

Membership class #2

PEACE AND PURITY OF THE CHURCH

Please turn in your notebook to class #2, skip down half a page to Vow #5 where we pick up today. Vow #5 says this *I submit myself to the government and discipline of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and to the spiritual oversight of this church Session, and do promise to promote the purity and peace of the church.* That commitment, which we believe is proper for Christians, is what we will cover now and next time. Next time we look at the government and discipline of the church. Today we concentrate on the part about studying, that is – giving care and thought to- or promoting the purity and peace of the church, beginning with the purity of the church. And there are two types of purity that we must maintain. The first of these is doctrinal purity, purity in our beliefs and teachings. Now when we talk about purity, we are speaking of being conformed to the biblical pattern. Purity of doctrine means that we are affirming what is set forth in the Scriptures. To assist us in doing that we rely somewhat on what are called doctrinal standards. And for us that means the Westminster Confession of Faith. We spoke of this somewhat in the North Park Encounter, so I will be brief here. Suffice it to say that we believe the WCOF accurately summarizes the teaching of the Bible and we use it therefore to demonstrate what is acceptable and not acceptable in the teaching that goes on in our church. It should never, however, take the place of the Bible because ultimately it is the standards of God that we are after.

Within the collection of doctrinal affirmations found in the confession and in our Presbyterian tradition, there are certain propositions which are more at the core of what we believe. There are essential doctrines which define what it means to be a Christian. We don't expect new members in our church to assent to or even know the content of the confession, but we do expect agreement about the person and work of Jesus and the way of salvation and the nature of man, things basic to Christian belief and apart from which one can't truly claim to even be a Christian. But then too we recognize that there are lots of issues about which well-meaning believers disagree, things more on the periphery of our faith, like how we baptize and the role of women in the church and the timing of the second coming. On these issues, we may have convictions and stated positions, but we do allow a certain diversity of thought among our members. The Evangelical Presbyterian

Church has an interesting motto about this. It says, “*In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.*” ® I like that. It says that in the essentials of our faith we must be agreed to have fellowship together. But in non-essentials, in the more peripheral elements of Christian doctrine, there may be some liberty, while in everything, our agreements and our debates we are to relate to one another in love.

Now understand this – if you stay around our church very long at all, you will hear things taught by me and others that will disturb you, that you will disagree with. This is really the only church I have ever been in where I agree with the pastor on everything. But I am the only one with that luxury. You will have to figure out how to respond when you encounter teaching that you believe is in error. Maybe the first thing you need to assess is how closely does a certain error strike at the vitals of our faith. My hunch is that the errors you will encounter here will be over the non-essentials. That’s not to say they aren’t important issues. They may be, but hopefully you will not find them so severe that you will need to break fellowship over them. Those who do teach and lead within our church are expected, more than other members, to maintain a greater degree of understanding and conformity to our doctrinal standards. James 3:1 *Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.* Right. In our church we expect more of our adult Sunday school teachers and church officers. Officers are required to vow their consent to the system of doctrine found in the confession – not to every line and phrase, but to the system. As a result, when someone moves toward church leadership their understanding of Scripture becomes more closely evaluated by us.

Now, just who is it in the church that is responsible for doctrinal purity? Huh? There are three good answers for that. Answer #1 is the pastors, those called and ordained especially with teaching in view. Answer #2 is the elders, the spiritual governors of the body. Answer #3 is the members. All of you have some responsibility to see to it that truth prevails in your church. That means that if you hear what you believe to be error of some serious kind, you should approach the teacher to clarify your understanding of his teaching, discuss the matter politely, and then, should you still have concerns, speak to an elder in the church about. We are concerned about doctrinal purity.

I would love, at this point, to be able to handle all kinds of questions from you about doctrinal concerns. I know some of you do have those. You wonder why we

Presbyterians believe certain things we believe. You may be really bothered by something specific. If so, please let me know. Most likely I have a tape that will address your concern. We can get you that, and if it doesn't settle matters for you I will be happy to speak with you personally.

