

Oneness in Christ

“That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one.”
—John 17:21,23

AS WE CONTINUE OUR series under the heading, “The Mind of Christ,” this month we will examine the important subject of oneness with God, with Jesus, and with the brethren. In the words of our text, Jesus prayed the night before his crucifixion that his followers, including us nearly two thousand years later, would

have oneness with each other and with him, just as he was one with the Heavenly Father. As is clear from Jesus’ words, he was not speaking of oneness of person or identity, but oneness of purpose and character. Indeed, Jesus had said earlier that evening, “My Father is greater than I.” (John 14:28) We also know that, as our Master, Jesus is above his footstep followers in rank, as stated by the Apostle Paul, “He is the head of the body, the church; . . . that in all things he might have the preeminence.” (Col. 1:18) Thus, there is no thought in our examination of this subject which would lead us to believe in a literal interpretation of oneness

between God, his son Jesus, and those for whom Jesus prayed—his footstep followers.

An important part of our learning to have the mind of Christ is to understand the spirit of oneness and unity which he and the Father have. Then we must seek to apply the principles which govern their oneness to ourselves. One of the chief measures and evidences of oneness with God and his son Christ Jesus is the degree to which we have oneness with our brethren. In the Book of Ephesians, chapter four, the Apostle Paul gives us wise counsel concerning oneness and unity among the Lord's people. He begins, "With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."—vss. 2,3

In these verses, Paul makes it clear that oneness, peace, and harmony among the brethren of Christ are possible only where there exists an attitude of lowliness and meekness. These, he says, are to be mingled with long-suffering, which enables us to bear with the imperfections of one another because we love them as fellow-members in the body of Christ. Paul refers to this blessed harmony among the brethren as "unity of the Spirit," and where these elements of Christlike character are lacking, there will be no unity of the Spirit. On the other hand, lowliness, meekness, long-suffering and love could not, apart from other considerations, produce the unity of the Spirit of which the Apostle Paul speaks.

In addition to possessing these fundamentally important elements of character, they must be practiced upon the basis of, and in harmony with,

our knowledge of the fact that “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” (Eph. 4:4-6) This would indicate that true oneness in Christ is based upon a unity of fundamental knowledge. It is not difficult to realize why this is so. Any group of people whose aims and efforts are akin will find themselves drawn together in a common interest. In the circle of the family of Christ and their endeavors, the same principle holds true.

We should all heed Paul’s admonition to “keep the unity of the Spirit.” The brethren at Ephesus had special need for it, as the epistle shows. As was quite generally true in the Early Church, some in the group at Ephesus had formerly been Jews, and some had come into Christ from among the Gentiles. This is clearly shown in chapters two and three. In these chapters, Paul explains that in Christ these two groups had been brought “together”—that the Gentiles who had been “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise,” were now “made nigh by the blood of Christ.” Paul says that peace had been preached to the Gentiles, “which were afar off, and to them that were nigh [the Jews].” He explains that because of this, both Jews and Gentiles now had “access by one Spirit unto the Father.”—Eph. 2:6,12,13,17,18

ONENESS OF JEW AND GENTILE IN CHRIST

It can readily be seen why a congregation made up of converted Jews and Gentiles would find it

necessary to forbear with one another in love. Their former viewpoints and experiences in life had been entirely different. The viewpoint of the Jews was that they were exclusively God's people. God had said to them, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth." (Amos 3:2) They were the "chosen people" of the Lord, and the Gentiles were mere "dogs" in the eyes of the Jews.—Matt. 15:22-28

On the other hand, the Gentile converts would view matters quite differently. Accustomed to being treated as "dogs" by the Jews, it would now be difficult for them to feel kindly toward those who had so disdainfully regarded them. True, they had become followers of the Jewish Messiah, but old prejudices would not easily be forgotten. The Gentiles would also naturally exercise a greater degree of liberty with respect to their food, and other living habits, than would the Jewish converts. They would not have in mind the restraining ordinances of the Law, hence might be inclined to do things which, to the Jewish converts, would seem very wrong. In other ways also, these two groups of Christ's followers would find obstacles in the way of their viewpoints and activities being blended in a wholehearted oneness.

