

# Oneness of the Brethren

*“With all lowliness  
and meekness, with  
longsuffering,  
forbearing one  
another in love;  
Endeavouring to  
keep the unity of  
the Spirit in the  
bond of peace.”  
—Ephesians 4:2,3*

## IN OUR TEXT PAUL MAKES

it clear that peace and harmony among the brethren of Christ is possible only where there first exists an attitude of lowliness and meekness. These qualities, the apostle continues, are to be mingled with longsuffering, forbearance and love, which enable us to bear with the imperfections of one another as fellow-members in the body of Christ. Paul refers to this blessed harmony among the brotherhood as the “unity of the Spirit.” Where lowliness, meekness, longsuffering, forbearance and love are lacking, there will be no unity of the Spirit. On the other hand, these essential elements of the Christian character will not, apart from other considerations, produce the unity of the Spirit of which the Apostle Paul speaks.

In addition to possessing these fundamentally important qualities of the Christ-like disposition,

they must be practiced upon the basis of, and in harmony with, our knowledge of certain scriptural principles, which Paul cites in subsequent verses. “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.” (vss. 4-6) This indicates that true Christian oneness is based upon a unity of knowledge with regard to certain fundamental teachings of the Bible.

It is not difficult to realize why this is so. Any group of people whose aims and efforts in life are similar will find themselves drawn together in a common interest. In the circles of Christian endeavor, the same principle holds true. Brethren of “like precious faith” will quite naturally rejoice together in God’s plan for the salvation and restoration of mankind back to favor and sonship with God as perfect human beings.—II Pet. 1:1; Rev. 21:3-7

We should all heed Paul’s admonition to “keep the unity of the Spirit.” The church at Ephesus had special need for it, as the epistle shows. As was often true in the Early Church, some in the group at Ephesus had formerly been Jews, and others 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 Jesus” these had been brought together. 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.” The apostle says that peace had been preached both to the Gentiles, “which were afar

off, and to them that were nigh," the Jews. He declares that because of this, both Jews and Gentiles now have "access by one Spirit unto the Father."—Eph. 2:11-18

### **GREAT FORBEARANCE NECESSARY**

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. The Lord 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 God and were in covenant relationship with him. The Gentiles were mere "dogs" in the eyes of most Jews.—Matt. 15:22-28

On the other hand, the Gentile converts would view matters quite differently. Accustomed to being treated with disdain by the Jews, it would now be difficult for them to feel kindly toward those who had so scornfully regarded them. While they had become followers of the Jewish Messiah, old prejudices would not easily be forgotten. Gentiles would 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 Mosaic Law. Hence, they would be inclined to do things which, to most Jewish converts, would seem very wrong. In other ways also these two groups of Christians would find obstacles that might impede the blending of their

viewpoints and activities into a wholehearted oneness in Christ.

Under these circumstances, only a unity produced by the Holy Spirit could create harmony in the church at Ephesus. Herein lies a critical point. As was true in the Early Church, so today, it is only by the influence of the Holy Spirit that the fleshly spirit of division can be overcome, wherever it may be found. Such a unity is much more than merely a kind feeling brethren may have toward one another. This is admirable, but it is largely based on friendship, which usually comes from a certain degree of similarity in temperament, background, education, habits, or station in life. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, produces oneness among the brethren irrespective of obstacles that might otherwise stand in the way.

The unity of the Spirit is that oneness among the Lord's people which is inculcated through the Scriptures. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is the means by which the written Word of God has been given to us. Speaking through the prophets, through Jesus, and through the apostles, as they were guided by the Holy Spirit, 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 influence of his 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 Christians, the Jewish and Gentile converts had different gods. The Gentiles usually had many gods, but now they all had but the one “God and Father of all.” They were all members of the one “body of Christ.” (I Cor. 12:12,27) There was not to be one body of Jews and another of Gentiles. There was also but the “one faith” for all—the faith which was “once delivered unto the saints,” our “most holy faith.” (Jude 1:3,20) Moreover, followers of the Master, whether Jews or Gentiles, were all called in the “one hope” of their calling. There was just “one baptism” for all who accepted God’s call. That was baptism into Christ, being “planted together in the likeness of his death.” (Rom. 6:5) For a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile believers, in order to keep their lives in harmony 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 human will and its selfish desires. God’s Spirit is an enlightening influence in the lives of Christians, and its power to change one’s character is partly due to 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 our text.

This word, according to *Thayer’s Greek Definitions*, is translated from a Greek word meaning “to exert one’s self, give diligence,” also “to make haste.” Thus we see that to keep the unity of the Spirit

requires work on the part of each member of the body of Christ. Additionally, these efforts are not to be delayed, but entered into quickly as each set of circumstances arises in the course of Christian fellowship.

