

EPHESIANS 4:3-6

INTRODUCTION

The key theme in this book is the theme of unity. Paul has spent some considerable time demonstrating how Christ has broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile so that they are now one in Christ Jesus. As I said last time no one can create unity, true unity is created by God and is brought into effect through Jesus Christ and the work of his Spirit. True unity is Trinitarian just as God is one so we are to be one for we are in union with God through Jesus Christ.

But although unity is God's work for He alone can create it; that does not mean that we do not have to do anything. Any sort of Christianity that says that all we do is to let go and let God do his work is a deficient faith. For as you read the New Testament you discover that Christianity involves both God working in us and us working out what God has placed within us (Philippians 2:12-13). In this context God creates the unity in Christ and we have to work hard at keeping that unity.

One of the ways that we keep the unity is to live lives worthy of our calling as Christians (v 1). This involves humility gentleness, patience and bearing with one another in love. But now as we move to look in more detail at verse 3 we want to notice

1. OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO MAINTAIN UNITY (v 3)

Now we must be thankful that we are not commanded to bring unity about for that would be impossible and it would be false unity. But we are commanded to keep the unity that is; it is our responsibility as a Christian church to do all that we can to ensure that the unity that God has brought about at great expense through His Son continues. Now as I said last week Paul is a realist he knows what we are like as human beings he knows that even as regenerate people we have a tendency to cause division.

We may not do this intentionally but he knows that Christians do not always see eye to eye with one another; we do not always agree on doctrinal issues or we do not always agree on how to apply biblical doctrines and principles to the working of the church. Now in any other group these things would be enough to cause quarrels and divisions but this should not be the case with Christian people.

Our sense of responsibility to make every effort to keep the unity created by God will help us to respond differently when divisive issues raise their heads in the church. We will always keep the unity of the church at the centre of our thinking when trying to resolve any dispute within the church. However this does not mean that anything goes within the church and all that matters is that we maintain unity. There is no unity when it is not based on truth; that is the mistake of the ecumenical movement. However, we must understand that many of the divisive issues that have split churches throughout the years have very little to do with doctrine. It is more to do with personality and practise.

Now when we think of the grievous quarrels that believers have had with one another through the centuries, it makes us wonder if the church has forgotten Paul's great instruction to keep the unity of the Spirit. But we must not only look at the past and grieve over it but we must look at the church today and ask have we neglected this instruction concerning Christian unity. It is so easy to react against the false unity of the ecumenical movement so that we actually become very independent as a church.

We are an independent church and I believe that churches ought to be independent but very often we have confused independence with isolationism. The truth is that as a church we do depend on other churches; we need other churches and their support both in prayer and financial support. But we also need their fellowship; that's why meetings like the Bible Rallies at Northallerton are so useful for they do express a measure of Christian unity. Fellowship can be so precious at such meetings. Saturday week ago some of us went to York to the induction of new Pastor of York Evangelical Church. What I enjoy most about such meetings is not just the preaching although it is usually very inspiring but I enjoy the fellowship afterwards; I enjoy the expression of unity when so many people from different churches meet to worship God together.

One of the problems with living in the Dales and not having a huge amount of Evangelical Churches around us is that we can become isolated even if we do not intend too. Therefore we must work at expressing our unity with true believers in true churches and this does involve a little more effort on our part but that effort is very worthwhile. When we have held joint prayer meetings with Geneva Road they have always been worthwhile events but it does take some effort on people's part to be present on such occasions.

It takes effort to attend special meetings outside of our own church meetings but if we make that effort then I believe it is attempting to keep the unity of the Spirit for we are fostering relationships and expressing our oneness in Christ Jesus. Of course Paul's main concern is not with cross church unity although that needs to be considered but he is concerned with making sure that unity at the local level is maintained and in many ways that is much harder. For we see each other frequently and we know one another's habits and faults, we can feel the hurts of living and worshipping with God's people. But before we do anything about one another faults and irritations and hurts we must consider the impact our actions will have on our unity with that person and the unity within the church. But let me say again that does not mean that we should never approach others about their faults, failings or sins.