Under these circumstances, only a unity and oneness produced by the Holy Spirit could make harmony in the church at Ephesus. Indeed, only the power of the Holy Spirit can overcome the carnal spirit of division wherever it is found. Such a unity is much more than merely a kind feeling brethren may have toward one another. This "unity" is admirable, but it is based merely on friendship, and

friendship is usually based upon a certain degree of similarity in temperament, habits, station in life, etc. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, produces oneness among the brethren in spite of natural obstacles that might stand in the way, such as differences in background, training, education, and nationality.

The unity of the Spirit is that oneness among the brethren which is inculcated only through the Word of God. Speaking through the prophets, through Jesus, and through the apostles, God had made it clear that believing Gentiles and Jews were to become “fellowheirs” in Christ. (Eph. 3:6) This was contrary to the experiences of the Jews throughout all the centuries of their national existence, but it was now God’s will, made abundantly plain by the working of his Holy Spirit. In the conference at Jerusalem, Peter explained that the Holy Spirit had come upon the Gentiles even as it had upon the Jews, and for this reason there was to be “no difference” between them.—Acts 15:8,9

ONE GOD AND ONE FAITH

Before becoming followers of Christ, the Jewish and Gentile converts served different gods. The Gentiles usually had many gods. However, now they all had but the one God, who was the Father of them all. They were all members of the one body of Christ. There was not to be one body of Jews and another of Gentiles. There was but the one faith for all—the “most holy faith.” (Jude 20) Followers of the Master, whether Jews or Gentiles, were all called in the “one hope” of their calling. There was but one true baptism for all, and that was baptism

into Christ, which meant being “planted together in the likeness of his death.” (Rom. 6:5) For a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile converts to order their lives in keeping with a program of this kind required the indwelling of a large measure of the Holy Spirit.

For God’s Spirit to dwell in the heart and control the life requires the subjugation of the selfish human will and desires. God’s Spirit is an enlightening influence in the lives of Christ’s footstep followers, and its power to change one’s life is partly in the fact that it reveals the need of change, and outlines a new program to be followed. It was this phase of the Spirit’s influence in the lives of the Ephesian brethren that called for the “endeavoring” mentioned in the text quoted earlier, in order that they might “keep the unity.” That is, all of the Lord’s consecrated people were to work in harmony with the divine plan of the Gospel as it had been brought to them.

This new program, revealed to them by the Holy Spirit through the divinely appointed channels of our Lord, the prophets, and the apostles, was different from that which any of them had previously followed. This meant that all of them, Jews and Gentiles, had to give up their former viewpoints and habits, and endeavor by God’s grace to conform themselves to his plan as it had been revealed to them through his Spirit. The one God, the one faith, the one baptism of their wills, was to take the place of their former many gods, many faiths, and many forms of devotion.

To be successful in such an undertaking they would need true humility of mind, a great deal of

forbearance, and much Christian love. This has been true of all the consecrated followers of the Master throughout the age. With true lowliness of mind, one would not be likely to exalt his own opinions and ways above the knowledge of Christ. He would realize that the knowledge of Christ was to be the order of his life, even as it should be the guide in the lives of all the brethren.

NEEDS TO BE PRACTICED

Humility needs to be practiced, not merely thought of and talked about. One might have a true appraisal of his own lack of wisdom and ability, yet not manifest it in his association with the brethren. This could lead to resentment when others seemed to be used more in the service of the Lord. It might also lead to unwarranted controversy over details of the Truth. When one is humble, truly lowly of mind, he will not be a troublemaker among the brethren. Such would rather withdraw from a scene of controversy than permit himself to become a storm center.

Meekness is also a necessary qualification for those who are successfully “endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit.” Meekness is teachableness, and unless we are willing to be taught by God through the influence of his Holy Spirit, we can never be in harmony with others who are likewise being taught. The wisdom of the world and of the carnal mind is foolishness with God. Both the Jews and the Gentiles in the church at Ephesus had many foolish ideas before they became followers of the Master. Most of us in the past have had foolish ideas. There could have been no unity in the Early

Church had the believers brought their ideas along with them, and insisted upon promoting them among the brethren. Likewise, we must give up our theories, our hobbies, that we may all be taught the “one faith.”

