

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION Chapter 31 Its Need Revisited-Concluded

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Transcript

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Chapter 31

Its Need Revisited-Concluded

It might be thought that we had pretty well covered this aspect in the preceding section. Not so; there is another important phase of it which needs to be considered. Sin has not only alienated man from God, but man from man as well. Where there is no love to God there is no genuine love to our fellow-men. By nature we are totally depraved, and as such possessed of a radically selfish, evil, malicious disposition. "The poison of asps is under their lips, whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their ways" (Rom. 3:13-17). The record of human history consists largely of a solemn demonstration of that fact. Envy and enmities have marked the relationships of one nation to another, one party against another, one individual against another. Frictions and feuds have been the inevitable outcome of a covetous and ferocious spirit among men, were they black or white, red or yellow. It is only the restraining hand of God which holds men within bounds and prevents the social sphere from becoming worse than the jungle. Every once in a while that restraining Hand is largely withdrawn and then, despite all our vaunted progress, human nature is seen in its naked savagery. The truth is that men today are neither better nor worse than they were at the beginning of this Christian era. Speaking of God's own people during their unregeneracy, the apostle described them as "serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another" (Titus 3:3). Such are men the world over, though they will not own up to it, nor can they be expected to. Since the natural man is ignorant of his inherent and inveterate enmity against God, it not to be supposed that he is aware of harboring such a spirit against his neighbors. But if all the police were removed from this so-called civilized country, how long would it be before "hateful and hating one another" was plainly and generally manifested! Fallen man not only requires to be reconciled to God but to his fellows, and where the one takes place the other necessarily follows. Reconciliation, as was shown, is one of the fruits of regeneration; for at the new birth a new principle is imparted to its subject, so that his enmity is displaced by amity. "Everyone that loves Him that begat, loves him also that is begotten of Him" (1 John 5:1). The reconciliation of a soul to God entails his reconciliation to all saints. Since God has been reconciled to the entire Church (considered as fallen) and its two main constituents (believing Jews and Gentiles) are made one, it follows that each Christian is, fundamentally, harmoniously united to all others. We say

"fundamentally," for the work of Christ has federally and legally united them. But that is not all. He procured the Spirit for His Church and He—by the work of regeneration—makes them vitally one in a new creation. "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, bond or free, and have all been made to drink into one spirit" (I Cor. 12:13). As the Christian's reconciliation to God entails certain clearly marked responsibilities, so also does his reconciliation to all fellow-believers, and these are what we shall now be occupied with. Let us begin with that basic and comprehensive duty, "Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Concerning that simple precept there has been much confusion, both as to its meaning and requirement, with almost endless controversy about church union and divisions. Man, with his usual perversity, has changed that exhortation to "Zealously attempt to make and enforce a human unity," anathematizing all who will not subscribe and conform unto the same. Romanists have made the greatest outcry about church unity, vehemently contending that it is indispensably necessary that all Christians should submit to the papal authority, and that there is no salvation for anyone dying outside their communion. Thus, a visible and carnal union with an Italian pontiff is preferred to an invisible, spiritual and saving union with the Christ of God. We do not propose to cover now the various efforts and devices of men since the Reformation to bring into existence organizations for unity and uniformity among professing Christians, both in creed and form of worship, such as State Churches "by law established," denominations which have laid claim to being the "true Church" or "churches of Christ," nor the high pretensions of those who rather more than a century ago denounced all sects and systems and alleged that they alone met on "the ground of Christ's Body" and "expressed" the unity of the Spirit, only to split up in a very short time into numerous factions and conflicting "fellowships." No, our object here is not to be controversial but constructive, to give a brief exposition of Ephesians 4:1-6, and then point out the practical application and bearing of the same. We cannot intelligently "keep the unity of the Spirit" until we rightly understand what that "unity" is; may He graciously be our Guide. "I therefore the prisoner of the Lord beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation with which you are called. . . endeavoring to keep" etc. (Eph. 4:1-3). That exhortation holds the same place in this epistle as 12:1 does in that of the Romans, being placed at the forefront of the hortatory section, and we at once observe the verbal resemblances between them in the "therefore" by which it is supported, and the "I beseech you" the earnestness with which the call is made. Standing as it does at the beginning of the practical division of the epistle, taking precedence of all its other precepts, we have emphasized its deep importance. It was written by the apostle during his incarceration at Rome, but it is blessed to mark that He looked above Caesar, regarding himself as "the prisoner of the Lord." Therefore we find his heart was occupied not with his own danger or discomfort, but with the glory of Christ and the interests of His redeemed. He asked not the saints to "get up a petition" for his release, nor even to pray for it, but was concerned that they should conduct themselves in a way which would bring glory to his Master. The "I therefore beseech you that you walk worthy. . . endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" requires that we carefully consult what precedes, for it is the contents of Ephesians 1-3 which explains the force of 4:1-3. First, it should be pointed out that the Greek word rendered "bond" is not the simple "desmos" but rather the compound "sun-desmos"—joining—bond. This at once links up with and is based upon the "fellow-citizens" of 2:19, the "being fitly framed together" and "builded together" (2:21,22), and the "fellow-heirs, and a joint-body, and joint partakers of His promise" (3:6 —Greek), where in each case, the reference is to the union of believing Jews and Gentiles in the mystical Body of Christ. It is therefore an affectionate plea that those who in their unregenerate days had been bitterly hostile against each other, should now walk together in love and harmony. The same Greek word occurs in the parallel passage in Col. 3: "above all things put on charity, which is the joint bond of perfectness" (v. 14), which throws clear light on the verse we are now considering. "I therefore. . . beseech you that you walk worthy

