

**“Christian Unity”**  
**Ephesians 4:1-8**  
**December 9, 2001**

**Text Comment**

- v.3 The connection between v. 1 and what follows is closer than appears, as in Paul’s original v. 2 is a continuation of the sentence. Paul wrote, “Walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, etc.” In other words, this preservation of the unity of the people of God is precisely how we walk worthy of our calling. The first sentence of chapter four ends only at the end of v. 3.

The word that the NIV translates “gentle” in v. 2, the older translators rendered with “meek” or “meekness.” One scholar defines the term as “courtesy, considerateness, and willingness to waive one’s rights that come from seeking the common good without being concerned for personal reputation or gain.” In another place [2 Cor. 10:1] Paul says that this was a characteristic of the Lord Jesus. In another place this meekness or gentleness is contrasted with a quarrelsome spirit. [2 Tim. 2:24-25; Titus 3:2]

You see in vv. 2-3 a mixture of personal qualities and of ethical duties. There is always this interplay. Only the humble will bear with one another in love. Only the gentle and the patient can preserve the unity of God’s people. There is never in the Bible the idea, so common in our political discourse in America today, that personal character does not determine public behavior. Right living requires virtue and character. Note the “Make every effort” or, as in the *ESV*, the “eager to maintain the unity...” Paul assumes that his readers understand that preserving this unity will not be an easy accomplishment. Determination will be required.

- v.6 Vv. 4-6 establish the theological foundation of the unity of believers. They *are* one. Paul is not asking them to be anything other than what they are! And all believers are one at the most profound level, one in regard to what matters most and is most precious in human life. They have the same God, the same experience of salvation, the same future, the same calling.
- v.8 We now learn that Christian unity is not achieved by the imposition of sameness or by reducing the individual believer to the status of a single cog on a large wheel. There is nothing monotonous about Christian unity. No, Christian unity is a musical harmony not a monotone. Harmony is when different notes are sung but, because the notes agree with each other, the combination produces not discord but beauty. In the Christian church, individuality and personal initiative are not crushed, they are rather encouraged. Each believer has his or her own gift, each a contribution to make to the whole, each an important place to fill in the life and ministry of the people of God. It is a unity amid diversity, which makes it still more beautiful, powerful, and fruitful.

Sin is a divisive force, a disruptive force. Isaiah told the people of God, “Your iniquities have *separated you* from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you...” [59:2]. Well, in the

same way that sin separates men and women from God, sin separates human beings from one another. Sin always divides and separates people. When there were but two people in the world, Adam and Eve, our first parents, before the entrance of sin there was perfect love and harmony. But, as soon as sin entered their hearts, they were estranged from one another. Adam began to blame his wife and no doubt she resented him for it. Their relationship of love and mutual appreciation had disintegrated into back-biting and in-fighting. The battle of the sexes had begun. Sin had created its first division.

And, so it has continued. Husbands divided from wives by sin, children resentful of parents, bosses and workers alienated from one another, races and peoples likewise. Human sin divided the nations at the Tower of Babel and that division has grown worse with time. The discord that sin causes among human beings is the theme of human history. Mankind, once a perfect unity, has been shattered into millions of pieces by sin. And human beings live their lives glaring at one another.

The grace of God, however, *reunites*. It restores peace and harmony between man and God and between human beings themselves. Peace and unity is the object of the gospel and the saving work of Jesus Christ. Paul has illustrated that already in chapter 2 when he spoke both of sinful men and women being reconciled to God *and* of Jews and Gentiles – two people deeply alienated from one another in that time – being brought into a single household. The Lord Jesus had broken down the dividing wall of hostility, he says in 2:14, and made a new man out of the two. Unity is what the good news is all about.

Now, as so often in the Bible so here, Christian ethics amount to an obligation to *be what we are, or what Christ has made us to be*. We *are* one. The people of God *are* one. Therefore, they must act as one, they must practice that unity. If the church is a unity, let it be united and demonstrate that unity in the world. This subject, of Christian unity, occupies the first 16 verses of this chapter, indicating the importance of the practice of Christian unity in Paul's mind. Having said that we must walk worthy of the calling we have received, Paul begins to explain what that means by talking about our unity in Christ and the practice of that unity.