NOT WEAKNESS

Meekness, however, is not weakness. God wants us to be teachable, in that we will accept the instructions of his Word without reservations or doubts; but he does not want us to open our minds to teachings which do not come from his Word and are not in harmony with its spirit—the spirit of truth. Not only should we lay aside our own ideas, but we should also resist the wrong ideas of others. As each consecrated follower of the Master endeavors to bring his mind and heart into closer harmony with the Lord, through his Word, he will find himself in closer unity with all others who are doing the same thing. Thus a willingness to be taught of the Lord is very important if we are to be successful in doing our part to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

The spirit of longsuffering and forbearance is also necessary. One might be lowly of mind, and meek, yet be unable to bear patiently with the imperfections of others. There was great need for forbearance among the various groups of disciples in the Early Church, and there is still great need for it today. We are all so very imperfect that forbearance with one another as we worship and serve together is most necessary if our viewpoints and activities are to be blended into that one harmonious program outlined for us by the Holy Spirit.

Love must be the motive behind this endeavor. Only unselfish love, shown by a desire to glorify God and to serve others, will make possible the exercise of true forbearance and humility in our association with the brethren. To the extent that self-interest enters into our fellowship, true humility and forbearance will be lacking. It might be possible for a time to get along with the brethren while having only a veneer of humility and forbearance: one might be seeking position, or popularity, and deem it good policy to be courteous to the brethren. This is not a proper basis, however, for attaining oneness and unity of the Spirit.

THE DIVINE PROVISION

How much the brethren now need God's grace to help them maintain the unity of the Spirit! Unity of the Spirit, like all other spiritual attainments, is possible only through the grace of God—that "grace to help in time of need." (Heb. 4:16) This is especially true today in view of the severe trials through which all are passing during this present "time of trouble." (Dan. 12:1) How necessary that we all keep humble before the Lord and before each other—that we bear patiently with the imperfections of the brethren, and that we do this in the spirit of unselfishness and helpfulness. Thus the Lord's name, and not our own, will be glorified, and his cause, not our selfish interests, will be advanced.

Only by God's grace can this be done. Continuing our examination of Ephesians, chapter four, Paul speaks of this grace. Verse 7 reads, "Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ." Here Paul says that God's grace

toward us is measured by the “gift” of Christ. As we study the succeeding verses we learn that the “gift” of God’s grace here referred to consists of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, all of whom the Lord has provided for the express purpose of “perfecting”—making complete—the saints. These have been given by God’s grace, Paul continues, for “the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in [into, *marginal translation*] the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature [age, *marginal translation*] of the fulness of Christ.”—vss. 11-13

OF THE SPIRIT AND OF FAITH

It is apparent from the sequence of Paul’s argument that he wants us to understand that the unity of the Spirit includes unity of the faith, as it also includes oneness in baptism. His testimony is that “there is one faith,” and the Lord, in helping us to attain unity in our understanding of that one faith, has given us apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. It is through these various servants of the body of Christ that the Spirit of God finds expression. As we scrutinize their teachings, we are given knowledge concerning the “one faith” which constitutes the basis of our oneness in Christ.

Due to endless doctrinal controversies among denominational groups, many of their leaders have adopted an interpretation of this chapter which makes the unity of the Spirit mean simply a kind attitude which all believers in Christ should be able to manifest toward one another, while unity of the faith, although desirable, is not, in their view,

fundamentally important. In these circles, unity of the faith is usually looked upon as a good ideal, but a condition which will probably never be reached.

This liberalizing of the apostle's lesson is not in keeping with what he would have us understand. It seems clear that the "Spirit" which is the means of unity in Christ is not our spirit, or disposition, but the Spirit of God. It follows, therefore, that to the extent unity is attained, it means also a unity of the faith, or leads thereto. This one faith is the "most holy faith" taught by all God's inspired writers of the Scriptures in presenting the divine plan. The teachings of these inspired servants constitute the outline of the faith within which the followers of the Master are to worship and to serve.

