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The Ethical Imperative of Christianity in Praxis

RICK HUNTER

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4.1-6)¹

The second half of the letter to the Ephesians is intensely practical and aims directly at practice (*praxis*)—the daily walk of the Christian journey. *Walk* is a Hebrew idiom for everyday conduct and pictures the behavioral patterns of Christians as they engage in the mission and purpose of Christ in the daily activities of living. Paul issues a prime directive—“practice what you preach.” He insists that the true church shows itself through genuine discipleship, and Christ’s disciples intentionally practice the truth of God by submitting to the sovereignty of Christ and by allowing the Holy Spirit to work through them. Paul says in Phil 2.12-13 that as God works in them, they will be able to work out their appropriate response to God.

This is the heart of the matter. True doctrine without true practice implies an anemic church—a church that is weak, debilitated, and unable to take the commission of Christ into an arrogant, self-centered, self-glorifying world. As we look at ourselves through the lens of this passage, we understand that Paul has called us to the service and conduct becoming of Christians.

THE LARGER CONTEXT

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul lays out the eternal purpose of God in history. Through Jesus Christ, Christians have been destined as God’s sons (1.5), sealed by his Spirit (1.13) and called to one hope (1.18). They have been made alive in Christ (2.5) and reconciled to God and to all of God’s people in Christ’s body (2.11-22).² Because of the unity of Jew and Gentile believers, made possible through the atoning work of Christ, Christians are to walk worthy of that unity. Chapters 4-6 then comprise the practical application of the teachings of these first three chapters, a counsel to behavior worthy of God’s calling, characterized in the opening verse by the word *walk* (4.1).

WALKING IN A WORTHY MANNER

Walking in a worthy manner is a weighty responsibility because of the high calling of Christ. Paul lets the Ephesians know that living Christianity is no easy journey. Possibly, that is why he now reminds them a second time that he is a prisoner of the Lord (4.1; cf. 3.1). Paul is imprisoned by Rome, but he is not a prisoner of Rome. He is only the prisoner of the Lord. Why? Because Paul knows what it would take to get out of a Roman prison; he has as it were a “get out of prison free” card. By simply renouncing Christ and his mes-

1. All verses quoted are from the NASB, unless stated otherwise.

2. *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press). 841.

sage he could be set free. But Paul will not do that. He is grasped by what Paul Tillich calls, “the ultimate concern.”³ In Phil 3.12-13 he states, “...but I pressed on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet ...”

These verses provide a commentary on Eph 4.1. Paul is emphatic. If the result of his walk with Christ Jesus is a Roman prison, then that is his reasonable service. Paul is only a prisoner of the Lord because he would not be in a Roman prison had it not been for his stand in behalf of Jesus Christ. Without actually saying so, Paul tells the Ephesians (and by extension all who accept the call of Christ) that they must become as he is—except for the bonds. (In Acts 26.29 Paul does state, “... but all who hear me this day might become such as I am, except for these chains.”) Thus, Paul simultaneously challenges and extends mercy to his readers. To accept Christ means to be locked up *by* him, yet free *in* him to utilize his power to build a great movement, a church that stands against the issues of human evil—issues that harden the heart, discourage the soul, crush the life, weaken the mind, dirty the hands, and darken the attitude—issues that stand against the praxis of Christian unity.

To “walk worthy” means to live harmoniously with the calling that belongs to every Christian (1.18)—a calling to holiness, service and sonship.⁴ In chapter one, Paul primarily addresses those things essential to right relationships within God’s covenant body, the church. However, Paul applies these same basic themes to society (4.17-5.21), to family (5.22-6.9), and to the invisible forces of evil (6.10-20).⁵ In doing so, Paul gives the Ephesians the proper foundation on which to live personally, within the body of the redeemed and within the larger society.

Before we explore in greater depth Paul’s essentials of the worthy walk, that is, his sermon on the praxis of Christian unity, we must ask some questions. Do you take your walk as a Christian seriously? In *doing* Christianity, have you presented yourself as a prisoner of Christ? Or, have you abdicated your discipleship—that is, given yourself over to enjoy the futility of the mind associated with the life you once rejected? Do you believe that the battle you fight daily with Satan is worthwhile? Do you not engage in your best walk because you observe so many Christians that are AWOL? Don’t lose heart. Paul instructs all of us about how to walk a life worthy of our calling (4.2-3), and provides the basis for which we make our stand in Christ (4.4-6).

