

## Endeavouring to keep the Unity

**Reading: Ephesians 4:1-3** “...endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit...”

### **Introduction:**

This lesson is the third and final lesson in the current series of Unity and Diversity.

You cannot read **John 17:20-23** without coming to the conclusion that unity is important. Jesus prayed for it, and it's a key factor in convincing the world of who Jesus really is - the Son of God, sent by the Father, the hope for sinners in a lost world (**Matthew 3:17; John 3:16; Luke 19:10; 1 Timothy 1:1**).

When we look at what Paul wrote in **Ephesians 4:3**, we can see that maintaining unity is not something that will happen all by itself. It is something that we all have to work at. In the New King James Version, the word “endeavouring”<sup>1</sup> is used; other versions use the term “being diligent”<sup>2</sup>. These words imply that watchfulness, or alertness, is required, and that it will involve effort on our part. Failure to work at maintaining unity can lead to the type of disunity that we see in **1 Corinthians 1:10** – disunity which was condemned by the inspired apostle, Paul.

Given that unity is so important, how is unity achieved? and what is required from us to help maintain it?

## **LESSON**

### **1) How Unity is achieved**

People become united in Christ and with other faithful Christians when they obey the gospel. When the penitent believer rises from the waters of baptism, the Lord adds them to the church (**Acts 2:47**). Their sins have been washed away (**Acts 22:16**); they have been raised to walk in newness of life (**Romans 6:4**). They are now a new creature (**2 Corinthians 5:17**), clothed with Christ (**Galatians 3:27**); an adopted child of God the Father (**Galatians 3:26; 4:4-6**); one with other members of the Lord's church (**Galatians 3:28**).

But obeying the gospel is not the only criteria for on-going unity – walking faithfully with God is also required to maintain this unity.

When we look at the history of the early church, initially there were no divisions. We read in **Acts 2:42** that the early Christians “...continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers...”. These brethren followed the same teachings and fellowship; they worshipped together, sold their possessions and used the money to help those in need (**Acts 2:45; 4:32-35**). They were “...of one accord..”, and spent time together “...with gladness and simplicity of heart..” (**Acts 2:46**). When problems arose, they worked together to resolve them (**Acts 6:1-7**).

### **2) How unity is broken**

However, as time goes by, we see issues arising in the church. False teachers corrupted the gospel, leading people astray (**Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Timothy 1:3-4**).

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotes are from the New King James Version Bible.

<sup>2</sup> New American Standard Bible

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Others were engaged in sin, corrupting the morals of the church (**1 Corinthians 5:1-7; Revelation 2:20**). There were those who were offending the consciences of others (**Romans 14**). There were those who were taking their brethren to court to resolve issues (**1 Corinthians 6:1-8**). There were those who were fighting each other (**James 4:1-2**). There were those who had fallen from grace because they tried to be justified by following the Law (**Galatians 5:4**). And there were those who had returned to the ways of the world (**2 Peter 2:12-22**). These sort of activities work against the type of unity that Jesus prayed for.

As a result, sometimes drastic measures were to be taken by the church in order to protect the faithful<sup>3</sup>, and hopefully to get those in the wrong to repent and change their ways;

- false teachers were to be avoided<sup>4</sup> **Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:9-11**.
- unrepentant sinners were to be excluded from the fellowship  
**1 Corinthians 5:5, 9-11**.

Those to be avoided or excluded were brethren who were no longer “...walk(ing) in the light as He is in the light...” (**1 John 1:7**). Such people, while they may well have been “baptised believers”, were no longer walking in unity according to God’s Word. In fact, some were actively working against it (**Romans 16:17** “...those who cause divisions...”).

The conclusion that we can draw from this is that, while responding to the gospel places us in unity with the church, that unity can be broken through unfaithfulness and worldliness.

So then, apart from remaining faithful to the Lord, what specifically is required from us as we “...endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit...”? In answering that question, I want to mention two key attitudes that must form the basis of our efforts to strive for unity, and then look at some of the ways that these attitudes can be applied in practice.

### **3) The need to keep the focus on what God wants – not what we want**

The church is not a “social club” where we get to set up or change the rules to suit ourselves. The church does not belong to us<sup>5</sup> – it is the Lord’s; it belongs to Him (**Ephesians 1:22**); He purchased it with His own blood (**Acts 20:28**). He is our Master (**Ephesians 6:9b**), we are His servants (**Romans 6:22**).