The extent to which this unity can be attained is in proportion to the degree of humility and determination with which the endeavor is made. We should not expect perfection on this side of the veil, and so long as imperfection exists, there will not be complete unity of the Spirit and of the faith. This is not because the Spirit, through the inspired Word, has not made the basis of unity clear, but because of the carnality of the fallen flesh, which more or less limits the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

If Paul's formula were followed without reservation, complete oneness of the Spirit and of faith would be attained. However, the fallen, imperfect tendencies of the flesh usually assert themselves, thus hindering to some degree the attainment of perfect unity. In some cases, we might not be able to bear with the imperfections of others as we should. In other experiences, a little selfishness of

one sort or another may prevent divine love from fully controlling our lives. Any of these and other slight degrees of failure to control the tendencies of the fallen flesh will impair the unity for which we are striving.

Additionally, our vision of the one Lord, one faith, and one baptism may not be as clear as it should be. Perhaps we are permitting other gods to supplant in our affections to some small degree our wholehearted devotion to the one Lord who has been revealed to us by his Spirit. There are many of these idols which we are prone to set up in our wayward hearts, permitting them to displace the “one Lord,” whose will should be the unifying power among all the consecrated. To whatever extent we permit the idol of pleasure, or of pride, or of ambition, or of vainglory, or of wealth, or of ease, to influence our habits of thought and action, it means that we will not be wholly at one with those whose devotion to the “one Lord” is more complete.

It may be that the “one faith” is not as clearly delineated in our hearts and minds as it should be, due to our imperfections. Perhaps we find a measure of selfish satisfaction in mixing the most holy faith with theories of our own. These theories in themselves may not be harmful, but because they are ours we may attach too much importance to them and, by attempting to force them upon the brethren, may be lending our influence in the direction of disunity rather than unity.

A failure to enter wholeheartedly into the “one baptism” by which our wills are immersed into the divine will, would also affect our oneness with the brethren. The unity of the Spirit is only in proportion

to the degree to which each of the Lord's consecrated people submits his will to the instructions and leadings of the Lord. To whatever extent our own spirit—or the spirit of others who may influence us contrary to the divine will—is permitted to govern what we think, say, and do, we will be standing in the way of attaining the full oneness among the brethren which could be our blessed portion if we were more completely immersed into God's will.

ECCLESIA ORGANIZATION

We also find that the Scriptures teach a certain decorum for the church, in the way of local ecclesia arrangements in which elders and deacons are appointed by the brethren to represent them in service. We should be lowly enough in mind to recognize these arrangements, and be subservient to them. This will call for longsuffering and forbearing one another in love. However, if we permit our own interests, of whatever sort they may be, to supersede or nullify the influence of these Christ-like qualities, and decide that we can get along as well, or better, by ourselves than we can with the brethren, it will mean failure, to that extent, to keep the unity of the Spirit.

We may attempt to justify our failure by claiming that we are standing for principle. Let us be on guard, however, lest we interpret our own carnal approach as being a principle of righteousness. There are real principles for which every consecrated child of God should stand, and when these are at stake the way before us should be clear, and our course uncompromising. Let us be sure, though, that we are standing for principle. Let us remember

that the brethren probably find it just as hard to get along with us as we find it difficult to get along with them. Rather, let us all encourage each other to keep our hearts and minds fixed more and more upon the perfect pattern, Jesus, and to have our lives controlled more and more by the truth of the divine plan, the “most holy faith.”

CHRIST THE HEAD

If, to any extent, we have wandered off into by-paths of false doctrine and false practice, let us come back to the “old paths,” back into the narrow way of full submission to the divine will, as that will is revealed in the Scriptures. Thus may the Holy Spirit, through the Word, lead us ever nearer to the center of that glorious unity of faith, where we will be “no more children [acting childish], tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.”—Eph. 4:14,15

While Paul makes special mention of certain servants in the body of Christ, and shows the value of their aid in helping the brethren attain oneness in the faith, he would not have us understand that these special servants are the only ones who help bring about this true oneness in Christ. The fact is that we all have some part to play in helping to bring about this unity, and no matter what that part may be, we should be faithful in performing it. We should all be promoters of oneness and love among the brethren.

The basis of that unity, however, must be the Truth. We cannot promote true oneness in Christ by compromising the doctrines of the Truth. However, we can promote unity by “speaking the truth in love,” by forbearing with one another, and by lowliness of mind and meekness. Thus, when our endeavors are in harmony with the Truth, and the Spirit of the Truth, we will have God’s blessing because we will be working in harmony with his will. Paul expresses the thought beautifully, saying, “From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.”—Eph. 4:16

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