

## Unity in the Church

Genesis 13:1–13, Acts 15:36–41

John Lennon wants us to “imagine there’s no heaven ... no hell ... no religion.” According to Lennon, religion is the problem. If there were no religion, the peoples of the world would live in peace. But Christians can do a little imagining too. If sin and death had not come into the world, there would indeed be universal peace. Individuals would still each have their own unique point of view, but everybody would work together and use their God-given abilities to build a flourishing society. That dream will be realized in the new heaven and earth, “wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Pet. 3:13). In a fallen world there are differences of opinion, even among committed Christians. Some differences are necessary: “What communion hath light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14). But over minor matters it is better to seek common ground for the glory of God.

Sin leads to separation. Our Old and New Testament texts this morning tell of two great separations: Abram and Lot separate from one another (Gen. 13), and Paul and Barnabas separate from one another (Acts 15).

In our Genesis account, Abram and Lot are relatives. The Lord had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation.” From Abram would ultimately come the Christ, through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. When Abram heard God’s call, he obeyed. He took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions and servants, and moved to Canaan. Along the way, both he and his nephew acquired many more possessions and servants. “The land was not able to support them, that they might dwell together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock.”

*Strife* is angry or bitter conflict. Abram was a peacemaker and wanted to avoid conflict. So rather than go to war with his nephew, he made him an offer. Clearly, the two of them must separate. If Lot would go to the left, then Abram would go to the right; or, if Lot would go to the right, then Abram would go to the left. Lot chose the fertile land. Abram settled for second best, and God blessed him anyway. Clearly, the reason he succeeded was because of the blessing of God, not from natural advantages.

There is another separation in our New Testament text. The pioneer missionaries Paul and Barnabas planned a second mission trip where they would return to the cities in Asia Minor where they had established churches and see how they were doing. The two were agreed in the basic plan, but Barnabas wanted to take along his cousin Mark (who would later write the second gospel) as part of the team. Paul strongly opposed this idea, as Mark had left the team in Pamphylia on

their first missionary journey. Why did Mark bail? Gill suggests it might have been fatigue from the journey, or fear of danger, or weariness in his work, or out of affection to his mother. Whatever the reason, Paul was firm in his conclusion that it would be unwise to take Mark with them. The contention became so sharp that they separated from each other.

It is ideal for God's people to live together in peace. Psalm 133 says, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." God's people need to be reminded of this. I remember years ago when I attended general assemblies in the PCA, there was a tradition of closing each assembly with the singing of Psalm 133. We ourselves will sing it this morning.

But in the present case both Barnabas and Paul had strong convictions. Barnabas wanted his cousin John Mark to be part of the missionary team, and Paul was resolutely opposed. So they separated. "Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God."

There is a bit of irony in the subsequent history. Though there was separation for a time, John Mark eventually would prove his worth to the apostle Paul. In his little letter to Philemon Paul would write of "Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers." I'm sure those words were of great encouragement to Mark in later years, to know that he was regarded by the great apostle as his fellow laborer! Mark had faltered, but later he reclaimed himself. We, too—all of us—have failed in one way or another. As we saw again in our reading from the law this morning, God's law is perfect, and binds everyone to full conformity in the whole person unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience forever; so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin.<sup>1</sup> "The law of the Lord is perfect"<sup>2</sup> and demands absolute perfection. Not one of us has perfectly measured up. The weight of our sins is overwhelming. We have failed to live up to God's standard of absolute perfection. We cannot merit heaven on our own. But the Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect Savior. He alone has fully lived up to God's standard of absolute perfection. Though we do not measure up, *he* measures up. All who look to him in faith are saved. Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. That is the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Larger Catechism 99

<sup>2</sup> Ps. 19:7

But here's the irony. Though there had been a bitter falling out between Barnabas and Paul over John Mark, it would be Mark alone among the Evangelists who would record the words of our Lord "Be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:50 ESV). The apostle Paul himself would tell the Christians at Thessalonica, "Be at peace among yourselves" (1 Thess. 5:13). Only Mark and Paul, among all the writers of the New Testament, would use the word *peace* as a verb. The original missionary party would separate, but both sides would learn from it. Here is God's will for his church: "Be at peace among yourselves." Amen! It is incumbent upon all of us to "[endeavor] to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

Let's draw some lessons from these two accounts (Genesis and Acts). First, each of us should

### **1. Cultivate a good reputation**

Barnabas and Paul agreed that going on a second missions trip to visit the churches in Asia Minor was a good idea, but they disagreed over whether to take John Mark with them. Luke tells us that "Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work." The problem was that John Mark had not proved himself. When things got tough, he bailed out. He left the missionary team when they needed him most.

Have we ever done that? We start on a job, we take on an assignment, a responsibility, but things do not go as we had hoped. We run into difficulties. And rather than focus on God's promises, we fixate on the problems. God's word declares, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." God promises, "Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest." He says, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen." It teaches us, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." It teaches us to say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

In this life we will surely have tribulation—trouble. But we need to remember that God has a special use for trouble, and that is to make us lean on him. And when we lean on him we learn from experience that he is faithful and true, that he keeps his promises, that "whatever evil he sends upon me in this vale of tears, he will turn to my good; for he is able to do it, being almighty God, and willing also,

being a faithful Father.”<sup>3</sup> We see for ourselves that “tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, *hope*.”

