

EPHESIANS 4.1-3, 15-17: LOVE AND THE CHURCH - LOVE BINDS US TOGETHER! [Chelmsford 26 February 2012]

1. LOVE IS OF THE ESSENCE

Love and the church – that’s today’s theme in our ‘Looking for Love’ programme. Love in the church is no optional extra – love is absolutely vital. For it is love which binds us together and makes us truly church. Love is of the essence of being church. There is far more to church than singing hymns, offering prayers, and listening to sermons. In the first place a church is a fellowship where people are not just committed to Jesus, but also committed to one another.

Every time I welcome people into church membership, I quote Jesus’ 11th commandment: **“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”** (John 13).

Alas, loving one another is sometimes easier said than done. Last year there was a major disagreement in a Baptist Church in Alabama. According to the news report, *“A minister of music at New Welcome Baptist Church, Mobile County, Alabama tasered the pastor who had just fired him on Sunday, touching off a fight and various knife slashings. The mayhem erupted when the Rev. Darryl Riley told minister of music Simone Moore that he was no longer needed and gave him a final paycheck. Moore disagreed with the amount of the check and an argument broke out, in which Moore wielded a Taser gun. Several church members became involved, including the music minister’s mother, who suffered a stab wound at the hands of a deacon”*. Apparently the deacon had brought to church a knife with an 18” blade to church.

Wow! Thank God that has never happened here! It is exceptional behavior. I have seen Christians disagree with one another – but never quite in that way.

And yet, sadly, there are times when Christians fall out with one another. As one wag put it:

*To dwell above with saints we love, Oh that will be glory.
But to live below with the saints we know, well that's another story!*

We may smile, and yet it is no laughing matter when Christians do not get on with one another. A church where members criticise one another, gang up against one another, and fight one another is a travesty of a church.

Such a church makes a mockery of the Gospel.

- How can we expect people to believe in the love of God when a church fails to live out the love of God?
- If Christians can't love one another, then why should non-Christians take any

notice of the church?

The passage I have chosen to preach on this morning comes from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians which in the GNB are sub-titled: The Unity of the Body.

Let me read you again Eph 4.1-3 and then Eph 4.15-16:

"I urge you..... live a life that measures up to the standard God set when he called you. Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. Do your best to preserve the unity which the spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together.... By speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way to Christ who is the head. Under his control all the different parts of the body fit together and the whole body is held together by every joint with which it is provided. So when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love".

Unity is not an optional extra. Loving relationships are of the essence of the church. It is the "standard" to which God has called us.

Hence Paul writes: **"Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives"** (4.3). NRSV: **Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit"**.

Literally Paul says: *"Keep on doing your best.... Keep on making an effort"*.

Paul uses the present tense. It is an ongoing action.

Paul doesn't have in mind a one-off action. Rather, it is an ongoing action

However difficult relationships in the church can sometimes be, don't give up.

Don't treat church unity like you would a diet - something you work at for a while, but then quickly give up. No: make it your constant priority.

Markus Barth, the son of Karl Barth the great Swiss theologian, wrote: *"It is hardly possible to render exactly the urgency contained in the underlying Greek verb. Not only haste and passion, but a full effort of the whole man is meant involving his will, sentiment, reason, physical strength & total attitude. The imperative mood of the participle in the Greek text excludes passivity, quietism, a wait-&-see attitude, or a diligence tempered by all deliberate speed. Yours is the initiative. Do it now! Mean it! YOU are to do it! I mean it!"*

If relationships are not right, then make them right.

It's not enough to feel sad that relationships are not all that they might be.

No: we are to get off our backsides and ensure that relationships are put right and remain right.

Incidentally, I don't want any visitor to our church to think that we have relationship problems in our church. Let me assure you that relationships are good.

There is much love in our church.

But we can never take good relationships for granted.

When the Devil sees a happy church, then he targets it – he does his best to upset things.

We therefore need to be constantly on the qui vive: in the words of Paul 'Keep on doing your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives!'

But how can we ensure that this is so?

How can we effectively "**preserve the unity of the Spirit**"?

2. LOVE INVOLVES RIGHT ATTITUDES

Paul writes: "**Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another**" (4.2). Or as Peterson puts it in his paraphrase: "*And mark that you do this with humility and discipline - not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences*"

Paul lists four attitudes we need to adopt:-

1. Be always humble

In the world of ancient Greece humility was not counted as a virtue. The Greeks looked on humility as a cowering/cringing thing to be despised & not to be admired. It was not until Jesus came that humility was recognised as something good to be desired.

But humility here is not something good to have - it is an essential quality which Christians are to display.

As Paul said to the Romans: "**Do not think of yourself more highly than you should. Instead be modest in your thinking**" (Rom 12.3).

Alas, humility is not always easy to come by - especially when we are convinced of the rightness of our position.

Strange to say, humility can sometimes be a difficult virtue for Christians to exercise, because they bring God onto their side. Instead of being humble, they become hard and proud - they believe that they, and they alone, are carrying Christ's banner. But Paul says: "**be always humble**".

2. Be always gentle

Gentleness is not a synonym for weakness. William Barclay: "*It is the gentleness of the strong, whose strength is under control - the quality of a strong personality who is nevertheless master of himself and servant of others*".

How gentle are we in the way in which we relate to one another?

