

Maintaining Unity

People of God, at the heart of Christian theology is the mystery of the Holy Trinity: God is One in essence and Three in persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To uphold the truth of who God is, we must hold both realities—oneness and threeness—in proper tension.

Lose that tension, and you lose the truth. Emphasize the One at the expense of the Three, and you veer into Unitarianism. Emphasize the Three at the expense of the One, and you fall into tritheism. Either way, you no longer have the God of Scripture.

The same principle applies to church life. Christians are called to preserve both unity in the essentials and liberty in non-essentials. That balance of unity and liberty will always carry tension—and we must not try to relieve the tension it by overcorrecting in one direction or the other.

Some churches overemphasize unity and end up enforcing conformity. They create manmade rules to maintain uniformity. That's not unity—it's legalism, and it is what cults do.

Other churches overemphasize diversity. They celebrate every opinion and expression but lose all doctrinal clarity. They trade the faith once delivered to the saints for the

idol of autonomy and freedom. What's left isn't Christian liberty—it's relativism and theological decline.

Both are ditches. Unity without diversity becomes tyranny. Diversity without unity becomes chaos.

But the Church, as the Body of Christ, is meant to reflect both unity and diversity of the Body in perfect harmony, which can only come about through Love. As Paul says in Colossians 3: *And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

So my point is that we must be careful to also hold together the Essentials and the Non-essentials together in love. We must keep the tension in place, without destroying the one for the sake of the other.

How is this done? It must be done through humility, patience, and of course love.

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love.

Thus Paul says in Ephesians 4:1-3 "*I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, ²with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, ³endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*"

Walk Worthy of Your Calling

In order to help us understand how it is that we can protect the unity of Church in love, I would like to highlight the keywords found in this passage, and another passage in 1 Thessalonians. My approach today will mostly consist of walking through a list of behaviors that we must learn to live by. For if we learn how to do this well, then we will excel at Paul's command to keep and protect the unity of the Spirit , for these are ways in which we show love for one another.

First, Paul exhorts us **to walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called.**

Another way of saying this is, to walk worthy of the *vocation* to which you have been called. What is your vocation? The vocation of our salvation is to be sons of God. The vocation is to be holy and blameless before Him, in love. Our calling as Christians is to live for the praise of God's glorious grace. Our vocation is to live in this world as those who are going to inherit the world to come. We are to live in anticipation of the glory of our resurrection body that is to come.

Thus Paul prays in Ephesians 1:18 – *that having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which*

he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.

You have been called to an inheritance of glory. Imagine therefore what Heaven will be like. Let your sanctified imagination guide you into what the grace of God will turn you all into. Remember Lewis' quote about if we were to see each other now how we will be then, we would be tempted to worship one another.

Imagine how glorious and holy and perfect and peaceful and content and patient and kind and loving you and everyone else will be in eternity. How your own aim in all things will be to glorify God. Your personality will not be extinguished or wiped away, but it will be perfected and glorified. Imagine, you will have no sin, and the way in which you will treat others will be in perfect alignment with how God treats you, in perfect love.

That is part of the glory of the vocation to which you are called to walk in NOW. Walk worthy of this calling to which you have been called.

Humility

So then, what does that look like to walk worthily of the calling to which we have been called?

First, Paul says, that we are to walk with all humility.

What is humility? Paul describes humility in a number of places. In Romans 12, He describes humility as not thinking of yourself more highly than you ought, but thinking with sober judgment, according to the faith God has given you as a distinct member of the body.

Each member has their own giftings according to the grace given them. So, whatever gift you have, you might be tempted to boast about it and think of yourself as better, or more superior to another. But how can you boast about a gift? It was given to you, therefore it did not originate in you. It is God who is working in you. So, don't boast of your giftings, and don't look down on others because they have different giftings.

You might be a person who plays music. But another might be a strong back to pick up tables and clean up after fellowship meals. You might be a teacher who excels in communicating. And another is there to offer a word of encouragement to sorrowful sister.