Therefore, our focus must be on what the Lord wants (**John 14:15**), not on what we want or what best suits us – either as individuals or as a group. Unity must be on His terms, not ours. When there is a conflict of wills, we need to follow the example of Jesus in the Garden – “...not My will, but Yours, be done.” (**Luke 22:42b**). And where do we find God’s Will? How do we know what God wants? By looking in His Word, the scriptures (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**).

We saw earlier that even in the first century, there were elements of the church that were wandering from the Truth. Some were led astray by men with evil, self-

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<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, division is necessary so that those who are faithful can be recognised (**1 Corinthians 11:19**).

<sup>4</sup> Unity should never be at the expense of following the Truth.

<sup>5</sup> God adds us to the church (**Acts 2:47**) so that we become members of it (**Ephesians 5:30**), but it is not “our” church in the sense of ownership; it is the Lord’s.

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serving motives (**Acts 20:29-30; Romans 16:18; Jude 4, 10-12a, 16**). Others were trying to mix the teachings of the Old Covenant with the New, thereby corrupting the gospel (**Acts 15:24; Galatians 1:6-9**).

Therefore, apostles like Paul and John wrote to various brethren exhorting them not to follow these various teachings, but to hold fast to that which they were taught in the beginning;

**2 Thessalonians 2:15** *“Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.”*

**2 Timothy 1:13** *“Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.”*

**1 John 2:24-26** *“Therefore let that abide in you, which you heard from the beginning.....These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you.”*

Their exhortations apply equally to us today. Whenever people choose to follow man’s teachings over the teachings of God (**Matthew 15:8-9**), division and disunity are bound to occur. Our individual and collective aim must be to let His Word, first and foremost, be our guide in all matters of life and godliness (**Psalms 119:105; 2 Peter 1:3**).

### **4) We must be motivated by a sacrificial love for one another**

Striving for unity involves inter-action with other people. As Christians, we are not called to live our lives in isolation from everybody else - consider **Romans 12:6-18**. We are to be “lights” in the world, visible, doing good so that men may “....see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven...” (**Matthew 5:14-16**). We are to spend time together, edifying and encouraging one another to “...love and good works..” (**Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25**).

It would be great if everybody in the church got on perfectly well with everybody else – no arguments, no disagreements, nobody ever had their feelings hurt, *etc*. But people aren’t perfect, and because they come different backgrounds, have different personalities, temperaments, levels of faith, *etc*, problems can arise that can threaten unity. An example of this can be seen in **Romans 14** and **1 Corinthians 8** where trouble arose between brethren over the issue of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Some thought it was wrong to eat the meat, others knew that there was nothing wrong, in and of itself, with eating it. But it became a point of friction;

- consciences were being offended (**1 Corinthians 8:7**), and judgemental attitudes were being displayed (**Romans 14:3; 10**).

We are called to love one another (**1 Peter 1:22**). Not the superficial or shallow type of love, but “agape” love - the type of love that seeks the good of another, even if it means that we have to make some sort of sacrifice in doing so. This type of love requires us to look beyond just ourselves, and to be conscious of the needs of others (**Philippians 2:4**). The focus then becomes; “*What do I need to do to help others remain faithful and unified in Christ*”, rather than, “*What can I do that best suits me and my needs*”.

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### 5) The practical application of love working to maintain unity

Below are some - certainly not all - of the ways that love can be put into practice in order to maintain the unity of the body.

#### a) The strong to bear with the weak

**Romans 15:1** says that, *“We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”*

Those who are new or weak in the faith will have many failings – just as we all do. At times, these failings may irritate us, or cause us to become impatient or frustrated with them. If we allow the irritations or frustrations to come to the fore, we run the risk of offending and discouraging these brethren. If the person is sinning, then we have an obligation to teach and correct them in love<sup>6</sup> (**Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:15; James 5:19-20**). But if it’s a case of giving the person time to grow, or simply a personality clash, then we need to “bite our tongue”, and exercise longsuffering (**1 Corinthians 13:4a; Ephesians 4:2; James 4:11**).