This new program, revealed to the brethren of the Early Church by the Holy Spirit through God's divinely appointed channels, was different from that which any of them had previously followed. This meant that all of them 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, one faith, and 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 meekness and lowliness of mind, a great deal of longsuffering and forbearance, and much Christian love. This has been true of all footstep followers of the Master throughout the age, even to this present hour. With true lowliness of mind one would not be disposed to exalt his own opinions and ways above the knowledge and wisdom of Christ as revealed by the Holy Spirit. (Eph. 1:13,17) He would realize that Christ's wisdom is 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. We might have a true appraisal of our own lack of wisdom and ability, yet not manifest it in our association with the

brethren. This could easily lead to resentment when others are used ahead of us in some particular service for the Lord. A lack of humility might also lead to unwarranted controversy over nonessential details of the Truth. If we are truly lowly of mind, we will not seek to incite trouble among the brethren by constantly promoting debate of such details, which often have varying interpretations. Paul warned Timothy about those who are disposed to “doting about questions and strifes of words,” which the apostle says produce “envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings.” (I Tim. 6:4) Rather than letting ourselves become a storm center, we should rather withdraw from, and discourage, such scenes that might result in unwarranted controversy among our fellowship.

Meekness is also a necessary qualification for those who are successfully endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit. Meekness has the thought of being gentle, mild-mannered, as well as teachable. If we are not willing to be taught by the God’s Holy Spirit, we can never be in harmony with others who are thus being taught. The “wisdom of this world” and of the fleshly mind is “foolishness with God.” (I Cor. 3:19) 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 similarly had foolish ideas. There could have been no unity in the Early Church had the believers brought their former ideas along with them and insisted upon promoting them among the brethren. We also must give up our fleshly thinking, that we may all be taught the “one faith.”

## NOT WEAKNESS

It has often been said, and rightly so, that meekness is not weakness. God wants us to be mild-mannered and teachable, so that we will accept the instructions of his Word without reservations or doubts. However, he does not want us to exhibit weakness by opening our minds to “every wind of doctrine” which may not come from his Word nor be in harmony with its spirit, the “spirit of truth.” (Eph. 4:14; I John 4:6) This applies not only to our own ideas, but we should also be very wary of “every wind” of thought we may hear from others. As we endeavor to bring our mind and heart into closer harmony with the Lord, through his Word, we will find ourselves in closer unity with all others who are doing the same thing. Thus, a willingness to be taught only 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. 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 whole endeavor. Only an unselfish desire to glorify God and to serve others will make possible the exercise of true Christian forbearance in our association



with the brethren. To the extent that love of self and self-interest enters into our fellowship, true humility and forbearance will be lacking, because our love will not be directed to our brethren, but toward self. If this be the case, it might be possible for a time to get along with others by having only a veneer of humility and forbearance. We might be seeking position, or popularity, and deem it good policy to be courteous to the brethren, and even condescend to them. This is most assuredly not a proper basis for endeavoring to attain the unity of the Spirit.

## **THE DIVINE PROVISION**

Unity of the Spirit, like all other Christian attainments, is possible only through the grace of God, his “grace to help in time of need.” (Heb. 4:16) How much we, as brethren, need God’s grace to help us maintain the unity of the Spirit. This is especially true today in view of the severe trials through which all the Lord’s consecrated people are passing. How necessary that we all keep humble before the Lord and before each other, and that we bear patiently with the imperfections of our brethren in the spirit of unselfishness and helpfulness. Thus the Lord’s name, and not ours, will be glorified, and his cause, not our own ideas, will be advanced.

Only by God’s grace can this be done. How does God’s grace operate to promote unity of the Spirit? Paul answers this question in the succeeding portion of Ephesians chapter 4. “Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” (vs. 7) Here the apostle 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 referred to comes as the result of God's grace. It is the gift of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, all of whom the Lord has graciously provided for our benefit. The purpose of these gifts, Paul says, is for the "perfecting of the saints," and for the "edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."—vss. 11-13

## **OF THE SPIRIT AND OF FAITH**

It is apparent from the details of Paul's argument that he wants us to understand that "unity of the Spirit" and "unity of the faith" are closely connected, and not to be thought of as separate attainments. Since Paul says there is "one Spirit" and "one faith," it must be concluded these are in harmony with each other. Thus the apostle says that to help us achieve unity of both Spirit and faith, God has given us help by means of apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, and pastors. It has been through these various servants in the church throughout the Gospel Age that the "one Spirit" of God has given expression, and by a scrutiny of their teachings, we have been given knowledge concerning the "one faith" delineated in the Word of God. Hence unity of the Spirit and unity of the faith are both made possible at the present time, if properly sought after and worked toward, amongst the brotherhood.

