

Most will agree that Paul's letter to the Ephesians contains the highest of truths. Written later in Paul's ministry, the letter contains truths deemed appropriate to be shared with mature believers. A complete study of all that Paul shares in this letter would be most appropriate, but for today I wish to consider just one small portion from the fourth chapter.

I am entreating you, then, I, the prisoner in the Lord, to walk worthily of the calling with which you were called, with all humility and meekness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit with the tie of peace: one body and one spirit, according as you were called also with one expectation of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, Who is over all and through all and in all. ^{Eph 4:1-5}

As we observe the significant differences between the writings of Paul and the writings of Peter and those of the Circumcision, we are sometimes hesitant to bring up the subject of works. We understand that works played an important part in the Circumcision evangel, but we often fail to elevate the importance of works in Paul's writings. Most certainly Paul tells us that we are justified by faith and not by works, yet he continually calls his audience to a life of good works. Here in Ephesians, in the midst of the highest and most spiritual truths proclaimed by Paul, he pleads...

Walk worthily of the calling with which you were called!

Now without the Law we may feel there is no standard for what it means to walk worthily. But Paul often provides examples, such as those we find in these five verses currently under review.

... with all humility and meekness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit with the tie of peace...

As we seek to walk worthily, we see that key ingredients will be humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit, and peace. In light of our human condition, this is a tall order. These things are not automatic, even for believers who have the spirit of Christ. It requires intentional effort. Note that Paul tells the Ephesians to ***ENDEAVOR*** to keep the unity of the spirit.

It is becoming more and more clear to me that keeping the unity of the spirit is no easy matter, even among believers who are in agreement on many points. We tend to allow differences of Biblical interpretation to divide us. All who study the Scriptures and seek God in earnest will agree on the basics, which are summarized by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.

For I give over to you among the first what also I accepted, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that He was entombed, and that He has been roused the third day according to the scriptures... ^{1 Cor 15:3-5}

Christ has been roused from among the dead, the Firstfruit of those who are reposing For since, in fact, through a man came death, through a Man, also, comes the resurrection of the dead. For even as, in Adam, all are dying, thus also, in Christ, shall all be vivified. ^{1 Cor 15:20-22}

Christ is central to God's revelation to mankind, which we call the Bible. Man has a need. All have sinned, and the penalty for sin is death. Man is helpless to overcome his shortcomings, so Christ does so for us. God has told us this, and we believe. But even here many believers do not understand the implications. It is not just believers that will be reconciled to God, but **all mankind**. Many believers are trapped within errant Bible teachings that have been propagated by many different denominations and churches since the days of the very early church. But if we examine the Bible closely, translating it consistently and interpreting it without allowing human bias to enter, it is very plain to see the fact that God is in the process of reconciling **all mankind** to Himself. And in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul summarizes the message to be shared by Christ's ambassadors.

Yet all is of God, Who conciliates us to Himself through Christ, and is giving us the dispensation of the conciliation, how that God was in Christ, conciliating the world to Himself, not reckoning their offenses to them, and placing in us the word of the conciliation. For Christ, then, are we ambassadors, as of God entreating through us. We are beseeching for Christ's sake, 'Be conciliated to God!' ^{2 Cor 5:18-21}

Thus far all is very plain and simple. Even the most basic of Bible students should be in agreement on these things, as we endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit.

Now let me say that while some things are made very clear in God's revelation to us, there are other things that are less clear. God's purpose is not to tell us every detail concerning every matter, but it seems that we have this natural curiosity to understand every detail. And this is where we run into trouble in maintaining the unity of the spirit. Allow me to cite a few examples.

What exactly will happen to the non-believer from the time of his death? We know that immediately upon death he will find himself in hades, "the unseen place." But what about after that. Anyone not found written in the scroll of life will be cast into the lake of fire. ^{Rev 20:15} We know that this is not the individual's final destination, since God will one day be All in all, and all mankind will be reconciled to Him. But during the time he finds himself in the lake of fire, what exactly will this look like, and feel like? I personally know individuals who study the scriptures very carefully and very "concordantly" but who disagree on some of these details. Those from both perspectives pay close attention to detail in the translation and in their interpretations, yet they disagree on some things. Some say that when one is cast into the lake of fire, this "second death" (as the Bible calls it) is the same as the first death. Once again the individual experiences "dissolution" and has no consciousness, as is the case in the first death, until the consummation ... when that individual is once again roused and reconciled to God.

