

Unity in Christ Psalm 133, Colossians 3:12-17

Introduction

What does it mean for “brethren to dwell in unity”? What is this unity we have? Christians dwelling in unity is like the anointing oil upon the high priest. It signifies that we are set apart from the world for God, holy. It is the sweet smell of God’s people. It can seem extravagant or wasteful (Ex. 30:23-25, cf. Mark 14:3-5). The beauty of dwelling together in unity does not stay put but rather flows out. This, too, is like the dew of Mt. Hermon and Mt. Zion which descends upon the land. And a fertile land watered by dew becomes fruitful. Like oil and morning dew, community refreshes those touched by it. It is a sign of God’s mercies which, like the dew, comes fresh every morning (Lam. 3:22-23).

What Unity Is

Paul describes this unity in Colossians 3:15. “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in *one body*.” Christians are called to share in the peace of God as we dwell with one another. Ephesians 4:1-3 parallels this: “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” We are united in the person of Christ and in the fact that, through the forgiveness of our sins, He is our salvation and our peace. Because of sin, apart from Christ, brothers will hate one another. But when Christ’s work is applied to a sinner, he is given peace with God and is called to share in that peace with his brother. This is key. Christian unity or fellowship or community is not “an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate” (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*).

Christian unity is not something to be grasped for. It is first to be acknowledged, and then entered into, and then practiced. Grasping after it often tends toward division because we seek to make it happen by our own devices. The unity of the brethren is not dependent on methods. It is dependent on a true love and submission to Christ, and an acknowledgement that I am to love my fellow believer because Christ has loved Him and gave His life for him. I do not love him because my brother is loveable, nor because I am so gracious. Rather, Christ has loved him such that he is loveable despite himself. Christ has loved me such that I can extend love towards him despite myself.

So, Christians have unity in their common salvation, or rather in their common Savior. To put this another way, unity is not something to be pursued for its own sake. Rather, it is to be entered into and cultivated as a fruit of the work of Christ.

Keep the Unity of the Spirit

Christians are to strive to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). In parallel to Colossians 3, Paul here indicates that this unity is the kind that occurs interpersonally. So how do we guard this unity we have given (remembering it is not something we create). We guard and maintain it by our lowliness and gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love (Eph. 4:2, Col. 3:12-13, cf. Phil. 2:1-4). Brothers in Christ forgive one another when someone has a complaint against another (Col. 3:12). This is because love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8), and so above everything else, we put on love, which is the bond of perfection (Col. 3:14). We let the bonds of love, the bonds of the peace of God rule in our hearts, not our own desires (v. 15). We maintain unity by

letting Christ's Word dwell in us, and one of the primary ways of doing that is by singing the Word to one another (v. 16). We sing to one another because we are singing in, with, and to Christ. In Him, we are one body. And through all of this, the unity of the brethren is layered with giving thanks (vs. 15 and 17).

One other practical way to maintain unity is for the saints to pray for one another (e.g., Eph. 6:18). When sinners dwell together, even sanctified sinners, there will be sin between them. Often, the sin is simply a form of pride. We want the other person to be more like us or to fit better with us or to just not be so weird. Christians fight this and all other sins between believers with prayer. "A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me...There is no dislike, no personal tension, no estrangement that cannot be overcome by intercession as our side of it is concerned...To make intercession means to grant our brother the same right that we have received, namely, to stand before Christ and share in his mercy" (Bonhoeffer). Praying for one another, or interceding for one another before the Lord, relieves and prevents bitterness and resentment from taking root. It prevents us from seeking to form our neighbor in our own image because we recognize that they are yet another image bearer of the Creator, though different from us. This is true whenever we are tempted to be out of fellowship, whether due to real or perceived sins.

In Psalm 133, David marvels at the goodness and delight of believers dwelling in unity, but not because there are no dislikes or conflicts or sins between Christians. Rather, those conflicts and dislikes are surrendered to the love of Christ, and the sins are confessed and forgiven because of His work on the cross. This is why it is so good and pleasant. It is the sweet aroma of Christ, the true High Priest. It is in the midst of the unity of God's people, joined together in Christ—dwelling together, rejoicing together, suffering together, confessing together, singing together, eating together, worshipping together—that God has commanded the blessing of life with Him forever. Spurgeon commented on Psalm 133 that in "dwelling together in love we have begun the enjoyments of eternity." In the fellowship of the saints, we taste the joys of ultimately being with Christ. This is because the unity of believers is unity in Christ.

Conclusion

Do you taste that joy? To dwell with your brothers and sisters in unity, first dwell with your Elder Brother in unity. If you are not right with the Lord, how can you expect to experience the fullness of the joy of the communion of the saints? Second, cultivate the gift of unity in Christ, but do not grasp for it. If you seek unity or community for its own sake or for your own sake, you will lose it. Seek unity for Christ's sake because we are His body. You are His, and your brother is His, and your sister is His, and so seek to dwell together in unity on that foundation. Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell in unity! This is only possible if it is based on the efficacious work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Unity is only possible if Jesus truly died for our sins and has given us new life. If He died for my sins and He died for yours, then we, as brothers and sisters in Christ, can dwell together unified by that central truth. True unity requires the cross.