

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (21-4-1996 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Ephesians 4:4-6
Christian Unity

Additional Bible Reading: Galatians 1

Introduction

Paul is still on the theme of unity, dealing with the great truths which unite us. Uses the word “one” seven times. Three of the seven allude to the three persons of the Trinity, the remaining four are references to Christian experience derived from the three persons: One body, created by One Spirit, called in One hope, believe in One Lord, One faith, One baptism, One God and Father who has brought us into His family.

It is because of these seven “ones” that Christians are united already. They may be in different churches and denominations, but can be united by these seven things. These seven great truths or doctrines are at the foundation. May disagree on secondary matters, but must be agreed on these seven great foundation truths.

Some people are looking for unity in some great “super-church” to which all will belong, but Paul’s emphasis is that unity rests on the work of the Holy Spirit, giving new life and building lives on these great truths of Christian faith.

Not going to have seven heads in sermon, but going to arrange these truths under three heads, and each head belongs to a person of the Trinity. (a) The Holy Spirit – One Spirit, creates One body, and guarantees One hope; (b) The Son – One Lord, centre of One faith and One baptism; (c) One God and Father of all. Unity is grounded in One God Himself revealed in three persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How the Bible teaches us to take our eyes off ourselves, and all our petty concerns, and fix them on God, and the great objective truths about God. Not self in the centre, but God in the centre, His glorious purposes and His grace to us.

Going to follow the order Paul gives us – it is true to our experience – the Holy Spirit shows us the need of the Son, and through the Son we know the Father.

The Holy Spirit

Three truths about Him – One body, One Spirit, One hope.

(i) One body – the Body of Christ, the Christian church of which Christ is the head. In God’s eyes there is one body, one church, to which belong all the redeemed who are truly His, in heaven and on earth. It is invisible, unseen, and its members are known only to God. A spiritual and internal society, created by the Holy Spirit. **We were all baptised by one spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free** (1 Corinthians 12:13). This one church may have members in many local and visible churches and denominations. It is made up of all the redeemed, from every nation, colour, language, education, temperament and outlook.

It does not follow that everyone who is on a church roll is a true Christian. Churches have different standards for membership. Not all emphasise the need for knowing Christ and the new birth. People can be on a church roll for all sorts of reasons – family tradition, it suits business, parents arranged it. The true Christian – a member of the one true church of Christ – ought to be a member of a local church, and publicly identify with people of God in the locality. But cannot assume that you are a member of the true church, just because your name is on a church roll somewhere.

This is the first basis of unity. If we are part of the body, we belong to one another, and therefore there is unity. This leads to the next basis of unity:

(ii) One Spirit. It is His work which makes us Christians. He must do a work in our lives – a miraculous work, raising us from spiritual death. He starts by convicting us of sin. Before this happens, we are pleased with ourselves, think we are quite good really, as good as the next person. But when the Holy Spirit convicts, we see ourselves as we really are – rotten with sin within. We resist God interfering with our life, only want Him there when we are in trouble. Lost and empty. Then we are brought low, and see our failure and our need.

The Spirit continues His work – He gives new life. Shows us Jesus is the very Saviour we need. Moves in our life to enable us to trust. He makes us aware we are born again, new creatures. Not just improved with new coat of paint, or dusted up and down – but He remakes us. We discover God is real, start to love Him and His people, the family of God. Brothers and sisters. Unites us to Christ and His people. We become the temple of the Holy Spirit because He indwells us. He begins to change us – new desires and outlook. The fruit of the Spirit start to appear.

When you and I know the work of the Holy Spirit, we belong to one another and there is unity between us.

(iii) One hope of your calling. The Holy Spirit's presence is our guarantee about the future - God's deposit on us, the first down payment. Lot more to give us yet. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of what is yet to come. Glorious future.

So many things to look forward to. The Lord Jesus to come again. New bodies like His. Never growing old, dying, suffering pain, hearing or sight problems. **I consider that our present sufferings are not worthy comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us** (Romans 8:18). **In keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness** (2 Peter 3:13). Sin banished forever. Reigning with Him as kings and priests forever.

Down here we are strangers and pilgrims. The blessed hope of the Lord Jesus' return and all that will follow should be in our sights now. To see Him, enjoy Him, be in His presence, be like Him, reign with Him. If you and I have this prospect and hope of a glorious future, then we belong to one another and there is unity between us. If we know this is where we are going, then this hope unites us.

