

Blessed Oneness

“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; 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.”
—John 17:20,21

EARLIER IN THIS ISSUE of *The Dawn*, the subject “Members in Particular” was treated, in which stress was laid on the unique importance of each individual member of the body of Christ. In this article, we will approach much of the same subject, though from a slightly different, but harmonious perspective, as we consider the oneness and unity which should exist among the many individual

members of the “one body.”—I Cor. 12:12; Eph. 4:4

On the eve of Jesus’ crucifixion, he prayed for the oneness of his followers, as quoted in our opening verses. The oneness that has always existed between the Heavenly Father and his beloved Son is a complete unity of purpose and objective resulting from the unreserved dedication of Jesus to do his Heavenly Father’s will. Thus, their oneness is not the outgrowth of a mutual agreement between the two, but is the result of Jesus’ humble obedience to the Father. This is also the basis of our unity with the Father,

with Jesus, and with one another. It is described in Ephesians 4:3 as a “unity of the Spirit.”

The Spirit of God is the power and influence of God, and in this association we may think of it as the power of his mind, his thoughts, his will, as these reach us through his written Word. Every part of the Word of God is a product of the Holy Spirit. The prophets of the Old Testament wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ teachings are the setting forth of truths revealed by the Holy Spirit beginning at his baptism, when the “heavens” were opened to him. The teachings of the apostles reflect the truths revealed to them by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and later by special visions given to Paul.—II Pet. 1:21; Matt. 3:16; Acts 2:1-4; 9:17

When the fully dedicated children of God humbly search the Scriptures, they find the will of God expressed therein. If they are obedient to what they find, they will be at one with the Heavenly Father, with his beloved Son, and with one another. Thus the formula for true unity of the Spirit is a simple one, but the real test of its workability depends upon the genuineness of our full and humble devotion to the Heavenly Father’s will.

Every follower of the Master from Pentecost until now has been afflicted by human imperfections which have hindered, in varying degrees, a complete subjection to the molding influences of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to note the large degree that the Spirit’s influence in the hearts of God’s people has had in bringing them together and enabling them to work harmoniously in a common cause, which is the service of the Lord.

In worldly circles, people are brought together by similarities of taste, nationality, or lifestyle, as well as other factors which may make it congenial for them to be associated with one another. However, this was not true with the followers of the Master, and apparently such was by divine design. For example, the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus were of differing temperaments and social backgrounds. Certainly Peter would never have chosen Matthew, the publican and tax collector, to be his partner in the fishing business, nor can we imagine Matthew inviting Peter to assist him in the collection of taxes.

Nevertheless, these two, and the remainder of the twelve—all different—were fused into a working unit by the power of the Holy Spirit, this being made possible by each one's dedication to the Heavenly Father, and to the doing of his will. The outworking of the Heavenly Father's plan became the common cause of all, and they rejoiced in that good and pleasant experience of dwelling together in unity, as noted by the psalmist.—Ps. 133:1

JEW AND GENTILE

A severe test of unity came upon the Early Church when the time came for believing Gentiles to be accepted as fellow-heirs of God's promises with believing Jews. It is difficult to imagine two groups of people who by nature had so little in common and at the same time entertained so many prejudices against each other. Yet, through the Gospel, individuals from these two groups were brought together into one fellowship.

This was not accomplished without difficulty. There is much in the Book of Acts and in Paul's

epistles concerning the challenges created in the church by the incoming Gentile converts. We can be confident, however, that the fully consecrated among them successfully overcame the hurdles and found the way to a true unity of the Spirit.

Paul's admonitions were a great help along this line. To the church at Galatia he wrote: "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."—Gal. 3:26-29

What a wonderful family—God's family—is here spoken of! They are all drawn to him by his love, the power of which is operative through their faith in his promises, a faith that leads to the full dedication of themselves to the doing of his will. Thus they are accepted into his family as "children," in and through our beloved Christ Jesus.—Eph. 1:5,6

It matters not who or of what background any may have been when the truth of the Word first touched their hearts, for they are now New Creatures in Christ Jesus. (II Cor. 5:17) They all have one Father—the Heavenly Father—whose will they delight to do. They also have an Elder Brother—Christ Jesus—whose teachings and example they follow. They are all one in him and are brought into this blessed unity by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the verses quoted above from Galatians 3:26-29, Paul makes a general reference to Jews and Greeks [Gentiles]; males and females; the bond and the

free. In these general categories we think of individuals. There was the Gentile, Cornelius, a centurion of an Italian troop. There was the wealthy Philemon, and his runaway bondservant, Onesimus. There was Lydia, the seller of purple, who evidently was also a woman of means. There was the young disciple, Timothy.

We might continue mentioning the names of faithful disciples in the Early Church. What we know of the characteristics of each of them suggests how unlikely it would be that any of them would have sought out the companionship of the others, yet they all became brethren in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.