How much are we in control of ourselves and our emotions?

Sadly there are times when we get so wound up, that we fail to hear what is being said by others, and instead lash out at one another.

The gentle person is a gracious person

Another commentator (Andrew T. Lincoln) says of gentleness that "*It involves the courtesy, considerateness, and willingness to waive one's rights that come from seeking the common good without being concerned for personal reputation or gain*".

3. Be always patient

Patience literally means "long temper" (*makrothumia*) in contrast to "short-temper". Lincoln: It is the ability "to make allowance for others' shortcomings", however exasperating others might be.

It has been defined as "*being long-suffering towards aggravating people*" (Stott).

Picture for a moment a puppy playing with a large dog - the puppy yaps, worries, bites, growls, attacks, but the big dog bears with the puppy's impertinence with dignity - he could annihilate the puppy with one snap of his teeth, but he doesn't. He puts up with the puppy's stupidity.

Let's face it: there are people who can be downright annoying. They really rub us up the wrong way. "**Be always patient**", says Paul

4. Be always tolerant

"Bearing with others means fully accepting them in their uniqueness, including their weaknesses and faults, and allowing them worth and space" (Andrew T. Lincoln).

At first sight there seems to be very little difference between patience and tolerance. However, it is possible that another dimension may be present: for if Col 3.13 be any guide, then it may involve having a forgiving spirit. There Paul writes: "**Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another, just as the Lord has forgiven you**". Some Christians carry grudges for years - but this is not God's way.

3. LOVE INVOLVES RIGHT WORDS

Love involves right attitudes – it also involves right words: "**By speaking the truth in a spirit of love, we must grow up in every way to Christ who is the head**" (Eph 4.15). Our speech as well as our attitudes must be controlled by love

Paul in this passage is concerned for Christian maturity.

"**We must grow up**", he says. "*No prolonged infancies please*" (Peterson).

He wants people like us to get beyond the 'dummy' stage of Christian believing and Christian living - he wants us to grow up and to become mature in Christ.

But this will only happen as we help one another by speaking the truth to one another.

Unfortunately there is nothing automatic about Christian maturity.

The fact that a person has been a Christian for years does not necessarily mean that they are mature Christians. Indeed, in my experience there are many Christians who have failed to grow & develop in their faith - they have remained in the playpen.

And they have done so because they have never allowed others to speak the truth to them. They have never engaged in meaningful relationships with other Christians where there have been opportunities to apply the Christian faith to one another.

Think for a moment: how did you become the mature person you presumably are?

When you were born were you put in a corner with a copy of the Encyclopaedia Britannica and told to get on with it?

No, you were brought up in a small group, called the family, where as a result of the inter-action of family members you grew and developed as a person.

Within the context of the family you learned what was acceptable, and what was not acceptable; there were times when you were told off if, and times when you were affirmed; times when you were disciplined, and times when you were encouraged

The same is true in the Christian life.

The way to Christian maturity is not achieved by giving a Bible to a new convert and telling him or her to read it and get on with it, but rather by putting them in a small group where they can learn from others. **“When each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows & builds itself up....”** (4.16)

Christian maturity is only gained together - for it is only when we are together that we can speak the truth to one another.

Within the context of a small group we need to be free to say to one another, ‘You got it wrong’; ‘your behaviour was unacceptable’ ; you did not display humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance.

But notice: this must be done **“in love”**

We must truly have the welfare of the other in mind.

What’s more, any correction that is given must be in a context where we are also affirming one another.

Let me illustrate. As a ministry team covenant we have adopted a covenant which includes as values ‘positivity’ and ‘excellence’:

- Positivity. In our relationships with one another – and indeed with the rest of the church – we will always exude a positive spirit. We will shun negative talking and thinking. We will instead affirm one another and will speak well of one another.
- Excellence: We will never be satisfied with the second-best. In our desire for excellence we will foster a healthy dissatisfaction with the way things are and will always strive for better.

In other words, in our team meetings there is a place for criticism, but it must be positive criticism – and what’s more, it needs to take place within the contest of affirming one another and speaking well of one another.

Precisely because the truth can be unpalatable, some people prefer to avoid telling the truth to the other. But at the end of the day it can be thoroughly unloving not to tell the truth. If I’m making a mess of things, I would much rather a person told me, rather than allowed me to continue and make an even greater mess. But if I am to receive such criticism, then it needs to be told me within a context of love.

Listen again to the Apostle Paul: **“Speak the truth in a spirit of love...So when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love”**

4. LOVE IS THE SUPERGLUE

“**Show your love**” says Paul, “**by being tolerant with one another**”.

Let love too be the motivating energy for humility, gentleness & patience.

Another way of showing love is “**by speaking the truth in a spirit of love**”

Let love characterise the way in which we inter-act with one another

Then “**when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love**” (v16)

It is when we love one another in word and deed that we have any hope of preserving “**the unity which the Spirit gives**”.

Love is the key - love is the super-glue which binds Christians together.

The love of which Paul speaks = *agape* love

- the love which God displayed in Christ
- the love that never gives up -
- that always sees the best in people
- that loves irrespective of the object
- the love which always seeks to upbuild, and never to tear down
- the love which is never just a matter of words, but also expresses itself in actions.

May God help us to remain a church, where love binds us together