spirit, is only possible in the invisible church because the visible church is not pure. Whilst this is true, Jesus taught that love for one another and unity among believers is a witness to the present world. We are urged to keep the unity in the visible church.

God the Father

In the closing verse of this passage we read there is *one God and Father of all* (4:6). God is the Father of all believers. Unbelievers do not call God 'Father' even though he is the creator of all. He is our Father because we are born again of his Spirit and are a new creation in Christ.

A Father has offspring and we are his children. We may not be blood brothers and sisters but are in fact closer as spiritual brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. Our oneness in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit transcends everything else that binds us together. It is a oneness that reaches beyond this earth and into heaven.

Jesus said *whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, sister and mother* (Matthew 12:50). Do you marvel in the wonder of being called a child of God, and a brother/sister of Christ? Remember, if you are such then you have other brothers and sisters in Christ. Are you making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace within the family of God?

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