The Importance of Working Together

Introduction

Referring to nuclear war and its consequences, Bertrand Russell – an avowed atheist – said, ***"It is co-existence or no existence!"*** Humanly-speaking the same could be said of the church. But the Holy Spirit is looking for **more than co-existence**. He is looking for **real working together** – co-operation.

A Story

A young man from a poor village was going to get married. He was ashamed because he couldn't afford a suit. His uncle gave him money and he went off to the city to buy a suit. He went to a big department store. He tried on many jackets and eventually found one that was a really good fit. He didn't realise there were fitting rooms to try on the trousers. He was too embarrassed to try them and so he just bought the suit.

The night before the wedding he tried on the trousers only to find they were about 10 cm. too long! He said*, "Never mind! I will fold them up very carefully and no-one will notice!"*

The young man's grandmother was staying with them. She couldn't sleep for thinking of the humiliation of her grandson going to his wedding with rolled up trousers! After everyone had gone to bed, she went to the room where the trousers were hanging up. She took them from the hanger. She cut off 10 cm. and carefully sewed them up and pressed them. She replaced them on the hanger and went back to bed to sleep peacefully.

But the young man's mother woke in the night with a nightmare! Everyone was laughing at her son during the wedding because of his rolled up trousers. About 2 am she went to the room where the suit was. She carefully took down the trousers. She cut off 10 cm. from each leg. She sewed them up neatly, pressed them and returned them to the hanger. She went back to sleep very happily!

Very early the next morning – the morning of the wedding – the older sister of the young man got up from her bed. She had slept very badly thinking about the trousers. Before anyone else was up she went to the room where the suit was. She took the trousers from their hanger. Carefully using her scissors, she cut 10 cm. from each trouser leg. She hemmed them neatly and put them back on the hanger.

An hour before the wedding the young man put on his suit. Imagine his shock as he put on his trousers only to find that they barely covered his knees!!

The point is clear! **If there is no communication and no co-operation, the story can end in tragedy! Even when there are good intentions and there is skilful work. Even when there is great satisfaction in finishing the job well, the results can still be tragic!**

This story highlights what can happen when we fail to act as **one body** and we don't work harmoniously and co-operatively together.

The Biblical Basis for Co-operation

We don't have enough time for a full exposition of John 17 and Ephesians 4, so I would just like to summarize some basic principles.

1 Cor. 12:27	***"Now you are the body of Christ and each of you is a part of it."***
Rom. 12:5	***"So in Christ, we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all others."***
Eph. 4:25	***"…for we are all members of one body."***

These Scriptures emphasize the unity of the Body of Christ with Jesus as the Head and all redeemed people (past, present and future) as the Body.

What was the beginning of Paul's understanding of this great theme in Scripture? I think it was his encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus. Paul had been doing his best to wreak havoc in the church. Perhaps Paul would have expected Jesus to say, ***"Why are you persecuting my people?"*** But no! What Jesus actually asked was, ***"Why are you persecuting ME?"*** Perhaps that was the beginning of Paul's understanding that we are all ***"in Christ"***. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit this was expressed to the church as the Body of Christ.

If we are to demonstrate our oneness as the Body of Christ, five major principles need to be followed. These are outlined in 1 Cor. 12:12-26.

1. The principle of induction (v. 12-13)

"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we are all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the One Spirit to drink."

It is the Holy Spirit who inducts us into the Body of Christ. We are born again by the Holy Spirit and united with Christ as part of His Body. And in Christ there are no racial or cultural distinctions, neither are there social or economic distinctions. God has given **all** His people the Holy Spirit to dwell in them so that their lives may overflow with the fruit of the Spirit. We are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28)

2. The principle of indispensability (v. 14-16)

"Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body."

We are all indispensable to each other. **Note** that we are **not** indispensable to the Lord Jesus! Although Jesus longs to use every one of us in glorifying His Name and promoting His Kingdom everywhere, He is not bound, limited or tied down to any single individual. One very great missionary leader (C.T. Studd) was once asked, *"What will happen to your work when you die?"* The answer he gave was, *"When I die, my Lord will have one fool less to contend with, He can therefore do His work better!"* God may bury His workmen but He never buries His work! We are not indispensable to the Lord Jesus, but we are indispensable to each other! **Every believer is a necessary member of the Body of Christ**. Every member of the Body of Christ is to fulfil a particular function. Each one of us can help build up the church and each other through mutual encouragement, exhortation and the sharing of victories and defeats.

Each of us can live in continuous personal revival as we humbly share our failures and as we ask for prayer for victory over them. If we do, then we do others and ourselves immense good as we walk in the light with each other. Personal revival may lead to corporate revival.

3. The principle of inter-dependence (v. 17-22)

"If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."

Amputation is not a good option! The body is poorer for the loss of a limb and the severed limb cannot function on its own. **'Solo performance'** is not an option for a believer. The structure of the body does not admit the possibility of isolated individualism.

Every believer needs the help of every other believer. Each part of the body has its own contribution to make to the growth of the Kingdom of God and the building up of the church. So **all churches in all nations** need help from one another!