How do we cultivate a good reputation? By keeping our promises, by being faithful to our calling, by doing our work heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men, knowing that from the Lord we shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for we serve the Lord Christ (Col. 3:23–24). That word “heartily” in the original is “from the soul.” It means that we should have a positive attitude as we do our work. God is not pleased with grudging, outward obedience—pasting a smile on our face but inwardly hating our work. Work since the fall has turned into drudgery. God told Adam, “cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee . . . in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.” The Christian can accept this, knowing that our Savior’s work on the cross will ultimately undo the curse, that one day there will be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. One day, he who sits on the throne shall say, “Behold, I make all things new.” The Christian goes to work, not to please his *employer*, but to please his *Savior*. We want God, who judges our hearts, to be pleased with our performance.

Yes, dear saint of God, whether you are just starting out, or whether you have walked with the Lord for many years, you need to fix your eyes on Jesus and ask him for grace to be faithful unto death. You need to tell him that you long to hear his words, “Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,” that you want to win his approval more than anything else. Cultivating a good reputation takes time, it takes grit, it takes determination. But even if we, like John Mark, fail at one point, a good reputation can be reclaimed. John Mark left the apostolic mission, but by and by he regained his reputation and was regarded by Paul as a fellow-laborer. With the Spirit’s help he authored the gospel of Mark. You may have failed, you may think there is no hope, but God is a God of the impossible. “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” “The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand.” I have been in the pastorate many years, and I have had the privilege of seeing lives transformed by the gospel of Christ. O dear one, do not give up! There is hope in Christ. Second,

## **2. Avoid strife**

In our Old Testament text we read that “There was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. . . . So Abram said to

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<sup>3</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s day 9

Lot, ‘Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren.’” Earlier I observed that strife is *angry or bitter conflict*. It is identified as one of the works of the flesh. Paul writes, “Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, *strife*, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revelings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” Notice the word “strife” in there with all the other ugly sins. Strife arises out of pride, when we begin to think that our opinion is the only way, when we don’t value other believers whom God has providentially brought across our path. What God requires is a humble spirit. “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.” Rest assured, God will vindicate his truth in due time. We can be valiant for truth, but do it with a good attitude.

The other day a dear benighted soul from the Jehovah’s Witnesses called as I was sitting in my car while Norma was having surgery. I was working under a deadline on my laptop. As the phone rang, I grumbled, not happy that my concentration was broken. It was a Lansing number, and I thought it might be the surgical center calling about Norma’s surgery, so I picked up the phone. The lady on the other end asked how my day was going, so I got right to the point: I am a Christian minister and I reject the false teaching that the Lord Jesus Christ was merely a created being. I quoted John 1:3, “All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.” She asked who that was talking about, and I said, “The word (v. 1)—the word that was made flesh and dwelt among us” (v. 14). She said no, it referred to Jehovah. Later I kicked myself that I didn’t think to say, “Your own translation says, ‘The word was *a god*.’ Did you really mean to say that Jehovah is only ‘*a god*’? That too is blasphemy.” But I am happy to report that I got the two of us to agree not to interrupt each other but listen to one another. I told her that if she believes in a purely-created Jesus, not the divine Son of God, she is on her way to hell. I pray that my witness planted a seed of truth in her heart.

Brothers and sisters, let us avoid strife! Let us follow the way of peace. Let us be at peace amongst ourselves. Let us, each one, be peacemakers. “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” Lastly,

### **3. Remember we are brethren**

It is interesting that both our Old and New Testament texts use the word “brethren.” “Abram said to Lot, ‘Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are *brethren*.’” Again, our New Testament text says that “Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the *brethren* to the grace of God.”

It was very generous on the part of Abram to say to Lot, “We are *brethren*.” After all, Lot was his nephew. Genesis 12:5 identifies him as “Lot his brother’s son.” Lot was the son of Abram’s brother—that is, Abram’s cousin. Abram was likely older. He helped Lot get established in the cattle business. Lot should have been grateful to Abram; he should have let Abram, as his mentor and master, have the well-watered land. But Abram, showing his true faith in God, condescended to Lot, saying, “We are *brethren*.”

Abram and Lot were brethren in the family sense. But in the church of Jesus Christ we are family, we are God’s household. Brothers and sisters, “we are brethren,” and we need to treat one another with respect.

I have a couple little dachshunds, and they are sisters. Occasionally they growl at each other if one of them gets too close to the other’s food, but usually they are on good terms with each other. They will sit together, and even move their heads this way and that in unison. They will sleep together, and groom each other. They have come to value one another. Siblings need to value each other as brothers and sisters in the same family. Spiritual siblings need to value each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. We belong to each other. God himself is our spiritual father. We ought to have brotherly love for one another. We ought to serve one another as brethren. Our example is Christ, of whom we sang earlier: “Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness, no harshness hast thou and no bitterness: make us to taste the sweet grace found in thee, and ever stay in thy sweet *unity*” (*Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 282, “I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art”).

It is the duty of every Christian to seek the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. As we do that, each of us should cultivate a good reputation, avoid strife, and remember that we are brethren. “How excellent a thing it is, how pleasant and how good, when brothers dwell in unity and live as brothers should! For it is like the precious oil poured out on Aaron’s head, that, running over, down his beard, upon his collar spread. Like Hermon’s dew, upon the hill of Zion it descends. The Lord commands his blessing there—the life that never ends.”<sup>4</sup>

There will be a consequential separation at the final judgment, when Christ will separate the sheep from the goats. Until then, let us, the members of Christ’s body on earth, live in unity.

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<sup>4</sup> *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 133A