And as soon as he does so, the gulf widens between the unbeliever and the believer in Jesus Christ. As soon as Paul begins to explain what it means to live as a follower of Jesus Christ, to live in response to God's great salvation and Christ's great sacrifice, it becomes clear what a reversal of human values the Christian life involves and requires. As Helmut Thielicke, sometimes referred to as the "German Billy Graham," put it, "Anybody who enters into fellowship with Jesus must undergo a transvaluation of values." More simply, Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to "the extraordinariness" of the Christian life. [Both cited in Stott, *Christian-Counterculture*, 55]

The world, of course, puts a premium on unity, though it means something very different by it and has never once begun to achieve it. Recently, our government, in the interests of dealing a death blow to international terrorism has fostered an alliance of nations to support its actions against the Taliban and the forces of Osama bin Ladin. Here is a unity based very specifically on a common aim. Otherwise, many of these nations and governments and peoples have very little in common with one another. The United Nations is, at least formally, an ally of the United

States in the current action in Afghanistan, but we are all aware of the mutual contempt that so often characterizes relations between the United Nations and the U.S. government. Arab nations are part of this current confederation because they wish, for whatever reason, to see the terrorists who attacked the United States punished. But they do not share the values of the United States or Great Britain. Certain Arab governments may join with Christians in a military action against terrorism, but these same governments have no intention of letting Christians practice Christianity in their Muslim lands. In Afghanistan, so we read in the newspapers, the fragile coalition of anti-Taliban forces is already tottering. Rival groups of Alliance soldiers were fighting one another upon taking possession of Kandahar.

And, within our own land, various political groups have unified against our common enemy, but among these people otherwise there is little agreement and little liking of one another. It will not be long before they are having at one another once again. And so it has always been. The world talks about unity a great deal, and even more about peace and brotherhood, but it is as fractured as it has ever been. The modern world, has made much of the ideal of brotherhood but has never come close to achieving it. As Metternich, the famous Austrian diplomat, said of the French Revolution and its aftermath: "Having seen what was done in the name of brotherhood, if I had a brother I should call him cousin."

People are divided by race, by nationality, by religion, by politics, by socio-economic groupings, by past grievances and present disagreements, and by jealousy and envy. Rodney King may plaintively ask, "Can't we all just get along?" But, the fact is, human beings have never gotten along, except superficially, and for short periods of time. Always there is division, always alienation, always resentment, bitterness, and discord. Name the subject and I will show you how it divides people. How about something innocent and not very important, like baseball? You should hear the things that people are saying about one another in regard to this most recent dispute. My son and I had the radio on in the car the other day and the disk jockey was pouring out pure venom toward Bud Selig, the commissioner of Major League Baseball. It was nothing less than character assassination. That ugly display was only different in degree, not in kind, from what we have witnessed with horror taking place in Israel and the Palestinian territories over these past few weeks.

Even polite and law abiding people are estranged from others in every direction. It is the inevitable effect of sin in human hearts and in human culture. Sin separates. And there is no remedy for that apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ drawing men and women into a common experience of God's love.

That is why all the emphasis on unity that you also find in debased and corrupted forms of Christianity is as futile as all other worldly aspirations for peace and unity. Paul here bases Christian unity on a distinctly Christian foundation. We are to love other men and women and, so far as it depends upon us, live at peace with all men. But we cannot have the unity that Paul describes here with those who do not share with us one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. We are not and cannot be brethren with those who do not belong to God's family, we cannot be fellow citizens with those who are not, as we are, citizens of Christ's kingdom.

You get a lot, nowadays, of efforts to create what is often called inter-faith unity. There are even such things as a World Congress of Faiths. But we cannot participate in this. It would be a denial of everything we believe as Christians. We must love and respect people of other faiths, absolutely. We must treat them with dignity and honor. We must behave toward them as we would wish they to behave toward us. We must care for them as we have opportunity and, in particular, we must care to bring them the news of salvation in Jesus Christ. But we can have nothing to do with the modern notion that Christian unity can be equally shared with non-Christians, as if the basis of that unity is something we share with unbelievers, as if, as is so often nowadays asserted, there is truth in all religions and that we have much to learn from them as they do from us. No, says Paul. In Christ are hid *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. There is, Peter said, no other name under heaven given to men whereby we must be saved. The Lord Jesus is, as he himself said, the way, the truth, and the life, and no one can come to God except through him. The unity Paul describes here, the unity we must preserve, is a *unity between Christians*. It is a degree of oneness and loving mutual regard that is possible only between real Christians because it is based on things that are true only for real Christians.