NOT ALL

Not all, however, who attached themselves to the Early Church were at one with the brethren. Paul warned the elders at Ephesus that “grievous wolves” would come in among them, “not sparing the flock”; also, that of their own number men would arise, “speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.”—Acts 20:28-30

One of the prevalent causes of disunity among the Lord’s followers throughout the centuries since Pentecost has been the desire to have a following. This is a clear manifestation of a failure to recognize the basic principle of Christian unity, which is a recognition of the will of God that Jesus Christ alone is to be the Head and leader of the church.

There are those among the human race who are not happy unless they are leading somebody or directing something. If perchance those of this nature are attracted by the Gospel and associate

themselves with the Lord's people, they have difficulty overcoming this desire to be a leader. If they fail to overcome it, then sooner or later they are likely to be found teaching "perverse things"—either of doctrine or practice—hoping thus to attract a following.

As Paul indicated, there were such in the Early Church, and it has been so in the centuries since. Yet, this does not imply that God's truly consecrated and humble people are not at one. The Heavenly Father may permit some of these to be influenced temporarily by false teachers so that they might learn needed lessons. However, if their hearts are perfect before him, he will draw them back to himself, and to that blessed oneness with his people which is a part of their present heritage of joy.

CARNALITY

In the church at Corinth a state of immaturity existed among the brethren, which Paul described as carnality, meaning that the viewpoints and desires of the flesh were not being fully yielded up in preference to the will of God. Paul explained how this spirit of carnality manifested itself.

"I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even

as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planted any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are laborers together with God.”—I Cor. 3:1-9

This admonition is not addressed to those who desired to attract a following, nor to “grievous wolves,” but to the sincere, fully consecrated, albeit immature followers of the Master. Instead of seeking a following, they desired to be followers of men rather than the Lord. With this immature viewpoint, there was naturally envying and strife among them.

This viewpoint also has prevailed throughout the age and exists here and there today. It reflects a state of immaturity that is due to a lack of full faith and confidence in Christ Jesus and in his leadership. One reason some of the brethren in Corinth wanted to be followers of Paul and others followers of Apollos is that these brethren seemed nearer to them than the Lord and were more tangible.

This lack of faith has led, in all periods of the Christian Age, to the setting up of human leaders, with the claim that they have spoken with equal authority in the church to Jesus himself. Paul desired that the brethren in Corinth would outgrow this lack of faith and learn to look directly to the Lord and to his Word for authoritative leadership. He continually endeavored to help them toward this end.

In this connection, what humility and nobility of character Paul manifested! Actually, Paul did speak

with authority in the church, for he was not “a whit behind” the other apostles as an inspired servant of the church. (II Cor. 11:5) Nevertheless, he was determined to point the Corinthian brethren to their true Head and Leader, Jesus. To do this he emphasized that in his personal ministry to the brethren in Corinth he was merely one of the laborers together with God. He also put Apollos in the same category.

THE LORD’S SERVANTS

One of the evidences of growth in grace is the ability to discern the true position of God’s servants in the church, and the ability to give proper respect and honor where they are due. The mature follower of the Master knows that there is only one Head of the Church, Christ Jesus. He also knows that the holy prophets of the Old Testament, the twelve apostles of the New Testament, and our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only inspired guides of the church. These are the ones who have been used by the Lord to fill his great storehouse of truth with the precious doctrine of God’s plan which constitutes the true basis of our unity in Christ.

Then there are the pastors, teachers, and evangelists whom the Lord uses to help us to further understand the divine plan. Jesus spoke of “a faithful and wise servant” who, at the end of the age, would be used to take from the divine storehouse of the Scriptures and serve those glorious gems of Truth placed there by God’s infallible servants of the past.—Eph. 4:11,12; Matt. 24:45-47

Such a wise and faithful servant would emphasize and reemphasize the vital need of proving all things

by the inspired Word, and of looking to Jesus as the true Head of his people. Human nature has not changed since the days of the Early Church, and we need to be reminded continually that it is not God's will that we be "of Paul," or "of Apollos," or of any beloved and greatly used servant in the church. We honor them most when we take heed to their instructions, which are in keeping with Jesus' statement, "One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren."—Matt. 23:8

TODAY'S DIVERSITIES

Considering the lessons and examples of unity we find in the Word of God and bringing them down to our day, we find that God's Spirit is working among his people now, even as then; for it continues to hold the brethren together despite their differences of background and characteristics. This is a great encouragement, for it is one of the evidences that God is dealing with us, even as his blessing was upon the brethren in the Early Church.

