

What Difference Can I Really Make?

In my last article I stated that if any true and lasting change is going to happen in our nation or in this world, it will only happen as the Holy Spirit works through the Word to change hearts from the inside out. According to his perfect plan, God is pleased to use the church as an instrument of his grace in the lives of others. This being true, there is a desperate need for unity in each local church particularly, as well as unity among all Christian churches generally, in at least, these foundational areas:

--Jesus Christ is the only way to be right with God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12)

--Salvation is all of God's grace and not based on our works of obedience (Ephesians 2:8-9)

--We should spread the gospel of Jesus in word and deed to those who don't know him (Matthew 5:13-16; 28:18-20).

We saw last time that genuine unity is foundational, i.e., based on the clear teaching of scripture. Unity is also visible, which takes us to the second of our four points on unity from Ephesians 4:1-6. Along with foundational truths, those who are truly Christian will live visibly changed lives. Paul writes, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love..." (4:1-2)

It is from the Greek word (*axios*) translated 'worthy' that we get our English word 'axiomatic' which simply speaks of a self-evident truth. It should be evident to everyone we meet that Christians desire to honor God in all that we say and do. Our lives shouldn't cast doubt on our profession of faith. Even though we will never live perfect lives, we need to seek, by grace, to live lives that point to the beauty and blessing of Jesus Christ and the gospel; lives that seek to be obedient to scriptural teaching. We should be examples to others, praying that God may be pleased to open their hearts, as he has ours, by his amazing grace.

Next, Paul begins to get more specific on how we're to visibly live our lives in relationship with others. The first virtue that he mentions is 'humility' which refers to an attitude and action that considers others ahead of ourselves. Biblical humility acknowledges my unworthiness before God and that I am undeserving of all the blessings that God gives me. It requires, then, our relating to others in a way that doesn't *excuse* sin but in a way that *exudes* grace. 'Gentleness' is not weakness but a word that means 'power under control' and was often used of breaking wild animals. One writer has noted that one who is gentle, 'makes allowances for others shortcomings and endures wrong rather than flying into a rage or desiring vengeance.' Next Paul mentions the familiar virtue of 'patience.' Like gentleness, patience is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5). The last phrase in verse 2, 'bearing with one another' calls us to a lifetime of seeking, by grace, to make allowances for one another's many faults. And then note that we're to do this 'in love' and I'll just reference 1 Corinthians 13:1-8 and John 13:34-35 as a reminder of the selfless sacrifice that is biblical love. Are we exhibiting this kind of visible love for one another?

Along with genuine unity being foundational and visible, Paul teaches that our unity is to be intentional. He writes that we are to be, “...eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit...” (vs.3). Notice that Paul calls this a ‘unity of the Spirit.’ Properly speaking, this is not a unity that we can manufacture in and of ourselves but rather this unity, in one sense, is already ours because we’re ‘in Christ.’ This is unity in its *objective* sense. But there’s another clear aspect of Paul’s teaching that requires something of us. The word translated ‘eager’ means to ‘make every effort.’ In other words, the unity that Paul is describing is also *subjective* and will take genuine, intentional, grace driven effort from all Christians. We’ll look more at unity in my next article.

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