

Reformation Now 2017 – S3: The Bond of the Spirit

[1] Introduction – Christian Unity as Union with Christ

Friday Evening:

- The Reformation was the move of the Spirit of God to preserve the people of God.
 - We are God's precious possession; he will not leave us or forsake us.

This Morning:

- Because we're his precious possession, he gives us the Sword of the Spirit.

What about this Afternoon? What's our focus?

Turn with me to Eph 4:1-16.

*"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the 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 all.***

*But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said: 'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people'. (When it says, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, **so that he might fill all things.**)*

*The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, **we must grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love"***

[Eph 4:1-16]

Here's our focus this afternoon:

- *"Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. For there is one body and one Spirit" [Eph 4:3]*
 - Because we're his precious possession, he bonds us by the Spirit, not just to one another but also to himself.

Now... I've heard Eph 4 used a million times before.

- Sometimes it's been used to talk about the gifts.
- Frequently it's been used to talk about the five-fold ministry.
 - **But often it's used to emphasise the importance of Church unity.**

A core concern of Scripture!

- We see it here in Eph 4 – but also:
 - *"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions amongst you" [1 Cor 1:10]*
 - *"All of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, and love for one another" [1 Pet 3:8]*
 - **From Jesus himself:** *"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" [John 17:20-21]*

It would be strange NOT to observe that we're discussing Church unity at a conference designed to celebrate the Reformation!

- Many would question if we should celebrate at all:
 - "The Reformation destroyed the idea of a single, unified Church. ... [It] shattered any semblance of unity. And it didn't just split Western Christendom into 'Catholic' and 'Protestant', but into 'Catholic' and 'Protestants' – the latter encompassing many different flavours of evangelical and reformed belief. The Reformation began an endless, fractal splintering of the Church. ... Breaking away and storming off in a self-righteous huff remains one of the most characteristic activities of the Protestant Church" – **Nick Page**

- “I do not like Reformation Sunday, period. I do not understand why it is part of the Church year. Reformation Sunday does not name a happy event for the Church catholic; on the contrary, it names failure. ... If the Reformation is to be narrated rightly, it is to be narrated as [one] of the dark days [in the Church year]” – **Hauerwas**
- This was something the Reformers themselves struggled with:
 - “They treat us as persons guilty of schism and heresy because we preach a doctrine unlike theirs, do not obey their laws and hold our separate assemblies for prayers, baptism and the celebration of the Supper, and other holy activities. This is indeed a very grave accusation” – **Calvin** [Inst. IV.II.5]
 - “Our adversaries accuse us, like as were the apostles, as rebels and disturbers of the peace of the Church. Whatsoever evil happens, that, say they, have we done or caused. In popedom, say they, it was not so evil as it is since this doctrine came in; now we have all manner of mischiefs... Of this they lay all the fault to our preaching, and, if they could, would charge us with being the cause of the devil’s falling from heaven” – **Luther** [TT 242]

“Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. For there is one body and one Spirit” [Eph 4:3]

- **This is an important subject.**
 - It’s right that we wrestle with this.
 - It’s good that we’re concerned with this.
- But it all begs the question: **how should we understand Church unity? After all –**
 - The Church isn’t like a political party.
 - Unity based on power.
 - The Church isn’t like a country.
 - Unity based on history.
 - The Church isn’t like a fan club.
 - Unity based on entertainment.
 - The Church isn’t a therapy group.
 - Unity based on sentiment.

Maybe there was something we missed...?

- **READ:** John 17:20-23
 - “... we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, **into Christ**, from whom the whole body [is] joined and knit together...” [Eph 4:15-16]

The bond of the Spirit between believers is not based on political pressure, it's not dependent on history, it's not defined by entertainment, neither is it grounded in mere affection – NO – the bond of the Spirit between believers is impossible to understand apart from our spiritual union with Christ!

[2] Union with Christ – The Eternal Theme

This doctrine is like sweet honey on the lips.

- **Justification is the ‘soul’ of the Reformation. (As we learned last night.)**
 - It gives it its life and being. *Sola Fide!*
 - It's the cause of its worship. *Sola Gratia!*
- **Scripture is like the ‘mind’ of the Reformation. (THIS MORNING?)**
 - It gives it its wisdom and authority.
 - *Sola Scriptura!*
- **This afternoon we handle the beating heart of the Reformation – *Unio cum Christo*, the doctrine of our union with Christ!**
 - If this heart fails to beat, nothing can survive.
 - Doctrines become necrotic and deathly and black.
 - But with it beating, the lifeblood flows!
 - To every artery and capillary of Christian theology.
 - To every limb and digit of holy doctrine.
 - To every cell and atom of sanctification.

“As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason he is called ‘Our Head’ [Eph 4:15], and ‘the firstborn among many brethren’ [Rom 8:29]. We also, in turn, are said to be ‘engrafted into him’ [Rom 11:17], and to ‘put on Christ’ [Gal 3:27]; for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing until we grow into one body with him. ... [We must] climb higher and examine the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits. ... [For] the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself” – Calvin [Inst. III. 1.1]

**This isn't accidental.
This isn't coincidental.
This isn't incidental.**

This is THE major theme of ALL Scripture.

[2A] From all eternity, God has delighted in Christ.