The Son of God

Three things about Him which unite us – One Lord, One faith, One baptism

(i) One Lord. Every true Christian, in the true church in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, confesses the one Lord. Unique person. The Lord. The Son of God. The Lord of glory. His coming on earth was a unique event. His virgin birth was a unique birth. Not just a man, but the God Man. His death is our only hope of salvation. No other way for sins to be put away. There was none other good enough to pay the price of sin. Now He is risen and alive forever more. If we trust Him and belong to Him, He owns us, He possesses us. We cannot believe and do as we like, because we are His.

The Lord Jesus Christ stands at the very heart of our faith. Being a Christian is not following a philosophy or teaching, it is belonging to a person. Christianity is Christ. **The same yesterday and today and forever** (Hebrews 13:8). This doctrine is very important, but not an end in itself because it points to Him and leads to Him. The burden of our Gospel is **Christ and him crucified** (1 Corinthians 2:2). The Buddhist can do without the person of Buddha, and the Muslim can do without the person of Mohammed. But we cannot do without the person of Christ – He is everything to us.

If you and I belong to the one Lord, then we belong to one another and there is unity between us. We can echo the words of Count Zinzendorff “I have one passion. It is He and He alone.”

(ii) One faith. Much debate here. Is it personal trust in Christ? Or, more likely, the body of essential beliefs which constitute the Gospel. **The word of God spread... and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith** (Acts 6:7). Christians are to **contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints** (Jude 3). There are certain essential truths for us to believe, because they make up the Gospel itself. At the same time there may be certain secondary matters on which Christians can differ and can debate. But on the basic truths which make up the Gospel, there can be no debate – sin, the person of Christ, salvation by faith in Christ and not by works.

To be wrong on these matters is a fatal mistake because a man's eternal destiny is at stake. Hence note of intolerance in New Testament. **If anyone is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned** (Galatians 1:9). **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved** (Acts 4:12). Cannot be any compromise here. Cannot be any cooperation with those who do not hold these things and preach them. The ecumenical movement play down doctrine for this very reason – doctrine divides, service unites. Hence the reluctance of many evangelical Christians to join, and hence the value of a Basis of Faith as touchstone regarding unity with others.

On what are we depending for salvation – Christian parents, Christian home, the fact you have always believed in God, never done anything bad, make donations to good causes? If relying on these things, you are lost. You have not seen the truth of the Gospel. You are outside the one faith, outside Christ. The Gospel is all of Christ and none of us. Only one faith; one body of essential doctrine. But if you and I believe that one faith, we belong to one another and there is unity between us.

(iii) One baptism. Subject of much controversy and debate. It is best to understand its meaning to be what baptism represents, since baptism itself does not actually do anything and is a public sign only. In itself it is not essential to salvation, it does not

achieve anything in itself. Baptism is **into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ** (Acts 2:38; 19:5). Outward sign of personal faith in Christ Jesus. Points to, represents and signifies that the person being baptized belongs to Christ, confesses Christ, has submitted self to Christ. Left the world, lives life in new sphere in which He is Lord and Master. No longer the individual going his own way, but yielded to Christ. Christ lives in this person and fills him with His power. Forsaken all to follow Him. Both forms of baptism point to this relationship – one looking forward to it in the future, and the other looking back and saying relationship is already established.

If you and I are personally related to Christ – in a relationship of which baptism is the outward sign – then we belong together and there is unity between us. So under the work of the Son of God – One Lord, one faith and one baptism.

God the Father

Only one truth about Him – **One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all** (Ephesians 4:6). United because of relationship to Christ has brought us into God's family of which God is the Father.

Salvation always brings us to God. Other religions and cults centre on man and benefits for man. Christian Gospel starts with God and leads us to God. He is at centre of everything. We all come to Him and when in heaven all will be centred on Him and His worship. He is sovereign over all – the church and the universe. Through all, providence under-girds our lives, maintains and sustains. His power energizes our lives.

If you and I belong to this God, if His eternal life is in us, then we belong together as brothers and sisters, and there is unity between us.

Conclusion

Concern for unity among Christians. This is based on the Trinity. We belong to the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

If we belong to the one true Church, are indwelt by the one Holy Spirit, looking forward to the same one hope, if we trust in one Lord, believe the one Gospel, and are related to Christ as signified by baptism, if we are in the family of one God the Father – then we are one and united. We belong to one another.

Thank God, not just for the few Christians in our local church, but for the vast multitudes who hold to these great truths. We are all brothers and sisters, we need to know about them, pray for them and enjoy relationship with them wherever we can.

Join in defence of the Gospel. So much confusion at present – but here we have clear landmarks and guidelines. Thank God for these great truths.