But, in the world of divine grace, in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, in the community of the reborn and the renewed, all of that division and discord between men is overcome in principle and, then, must be overcome in practice. It is the aim and the effect of God's grace to create harmony among human beings, to make them live together in love, mutual appreciation and respect, and cooperation. Sin separates and divides human beings because it exalts the self over against others. We want *our* way. Others stand in *our* way and we resent them for it. But God's grace and Christ's love humbles the soul before God *and so before man*. We are made to face our sin and guilt, made to realize that there is nothing that we have that God did not give to us as a free gift, that we have no claim on his favor apart from his eternal love, that, in fact, we were Christ's enemies when he died for us. In view of this, *our way* can no longer be the be all and end all of our lives. For us it must be God's way and Christ's way. Indeed, so great is God's love for us and now ours for him that Christians are willing to *forsake their way*, even to suffer great loss, if only they might walk in God's way. Their acquaintance and honest reckoning with their own sinfulness makes them ashamed to assert themselves as if they deserved this or that from others. They know they deserve nothing. And having been dealt with so gently, so kindly, so generously by their heavenly father, having been so graciously and sacrificially served by their Savior, they know that it is right that they should treat others in the same way and that it would be dishonorable and ungrateful for them to fail to do so. It becomes the glory of a Christian to forget himself or herself for the sake of others.

Think, for example, of Abraham, to whom God had given the Promised Land as an inheritance. But, when Lot's servants and Abraham's servants quarreled because their flocks were crowded together in too small a space, Abraham gave his nephew first choice of a place to settle. He was willing to give up what rightfully belonged to him to preserve the peace between Lot and himself and between their servants. Though the choice of a place to live was rightfully Abraham's to make, he was willing indeed to take the poorer ground – which is what he was left with after Lot chose the richer country – in order to preserve unity. It was love for God and thanksgiving that animated Abraham's self-forgetfulness and it was his selflessness that preserved the unity between Lot and Abraham.

Or think of Paul's exhortation to the Christians in Corinth. They were, as alas far too many Christians have been, disunited. Discord marked their common life rather than the unity and harmony appropriate to the people of God. It had reached the point that Christians were suing other Christians. Paul put a stop to that! He told them straight away that such behavior was utterly incompatible with being a Christian. And he pulled the rug out from under any further argument: "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?" Paul wrote. That is how committed to unity and brotherly love a Christian must be. Give up your rights to preserve unity with your brother, take a beating so as to protect the brotherhood, just as Jesus Christ gave up his rights and suffered terrible loss to save you from your sins.

This is a spirit that you do not often find and still less often do you find it to an eminent degree. And there is not one in a thousand that you can think of who is happy to surrender his own rights, to let someone get away with something, to let another advance at his or her expense, if only to preserve the brotherhood, if only to prevent disunity between people. But, rare as it is in the world, it is to be the staple of Christian life, the ordinary state of affairs in the Christian church.

In early Christianity and in many times and places since, the practice of this unity and brotherly love has startled the world and made it sit up and take notice. In the early church, the way men and women, slaves and masters, Jews and Gentiles mixed together in a single church, the way in which they loved one another and the way in which the barriers which so divided people in that time no longer existed in the church, all of this was a powerful witness born to the power of God's grace to make things new and to overcome the discord of human life.

*However, outsiders can be forgiven if they roll their eyes at all I'm saying.* They know very well that there have been times without number when Christians did not practice this unity and were not so gentle and peace loving as all that! They know about our divisions and our petty quarrels. They know that churches of Christian believers have been split in two over the color of the carpet or the hour of the Sunday morning worship service. They may even be aware that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was estimated that there were 1,900 denominations in Europe and North America and that by the late 1980s the estimate had ballooned to 22,000! [Mark Shaw, *Ten Great Ideas from Church History*, 64] Paul in Ephesians 4, they may well think, sounds more like wishful thinking than an honest account of reality.