4. The principle of impartiality (v. 23-25)

This means not giving preferential treatment. In fact, particular respect should be shown to those members who **seem** less important than others.

"The parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour and the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other."

Every believer plays a significant role in the life of the Body of Christ. **We** might not fully appreciate that role, but **Jesus does**! Before Him all things are laid bare and wide open and Jesus will always evaluate justly. When this principle is violated, the result is factions and dissension. In chapter two of his letter, James makes it very clear that favouritism is wrong!

5. The principle of identification (v. 26)

"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part is honoured with it."

All believers should have the same care for each other. If one member of the body suffers, all the members suffer with that member. If one believer is honoured, all the rest are glad. They do not get upset, unhappy or burned up with jealousy when honour is conferred on another believer. Instead, they rejoice with that brother or sister and thank God for the favour He has bestowed on them.

If we practice these five principles fervently, then the world will notice our corporate oneness and our unity. They will come to understand that God alone has done this.

Working the Principles out from the Global to the Local Church.

Usually these principles are learned slowly, step by step. There is a development by stages:

- **Coming** together is a beginning
- **Staying** together is progress
- **Thinking** together is real unity
- **Working** together is success

You must work through the process stage by stage. You can't skip stages and hope to move right away from the first stage to the final stage. May God give us all the grace to **come, stay, think and work** together, so that we can demonstrate that we, the followers of Jesus Christ, **can** co-operate with each other with a single purpose – **bringing glory to our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Unity in Diversity is nothing new. Paul encouraged the churches he had a part in founding to maintain this distinctive – so that the world may believe Jesus was sent by the Father. (John 17:21)

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)

- **Its Principles of Working Together**

  A statement of faith was drawn up. One of the central beliefs included:

> **"The great essentials of divine revelation contained in the Scriptures; namely the fall of man, the necessity of the new birth, the atonement of Christ and justification by faith, with an emphasis on presenting these truths to all."**

Evangelicals, including both conservatives and charismatics, came to distinguish between **principles** and **preferences**.

The principles of the Gospel never change – for example:

- The death of Jesus was to atone for our sins.
- Jesus is the Son of God and the Saviour of the World.
- Without Jesus all people are lost.

We can never compromise on principles. But there are other teachings in Scripture that are matters of personal interpretation – e.g. the exact period when the church will be raptured to meet the Lord. Devout Godly men have maintained that it is:

- Before the tribulation
- During the tribulation
- At the end of the tribulation

In the end, these are preferences of opinion. Looking carefully at the Scriptures, some people prefer one interpretation over the others.

On our principles we should speak out strongly. On our preferences we may speak quietly and graciously being very careful not to sacrifice the unity of the Body of Christ. A paraphrase of a statement by a North African theologian summarises it well:

In essentials – unity

In non-essentials – liberty

In everything – love

For believers unity must be **unity in truth**. And truth is rooted in the Bible. Co-operation is only possible if there is a measure of unity. Characteristics of believers everywhere should be **unity – fellowship – co-operation.**

Henri Blocher wrote a paper called **The Nature of Biblical Unity**. In this paper he gives five criteria that can be used to evaluate any Biblical teaching to determine if it is **a principle or a preference**:

1. **The Biblical Criterion** – the place given to the subject in the Bible itself
2. **The Theological Criterion** – how strategic the teaching is
3. **The Practical Criterion** – having to do with the consequences of the teaching in the lives of the believers
4. **The Historical Criterion** – how this particular teaching has been evaluated in the past by Godly believers

5. **The Contemporary Criterion** – where Godly believers who have studied the teaching in depth from a variety of sources find themselves (in numbers) in disagreement, we can conclude this teaching doesn't belong to the vital centre of truth – i.e. it isn't a principle.

Possible areas of co-operation:

- Evangelism and spiritual revival in the church
- Theological education/ leadership development
- Education for children/youth in Biblical truth
- Literature / Media / Communication
- Relief and economic development
- Reaching unreached peoples
- Prayer
- Annual Conference
- A leaders' Book Club

What are the current blockages to regional and national co-operation?

- **Satanic opposition**: he constantly promotes disunity, discouragement and despair through lies, fear etc.
- **Fear** that if North African believers are seen to be well established and organised, then this will provoke a backlash.
- **Doctrinal disunity** brought about through an inability to distinguish between principle and preference.
- **A lack of trust among leaders** because they don't know each other. They don't meet often enough. Too much travel gives rise to suspicion.
- **Foreign involvement and especially foreign money** tends to "buy" loyalty to foreign groups. This means local churches are not free to build local, national and regional ties.
- **Lack of understanding of the "big picture"** of the global church of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- **Churches are small** and maturity levels are low.
- **Leaders are known locally but not nationally** and so levels of trust are low.

Summary

There are warnings to be heeded and there are mistakes to be avoided. But if we have the will to **come** and **stay** and **think** and **work** together, we will be able to demonstrate to the world that, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can co-operate with a single goal – to glorify the Lord Jesus and ***"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."*** (Eph. 4:3)