But others believe the second death may be different than the first, and that this may be a figurative death. The individual is conscious as he endures an unpleasant time of reformation and purification.

Now I have looked at the arguments presented on both sides, and have great respect for those who have studied this matter in detail on both sides. Let me tell you where I stand on this matter.

- Those within the lake of fire will not be there forever
- The experience of the lake of fire will not be a pleasant one
- As a part of the body of Christ I will not experience the lake of fire
- I would not want anyone to experience the lake of fire, and would prefer that they believe God and be found in Christ
- It seems that we are not given a great amount of conclusive details about the exact nature of the lake of fire, so we cannot know definitively many details of which we are curious concerning the lake of fire

It would seem logical to me that God *could* be using the lake of fire to purge and reform, with those within the lake being conscious ... but I cannot depend on logic to add details to God's Word where details are not provided. I may have opinions concerning the lake of fire, but there is much that I do not know conclusively. And most importantly, where matters are inconclusive in the scriptures, we must not allow disagreements in interpretation to shipwreck the unity of the spirit. As Paul writes, *endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit*.

I hope my friend, Phil Scranton, will not mind my using him as an example. I appreciate Phil Scranton. He presents his theory concerning the lake of fire in his book, "Journey To And Through the Second Death." I appreciate Phil's humility and his meekness. I cannot speak for Phil, but believe he would agree that much of what he offers in his book is a theory, with at least some level of detail that cannot be known definitively from the Scriptures. I do not believe there is anything wrong with believers discussing the Scriptures and offering their interpretations for the body of Christ to consider. And I do not believe there is anything wrong with folks disagreeing with Phil. I do think it is wrong to take our disagreements to the point where the unity of the spirit is undermined.

I do not believe maintaining the unity of the spirit means we must always agree on all points. Especially on matters not made clear and definitive within the Scriptures it is natural that there will be disagreements at times. But we should be able to have these disagreements in interpretation without destroying the unity of the spirit.

Here is the bottom line as I see it. If we allow disagreements on matters not made definitive in the Scriptures to undermine the unity of the spirit, then our testimony as Christ's ambassadors on the matters that **are** definitive will suffer. Those of the world will point to the turmoil within the body of Christ, and focus on our disunities ... discarding the key truths of the scriptures in the process, no matter how clear they may be.

So let me summarize a few key points.

1. Some things are made very clear in the Scriptures
2. Other things are not made perfectly clear
3. We should not allow differing interpretations on the unclear things to destroy the unity of the spirit, affecting our ability to convey the clear things

Let me anticipate an objection. Some may say, “Who is to determine what matter is made clear, and what matter is not?” Some on both sides of the lake of fire issue may think they do have a clear understanding.

Here is where our maturity is truly tested. Can we allow one another to present their perspectives without anyone being burned at the stake? Can we allow others to present interpretations that differ from our own, no matter how strongly we may feel about our own interpretations?

The lake of fire is an issue that offers a good illustration. Are the details concerning the lake of fire important enough that they warrant continuing debate and definitiveness? Or can we simply leave the matter as knowing there are differing opinions, and these differing opinions do not change the following key facts that:

- Christ has died,
- Christ is risen, the Firstfruit; and
- God is in the process of reconciling the entire universe to Himself

I appreciate Phil Scranton because he has studied this matter, he has presented his opinions to us, and he is now moving on to other studies. Let us take into consideration what Phil has presented, let us take into consideration what Mr. Knoch and others have written, let us keep these perspectives in mind as we continue to study the Scriptures for ourselves, and let us move on to the important work of being Christ’s ambassadors as we endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit.

Christ’s essence is another issue often debated. As a matter of fact, believers have been condemned since about the 3rd century for holding certain views concerning the essence of God. I was raised in the church and knew only the interpretation referred to as the Trinity. God the Father, Christ Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three in one. When I came to see God’s plan to save all mankind, those whose writings I studied also presented the Biblical evidence that led me to see Christ Jesus as God’s first created being. More recently I learned of another interpretation that I had never been exposed to before ... that God the Father and Christ Jesus the Son are one in the same, but appearing in different modes at different times. This has been referred to as “modalism” or “one-ness.”