of the vocation wherewith you are called," which is unto sonship—holiness and glory, conformity to the image of Christ. The inestimable privileges conferred upon those who are effectually called by God out of darkness into His marvelous light, obligates its favored recipients to order their lives accordingly. It requires from them a distinctive spirit, a particular disposition and temper, which is to be exercised and manifested in their dealings with fellow-saints. They are to conduct themselves with humility and gentleness, not with self-assertiveness and self-exaltation. They are required to seek the good and promote the interests of their brethren and sisters in Christ, and continually endeavor to preserve amity and concord among them, "to bear with one another in love as to those light occasions of offence or displeasure which could not be wholly avoided even among believers in this present imperfect state" (T. Scott). For the Christian to walk worthily of his vocation is for him to live and act congruously, suitably for it. Here it has particular reference to the spirit and manner in which he is to practically conduct himself toward his fellow-saints, namely, by endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That word "endeavoring" means far more than a half-hearted effort which ceases as soon as opposition is encountered. It signifies "give diligence," laboring earnestly, doing our utmost in performing this task. The nature of this duty is intimated with considerable definiteness by the particular graces which are here specified as needing to be exercised. Had that "unity" consisted of uniformity of belief—as many have supposed, then the saints had been exhorted unto the acquirement of "knowledge" and the exercise of "faith." Or had that unity been an ecclesiastical one which is to be framed or "expressed" on earth, then the call would be to the exercise of "faithfulness" and "firmness," in uncompromisingly resisting all innovations. But instead, it is "with all lowliness and meekness, forbearing one another in love." Thus whatever is our angle of approach in seeking to define this controversial expression, whether it is from the contents of the previous chapters, the parallel passage in Colossians 3:14, or the congruity of the preceding verse, it should be clear that the "unity of the Spirit" which we are to diligently assay to keep "in the bond of peace" has no reference to the formation of an external and visible unification of all professing Christians, in which all differences in judgment and belief are to be dropped and where all worship is to conform to a common standard. The union of Christendom which so many enthusiasts have advocated would, in reality, consist of a unity in which principle gave way to policy, contending earnestly for the Faith once delivered to the saints would be displaced by the uttering of mere generalities and moral platitudes, and the masculine virtues degenerating into an effeminate affection of universal charity. Sheep and goats will never make amicable companions, still less so sheep and wolves. Variety and not uniformity marks all the works of God, whether it is in creation, providence or grace. The unity of the Spirit is not an ecclesiastical one here on earth, nor is it one which God will make in Heaven by and by. Nor is it the unity of the mystical Body, for that can no more be broken than could a bone in the literal body of Christ (John 18:36). The very fact that it is "the unity of the Spirit" precludes any visible ecclesiastical unity. It is a fact subsisting to faith, without any evidence of it to sight. It is therefore a Divine, spiritual and present unity which is quite imperceptible to the senses. It is that unity of which the Spirit is the Author. It is the new creation of which He makes God's elect members by regeneration. Every soul indwelt by the Spirit is a part of that unity, and none others are. By being made members of the new creation we are brought into "the joint-bond of peace." Each soul indwelt by the Spirit is inducted into a company where enmity has been slain, in which the members are united as the fruit of Christ's sacrifice, and they are here enjoined to act in full harmony with this new relationship. By virtue of his having the Spirit each Christian is in spirit united with all other regenerated souls, and he is to give diligence in practically observing that fact in all his converse and dealings with them. He is to earnestly avoid falling out with a brother or sister in Christ, being most careful to eschew everything having a tendency to cause a breach between them. He is to love all in whom he can discern any of the features of Christ, whether or not they belong to his own "church" or