You are each a member of the same body, and you are different, and neither one of you is better than another, nor is one of you more or less necessary. God has assigned to each member his or her own gift. So do not boast in

your gift as though you were the source of it. Instead, walk in humility, not thinking more highly of yourself than you ought.

So, humility is having a sober judgment about yourself. But Paul also says in Phil. 2 that **humility is counting others as more significant than yourself**, such that your life is wrapped up in looking not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

He then proceeds to illustrate this truth with the incarnation of Christ, and how he did not consider his own glory as God as something to be boasted in and held onto at all costs, but rather he willingly took upon himself the form of a servant and died on the cross to save us all.

A quote that is often attributed to C.S. Lewis about humility often goes like this –

Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less. Humility is thinking more of others. Humble people are so focused on serving others, they don't think of themselves.

This is actually from Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Life*. Now don't let that make you think less of the quote, for it is truly a good one. C.S. Lewis did say something very similar in "Mere Christianity." He said:

“Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody.

Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him.

If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”

So humility is a sober judgment concerning oneself, that you are nothing more than a recipient of gifts and graces, and that you have no room to boast in anything except Jesus Christ.

Secondly, it considers others more significant than oneself, and so humility focuses on other people and is not wrapped up in your own thoughts about yourself.

A person who is humble does not think less of himself, nor considers himself to be good for nothing but worm food. That is to think of oneself too much. Humility is to learn how to not think of yourself at all, and instead to think about how to serve others.

So, to help guard the unity of the Church, stop worrying about what you think about yourself, nor what anyone but Christ thinks about you. Instead give yourself to serve others with the gifts God have given you. That is to be humble like Jesus.

Gentleness, or Meekness

Another way to walk worthy of the calling to which you were called, and to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is to be gentle or meek. This is primarily in the context of how a person responds to another who sins against him.

To be meek is to not be resentful, nor is it to seek vengeance for wrongs committed against oneself. To be meek means that you bear no grudge against another who sinned against you. A meek person is one who is not easily provoked by insults and personal injuries. A meek and gentle person does not easily take offense, but is prepared to endure anything against him or herself, rather than return sin for sin.¹

A person who has perfected meekness is one who would endure being sinned against 100 times rather than sin against another even once. And when he does respond to

¹ Calvin, 262.

being sinned against, he responds in prayer for the person who sinned against him, and offering forgiveness.

Gentleness and meekness therefore will affect the way you respond to one who sins against you, and will help you to guard the peace and unity of the Church.

Prov. 15:1 - *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

Patience

Meekness is related to Patience and have much in common. But one way to think about the difference is this – Meekness is the response you show towards others, while patience is the inner disposition you have within yourself, that allows for you to show Meekness.

Whenever God is spoken of as being patient it is usually in the context of how he responds, or does not respond to sinners. The Patience of God is him not destroying everyone right away because of their sins.

It is also referred to as Longsuffering. The patience of God allows people time to repent. God knows our frame, he knows that we are sinners and are nothing but dust and foolishness. So He is patient and kind toward us, as he walks with us slowly throughout the course of our lives. He

gives us more and more chances to get it right, while not holding our sins and shortcomings against us, because he has already placed all our sins on Jesus.

By being patient and longsuffering with others we acknowledge that none of us has arrived yet, and all of us are at different places in our walk with God. And that God has placed all our sins on Jesus, and so we can do the same. We can be patient with one another recognizing that God is patient with us, and that one another's perfection and glory has already been purchased by Christ, it is just be stored up in heaven for us. None of us are now what we will be then. But by the grace of God we will be. So be patient with one another.

Bearing with one another in love

Patience then naturally follows into **bearing with one another in love**. Because none of us are where we will be, that means we all fall short of the glory of God.

Bearing with one another in love means patiently enduring each other's weaknesses out of a spirit of genuine love—refusing to let those faults diminish our love for each other. We can bear with one another in love because God is not done with us, and we will one day be perfect as He is perfect.