#### b) Suffer a loss, if necessary

Sometimes, disputes between brethren may never be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties. As a result, grudges, resentment, or the lack of a willingness to forgive can undermine the efforts to maintain unity. An example of this can be found in **1 Corinthians 6:1-8**, where it seems that conflicts between some of the brethren had gotten out of hand. The situation had reached a point where brother was taking brother to court in order to get satisfaction (vs.1, 6).

Now the scriptures do give us avenues to approach those who we feel have wronged us (**Matthew 18:15-17**). However, the lesson from **1 Corinthians 6** is that, if all Biblical processes have been followed without success, then we should be prepared to accept the wrong (vs.7)<sup>7</sup>.

If an injustice has been done, and we cannot resolve the issue, then leave it to God – He will judge the matter in due time (**Romans 12:18-21**).

#### c) Putting on tender mercies

As children of God, we are to have a kindly disposition toward each other. Consider the following passages;

**Romans 12:10** *“Be kindly affectionate to one another....”*

**Colossians 3:12-13** *“...put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, and forgiving one another....even as Christ forgave you..”*

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<sup>6</sup> Some may get upset when we correct them, but our desire for them to be right with God should be stronger than any concerns we may have that *“they won’t like me anymore if I point out their error”* – consider context of **1 Corinthians 5:1-7; 2 Corinthians 2:4; 8-12** Paul acted out of love when correcting the Corinthians.

<sup>7</sup> a) From what we learn of the account in **1 Corinthians 5:1-7** (and related scriptures), I suspect that the **Matthew 18:15-17** passage is more about trying to get the “offender” back right with God, rather than the one who was “offended” getting “justice”.

b) Something to consider: During His earthly ministry, Jesus did not seek an apology from all those who treated Him unfairly – consider **Luke 23:34**. The point is this: While the **Matthew 18** passage does give us a process to “right wrongs”, we don’t necessarily have to pursue every issue – we can let some things go. In the end, God will judge all things.

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**1 Peter 1:22** “...love one another fervently with a pure heart...”

**1 Peter 3:8** “...having compassion for one another....tender hearted....courteous..”

These actions and attitudes towards each other are to take precedence over whatever natural responses we may have<sup>8</sup> – particularly towards those with whom we may not get along all that well. And these things are to be shown sincerely from a pure heart – which may take a lot of “soul searching” and attitudinal change on our part in some cases.

Therefore, things that divide brethren, such as backbiting (**2 Corinthians 12:20**), harsh judgements (**Matthew 7:1-5**), gossiping (**1 Timothy 5:13**), putting others down (**Ephesians 4:31**; **James 4:11**), being indifferent (**Philippians 2:4**), always wanting to be the “king pin” (**Romans 12:3, 16**; **3 John 9-11**), *etc*, should be far from us.

In their place should be qualities such as speech that edifies and builds people up (**Ephesians 4:29**; **Romans 14:19**), giving preference (or honour) to others over ourselves (**Romans 12:10b**), empathising and being patient with those who are weak (**1 Thessalonians 5:14**), showing mercy and forgiveness “...as God in Christ forgave you..” (**Ephesians 4:32**), and “...in humility, correcting those in opposition...” (**2 Timothy 2:25**).

### **Conclusion:**

The Lord only established one church – His church. It is His body (**Colossians 1:18**; **Ephesians 4:4**). It is the church that He died for (**Ephesians 5:25**). It contains the redeemed who were purchased with His blood (**1 Peter 1:18-19**; **Acts 2:47b**). And the Lord prayed that those in the church be unified (**John 17:20-21**). These things make the church, and its unity, important.

Unity in the church can't be just any sort of unity – it must be based on the Word of God, holding fast to its teachings and precepts (**2 Timothy 1:13**; **3:16-17**). And we all have a role to play – each one of us need to do our part in striving for and maintaining that unity (**Ephesians 4:3, 11-16**).

- by holding fast to the Word of God (**1 Timothy 4:16**), and
- by showing the love of God towards our fellow brethren (**1 John 4:11**).

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<sup>8</sup> This does not mean that we don't take a strong stand against those who sin when the need arises – e.g. **Galatians 2:11-14**; **Romans 16:17-18**; **Titus 3:10-11**.