

November 21, 2010

The Peacemaking Church

Unity in the Bond of Peace

Ephesians 4:1-6

As Christians we are called to be peacemakers. That is, to be those who promote shalom, those who work hard at unraveling the unraveled, striving to bring harmony out of discord, committed to restoring peace where there is now war. We saw last week that peace is a priority to God; real peace is expensive and requires an ally; it is found only at the foot of the cross of Christ and has eternal consequences. Peacemaking leads to real peace – shalom, wholeness, completeness, harmony restored and the fabric of our relationships mended and made right. The gospel calls us, by the mercy and grace that reconciled us to God to be reconciled to one another and to be reconciliators – peacemakers in the world and in the church.

One of the most dramatic scenes in ancient war movies is that of a battering ram smashing against the gate of a besieged castle. Whether we are watching an old classic like *Ivanhoe* or a recent classic like *The Lord of the Rings*, we all sense that the end is coming ... the battering ram is wheeled toward the gate amidst a shower of arrows and smashed against the city's doors again and again. These mighty rams provide a vivid illustration of the irresistible power of unity. No army ever broke through a gate by cutting a huge log into pieces and sending its men to beat on the gate with separate sticks of wood! No matter how long or hard they pounded, their individual blows would never carry sufficient force to break down the thick planks of a well-built gate. But if that large log is kept intact and hurled against a gate through the coordinated efforts of many men, its heavy blows will soon shatter all resistance and open the way to victory.

This is the kind of force Jesus calls us to imagine when he describes the irresistible power of His church in Matthew 16:17-18. Responding to Peter's great confession that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God," our Lord said, *Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* The church of Jesus Christ is the means God is using to destroy the works of the devil in the world and bring real and lasting peace to the earth. When Jesus said that He will build the church and the gates of Hell would not prevail against it; He was saying that in every place where Satan has established his kingdom, the gospel of grace through the unified church would bring freedom and peace and eternal life, by smashing through the gates of hell that have captured and enslaved humanity and promoted strife and war and death. And in fact everywhere the gospel is preached and the church is raised up, Christ triumphs over evil and the kingdom expands and evil retreats.

At times we have seen great victories, with evil and wickedness being overturned, the gospel going forth in power, and many people being rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light. But at other times, the church has not only failed to make headway against the strongholds of darkness, but actually lost ground before its evil forces. The reason for our tragic defeats can usually be traced to our *lack of unity*. As Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote, *"The devils are united as one man in their infamous rebellion, while we believers in Jesus are divided in our service of God, and scarcely ever work with unanimity."* Instead of crashing against the gates of hell with an irresistible unity, we believers are more prone to smash the body of Christ with battering rams and tap away at the gates of our enemy with drumsticks. As long as we keep beating away with our little sticks and individual agendas, our witness for Christ is robbed of its power and Satan can watch and laugh at us.

I remember reading about a feud in a church in Wales looking for a new pastor. The newspaper article read: *“Yesterday the two opposition groups both sent ministers to the pulpit. Both spoke simultaneously, each trying to shout above the other. Both called for hymns, and the congregation sang two—each side trying to drown out the other. Then the groups began shouting at each other. Bibles were raised in anger. The Sunday morning service turned into a bedlam. Through it all, the two preachers continued trying to out shout each other with their sermons. Eventually a deacon called a policeman. Two came in and began shouting for the congregation to be quiet. They advised the forty persons in the church to return home. The rivals filed out, still arguing. Last night one of the group called a “let’s-be-friends” meeting. It broke up in argument.* How do we as the church of Jesus Christ overcome our inclination towards disunity and unpeace and learn to maintain unity in the bond of peace that will advance the kingdom of God?

The unity of the church was a continual theme for Paul. In letter after letter, he encouraged and taught the Christians to *maintain and exercise the unity God has created* in his church. We saw this in our text for today: *“eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* Ephesians 4:3 Paul makes a similar appeal in his first letter to the Corinthians. In verse 10 of chapter 1, he writes, *I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.* To the Romans he wrote: *May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* Romans 15:5-6 To the Philippians he said *‘...complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.* Philippians 2:2

First of all, it is essential to realize that we do not *create* unity—God does. In Ephesians 4:3, Paul does not call us to *“create unity,”* or *“make unity.”* Instead he says, *“...[be]eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace .* True Christian unity originates in the unity of God Himself, the Holy Trinity. This unity – the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is given to the church by the Father, through the Holy Spirit because of what Christ did for us at the cross: *For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility* Ephesians 2:14 And as Ephesians 2:22 promises, *In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.* Ephesians 2:22 Since true unity originates in God, we cannot create it nor can we destroy it. It is always there, waiting for us to take hold of it. But even though we cannot destroy unity, *we can fail to cultivate it, to experience it, and to demonstrate it.* When we do so, we rob ourselves of God’s blessing, destroy our witness for Christ, bring shame on Christ’s name in the world, and fail to batter down the gates of hell.

