

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (14-4-1996 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Ephesians 4:2,3

Christian Unity

Additional Bible Reading: Galatians 5:16-26

Introduction

From this point onwards are down-to-earth details about what it means to walk worthy of our calling. Leaves us in no doubt what living the Christian life means – in church, daily life, in society, in family and as we face all the powers of darkness and evil which are rampant in our world.

But Paul's first concern is that in the church, among God's people, there should be unity and oneness. Already united. But this unity has to be carefully protected and it is protected only as we behave in certain way and have certain attitudes to each other. Later going to explain foundation and grounds and reason for unity among Christians.

Endeavouring – making every effort – to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace

Tells us that among Christians, saved, born again of God's Spirit, there exists a unity already. One of God's purposes in salvation. Sin disrupts and divides and separates and splinters. The more it gets a hold, the more it is not held in check, the greater the division it causes. Not need to illustrate that – just look at modern society and family life. Sin divides a man within and against himself.

Salvation is meant to have very reverse effect – it reunites, restores unity, brings healing, brings together traditional enemies, breaks down middle wall of partition. Now this unity has to be protected and preserved. Unity in the Spirit in the bond of peace is to be maintained. First concern if we are to walk worthy.

Very different from church unity, which we hear so much about, where churches and denominations get together and join ranks so that they can win people. Too often there is a wide difference of opinion about what a Christian is, the Gospel, the members of the church. They choose to ignore these differences as if they don't matter, avoid being precise and definite, and work out formulas where people can read whatever meaning they like into things.

This is not what Paul is talking about. We do not have to create unity – it already exists among God's people. Born again and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and truly believing the great truths already mentioned about salvation. Clear and definite about the Gospel. God's people are already united spiritually and hold onto the great truths of the Gospel. Very different from churches and denominations getting together, because some churches and denominations know this new birth, and others do not. Some believe these great truths, and others neglect them or deny them outright.

This unity is not vague or nebulous. Not a matter of being good or moral and religious or friendly, or showing public school spirit or hail fellow well met. This unity is about real spontaneous and hearty belief in essentials of Gospel of Salvation. Unity not

produced by man with schemes and ecclesiastical plans, but unity created by the Holy Spirit. Only He can do this.

Our responsibility is to maintain, preserve and keep this, not create it. It is an internal unity, not the external unity of ecclesiastical bodies. We experience this unity only if Holy Spirit has done His gracious work in us giving us new life in Christ, and indwelling us. But if Holy Spirit is in two people, there is recognizable unity at once. C.f. meeting of two Christians, complete strangers, but once they know the other is a Christian, there is a bond that is deeper than family.

Unity of the Spirit is primarily spiritual, unseen, internal and vital. Then expressed outwardly and visibly. Now this spiritual unity based on the Gospel has to be preserved. It requires effort, endeavour, have to do your utmost. Effort, care, thoughtfulness, putting self out. Easy for unity to be spoilt. Can take nothing for granted. Just as in a marriage, nothing can be taken for granted to preserve the unity, it needs to be worked at, so with spiritual unity. (σπουδαζοντες “being eager” present participle) Need to guard and preserve – watch for anything which might spoil by words, attitudes, neglect, or unkindness, or thoughtlessness. The job never ends.

Manner in which we are to preserve this unity

Things which we need to display to keep disunity at bay and to preserve and foster spiritual unity:

- (a) Lowliness and humility. ταπεινοφροσυνης. Humble and lowly – this is stressed by the New Testament, but was so despised by the ancient world. To be humble was to have the attitude of a slave and menial and unimportant person.

Jesus Himself made humility a virtue. He said the poor in spirit would inherit the earth (Matthew 5:3) He warned the disciples to be like little children (Matthew 18:3). In Paul’s words, **He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross** (Philippians 2:7-8).

Paul told the Romans **Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited** (Romans 12:3,16). Of His ministry in Ephesus for three years he said, **I served the Lord with great humility and with tears** (Acts 20:19). **I am less than the least of all God’s people** (Ephesians 3:8).