Until that day, all of us misstep, misspeak, misjudge, and make mistakes. We all carry the weight of our past mistakes and often find it hard to overlook our own faults. So it should not surprise us when we struggle to bear with the faults of others. Yet just as we show mercy to ourselves, we are called to extend that same mercy to others—forgiving as we have been forgiven. Even the most mature believers must continually learn to bear with one another, choosing to draw out each other’s graces rather than dwell on one another’s flaws.

Bitterness and frustration between people in the church will disappear and be replaced by love and compassion when people stop complaining about others flaws, and instead start lifting up one another in our prayers.

Thus I urge you to walk in manner worthy of the vocation to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, being eager to keep and guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

1 Thessalonians 4

There is another passage of Scripture I want to look at which comes from 1 Thes. 4:9-12.

Paul is quite happy with the Thessalonians that they have been practicing brotherly love for one another, which is mandatory if we are going to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace with one another in the Church. But he wants to encourage them to keep up the good work.

So what does he tell them to do that will increase their love for one another, and which will also help them to walk properly toward outsiders? Listen to what he says here, because it probably seems counter-intuitive.

“But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should I write to you, for your yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more; that you aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside, and that you may lack nothing.”

Aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your hands.

Fanatics, busybodies, and loafers – nearly every church has them! Often, one and the same person is all three. So Paul urges the Thessalonians against those worthless

behaviors, and instead urges them to love one another by throwing off those sins.

Aspire to Lead a Quiet Life

Let's begin with this charge: *Aspire to lead a quiet life*. The word *aspire* literally means “to love honor.” It implies exerting oneself toward something noble—striving with serious effort. It can also be translated to *study*, to *strive*, or to *endeavor earnestly*. But what are we to aspire toward? What honor are we to seek?

We are to aspire for the honor that comes from a quiet life.

There's a paradox here. Paul is saying, “Be ambitious to live without ambition.” “Strive to cease striving.” The world sees glory in noise and attention. Social media influences, clicks, like, ratios, and interactions. The world tells us that we are supposed to busy ourselves with more and more noise. But scripture tells us to seek the honor that comes from being quiet.

Matthew Henry said –

The apostle exhorts to these duties: that they should study to be quiet, v. 11. It is the most desirable thing to have a calm and quiet temper, and to be of a peaceable and quiet behaviour. This

tends much to our own and others' happiness; and Christians should study how to be quiet. We should be ambitious and industrious how to be calm and quiet in our minds, in patience to possess our own souls, and to be quiet towards others; or of a meek and mild, a gentle and peaceable disposition, not given to strife, contention, or division. Satan is very busy to disquiet us; and we have that in our own hearts that disposes us to be disquiet; therefore let us study to be quiet.

In Reformed and Presbyterian circles, there is often a martial spirit. Every theological nuance becomes a battleground. The Great Commandment—to love God and neighbor—gets twisted into a call to war against every neighbor who doesn't match our doctrinal precision point-for-point. If they *really* loved the Lord, we reason, they would agree with *me* on every obscure point.

Frankly, I loathe that spirit. I detest it. It is harmful to Christian love. Paul warned Titus: *Avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless* (Titus 3:9).

Paul so cherished a lifestyle of peace and quiet that he instructs us to pray for those in authority so that *we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way*.

That is a life worth striving for – a life of peace and quiet.

But much of the Christian world—especially online—is addicted to controversy. Stirring it up, or reacting to it. It's as if many believers think zeal is measured by how many fights they're in. Paul would tell them to take all that misplaced zeal and channel it into love: love that is willing to develop a quiet soul. Love that refuses to add fuel to the fire.

