

Unity of Faith and Understanding

“If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin”(1 John 1:7). Here the Apostle John reveals the central reason for the unity that is a unique trait of the children of God. With these words he has linked the personal endeavor of faith (“we walk in the light”) to both the Word, that is Jesus Christ (“as he is in the light”), and to life and unity with the congregation (“fellowship one with another”) wherein “the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin.”

The endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace has long been a major emphasis of God’s kingdom. Unity is always a reason for joy and we are often reminded of the psalmist’s exclamation: “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Ps. 133:1). This spiritual unity is inspired by love for God’s Word, of which Jesus said: “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (John 17:17). It is a unity realized when individuals discard personal understandings and opinions that are not supported by the Word. There can be no true unity or love in the congregation of God without the light of the Word. God’s Word is the hope and foundation of our salvation. Faith of the heart and a conscience bound to the Word of God give us the hope of eternal life.

The Tabernacle of God is With Men

A good beginning point for any discussion about unity of faith and understanding in God’s kingdom is a personal one. “What is my relationship to God and His kingdom?” The state of human relationships and questions of unity within the household of Christ can be traced back to the way that this question is answered. One must believe that the kingdom of God is here on earth with men. This truth was declared unto the Apostle John on the Isle of Patmos: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God” (Rev. 21:3). One must also believe, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, that it is united in body, Spirit, the hope of salvation, and faith (Eph. 4: 4, 5).

As our brother Olavi Voittoinen has written, Christ’s exhortation to first seek the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33) gives a child of God that basic direction on which he can daily make his important decisions. (ATW II, p. 85) It teaches us to think about the kingdom in its entirety instead of merely ourselves. Thus when we apply these words in our life, we have a compass that always points us heavenward even when we are surrounded by issues that may cause doubt and confusion. The “standard of truth ” to which we must compare all doctrine and thought is the Word of God, for it is unchanging. Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). The Word is eternal truth and as such does not change with the times or norms of society. When the light of grace and truth shine into man’s heart, he joyously unites with God’s children around the Word. When our affection is set on things above, and not on things on the earth (Col. 3:2) many vain questions disappear and unity is strengthened.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

In the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed we confess our belief that the work of the Holy Spirit is to call, unite, enlighten, and sanctify the Christian Church on earth and preserve it in union with Jesus Christ in the true faith (M. Luther, Small Catechism).

Therefore unity of faith and understanding is the result of the Holy Spirit's work within both the congregation and the hearts of its individual members. It is not the result of an outward, forced compliance to a catalog of activities, some prohibited and some permitted. Even when our understanding is weak, God's Word teaches us to obey in faith: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Rev. 2:29).

The Experience of the Early Church

The apostles understood well the blessing of unity and were keenly aware of the dangers of division, and thus often exhorted Christians to "be ye all of one mind" (1 Pet. 3:8). This has not changed and we must still work to maintain the unity of faith and understanding. It is an endeavor that is undertaken with love, patience and the exhortation of the Word. When there is unity of Spirit and faith the energy and resources of God's kingdom can be used to bring the message of the gospel to those yet in darkness or to strengthen the faith of the believing rather than be consumed by warfare within the congregation.

History shows that our "adversary the devil" (1 Pet. 5:8) works diligently to destroy our unity and peace by causing division. If discontent over the understandings or decisions of God's kingdom continue long enough heresy may result. By the middle of the eighth-century the Early Christian Church had cataloged 103 heresies. The causes of dispute ranged from arguments for a more permissive lifestyle, to disagreements over either the divinity or humanity of Christ, to legalistic dryness that arose from despair over openly sinful life and the wish for a congregation in which there were no great sinners, to heresies that formed as the result of over reactions to other heresies.¹ Over the last one hundred years, the Zion of North America has experienced heresies centered on either the Law or the love of this world.

¹ The Fathers of the Church Fathers, An Introduction to the First Christian Teachers, Aquilina, M. pg. 38

The Desire for Change and Choice

So how then is the unity of faith and understanding lost? In a recent article, Juhani Alaranta raised a series of questions that asked whether time has changed the understanding of believers on various previously discussed and decided issues (*Siionin Lähetylehti*, No. 10, 2006, 20, 21). He used as examples the matters of TV, birth control issues, cosmetics, and divorce. He asked: "Does time change us? Does the mind of the listener change? Do our interpretations of right and wrong change?" The questions arose because a believing mother had been asked whether she was a liberal or a strict Laestadian with regard to childbearing issues. Such a question points to a disunity of faith and understanding within the kingdom.