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 kindly attitude which all Christians should be able to manifest toward one another. On the other hand, unity of the faith, although desirable, is not, in this view, fundamentally important. In these circles unity of the faith is usually looked upon as a noble ideal for Christians to keep before them, however one which will probably never be reached.

This slackening of the apostle's lesson is not in keeping with what he would have us understand. It seems clear that the "one Spirit" which is the means of Christian unity is not our spirit, or disposition, but the Spirit of God. It follows, therefore, that to the extent unity of the Spirit is attained, it means also a unity in the "one faith," as it also emanates from God. As noted earlier, the one faith is our "most holy faith," taught by all God's inspired spokesmen in presenting his divine plan. The teachings of these servants constitute the outline of the one faith which the followers of the Master are to worship and to serve.

The extent to which this unity of both Spirit and faith can be attained is in proportion to the degree of humility and determination with which the endeavor is made. We should not expect perfection this side of the veil, and so as long as imperfection exists, it will not be easy to attain, or maintain, 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, nor because the faith "once delivered unto the saints" has somehow changed. Rather, the difficulty lies with our flesh and its fallen tendencies, which more or less

limits the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, albeit most often unintentionally.

If Paul's formula were followed without reservation, complete oneness of the Spirit and of faith would be attained with minimal difficulty. However, the fallen, imperfect tendencies of the flesh frequently assert themselves, thus hindering to some degree our attainment of complete unity. We might not be able to bear with the imperfections of others as we should. A little selfishness of one sort or another may prevent divine love from fully controlling our lives. Any slight degree of failure to control the selfish tendencies of our 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. Indeed, there are many such idols which we may be prone to set up in our hearts, permitting them to compete, as it were, with the "one Lord," whose will should be the unifying power in each of the consecrated. To whatever extent we permit the idols of pleasure, pride, ambition, vainglory, wealth, or ease, to influence our habits of thought and action, it means that we will not be wholly at one with God, nor with those whose devotion to the "one Lord" is more complete.

It may be that the one faith is not the central focus of our hearts and minds, as it should be. Perhaps we find a measure of 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 spend too much time in their consideration. Furthermore, if in addition we attempt to impose such theories upon our brethren, we may be lending our influence in the direction of disunity rather than unity.

Failure to enter wholeheartedly into the "one baptism," by which our wills are immersed into the divine will, would surely affect our oneness with the brethren. Attainment of 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.

## **CHURCH ORGANIZATION**

In the Holy Spirit's outline of God's will for his people we also find the Scriptures teaching a certain decorum and organization for the church. This is manifest in the matter 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

scripturally authorized arrangements, and if we decide that we can get along just as well by ourselves as we can with the brethren, it will mean a significant failure on our part to keep the unity of the Spirit.

We may attempt to justify our actions by claiming that we are standing for principle. Let us be on guard, however, lest we interpret our own fleshly approach as being a principle of righteousness. Unquestionably, there are valid principles for which every consecrated child of God should stand. When these are at stake, the way before us should be clear, and our course uncompromising. Nevertheless, let us be sure that we are standing for divinely authorized principle. We should also remember that our brethren may find it just as difficult to get along with us as we find it hard to get along with them. Thus let us all encourage each other to keep our hearts and minds fixed more fully upon the perfect pattern, Jesus, and to have our lives controlled to the greatest extent possible by the one Spirit and one faith which he embodied as our exemplar.

## **CHRIST THE HEAD**

If to any extent we have wandered off into paths of disunity, whether of Spirit or of faith, let us come back to the Lord's pathway, the narrow way of full submission to the divine will, as it is revealed in God's plan. Thus may the Holy Spirit, through the Word, lead us ever nearer to the center of that glorious unity of faith, "That we henceforth be no more children, 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 church and shows the value of their aid in helping the brethren attain oneness in Spirit and in 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 an important 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, goodwill and love among the brethren.

The basis of our unity must always be God's Word of truth. We cannot promote true Christian unity by departing from the Scriptures, nor by seeking other sources of spiritual understanding. On the other hand, we can promote unity by “speaking the truth in love,” by lowliness, meekness, longsuffering and forbearance one with another. Such endeavors will be in harmony with the one Spirit and one faith, and we will have God's blessing because we will be working in harmony with his will. Paul expresses the thought beautifully. Noting our head, Christ Jesus, he says, “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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