

EPHESIANS 4:1-2

INTRODUCTION

The first three chapters of the book of Ephesians have now been completed. They were primarily doctrinal in nature although I hope we were able to apply those doctrines as we went along. But Paul is an excellent preacher and so he knows that filling people's heads with doctrine does not necessarily makes good solid Christians. Like all good preachers the doctrine needs to be applied and so this is now what Paul does in the remaining chapters of this book.

As I said he is an excellent preacher for 50% of his book is doctrinal and 50% is application. If Christians believe certain truths then they must behave in ways that are consistent with those truths. This behaviour must be seen in the church and in the home and so Paul applies these truths to those two situations. Because it is easier to live as a Christian in the church than it is in the home it is with the church that Paul focuses upon first of all.

Now the central theme in this book so far is the theme of unity and so it will not surprise you that as Paul applies these truths his central application concerns unity of the church. In Paul's mind of course is the unity of the church at Ephesus but his application applies to all true churches, it applies to our church. We must remember that Paul has shown that the old distinctions are done away with in Christ. Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to each other in Christ they both enjoy the same privileges and they both have the same responsibilities to live as the people of God. Now this is a teaching that the church in our day and generation needs to be reminded off.

We live in a day when many local churches are riddled with tensions and suspicions. They are troubled with cliques and splinter groups, some church split and split again and in doing so they are by their actions denying the truth of their oneness in Christ. How can we say that God in Christ has made us one when the church is full of splits and divisions?

Now we as a church need to be careful for although in the history of this church there has been no major split, although some people have left us we must not think that division and splits could not happen to us. Churches that think like this often prove to be most susceptible to division. If we hide our head in the sand thinking it could never happen here then we are leaving the door open for an attack from the Evil one who loves to cause division and discord among God's people.

1. UNITY NEEDS TO BE MAINTAINED (vs. 1-2)

If unity was guaranteed at all times then this paragraph from Paul was not needed. Unity is not something that just happens it has to be worked at it has to be maintained. Now we do not create unity, it is God who creates unity, and he creates it by bringing sinners to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. When that happens then automatically fellow Christians are brought together and immediately have an oneness in Christ.

That's why when two Christians meet for the first time there is a bond there because both love the Lord Jesus both are brothers or sisters in Christ. But although God creates the unity we must work at it to develop it and to maintain it and that does not come automatically. God brings us together in Christ but we must work that unity out in practise so that what is true theologically is true practically. Let me illustrate this. When two people are born in one family they are by birth blood relations.

There is a unity among them a bond among them; they both come from the same parents. But that unity that exists because of birth needs to be fostered and maintained so that in reality and in practise that unity is shown. We all know far too many families who are torn in two because this natural unity is not worked upon encouraged or maintained. So it is with Christians, We are born again supernaturally, we have come into God's family we have the same Father there is a unity as a result but it needs to be fostered and encouraged and maintained so that what is true becomes a reality in practise. Now what we have in these verses is instruction on how to maintain encourage and develop that God created unity.

A) Live a consistent life (v 1) – The Christians at Ephesus have been called to salvation and they have been called to unity with one another as a consequence. Now they are to live up to their name. You know the Royal Family has a name to maintain there are certain things that are expected of them; there is a certain way of life that has to be maintained. They have to live up to their calling as a Royal family.

This is why when one of the Prince's acts foolishly in a way that is not in keeping with their name it is all over the newspapers and everyone is shocked. We didn't expect that sort of behaviour from one of our Royals. The church at Ephesus have been called to God and have been called to unity with God and with one another, Therefore they must not act in ways that deny their calling otherwise untold damage is caused to the church and to the doctrines which it holds.

You see it is one thing to claim that we are united to one another, but it is another thing to work that out in practise. If the world hears of a church that is divided and is split then what credibility does our message of unity with Christ and others have. If we are calling upon unbelievers to be united to God through Christ but actually as a church we are anything but united then what does that say about our message. The truth is the world is not shocked when it hears about splits in churches it has got so used to it that it no longer affects them.

