

Christian Unity 4

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-3).

The first three chapters of Ephesians are devoted to describing the marvelous work of redemption God has wrought for us in Christ Jesus. Chapter four then immediately takes up our responsibilities in view of this great salvation. It must not escape our attention that the first particular which is addressed in our walking worthy of this great calling is that we should endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit.

As we have noted previously, we can neither make nor restore true unity. It is a Spiritual unity in view, and can only be made or restored by the Holy Spirit. But we do have a solemn and urgent responsibility to keep it . . . to guard against its disruption, to give all diligence to preserve the unity which God has given us by our common life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Considering that truth is taught by divinely called and gifted men, that true doctrine is set forth in order that the saints be not divided, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine which comes along, then the cause of any disrupted fellowship must rest in men themselves. True doctrine does not divide men. Rather, it enhances unity. “Mark *them* (men) which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned . . . “ (Romans 16:17). But before we become too occupied with marking others who are potential spoilers, let us take heed to ourselves. If every man took earnest and careful heed to himself, there would be no need for us to watch for anyone else.

It is not enough for us to be right, to have the right doctrine and to have right biblical views about something. We must behave rightly about what we are right about. We are more to blame than the brother who is wrong when we are so offensive and antagonistic about setting forth truth that we goad him into a rebellious position. None involved in any way in a split among brethren may be completely exonerated from some blame. Let us remember that it is the true saints, partakers of the divine calling, who are charged with responsibility for keeping the unity of the Spirit. Immature children or selfish, ambitious, egotistical men cannot be expected to do so.

The preposition “with” indicates three qualities which must describe our walk. These are our first means of keeping fellowship.

We are to walk with lowliness, humility. It has already been observed that the schismatic is proud (1 Timothy 6:4), and also ignorant. The two go together. No truly knowledgeable man is proud, for true light always humbles the student. A man is unteachable, primarily, because he thinks he has already arrived at ultimate truth. So his pride shuts him out from profitable knowledge that would rescue him from his destructive ignorance.

If one does not walk in true humility, he will most certainly be possessed of a sensitive, touchy spirit. He will be quick to interpret remarks, statements, actions of others as deliberately demeaning or insulting to himself. He will immediately be offended and strike back. Nor will he always be on the defensive. Lest he be put to disadvantage and be considered inferior to others, he will arrogate to himself authority and power which he neither earns, deserves or is qualified to handle. He will attempt to secure himself by lashing out and cutting down others.

Pride can rightly be singled out as the root of all sin because it is essentially competitive. It was pride which caused Satan’s rebellion: He thought to exalt himself above God. It was pride which caused man’s original sin: He wanted to be equal with God. And it is pride that causes man yet to steal the glory of God and impute it to himself. It is yet pride which drives men to plunder, push down, compete with and subjugate other men . . . simply the devilish joy of sitting at the top of the pile and calling the shots.

Christians have an excellent aid for combating the perennial problem of pride. It will be a most humbling experience for us to “look to the pit from whence we were digged.” “Wherefore remember that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.”

Considering your condition in your calling, how did you come to be somebody of importance? Verse 1 of chapter 2 tells us we were *dead* in trespasses and sins; there was nothing in us inclined toward God or good. The next verse reminds us that we were Satan’s slaves, owned and controlled by him, and had no power to do otherwise, and that we lived as brute beasts driven and obsessed by animal lusts. And have we forgotten that, as such, we were just as much the children of wrath as the reprobate now is? How can we so quickly forget that God, in His mercy, quickened us, breathed spiritual life into us by the Holy Spirit, bestowed upon us the gifts of repentance and faith, and drew us to Him by His irresistible cords of love? What in all of that is to be found that we might boast? Surely nothing.

Such reflections which must be a part of my everyday meditations will surely keep me walking in gratitude and wonder toward such a God Who saves such a sinner as I. A grateful soul must certainly be an humble one. He will have no trouble walking in lowliness. And he will not be provoking his brethren by his arrogance.

Closely akin to lowliness and humility is meekness. If we are not meek, we will surely be haughty and puffed up. We will have egotistical illusions of grandeur. Whereas pride is an inherent sin in all men, and all men must be brought to a state of humility, meekness is a quality which is to be especially sought when men are placed in a position of station and power.

A preacher sagaciously informed a group of his peers recently, "What is wrong with most of you is, you have begun to believe what people have been saying about you." He was, of course, referring to the compliments, the flattering introductions, the near-blasphemous adorations that are too often lavished upon men of the cloth nowadays who are careful to keep their noses clean and to polish the right brass. Without meekness, we come to believe we actually deserve the rank and station given to us. We get an exaggerated estimation of our abilities and gifts. Along with that grows an increasing conviction of our near, if not absolute, infallibility. Therefore, we grow less and less tolerant of any views which do not coincide with ours, and more and more hostile toward those who do not recognize our most evident superiority.

