

KINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH ONLINE NOTICE BOARD – 75

From our Lord's prayers and teaching in John's Gospel it's clear that he gives a high priority to the *unity* of his people. Our *unity* in Christ is to be viewed on two levels. Firstly, the *unity* of each local church congregation is vitally important, with every member called to guard and protect that *unity* for the well-being of the fellowship and for its witness in the community. Then, as we see from John 17, our Lord's focus was also on the entire company of those who, as he says, '*will believe on me*'. The tragedy is that the story of the Christian Church is one of disunity, separation and divisions – divisions between churches and 'denominations' (a concept quite alien to the New Testament!), and even, shamefully, within churches.

Two vitally important verses in Paul's letter to the Ephesians give an insight that is crucial to our understanding of this whole subject of Christian unity.

The first of these verses is chapter 4 verse 3: *making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

Paul speaks here of the '*unity of the Spirit*'. What he says makes clear that this '*unity of the Spirit*' is a fact. This is not a *unity* that we are left somehow to create or establish. It is a fact already established by the Holy Spirit and it comprises all believers in every age and from every nation. This *unity* includes all Christians – I'm tempted to add, whether we like it or not! The *unity of the Spirit* is just another way of saying that we are '*in Christ*' but seen from the perspective of the Holy Spirit's work in salvation. Being '*all one in Christ Jesus*' (Galatians 3.28) we comprise '*the unity of the Spirit*'.

What Paul expects so far as this unity is concerned, is not that we create this *unity*, but we '*maintain it*', we preserve and protect it. And he tells how to do that: within '*the bond of peace*'. Here the word *peace* has all its deep spiritual richness: *completeness, wholeness, freedom, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquillity, prosperity, fullness, rest, harmony, freedom from distress, worry, anxiety and discord.* The *unity of the Spirit* isn't preserved by insisting on certain exclusive teachings, ideas or doctrines. It's preserved by recognizing that this *unity* is made up of all who are Christ's; as he says, '*those who believe in me*'. If we depart from that as the sole condition for the *unity of the Spirit* it will be impossible to 'maintain' this *unity* – it's inevitably shattered and lost. This is vitally important, because if I insist that 'you' must accept 'my' conditions for *unity* we make union with Christ depend on something other than faith alone in Christ alone – and we exchange the gospel for some sort of 'my gang', a club or confederacy. Of course there are some teachings and ideas completely incompatible with faith in Christ – but that's another matter.

What is vital is that we understand this *unity* is defined, forged, created and brought about by the Holy Spirit's work of new birth. It's through faith alone that the Holy Spirit incorporates the believer into the body of Christ – those '*who will believe on me*'. This *unity* comprises the entire company of the redeemed, on earth and in heaven. Our task isn't to limit this *unity*, insisting on this or that doctrine, this or that ritual, this or that church government. Our privilege is to recognise those who are one with us in Christ; to rejoice in our *unity* with them, to maintain it '*in the bond of peace*'.

Now we come to the second type of *unity* of which Paul speaks. This *unity* is distinct from the other and it is *not* an already established fact, it does not yet exist, it's a project – one that may never be fully achieved in this life. This is how Paul speaks about this second sort of *unity*: *until all of us come to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.* (Ephesians 4.13)

Of this unity Paul says: '*until ...*'. His point is obvious when we understand what he has in mind. Paul never talks of our life in Christ in half-measures! What he sees here is a time when '*all of us*' – all who make up '*the unity of the Spirit*' – will reach '*the full measure of the stature of Christ*'; achieve spiritual maturity; what he calls '*the unity of faith and knowledge*'. Here 'faith' doesn't mean 'believing' but means what we believe – the truths we confess, the 'knowledge' we have and hold to. This unity hasn't yet been achieved. We strive for it – knowing its God's ultimate determination for us!

So how are we to strive for this *unity*? Paul tells us, in the preceding verses: *Each of us [each included in 'the unity of the Spirit'] was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers; these gifts equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.* (verses 7, 11-12)

We *build up* the *body* by developing and using the *gifts* we're given. That's how we attain '*the unity of faith and knowledge*'. But we'll attain this *only* if we use the gifts we've been given and work together. We grow to '*the full measure of the stature of Christ*' by obeying Jesus when he says '*learn of me*'.

It's essential we recognise these two stages of Christian *unity*. We mustn't confuse them or muddle them up. It's fatal to insist that someone must meet the conditions for *the unity of faith and knowledge* before we recognise they are one with us in *the unity of the Spirit*. This is one of the greatest proofs of the truth of the doctrines of grace, that a person may be saved in spite of their muddled or erroneous thinking. The grace of God saves us in spite of ourselves. That's grace! If you say someone is saved by their understanding of doctrine you're denying grace. We're all saved in spite of what we are in every respect. Equally it's disastrous to ignore our responsibility to grow to full maturity in Christ, to '*grow in grace and knowledge*'. Fail here and we open the door to chaos and confusion and all manner of harmful ideas and spiritually reckless conduct.

How good and how pleasant it is when we live together in unity! (Psalm 133.1)