Perhaps that is one reason why the message of the church is no longer listened too.

People simply do not see that unity that we proclaim worked out within the church. Why is this because as individuals and collectively we do not walk consistently as Christian people. We talk about the bible being God's word yet we read it so little. We talk about prayer being the powerhouse of the church yet we fail to pray. We talk about unity with Christ yet so often fail to be united to one another. The world will only start taking the church seriously when it sees a clear link between what it says and what it does.

This is no truer than with the issue of unity.

But it's OK saying that if unity is going to be maintained within our church then every member must start to walk worthy of their calling but what is involved in walking worthy of our calling. What sort of things must we be displaying and doing if we are to walk consistent Christian lives. Well Paul lists some of the things involved in these verses.

B) We must display and demonstrate certain characteristics and attitudes - Paul lists four things here and the reason he chooses these four is because they are all essential for the continued unity of the church.

i) Humble – Everyone knows that Christians should be humble for humility is the opposite of pride or self-assertiveness but it is not easy to live humbly. We are by nature proud people; what we consider to be thoughtless and unfair conduct by others can so easily wound our pride. We all live in a world that demands our rights and loves to push ourselves forward. Humility does not come easy, but for Christians we have at least experienced humility in becoming Christians.

For in becoming true believers we have to humble ourselves to accept that our thinking has been wrong, that our actions have been wrong and that our attitudes have been wrong. Our pride has to be dealt with in order that we might become Christians otherwise we would never become Christians for we would continue to try and save ourselves because that is what our pride tells us. But God has humbled us in bringing us to salvation and now as Christians we must not allow our pride to rise again for it will bring disharmony and discord into any fellowship. When we want to put ourselves before others, which is pride then that leads to disharmony and that leads to disunity. But unity will be maintained when everyone of us puts others first and seeks to follow the example of Jesus who being God, humbled himself and became man and went to the cross on our behalf (Philippians 2:1-10).

The Lord Jesus did not think about himself for one moment if he had he would have stayed in heaven but he gave himself willingly for others. In the same way we are to display that attitude according to Philippians 2:1 and if we do then unity will be maintained in this church. Now humility was not seen as a virtue in Paul's world as indeed in our own world in fact it was seen as a weakness as a defect in one's character.

You will not find this character in any other sphere of life, which is why there is so much disunity within our families, and world but the Christians church is to be noted for it, which is why unity will be maintained when it is noted in churches. We all need to repent here, we all know how proud we are, we feel threatened by new people joining our church because we feel that we might be pushed out or I will not be as valued if this person starts to display his gifts in our church. We can so easily show our pride when things are done differently in the church perhaps when our original idea is changed or altered and we can get on our hobbyhorse about it. My dear brothers and sisters in Christ display humility otherwise you and I will be in danger of causing discord and disharmony within our church. If we do that we will as a church be denying the very thing that we claim that the gospel does that is bring unity.

ii) Gentle – In the older translations this word is translated 'meekness.' Now once again this value was not highly esteemed in the first century Roman Empire. The

primary concern of both the Romans and their subject peoples were to set forward their personal aims regardless of the consequences to other people. Gentleness or meekness was a sign of weakness.

But meekness or gentleness has nothing to do with weakness; in fact Moses is described as a meek man ('humble' NIV; Numbers 12:3) yet he was anything but weak. He courageously stood against Pharaoh and demanded the release of the Israelites that is not a sign of a weak man. Of course the meekest person who ever lived was Jesus Christ and he was certainly not weak, it took unbelievable strength to die for sins not his own.

Meekness is actually a real strength it is shown by one who could force upon people his own way (like Jesus) but chooses not to do so.

Now I trust you can see how this characteristic helps to maintain the unity of the church. The very opposite of gentleness is harshness, self-assertiveness, pushiness or heavy handedness. Now if there is anything in the church likely to divide it; it is the self-assertive person who always has to have things his or her own way. So we have worship in a style that they think is best, or you have to read their version of the Bible or you have to sing their tunes to hymns or you have to evangelise their way or else it is not evangelism.

