

Chapter 11

Unity of the Spirit

Keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace

Growing up in south east London there is one place that I really enjoy. It is Greenwich Park. I still love to go there. It has always featured in my life. I can remember going there as a small boy on family picnics. I went to a school that overlooked the park, and sometimes spent time there when I should have been in lessons. I ran cross country events up and down its hills for several years. Now I love to go and walk and pray there. An Iraqi friend of mine says that he has travelled to many places around the world, but there is not a park in the world as beautiful as Greenwich Park. There is a place where you can stand and look across the whole of London to the hills way to the north. That view has changed considerably over the last twenty years.

Across the River Thames there is a new business development and now the view is marred by several high rise buildings. Some are the highest in London and they would probably build higher if they were not on the flight path into Heathrow Airport. For me, they should never have been built because they spoil the view, but progress is progress and I cannot change them. I was fascinated when they were being built. I watched their progress. After they had cleared the site it seemed for a long time as though nothing was happening. There were lots of workmen and huge pieces of machinery but nothing was going up. Weeks, maybe even months passed before signs of upward progress were visible. Up to this time they were still building, but they were building down. They were laying foundations.

London is built on soft clay and to enable them to construct buildings that would not topple over, they were drilling down through the clay until they hit solid rock. I understand it was several hundred feet below ground. The most important part of the building is the foundation. If the buildings were on clay they would not survive the first major rainfall. The clay would absorb the water and the foundations would wash away with inevitable disastrous results.

Jesus told a story about two builders in Matthew 7:24-27.

Whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.

The principle of foundations is the same whether applied to buildings or to our lives. We need a good foundation in our life. In this story we can imagine both men had the same building materials and even that they were building identical houses. On the outside they may have looked exactly the same, but one was built on sand. He did not

bother to dig deep and find solid rock. When the wind and the storm came the sand shifted and the building fell. Jesus said that the building material for our lives is the Word of God. It is not enough simply to hear the word we must put it into practice.

I have mentioned that from the age of three, when I was sent to Sunday school, I have heard the word of God. I knew the stories of the Old Testament. I knew the Gospel. I had no difficulty in understanding that Jesus died for my sin. As I grew up, however I did not always put what I had heard into practice. Living on an Inner London council estate I often copied my friends in wrongdoing. I started smoking when I was twelve and drinking at fourteen. I found it easier to follow them at that age than to follow Jesus. My life was a contradiction. I would confess that I was a Christian and go to church and Bible study. I liked the church youth club because there were some very nice girls there. I was an officer in the Boys' Brigade and at one time served on the 'council' of my local church. At summer camp I preached the Gospel at the morning service and boys would receive Jesus. I had the head knowledge. As Jesus said 'I knew His words but did not put them into practice'.

I can remember the date, even the time when I decided to put my life on a firm foundation. That was not how I expressed it at the time. I had been drinking on my way home from work and was disturbed by questions a friend had asked me about my Christian life. "When did you give your life to God?" was the question that unsettled me most. My answer had not even convinced me. "Oh, I have always been a Christian!" Now alone in my flat, I was disturbed. I phoned a friend who I described at the time as 'having religion'. I used to avoid him because of his awkward questions, but today I wanted to talk with him. He was preparing a Bible study on the story of Nicodemus to whom Jesus had said, "You must be born again!" I was the recipient of his whole Bible study but after hanging up I knew that I had not always been a Christian. I remember every word of my prayer, as, alone, I slipped out of my chair and onto my knees.

"Lord! I have made a mess of my life. I want to be born again. I want you to take over."

Wow! God answers prayer! I woke before six o'clock the next morning! Something had changed! I was alive, fully alive. My cigarettes at the side of my bed held no interest. I had struggled almost every Monday to give them up, and now my addictions were broken. I was free!

I can only describe it as knowing God instead of just knowing about Him. The next morning, very early in the morning, I was in Greenwich Park. I saw birds, trees, flowers, clouds for the first time. They had life. Colours were brighter, stronger, deeper and fresher. In the words of that wonderful hymn by John Wesley:

My chains fell off! My heart was free!

After this wonderful experience, my first question was "Why didn't anyone tell me?" Of course, I had known the truth but had not applied it. I will not say that all my problems have disappeared (that is not the Gospel) but I do have a foundation that enables me to stand when troubles come, because I now attempt to put His word into practice.

Most attempts to build unity in the church have failed. It is not an easy task when there is so much division but it is not impossible. It takes work but there is a foundation that will bring success. It still takes work, but the foundation is solid and will not shift when troubles come.

There are two very significant verses in Ephesians 4 which will help in understanding unity in the church. The first is verse 3:

*Keep the **unity of the Spirit** in the bond of peace*

This clearly tells us that we have something. I cannot keep what I do not have. A policeman friend of mine was trained in riot duty. One day there was serious trouble in an area that has over the years had more than its share of racial tension. All day there was tension and trouble in the air and the police were trying to keep a low profile and 'keep the peace'. It was impossible! Those on the streets did not have peace in mind. The tension did not bring peace. Peace was nowhere to be found in the area. They could not keep the peace – at best all they could do was to quell the inevitable violence and restore order. They could not keep the peace because peace was not there to keep.

