

## Replacing Conflict with Unity

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### Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:1-7

<sup>1</sup> ‘As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

<sup>2</sup> Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

<sup>3</sup> Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

<sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;

<sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism;

<sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

<sup>7</sup> But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.’

### Introduction

This message is from a short interdenominational course that I have written about managing conflict between Christians.

Regrettably, there is no shortage of conflict between Christians, which is sad. And if we are to be honest with each other, our conflict is self-created. I have always found it sad that from the unity that Christ has given us, we as a church and a people, are so divided.

When we are in a state of conflict, the danger is that instead of focussing on Jesus, we instead focus on our need for victory; our need to be right.

David Moore wrote this sharp anecdote:

‘Two men who lived in a small village got into a terrible dispute that they could not resolve. So they decided to talk to the town sage. The first man went to the sage's home and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the sage said, "You're absolutely right."

The next night, the second man called on the sage and told his side of the story. The sage responded, "You're absolutely right."

Afterward, the sage's wife scolded her husband. "Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible -- they can't both be absolutely right." The sage turned to his wife and said, "You're absolutely right."

As much as it is true that one of the men is absolutely right, it is probable that one is also absolutely wrong. Each party could only explain his side of the story, believing that he is right and the other wrong. Neither party stood, for a moment, in the other party's shoes, so to speak. And with highly biased information received, the sage could not stand in either party's shoes. In this particular conflict situation, there were no winners.

People perfectly united with one another cannot be in conflict with one another, and for each of these men it was about the need to be right over the cost of their relationship.

### **Unity is Effort**

When we read Ephesians, we can be sure that Paul is clarifying the teaching of Christ, the church, salvation and sanctification. Paul uses concepts of holiness, service and temple to reveal the power of the Gospel in how it creates a new people born of God dedicated to His holy purposes.

In this particular passage from Ephesians, Paul is calling for unity in the Body of Christ. He is reminding us that we should never take unity for granted; note the wording, "Make every effort..." Effort implies work. We should be working toward unity as opposed to division and conflict. We should be making every effort to live as a Christian and not the old self-centred person that we once were.

As members of the church – the *Ecclesia* – we are the ones who have been called out of the world to God. If we fail to walk in this way, we are also failing to live up to the fullness and witness of His call. At the same time, you will also make known, your seriousness about matters.

### **Baptised into One Body**

Let's for a moment revisit our baptism. Let's place Romans 6:3 and 12:5 alongside each other:

'Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?' and 'so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.'

Despite our many differences we have one baptism and serve one God. Not that it is our baptism that saves us or unites us, we are saved and united through Jesus alone. Baptism is reserved for His covenant people united in Him. And this is what our baptism symbolizes. We are born again; God the Holy Spirit breathed life into death, God's inward call to you produced regeneration, which caused you to cry out in repentance and faith so that you are justified by God. And you became part of the one body of Christ.

If your baptism symbolizes our burial with Him; our being dead to the power of sin and being raised up into a new life in Christ ... what does unresolved self-centred conflict – post-baptism – among Christians symbolize? Would it be fair to state that: in baptism we identify with Christ and in unresolved conflict we identify with our old self?

### **Maintaining Unity is Effort**

Reading further on from this morning's Scripture in Ephesians 4:4-6, Paul reminds us, 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.'

I believe that it is proper to elevate the story of God above the story of self. Our unity is to be celebrated, which also means that conflict must be addressed in a God glorifying manner as opposed to self-centredness and the overwhelming need to be right.

Perhaps we need to ask of ourselves if we are doing our best? Is there something more that we can do? The church is the body and family of God (Ephesians 2:19). On the one hand it is normal to commit toward God, but what about to each other? What is our conduct during moments of conflict actually saying?

As Christians called by God to glorify Him in all that we do, insists on certain conduct toward one another:

- Humbleness. The opposite of humbleness is aggressiveness and proud. John Flavel once said, "They that know God will be humble and they that know themselves cannot be proud."
- Gentleness. The opposite of gentleness is harshness and hardness. It has been said that we uncover true humility by displaying the gentleness of Christ.

- **Patience.** The opposite of patience is defiance and impatience. ‘Research suggests that patient people tend to be more cooperative, more empathic, more equitable, and more forgiving.’ Patience is accepting some personal discomfort to lessen the suffering and challenges of those around us.
- **Bearing with one another.** The opposite is dismissing and rejecting. We, although all human and members of the Body, are very different to one another. We differ in temperament, character, preferences and more.
- **Peacefully united.** The opposite of peace is conflict and war. The opposite of unity is imbalance and confusion.

Carefully considering the opposite of what the Bible instructs is indeed, an eye opener. This ‘opposite state’ is very fertile soil making up the battle area of active conflict.

By nature, we are self-centred. Think back to David Moore’s anecdote that I shared with you earlier. We have to overcome self-centredness in favour of Christ-centredness.

### **The Lord’s Supper (Conclusion)**

It is written in 1 Corinthians 11:28, ‘Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.’ There were problems in Corinth about the way in the Lord’s Supper was celebrated.

Paul here is asking everyone to check his/her heart before partaking of the Sacrament. When we partake, are we eating the meal to remember Christ’s sacrifice and to engage in community? Are we divided among themselves or unified in Christ?

Two persons know the answer to these questions, you and God. Reconciliation with one another – terminating conflict – is important before partaking of the meal. We need to examine ourselves concerning our relationship to the Lord and other members. We need to repent from our sins and reconcile with one another as necessary. In this manner, we would more likely maintain the unity of the Spirit, as Paul so encourages in our Scripture reading.

Amen.