

Striving For Oneness

I begin this morning with a text taken from our assigned reading this past week, from **John 17**. Beginning in **verse 15**, with reference to his disciples, the apostles, we find Jesus praying:

"I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. 16) They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17) Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18) As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19) And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. 20) "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21) that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Without a doubt, one of the biggest problems facing those who want to make known the gospel of Christ to this sin-lost world is the problem caused by Christians not being able to agree and get along. Differences in ideas and beliefs and practices have generated numerous occasions when people stopped loving and worshipping and working together. Over the centuries that kind of thing sort of evolved, resulting in giving us what is loosely call denominationalism, which is nothing more than the organized results of division.

But, not only have churches differed and fallen out with other churches, too many individual Christians have found themselves at odds with others over what Christian beliefs and practices should be. Too many times, those differences become divisive and the next thing you know, the fellowship and unity that ought to characterize Christianity ends up on the ash heap somewhere. Only God knows how many times and in how many places the devil has destroyed some church or some Christian by fomenting disagreements! And every time he succeeds at doing that, it makes it harder for the world to believe that we have something that is worth hearing.

Jesus' prayer was that we all be one, even as He and the Father were one, and that somehow, our oneness might be a witness to the world.

This morning I want to bring you a lesson on "Striving for Oneness," and I want to begin by asking you to keep these words of Jesus in your mind as we revisit something that is told about in the last six verses of Acts, chapter 15.

You will remember that two Christians, both evangelists, named Paul and Barnabus had worked together on what we often call Paul's first missionary journey. They had gone out and for about a year or so, they preached the gospel and established congregations all over the Mediterranean. Then they went up into what today we would call Turkey. They had returned back to Antioch, from where they had started, and had then gone down to Jerusalem to help settle a question about circumcision, and were then ready to go back out on another mission. Barnabus wanted to take his nephew with them, a young man named John Mark. That was a problem for Paul, a big problem, because John Mark had gone with them on the first trip, but

along the way he turned back. Acts 15:38 tells us that Mark had deserted Paul and Barnabus and did not go with them to the work. So Paul had no confidence in him, but Barnabus wanted to give him another chance.

Verse 39 says they got into a heated discussion about it. Your version may say, “sharp contention” or “sharp disagreement.” The Greek text uses a word from which we get the English word *paroxysm*. In English that word is used to describe a sudden attack or fit, a convulsion, outburst, or explosion. Luke doesn’t suggest that they came to blows but for sure it wasn’t something pretty! It wasn’t just a mild disagreement. The verb tense implies that it was something that continued for some time and the longer it went, the more contentious it became, until Paul, convinced that he was right, went one way, and Barnabus, just as equally convinced that he was right, went another way.

My point is that sometimes even good people disagree and have a problem getting along. And sometimes it is not always easy to determine who or what is right or wrong. There might even be right and wrong on all sides!

Now, with that story in mind, I want to share with you seven observations that will hopefully help us in dealing with those times and issues when our striving for oneness becomes strife. Incidentally, because Jesus taught that “the two shall become one,” with respect to husbands and wives, what I am about to share with you can easily be applied to those times and issues that threaten the oneness of our marriages.

Observation # 1: God’s ideal is for there to be unity and peace and harmony between brethren.

Psalm 133:1 says, “*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!*”

In **Ephesians 4, verses 1-3**, the apostle Paul wrote:

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2) with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3) eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Some of the other versions render verse 3 as “endeavoring” or “being diligent.” We are to endeavor and be diligent and eager to “*maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”

Listen to this passage, found in **1 Corinthians 1:10**, where Paul writes:

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.”

Please notice a couple of things about what Paul said there.

- First, notice that Paul called upon Christians to be united in the same mind and in the same judgment. He said, let “*there be no divisions among you.*” We haven’t had any major divisions among us, but we have had a number of little divisions haven’t we? How many times have brethren become upset or angry about something and gone off to another church or just quit altogether? That isn’t what God wants, is it? We are to be united, and to be of a common mind. That’s the goal; that is the ideal.
- Secondly, notice Paul said, “*I appeal to you brothers.*” KJV uses the word, “Beseech” NASV uses the word “exhort.” There were some things that Paul commanded, but interestingly, he didn’t use that word here. Over in the book of Philemon, Paul appealed to his friend to receive Onesimus the runaway slave as a brother. In fact, he said, receive him like you would receive me. In verse 8, Paul said, I could command you to do that, but for love’s sake I appeal to you. Paul said here in **1 Corinthians 1:10**, “*I appeal to you brothers.*” That is because unity and oneness is hard; it is hard to obtain, and it is hard to keep. Sometimes it becomes almost impossible to have.

Unity and peace and harmony between brethren is the ideal, but it is not always easy to have and keep.

Observation # 2: There are a lot of things that brethren can disagree about and even good people can be on opposite sides of the issue.

- Let me just give you a quick list of the things that I am sure, if we wanted to, we could find some disagreement among ourselves.
- How about drinking wine? I’m not talking about getting drunk, just drinking wine. Ought Christians do that? Some would say “yes,” some would say “no.”
- How about watching TV or going to the movies? We may all do both now, but in the lifetime of some who are here today, that wasn’t always the case
- How about playing cards?
- Would it be wrong if someone raised their hands during prayer or singing?
- How about women wearing pants to worship? No problem with most of you I’m sure, but again I can remember when that was a heated issue.
- How about what is loosely called “mixed swimming?” Or dancing? When I was a Christian teenager that was definitely considered a sin.
- What about working on the Lord’s Day? How about fishing on Sunday?
- What about smoking? I am sure some of you can remember some very strong sermons against smoking.
- How about bringing in a piano or organ, or even a guitar for use during a wedding?
- What about listening to contemporary “Christian” music that is instrumental?
- How about long hair on men?
- What about women working outside the home? Where do you stand on that? Does the Bible have anything to say about that?
- What about birth control? Or, the morning after pill?

