

Church Unity: Ephesians 4:2-3

by Casey Head

As we continue our discussion of church unity, let us consider the words of Paul in Ephesians 4:2-3. He says, “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.” The apostle sets forth one command here, but he divides that command into two points: one, we are to keep the unity of the Spirit, and two, we are to do so while maintaining the bond of peace. We can achieve this peace by having lowliness, meekness and longsuffering. Let us further discuss these two concepts.

First of all, what does it mean to keep the unity of the Spirit? This is not referring to our attitudes towards one another, but rather to our obligation to follow the teachings of Christ which are given through the Holy Spirit. Notice, if you will, Ephesians 3:4-5, “Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” What we find here is a chain- the commands are given by Christ to the Spirit, who then reveals them to the apostles and prophets. Paul also tells us in Ephesians 6:17, “And the sword of the *Spirit*, which is the *word of God*.” Furthermore, in John 14:26 and 16:13, Jesus told the apostles, “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you...Howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth.” We say all this to prove that when Paul mentions the unity of the Spirit, he is referring to our obligation to follow God’s word.

As seen above, in order for the local church to maintain unity, there must first be cooperative obedience to the will of God. True unity comes, not by tolerance of division, but by the word of God (Jn 17:17). We are commanded in several places NOT to be tolerant of new and different doctrines. Paul again tells us in Romans 16:17, “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences *contrary to the doctrine* which ye have learned; and avoid them.” When something is taught or done contrary to the law of Christ, we are to address it. We find in 1 Timothy 1:3 that we “mightest charge some that they teach NO other doctrine,” and in 6:3-5, “If any man *teach otherwise*, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness...from such withdraw thyself.” Finally, we are instructed in 2 Timothy 4:2, “Preach the WORD; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine.” The local church clearly has a responsibility to maintain the unity of the Spirit. We must not tolerate doctrines that differ from the word of God. This means that when error arises, it must be rebuked, and by necessity, the truth must be set forth.

In addition to maintaining the unity of the Spirit, we are told to keep the “bond of peace.” Both are absolutely necessary in dealing with church unity. Not only are we to follow the law of Christ, but we are also to maintain the proper attitudes towards one another. We are instructed here to be lowly and meek. In other words, avoid selfish and prideful attitudes. If our goal is to always be right and to have dominance in the church, or if we want everyone else to submit to our will, then we are going to break the bond of peace. Likewise, we are commanded to be longsuffering and forbearing. This does *not* mean that we should overlook false doctrines, but rather that when it comes to our attitudes towards one another, we are to be patient and loving. Everybody has idiosyncrasies and personality quirks. We sometimes say things the wrong way and accidentally offend a fellow Christian? Haven’t YOU done this before? And of course, we have many liberties in Christ that some brethren want to make into law, resulting in unnecessary division.

Paul’s message in Ephesians 4:3 is so important in dealing with church unity. Not only are we to remain obedient to the will of God, but we are also to maintain the proper attitudes towards one another. This involves patience and meekness, qualities which are difficult to maintain.