This is the sort of person who uses intimidation to get his or her own way, they force their personality upon you and they force their opinions on you. Well when a church has anyone like that in their congregation then division is just round the corner. To be honest we are all a little bit like that I have deliberately used extreme examples of this sort of person but there is a little self assertiveness in most of us, we can all be pushy and heavy handed when it suits us when it serves our own purposes.

We constantly need to be examining our own lives in the light of his word. We should constantly be praying for meekness or gentleness within our own lives, we all need to be softened so that we are less hard. That does not mean that we become like putty that can be easily manipulated by others, No a meek person is someone who spiritually and morally is strong someone who will not be pushed around over matters that really do matter in the church. Matters concerning belief and behaviour.

iii) Patient – Again the older versions translate it 'longsuffering.' Now we use the word 'short-tempered' in English to mean someone who flies off the handle quickly but we do not speak of its opposite virtue as long-tempered. But this is exactly what Paul means by the use of this word, for long-tempered is literally the meaning of this Greek word. It means to resist aggravation. When a wrong is done to us our natural tendency is to strike back but that sort of attitude only provokes others and causes disunity within churches.

The patient Christian will seek to be considerate of others at all times even under provocation, a patient Christian will resist the very strong temptation to strike back. God of course is our example is He not long suffering with us? How many times a day do we provoke his wrath because of our sin and rebellion of heart? Yet so often God treats us with great gentleness and with great patience seeking to instruct us and encourage us to follow Him.

Of course no Christian can suddenly become patient we need the work of the Holy Spirit to instil within us a patient heart that will put up with other believers even when they are provoking us. Now these attitudes are not exceptional attitudes but they are what every Christian must be displaying in one way or another for they are fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

Imagine what chaos there would be in God's church and in our church if we failed to be patient with one another but every time someone wronged us or did something that we did not approve of we would be straight over to them in order to put them right. It would not be long before people left and splits occurred.

iv) Bearing with one another in love – Paul is very realistic; he knows that Christians are not always easy to get on with he found it difficult to get on with John Mark and I'm sure others found it difficult to get on with Paul. The truth is that Christians have some really irritating faults so the temptation is to become irritable with others.

But Paul says that is not the Christian way, rather Christians should always bear in mind that they have been forgiven at great cost to the Son of God and that the most important part of our new life in Christ is that we now live a new life in love. You see how can we put up with one another how can we bear with the failing and faults of one another? We will only be able to do it if we really love one another. Again let me use the family illustration. There are some things about me that drive my family nuts. There are something's about them that drive me nuts. But we bear with one another, I put up with the music they listen too; and they put up with my sporting interests and cooking. But why do families put up with one another; why are there not more rows in the home.

The answer is simple we love one another and love simply bears with a lot more than we normally would. So when I am let down by someone in my family I bear with them and they with me because we love each other. Now we know that Christian love is not affection for the kind of people that we naturally like and get on with. No It is a response to the love that God has shown us in Christ, a love that gives of self for those who do not deserve our love.

We love one another not because of our personality or because of our gifts or sense of humour but we love each other because of what we have become in Christ children of the living God. Even when our fellow Christians are not as considerate as they should be towards us, we bear with them in love. We love our fellow Christians not because of the way we are treated by them but because Christ has died for us and part of our response to Christ's death on our behalf is to love God who has saved us and to love those that God loves, trying though that may be at times.

So how do we maintain the unity of the Spirit? We do it by allowing God's Holy Spirit to work in our hearts and lives so that increasingly we are displaying attitudes and actions that are governed by humility, gentleness, patience and love for one another. But it's no good if only a few in our church or any church show these characteristics for as long as there is one who thinks speaks or acts in a self assertive, proud, quick tempered or unloving way then our unity will always be under threat.

Our enemy seeks to exploit every opportunity to cause division therefore let us be on our guard let us all pray for one another that God might work in each one of us so that these qualities mark our lives. When that happens then we will continue to experience unity in our church and we will be living a consistent Christian life, which we pray under God, will make an impact for his kingdom in this area.

Let's pray.