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on
Eph. 4, 1 - 6

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Ephesians 4, 1-6: "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."

Dear Brethren in Christ, our Savior:

From time immemorial, as Dr. Walther pointed out in a sermon on this text about a hundred years ago, both in the Old Testament times, in the New Testament times, and since then up to the present day, the true believers and zealous confessors of the truth have always been accused of being enemies of peace and unity in the church. Thus it was with the prophet Elijah. When King Ahab of old departed from the true Word of God and worshipped idols, and when the prophet Elijah admonished him to return from his wicked ways to that truth, and there was, as a result, great confusion in Israel, that wicked king turned on God's prophet and accused him of being the trouble-maker, asking him with a sneer: "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?"

Thus it was also with our dear Savior, the Prince of Peace. He had only preached and defended the truth of His heavenly Father that leads to eternal salvation. He had done no sin, no wrong. Yet the unbelieving Jews turned on Him when He was being tried before His crucifixion and accused Him of the trouble in the church of that time, saying: "He stirreth up the people."

Thus it was also in the case of Paul, the heroic Apostle of the Lord Jesus. When he was brought before Felix the Governor because of his faithful testimony, (Acts chapter 24), they accused him likewise, saying, "We have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes."

If then we read through the pages of church history following the time of the apostles, we find that the faithfully confessing Christians were accused of being disturbers of peace and unity not only by the heathen but also by other Christians. Such a one was, for instance, a young man named Athanasius, who at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. defended the deity of Jesus Christ when this was attacked by others within the church. Due to his bold confession, we today have the Nicene Creed, in which we still confess Jesus to be true God with the Father and Holy Ghost, our almighty Savior. But at the time Athanasius, on account of his testimony, was banned for 20 years as an enemy of the church's unity and peace.

And then in our enumeration we must not forget Luther in the 16th. century and Dr. Walther a hundred years ago, both of whom suffered similar false accusations and abuse simply because they would not consent to mere

outward unions and compromises that disregarded the necessity of unity in faith and confession.

Now, beloved fellow Christians, if such accusations against orthodox Christians were true, both those already mentioned and we, too, still today would be in a sorry plight. For many passages of Scripture show that it is God's will for Christians to be united; such as the Savior's prayer in John 17, where He prays: "That they all may be one, as thou, Father, art one in me, and I in Thee." Surely, though, everyone who hears these words and thinks them through can see that Jesus is not praying for a mere outward union; for He says: "As thou, Father, art one in me, and I in thee." Their very thought and will are one and the same. No, the Savior is here praying for the true unity of His believers; and what that is His Apostle now clearly explains to us. Let us now therefore give our attention to this text, where we are urged to

KEEP THE TRUE CHRISTIAN UNITY!

I.

Let us first see what the true Christian unity really is. A prisoner at Rome because of his faithful testimony, the Apostle writes to the Ephesians; "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

These words, dear Brethren, are often quoted as a supposed proof that all Christians and their churches should join together into one great union, regardless of the differences that exist in their faith and confession. The pastors of the various churches, they say, should exchange pulpits with each other; and all the people, no matter what they believe, should work together in such things as union services; radio-broadcasting, mission work, and the like. And if some are unwilling to take part in such merely outward union, they are branded as enemies of Christian unity and are told: "Have you never read or heard the words of the Apostle: 'Endeavor to keep unity?'"

When we are challenged thus; and surely almost all of us have at some time been approached in this way; let us not jump to hasty conclusions, but let us rather carefully and honestly consider what the Apostle here teaches.

Let us ask ourselves first of all: Do these words of the Apostle tell us to establish any kind of union, or even unity? Do they tell us to go after and get something that isn't already there? Certainly not. They tell us only to keep the unity which we as Christians already have. And so to apply this text to the establishing of unions is as much a misapplication and misuse of Scripture as when the devil said to Eve: "Yea, hath God said?" He tried to make Eve think that God's words meant something different than what they plainly stated. No, friends, we are admonished here to keep, only to keep the unity that we already have as Christians.

And what is that unity? Is it only a kind of outward union, the mere joint worship and activity of those who believe all kinds of different and conflicting things? Again, let us carefully weigh the Apostle's words, for he writes: "Endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit." The true Christian unity is therefore not an outward arrangement, not something that we human beings could even produce if we wanted to, but the inner unity which is brought about alone by the Holy Spirit of God through His Word. It is the unity of heart and mind and soul; the kind of unity which really did exist in the first Christian congregation at Jerusalem, of which we read, Acts 4,

32: "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul."

