

The Ideal: The Biblical Pattern Of Unity Endeavoring to Keep the Spirit's Unity

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As we analyze our past and discuss a strategy for racial reconciliation in the Pentecostal Movement, we must consider the apostle Paul's admonition to the Ephesians to "[Endeavor] to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

Unity and peace seem so hard to achieve and hold in our world. Though it would seem that the contrary should be so, these qualities, which so adequately reflect the will of the Lord, are often difficult to achieve even within the church of God. Seemingly our world is fraught with forces, persons, and programs aimed at creating dissension and chaos. Anyone expecting unity just so can forget about it before the thought has time to germinate: you will be disappointed, my brother and sister, if you are waiting to have unity without struggle and effort. The same is true of peace: one must literally make peace in order to have peace; so high is the vocation of peacemaking that those who busy themselves in the process can properly be called "children of God." We must "endeavor" to keep unity in the bond of peace; this is the Spirit's unity.

Unity Essential to Integrity

The unity we must endeavor to keep is essential to the integrity of the church. The church, like the Christ who is her head, stands on the border between two worlds. It is the conjunction of two realms. It brings together two dimensions of life. On the one hand, the church is worldly; those who comprise its membership are citizens of some particular country, persons of some specific racial and ethnic group. Church members work, cry, and assume the same responsibilities as do other persons living in historic communities. As a social institution, the church is one among the many that establishes the order within a given society.

On the other hand, the church is a mystical body of believers who have been incorporated together in Christ. It is comprised of those who yet live and believe on the Son of God, and it includes those believers who have preceded us and died in the faith. It is the body of Christ in the world; the world is to look to the church to know the righteousness and power of the living Christ. The church is to reflect on a small scale what the rule of Christ shall be when He comes to reign in the earth.

Without the unity that gives the church her integrity in the world, she is little more than a freak and an embarrassment to God. Disunity in the church can be compared to a human body that is missing some vital part: a hand, a leg, an arm, or a foot. Even when a body possesses life, those impairments that leave a part missing detract

from vitality and power. People with no legs can still get from one place to another, but they are not agile and as productive as they would be without such an impairment. When God would show us off to the world, we are like the imperfect project: instead of bringing glory to God, we become a laughingstock, an object of scorn. Those who need Christ the most find alibis in our misdeeds. As was the case with the vineyard in the prophet's parable, a church without unity is like the disappointment of finding sour grapes when luscious, sweet ones were promised and expected.

The epistle-writer goes to great lengths to disclose how God has provided for unity in the church by giving gifts and establishing offices and ministries within the church. He anchors this unity and this service in the victory of Christ: after winning the victory on Calvary and defeating the powers of death, hell, and the grave, He took all power in His hand. At the point of His ascension, He even led captivity captive; that is, he collared, chained, and dragged away the powers that enthrall minds, spirits, and communities. The force which snatches people out of line with the will of God, and the mission of the church, is a captive to Christ. The enemy can only have those who deny the power of God and locate themselves outside the sphere of divine dominion.

With captivity out of the way, the Lord could freely give gifts to men and women. By the Spirit whom He sent, Christ gave some the office of apostle; it was within their authority to establish order in the church. Upon them the church is founded. To some He gave the unction to be prophets: they speak the word that God reveals to their heart. It is a word that God reveals to edify, to discern, to warn in matters in which God's people need immediate guidance. Some are equipped as evangelists: they are to tear down, root up, plant, and build. It is by their work that the good news is spread to those who do not know Christ, and to those who know Him but fall short of what He requires and expects. Some are in the church as pastors and teachers: the care of the souls of the people is entrusted to them: they are to feed the flock with knowledge, to pray for the people, to chastise when they stray. They are to live, counsel, and to hold God's people together. Paul says these gifts are:

"For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; That we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive."
(Ephesians 4:12-14).

The Lord wants us sound, whole, impregnable--even against the gates of hell. He has provided that we be out of the reach of the Strong Man who would pervert what belongs to God. To this end, every ministry gift in the Body is sustained by the same power. Indeed, the Body is constituted of charisms--spiritual energies--that receive life from and return life to the Body. The list of these gifts and ministries includes,

but is not exhausted by, those listed in this chapter (See also 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12). Without them, the Body is without vitality.

What this chapter teaches us, however, is how the gifts of ministry are to build up, or edify the Body. Within the local assembly, the exercise of charisms is to be under the guidance, supervision, and authority of the pastor-teacher. This is not to say that the pastor is to do all. No! But the pastor is responsible for it all. Boards, committees, departments, auxiliaries, teachers, and ministers cannot have independent work, any more than members of the human body can have independence. Severed from the body, the member atrophies and dies.

Again, notice the nature of this unity the Spirit gives. It is described in verse 16 as the power the joint supplies, or "sorbornicity." This is not an authoritarian power; neither does it violate diversity. Like the joint, this power holds the Body together from within. The strength of each member is brought together in dexterity, enabling the performance of many functions by the same Body. Yet the full strength of the Body can be extended through any single member. A small hand can be greatly empowered by a strong arm! But this peculiar unity cannot be kept without an endeavor.

The Spirit's Unity

The unity we must endeavor to keep is the Spirit's, and this we must never forget. No individual, no community, no race, and no generation has knowledge or a perspective that is wide, broad, or deep enough to encompass the eternal will of God, the vast complex of human needs and aspirations, and the forces at work in the world that are irrevocably committed to chaos. Unity of human origin transgresses the will of God, excludes some who are brothers and sisters, and plays into the hands of the devil. Whenever the fixing suits our fancy, we are on the road to failure. The unity that would please the Lord must be of the Spirit.