We live in a time that emphasizes individuality and personal freedoms. One result of this emphasis is the nowadays commonly held and accepted notion that each individual has the right to define his/her own concept of right and wrong and that others have no right to interfere with it. This view is characterized by phrases like “to each his own.” This line of thought, so prevalent in our day, poses a threat to God’s children for it separates the discussion of conscience and the definition of right and wrong from God’s Word. Our freedom was purchased by Jesus Christ and is freedom from sin, not a freedom to sin.

A common cause for disunity, and eventually heresy, is the desire for change, that is, a desire to choose a different direction. At such times individuals depart from God’s kingdom because they want to pick and choose from the doctrine of salvation those teachings that are compatible with their own understanding and lifestyle and to leave behind those that are incompatible. The English word ‘heresy’ is based on the Greek word ‘*hairesis*’ which together with its derivatives mean to be able to choose or the act of choosing. Are we again living a time when some individuals believe that it is right to choose or reject the teachings of God’s Word and kingdom as it suits their own desires and notions?

Danger of Carnal Mindedness

What happens in the life of an individual believer that he/she chooses to turn away from the Word of God? The Apostle James answers: “Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (James 1:13, 14). For an example of this we don’t need to go any further than the Fall, the occasion upon which Eve and Adam first fell into sin. Satan started with a question that both he and Eve already knew the answer to: “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” By posing this question, he successfully placed the seed of doubt in Eve’s mind and the warfare between the mind and faith began. This warfare has continued throughout history. The enemy then proceeded to paint a picture of reduced punishment for disobedience by stating: “Ye shall not surely die.” He thus tried to make sin appear harmless or at the very least minimize its consequences. Eve felt assured of the serpent’s claim because the tree and its fruit were pleasant to the eyes. She perhaps wondered what harm could come of such a beautiful and useful thing. Finally, Satan promised a level of knowledge and understanding the equal of God’s. Eve and then Adam ate of the tree and they fell into unbelief.

Throughout time the enemy has worked in the same way and with the same results. Carnal mindedness is the application of human reason to spiritual issues with no regard to the Word of God or teachings of the Holy Spirit within the congregation.

With Carnal Mindedness Comes the Breakdown of Unity

What happens when carnal mindedness prevails in a congregation? In order to answer this we can look at the Scriptures and examples it gives from Corinth and Rome and also to our own experience during the heresy of the 1970s.

In Corinth:

Corinth was a congregation faced with a number of divisive issues. They included the evaluation of servants and their gifts, the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, moral laxity, confusion concerning the resurrection of the dead, and abuses during celebration of the Lord's Holy Supper. Paul taught that there was a difference between earthly and spiritual wisdom and that spiritual matters could not be resolved with a carnal reason. He wrote, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritual discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). On the issue of following preachers, Paul pointedly writes, "For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul and another, I am of Apollos: are ye not carnal?" (1 Cor. 3: 3, 4).

In Rome:

In Rome dissension arose between the Jewish and Gentile believers over the eating of meat. Paul warned the believers about the danger and consequence of carnal mindedness, and also contrasted those dangers with the blessings of being spiritually minded: "For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither can be" (Rom. 8:5-7). In trying to turn the focus of the Roman believers to that which is most beneficial for congregational life and away from the polarization caused by the dietary laws of Moses, he proclaimed: "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Rom. 14:17).

In the Zion of North America:

Many of us remember the last heresy on this continent. At that time the enemy of the soul was found to have breached the walls of Zion and waged war against the children of God from within. Where carnal reasoning prevailed there was a falling away from the truth of God's Word and His kingdom was viewed carnally instead of spiritually. It was no longer seen to be the "pillar and ground of truth." Direction and action was based on the opinions of individuals and the local congregation was regarded as the spiritual mother instead of the kingdom of God in its entirety. The work of the Holy Spirit was seen as the actions of certain men.