But let's move on now to the second type of purity we must maintain, and that is moral purity. One of the greatest problems in the world, in my opinion, is the polluted church. As a result of moral corruption within the church, we can't worship like we ought, our prayers lack power and we offer a rotten witness to a very needy watching world. And the problem is not sin in the church, so much as it is hidden or tolerated sin in the church. It's how we just wink at it, and go on that raises the issue of hypocrisy. But we must vow to maintain church purity, beginning with ourselves. Consider what is at stake in this. What is at stake is nothing less than the honor of our Lord, His glory. When you call yourself by the name of Christ, and identify with him in baptism, now his reputation rides with your conduct. When David sinned so grievously against God in the OT, he was rebuked by the prophet Nathan who said to told him that by his sin he, the king, had given reason for the enemies of God to blaspheme. The pagan nations could scoff and say, "Ha, Israel claims to be the chosen of God, and look at what their psalm-writing king has gone off and done." In Romans two Paul says of the Jewish leadership in his day, that they caused the Gentiles to blaspheme God because they were inconsistent hypocrites. If you care for the purity of God's name, watch out for the purity of your life. Be zealous for God's glory in this way. In John ch.2 we read a story about Jesus going into the temple and discovering there the vendors, the salesmen gathered there to swindle those who came to Jerusalem to worship. So, Jesus gets violent. He makes himself a whip, overturns the table and runs the vendors right out of the temple. Why? Surely Jesus had seen corruption and thievery before, why only in this instance did He get violent about it? (pause) Location, location, location. In John 2 Jesus got violent over sin because it was going on in the temple. He said, "My Father's house is to be a house of prayer and you have made it a den of robbers." Then in John 2:17 *His disciples remembered that it was written, "ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE WILL CONSUME ME.* We never read about anyone being run into the church, but they are run out of the church when their conduct becomes a disgrace to the name of God. Then in Acts chapter five we read quite a story. In Acts ch.4 we read of people in the early church selling their properties and giving the

money for the church. And this one couple, named Annanias and Saphira, thought that was pretty cool. They made it known that they would do the same thing. When they had sold their property however, they decided to keep some of the proceeds for themselves. That would have been fine, but they lied and said they gave it all. Annanias comes to church and Peter asks him about the sale, Annanias lies to Peter and listen, he falls over dead in the service. You talk about getting slain by the Spirit. Wow! Then three hours later, his wife, Saphira comes to the same worship service. Three hours later. You wouldn't want to work nursery back then. Saphira comes in, repeats the lie of her husband and she too is carried out dead. Wow! Can you imagine someone going home, and the wife says, "Hi honey, how was church today?" "Well, two people were struck dead." The next verses speak of how fear fell upon all the people because of this. But what was God doing here? Why did He take their lives as He did? I believe it was to dramatically communicate to those early believers that God is not one to be trifled with. If you call yourself a Christian you don't go around lying. You take your moral conduct very seriously. Another verse on this Titus 2:14 speaks of the Jesus **14** *who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.* Why did Jesus die? What was he after? According to this verse he was out to redeem a people and to purify them, right? This was and is His goal. Not to leave us as He finds us but to make us different, to make us zealous to do what is right. Let's suppose you have a friend named Kong, at least that is what everyone calls him. And he is called Kong because he is a brute of a man 6'4" 260. And you know two things about Kong. One is that he is scrupulously honest. Kong would never even think of lying or breaking his word. Secondly, you know that he can physically have his way with anybody. And on Sunday Kong says to you, "Tomorrow, I will punch all of my enemies in the eye." On Tuesday you see me on the street and I am looking good, feeling fine, what does that tell you about me? That I am not an enemy of Kong, because if I were, I would have a black eye. Now compare Kong to Jesus. Is Jesus honest? Perfectly. Is Jesus powerful? Totally. Will Jesus do what He says He will do? For sure. And we read in Titus 2:14 that all who are redeemed by Jesus He intends to purify and make zealous for good deeds. So, when you see someone who claims to be redeemed by Jesus, but is not growing pure at all, and shows no real interest in learning what is good or in doing it, what does that tell you about that person? They have never been

redeemed by Jesus. What's at stake in our moral purity? Ultimately it is even our eternity. Hebrews 12:**14** *Pursue peace with all men and the holiness (or purity) without which no one will see the Lord.* We have covered then the last elements of that verse. After a break we will look at the first part, about pursuing peace.

Ephesians 4:**1-6**

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

We are going to consider together the command in vs.3 to be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, as we look at three points: the importance of a diligent preservation of spiritual unity, the need for a diligent preservation of spiritual unity, and the pathway to a diligent preservation of spiritual unity.

First then, the importance of spiritual unity. And it is important in the church because of four considerations. First, because of the value and joy of spiritual unity. Ps.133:**1** *Behold how good and pleasant it is for brother to dwell together in unity.* This is a gift of God and a very great gift. A church that is unified, that is marked by peace and love and humility is a sweet haven for the saints. It is a place of emotional rest from the turmoil of a wicked world. It is something to be cherished and therefore preserved with diligence.

