

# Church Unity- Loving Our Brethren

## by Casey Head

As we continue our series of lessons on maintaining church unity, it is vital that we recognize the responsibility that we have to love our brethren. Many Christians may half-heartedly say that they love their brothers and sister in Christ, that they care for their church family, but do they really mean it and do their actions reflect their claim? If we can grasp the subject of love, then it will be much easier to establish and maintain church unity.

In the book of 1 John, many points are made and commands given concerning the love that we should have for our brethren. In fact, not only is it expected of us, but if we fail to love our fellow Christians, we are considered to be liars and haters of God. Let us examine several verses from this powerful book. We are first told in 2:10-11, "He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness." And then notice John's statement in 3:15, "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in Him." Finally, in 4:7, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." Notice that loving our brethren is not optional, nor is it something that only applies on certain occasions, or when it is easy. It is a commandment! If we do not love our brethren as we ought to, then the result is a loss of fellowship with God...a loss of salvation. Do you see how serious this is?

Now that we have established the necessity of loving our brethren, we must define love. It is often said that the Bible is its greatest commentary, and that's true, for we are given an in depth definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. Let us read the passage, beginning in verse 4, "Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up. Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth." Have you ever thought about this passage, and have you ever applied these principles to your relationships in the church? Let us do that now.

We are first of all told that love suffers long. This tells me that in loving our brethren, we are to be patient and longsuffering with them. In Galatians 5:22, longsuffering is listed along with love as a fruit of the Spirit, and notice the words of Paul in Ephesians 4:2, "With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love." Love is forbearing, which means that we are sometimes going to have to overlook the idiosyncracies of others. Personalities will sometimes clash and comments can easily be taken the wrong way. Perhaps a brother or sister in Christ is annoying to us, or they do something that irritates us. How should we react? By bearing with them, just as they undoubtedly bear with our faults! A personality quirk is not something to split the local church over.

It is also said that love is kind. That is such a simple point, but one that we often overlook. Sadly, so many Christians treat one another cruelly and unfairly, and then they actually attempt to justify their actions; but even in dealing with wayward brethren and false teachers, we should never be cruel and mean. Notice the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 2:24, "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle (kind) unto all men, apt to teach, patient." If we are not kind and gentle to all people, including our brethren in the church, then we cease being servants of the Lord. How do you treat your brethren? With cruelty or with love and kindness?

Love also is not envious. In other words, love rejoices when another person succeeds, improves and grows positively. Rather than coveting and envying our brethren, we need to rejoice when they rejoice and weep when they weep (Romans 12:15). Some Christian may envy others and the talents that they have, but we need to recognize our own talents and get to work ourselves.

As we continue in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul really begins to lay it on us concerning the nature of love, and he gets to some points that we may have trouble with. He says in verse 4, "Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up." In other words, love does not exalt itself in prideful arrogance.

When we are prideful towards our brethren, we are not showing our love for them. For example, when a disagreement arises in Bible class, and the one who is wrong comes to realize that he is wrong, rather than being prideful, he needs to acknowledge his error. We also MUST avoid this lust for power and control that so easily and quickly tries to overcome us. Some Christians HAVE to have their way, whether it be a complicated decision such as hiring a preacher, or a small decision like the color of the carpet. People are so ridiculous and hateful sometimes, and they allow pride to get in the way of love. Are you willing to admit when you are wrong? Are you willing to concede your view or desire when it comes to certain decisions?

When Paul says that love “doth not behave itself unseemly,” he is basically saying that love is not rude. How many times do Christians, during times of impatience or stress, act rudely with their spiritual family? Rather than being considerate, we are quick to say what is on our mind...which is sometimes inappropriate. It is very important that when we come to worship God with the local church, that we say a prayer and leave our worldly stresses and frustrations with the Lord. When you walk into the church building, have a smile on your face and be kind towards your brethren. A good principle is set forth in Ephesians 4:26, “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath.” The point here is simply that we should not be carrying our frustrations with us and allowing those feelings of resentment and bitterness to fester.

Love does not seek its own, and this is so important in maintaining unity in the local church. Notice the point in Philippians 2:4, “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.” It is easy for Christians to be so wrapped up in their own life that they forget to care for others. Have you ever been talking to a fellow Christian and then suddenly realize that you’ve neglected to even ask them, “How are you?” We can easily become selfish people, and this results in our unwillingness to go out of our way to help others. Let us not be prideful, but rather humble in our serving others in the church. Volunteer your time and energy to spend time with and help your brothers and sisters in Christ. Don’t be vain.

Agape love is not easily provoked, or easily angered (NIV). It is amazing to me how many “Christians” are sensitive and easily angered when it comes to their own brethren. Others have to walk on eggshells around them lest they accidentally say the wrong thing or say the right thing the wrong way. Jesus says in Matthew 5:22, “But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgement.” Do you see how serious this is? If you are a sensitive person, then learn to not be so sensitive. Bear with others and understand that people make mistakes. If you ARE angry with your brother and let’s assume that you do have a reason, then go to him or her and solve the problem quickly before you spread it around the church (Matt 18:15).

Paul also says that love “thinketh no evil.” Rather than assuming the worst motives upon our brethren’s comments and actions, let us assume the best. When you are tempted to have negative thoughts about a brother or sister in Christ, go to God in prayer and learn to think *good* thoughts. It is not uncommon to hear of a Christian causing an uproar in the church over a simple misunderstanding or gossip. How wicked is this!

Another aspect of love is that it “rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth.” Love does not overlook sin and doctrinal error. Sure, we may really hate confrontation, and it may be tempting to overlook sin for the purpose of “keeping the peace,” but we need to help our fellow Christians overcome weakness. This may simply involve our bearing others’ burdens and talking to them about their problems (Gal 6:1-2) or this may involve church discipline (1 Cor 5). Either way, our motive is love. As Jesus says in Revelation 3:19, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten.” It is sad, that when a church splits or has problems, some Christians want to blame those who stand up for the truth rather than praising their efforts to maintain unity.

In conclusion, love “beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth.” If we love our brethren in the way that Paul describes, then unity will be achieved and maintained. This kind of love will overcome every issue and problem that arises, whether that issue relates to doctrine or attitude. Let us love our brethren!