It does not mean that we should never exercise church discipline but it does mean that our approach will be tempered with our consideration to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Of course we will not always succeed no matter how hard we try and how careful we are in our dealings with others, there will be some Christians who take exception to one of our beliefs or practices and decides to go elsewhere.

That is always a sad day it is not one that I personally ever rejoice in but our responsibility is to do all we can to maintain the unity created by God if other Christians don't give Paul's instruction the same priority as we do then there is

nothing we can do about it. We simply have to make sure that we deal with every believer in a humble, gentle, patient and loving way and seek to keep the unity in the Spirit with each believer. But at the end of the day if other Christians decide to cut their ties with us there is nothing we can do apart from continuing to pray for them and when the opportunity arises seek to express our union with them in Christ.

At other times it might be better for people to leave a local church for the sake of keeping the unity. There once was a group of Pentecostal believers who came to a reformed church. They worshipped in that church for a couple of years but never became members there. After discussions with the Pastor some of these people decided to go back to the Pentecostal church because their beliefs were more in line with what that church actually believed rather than with the Reformed church.

They left on good terms and continued to have personal fellowship with members of the Reformed church, but it simply was more practical for them to go to a church where they felt comfortable with the style of worship and beliefs. I wholeheartedly agree with their decision for at least the unity was kept as they left on good terms.

My point is that unity does not have to mean wholehearted agreement on every doctrinal point; if people are saved people then I have a Christian duty to seek to keep the unity that God has created in Christ even though that means that some people may feel unable to be in membership with us here.

2. WHY WE SHOULD MAINTAIN THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT (vs. 4-6)

Paul is going to state a number of truths that emphasises that we are in union with one another and he is doing so in order to give us the reasons why we need to work at maintaining Christian unity within our church. If you notice the word “one” is mentioned 7 times in these three verses. Paul is saying we are one therefore live as if you are one and maintain that oneness in Christ within the life of the church.

In the Greek there are very few verbs used here by Paul we in our English translations have added verbs to this sentence so that it makes more sense. Literally Paul says “one body one Spirit,” he is going to highlight the fact that we are already one in Christ therefore we must do our part to maintain it.

We are united because we are one body and the one body clearly refers to the church. Paul has already in this letter referred to the church as ‘his body’ (1:22-23) and he has referred to the reconciling work of Christ as reconciling both Jew and Gentile to God in ‘one body’ (2:16). Now in Paul’s day it would have been easy to talk about a Gentile church and a Jewish church if the Apostles had of done that it might have solved some very difficult problems within the life of the church. But for Paul that would have been a denial of the gospel, which brings reconciliation and oneness in Christ. Paul refused to think of the church in any other way but as one body.

Now in our own day I think we have probably forgotten such teaching. For as we look at the church nationally we see a church that is very fragmented, a church that claims to be one in Christ but yet in practise there is anything but one body. We have churches that seem to be in competition with one another, churches that refuse to

co-operate with one another and churches who for whatever reason seem to rejoice in the troubles within their neighbouring church.

Or within the work place we can so easily boast about our own church to another Christian work colleague who goes to a church that is going through a really tough time. We almost can rejoice that God is blessing our church and not their church. But for Paul there is only one body therefore the unity of believers was very important to him and it should be to us.

Paul links one body with one Spirit. Just as there is only one body in which every believer belongs so there is only one Holy Spirit who has brought us to experience salvation in Christ. It's the same Holy Spirit who works in the heart of the Baptist as well as the Paedo-Baptist. It's the same Spirit that brings the Charismatic to faith in Christ as well as the Reformed person. Paul's point is simply that we are one with all fellow believers no matter what church people go too therefore we need to work at maintaining this unity that God by his Spirit has created.

God has called every believer to salvation there is no believer who has not been called to one hope. The church of Jesus Christ is not made up of people who are called and those who are not called, no all believers are called into one body therefore all believers are brothers and sisters in Christ. Now this hope to which all believers are called is an expectant hope. In the New Testament believers always expected what they hoped for and it is a sad loss to the church today that we have lost the New Testament expectation of hope.

