

10. Striving for the Unity of the Faith to Build Up the Body of Christ

The unity of the faith is a centerpiece concept in the New Testament. Christ, our Lord, prayed for it just before his crucifixion in John 17:20-21: "20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." The apostle Paul wrote vividly about this same unity of faith in Eph 4:12-13, ". . . that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." All Christians must strive for unity of the faith to build up the body of Christ.

The Bible Condemns Division

The Bible condemns the opposite of unity – division – in Gal. 5: 19-21, where we find that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God:

19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The largest group of the acts of a sinful nature is divisive sins: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy. Notice that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. The church cannot be strong when the members participate in these sinful acts.

In 1 Cor 1:10-13, Paul condemns division in the strongest terms:

10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11 My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

13 Is Christ divided?

What Paul confronted in Corinth is not unlike the divisions that exist in the 21st century where each denomination calls itself by a divisive name. Webster shows how the names of religious groups identify their divisive practices: "3: name, designation; especially: a general name for a category 4: a religious organization whose congregations are united in their adherence to its beliefs and practices."

False Teaching Interferes with Building up the Church

The New Testament teaches clearly that our job is to work toward unity and keep division away from this congregation. However, when confronted with divisive deeds or false teaching, the New Testament instructs us to take decisive and clear action. Paul tells us, in Rom 16:17-18, to watch out and keep away from those who cause division:

17 I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. 18 For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the minds of naive people.

Paul admonishes elders in Tit. 1:9-11 of the particular responsibility for protecting the congregation from divisive false teachers:

He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

10 For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. 11 They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach – and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

We must work to attain the unity of the faith, to protect that unity once we attain it, and to refute those who contradict the sound doctrine that supports it. The elders, as shepherds of the flock, must take the lead in achieving the unity of the faith. To this end, they need your help and prayers.”

Gossip and Backbiting Interfere with Building up the Church

Some aim the divisive acts of a sinful nature in Gal 5 at fellow church members-- hatred, discord, jealousy. These sinful acts hurt the individual Christians at whom they are aimed and the entire local congregation. We cannot attain the unity to the faith and build up the congregation when members practice such sins. In 2 Cor 12:20-21, Paul summarized the acts that are so destructive to the congregation: “I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.”

Once one throws slander and gossip out on the gossip network, it is gone forever. One can never retrieve a lying message. Such gossip is as if a person tears open a feather pillow, throws the feathers to the wind, and then tries in desperation to retrieve the feathers. The feather – and the gossip – are gone forever.

The Divine Recipe for Unity and Building up the Church

God has given the church a recipe for attaining and maintaining the unity of the faith in the local congregations. In Phil 2:1-5, described how we may be united in Christ:

2:1 If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

We should be like-minded with the mind of Christ.

Conclusion

Let us pray that at the end of our time, the congregation where we attend will still be a faithful, unified, and true church of the Lord. This goal can only be achieved if we continually seek the build up the body of Christ till we attain the unity of the faith. The text of this lesson from Eph 4:12-13 bears repeating: “. . . that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”