The trouble with relationships begins, and disunity is caused, when people begin to forget their own weakness and failings and sinfulness. Pride leads them to assert themselves, anxious to put self in the centre, they become puffed up. If we remember “J-O-Y” –Jesus, Others, Yourself - this order of priorities gives us the best way to be humble and lowly. Pride, self-assertion and self-importance has no place in the Christian. The world is

riddled with aggression, self-assertion, brazen attitude – the reverse of the Christian attitude. Unity is preserved by humility and not pride.

- (b) Meekness and gentleness. *πραυτητος* This is not weakness. This is the man whose strength is under control. The man who is master of himself. C.f. Moses was very meek, but of great strength and power (Numbers 12:3). The Lord Jesus was meek and lowly of heart, He washed His disciples feet, yet He threw the money-changers out of the temple. Paul was meek, but had strong things to say, and at times had to be very firm.

Rather than being quick to assert yourself, be like Abraham who gave Lot the choice of the land (Genesis 13:7-8). However there may be times when you have to assert your rights, as Paul asserted his Roman citizenship, if necessary to correct a mistake or help the cause of the Gospel (Acts 16:35-40). But power is exerted under control, it does not take over the life.

Being meek does not mean enduring wrong-doing from others, and not correcting people or challenging wrong-doing. But these things must be challenged in spirit of meekness. **The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him, he must gently instruct** (2 Timothy 2:24-25). Greek word for humility here *προυτητι*.

No revenge or retaliation. Jesus was reviled, but He reviled not again. Comes from a man who was totally submissive to the Lord, under His control, accepting His will under all circumstances, accepting the Lord's authority without any question. **Show true humility towards all men** (Titus 3:2).

This will ensure that unity among believers is maintained and safeguarded. Pride of grace, race, lace, pace, place, face – what havoc it causes! Our conceit causes division. Cromwell said to some Scottish presbyters, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, consider it possible you may be mistaken". This is humility and meekness. In all situations, at all times, wherever you are, whatever you are doing, whoever the person is, never be without it.

- (c) Long-suffering (patient)
- (d) Bearing with one another.
- (e) In love. *μακροθυμιας ανεχομενοι εν αγαπη* The last phrase has several words which belong together. Bear with, be patient with, put up with, keep self-control with others who are awkward or disagreeable or irritating. Consider why they might be awkward – because of health, background, anxiety? Bear without resentment, not to retaliate or score points over. Aim to be a peace-maker.

This does not mean we are blind to sins and weaknesses of others or to the problems they cause. It does not mean we should put up with the situation

without attempting to change it. It is important for ourselves and good for others that people should change, and the problems they cause be removed. But all depends on the way we go about it. Irritable and bad-tempered and seeking to get even – solves nothing. Need to be willing to put up with a lot as we try to change the situation.

We know from the New Testament there are two situations where this attitude is vital. One situation is Christians suffering misunderstanding and cruelty from enemies. The other is the case of the Christian wife married to an unbeliever or vice versa. If the non-Christian is willing to live with the Christian, then the Christian is to remain with the non-Christian (1 Corinthians 7:12-14). Wives with husbands who are not believers are to be submissive, so that without a word they may be won by the conduct of their wives (1 Peter 3:1).

And if this is difficult, we need to remember how patient others have to be with us, and all they have to put up with from us. Also remember how patient God is to us. If God had not been long-suffering to us, none of us would be alive and none of us would be Christians. Paul speaks of God's forbearance *ανοχης* and long-suffering *μακροθυμιας* to us (Romans 2:4). His goodness is meant to lead us to repentance.

Driving force behind this is love. It makes us long-suffering and patient. We have the other person's good in sight, concerned with their welfare, to help them to be what they need to be and ought to be, and perhaps in heart want to be. Not concerned to show them how wrong they are and how right you are, but to help them to be where they ought to be.

Conclusion

The Church of Christ needs to be united, and have unity preserved. Rejoice in the unity, which Christ brings, but do not take it for granted – it is a delicate flower, easily damaged.

All about humility and meekness, patience, long-suffering and love. How? Back to doctrine again. Impossible on our own. Need the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Do not quench the Spirit but allow Him to produce His fruit in and amongst you.