



WEST VALLEY CHURCH OF CHRIST

9:30 am Bible Class—all ages
10:30 am Sunday Worship
5:00 pm Proverbs study (online)
7:00 pm Wednesday Bible Class

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Defending Unity by Overcoming Conflict

You almost can't help but say, "Amen!" when you read Psalm 133:1: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" Reading these words as Christians calls to mind a unity that is greater than any the Psalmist ever saw: the unity between brothers and sisters in Christ.

Unfortunately, there is nothing good or pleasant for us that Satan does not seek to destroy. This is why Paul begged us to walk "worthy of the calling with which you were called" by "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit" (Ephesians 4:1). The word "endeavoring" implies both effort and haste. The latter aspect of the word answers "when" we should work to protect unity, but the former calls us to ask: "How?"

Paul himself helps to answer this question in Galatians 2. He recounts to the Galatians how a conflict in the church had arisen over whether Gentiles should be religiously circumcised (Galatians 2:1-3). Some held to a standard other than the Gospel on this issue, but Paul didn't give in to them (Galatians 2:4-5). Unity can never be preserved through division in thought and practice. Thankfully, unity still existed between Paul and other Christians who believed and obeyed the Gospel (Galatians 2:6-10).

Unfortunately, belief in the Gospel doesn't prevent conflict. The fact is that while the Gospel is perfect, we as Christians often follow it imperfectly. Paul's record of a conflict that followed the above events describes what Paul did to restore unity that was fractured due to imperfection (Galatians 2:11-14). Let's ask and answer several questions about this text to see how Paul "endeavor[ed] to keep the unity of the Spirit."

What does unity look like? Unity existed before certain "men came from James" and is pictured by Peter "eat[ing] with the Gentiles" (Galatians 2:12). True unity exists when people spend time with each other and share meals with one another. Unified Christians look just like good friends and close family do. Unity knows nothing of cliques, dissensions, factions, and divisions, things later identified in Paul's letter as "works of the flesh" (Galatians 5:19-21).

Why does unity fall apart? Whenever there isn't unity, someone/some ones is/are "to be blamed" (Galatians 2:11). Often, there is plenty of blame to go around! Regardless of where the blame lies, the root of the problem is "hypocrisy," people living according to other standards instead of being "straightforward about the truth of the Gospel" (Galatians 2:13-14). Hypocrisy itself can be motivated by any number of things; in the case of Peter, it was motivated by an unhealthy fear (Galatians 2:12).

How can unity be restored? For unity to be restored, someone needs to evaluate what is happening by comparing it to "the truth of the Gospel" (Galatians 2:14). Ideally everyone would be doing this! It's almost certain that every Christian will take his turn wearing the mask of the hypocrite on one occasion or another. In other words, as we consider the two men in the text, sometimes we'll be Peter, and sometimes we'll be Paul. A "Peter" likely won't be there to help "Paul" later if "Paul" doesn't help "Peter" when he can.

Note the steps that Paul took after evaluating Peter's behavior. First, he addressed Peter directly about the conflict, going "to his face," *not* behind his back (Galatians 2:11). Paul might have been tempted to go to the Gentiles first and ask them how all of this made them feel, but he didn't. His aim was not to fan the smoke but to put out the fire. Second, he involved others who were affected by the conflict, by speaking "before them all." Third, he worked to return everyone back to the standard to which they were all subject: "the truth of the Gospel" (Galatians 2:14).

Paul doesn't give us the rest of the story of this conflict, but in a way Peter does. Later in life, he becomes an elder, indicating he put this hypocritical sin behind him (1 Peter 5:1). He clearly held no grudge against Paul, calling him "our beloved brother" (2 Peter 3:15). It's clear that unity was restored, as it always should be among faithful Christians.

May God bless us as we seek "to walk worthy... endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1, 3)!