Secondly, this subject is important because of the pain of disunity. Psalm 133:1 turned around could say, "Behold, how bad and yucky it is for brothers to dwell together in conflict." Some of you have been there haven't you? You've been in churches full of conflict and strife and suspicion. You know how unpleasant that can be. Most of us know this from personal experience in our families as well. Division of united elements is a sad affair and is always escorted by misery. God's word says that Christians are united by God with a unity produced by His Spirit. Ours is the unity **of the Spirit**. And there is a universal law that says, "what God has joined together,(pause) let no man rend asunder." That is true for marriages and it is also true for churches. Now, you can break that law, but know this - when you do that law will break you and will crush your soul. Believer is

bound to believer like the hand to the arm and to sever them means blood, pain and a permanent handicap to the effectiveness of the body.

Thirdly, this matter of unity is important because of its effect on a church's witness. Think of it - we preach a message of grace, and love, forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation. What does it communicate when those who preach those things can't get along with each other? Is it any wonder that our message goes unheard? We have deafened men to the gospel with the earplugs of quarrels and strife in the church. Furthermore, when our physical energies and our emotional energies are spent fighting with each other, we have little time and little strength left to do battle with the world and the devil. You know, conflict is a terrific emotional strain. It really is. And if we have it in the church we won't have it with the world where it belongs. Division in the church stifles and kills her ministry and her witness.

Point four is that unity is important because of its effect on a church's life. Listen, where there is any real vitality in a body of Christians the source of it is not in the pastor, but in the Spirit of God. Jesus said in John 6:**63a** It is the Spirit who gives life. Paul says it is the Spirit who gives unity as well. We are called to preserve the unity that is the creation of God's Spirit. So, when you tear that unity apart what are you doing? Who are you opposing? Eph.4:**30a** *Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.* I Thess.5:**19** *Do not quench the Spirit.* I know of no better way to grieve and quench the Spirit than to nullify and subvert His work. And since the Holy Spirit is the life of the church there is no quicker way to kill a church than to quench its life. When Christians fight, they effectively run the Holy Spirit out the church door. I have a friend in Cocoa Beach trying to resurrect a church that effectively died. He has about 150 people worshipping this morning in a sanctuary that can seat 1500. Can you believe it? In the 1970s God greatly blessed this church with revival. Many people were saved, the church was booming, but then there were quarrels and factions and gossip and the life of the HS was gone. A big, empty church sits there as a monument to human pride.

Dear friends, that could happen here. God forbid that we should let it. The Lord has made it clear to us how important our unity is to Him. He has pronounced a blessing on those who preserve it. Mt.5:**8a** *Blessed are the peacemakers.* God has also pronounced a curse on those who divide. Proverbs 6:19 says God hates those who spread strife among brothers. This unity stuff is important to God and should be to you because of the value

and joy of unity, the pain of disunity, the effect of either on a church's witness and on its life.

We move then to a look at why church unity requires a diligence of preservation. Not every valuable thing requires this but spiritual unity sure does. It comes with a label that says, "refrigerate immediately" and in a box that says, "FRAGILE, handle with care." It is a delicate and perishable item because the laws of nature tend toward disunity and disintegration. Spiritual unity is hard to maintain because men, even Christian men are sinners and tend toward disharmony. Christians are like porcupines in a snowstorm. We have a need to stay close but sometimes we stab and wound each other in the process. Why? Because we are sinners. This fact caused someone to write that *"To dwell above with the saints we love, oh that will be glory. But to dwell below with the saints we know; well, that's another story."* Yes it is and the Bible does not try to hide the difficulty of preserving unity, nor the reality of the offenses which occur. Verse two of our text says that preserving unity requires humility. Nothing is so opposed to our Adamic nature as humility. It means a denial of self. Everything in me wants to express myself. God says that preserving unity means I deny myself. I am by nature a pretty gruff character, rather harsh. God says I need to be gentle. I say, "Lord, that's not me, that's not the way I am." God says, "then change." (R) Unity calls for gentleness. You ever had to pack crystal glassware? What a pain! You have to wrap it up with newspaper inside and out. You have to protect those sensitive edges. It takes a lot of effort but you do it because you value the crystal. This valuable unity requires the same care. Vs.2 goes on to say it requires patience and forbearance and the very meaning of those words implies that you will have something or someone to be patient with and to forbear. Sin and offense in the church is assumed. I meet people all the time who have left their church, or left our church and I find out it was because someone did something offensive. So and so didn't treat my child right; the pastor didn't say thank-you for something I did. These kind of things that make me want to say, "So what?" Those situations are just opportunities to apply Eph.4:2. Listen, nobody said this business of maintaining unity would be easy. Vs.3 says it requires what? Diligence. The NIV says you must make every effort. This means a lot more than just not causing division. Too often we feel our whole obligation to preserve unity is found in not causing division. "If I just do what is right and not create trouble then I'm OK." But the Scriptures call us to much more. I discovered this in the