"assembly." He is to exercise good will unto all who are members the Household of Faith. He should be slow to take offence, and having himself received mercy, should ever be merciful unto others. God's reconciliation should be our rule in dealing with our brethren: "If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another" (1 John 4:11), and since His heart embraces the whole of His family, ours should do no less. If He is longsuffering to usward, we should be longsuffering to themward. "Be you therefore imitators of God as dear children" (Eph. 5:1). Now the only possible way in which the reconciled soul can discharge this essential and blessed part of his responsibility is by exercising those graces enjoined in verse 2. After beseeching the saints to walk worthy of their vocation, Paul described the necessary qualifications for so doing, namely, "with all lowliness and meekness, forbearing one another in love." Lowliness of mind or humility is to have a mean estimate of myself, based upon the consciousness of my sinfulness and weakness. Let it be most attentively noted that the exercise of this grace comes first, and that it is not only "with lowliness," but "with all lowliness." Nothing so hinders our keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace as personal pride. Next comes "meekness," which signifies tractability, gentleness, mildness; an unresisting and uncomplaining temper. It is that lamb-like disposition which enables one to bear injury from others without bitterness and retaliating in a spirit of revenge. "Forbearing one another in love:" suppressing anger and ill feelings, patiently enduring the failings, foibles, and faults of my brethren, as they do (or should) mine. Those grace of humility, meekness and longsuffering are to be manifested in keeping—recognizing and cherishing—that spiritual and invisible unity which there is between the children of God, loving all in whom they perceive His image doing everything in their power to further one another's interests and to promote harmony and concord. For the glory of God, the honor of Christ, and the good of His people, each believer is under bonds to exercise and manifest a spirit of good will unto his brethren; that is to override all natural peculiarities, all selfish interests, all party concerns. That does not mean a peace at any price, wherein we connive at error or condone the sins of an erring saint, making no effort to recover him. No indeed, the wisdom which is from above is "first pure, and then peaceable" (Jas. 3:17). If we perceive a professing Christian walking contrary to the Truth, we are to have no intimate fellowship with him, "yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2 Thess. 3:15); if he is suddenly overtaken in a fault we should, in the spirit of meekness, seek to restore him (Gal. 6:1). Rightly did Matt. Henry point out that "The seat of Christian unity is in the heart or spirit; it does not lie in one set of thoughts and form or mode of worship, but in one heart or soul." In other words it lies in the exercise of a gracious and peaceable disposition. As that writer so aptly pointed out, "Love is the law of Christ's kingdom, the lesson of His school, and the livery of His family." If Christ is the Prince of Peace, then surely His disciples ought to be the children of peace, ever striving to maintain amity and harmony. The root cause of strife and dissension lies not in anything external, but within ourselves: "From where come wars and fightings among you? Come they not here even of your lusts that war in your members?" (Jas. 4:1). We should not rudely obtrude our ideas upon others, but rather wait until we are asked to state our views, and then do so with meekness and reverence (1 Pet. 3:15). The cultivation of an amiable disposition and peaceable temper is the best cement for binding saints together. In verses 4-6 the apostle mentions several motives to prompt unto a compliance with the duty expressed in Ephesians 4:1,3. "There is one Body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling." What better grounds could believers have to love and act peaceably toward each other! They are fellow-members of the mystical body of Christ, they are indwelt by the same blessed Spirit, they are begotten unto the same glorious and eternal inheritance. Do they look forward to the time when they shall join "the spirits of just men made perfect"? Then let them anticipate that time and act now agreeably toward those they hope to dwell together with forever. "One Lord, one faith, one baptism." There may be different apprehensions of that Faith, different degrees of conformity to that Lord, different understandings of "baptism," but that must not

