

Devotional: Ephesians 4:1-6 ~ The Forgotten Link between Grace and Unity

I sometimes hear stories about disturbances and unpleasantries in other presbyteries, and am reminded of how good we have it right now in Blue Ridge. Where does our unity and spirit of cooperation come from? Our presbytery's Purpose Statement and the vision of our founding brothers certainly helps, but is that alone to sustain our unity in Christ? Also, like most of you, we have been blessed here with a godly and united group of Ruling Elders. In my six years here, I can only remember one divided vote and that was whether to replace our pew Bibles with the new ESV. As you can imagine, even that was a friendly disagreement.

But here is the thing -- disagreement is not always bad. Otherwise we would not be called to sharpen one another (Proverbs 27:17). There are times when truth must prevail over feelings, and even good men may disagree on how to apply that truth, as our own Book of Church Order says (Preliminary Principle 5). I don't think it is for nothing that in Acts 16, God in His providence allowed Paul and Barnabus to split up right after the sweet unity seen in the First Ecumenical Council of Acts 15 (well, after considerable prayer and debate!). We should not seek a Golden Age of the Church where there is no disagreement.

So, how are we to maintain our unity in Christ in the midst of disagreement? I have found Ephesians 4:1-6 to be a helpful guide to this end. As you know, Paul begins the practical section of Ephesians in 4:1 with the phrase, "Therefore, I urge you," (same as Romans 12:1), indicating the change from the doctrinal section of the letter to the application. And what does Paul urge? To walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called. He then goes on to describe what that looks like in the rest of chapters 4-6. Paul will go on to talk about all sorts of things -- church offices and gifts, what it means to put off the old man and put on Christ, spiritual warfare, and what godly relationships look like in marriage, work and family. But before any of these things, he begins with what? Church unity. He begins by telling us to be "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (verse 3), and then in verses 4-6 reminds us that Christians have only One body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, and God and Father of us all. This priority of order ought to instruct us of how important Church unity is to the application of the Gospel.

Right away, we learn several things from this order. First, Paul begins with the Gospel. There can be no real unity where there is not agreement on the Gospel itself. Where does Paul do this? Well, in verse 1, he says for us to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which we have been called. Well, who called us? It was God the Father, who chose us before the foundations of the world (1:4). We have been called and saved by grace, and grace alone, as Paul states so clearly in Ephesians 2:8-9. And even the resulting good works we are to walk in are only those which God Himself prepared for us to do (Eph. 2:10). So, we must begin with the doctrines of grace and hold the line there. Any doctrine or habit which undermines grace necessarily will rot away at our unity. So, we begin with the Gospel of Grace and make no apologies for drawing our dividing line there.

Second, between those who understand this grace, unity still takes effort, as Paul says in verse 3. It is ours already in Christ, but we must work to maintain it. It takes work and we are to commit ourselves to it. That often means going the extra mile with brothers or sisters whom we do not

seem to appreciate at first blush. It also means making an extra effort to overcome cultural differences since Christ has become our peace and made Jew and Gentile into one man (cf. Eph. 2:14-15).

Thirdly, from verses 3-6, one goal of church life appears to be a likemindedness and doctrinal conformity to the truth, even if we will never attain perfect agreement as to what that is this side of heaven. (Arguably, I believe we see similar sentiments in Paul in such places as Philippians 2:2, II Timothy 1:13, and I Corinthians 11:16.) As elders, part of that means developing a self-aware and wise system of knowing which doctrines we believe to be *essential* to salvation (such as *Solo Christo*), which doctrines are not essential but nonetheless *important* for church health (such as infant baptism), and which things are simply *adiaphora*, things indifferent (like whether black horn-rimmed glasses actually fulfill I Corinthians 9:22, or not).

So, is that it? Is having a common Confession of Faith all we need to maintain our unity? Well, clearly, from all the anecdotes we have heard -- and knowing our own hearts -- no. You see, I was not quite accurate when I said that Paul begins with Church Unity. I missed a verse. There is a link between verse 1 (Grace) and verse 3 (Unity), and that is of course, verse 2.

And what does Paul say there? Paul tells us to walk "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." That is the link between Grace and Unity, and we make a grave mistake if we pass it over, as I did earlier in this devotion. In other words, it is not enough to know and understand the doctrines of grace, although such is essential. Nor is it enough to have a common Confession of Faith, although such is very helpful. If we are to be truly united in Christ, we must have humility. And that humility then leads to gentleness and patience, and we will indeed bear with one another, as one forgiven sinner to another.

But here is the thing -- if we have truly understood and embraced the Gospel of grace, how can we do any other? As Paul says in Ephesians 2:9, we are saved by grace through faith, "not by works, *so that no one may boast.*" That is the very first application of the Gospel -- humility. My friends, Calvinists ought to be the most humble of all Christians. Sadly, we often fail that test. My wish would be that, whatever else the world thought of Reformed Christians -- goofy, weird, ineffective, whatever -- they might at least say that we are a humble people. Is your church marked by a Gospel humility? Is your ministry? Is your life?

If it is, then that too, is only by God's grace. And it can only lead to great fruit -- foremost of which, is unity in Christ's church. That is the link between Grace and Unity -- a Gospel humility. Let us then make every effort to grow in our humility before God and man, and thus maintain that unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Amen.