Such true unity is therefore, in a word, unity of faith, as the Apostle further points out when he says: "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." The true unity of Christians is then nothing else than this, that they all believe in and confess one Lord, namely, the only true God revealed in Holy Scripture, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; that they are brought into fellowship with this Lord through one baptism as it was instituted by the Lord Jesus; that they are all children of one heavenly Father by faith in His dear Son, the only Savior of sinful mankind; and that they all rest and base their faith alone upon His Word of truth. (John 8, 31-32)

Oh verily, how wonderful is that true unity of Christians and the Christian Church! Would to God that all Christians had kept such unity perfect and unmarred, as the Apostle here urges all to do! Indeed, as long as people still believe in Christ as their Savior, they are in so far united in the faith. But then, when some begin to depart from the Savior's Word, where one believes this and another that, where one rests his faith entirely upon the inspired Word of God and the other does not; there is no longer the perfect, inner unity of heart and mind and soul described by the Apostle in our text; and when therefore an external union is brought about under such conditions, that can be nothing but a fake union, like a beautiful sepulcher that hides dead bones, an outward appearance that is different from the real thing within.

Against such mere outward union, in which there is no real unity of faith, the Lord seriously warns all Christians in no uncertain terms. He says, referring to the unbelievers: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers. -- (But) come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord." (2 Cor. 6) And He says again, referring not only to unbelievers but also to Christians who persistently go contrary to any doctrine of the Bible: "Now I beseech you, brethren, ... Mark them ... and avoid them." (Rom. 16, 17) To ignore and disregard these commandments of God is not only in itself sheer disobedience against Him, but also, like all other sins, it accomplishes no good purpose. Indeed, to unionize and fellowship with those who teach and adhere to false doctrine only tends to encourage them in thinking that it makes little or no difference what one believes and confesses. It certainly does not help Christians to endeavor to keep the unity of faith, which is the one and only thing to which the Apostle of the Lord here admonishes us.

II.

Yes, we Christians should endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit, the true Christian unity in faith. But how, or in what way, is that unity to be preserved?

Should the church, as some have suggested, be governed by a sort of pope or high official who would take the decision of important matters into his own hands, decide for us what is right or wrong, and then simply compel us to abide by his decision? No, dear Brethren; for such an arrangement, while producing a kind of outward union, actually destroys the true unity of the Spirit, the inner oneness in faith that is based alone upon the Word of God, and not the word of men.

Well, should we Christians then simply tolerate departures from the true faith? Should we merely ignore and keep still about false teachings that arise within the church, in order thereby to avoid any disagreement or dissension? Should we say in such a case: "I prefer to remain neutral; I don't want to take any side; let's rather all give in and keep peace"? No, indeed, dear friends; for then we would be nothing but moral cowards, afraid for our own sake to defend our Savior and the truth of His Word, which He in many passages of Scripture commands us to do. Yes, then we would be untrue to our baptismal and confirmation vow, in which we promised to renounce the devil and all his works and ways, and be faithful to the true God, even unto death! Then the words of Jesus would surely apply to us: "He that is not for Me is against Me!"

But how then can the true unity of the Spirit among Christians be kept and maintained? The Apostle answers: "Endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." And he explains this when he says first of all: "With all lowliness and meekness; -- one Lord, one faith." In other words, we Christians are first of all to be lowly and meek in relationship to our Lord. We are not to make ourselves lords, as when one says: I want this; and another says, I want that. But we are to recognize that Christ is our only Lord, and that His Word, being the truth, is our final authority. If then we all, in such lowliness and meekness, submit to Him and His Word, how can we have anything but peace? How could we possibly disturb the unity of the Spirit that is based upon His Word?

Yet that virtue of lowliness and meekness is to be practiced by the Christians also in relationship to each other; and therefore the Apostle yet adds: "With longsuffering forbearing one another in love." The Bible tells us that Christians never wilfully sin against God; yet it also tells us and we know from experience that we nevertheless have many sins of weakness, besides many personal peculiarities. I have them; and have you stopped to think that you, too, have them? In fact, both you and I have so many such weaknesses and peculiarities, that it would not at all pay us to start enumerating them. For you could no doubt find a hundred little, petty grievances against me; and I no doubt could find the same number against you. And in the doing of just such things, fussing and quarreling about petty things, many Christians have already lost and forfeited the real and only thing that counts, namely, the unity of spirit, the oneness of faith.

Oh, therefore, my Beloved, if you would, according to this admonition of the Apostle, earnestly endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; then learn more and more, first of all, in lowliness and meekness, to acknowledge Christ as your Lord and Master in matters of Christian doctrine and practice. Don't decide by what you like or dislike; don't run to others for their puny human reason; but run to Christ, the Lord, whose Word is truth! And in those other petty things, learn more and more from your dear Savior, who daily and graciously forgives you many grievous sins, to forgive and forbear one another in love.

Thus and thus only will you be able to keep that most precious jewel in the Christian's glorious crown, the unity of the Spirit, the perfect unity of faith; and in that unity of faith you will be able to sing with joyful and thankful hearts:

"Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above!"

Amen.