For most of us today hope is very uncertain and unsure but for the church it should be full of expectation as we wait for the Lord to fulfil all his promises in Christ to the church. Do we live with this expectation in our hearts for we have been called to this hope and this hope is one; it is the hope or expectation of all Christians that God will accomplish all that he has purposed and promised to accomplish for the church in Christ Jesus. At the end of the day if every true believer is going to live together in harmony at the fulfilment of God's purposes then surely we need to learn to live in harmony now otherwise we are simply denying this hope that we profess.

But isn't it strange the hope that is suppose to unite Christians so often divides them Is there anything that divides the church more than views concerning how God is going fulfil his purposes. We have believers who think there is going to be a Millennium and believers who think there is no Millennium and then there is the whole issue of the tribulation, will the church go through the tribulation and so on.

The future becomes very complicated and the church has done its best to make it complicated and so often the church has been divided on this issue. Some churches go as far as to state a particular doctrinal belief about the future as essential for membership.

Now of course when Paul talks about hope he is not thinking about particular views of the Millennium, which Christians may differ on, but he is talking about that hope that every Christian agrees about things like the return of Christ the resurrection of the dead and the last judgement.

This is the hope of Christian people, we can hold our own views about the Millennium but they must never be used to divide churches we simply must focus upon the hope that does unite all Christians. So these three, body, Spirit and hope go together. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to graft us into the one body and to give us the one hope in Christ.

Now in verse 5 Paul introduces another set of three one Lord one faith one baptism.

Now who is it that saves all believers? It is the Lord who does it. Our experience of how he does it will be different for some of us our salvation was very instant and the change dramatic but for others we may not know for sure when we were regenerated but slowly over time we realised what has taken place in our lives. But if you are a Christian the same Lord Jesus that saved me has made you a believer. This is why we ought to work hard at maintaining our unity.

There is only one Lord and if someone is a true believer then the same Lord that saved us has saved them and therefore we are united to them, even though they might hold different views from me on what we might call secondary matters.

To this one Lord Paul adds one faith. Now faith can be used here subjectively or objectively. If the subjective faith is meant then Paul is saying; did not we all come to Christ in faith. Did we not all personally trust him for salvation? Paul is saying there is no other way of salvation if someone is saved they are saved because they placed their faith in Christ, they are trusting him for salvation.

If Paul means objective faith here then he is saying there is only one gospel one set of truths that all believers must believe in order to be saved. Now if every true believer has come to faith in Christ by believing the gospel that Christ died for sinners then is this not a reason why we should work hard at unity within the church. Has everyone who is a member here not placed their faith in Christ? Did they not believe the same gospel that you and I believe?

If so then what right have we not to be united to them, what right have we to choose not to be at one with them in practise? We are one with all true believers in Christ therefore we need to work that unity out and seek to foster it and maintain it because we have one Lord and one faith.

Finally Paul says we have one baptism. Now once again the subject of baptism has caused divisions in the church the name Baptist church tells us what that church believes about baptism. We know that we can have a small Paedo-Baptist Church and a small Baptist church in the same small town and all that divides them is the issue of baptism. So how can Paul say that one baptism is a reason for making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?

Paul is not concerning himself with modes or who should be baptised here but Paul is thinking about what baptism signifies namely identification with Christ. It is baptism into Christ (Galatians 3:27). It is public identification with the Lord Jesus. Now Paul's point is that if through baptism people have identified with Christ if they are expressing their new found faith in the waters of baptism then is this not a reason why we should maintain our God given unity with such people.

If we are identifying ourselves with Christ in our baptism and other believers are doing likewise then how can we be divided from them?

Paul's final argument is that there is only one God (v 6). In Paul's world this claim was outrageous for most people believed that there were many gods. But the Christian held that there was only one God and this one God is the Father of all and in this context the 'all' means all true believers all who have been created and redeemed by him. He is the heavenly Father of the Jewish Christian and the heavenly caring Father of the Gentile Christian.

If this is so then how can we divide the family, surely we ought to work at maintaining the unity within the family for we share the same Father with all believers in this church and with all believers in every church. As God he is sovereign over all his people and he is in all his people and is working out his purposes through every single one of his people and through every local church.

In conclusion let me say in these three verses Paul is talking about the triune God he mentions the Spirit in verses 3-4 he then talks about the Lord Jesus in v 5 and finally God the Father in verse 6. His point is God is one and therefore all who are called to him are also one therefore make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Amen