- How about women helping serve the Lord's Supper?
- How about working in a restaurant where you are serving liquor?
- How about eating in the church building?
- What about moving the Lord's Supper from before the sermon to after the sermon?
- What about celebrating Christmas? How about Halloween?
- What about clapping during a song? Or, how about clapping after a baptism?
- What about Christians serving in the police or military where they might be required to shoot and kill someone?
- Could we call ourselves the Church of God? What if the church met in homes instead of a church building?
- What about a man with only one child? Can he serve as an elder? What about a man who has adult children who are no longer faithful? Can he serve as a deacon?

Now I raise these questions, not to be provocative or silly, but to illustrate that there are a number of issues over which we could have a lot of disagreement. There are churches that have been ripped apart by issues like these.

Observation # 3: People, and even Christians are not always consistent. Sometimes, for some reason, some things strike them with greater or less force than other things.

I think it is interesting that more than anyone else, in the New Testament, Paul—the man who didn't want to take John Mark—writes more about the unity of the church than anyone else. Here's just a sampling:

Romans 12:10: *“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”*

Romans 12:16: *“Live in harmony with one another.”*

Or how about this one taken from **Romans 12:18:** *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”*

2 Corinthians 13:11: *“Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”*

Ephesians 4:3: *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”*
(see also Romans 14:17-19)

Now, would you say that Paul was nothing short of a hypocrite for writing things like that? After all, it doesn't look like he practiced what he preached when he and Barnabus had their disagreement? I don't think most of us would say that, but isn't that interesting? Incidentally, I think it is interesting that Luke included this in his history. It wasn't something very flattering to either Paul or Barnabus, and yet Luke included it. You have to know there was a reason he did that.

Observation # 4: While disagreements can be painful and difficult, they are not always a bad thing. Sometimes by having the courage to disagree, more light gets focused on the issue and the truth becomes clearer. Christians need to have the courage of their convictions.

1 Corinthians 11, and verses 18 & 19 says: *“For in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.”*

I am sure we all wish that many things in the Bible were a lot simpler and a lot clearer. But if God had desired to give us a book in which every possible matter, idea, and every possible question was clearly and definitively spelled out, it would surely be a book so massive no one would ever be able to finish reading.

I believe we can see God’s wisdom in leaving a number of things a little unclear. In doing so, He created a wonderful opportunity for us to practice some of those things that are very clear, such as love, and patience and forbearance, and forgiveness, and mercy.

Observation # 5: When we do disagree with others, we must be careful to not let our attitude and approach make the matter worse.

Do you remember Paul’s words that I read a few moments ago from Romans 12:18? Paul said, *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”*

That puts quite a responsibility on you, doesn’t it? Sometimes you have the opportunity to resolve a matter peaceably, and sometimes, in spite of your best efforts, it still becomes contentious. Paul says, *“as far as it depends on you.”* You know it takes two to have a conflict, and so there may be a time and place for you to let your convictions be known through your silence. Paul told Timothy, *“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.” (2 Timothy 2:24, 25).*

The writer of **Proverbs** said (17:14), *“The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out”*

We have to be wise in deciding how to handle disagreements, and certainly we need to cover them with prayer, and always be open to praying through these situations. As Paul instructs, let us not be quarrelsome, but instead, let us be kind and patient while we strive to make known our understanding.

Observation # 6: Truth and God’s glory ought to be our goal, not personal vindication. It isn’t about who is right, it is about what is right.

We had an elder’s wife out in California who was a great counselor. She was full of wisdom that I suspect came from a lot of experience. She used to say, couples need to stop fighting each

other and together fight the thing that is tearing them apart. That is sage advice. When brethren disagree with one another, they ought to realize that somehow Satan is trying to drive a wedge between them and if they let that happen they are helping Satan, not God.

In **Ephesians 4:26, 27**, Paul wrote: “*Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27) and give no opportunity to the devil.*”

Sometimes we take things too personally and it warps us. Just because of our human nature, this can happen to us without us even realizing it is happening. Let me give you a couple of warning signs that we are in danger of that happening and that we may need to take a step back.

- **One**, we need to step back when an issue becomes all we can think about and talk about.
- **Two**, we need to step back when we are talking more about the “who” than we are the “what.” Remember we need to fight the thing that is dividing us, not each other.

Let’s not give the devil any opportunity or help him out in any way. Let’s stay focused on what our goal ought to be.

Observation # 7: While there may be many things in the Bible about which we may disagree, there is one thing about which we can all agree and that is that we ought to love one another.

I have always thought it was amazing that brethren can fall out with one another over things that may be a little unclear when in doing so they violate something that is very clear. I hear brethren sometimes talking about “sound doctrine,” but I don’t know of a doctrine that is more basic, more foundational, more sound than that we are to love one another.

It’s as if some brethren think, “well if you don’t agree with me about X or Y or Z, then that gives me the right to not love you.” No, we still are commanded to love one another, and about that there should be no disagreement.

Now, please do not take anything I’ve said here this morning to mean that I believe truth doesn’t matter, or that we ought to compromise with error. I’m just saying that when we have disagreements, let’s not let those things drive us apart. Let’s continue to strive for the oneness for which Christ prayed.

Will you pray with me?

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