One Christian minister years ago illustrated the situation that exists by imagining a conversation between the two blind men who were given their sight by the Lord Jesus: the blind man whose healing is recorded in John 9 and the blind man whose healing is recorded in Luke 18. In the case of the man in John 9, our Lord, you remember, spat on the ground, mixed the saliva and clay, and anointed the man's eyes with the mixture. Then he told the man to go wash in the pool of Siloam. In the case of the man in Luke 18 he did none of this; he simply commanded the man to see and he did. Well the preacher imagines these two highly favored men meeting one another at some point and having a conversation about what happened to them. The man in the 9<sup>th</sup> of John asks the man in the 18<sup>th</sup> of Luke, "What did you feel like when He put that mixture of clay and spittle on your eyes?" "Clay and spittle?" replies the man in Luke 18, "I don't know anything about clay and spittle." "What?" asks the other man, "don't you remember how he spat on the ground and made the mixture and put it on your eyes? I'm asking, 'What did you feel?'"

But, the man of Luke 18 replies, “There was *nothing* put on my eyes!” And on and on the conversation goes, with the one man putting his questions and the other showing his confusion, until finally the man from John 9 says, “Look here, I don’t think you were healed at all; either you never were really blind or you’re still blind. Jesus healed the blind by putting a mixture of clay and spit on their eyes.” And, so, the preacher concluded, two denominations came into being: the Mud-ites and the Anti-mudites! [Modified somewhat from the anecdote given in Lloyd-Jones, *Ephesians*, iv, 87-88]

Now that would be funnier except for the fact that it has happened times without number in Christian history and is still happening today. People for whom God has done such astonishing things, falling out with one another because they let self get in the way, let self crowd out Jesus Christ in their hearts. People who claim to have been saved by the love and the power of God, by the supernatural work of Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit, people who claim to have been deserving of God’s wrath but nevertheless received an indescribably great gift, still sit glowering at one another for this reason or that. They still do not treat one another in anything like the way they claim to have been treated by God. There is little in their consideration of others that proves the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We admit this. To our shame, we Christians admit it. We are guilty of failing to be one and failing to practice that unity with a vengeance as Paul teaches that we must. All we can say in our defense is that this is evil and inexcusable on our part. That we know it is wrong and we are ashamed of ourselves. We know that we ought to care more for the brotherhood, ought to prize our unity with Christian brothers and sisters and live out that unity in defiance of the fact that being a Christian does not prevent a man or a woman from being a real pain sometimes! And, we can say this one thing more: as often as we have failed to promote and preserve love, affection, good will, mutual consideration, regard, and respect among our brothers and sisters, by the grace of God and the love of Christ, we have sometimes achieved this, and achieved it with people that naturally, ordinarily, humanly speaking, we would not find agreeable to ourselves.

As unbelievers know who observe the Christian church, there are the same different kinds of people within her as one finds outside of her. There are the shy and the bombastic; there are the cheerful and the morose; there are the refined and the unsophisticated; there are the likeable and the obnoxious; there are the clever and the dull; there are the gifted and the inept; there are the mature and the childish and everyone of us has less attractive qualities. Christianity begins with the admission that God did not love us and Christ did not die for us because we were any great shakes. We were not and are not. You know the old verse:

To dwell above with saints we love,  
 Indeed! That will be glory.  
 To live below with saints we know,  
 That is another story!

But our Heavenly Father *did* love us and Christ *did* die for us. And, as a result, we know, you and I know, brothers and sisters, that we ought to be willing to make every effort, ought to be willing to make great sacrifices, to love others as God and Christ have loved us. And the fact that God and Christ loved those brothers and sisters of ours, *just as he loved us*, means that it

matters not one whit how much they irritate us, or how little we have in common with them. We are one with them and must behave like it. Anything less is an affront to the grace of God that has been lavished on us. As Augustine said of his friend Alypius:

We were washed in the same blood. Say that about *your* brother or sister in Christ. Does that fact not compel you to love and be patient and gentle with him or her? We were washed in the same blood.

When we fail, let us mourn our failure and repent of it furiously. And then let us set out to treat our brothers and our sisters, perhaps especially those we might otherwise avoid or ignore or resent, with considerable love and kindness for no other reason than that by doing so we walk worthy of the calling that we have received. Do it every day and day after day and I promise you one thing: people will think that you are a follower of Jesus Christ, they really will, everybody will!