

## **Lesson Four – Cultivating Peace and Unity in the Church**

Text: Ephesians 4:1-16

**Ephesians 4:3-4a** Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit...

Of the many themes that frequently appear in Paul's writings, unity in the church is prominent. Yet, few things have proved to be more challenging then and now than living into the unity and oneness of Christ. As we look across 2,000 years of church history, it is riddled with fractures as the church has divided and splintered into numerous Christian fellowships. Jesus himself prayed for the unity of all believers (John 17:20-23). Within our own heritage, Churches of Christ sought to be a movement of unity among all believers. No doubt we should pray and work towards that very same unity amongst all who seek Christ today.

As Paul has instructed throughout the letter, he now urges that we strive with all our energy towards this "calling" of Christ in the church (4:1).

In this lesson we will focus on two questions that can be framed within the text of 4:1-16:

- 1) How do we cultivate the peace of Christ towards our brothers and sisters in faith?
- 2) What is the basis of our unity in the church?

### **I. How do we cultivate the peace of Christ toward our brothers and sisters in faith?**

**Ephesians 4:2** Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

The postures and practices that Paul names here are at the very center of those lived and taught by Christ. They are empowered in the church by the Spirit, but they are also something that requires our training and attention.

#### **"Be completely humble and gentle..."**

It may seem obvious that such an attitude and approach is needed in the church, but they often remain elusive. Pride is the sin most common to turn our focus away from the worship of God, but humility is the key antidote. As our awareness of God, increases the greater our humility will increase. We follow Jesus on the humble road. As humility takes root in the heart, it grows and is extended to others in the form of gentleness and compassion in our relationships.

- **Matthew 11:28-29** "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart..."
- **Philippians 2:3-4** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.
- **Colossians 3:12-15** <sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. <sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

### **“Be Patient...”**

We live in a frenzied world. Technology has made it possible to do things at the speed of a click of a button. However, people are not machines. Human beings need much time and patience in all aspects of life. It is especially true of the spiritual life. Discipleship to Christ is a lifetime commitment. There are no shortcuts when it comes to our relationship with God or with one another. We must continually practice the grace of patience when it comes to one another's strengths and weaknesses in the church. God is working in time. Faith takes time. Prayer takes time. Change and transformation into Christ take time. Much of our disunity and frustration comes from our being short with one another when the Spirit is calling us to be patient. Being patient is the only way to practice the peace of Christ with one another.

- **Psalm 27:14** Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.
- **Psalm 46:10a** He says, “Be still, and know that I am God...”
- **1 Corinthians 13:4a** Love is patient, love is kind...
- **Romans 12:12** Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
- **James 5:7-9** Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. <sup>8</sup>You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. <sup>9</sup>Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged.

### **“Bearing with One Another in Love”**

Agape love is the primary direction and aim of all the Christian life. The wonder and power of God is at work as we bear with one another's weaknesses in love. The church is the only place where such love of sinful, broken people is continually welcomed and received as Christ has done for us. Our sharing communion with one another is a visible sign of our sharing in Christ and one another together in love.

- **John 15:12-13** My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.
- **Romans 15:1-3** We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup>Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. <sup>3</sup>For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”
- **Galatians 5:13-15, 6:2** You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. <sup>14</sup>For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>15</sup>If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other...<sup>2</sup>Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.
- **1 Corinthians 13:4-8** Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup>It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup>Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup>It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. <sup>8</sup>Love never fails.

### **Discussion:**

Which of the above practices do you think requires the most “effort” (Eph. 4:3)?

Why are they so crucial in the church?

Which of these has the most lasting impact when it comes to practicing the peace of Christ?

How can we encourage and help one another in living out these practices?

## **II. What is the basis of unity in the church?**

**Ephesians 4:4-6** There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Paul now names seven “ones” that form a guiding basis for unity in the church:

- 1) **One body** – Just as there is only one Jesus, there is only one body, the church. There are many congregations, gatherings of Christians that meet at various times and places, but they are supernaturally part of the one body of Christ. There is not a Jewish church and a Gentile church.
- 2) **One Spirit** – The Holy Spirit unites us with God and one another forming us into God’s holy temple (Eph. 1:13-14; 2:18).
- 3) **One hope** – The hope of Christ unites us in the promise of what God has done and is yet to do in finishing the saving work for all creation.
- 4) **One Lord** – Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of all creation.
- 5) **One faith** – The witness and testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the one confession of faith in the church. That Christ came, was crucified, buried, risen on the third day, ascended, and is coming again in glory is the faith that is forever making us one.
- 6) **One baptism** – It is in our baptism “into Christ” that we receive the new identity that makes us one (Gal. 3:28).
- 7) **One God and Father of all** – The belief in the one God signals a dramatic shift for Gentiles who formerly would have believed in many gods. Understanding that one God is the true creator God over all and in all is a dramatic change. It is a universal call for all creation to worship the one God in whose image humanity has been made (Genesis 1:27; Acts 17:28). In the church, the “one God and Father of all,” has created us to be a family united together in him.

“These seven items are part of the “givens” of Christianity. Unity is already provided by God in the most important things. Sharing these fundamental things gives a broad and strong basis for unity. In view of what unites, the things that divide seem less formidable. They may be important in themselves. It is important to try to be “right” on any issue. But the things that divide believers are not nearly so important as what unites - one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one body, one faith, one baptism, one hope. In a sense, to be divided is to say God has not done enough to produce unity; it is to minimize the most important aspects of the Christian faith. These doctrinal unities should encourage the expression and application of unity among Christians.” (Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, 403-404).

**Discussion:**

How does focusing on what unites us together in Christ help us to practice the peace of Christ in the church?

How can we seek to find peace and unity with those with whom we disagree religiously?

Read and discuss the restoration plea below and its desire for broader Christian unity.

**Consider the Restoration Plea for Unity:**

In 1804, this desire for unity led Barton W. Stone and others to simply be called churches of Christ or Christian churches they wrote:

We *will*, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.

We *will* that our name...be forgotten, that there be but one Lord over God's heritage, and his name one.

We *will*, that preachers and people cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance; pray more and dispute less...

--Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery, June 1804