

080928 Unity in the Faith Comes from God: Schism Does Not 23/39 September 28, 2008GG Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Unity in the Faith Comes from God: Schism Does Not

Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ([Ro 15:5-6](#))

A major premise behind the Roman letter, hinted in the first chapter and clearly affirmed later in this chapter, is Paul's confrontation of schism in the Roman Church. Will the Romans perpetuate their internal bickering over race, culture, and over who is stronger and who is weaker in the faith? Or will they lay aside these spiritual detractions to the faith and unite to support Paul and his desire not only to preach at Rome, but to carry the gospel beyond them into Europe? They cannot do both.

In our study passage Paul affirms what should be for us a "no-brainer." God is the Author of likeminded harmony among believers. He consistently nudges His people to work toward harmony within the family of God. The Holy Spirit does not "reveal" one truth to one person and a contradictory different truth to another. The primary revelatory work of the Holy Spirit appears in Scripture, not in private revelations that set believers against each other. Advocates of schism often rationalize and justify their deviation from the faith with such passages as this from Matthew's gospel.

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. ([Mt 10:34-36](#))

The passage addresses our relationships with unbelievers, be they numbered among our dearest relatives or not. It does not deal with schism within the family of God. Nothing in this passage justifies a believer's schismatic conduct toward other believers with whom he/she may disagree on various points of Biblical teaching.

Consider this wise reference to schism from the Old Testament.

These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren. ([Pr 6:16-19](#))

God hates all the things that Solomon lists here, but He reserves "abomination" for the person who sows discord among brethren.

Of all the problematic churches in the New Testament, the church at Corinth takes the prize for being the worst of the lot. In a letter that surfaces some twelve to fifteen different errors, some practical (eating meat offered to idols), some moral (the man who had an affair with his step-mother), and some doctrinal (denial of the resurrection), Paul also confronts the counter point that all this schism and confusion did not come from God.

For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints. ([1Co 14:33](#))

The Corinthians could not blame God for their dreadful state. God was not in His "secret will" orchestrating or causing their schism and confusion to bring about a secret greater good. When God works among His people, the result is always consistent. It is peace, not confusion and schism.

Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another.... The word

“grant” in this reference is translated from a Greek verb that appears in the optative mood.

The **Optative Mood (opt)** is rare in the Greek New Testament. This mood is used in two ways. It may be used to express a wish....¹⁴⁵

Paul is not here implying that God intends to effectually and irresistibly bring about this peace. He rather expresses his desire, his sincere prayer, a prayer that he communicates to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. If God intended to irresistibly orchestrate peace among His people, we have a world of explaining to do in the face of the thousands of different professing Christian groups who carefully distinguish themselves from other Christian groups on the basis of different beliefs and practices. Something went dreadfully wrong! However, we must not blame God for the problem. Solomon points us to the root cause of this problem.

Paul’s point should be quite easily grasped. Paul is praying that God’s patience toward His people will not wear thin with their sinful schisms; that divine consolation will supersede and override the human appetite for ego satisfaction (“I’m stronger in the faith than those other folk, so God has appointed me to correct their error and make them stronger.”)

Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus.... Paul’s perception of harmony in the family of faith is not based on closed-door, cigar smoke-filled rooms where politically convenient and contrived compromise is hammered out by men who pit their ability to convince others to agree with them against their opponent’s ability. It is not worked out by a Nicolaitan-like attitude of personal arrogance¹⁴⁶ over other believers.

Paul’s teaching models a true harmony that grows out of “likeminded” beliefs. You and I have the same attitudes and beliefs. If we agree in our beliefs, harmony is as natural as breathing fresh air. Paul emphasizes that this likeminded relationship toward other believers is “according to Jesus Christ.” When believers work to understand each other and truly to believe the same things, this likeminded blessing comfortably and naturally follows.

External harmony must necessarily build on mutual beliefs and trust. Amos makes the point.

Can two walk together, except they be agreed? (Am 3:3)

Agreement in the faith will inevitably produce harmony and a walking together kind of fellowship. Disagreement in beliefs, however carefully veiled or avoided, will just as inevitably produce tension and discord. Respectful disagreement is not only possible, but commendable. How do we attain this ideal? At the heart a full transparency and openness is required. If I realize that you and I do not agree on a point of belief that is central to our mutual faith, I am morally obligated to take the initiative and approach you with the fact. This action will not dissolve the disagreement, but it will demonstrate personal, moral integrity in me. Discord is exacerbated when we take the opposite attitude and attempt to confuse or wholly mislead others into thinking we agree when we actually do not agree at all.

