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Coming To Unity

Jesus urged unity on his disciples.
How can we fulfill his prayer?

by Bill Faith

Before He was taken captive, interrogated and later crucified (John 17) we find recorded a prayer of Jesus. It must have been quite intent knowing that His life on this earth as a human being was about to end. In fact we read, *"And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. And His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground"* (Luke 22:44).

In that prayer, Jesus surely must have mentioned the things most prevalent in His mind. Indeed we find that one of His desires was that we would all be one. Jesus prayed, *"I do not pray for these alone [the disciples], but also for those who will believe Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they may also be one in Us..."* (John 17:20-21).

There are probably many reasons why Jesus was concerned about their unity. For one thing, He knew that they would stumble because of what was to happen to Him. In fact Jesus told His disciples after He had eaten His last Passover meal with them that, *"All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'"* (Matthew 26:31).

Surely as prophesied, several of the apostles returned to commercial fishing after His death for a short time; and of the thousands who had flocked to hear Him preach, only a handful gathered together on the following Day of Pentecost to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when it was first given.

Jesus also knew human nature. He knew that just after the Passover meal that night that there had been, *"...rivalry among them as to which of them should be considered the greatest"* (Luke 22:24). He also

probably recalled the time when the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him asking that her two sons, *"...may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom"* (Matthew 20:21).

Jesus also knew better than anyone the fruits of the flesh that would cause reason for concern: jealousies, contentions, selfish ambitions, dissensions, envy, revelries and the like (*see Galatians 5:20-21*).

As the New Testament testifies, the followers of Christ were not always unified. However, the letters from Paul as well as from the other apostles indicate the fact that they tried earnestly to unify the brethren.

Lessons

Paul explained to the church in Ephesus that Jesus Himself, *"...gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping [perfecting] of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying [building up] of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith..."* (Ephesians 4:11-13).

We can learn from this that there is to be structure and order in the churches of God, the opposite of what Satan, the author of confusion, would have us. Paul further explained that the reason for having structure and order is so that we won't be, *"...tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine"* (v. 14).

In Hebrews 13:7, 17 we read, *"Remember those who rule [lead] over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow..."* and *"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account..."* Again we see that there is to be structure, order and

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accountability in the church of God.

There were times when Paul even pleaded for unity in each church, such as in Ephesians 4:1-6 when he wrote, *“I...beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all...”*

In his letter to the Philippians Paul wrote, *“Let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind”* (3:16). To have unity everyone must follow the same set of rules, or division is guaranteed.

As an example, it would be difficult if not impossible for Protestants, Catholics and Muslims to be in complete unity with each other. This is because they do not follow the same set of rules. Protestants claim to follow the written word of the Bible, while Muslims follow the writings of the Koran. Catholics claim first in priority the infallibility of the Pope, and secondly, the writings of the church fathers. Finally, third in priority, they follow the Bible. Since they each base their beliefs on different teachings they could never be in complete unity with each other.

Even within the same church it is important that everyone must follow the same rules if unity is to be had. As Paul exclaimed to the Corinthian church (1:10), *“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”* Like someone once said, *“If you’re a Ford dealer, you don’t try to sell Chevrolets.*

Jesus’ prayer was that all those who would believe in Him would be one, as He and the Father are one, and that they may be one in them. How much was Jesus and the Father at one? Enough that Jesus was able to tell Philip, *“He who has seen Me has seen the Father...”* (John 14:9). Jesus and the Father are two separate beings; yet their thoughts, beliefs and way of life are so much alike that Jesus was able to make this statement.

Unfortunately, even though we are Christians there are times when we find ourselves at war with the Spirit. This can be a brutal reminder to us of what Jesus meant when He told His disciples, *“...The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”* (Matthew 26:41). We must be careful not to quench the Spirit.

In I Corinthians 14:32 we are told that, *“The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.”* This is a reminder to us that God will not force His will upon us. He will lead us to make the right choices, but the final decision is ours. God gives us freedom of choice and we must be careful to make the right choices. If we are to have unity we must as Paul said, *“...walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.”*

We are told that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Those who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and have been baptized have made a life-long commitment to God. They have committed their life to Him. And if we ever find ourselves being overwhelmed and seeming to be falling short of our calling we need to remember how Paul must have felt when he said, *“...For I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He [Jesus] is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day”* (II Timothy 1:12). Although we may be weak, Christ in us is strong.

We know that God is love. So if we have God’s Spirit, then we also should have love. Love can go a long way in uniting brethren. In fact the apostle John wrote, *“...He who loves God must love his brother also”* (I John 4:21).

With God’s Spirit we have the power to become at one with Him and with each other. For we are told, *“For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled”* (II Corinthians 10:4-6).

If we can come to the point in our life when we can allow God’s Spirit to work in us like this, then truly we will be at one with God and with each other.

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