I am sure you have experienced a broken promise. I have been on the receiving end of a broken promise. Maybe that is the wrong expression. I have been on the 'non-receiving' end of a broken promise. I was once promised a car for my work but the person did not keep the promise and I did not receive the car. (Since that time, however, I have been given four cars for the work of the Lord and two others that I have been able to pass on to other ministries!) I planned how I would be able to use it for the ministry. I would be able to do so much more. But I was not given the car! I had planned to keep it well maintained so that it would serve me. However, I could not keep it because it was never in my possession.

We cannot keep what we do not have!

Yet the church is told to **keep the unity of the Spirit**. God would not tell us to keep what we do not have. It is another one of those truths that 'whether we like it or not' we have unity of the Spirit. People often come back to me and say that surely when we look at the church there is no unity. There are many examples in this book of division and not unity. True! The church does not have unity in many ways, but it does have the unity of the Spirit. I am sorry, but you cannot argue with that statement. God tells us to keep it because we have it. If we do not have it, how can He tell us to keep it?

However, there is a unity that we do not have. Ephesians 4:13 tells us about it.

*Until we all come to the **unity of the faith** and of the knowledge of the Son of God*

This tells us clearly that we do not have something. Notice, this 'something' is not the unity of the spirit. This is **unity of the faith**.

When I was still at school I really wanted a bicycle. Many of my friends had one and would go cycling into the countryside together and I would be left behind. My parents could not afford to buy one, and besides they would have had to buy one for each of my sisters too, and they could not manage that. I decided that if I wanted a bike I would have to save for one. I managed to get a job delivering newspapers and saved up week by week. It seemed I would never reach my target. Each week I would count my money and it was not enough. I remember getting close and then the cost of the bicycle went up. I was so disappointed but I kept on saving until I reached the target and bought a beautiful red and gold bicycle. I was so pleased with it and was able to join my friends into the countryside.

I had to work and save until I reached my target.

This is what God is saying. We have not yet reached the target. He has given the church the five-fold ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to whose function is to build up the body of Christ and build it into maturity **until we reach the target**. We have not yet attained to the unity of faith. We will not attain it until Jesus comes for His church because, the very moment before He comes, His word will say **until** we reach the unity of faith.

We have our differences in doctrine and practice. We see things differently in our different denominations. Our interpretations and understandings are not uniform. Churches have different doctrine about the working of the Holy Spirit. There are different practices in baptism services. That should not be a reason for division. It is exactly what we are told in Ephesians. We have not yet reached unity of faith. Until we do we should keep the unity of the Spirit. If we put those two verses together we could read it this way:

Let us keep the unity of the Spirit until we all come to the unity of faith.

Even though we do not have unity of the faith we do have unity of the Spirit. Let us, therefore, work to keep the unity that we do have. There have been many attempts among churches over the years to build unity, but they mostly fail because they are building on a false foundation.

There are many movements that are honestly trying to build unity among the denominations. They cannot succeed until they understand this principle. Why? Because they are building on a wrong foundation. They are trying to build a solid unity based on Ephesians 4:13, the unity of faith. Since the bible says that we have not yet attained this foundation of unity, these movements are building a house upon the sand. It is my experience that most attempts at church unity are made on this basis.

Instead of finishing up with a solid basis of faith, the fundamental tenets of Christian faith become watered down until there is barely a biblical basis for agreement. In our attempts to build on a unity of faith we have moved away from sound biblical doctrine and ended with a social Gospel. We work together but we cannot agree doctrinally. Unity that is based on works is not the spiritual unity for which Christ prayed in John 17.

The beginning of true unity, the unity of the Spirit, is to acknowledge that we have not yet attained the unity of faith and will not do so until the return of Jesus. Our brother is our brother because he is born again and has accepted for the Gospel of Jesus. Even if he is in a different denomination he is still your brother. He is born again of the same Holy Spirit. He may be a 'Calvinist' and you an 'Armenian' but he is your brother because he has received Jesus. You may baptise by immersion and he by sprinkling, but he is still your brother because he has been to the cross of Jesus. You may speak in tongues and he may think that tongues disappeared with the twelve apostles but he is still your brother because he has entered the new covenant by the blood of Jesus.

The point is, if a man or woman is saved, he is your brother or sister. You have the unity of the Spirit even if you disagree on several points of faith. It is time for the church to stop dividing over issues of faith and uniting in the unity of the Spirit. It is time to stop fighting one another and begin loving one another. It is time to acknowledge that we **have** the unity of the Spirit. This is the unity for which Jesus prayed.

Let us keep the unity of the Spirit until we attain the unity of faith.

It is the only biblical way.