Prov. 20:3 – *It is honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.*

Mind your own business

Related to striving to be quiet, is the command to **mind your own business**. Matthew Henry said - *It follows, (from the command to be quiet) Do your own business. When we go beyond this, we expose ourselves to a great deal of inquietude. Those who are busy-bodies, meddling in other men's matters, generally have but little quiet in their own minds and cause great disturbances among their neighbours;*

The world is full of turmoil, and that is because much of our own hearts and minds and souls are full of turmoil and chaos. We take in too much information about the world. And our minds are fixated and addicted to receiving a constant stream of dopamine. Instead of striving to be quiet, and minding our own business, it is much easier for

us to give a hot take about something we know nothing about, or, to make contributions to the kingdom by striving to show how someone is guilty of a thought crime. People make it their aim in life to be full time busybodies. The Apostle Peter thought this sin to be so bad that he includes it with other first rate sins. He says in 1 Peter 4:15 - *But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a **busybody** in other people's matters.*

If you want to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in the Church, then stop taking undue interest in the concerns of your neighbor, real, or virtual, and mind your own business. How destructive it is to busy yourself with the affairs of others, when it is your own life for which you will have to give an account to God.

Minding your own business does not contradict the previous command to esteem your neighbor as more honorable than yourself. Both are true in their proper place. When confronting your own selfishness, you must learn to put your neighbor's needs above your own. But when dealing with the sin of being a busybody and a meddler, the solution is simple: mind your own business.

Calvin - *that those who intrude themselves with forwardness into the affairs of others, make great disturbance, and give trouble to themselves and others. This, therefore, is the best means of a*

tranquil life, when everyone, intent upon the duties of his own calling, discharges those duties which are enjoined upon him by the Lord, and devotes himself to these things: while the husbandman employs himself in rural labors, the workman carries on his occupation, and in this way everyone keeps within his own limits. So soon as men turn aside from this, everything is thrown into confusion and disorder. He does not mean, however, that everyone shall mind his own business in such a way as that each one should live apart, having no care for others, but has merely in view to correct an idle levity, which makes men noisy bustlers in public, who ought to lead a quiet life in their own houses.

There is a spirit present in some people to have an undue obsession with what other people are thinking, saying, and doing, and think it is their calling in life to point out where other people are falling short and have sinned and committed thought crimes.

That type of person, ought to spend their time focusing on their own business, in their own home, with their family, and devoting themselves to the work of sanctification of themselves. It is no honor to busy oneself with the affairs of other, and to neglect your own. Mind your own business.

Work with your own hands

Finally, he commands them to love the brothers by working with their own hands. Paul is telling them that it you love your brother in Christ when you give yourself to your earthly job.

Prov. 22:29

Do you see a man skillful in his work?

*He will stand before kings;
he will not stand before obscure men.*

Working your job, focusing on providing for your own family, or focusing on preparing yourself to have a family, and also saving up extra to provide for those in need, this is a godly aspiration that Paul calls us to. We have been created by God to work, and so the person who dedicates himself to his work, doing it well, with skill, and with honesty and integrity, pursues a glory and honor that is unique to us as the image bearers of God. So get to work.

In conclusion, Christians who pursue a quiet life, tend to their own affairs, and faithfully labor to provide for their own households are often the very ones who help preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, because they don't have time to or energy to meddle in other people's affairs and stir up strife. These are usually the same people who tend to walk in humility, gentleness, and patience.

But those who are full of themselves—quick to argue, eager to fight, and constantly preoccupied with the sins of others – not to restore them, but to expose them—these are busybodies who have not figured out how to bear with one another in love, and who think more highly of themselves than they ought - they are the ones who tear down the Church and sow division.

I would like to spend more time on a much longer passage, but the time is past due. So let me just conclude by reading from the end of Ephesians 4. For if we really internalize these commands we will guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and preserve the unity of Christ's Church, for the glory of God and the good of one another.

²⁵Therefore, putting away lying, “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,” for we are members of one another. ²⁶“Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, ²⁷nor give place to the devil. ²⁸Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. ²⁹Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. ³²And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Amen.