HOW TO WALK THE WORTHY WALK

Be sure to understand that Paul is not simply saying that God will bless you if you obey him; rather, because God has already blessed you, your appropriate response is to obey him. It is the Christian’s goal to live up to the marvelous calling of Christ. But how is this done? Paul says “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love.” *The Living Bible* translates verse 2, “Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love.”⁶ The ability to have unity is directly tied to the intense application of love (*agape*). *Agape*, as Paul uses it, is not a lovesick, wimpy, puppy love. *Agape* is not a love for weaklings. Rather, it is the love of Calvary—nothing less than the love that took Christ to the cross. It is a battlefield love that fights to its last breath. It is the love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13, a love that places Christ first and leads us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12.30-31).

Perhaps this personification of love is the culprit of Christian disunity and the inability to perpetuate God’s message through our lives. In our time, love is too easily defined in sexual terms and equated with making love. If so, God’s love is co-opted and loses its power for healing broken relations. God’s family must retrieve the word *love* from the world, and in turn, give the world its true meaning and application.

3. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 11-12.

4. Curtis Vaughn, *Bible Study Commentary, Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Lamplighter Books, 1977), 87.

5. *Ibid.*, 88.

6. *The Living New Testament* (Wheaton: Tyndale Pub, 1967).

Through our example, as inheritors of the love of God, we must give the world a love that can hold out in the exigencies of life; a love that will not die when it is not gratified, and most of all, a love that makes sense. Paul says that love is essential to the high calling we have in Christ, and love is essential for Christian unity to flourish. But the fruition of that unity requires self-examination and a search for truth that may come from unexpected quarters—perhaps from marginalized forms of theology that help us better see “through a glass darkly.” For example, from the womanist⁷ theological context, Dr. Linda Thomas writes, “Womanist

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theology affirms the positive and critiques the negative attributes of the church, the African American community, and the larger society.”⁸ Is it not possible that Paul’s ethical message in Ephesians 4 provides a foundation for the “womanist” work of the Christian faith? What is the unity of women within the context of the greater unity of the church? How does Paul address marginalized and voiceless persons as he pursues his quest for Christian unity? How does Paul’s ethic of unity engage racial biases, gender biases, and the oppression of two-thirds of the world?

How does Paul address marginalized and voiceless persons as he pursues his quest for Christian unity? How does Paul’s ethic of unity engage racial biases, gender biases, and the oppression of two-thirds of the world?

To embrace the unity we have in Christ, we must grapple with humility. Humility is the opposite of pride, and in the culture of Paul’s day it was considered a vice to be practiced only by slaves. It was not held to be of significant worth and it was considered a deterrent to getting the best out of life. Humility allows us to see ourselves as we are. Believers are not to promote false humility, but should recognize who they are in God’s program (cf. John 3.30; Rom 12.3).⁹ Humility is not an easy concept for Christians to grasp. The key is submission to God, and a realization of one’s place before God. For that reason, humility has been called the first, second and third essential of the Christian life.¹⁰

Humility leads to *gentleness* (meekness), but this is meekness full of resurrection power. Meekness means having one’s emotions under control, and its word picture is that of a wild horse broken and under control—an animal that still has all of its energy and power but is channeled now for its master’s will. William Hendricksen states, “The meek individual does not insist on his rights. He realizes that in Christ he has no rights at all that are his by nature. All his rights were secured by grace.”¹¹ The meek person understands the need for justice that manifests itself at times when it is imperative to insist on his rights, but he does not do so with disregard (Acts 16.35-40). Meekness demands dependence on God’s power for sustenance. Satan’s daily incursions into our lives, hopes and happiness demand that meekness avoid snapping under constant attacks. It is easy to see, then, how meekness gives way to patience.

Patience (*makrothumia*) is the spirit that never gives up. It does not hastily retaliate against a wrong. In today’s high-strung, instant gratification world, patience is difficult to find. Battles of the home and society and among countries can be attributed to a lack of love, resulting in a lack of humility, meekness and patience. Too often we seek to even the score. Retaliation is God’s work, and when we take it upon ourselves we assume a responsibility beyond any imaginable consequences. When we assume the responsibility to retaliate, we purport to know the mind of the person we seek to avenge and the motives of the wrongdoer.

7. Womanist is defined as critical reflection upon black women’s place in the world, and that God created and takes seriously black women’s experiences as human beings who are made in the image of God. “Womanist” theology is a religious advance to deconstruct, reconstruct and construct the position and voice of black women in the Bible, society and history. The term feminist would loosely serve as a white counterpart to “womanist.”