alienate the heart of one Christian from another. "One God, and Father of all," whose family all the reconciled belong to; and should not the members of that family cherish one another! Let that sevenfold consideration animate each of us to live in peace and brotherly affection with our fellow-saints. The unity of the Spirit differs from the oneness of the Body, in that while we may either keep or break the former, we can do neither the one nor the other with the latter. The responsibility of those reconciled to each other is, negatively, to avoid anything which would mar that unity; and positively, to engage in everything that would further it. Pride, self-will, envy, bigotry, fleshly zeal about comparative trifles, are the causes of most of the frictions and factions among believers. "Only by pride comes contention." (Prov. 13:19). That is the most fertile root of all—offence is taken because I do not receive that notice to which I deem myself entitled, or I am hurt because I cannot have my own way in everything. "A whisperer separates chief friends" (Nov. 16:28): but he can only do so by one giving ear to his malicious tales! An acquaintance of ours used to say unto those who come to her with evil reports of others, "Please take your garbage elsewhere: I decline to receive it." "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you; leave there your gift before the altar and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23,24). How emphatically that makes manifest the importance which God attaches to our keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace! When that unity has been broken, He desires not our gifts. If you have done a brother an injury and he has just cause of complaint, peace has been disrupted, and the Holy One requires you to right that wrong before He will receive your worship. "If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66:18). God is as much the Father of the offended one as He is of you, and He will receive nothing at your hand until you remove that stumblingstone from before your brother. No worship or service can possibly be acceptable to God while I cherish a malicious spirit toward any of His children. When a minister of the Church of England gives notice of an approaching "Holy Communion" he is required to read unto those expecting to participate from an exhortation containing these words: "And if you shall perceive your offences to be such as are not only against God, but also against your neighbor, then you shall reconcile yourself unto them; being ready to make restitution and satisfaction, according to the uttermost of your power, for all injuries and wrongs done by you to any other; and being likewise ready to forgive others that have offended you, as you would have forgiveness of your offence at God's hand. For otherwise the receiving of the Holy Communion does nothing else than increase your damnation." Alas that there is so little of such plain and faithful warning in most sections of Christendom today, and that Christ is so often insulted by His "Supper" being celebrated in places where bitter feelings are cherished and breaches exist between the celebrants. The following precepts are so many illustrations of Ephesians 4:3 and so many branches of the responsibility saintwards of each reconciled soul. "Have peace one with another" (Mark 9:50). "You ought also to wash one another's feet. . . love one another" (John 13:14,34). "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love, in honor preferring one another" (Rom. 12:10). "Admonish one another" (Rom. 15:14). "By love serve one another...bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 5:13; 6:2). "Be kind one to another, tender hearted, forgiving one another as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). "In lowliness of mind let each one esteem other better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3). "Comfort yourselves together and edify one another"(1 Thess. 5:11). "Exhort one another. . . consider one another to provoke unto love and good works" (Heb. 3:13; 10:24). "Speak not evil one of another" (Jas. 4:11). "Use hospitality one to another. . . all of you be subject one to another" (1 Pet. 4:8; 5:5).

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