

Unity and Law

Differences Require Repentance and Compromise

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In John 10: 30, Jesus proclaimed that He and the Father are *one*. At least six times in John 17, He asked the Father for oneness for us with Them. He obviously did not mean that they were one person, but that they were one in *kind*, and in perfect agreement.

Unity is obviously very important to Him.

It dawned on me a couple of months ago that virtually every human communication; ½ for all time; ½ whether face-to-face, over the phone, by email, by snail-mail, or by radio; ½ carries with it some aspect of unity. All of us have the driving desire to be aligned with each other because we want peace or because we want to influence or manipulate for some reason.

Unity is important because of the peace and productivity that is its fruit. Our desire for oneness is not always altruistic, but it *is* always significant enough to make the effort to achieve it through some means and some measure of communication. So important is it to peace that James says that even the fruit of righteousness; ½ that is, the product, the effects, the good things of God's way of life; ½ is sown in peace by those who make peace. Without unity, there is at least an undercurrent of unrest and agitation.

Unity is the theme that threads its way through the book of Ephesians. Paul shows in the first chapter how a measure of unity with God was made possible for us through His calling and the giving of His Spirit. But before that chapter is completed, he prays that we might grasp the great hope of our calling of being in Christ Jesus. Then at the beginning of chapter 2, he briefly outlines why unity is so difficult to achieve. This is because there is a great Adversary influencing against unity with God, and therefore against each other as well.

In the remainder of the chapter, Paul shows that Satan's influence is so prevailing and pervasive that the only way that we can be saved from destruction caused by our disunity is by God's merciful grace. Salvation; ½ which is unity or oneness with God; ½ is by means of grace.

We are going to pick up on this theme in the book of Ephesians beginning in Ephesians 2: 11. But before we read that, another note of explanation is needed.

Understand as we begin that Ephesians was originally written to a congregation containing both Israelites and Gentiles, and they most certainly had their differences that prejudiced one against the other. We do not have exactly the same differences today, but *other differences* nonetheless exist between us, and they must be overcome.

God is calling for us to rise above our wrong beliefs and feelings, our personal self-righteousness with each other, in order to be at one with Him. Does He not sometimes give us some very strong charges to do so? For example, does He not say that if we will not forgive others that He will not forgive us (Matthew 6: 14-15)? And if He does not forgive us, we

will *never* be one with Him. It is that serious. Pursuing unity is no insignificant matter.

Today, in our time, because of the scattered condition of the church, if a disagreement arises between members, one or the other leaves one group or one fellowship so that they might fellowship with another. But that avoidance of the issue is not solving the problem with God; it is merely swept under the rug. What do you think that God thinks of that? Will He forgive? I do not know. But at least He warns us.

The Israelites and the Gentiles had a major attitudinal difference between them in the first century that involved each one's relationship with God. The Israelites had feelings of *superiority* that they had to overcome, and the Gentiles had feelings of *inferiority*, resentment, and rejection that they had to overcome. The offense on both sides was very real.

On the one side, resentments raged. On the other side, pride generated a better-than-thou mindset that rubbed raw and kept the Gentile and Israelite from becoming one. Interestingly, what each member had to reconcile to himself was that *God's* choices got that *God's* choices were at the base of this issue. In other words, He set it up. It was God's choice to work through the families of Jacob. That separated the Israelites from the rest of the world by revealing Himself and His Word to them.

It was God's choice to love the Gentiles less, by continuing to more fully hide Himself, that caused the Gentiles to be on the short end of the stick in a relationship with Him. This was a situation neither was wholly responsible for, but it was nonetheless a situation that God *required* be dealt with, and that each person's feelings of superiority or resentment dealt with and overcome. It was a built-in problem, generated by their calling and God's showing mercy to both.

Each Israelite had to face the fact that he was *not* superior by nature to any other man. The Gentile had to learn that he was by nature not inferior to any Israelite. The foundation of unity is having things important to life *in common* with each other.