- God's mission statement:
 - *"See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high" [Isa 52:12]*
 - What did God say at Jesus' own baptism?
 - *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" [Matt 3:17]*
- **God's eternal delight is in Christ.**

[2B] God knew us and predestined us in Christ.

- Paul makes this abundantly clear:
 - *"[He] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him in love" [Eph 1:4]*
- **We were known and loved and chosen by God in Christ.**

[2C] God created the world and all that exists in Christ.

- All of creation, without exception:
 - *"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in Him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through Him and for Him. He Himself is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" [Col 1:15-17]*
- **Creation was not only created but also lives and moves and has its being in Christ.**

[2D] On the cross, our sin was atoned for in Christ.

- The happy exchange and the beauty of Penal Substitution:
 - *For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God [2 Cor 5:21]*
- **His death was able to reconcile us to God because on the cross we were found in Christ.**

[2E] Our hope of Resurrection resides in the death of death itself in Christ.

- Paul talks about us being “raised with” Christ (e.g. Eph 2:6 & Col 2:12) –
 - Just as we were found in Him on the Friday, dying to sin, so were we found in Him on the Sunday, rising to new life!
- It is therefore our hope, that we will rise in Him!
 - *For the Lord Himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first! (1 Thess 4:16)*
- **The last enemy was defeated and will be destroyed in Christ.**

[2F] When God takes us home, we will be glorified in Christ.

- We will be glorified in Christ – we will be found in Him and we will be like Him.
 - *God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col 1:27)*
- **We will praise the glory of God forever having been restored to His likeness in Christ.**

[2G] Finally, He is going to make all things new in Christ.

- The great mystery and plan of God:
 - *With all wisdom and insight He has made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure that He set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Him, things in heaven and on earth (Eph 1:8-10)*

**God delights IN Christ.
We were predestined IN Christ.
All things were created IN Christ.
Our sin was destroyed IN Christ.
We will be raised IN Christ.
We will be glorified IN Christ.
All things will be gathered up IN Christ.**

Brothers and sisters, this is your hope and mine.

- **Because the Son is given all things**, and we are found in Him, WE are given all things!
- **Because the Son is made much of**, and we are found in Him, WE are made much of!
- **Because the Son is God's beloved**, and we are found in Him, WE are counted as God's beloved!
- **Because the Son is righteous**, and we are found in Him, WE are counted as righteous!
- **Because the Son is holy**, and we are found in Him, WE are counted as holy!
- **Because the Son is glorified**, and we are found in Him, WE will be glorified!
- **Because the Son enjoys eternal relationship with God**, and we are found in Him, WE will now enjoy eternal relationship with God!

We know this by Scripture alone!
We live this by faith and grace alone!
All of this possible by Christ alone!
All of this will happen to the glory of God alone!

*"What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not **with him** also give us **everything else**? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us! Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered'. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors **through him** who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, no powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God **in Christ Jesus our Lord!**" [Rom 8:31-39] **GOD IS GOD, AND GOD WINS!***

[3] The Bond of the Spirit – Rightly Defined

Only now, with all that established, are we able to do full justice to Christian unity!

READ: Eph 4:15-16.

“But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love”

We really need to see this:

- The body grows up INTO Christ the Head →
- ← FROM whom the body is joined and knitted together.
 - Unity is defined by the Head, not the Body.

This single-handedly explains so much confusion in the Church today.

- **When the FEET determine what unity means –**
 - *The Church prioritises regularity and order as the bond that keeps it all together.*
 - Institutional Christianity.
 - Deathly but pristine, like a whitewashed tomb!
- **When the HANDS determine what unity means –**
 - *The Church prioritises service and charity as the bond that keeps it all together.*
 - Social justice Christianity.
- **When the EYES determine what unity means –**
 - *The Church prioritises what’s seen to work as the bond that keeps it all together.*
 - Utilitarian Christianity.
 - Entertainment. Capitulation. Humanism.
- **When the HEART determines what unity means –**
 - *The Church prioritises sentiment and affection as the bond that keeps it all together.*
 - Opera Winfrey Christianity.
 - Perhaps the most insipid of all – because it has some of the truth, that we must love one another. But that love lacks a root.

But what do the Scriptures say?

Unity flows from the Head!

Christ alone can define the bond – for he IS the bond!

- You cannot establish amongst believers by the flesh that which can only be found in Christ by the Spirit!

Why is this important?

FIRST: because this is how the Reformers justified their Reform.

SECOND: because Jesus promised of Christian unity, that this is how *“the world may believe that you have sent me”* [John 17:21b]

So how is it defined?

*“But **speaking the truth in love**, we must grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ”* [Eph 4:15]

Word + Spirit.

Speaking the truth...

- “Thousands of well-meaning persons nowadays are continually crying out for more ‘unity’ amongst Christians. To attain this they are ready to sacrifice almost anything, and to overthrow sound doctrine, if they can secure peace. Such people would do well to remember that even gold may be bought too dear and that peace is useless if purchased at the expense of truth” [Ryle on Luke 12:49-53]

... In love.

- E.g. *“I appeal to you... by the love of the Spirit”* [Rom 15:30]

We bond to one another by Word + Spirit.

For we are bonded to Christ by the Spirit.

Through whom we are bonded to the Father.

For we are his precious possession.

“That word above all earthly powers, No thanks to them abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through him who with us sideth!
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill,
God’s truth abideth still;
His Kingdom is forever”