8. Linda Thomas, ed., *Living Stones in the Household of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 38.

9. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (USA: Victor Books, 1983), 632.

10. William Hendricksen, *The New Testament Commentary, Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 183.

11. Ibid.

We assume the responsibility of knowing the best method of retaliation, the degree of how far to retaliate, how to apply vengeance, and where it should take place. We assume to know what is best for the healing of all persons involved. As you can see, as human vessels, there is no way we can do all of this under God's authority, while at the same time being "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4.3).

THE BASIS OF SPIRITUAL UNITY

The church cannot manufacture spiritual unity. It has already been created by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in 1 Cor 12.13, "For by one spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we are all made to drink of one spirit." Two matters are stated: first, unity is the creation of the Holy Spirit, and second, Christians have a responsibility to cherish unity by their harmonious relationships.¹² Unity is the church's responsibility, worked out through the lives of its members. It is preserved by walking in harmony with God. Our strongest testimony to others is that we have a real and dynamic relationship with Christ. This harmonious relationship with Christ validates the Christian message. People care less about how much we talk; they care more if we can *walk* the talk. Peace is the bond among Christians that advances unity. The believer will do what is necessary to make peace. Not peace at any price, because a compromised peace is not peace. Real peace is a spiritual phenomenon.

Paul tells the Ephesians that their ability to get the message of Christ to the world is based on their level of commitment and submission to Christ. So many things pull against the unity of believers. Remember, Satan has targeted unity as a primary assault against the life worthy of our calling. Remember, too, Christian unity manifests itself first within the individual. It is important that a Christian be at peace, because peace takes hold of God's indwelling presence. The unity that Paul speaks of is not an ecclesiastical union. Rather, this unity is a union of the heart that binds believers together under the sovereignty of God.¹³

Paul names seven elements that unity in the Spirit implies—"There is one body, and one spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." There may be numerous outward matters that divide the people of God, but there are fundamental inward experiences that bind them together in an indissoluble spiritual oneness.

One body, the church, is composed of those saints that have submitted to the will and work of God in their lives and have obeyed God's will in becoming God's children. There is no denominational, ethical, racial or geographical body of Christ. The walls between Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female (cf. Gal 3:28) have been torn down. There is simply the body of Christ, and that is what Paul is presenting to the Ephesians. This body is the manifestation of 1 Cor 12.12-31. To miss the import of this verse prevents us from recognizing the power of God's collective, mighty army that can send a strong, unified and ethical message to the power structure of the world.

James H. Cone, in his book, *Speaking the Truth*, helps us see clearly the unity that Paul advocates:

The beginning and end of the church's identity is found in Jesus Christ and nowhere else . . . To ask 'What is the church?' is also to ask 'Who is Jesus?' for without Jesus the church has no identity . . . The differences among the churches, therefore, have not arisen from the issue of whether Christians adhere to the confession that 'Jesus Christ is Lord.' Rather, the differences among the churches that prevent their unity arise from their understanding of the theological and sociological implications of that Christological confession. When the churches begin to spell out the structural meanings of Jesus' Lordship for congregational life and for participation in society, they often find themselves in sharp disagreement.¹⁴

12. *The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol.11, 2 Corinthians – Philemon* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 154.

13. *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 89.

14. James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 115-116.

Cone raises questions that dare not be ignored as we search for the necessary attitude and mindset to see God at work, unifying all believers in the church, which is the body of Christ. The christological confession demands first an individual unity with Christ. It then becomes impossible to ostracize elements of society, marginalize people that are considered *other* than self, and fulfill Paul's instruction to the church about thought and walk.

One Spirit is the Holy Spirit that unifies every believer. The indwelling Spirit in the believer (1 Cor 6.19) means we belong to each other. With that kind of connection, unity is not only possible, but also a given reality, because the Spirit is one with the Father and Son. The unified community, the church, placed together by the Holy Spirit, grows into a holy temple (1 Cor 3.16-17; 2 Cor 6.16). The *Star Trek* television show helps us see this reality. In the *Star Trek* saga there is an alien race called the Borg. The Borg community has a collective self-identity. They are one because each individual only functions in relation to the whole. The Borg are able to rejuvenate, revitalize, and restore any damage at a highly accelerated rate because all Borg work on that problem. Can you imagine the implications of such a model for the Lord's church? If every member did praxis as if plugged into the collective, or indwelt with the Spirit, so that the Spirit directed the whole: planning, work, direction, healing, discipline and hope of the body, what a power the church would be!