context of my marriage. My first year of married life was difficult. I went into marriage with this crazy notion that I could make my wife happy and it didn't happen. In fact, we had a whole lot of conflict in those days which I couldn't figure out because it was never my fault. What I mean is that I was always on the right side of the arguments. I griped a little to God. How could someone as right as me have so much discord in my marriage? And God began to teach me that there is a whole lot more to being righteous than being right (R). You know what that means? When there is disagreement we all think we're on the right side, but God calls us to go beyond that and to be righteous. Maintaining unity means we humble ourselves, admit we may be wrong, forbear with the flawed and the different. That's not easy. Sometimes you feel like you are dying. And, well, you are - dying to self. I did it in marriage because I valued that relationship. We do it in the church for the same reason. Unity is a precious gift that deserves a diligent preservation.

So, let's look now at how to go about this. How shall we preserve this unity in the bond of peace? This is the pathway to our goal. I offer today 7 applications, 7 rules for maintaining peace and unity in the body of Christ. #1 is that we must approach church-life to minister, that is to give, not to get. Ask not what your church can do for you, but what you can do for your church. That's a good line, huh? Now, what you can give to your church cannot be your only concern. You need to see that your family is in a place of spiritual life and nurture but honestly, we are living in the me-first generation. It's the age of consumerism in the church, with the result that our churches are full of sponges, soaking up whatever nice programs are being offered without any sense of personal obligation. And the same, me-first consumer mentality is behind the discord and conflict that often shows up. James 4:1,2 *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.* It's the big I getting in the way of brotherly concord. That's why Ephesians 4:2 calls us to humility. That's putting others first. Philippians 2:2 *make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.* How can we do that? 3-4 *Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.*

After all we are Christians, followers of the Supreme example of this virtue. Nothing leads to disunity like self-seeking. Nothing leads to unity like a love that gives.

Appl.#2 is to be gentle. This can take many forms, but it simply involves an appreciation of and sensitivity to one's feelings. Thanking others is a form of this. Not being pushy or stern with certain personality types. Some are more fragile than others. A hug or a pat on the back can sometimes do wonders in the way of promoting unity. Be gentle.

Appl.#3 is to remember God's patience and forbearance with you. (R) God is our model of forbearance. Eph.4:**32-5:1** *Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. 1- Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. Colossian3:13 bear with one another, and forgive each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.* Just as the Lord forgave you. How has the Lord forgiven you? How often? How much? His forgiveness is our standard. The offenders contrition is not the measure of our forgiveness. We imitate the Lord. And I'll tell you, no thought is so useful for me, when it comes to controlling my anger and developing patience. Whether it's my wife, or my kids, or an elder in the church - I know that God has endured infinitely more from me than I have from them. Ephesians 4:1 speaks of walking worthy of our calling. We have a calling that it entirely gracious. How dare we not extend grace to others! When you think about it there is nothing more tacky than an unforgiving spirit in a man that is saved by grace. Jesus had a parable to show us just how tacky this is. You can read it in Mt.18. It's about a servant who owed his master a million dollars. The big boss, knowing the servant could never pay, forgave the debt completely. But this slimeball servant then goes out, finds a fellow servant who owes him \$50 and starts to get tough with him. Jesus says that this guy is in big trouble because he received great grace and refused to extend little grace. That is what we do when we hold grudges and cling to bitterness against our offenders. Drop all that stuff and remember to model the patience, the mercy of God.

Appl.#4 is to repair hurts and tears as soon as possible. Eph.4:**26,27** *BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not give the devil an opportunity.* You understand what that means? The devil is looking for opportunities to divide the body of Christ. He knows that when we are united we are strong, so he is ever on the hunt for openings in the ranks that he can exploit. The

Scripture says that when you harbor bitterness, when you let yourself stay angry you are giving the devil opportunity to destroy you and your relationships. Again, we are like cold porcupines. We need each other, but we are the kind of creatures who wound those we need and even those we love. Offenses will occur, both real and imagined and we have to learn not only preventive tactics but reparative ones as well. If you are the offending party, Jesus says to forget about trying to win until you seek to make the relationship right. You are the one who is to take the initiative, go to your brother and seek his pardon. Again this requires humility.