Unless the unity of the Spirit binds the church together there can be no embodiment of her essential life. What she does in such a condition could really be done better by some other agency. Even those things we do as legitimate expressions of the Spirit's movement within us can be done as well, if not better, by others when the Spirit is not the author. If all we are about is entertainment, a better show can be produced at the coliseum. If our major concern is who can dress the best, a fashion show could draw far more people. Surely we must capture the interest and imagination of our young people, but if that is all we desire, we could do better with a basketball game or a rock music video. If our outreach is not motivated by Christian charity, we would do better to just send people to the social agencies: they can do it better.

No! When we are joined together in the Spirit's unity unique and mysterious power is released. When we are joined to one another with Christ as the head, simple acts of obedience, plain truth declared, ordinary words of encouragement, and unsophisticated songs have power to convict men and women of sin and

unrighteousness and to soothe their aching hearts. By the Spirit who is most pleased to work in unity, a wretched, undone, nasty soul is cleansed by the power of God. One who is despondent is given the courage needed to endure the stress and the test and rise up with new life.

Within the life of God, the Spirit is preeminently the establisher of unity. The Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father through the Son. Coming from the very depths of the being of God, the Spirit is the Lord and giver of life. The Spirit is eternal, all wise, and holy as the Father and the Son. By the Spirit the Father sent the Son into the womb of Mary. By the Spirit, God raised Christ from the dead. The Spirit upholding Him, the Son passed through death and offered Himself without spot unto God. The Spirit's work is that of unity; where there is division, the Spirit is frustrated. In those in whom the Spirit dwells there is the constant pressure to be one with God and one with the people of God of all cultures and nationalities.

Upon entering the soul, the Holy Ghost implants a relentlessness that does not subside until one finds peace with God and unity with His eternal purposes. The Spirit is grieved by disunity, division, and strife in the Body and will not settle for anything less than what God wills. For being one with God, the Holy Ghost does not have a separate mind, will, or program. The Spirit gives no independent message or revelation. The witness of the Spirit is consistent with what the Scriptures have already declared, testifying the things of Christ, opening that truth already given in the law, the prophets, and the gospel. More than all else, being filled with the Holy Ghost means that God lives on the inside of the believer compelling unity and peace with God and with those for whom Christ died, whatever their race or national origin.

The very nature of the church is bound with her unity: there is "One Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5). This means that an individual or a family of believers is either part of "The Church" or they are not part of Christ at all. No one group is all right with all others being all wrong. Rather, there is a unity in Christ, to which the Spirit is seeking to carry us, which is deeper than the superficial divisions that block our path to the Kingdom.

All of our divisions are outside Christ: He is not in our midst under such conditions. In division we have denied the faith and our baptism is in vain. No, Christ stands outside the edifice that allegedly belongs to Him, knocking and begging for admission. In division we are like the fig tree with nothing but leaves. We are swaying in the breeze and not producing fruit. In such a case, it is only a matter of time before the pronouncement of the curse that causes life to dry from the root.

The Spirit's Unity by the Spirit's Power

The endeavor to keep the Spirit's unity must be in the Spirit's power, flowing from a life of concern and consecration. The only way to keep the Spirit's unity is to be and do what the Spirit creates and authors. Such centering in the will of God is ultimately

critical to our life and well being. By the same power by which the Spirit brings creation to its destiny, The Spirit also brings judgment on all who stand against the working of the Almighty.

Before the curtain is drawn on the stage of time, God will allow that which belongs to God to be ripped to pieces rather than permitting it to persist in a state of profanity and apostasy. Indeed, this is the pattern for God's dealing with the chosen people when they failed to keep the Spirit's unity. Israel was chosen from all of the families of the earth. Because she refused to hear the prophets, God allowed her to be led into exile and her cities made into a heap of rubble.

Jesus commissioned the church to go into all the world and preach the gospel, but she huddled around Jerusalem too long, and God allowed persecution to drive the disciples to the uttermost parts of the world. The church at Ephesus labored patiently, withstood evil, and refused to follow liars who called themselves apostles. But they failed to keep the unity of the Spirit. They left their first love. So Christ warned them by the revelation given to John on the Isle of Patmos: "Remember therefore from whence thou are fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place except thou repent" (Revelation 2:5).

The same Spirit is working in the nations and the church to establish unity. While having compassion on those who suffer dreadful diseases, violence, poverty, and many other scourges of our time, we must not neglect to observe where behavior follows a course that conflicts with the unity the Spirit establishes. Along with the offering of immediate relief, our ministries must also move our communities to alignment with the Spirit's unity manifest in Christ. Churches who fail to obey God may find that they have to close their doors and go out of business altogether.

The movement of the Spirit as the cosmic Unifier is to prepare in this world a fit dwelling place for the Father. The place of the Father's dwelling must be a place of peace; it must be a place of holiness; there can be no disharmony or strife. Issuing forth from God, the Spirit accomplishes inner transformation. This is why there can be no contentment in our souls or our churches until the Spirit has full control. In our souls the Spirit is the pledge of the full restoration that is to come--groaning within us and within creation--bringing forth full redemption. Already Christ has been raised above every power and principality, and He has led captivity captive. The Spirit will not rest until the work of Christ is applied in all creation. Then God will be all, and in all. May the work begin in this family.

Though we have come along way, we still have a long way to go to be what He wants us to be. For us all, that destination must be: the Spirit's unity!