And peace is the glue that binds our hearts together in unity. It is the foundational bedrock of oneness. You cannot have unity if there is no peace. Paul says, *“...[be]eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace .* In fact in some translations the concept is put as *‘the uniting bond of peace’.* The word ‘bond’ is a word that was used to describe the manner in which the sinews of the body held things together. It was also used to describe the fastenings that held a ship together. Peace is what binds our heart and minds and souls together in unity. A unity that flows from Christ Himself. Our Christian unity is not built around a cause, or program, or likes and dislikes, but it flows from the perfect peace and unity among the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

At its core, Christian unity is being of one heart and mind and purpose to love Jesus Christ and make Him known to others. In fact, unity among believers is the testimony that Jesus is Lord and Savior. In John 17, Jesus prayed to the Father for His disciples: *I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent me and loved them even as You loved Me.* John 17:23 Our unity not only gives testimony to the reality of Christ but it displays the glory of God to a watching world: *May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* Romans 15:5-6 So what does being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace look like? Paul gives us a clear path to follow to peace.

The Path to Peace

Walk Humbly

First of all Paul says *walk ...with all humility* Ephesians 4:2a The primary characteristic of someone who has embraced gospel truth not only in their head but their hearts is humility. It is a attitude born out of the staggering revelation of the wretched state from which they were delivered. It is a continued consciousness that without Christ they are lost. *Humility is the accurate estimation of yourself in the face of Christ.*

It is correctly understanding who you really are and who God really is. Winston Churchill was once asked, *“Doesn't it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?”* *“It's quite flattering,”* replied Sir Winston. *“But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big.”*

I believe that the more you grow in grace, the greater the sense of humility. It is interesting to note the progression of Paul's consideration of himself as you read through his letters. In 1 Corinthians, written around 59 AD Paul writes, *I am the least of the apostles*. In Ephesians written around 63 AD he says, *I am the very least of all the saints*. And finally in 1 Timothy written near the end of his life he writes, *I am the foremost of sinners*. I think this is the result of really knowing God. Someone once said, *“They that know God will be humble and they that know themselves cannot be proud.”*

William Temple wrote, *“Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all.”* Humility is thinking more about God than about you. It is a sense that any goodness or greatness is *not inherent in us* rather it is *through us* in Christ. Andrew Murray said, *“The humble man feels no jealousy or envy. He can praise God when others are preferred and blessed before him. He can bear to hear others praised while he is forgotten because ... he has received the spirit of Jesus, who pleased not Himself, and who sought not His own honor.”* Truly humble people cannot help but promote peace and unity.

Walk Gently

Next, Paul says we ought to walk gently - *walk with ...gentleness*, Ephesians 4:2b The word literally means *'gentle-hearted.'* It is the very opposite of someone who is vindictive, or bitter or resentful toward others. It is characteristic of someone opposed to vengeance and exhibits a quiet willing submission to God. This word is often translated as 'meek'. But we shouldn't understand that to mean spineless. In ancient Greek this word also referred to a colt that had been broken and tamed – whose power and energy could be channeled for useful purposes. In fact the word should be understood to mean *power under control*. One of the characteristics of Jesus in the gospels is gentleness or meekness.

And we would never understand that to mean that Jesus was a spineless pushover. His meekness was power under control as when He was being arrested in the garden and Peter, full of righteous indignation, drew his sword and cut off the ear of one of the guys arresting Jesus. If Jesus wasn't going to stand up for himself then by George he would. *Then Jesus said to him, Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?* Matthew 26:52-54 Walking gently is only the prerogative of the powerful. Peacemakers walk gently.

Walk Patiently

walk ...with patience, Ephesians 4:2c The word here is *makrothumias*, patience or endurance, which is contrasted with another word for patience or endurance that we are familiar with *hupomone*. *Hupomone* is endurance with respect to circumstances whereas *makrothumias* is endurance with respect to people. It is often used in connection with the quality of not being easily provoked. *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience [makrothumias] waited in the days of Noah,* 1 Peter 3:18-20 Good for us that God is not easily provoked. Patience toward one another is the outflow of love. 1 Corinthians 13:5 tells us that love is not easily provoked. That is, as Christians we are not to be easily offended – we are to walk with patience toward one another. Walking with patience frees us up to walk like Christ. How wonderful it would be if we didn't take offense so easily. Probably ninety percent of our issues are because we allow ourselves the luxury of wallowing in our hurts and offenses – either real or imagined.

