

3.

THE ESSENCE OF UNITY

"Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently." I Pet 1:22

Unity is not primarily something outward. Merely gathering a large number of people together into one place does not constitute unity. The kind of unity that God desires goes much deeper than outward appearances. He desires unity that proceeds from the heart. Therefore in order to experience this unity, our hearts must be right—right before God and right with our brothers also. If we fail in these two areas there can be no true unity. As Christians we must learn to align our hearts with God's will so that we can experience this true unity.

The unity which God desires originates with Himself. It is something that we as human beings do not possess naturally. Oneness is a divine substance, a kind of heavenly glue which holds the church of God together. God our Father is using this oneness to build up the church and create a new man in Christ out of a vast array of individuals who previously had no unity.

The first element which our hearts need to have true unity with other believers is a deep love for God. Jesus said that the highest commandment is to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength (Mk 12:30)." Since God is the source of all true unity, it is impossible to have genuine oneness with other Christians without this kind of deep burning love for God.

Godly unity is not only a unity of desire or of common interests, such as a social club or philanthropic organization. Biblical unity is a unity of the Spirit which manifests itself in love—a deep spiritual love which comes from God. In order to have this kind of love one for another, each individual must cultivate a personal, intimate relationship with God. God is love. He is the source of genuine love, and it is from Him that we can receive the kind of love that we need for our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the love that will build up the church of God today (Eph 4:16). We have only to read I Corinthians, chapter 13, to realize the importance of love in God's economy. We may have all knowledge, all wisdom and understanding, spiritual gifts or mighty spiritual powers; yet if we don't have love, they mean nothing.

When our hearts are filled with the love of God one for another, unity actually happens quite automatically and spontaneously. If we are full of love, it is easy to express and experience unity. On the other hand, if we don't have love, no amount of energy which we can exert or outward measures we can take will achieve the results that God desires. To have unity means to have love one for another. Significantly, the commandment that Jesus listed as second in importance is that we should love our

neighbors as ourselves (Mt 22:39). If we as Christians could only fulfill Christ's two simple commandments, love and unity in the church of God would be abounding.

Without love it is very difficult for us to maintain unity. There are many problems and disturbances in the church today. There is much with which we as Christians have to bear. To be one with new believers, mistaken believers and untransformed believers requires that we have an abundance of love. In order to maintain unity with all the many Christians in the body, the love of God must be shed abroad in our hearts. If we deal with them only in judgment and condemnation, division will be the ultimate result. On the other hand, love covers a multitude of sins (I Pet 4:8).*

Sadly, love seems to be in short supply in the church of God today. There are many reasons for this shortage. Perhaps one of the most common reasons is that our love for God has grown cold. It seems so easy for our hearts to love other things. The world and the things of the world often appear inviting. Ambitions and goals that we are trying to achieve that are apart from the will of God are another great problem. Our love for these things creates a shortage in our love for God. This shortage quickly manifests itself as a lack of love for one another.

The scriptures state clearly that a man cannot serve two masters. For, it says, he will either hate the one and love the other; or he will cleave to the one and despise the other. He cannot serve God and mammon (Mt 6:24). When we love the world or any other thing too much, our love for God grows cold. If this is our situation, we have lost our first love. The solution for this is repentance. We need to repent to God for loving other things and turn away from them, put them away if necessary and renew our hearts with love toward God. In this way, we will again be filled with love one for another.

Another hindrance to the love of God flowing in our hearts is love of self. Naturally speaking, every man loves himself. The love of God, on the other hand, is contrary to this love of self. If we want to follow God and to have love flowing in us, the Bible teaches that we must deny ourselves. We must learn not to serve our own desires, our own ambitions or our own feel-

*NOTE: The New Testament scriptures are full of exhortation and teaching on the subject of love. Although it does not seem appropriate at this time to analyze each of them, I am including a partial listing of references for readers who wish to look more deeply into the matter: Jn 15:12,13 Rom 12:9,10 Rom 13:10 Gal 5:22 Eph 4:2,16 Eph 5:2 Phil 1:9 Phil 2:2 Col 2:2 Heb 13:1 I Pet 1:22 I John (entire epistle).

ings. In the place of these things we must learn to serve God. Let us serve Him first and allow Him to meet our needs. In this way we will be full of love for God and have a supply of love for our brethren also.

A third item which hinders our love for the brethren is sin. This sin manifests itself in many ways. At times we are jealous of one another or we envy one another. Some brethren have a tendency to strive about certain things—doctrines, teachings, beliefs, concepts or ideas. Actions such as these make it very difficult to have unity. Backbiting, gossip, bitterness, unforgiveness and hate are also great problems in the church today. All these things are contrary to God's love and bring forth division in the body of Christ. This kind of natural, fleshly activity is sin and it destroys unity. Such sin only frustrates God's plan for His church.

Once we are in Christ, unity should be easy. When we first meet the Lord, He

plants a love for the brethren within us. We have been given the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus; and He is accompanied by love and unity. In Ephesians we read that we should endeavor to maintain this "unity of the Spirit (Eph 4:3)." Since oneness has been brought into our lives by the Spirit, we can immediately begin to love the brethren. We can begin to live in unity as soon as we receive the Lord.

Naturally, as we grow and continue on in the Lord, difficulties may arise in our own hearts or in our circumstances. These are things which we need to overcome in order to retain what He has given us. To have this victory, we must seek the Lord and be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will supply us with love so that we can continue to enjoy unity with the entire body of Christ.

Let us learn today how to put away from ourselves everything which destroys and distorts unity. May we shun anything which keeps us from experiencing love and oneness with all other believers. We must agree with God that unity is His will and His purpose for His children. This agreement should cause us to put aside everything that hinders us and seek God diligently that we might have the genuine experience of unity; for without it, we cannot be experiencing the reality of the church.