Understanding of the need to care for one's own conscience and to care for the souls of others had dimmed and was rare in practice. Where sin abounded and governed the heart true love disappeared (Matt. 24:12). Carnal love replaced spiritual love. Sins were overlooked or considered only a weakness. Carnal reasoning made sin seem relative to the individual and some tried to justify their inappropriate actions by stating "it is not sin for me." Others excused the violation of their own conscience with the rationale that "everybody else is doing it." It was discovered that at some point many had left their place of watching on the wall of Zion and as a result had been taken captive by the enemy of the soul. They had forgotten, or perhaps never clearly understood, that the first place of watching for a believer is to put away sin as sin attaches and believe the gospel.

In God's kingdom, the exhortation to hold faith and a good conscience (1 Tim. 1:19) is a fundamental teaching. Without living faith and a conscience bound to the "measuring stick" of God's Word many were overtaken by the sin of "worldliness" as they loved the things of this world more than they loved God. Worldliness demonstrated itself in specific issues which included TV in the home, birth control, believers courting unbelievers, movies, sports, fornication, and generally seeing how far one could go and still be considered "in faith." While many fell away into the sins of the flesh, the enemy caused others to fall into equally destructive self-righteousness or law-mindedness. This demonstrated itself in the form of false watching, faultfinding, evil surmising, dryness, legalistic demands and other such errors. The end result was that the unity of faith and understanding given of the Holy Spirit was gradually displaced by the disunity and tension created by carnal mindedness and unbelief.

Congregational Decisions and Carnal Mindedness

The God of grace has always enlightened His Holy Congregation to dangers peculiar to the present time. When the Holy Spirit reveals to God's congregation that partaking of some activity will cause the heart to fall away from God, it preached as sin because one cannot partake of it and maintain faith and a good conscience for "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). TV was and is one such matter.

Other matters may not themselves be sin but entail danger. They may, for example, easily lead to unwatchfulness and then eventually sin. In such instances the Holy Spirit works through the individual conscience and God's children to warn that there is a place of watching in the matter, or that there is a point beyond which one cannot go without wounding the conscience. The children of God don't have a rulebook, but rather face the issues of their time guided by God's Word and a sincere desire to keep faith and a good conscience. During the time of the last heresy, carnal mindedness prevailed in some individuals who then placed their own understanding and conscience above the understanding of God's congregation as a result fell from God's kingdom. It is no small matter when an individual or group, either secretly or openly, begins to believe that the house of God is not necessarily "the pillar and ground of truth" in all matters of soul and conscience or that there is more than one saving faith. Paul warned the Thessalonians the carnal mindedness and self-exaltation that will precede the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition: Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshiped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God" (2 Thess.2: 3, 4). Paul then stated that the reason for this falling away and condemnation was that "they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but have pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thess. 2:10-12).

Paul advised Timothy as to how one should live in the congregation of God saying: "That you mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). Paul wanted to put things in perspective for Timothy and for us. In God's congregation we have been encouraged to listen to what the Spirit says in the congregation to consider how our position affects other believers.

After all, it is the house of God, the church of the living God that is the pillar and ground of truth, and not our individual conscience, the norms of society or our own opinions.

Let Each Remain in Their Place of Watching

The walk of each individual believer directly influences the unity or lack of unity within the family of God. Knowing this helps us understand both how disunity originates and also what might be done to encourage unity. Unity of faith and understanding will not result if one receives the Word of God and teachings of the Spirit with a carnal mind. Unbelief is always a danger. Many of the children of Israel began the journey to the Promised Land but never arrived, having died spiritually on the way. What was the cause? Of this it was written: “Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into this rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it” (Heb. 4:1, 2).

To encourage unity of faith and understanding we need to continue to exhort each child of God to remain at his or her place of watching on the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah describes the manner in which God’s children in ancient times, using both tools and weapons, built the wall of God’s city: “They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, everyone with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded. And he that sounded the trumpet was by me” (Neh. 4:17, 18). Those of us old enough to remember the last heresy know that the walls of our North American Zion were breached and broken down. Since then years of peace and work have allowed the walls to be rebuilt and fortified. Let each child of God make new promises to be faithful to Him who has called us and to remain in our own place of watching, a tool in one hand and a weapon in the other, working to maintain the walls.

“Finally, my brethren be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:10, 11). 38

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