In reality, conditions are not so different among the brotherhood now than they were at the beginning of the Gospel Age. Indeed, we do not have the Jews/Gentiles problem as a deterrent to unity, but we do have brethren of many nationalities, ages, ethnic backgrounds, and former faiths. By the power of the Holy Spirit these have been brought into a blessed unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace. If Paul were writing to us now, he might well say, "There is neither European nor African; there is neither North American nor Australian; there is neither Asian nor South American; nor are there any subdivisions of these; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

Before coming to an understanding of God's glorious plan, some of these were members of various denominations of Christian belief. Some also were associated with non-Christian groups, and some were unbelievers entirely. In the Early Church there were both young and old, brothers and sisters, and that also is true today. All these factors make for diversification of temperament which would tend to separate rather than draw together. However, the power of the Holy Spirit overcomes these differences, and blends the hearts of the Lord's people into that blessed unity of the Spirit.

Regardless of any and all of these outward differences, each of God's truth-enlightened, Spirit-filled people has something to contribute toward the upbuilding of the brethren with whom he or she may come in contact. This is also true regardless of age. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Let no man despise thy youth." To this he added, "But be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation [Greek: conduct], in charity, in spirit, in faith, and in purity." (I Tim. 4:12) In other words, if Timothy displayed from the heart these genuine qualities of a mature Christian, which we have every reason to believe he did, he would continue to be accepted by those of "like precious faith," and by his ministry be a blessing to them.—II Pet. 1:1

UNITY IN THE MINISTRY

We are to use every possible opportunity to minister the glorious Gospel of Christ. As we grow in grace, we will rejoice to cooperate with one another in that ministry, and thus enjoy this aspect of the blessed unity of the Spirit. Our increasing faith will

enable us to discern that the Spirit of the Lord would not be leading his people in opposing directions.

Faith is a tremendously important adjunct to the unity of the Spirit, both as it is related to our fellowship one with another and to our ministry of the Gospel. If we truly believe that God is dealing with us, and teaching us through his Word, there will be little danger of our doing and saying things which may tend to disrupt the blessed unity of the Spirit which we enjoy with his people. If we lack faith, any slight spirit of ambition might well cause us to go contrary to the Holy Spirit, and thus fail, temporarily, at least, to enjoy the blessings which belong to those who are at one with Christ Jesus and with his people.

Our faith should enable us to believe that God is caring for his people today, even as he has in the past. By faith we accept the divine commission of the Spirit to proclaim the “gospel of the kingdom,” and thereby “bind up the brokenhearted,” “comfort all that mourn,” “proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.” We also have the privilege of proclaiming “the day of vengeance of our God,” not against people, but against sin, and Satan, and all his evil works.—Matt. 24:14; Isa. 61:1-3

Faith will accept the instructions of the Word of God as to how this is to be done—that Jesus is to be the hub around which our message is proclaimed—for we are to be witnesses of him. By faith we will rejoice in the knowledge that it is those who are symbolically “beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God,” who will live and reign with Christ a thousand years. (Rev. 20:4) Faith

should help us to realize that we are not commissioned to proclaim any other message.

Thus, we will continue to rejoice in the privilege of together lifting up the voice of truth in proclaiming the glorious Gospel message. (Isa. 52:8) Truly our partnership in the ministry of God's glorious plan and eternal purpose for the blessing of all mankind is one of the blessed aspects of our unity in Christ.

THE SPIRIT'S POWER

We should not underestimate the power of God's Spirit in keeping his people together. The story is told that some years ago a brother from one part of the world attended a convention of brethren in another country. He observed the harmony that existed, not only in the many messages which were given from the platform, but also in the general fellowship of those in attendance. In reporting his experience, he speculated that there must have been some form of absolute authority which was holding the brethren in line. It was difficult for him to believe that the Spirit of God could be working so fully among the Lord's people in these last days.

How blessed it is to realize that the Holy Spirit is still in the midst of God's people! We believe that we have been begotten by the Spirit and have received the Spirit's anointing. We are assured of our sonship by the witness of the Spirit. By the seal of the Spirit our victory of faith is guaranteed, if we continue submissive to the will of God. (I John 2:27; Rom. 8:16; Eph. 1:13) Shall we doubt that the same Holy Spirit of God that has come down to us from Jesus, the Head, even to the last remaining

members of his body, is functioning to hold us together in a sweet and blessed oneness, even as it did in the Early Church?

Outwardly, it is not a perfect unity now, even as it was not a perfect unity at the beginning of the age. “Wolves” may appear among us now, even as then. From time to time there may be those who seem more interested in a following than in the spiritual prosperity of Zion. There are also those whose faith may not be quite strong enough yet to let go of the arm of flesh and lean wholly on the Lord. Nevertheless, we are all maturing into a deeper spiritual life, and into a more precious and fuller unity with Christ Jesus with one another. We are rejoicing in the hope of that perfect oneness beyond the veil, when the Master’s prayer for unity will be fully and gloriously answered! ■