

## PRESCRIPTION FOR UNITY

The religious, Christ-believing world is terribly divided. As such our God, who is not the creator of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33), must be displeased. We are commanded to agree and not to have divisions within the body (1 Corinthians 1:10). But at the same time we are warned about accepting those who are false teachers (2 John 10) and we are told to carefully observe or “keep your eye on” those who created problems and not to associate with them (Romans 16:17). We believe there are excellent examples of unity found throughout the Bible, most notably the unity between the Father and the Son (John 17). Paul offers a very down to earth discussion of unity and the bounds of unity in his letter to the Ephesians. Our intent in coming weeks is to carefully examine Ephesians 4:1-16. We make no claim to present an absolutely exhaustive study of the topic, rather we simply seek to contribute to the readers understanding of Biblical unity. We pray this will be helpful.

*Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3, NASB95)*

These first three verses actually form a single sentence, a single unit of thought, which begins the apostle’s discussion of unity. This is a call for those who claim to be Christians to act like Christians. That is, we are to walk or behave in a certain fashion fitting for the child of God. The purpose is given in verse three and the end of the sentence, “to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” We will discover in a later study that this unity does not come at all costs but exists only within the constraints that Paul will soon list. Nevertheless however, the Christian does all he can within those constraints to preserve Christian unity and fellowship.

Notice here the three nouns which describe the Christian’s conduct toward his brethren. We are to walk with humility, literally, in lowliness of mind or attitude toward others. We are not the judge and we cannot punish or reward for such is left to God. We appreciate further that our knowledge is often incomplete or even erroneous. Therefore, we approach our brethren humbly and without arrogance. We are “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). An example of humility is seen in the life of a man who is regarded as the greatest college football coach in history. This man, at the zenith of his career, would not accept outrageous salaries. Instead, he insisted on being paid \$1 less than the school president. Likewise, we ought not think too highly of our own selves.

We are also called to be gentle people. Language expert Timothy Friberg suggests that gentleness be understood as “strength that accommodates to another’s weakness.” It is a form of meekness that assists and encourages the recipient. A similar form of the word is used by Paul as a recommendation to Titus to be gentle with all men (Titus 3:2) and he instructs Timothy to be gentle when correcting those in opposition to the truth (2 Timothy 2:25). You might recall Charles Porter IV’s haunting photograph of a fireman carrying the tiny body of a 1 year old victim from the ruins of Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April of 1995. The big helmeted fireman, in his turnout gear was using his strength to do what the child could not do. Sometimes we must use our spiritual strength to guide and direct for who are weaker. In the photograph, the firemen had removed his rough and dirty gloves to gently cradle the child. Likewise, we ought to be so gentle with those of our brethren who need direction. It is necessary to use unbridled strength at times, but generally, a gentle hand is superior.

These two attributes, humility and gentleness are complimented by patience. Occasionally translated “long-suffering” the word here demands that we work unendingly toward our goal of unity. Friberg calls this an “emotional quietness in the face of unfavorable circumstances.” There is no surrender in the work of the Lord and there is never a moment of surrender. We will work and strive for unity until we are called home by the Lord. In spite of what seems overwhelming odds against us, we still strive for the goal.

Perhaps the most difficult characteristic here mentioned is that of tolerance. There is a tendency at times to think that our way of doing something is the only way of accomplishing the task. Certainly there are occasions when God has spoken and given specific authorization which cannot and must not be changed. But in other areas, commonly spoken of as expediencies, let us be different and let us allow and tolerate differences among our brethren. Vine suggests the idea is to bear with someone or something. Obviously we all know of people who perhaps say things differently than we or perhaps they do things differently. That someone is different does not make them wrong. Rather, in our patience, gentleness and humility we seek to put up with certain differences so that peace and unity may come. Make no mistake however; there is a limit to tolerance. Some brethren, no doubt well meaning people, have become so tolerant as to allow every device of man and every corruption of worship to go virtually unnoticed and certainly unchallenged. Just as God does not tolerate sin, neither can we. All of the foregoing is moderated by love, true, sacrificial love that we are to have for the brethren. Unquestionably, God loved us (John 3:16; Romans 5:8) but he never tolerates our sinfulness and nor should we.

Having now described our approach and demeanor, Paul calls us to the purpose of this section of Scripture. That is the preservation of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (vs. 3). As the Psalmist records, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity” (Psalm 133:1). Can you imagine the feeling of abundant love and peace flowing from a church that all spoke the same words and taught the same doctrines? What a presence for God among the lost of the world!

Bryant Evans

NEXT WEEK: ONE BODY