In this issue, the Israelites truly had a knowledge advantage over the Gentiles. But that advantage gave him *no right* to have a sense of superiority because the advantage was a *God-given GIFT* to him. It was not earned by any natural superiority.

The Ephesian congregation was apparently heavily weighted toward the Gentiles in terms of numbers. In other words, there were more Gentiles in the congregation than there were Israelites. Thus the counsel in the book of Ephesians was primarily aimed at them.

As we begin to read, I want you to notice how God, through Paul, meets both the Israelites' and the Gentiles' need for commonality.

Ephesians 2:11-17 Wherefore remember, that you being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands [Pay attention to that: "circumcision *in the flesh*"]; that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the

world: but now [as a result of the calling] in Christ Jesus you who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.

In verses 11 and 12, Paul reminds the Gentiles of their past *complete* separation from both Christ and Israel; the nation God chose to work in and through. But in so doing, he also reminds the Israelites that their circumcision was only "hand-made!" It was not a supernatural, spiritual remaking of the heart by God. So what did they have to brag about? Nothing, spiritually. He is putting them in their place. Actually, we find then that both in that sense were on exactly the same level.

Verse 13 establishes the most important commonality: through God's calling; and *only* through God's calling; both have faith in Christ, justification before God, and hope in and for the Kingdom of God in common. If God had not called, neither of them would have that.

In verses 14-17, it firmly establishes that each person carrying through with his responsibilities on the strength of this commonality (Jesus Christ) is what creates peace between them.

Let us make something that appears in verse 15 clear, because many think that this verse abolishes God's law. Notice that it clearly states that Christ abolished *the enmity*; not the law. Where was the enmity? It was that antagonism that existed between the two groups of people. *That* is what was dissolved. The dividing line was hostility, not laws.

Notice next that the word *even* (in verse 15) is in italics, meaning that it was not in the original manuscripts. It was supplied by the translators, hoping to clarify. But, brethren, the word that they *should* have supplied is *against*.

Understand a clear Biblical truth: human nature, whether in a Gentile or an Israelite, is *against* God's law (Romans 8: 7); God's spiritual, moral, and ceremonial laws. It was Paul; this epistle's author; who stated in Romans 7 that God's laws are holy, just, and good, and that *he*; a converted apostle; *delighted* in them. He is reminding everybody of human nature's antagonism; its enmity; against God's laws.

Interestingly, the *New Testament Commentary* by Hendricksen and Kistemaker affirms that they believe that because of the body of statements found in the entire New Testament regarding the importance of the moral and spiritual laws, the body of laws that Paul had reminded them of here in the book of Ephesians was ceremonial. That is pretty interesting, coming from a Protestant group.

Let us get this: the real barrier to these people becoming one was their attitude toward law! The Jews' religion had become so formalized around ceremony; they minimized the vastly more

important spiritual and moral laws. They looked to ceremony to justify them, and overlooked the pride-generated spiritual sins, primarily self-righteousness. The Gentiles' natural antagonism against God's laws moved them to resent the Jews' attitude toward them, into an envious hatred every bit as evil as the Jews' pride.

The solution available to both of them was to be found in each carrying out their responsibilities to Christ, Who loved them both. In His mercy, by justifying them $\frac{1}{2}$ Israelite and Gentile $\frac{1}{2}$ and giving them His Spirit, God had removed the worst of the attitude against His law, so now the pressure was on them to carry through by humbling themselves to make personal peace with each other out of their common respect for Christ, and their hope in the Kingdom of God.

What is the solution to unity in this very important episode? Each person had to *repent*, and to make the sacrifice of compromise by humbly forgiving the other. Would God then forgive them for their former resentments? Would God then forgive them for their former sense of superiority? Absolutely. And so, in getting things straightened out with each other by humbly repenting, they also got things straightened out with God, and unity then became a reality.

This same issue is just as alive and just as important to us in this day, though our problem may not be exactly the same as these peoples'. We still have problems amongst us, but the solution is exactly the same. God called us all; none of us is perfect; *everyone* needs to repent and make that sacrifice.