Without getting into the fine details of these varying perspectives, let me ask this. If Christ Jesus is the first created being ... or if He is of the same essence (that is, He is the same being) as God the Father ... what are the practical implications? In either case, Christ Jesus

is high above *any* of God’s creation, and worthy to be praised. If Christ is the same person as God, but has been spoken of in the Scriptures at times as being less than God the Father, will God not understand if we have concluded that Christ is indeed a separate being apart from God? And if Christ was created by God, but is spoken of in the Scriptures at times as being the same as God, will God not understand our misunderstandings?

Could it be that there is a bit of “mystery” concerning God’s being that we will never fully understand? Even if we can use multitudes of Scriptures that seem to prove one perspective or the other, does it matter? Whichever interpretation we adhere to, does it affect the following key facts?

- Christ has died,
- Christ is risen, the Firstfruit; and
- God is in the process of reconciling the entire universe to Himself

I say again, I have friends on both sides of this debate that study the Scriptures carefully and concordantly, yet they come to different conclusions. When this happens I tend to think there may be a bit of mystery involved in the issue, and that perhaps things are not as conclusive as either side tends to conclude. And then I also consider the fact that whichever side to the debate is right, if *either* side is right, does the issue give cause to destroy the unity of the spirit? Does the issue change the commission we have as Christ’s ambassadors? Are we charged with explaining the fine details of God’s being, or with beseeching for Christ’s sake, “*Be conciliated to God?*”^{2 Cor 5:21}

I wish to talk about just one additional issue, since I have not yet offended everyone. How much free will does man have? I was raised in the Methodist tradition, and always believed I had a free will. After reading extensively outside of the Methodist tradition, I encountered the position that there is no such thing as free will, and that all is determined by God. It seems that in every debate on this issue there are two extremes:

- Man’s will is free, and if it were not man could not be held accountable for his actions, or
- Man has no free will, and all things are determined by God. If this were not the case, God would not be sovereign.

Both sides point to the Scriptures. Some focus on those passages showing man’s will being exercised, or in those passages calling upon man to exercise his will in a certain way. Others focus on those passages showing

God's total control of the events of history.

I believe that man has a will, but it is not free. It is influenced by his environment, his hereditary makeup, and at times by God Himself (as in the case of Paul on the Damascus Road). But I do not believe God controls and determines every event, as He did so powerfully with Paul on the road to Damascus. I believe man is called upon to exercise his will, though it is not a free will but an "*influenced will*." And I believe God is sovereign in that nothing man can do in exercising his will can overcome God's will. It is God's will that all men be saved. Man can make whatever decisions he would like, but none of his actions can thwart God's will to save all men. The salvation of all is going to prevail.

Now if you believe God determines all actions of man, or if you believe man has a will and can make decisions without being fully micro-managed by God, does either perspective change anything? God is sovereign, without a doubt. But as to how God exercises that sovereignty and takes us to the point where all is reconciled to Him, does that change how we are to live today? If my every action is controlled by God, or if I have the ability to exercise my human will to take certain actions, does that change the fact that I am called to "walk worthily of the calling?" And does either perspective change the key facts that:

- Christ has died,
- Christ is risen, the Firstfruit; and
- God is in the process of reconciling the entire universe to Himself

Does it change the message I am commissioned to bear

as Christ's ambassador?

Some may object to all I have said, stating the importance to expose and rebuke teachings counter to the Scriptures. ^{2 Timothy 4:2} I would agree wholeheartedly in matters that are expressed clearly in the Scriptures. But remember that the apostle Paul focused his energies primarily on those denying the resurrection, and those attempting to integrate the law into grace. I do not believe we are to expose and rebuke on every minor difference of opinion relating to the Scriptures, especially when doing so leads to a destruction of the unity of the spirit. And we must be sure the matters we decide to expose and rebuke are truly clear in the Scriptures. Let us not rest on our own conclusions, thinking they are final and conclusive. Surely we should not rush to change our opinions with every wind that blows a new understanding our way, but we should be open to hearing the perspectives of others without thinking our understanding it complete and accurate. We each are but one part of the body, and all parts are needed. Often insights from others who study the Scriptures with great care are needed to help us to better understand as we study. And in those cases where exposing and rebuking may be necessary, let us also remember Paul's call for patience in doing so.

^{2 Timothy 4:2}

As we study issues that are less central to our commission, and where few details are provided in the Scriptures, let us learn to use phrases such as, "*I believe* this is what the Scriptures are saying." Let us grow in maturity. Let us remember Paul's admonition to walk worthily of the calling, endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit.

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