Look at Christ – if anyone had the right to be offended – He did. God in the flesh, coming to rescue sinners from an awful eternity in hell – pursued by self-righteous Pharisees, falsely accused and slandered, put on trial and put to death for a crime He never committed. But this was His testimony: *He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.* Isaiah 53:7 When you are offended, when you are hurt – it is really hard not to open your mouth. *He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly.* 1 Peter 2:22-23 Peacemakers walk gently.

Walk With Forbearance

walk ...bearing with one another in love, Ephesians 4:2d This is a greater virtue in some respects than mere patience. This means to hold up, to sustain, to endure with others when it would seem to make sense not to. It is holding on to our relationships in the love of God as misunderstandings arise, as cutting words are said, as deliberate or unintentional offenses are given, as unkind and even hurtful things are done. To bear with one another in love is to take the offense and turn it into prayer. It is to take the hurt and bury it with love. It is to take those cutting words and make them a sacrifice of praise to God. It means that we reject the breaking of our relationships with one another in view of the sin-covering love that Christ demonstrated for us at Calvary.

Forbearance is overlooking the offense for the sake of Christ. It is knowing that we have been sinned against and in spite of that, making a merciful, gospel-inspired decision to cover that sin with love. It is *...bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*' Colossians 3:13 Walking with forbearance is to give up any right we think we have to even the score or set the other person right or to nurse a grudge or wallow in self-pity. It means putting our relationships before our pride and not insisting on our relational rights. Simply put, forbearance is mercy in action – and mercy triumphs over justice every time.

Walking humbly, gently, patiently, and with forbearance is the means to maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It is difficult to walk in unity with proud, impatient people. It is hard to live in unity with people who are all the time easily offended and hurt. But unity takes maintenance – it takes some work. I like the NASB here because it gives a better sense of the original: *being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit*. The idea is that we have been given unity and we need to preserve it, and we need to be diligent about doing it. Literally the word means to *be in a serious hurry to do the thing*. Unity requires that we lay aside our opinions and personal preferences that cause trouble for the sake of peace. And that requires work. We are not naturally humble, gentle, patient and longsuffering.

John Calvin, who understood that the Devil's chief weapon against the church was disunity and division, made this point in a letter to a trusted colleague: *"Among Christians there ought to be so great a dislike of schism, as that they may always avoid it so fast as lies in their power."* We are cautioned in the Bible not to be in a hurry about a lot of things – *but this is not one of them*. Be eager – be in a hurry to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Don't be apathetic and complacent about this. Keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace means that we are quick to fight off through walking humbly, gently, patiently, and with forbearance in love, all those things that threaten to divide us.

But the \$64,000 question is always – 'What is the ground of our unity?' That is, *what is it that we should exercise such fierce diligence to keep?* I believe Paul answers this question by giving us seven factors of our common identity: *There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* Ephesians 4:6 *We think we have to have a lot of other things in common but here Paul lists only seven crucial elements: One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.*

One body means that all God's people are in this thing together – sort of like all of us being in the same lifeboat. And if there is one thing you need in a lifeboat it is unity among the passengers. Too often however, we take shots at each other and end up shooting holes in the boat. One Spirit refers to the fact that we have all been born again from the same source and made to be members of this one body. Which means that we share one hope of our Lord's imminent return. One Lord means that we are all of us responsible and accountable to the same master. One faith refers to the fact that none of us can boast of anything because our standing before God and with one another is by faith alone through grace alone. One baptism means that we share a common confession of salvation, and one God and Father of all refers to the fact that we are more closely related to one another than we are to our blood relations.

That is why when we fight over non-essentials and trivial matters, we lose and Satan wins. The essence of unity depends on how close to Jesus we get. Unity is at the center of the relationship of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We never look more like Jesus than when we are at one with each another. It is like the spokes of a wheel. Out at the periphery of the wheel, the spokes are far apart – but as they get closer to the hub, they get closer to one another until it's hard to tell which one is which. As Christians we are called to be peacemakers. ***Walking humbly, gently, patiently, and with forbearance is the means to maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace.***

Our gracious God and Father,

You have loved us with an everlasting love and called us by Your great mercy and grace to love Your Son and make Him known in the world. You said that our loving each other and living in unity and peace would testify to Your goodness and grace to the watching world. Forgive us Lord where we have promoted disunity and strife and grant us to humble ourselves under Your mighty hand and be diligent to reject all those things that threaten to divide us. Have mercy on us in our battle with pride and help us put to death all that is arrogant and self-exalting in our lives. Grant us to walk humbly, gently, patiently, and with forbearance for one another so that we might live to make Your name great. Grant us to be earnest about keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Never let us fail to cultivate it, to experience it, and to demonstrate it. May we be true peacemakers in the church and in the world we pray for the sake of Your name and the triumph of the gospel, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.