

Unity of the Saints

June 18th, 2017

Psalm 133:1-3

¹ Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brethren to dwell together in unity!
² It is like the precious oil upon the head,
Running down on the beard,
The beard of Aaron,
Running down on the edge of his garments.
³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
Descending upon the mountains of Zion;
For there the Lord commanded the blessing—
Life forevermore.

Introduction

One accusation of the Catholic Church against the Protestants is that the hundreds of denominations is evidence that the Reformation was a dismal failure. Although you might be able to argue that this is not the design for the church that God gave us in scripture, you can say that it certainly is within His providence for it to be so. However, you can't say that the structure the Catholic church embraces is acceptable either.

This church is a good example of why there is so much fragmentation in the Christian Church. We carried certain convictions that were not embraced by other fellowships in the area, and we felt compelled, because of our understanding of the importance of these convictions, to equip ourselves in such a way that these convictions were emphasized. We did not start because we simply wanted to be separate, as though the separation were preferable or even the purpose.

Such fragmentation within the Church at large is not necessarily bad, but how then shall we obey the Scriptural imperatives to be unified? How shall we overlook each other's differences to achieve unity? This is where the answer is hidden. Overlooking each other's differences is not the *grounds* of our unity; it is the *fruit* of it. Agreeing to disagree is not the *grounds* of unity it is the *result* of unity. How then do we promote unity within the body at large—but especially within our fellowship?

Different Ministries - 2 Corinthians 10:13-18

- ◆ God has given different “spheres” of ministry to different groups. Unity will not come from getting more people under one roof. Nor will true unity come from all churches having the same name. But we should affirm God has established unique ministries (or spheres), and we should not mistakenly think that the existence of multiple spheres is evidence for disunity.
- ◆ Others would argue that unity would come if there were one group who was deciding what is true and false for everybody. Over time, the constituents of that group change and so do the beliefs that the previous group had determined. This is true because as God has granted us faith, all of us are at different stages of sanctification and spiritual maturity. We are all being conformed to the image of Christ and at different paces.

Basis and Threats to Unity

Pluralism

- ◆ There is a worldly philosophy called pluralism which states that all thoughts and opinions are valid and it is invalid to say otherwise. It is perfectly acceptable to the pluralistic mind for someone to say that they don't like something, but it is unacceptable to assert that someone else is wrong. It is easy for Christians to get caught up in this thinking because of the desire not to offend. This desire is really called charity and should not be replaced with this pluralism philosophy which attempts to make truth relative.
- ◆ The presence of disputes between Christians does not indicate that the Word of God is confusing or that truth is unattainable. A plurality of interpretations of Scripture does not imply that the Scripture is unclear—the problem rests with the interpreters, not the Word of God. This problem does not mean that God has failed at revealing His will.

Theological Heresy vs. Theological Muddledness

Theology matters and all of the scriptures are equally *true*—but not all Biblical theology is equally *important*. The truly hard work is in knowing which theologies are central and which differences in theology create boundaries for fellowship. Clearly, the primary theology that the Church has been entrusted with is the Gospel. This message has been declared from the beginning, and until the advent of the Messiah, the mysterious message has been progressively revealed to where now the Gospel has been entrusted to the Church with much greater clarity.

However, there are differences of theology embraced by some which undermine the Gospel. There are those who have embraced the true Gospel of salvation by grace through faith as taught in the Scriptures. There are others who have embraced doctrines such that they now are messengers of a false gospel. There is a difference between those who are heretics and those who simply are growing and maturing in their understanding. One distinction is that usually, heretics try to set themselves up as teachers and do so to garner a following. For the sake of maintaining the purity of the Church, we are to divide ourselves from these people. This separation is commanded in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; 2 Corinthians 11:1-4; Galatians 1:6-9.

But we can also see that different theologies are embraced that don't destroy the gospel; rather they confuse the gospel. Working together arm-and-arm is difficult, but the fruits of humility and submission to the Scriptures indicate that God has drawn us into the same Christ and therefore we must work out the unity that He is working into us.

Love & Humility - Philippians 2:1-7

- ◆ In this letter, Paul has just told the Philippians that their conduct should be worthy of the Gospel and he told them not to fear their adversaries. Those who have been buried with Christ have also risen with Him and therefore are included with Him. These are the saints with whom God fellowships with—therefore, we have no grounds to *not* fellowship with them as well. Notice that both believing, as well as suffering, was something granted by God on behalf of Christ.
- ◆ The primary basis of our unity is that we have been given one faith to believe that we have been saved by one Savior Jesus Christ, given the Holy Spirit, adopted into the same family by the same Father, and granted the same eternal inheritance. Unity goes hand-in-hand with two key factors, love, and humility. Without these two attributes, there cannot be unity within the body of Christ.

Unity of Spirit and Pursuing Unity of Faith - Ephesians 4:1-16

- ◆ The unity that we have with each other as Christians is called here the unity of the Spirit. Each of those whom God has called into His Kingdom and begun the work of sanctification, have been given the same Holy Spirit. This doesn't mean that every Christian is necessarily your best friend, but it does mean that we have a deep and profound connection to one another.
- ◆ We are told to keep the unity of the Spirit, and then Paul teaches that Christ gave us apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, and evangelists to equip the church for the work of ministry. God uses this work of equipping to strengthen our faith and continues to build us up until we come to a unity of faith. Therefore our mindset should be that as Christians; we are unified by the one Holy Spirit and that we learn and mature toward one faith. Hopefully, we will go to our graves striving for the unity of mind.

Romans 12:16

- ◆ Notice that in all of these passages, the common attributes of our unity are love, humility, and truth. The primary threats to our unity are, generally speaking, sin. The specific sin mentioned over and over in the Scripture that will destroy unity is self-centeredness.

Effects of Unity - 1 John 1:5-7

- ◆ As we are cleansed from our sin, the immediate byproduct of our justification is a restoration of unity among the saints. Walking with God in fellowship automatically means that we are in unity with the brethren. If we don't keep short accounts with God by confessing our sins to God and one another, we won't have unity with God or our brethren.