One hope refers to the promise of the Lord to return and to take his church to heaven. Paul implies that the believer, who realizes the existence of the one body, submits to the Spirit, and who looks for Christ's return, will work for peace. She will bring peace and will not tear up God's inheritance.

In God's awesome providence we are assured that we belong to God. In Romans 5.5, Paul states that we have the Holy Spirit poured into us, a guarantee that we belong to God and that God does not forget us (Eph 1.12-13). In the midst of daily trials, problems, and emergencies, we may forget that God is moving toward his goal of calling his followers to their ultimate reward. It seems as if "the good die young" and "the evil get by," but Christ, through the indwelling Spirit, gives hope to believers not to give up, give in or give out. Because the Spirit sustains the believer, the foundation of the Christians' calling is to "be holy and blameless before him" (Eph 1.4). The Christian's goal is to be like Christ, although the reality of that pursuit will come only as God glorifies the believers. Imagine finally becoming what you have prayed, worked, fought, and humbled yourself for. That, brothers and sisters, is the joy of going *home*. That is why believers "hang in there." That is why believers persevere in study and submit their lives. That is why believers live the submissive life; they feel like going home.

Kenneth Greene would say that hope must also be liberative. Writing from the context of the African American Christian, Greene asserts that the hope of Christianity must liberate African Americans from the many crises they face. "African Americans are vulnerable because they lack the resources and support systems necessary to meet the challenges that all people face. Therefore, it is important to challenge the church, God's people, to manage well the natural vicissitudes of life."¹⁵ Greene implies that the ethical response to unity is to address the problems of racism that appear in seemingly unrelated statistics, such as unwed pregnancies, Black on Black crime, under-employment, economic slavery, and the disinheritance of those upon whose backs the United States of America was built. Paul's message is that the worthy walk validates and gives expression to the one body and the one Spirit. According to Paul, the unity of the church was to be an example to the world—and not the opposite. Spiritual unity is the foundation for social unity.

One Lord affirms that Jesus Christ is the Savior. Acts 4.12 says, "For there is no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved." It is hard to understand how two believers who claim to obey the Lord cannot walk together in harmony. No one can call herself a Christian who does not acknowledge Christ as

15. Gary Holloway and John York, eds., *Unfinished Reconciliation (Justice, Racism & churches of Christ)* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2003), 180.

Lord. And if Christ is Lord, everything else falls in line. Obviously, one Lord raises the question of religious pluralism, but Christ is Lord and our task is to harmonize our walk with this truth.

One faith is a body of truth given by Christ to his church. Jude 3 calls it “the faith which was once for all handed down.” *The faith* appears to be an objective body of teaching that was taught, guarded, and committed to others (2 Tim 2.2). Commentators are divided over whether *the faith* is subjective or objective. The sense seems to imply that it is objective, but probably both concepts are in view. The harmony of various religious traditions lies in the understanding of the faith. Ultimately, *the faith* means trust in the Lord and his will.

One baptism seems best to picture water baptism, the common New Testament means of a believer confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. Spirit baptism, which implies the work of the Holy Spirit in placing one in the body, is alluded to in verse 4 by the phrase “one Spirit.” Water baptism was an important element in the early church as a testimony of identity and unity with Christ.

“*One God and Father* of all, who is over all and through all and in all,” reminds the believer his or her reality in Christ! First, God is over all; that is transcendence. Nothing is greater, nothing is more, and nothing is over God. Second, God is through all; that is omnipotence. God is not at a distance but is here, right now, ministering to you. Third, God is in all; that is omnipresence.

Paul, in this statement, highlights the glorious truth of what God gives the believer, through the Son and by the Holy Spirit. The message is, you are loved, led, protected, cared for, filled and blessed-and all of that is because you are under the sovereign God.

CONCLUSION

Paul affirms that the believer must show the unity of the doctrine of God in her daily walk. How the Christian displays Christianity has everything to do with how unbelievers interpret Christ. Paul affirms that because of what God has done, Christ has sacrificed, and because the Spirit dwells in us, there is no reason to be a debilitated Christian witness. Paul calls for unity, and in Eph 6.10, he describes this unity as “the strength of His might.”

We are called to put into practice what God has given to us. We are to show by example, to a denying world, that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one; therefore, those who believe are to be one. Unified, we fight the enemy, Satan, and not each other. By our walk of life, we must allow God to use God’s church. We must march to God’s word, to do God’s will. We must find the ability and spirit to be one!

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