

Unity - and Exhortation !

We are going to take another look at 'Encouragement and Unity', but let's consider three quotations first:–

1) A few months ago, Jeff Lucas introduced us to the understanding that 'everything is broken'. Not a reason to be depressed, but a realistic appraisal of the challenges we face. We cannot expect everything – anything – to be perfect!

2) Fifty years ago, I read a book entitled 'Let My Heart Be Broken – with the things that break the heart of God'. It told the story of Bob Pierce, founder of *World Vision* (and later *The Samaritan's Purse*), and the title was taken from words that he wrote in his Bible after witnessing the suffering of a group of Korean children. With its emphasis on meeting humanitarian needs in the name of Jesus, this book made me think through the priorities for my life. I was already prayerfully considering a major career change towards full-time evangelism; should I be concentrating on humanitarian aid instead? The question was valid, but it served to confirm my plans, not change them. The title of the book has been with me ever since.

3) One Saturday morning in Nazareth, nearly 2000 years ago, a young man stood up in the synagogue and read from **Isaiah 61:1**, and then said that it had been fulfilled that day. (See **Luke 4:16-21**) Among many glorious promises of restoration, **Isaiah 61** speaks of 'binding up the broken-hearted' as part of the mission of the LORD's anointed, the Messiah.

All these promises refer to 'you' and 'they' – the people of the LORD – people who may have started as isolated, poor, broken-hearted, captive, mourning, grieving and in despair but now have a very positive future **together**, a future which will be visible to everyone else and bring glory to the LORD. *"They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour" (Isaiah 61:3)* and *"Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed" (v.9)*. Reminds me of **Ephesians 3:9-11** : *" . . . to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

Sometimes we may forget that purpose, lose sight of the fact that our new life in Jesus is not simply a rescue operation, to get us **out** of our problems – though it certainly **is** that. In the same way, the Church is not simply a group of people who have been rescued, though again, it **is** that! But there is so much more! Have we been looking at it all the wrong way round, starting from (and focussing on) our own needs? . . .

As the Church, we have a destiny! Back in **Daniel 7**, there is a glorious passage where Daniel sees a vision of "one like a son of man", who was given "authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." (v.13-14) No prizes for guessing who that refers to! But then later, in v.27, it says "Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him."

That's us! In case we were in any doubt, the Lord Jesus confirms it in **Luke 12:32** : “*Do not be afraid, little flock, for the Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.*” When he spoke about the Kingdom of God – as he often did – every Jew who heard him knew what he was talking about: the rule of God and his Anointed One (= Messiah, Christ) **on this earth**, as this passage in Daniel makes clear, along with plenty of others. So, although everything may be broken right now, that is by no means the end of the matter. Our Father has a plan for the **restoration of everything**, and we are an essential part of it. (**Acts 3:21**) The Church is not the Kingdom, but it is a foretaste of it, an outpost of it in a broken world.

Paul, probably more than anyone else, was given a clear understanding of the Church in God's purposes, and he saw the fact that the proper functioning of the Church is essential for those purposes to be worked out.

His letters to the believers in Corinth are rich with truth that continues to build us up as we read, re-read and study them with the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Much of what he wrote was to correct things that were not going quite right. He dared to face them up with uncomfortable truth when necessary (compare **Galatians 4:16** !) because “*Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?*” (**2 Corinthians 11:28-29**)

When he saw that the church in Corinth was not functioning as it should, he could not remain silent. He was the one who had brought many of these believers to the Lord; he was the one who had put the initial foundation into their lives, individually and corporately.

Faced with the disunity of the believers in Corinth, he knew that he needed to tackle the problem head-on. This was a situation where the time for ‘calling alongside’ and ‘encouragement’ was past. It was time to talk face to face, to correct and confront where necessary.

Certainly his words to them in **1 Corinthians 1:10-13** and **1 Corinthians 3** are very direct and to the point but to understand them properly we need to realise that Paul was coming from the direction of the 3 quotes we have just looked at:– Yes, the situation there was ‘broken’ – everything is! But Paul was not fuming at them in anger; his heart was broken over what he could see in Corinth, because he shared the broken-heartedness of his Lord over fragmented fellowship. He also knew that the **restoration of unity** was essential to the Lord's purpose and plan. And so he wrote . . .

This was not a time for encouragement but for loving confrontation. In terms of the Greek words used, this was time for *nouthesis* – putting them on notice – not *paraklesis* – calling them alongside. Perhaps an easy way to understand the difference between these two words is to see that *paraklesis* is standing alongside someone to help them, while *nouthesis* is facing up to them, also to help, but to face up to hard truth.

Nouthesis is not easy to receive. Literally, the word means ‘placing in mind’. In other words, telling it as it is, facing each other up with the facts, being real with each other. Wherever it turns up in the New Testament, there seems to be the implication of the need for correction, and none of us likes that very much! But from time to time we need it! It is one of the functions of spiritual leadership in the church. See **1 Thessalonians 5:12**. Effective ‘*nouthesis*’ springs out of intense love and care.

Not only for those in leadership, though! See **Romans 15:14**. 'Instruct' is actually 'exhort' – *noutheteo* again! Something we can all be 'competent' to do, he says.