Just within the last few days a friend and pastor who lives in another part of the country confided to me that he and his church had taken a particular action that he feared might be misunderstood by surrounding pastors and churches, one pastor in particular whom he highly respects. He asked me how to deal with the situation. My response was quite simple. Immediately contact that pastor, explain the situation to him fully, and seek his input. Within less than a day my friend phoned me back. He had followed my advice. The other pastor understood the situation, supported my friend’s decision, and voiced sincere appreciation that he had been considered and informed by my friend. We sadly often create our own problems by refusing to be as open, honest, and straightforward as my friend was toward fellow believers. Sheep are not by nature war-like animals. They’d rather dwell together than apart. They tend to separate when stampeded, frightened, or enticed by wolves—or sometimes by misguided sheep.

That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So long as God's children fail in the Biblical goal of likeminded faith and service their efforts to glorify God are crippled and compromised. Only to the extent that we practice respectful openness and mutual trust can we rise above our disagreements and glorify our Lord.

A Song of degrees of David. Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore. ([Ps 133](#))

David makes the same point that Paul makes. Harmony among believers is the goal, and it is good and right in the eyes of God when His people strive toward that goal. The results of this unity appear in the psalm in the analogy of the anointing oil that Moses used to anoint Aaron to the priesthood. Our agreement of mind, or our gracious disagreement when we do not agree, anoints us to the service of God. When we practice deceit or duplicity to hide our disagreements with each other, we turn away from the anointing oil of the Holy Spirit and cannot attain the goal of either harmony or of our calling to be priests and kings to God.

Both in church situations and in my secular work, over the years I have struggled with those occasional people who were less than candidly open about their beliefs and actions. I must confess that my indignation rises strongly when I see evidence of duplicity in someone's actions, a good thing I believe, but I must be careful not to imitate the very action that I despise. My responsibility starts and stops with the church that I serve. God called neither me nor anyone else as a super-pastor over all His people or over all of the fellowship in which I serve. The people who hear me preach may not always agree with me, but God requires that I preach my convictions with all the clarity that I can possibly bring to bear on my preaching. If at times those who hear me preach do in fact disagree, they are obligated to bring their disagreement to me with the same spirit of transparency. We may at times simply reach the point that we agree to disagree. If we engage each other in the spirit of respectful transparency so that we both fully understand each other, we will go our separate paths with personal respect and regard for each other, even in disagreement. A less than candid transparency tends to breed distrust and to sow the seeds of deeper discord and distrust.

Two examples stand out in my personal experience. Many years ago a friend introduced me to a man whom he believed would get along well with me. He arranged for us to meet at lunch for conversation and fellowship. We met, the three of us, and for many years we all looked forward to those occasional gatherings at Coco's Restaurant near the Green River golf course in southern California. Dr. Kenneth Connolly and I did not agree on all the fine points of our beliefs, but we both spoke of our beliefs with transparent sincerity. He quickly became one of my dearest friends. He now has a distinct advantage over me. He has gone home to the Lord and knows whether he, or I was right, or whether we both needed more light and truth. His character shined beautifully through our conversations and kept our occasional differences of belief in clear perspective. He blessed me in so many ways that I couldn't name them. Our differences? Oh, did we have that many? Not at all.

On one occasion over a decade ago I had the opportunity to meet and spend regular time for a season with a well-known and highly respected leader in the Founder's Movement of the Southern Baptist fellowship. This group has worked diligently within the Southern Baptist fellowship to nudge their beliefs back toward the doctrines of grace that historically characterized the Baptist family. I do observe that they have not fully confronted, at least in my opinion, the distinction between truly historical Baptist beliefs and Baptist beliefs as altered by the influence and teachings of Andrew Fuller, the eighteenth century English Baptist preacher. During one of my first conversations with this man, I identified myself as a Primitive Baptist. Knowing Baptist history quite thoroughly, he promptly

acknowledged that he was aware of our people and of the Kehukee Declaration, one of two primary documents that defined the doctrines and practices that prompted Primitive Baptists around 1832 to state their opposition to the teachings and influence of Fuller's ideas. He followed up with a straightforward question, "Do Primitive Baptists still oppose 'duty-faith'?" "Duty-Faith" is a central point in Fuller's neo-Baptist teachings. I comfortably responded that we indeed do still oppose that teaching. We readily understood by this open and sincere exchange that we were not agreed on this point. However, our mutual openness paved the way for several months of delightful conversation and fellowship around many, many truths that we did hold in common. To this day I hold this man in personal high regard for his transparent and sincere dialogue.

My experience with both of these men taught me that sincere Christians who do not always agree, even on significant theological points, can disagree with grace. Disagreement with grace paves the way for continuing and respectful friendship around other points of agreement. A less-than-transparent demeanor erodes respect and destroys any future ability to enjoy the blessings of friendship and fellowship around those other points of mutual agreement.

Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul affirms a truth that is as timeless as the Bible itself. True Biblical unity grows out of true agreement on essential beliefs, like-mindedness based on common beliefs and a sincere communication of our mutual beliefs. He neither directs us toward contrived harmony when we do not agree, or coerced and "back-room" political compromise that pretends agreement when it in fact does not exist. We all have much to learn from Paul. Let's sit down at his feet and try to learn this truth more clearly.