We can be helped here again if we will remember that we are called to "walk worthy of our calling." Strange as it may seem, the sheer greatness, the astounding magnitude of the calling itself will bring us back down to where we belong. We have been called and predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will (Ephesians 1:11). The purpose of our calling is not the work or office in which we find ourselves. We might well deceive ourselves into thinking we are big enough to handle that. We are a predestinated part of God's ultimate purpose. We are not the whole, not the origin, not the object or the end, but an essential part of it all. We are an essential part solely because He has chosen to include us in it all. Now, where is the man so much a fool as to think himself sufficient for that? Surely these thoughts will keep us in right relation before God and with our fellow Christians.

Moses was called the most meek of all men (Numbers 12:3), and when he had a rebellion on his hands from his own family, it was not his great training and skills which made him to excel, but his meekness. He had such a monumental charge that he could not ever permit illusions of self-sufficiency to cloud his access to the One Who was sufficient for his calling.

Nehemiah also was given an impossible task. He was called to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem when everyone else had given all up for lost. He well knew the source of his strength and the guarantee of his success lay, not in himself, the king, or anyone else other than the "good hand of his God upon him" (Nehemiah 2:8). He knew better than to be side-tracked by the taunts and challenges of the opposition. So when Sanballat and Geshem wanted to call a "Council," to stage a debate, he quickly informed them that his calling was too great. "Why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (Nehemiah 6:3). And we might well ask a similar question. Why should we forsake the ministry to stoop to the nit-picking, bickering, criticizing, debating occupations of those who seem to have no greater calling? Surely the temptations will be strong. We will be challenged by someone with an argument so absurd, so full of holes, so vulnerable, it would be a literal pleasure to take it to pieces. But when you have successfully finished, you will have likely accomplished the following: You will have left the ministry while you were so engaged. You will have further alienated your antagonist. You will have cultivated a bitter, railing spirit in yourself. And you will have proved to yourself what a great scholar you thought yourself to be.

We are to walk with longsuffering. Otherwise, we shall be impatient, demanding, irritable with others. It will be utterly impossible for us unless we have learned in some degree to walk in lowliness and meekness.

Longsuffering, by necessity, indicates that there will be something to suffer; and that whatever we must suffer, we must patiently suffer for a long time. While it is true that the early church suffered much at the hands of the state, the Jews, and other unbelievers, it is not likely that that is what is in view here. Since we are concerned with keeping a unity among fellow believers, the longsuffering we are enjoined to embrace is with fellow Christians. They will do things offensive to us, they will sometimes hurt us, intentionally or not, they will reject our good counsel, they will often irritate us by their immaturity, their carnality, childishness, their backsliding, wandering weaknesses. Many times the cockiness and audacity of novices will provoke a desire to cut them down with hasty, angry words. And when the wayward brother comes to us repenting again at something less than the seventy times seven, but somewhat more than a few, we are inclined to say, "I have had enough of you," rather than forgiving and restoring.

Once again, we must admit that human flesh is not sufficient for this kind of grace. We must avail ourselves of the mercies of the longsuffering One if we are to be so toward our brethren. It will help us to reflect upon His longsuffering with us. Of course, if you have always been instantly obedient to the Saviour's will, if you have always followed without hesitation at the Spirit's call, if you have immediately laid down every sin and every care which the Lord required of you; if you cannot look back along the way you have come and have seen heel marks testifying of your stubborn, rebellious resistance all the way God has led you, then perhaps you cannot sympathetically identify with others who so behave. Think about it. Is not the above a perfect opposite of your experience? Have you not been a most difficult and obstinate, self-willed, disobedient child? Has your growth not been prolonged by your hesitancy to part with your pet sins? And has not God faithfully been longsuffering with you? More than that, is it not *yet* so with you? Can you actually say that you are not contending with God about something right now? If not right now, then perhaps no longer ago than day before yesterday? Is it not a wonder that God has not kicked you off into hell and washed His hands of you long ago? Surely these reflections will turn us in compassion and longsuffering with those of our fellow travelers whom we, in our own selfish childishness and immaturity, would not mind being rid of. They will cause us to view them in a new light and identify with their infirmities as Christ does with ours.

Let us also remember that it is God's mighty power working in them as well as in us. See how far God has brought you in spite of yourself. Then know assuredly that as certainly as He Who will finish the good work begun in you, will also finish what He has begun in your brother. Don't so rob yourself of his fellowship simply because he isn't coming along as fast as you think he should. When you do so, you are complaining more against God than you are of him. It is God Who is bringing him along. And it is God Who will make him to stand. "Yea, he shall be holden up" (Romans 14:4).