So, what do you do when the sin is someone else's? Maybe someone sins against you, and hurts you - what do you do? (Mt.18) It says that if your brother sins against you, get on the phone and tell some of your friends (pause), go tell it to his pastor, contact your lawyer. No, it says **15** *If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.* To win your brother is to restore the relationship. That's what our goal should be. We aren't out looking to make the person pay, or make sure they get humbled. The goal here is peace and purity in the family of God. This passage goes on to speak of what happens if the brother won't repent, as it may come before the elders in the way of church discipline. But the responsibility of the offended party is clear. Whether it's in you or in others you just don't allow bitterness to build. You nip it in the bud. You repair hurts and tears as soon as possible.

Appl.#5 is to complain only to those who can change things (R). You need to realize that complaints engender a sour, negative attitude towards the church, and they serve no purpose if they are not made to the proper parties. Sometimes we are in a situation that calls for some complaining, or at least a little constructive criticism, but these complaints are to be shared with great discretion and specificity. You offer complaints like a nurse with an eye-dropper, not like a wet dog that's drying off. You don't wet down the world with your negativity, instead you approach the key person who can correct the problem. There are proper outlets for criticism, but your ladies circle isn't one of them.

Appl.#6 is to beware of the tongue. Beware of the destructiveness of loose speech.

James 3:**5-10**

So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. ¶ See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. 7 For every

species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. 8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; 10 from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way.

With the tongue we gossip, passing on evil reports about others without regard for their truthfulness. Sometimes we know it's a lie and we call that "slander." Proverbs has a great deal to say on this type of sin. 11:**13** *He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets, But he who is trustworthy conceals a matter.* 16:**27,28** *A worthless man digs up evil, While his words are like scorching fire. 28 A perverse man spreads strife, And a slanderer separates intimate friends.* 17:**9** *He who conceals a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends.* My mother had an old saying that isn't too far off the truth. She said constantly, "if you can't say something nice..." Did your mother say the same thing? If you can't say something nice don't say anything at all. But, oh, how we love to gossip! Do you know why? What is so tempting about gossip? (pause) Several things could motivate us to do this. Maybe we are bitter, and gossip is a way to get our vengeance. Maybe we are envious and therefore we attack the one who has the office, or the respect we wish were ours. Maybe we are proud. We like how gossip exalts us over others. We like how our gossip shows others that we are people in the know. Maybe it's just a desire to be liked. We just participate in the school gossip, job gossip, church gossip to get along with others who do it. Whatever the reason, teach yourself to hate this sin. Be slow to speak, weigh your motives, and remember Eph.4:**29** *Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.*

Appl.#7 is "don't listen to evil reports." (R) Pr.17:**4** *An evildoer listens to wicked lips; A liar pays attention to a destructive tongue.* When someone comes to you with something juicy on someone else don't you become a co-gossip. Don't you be an accomplice to this crime that divides intimate friends. This means you don't encourage the gossip by taking an interest. A facial expression or silence may do the trick. Maybe you need to go a step further and rebuke the reporter. Oh, you can do this subtly. You could say, "Boy, I wouldn't want to spread that around even if it were true." Or ask the

gossip this question: "Just what do you feel I can do about this?" Usually there is nothing you can do and the question exposes that. I like this one, "May I quote you on this?" You see, you have to realize that when you come telling me about another person's alleged sin, you have put a burden on me. Now, I have thoughts and suspicions that either need to be acted upon or forgotten. If you tell me that Joe Christian is cheating on his wife I have an obligation to find out if its so, but I can't just go to him and say, "someone said." I need freedom to name my sources. Here's another good response: "What did Joe say when you confronted him with this?" Here we remind the gossip of his obligation to go first, in private, to the brother. Listen, you respond this way and you will limit the amount of sinful gossip that comes your way and you will discourage the whisperer from passing on the news. It only takes a spark to get a fire going. And soon all those around may burn up in its glowing. If you love the woods you put out forest fires; if you love the church you put out gossip fires. Proverbs26:**20** *For lack of wood the fire goes out, And where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down.*

Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words --- words can do a lot more damage than that can't they? We have seen today the importance of, the need for, the pathway to a diligent preservation of spiritual unity. I thank God, that He has maintained the unity of this body of believers, with just a ruffle here or there, for over 20 years. The responsibility now is ours. The stakes are so very high. May God find us faithful, humble, gentle, patient, diligent to preserve the gift of unity that He has given.