Not easy to give, though! Not properly, anyway. **Ephesians 4:15** talks about 'speaking the truth in love'. Why did he insert those two words? Because it is all too easy to convince ourselves that we are dealing in truth when we confront harshly. 'In love' reminds us of the need to be genuinely broken-hearted when facing each other up with uncomfortable truth. The goal is growth – together!

Paul's own heartbreak at needing to confront the Corinthians is shown in his second letter to them, in **2 Corinthians 2:4**: "*For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.*" This sort of love needs to be right at the heart of confrontation.

The goal is restoration and we may need to remind ourselves that it is wholly achievable. There is never a totally lost cause! (See **2 Thessalonians 3:14-15**)

When we look at the present-day situation of 'Christian unity', though, we might think that we have found the exception. Christians seem to be good at talking about it, but not working it out in practice. Someone said to me years ago, "But David, it will never happen!" My response was, and is, that it simply has to happen to meet God's purpose. As Watchman Nee said in early 1940, "He cannot fulfil His purpose without a corporate witness" (*Changed into His Likeness, chapter 15*)

Let's get one thing clear first. Moves towards organisational unity (if they even work at all) will not bring the needed result. They **may** help to break down some barriers, but will not solve the basic problem. If that had been the answer in Corinth, Paul might have been writing to them with suggestions about how the 'Paul-ites', the 'Apollos-ites' and the 'Cephas-ites' could have somehow made compromises and got together, and maybe even included those 'I am of Christ-ites' who were just as partisan but hid behind the disguise of claiming to be the **real** genuine believers! (Does that sound familiar?)

The problem seems to have been loyalty. Loyalty to one person or group rather than another. We don't know whether there were doctrinal differences between them, but there were certainly conflicts of loyalty. So much so that these new believers claimed that they 'belonged' to Paul, Apollos or Cephas and so separated from each other. Even the claim that 'I belong to Christ', which sounded so correct, was used as a way of separating from the others: "You others are all following just men; we over here are doing it right – we are following Christ."

There were problems in the Corinthian church: sexual immorality, legal cases against each other, confusion about idol worship. But Paul homes straight in on the main factor that is hindering their growth – disunity. (Would we have agreed with this priority?)

After his initial greeting in **1 Corinthians 1:1-9**, it is the first thing he mentions. It leads him on to write about how the message came to them and his own part in that process. How the Holy Spirit works through him as he brings the message, both to those hearing the gospel for the first time and also for the mature, the developing 'spiritual man'. (**1:10-2:16**) But, he reminds them, when he was there with them before he could only give them 'milk', suitable for 'infants' (children too young to talk). This was not surprising as they were only just starting out. No shame there.

But **now** it was different. They should have grown up a bit but they are still not ready

for the 'solid food' which he so deeply longs to give them. Why not? Because, Paul says, there is jealousy and quarrelling between them and that proves that they are still acting like 'mere humans'. He expected something better than that, because "*I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge – God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you.*" (**1:4-6**)

That was how it had started in Corinth, but now their disunity was putting them back into the 'mere human' category instead of acting as heirs of the kingdom, spiritual men and women. Disunity was preventing growth then, and it still does today.

Paul knew that the Church is central to God's plan for this world. In many ways, we could say that it **IS** his plan for this world! His ultimate purpose (as far as we can know it) is to sum up everything in the Lord Jesus Christ (***Ephesians 1:10***) – "to place everything in heaven and on earth under the Messiah's headship", as the *Complete Jewish Bible* translates it. Just read ***Romans 8:15-23*** for a glimpse of what it means and will mean for us to be children of God and heirs together with the Lord Jesus – Wow!

In several places, the New Testament describes the Church as 'the Bride of Christ' and looks forward to 'the marriage supper of the Lamb' (Jesus). In a very telling passage in ***Revelation 19:7***, it says that the Bride has made herself ready, and again in **21:2**. Try reading on to the end of **chapter 21**. An amazing picture is painted of the 'new Jerusalem' "*having the glory of God*" (**v.11**). We have probably read or heard this passage before and may think it describes 'heaven'. Look more carefully. It describes **the Church!** Are we beginning to see the priority that the Church has in God's plan and purpose? The vital **necessity** that each member functions properly – and in right relationship with the other members – so that the Church is built up and the Bride makes herself ready? (See ***Ephesians 4:11-16***)

Now, in the context of our great destiny, do we begin to share the pain and broken-heartedness of our Lord as he sees fragmentation, disharmony and the resulting ineffectiveness in his Body? The Bride apparently not interested in making herself ready?

The Corinthians, Paul said, had got things the wrong way round. They were thinking in terms of 'belonging' to a man or a group. 'No', he says, 'it's the other way round. These men belong to you, you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.' (**1 *Corinthians 3:21-23***)

Can we see how our own petty loyalties make it more difficult for the Lord to achieve his purpose? Perhaps even impossible? "No", we say, "nothing is impossible with God!", but then we frustrate his purpose by refusing to line ourselves up with his priorities!

In ***Ephesians 3:20***, Paul writes "*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*" How often do we stop after "ask or imagine", and conveniently forget that our Father's ability to do 'immeasurably more' is according to how much his power is at work within us – ?

Do we dare to pray "**Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God.**" – ?

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