Along with our walk, we are given a specific command which relates directly to others: We are to forbear with one another. The word is derived from an expression meaning literally to restrain oneself or to hold oneself up. While we are consenting to the fact that God is able to make our brother to stand, we must also face the responsibility we have to hold ourselves up during his perversity. We have a similar expression in the English language. We speak of "putting up" with someone or something. The meaning is

essentially to endure. But when we so use it, we do not usually have the evangelical sense. When we say that we have to put up with something or that we have determined to put up with someone, we usually mean that we are doing it as a matter of duty, but not without resentment and self-pity.

When we forbear with our brother, we are not simply restraining ourselves from punching him in the nose, or kicking him out of the fellowship. We are not exercising some sort of psyched-up will power that we may glory in, or practicing a sort of stoical suffering which ignores pain as if it did not exist or matter. Oh, no! Christian Unity is motivated by something much higher than that. And we are not left to guess at what it is. We are to forbear one another in love. Love suffers long. It does not ignore suffering. Suffering is real, but love suffers, and puts no qualifications on how long it will suffer. It does not compete, envy, puff up and vaunt itself against those whom it is directed. It is not self-seeking, cannot be provoked, and keeps no account of the evil done it. It bears, believes and hopes all things (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Let us make no mistake about it. If we do not walk, act and behave in love, then that ugly four-letter word, *hate*, is dominating our behaviour as well as our emotions. And along with hate, all its companions such as envy, jealousy, resentment, unforgiveness, grudging, and vengefulness.

When we cannot stand a fellow, it is not because of his faults. We likely have close friends with worse faults. Our problem is that we hate him. When a Christian becomes alienated from his pastor, when he can no longer receive the truth of God's word from him, when he cannot walk with him any longer, it is most likely not because of the pastor's faults. He has had them all along. And he ignores greater faults in others with whom he has no problem. No, the real problem is that he no longer loves his pastor. Worse than that, he *hates* him. Nothing the pastor does can please or reconcile him. He cannot forgive, for he does not love.

Contrast this to a scene familiar in most any police station. A man is arrested for beating his wife, and jailed overnight. The next morning, his wife, bruised, battered and swollen from her husband's abuse the night before, is down there attempting to raise the bail to get her husband released. She wishes to lodge no charges. Why? She loves him. His faults which cause her much pain and suffering cannot in any way change that. Whatever he is, she loves him and will always forgive him. That is forbearing in love. Our problem with forbearance with one another is not the faults of the other; it is our lack of love. And if we would have fellowship maintained, we must learn to love as Christ loved us, even while we were yet sinners of the worst sort, and would yet be, but for the mercy and restraining grace of God.

We are now confronted with the present participle, "endeavouring," which refers back to all we have said concerning our duty and responsibility. Unity does not just roll along undisturbed. There are powerful forces working in the fleshy nature of men, supernatural dynamics in the realm of demons constantly assaulting the unity of the church. We must be constantly vigilant, ever busy employing every legitimate and spiritual means available to keep unity and harmony among brethren.

The bond of unity is said to be peace; that is, in all that is said and done, a primary consideration will be, "How will this affect the peace among the brethren?" We are not at all suggesting peace at any price. Truth, the gospel, justice and mercy, cannot be compromised. But within the framework of the above essentials, our first consideration must be peace. If it is strife which divides, then it is surely peace which binds us together. "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men . . ." (2 Timothy 2:24).

None of us live to ourselves alone (Romans 14:7). There is no area of any person's life of which he can say, "This is my business alone, and it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks or says." Everything we do affects someone else in some way. Sinners may say, "I don't give a hoot." Saints cannot. We are bought with a price, belong to the Lord, and must give account to Him of how our lives and activities affect others.

God is not the author of confusion, but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:33), so it is a fair rule to judge that what causes confusion, strife and discord among brethren is not of God and had best be left alone. No matter how right we think we may be, or how indignant we may feel about something, the wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God (James 1:20).

If we do not work for peace, we will be militant and hostile. We will be engaged in verbal brawls (often politely called theological interaction), contentions and unchristian attacks on each other.

As we work for unity, we must realize that we cannot embrace everyone in the bond of peace which is wrought by the love of the Spirit. We can only hold together what God has put together. It will be necessary to separate that which God has not united with us. Israel can have no peace with Ishmael. This "wild ass" is ever hostile; his hand is against every man's hand. He must not be allowed to disrupt the fellowship of God's people. If peace is to be kept, all unpeaceable elements must be excluded. The flesh always strives against the Spirit. Amalek and Israel are perpetual enemies. If we walk in the flesh, we can have no truck with the Spirit. But if we are to walk after the Spirit, all flesh must ever be mortified; the bondwoman and her child must be put away from the children of promise.

We must be quick to forgive, diligent to heal wounds, and careful to maintain a constant discipline in the word of truth, spoken in love.

For "the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace (James 3:17-18).

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