

DWELLING TOGETHER IN UNITY

Today's Text: Ps. 133

Extract:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing-life forevermore [Ps. 133: 1-3]

Trinidad & Tobago is the industrial giant of the Caribbean, with a vibrant economy that depends mainly on oil and gas, and manufacturing. Its harmonious population of 1.3 million is a rich blend of East Indians, Africans, Amerindians, Europeans, Chinese and Syrians. Their unity is expressed through music (calypso and soca), food (rôti) and enjoyment (the Carnival and liming). In recent times, politicians, especially of the East Indian and African stock (which together constitute about 75% of the total population), have begun to stoke the fires of racial divisiveness for their selfish political gains. The matter has worried the President of the country to the extent that it formed the theme of his 2004 Inaugural Address to Parliament and the Republic Day Address to the Nation. Perhaps, in response to his strident call, 27 organizations representing virtually all shades of opinion, have just signed a memorandum of understanding called "The Principles of Fairness"¹ to guide the promotion of national unity among all the races and religions.

Unity is an old problem among nations, communities, religions, churches and families, but do we really understand what it is all about? Is it uniformity or equity or equality or all of them? Is it compatible with competitiveness? What does it take for brethren to dwell together in unity? Is unity even necessary?

Such and other related questions are the subject of today's lesson, and we shall use Psalm 133 as a guide.

¹ Source: http://www.trinidadexpress.com/index.pl/article_news?id=40566391

1. Benefits of Unity

David, the writer of Psalm 133, is in a very good position to speak on the subject. Driven into the wilderness as a teenager by King Saul [1 Sam. 18: 8-9], he emerged at the age of 30 as king over Judah [2 Sam. 2: 8-11]. For the next seven-and-a-half years thereafter, David had to fight a civil war with Saul's family before he was finally crowned king of all Israel through a negotiated settlement [2 Sam. 5: 3]. For the rest of his reign, he battled the Philistines [vv. 17-25] and faced incest [2 Sam. 13: 1-21] and rebellion [2 Sam. 15: 1-16] within his own family. After all such experiences, David says that it is good and pleasant for brethren to dwell together in unity.

In pointing out the benefits of unity, David uses a figure of speech called the *simile*. You compare the object of your discussion with another object that is more familiar to the audience. For example, when you say that a shirt is *as white as snow*, your audience immediately relates to it if the people are familiar with the colour of snow. In describing the manner of the coming of the Day of the Lord, Paul said, "sudden destruction comes upon them *as labour pains upon a pregnant woman*" [1 Thes. 5:3]. Mothers have no problem relating to that!

According to David, the goodness and pleasantness of dwelling together in unity can be likened to the following:

a) *Precious oil upon the head of Aaron*

In instituting the order of priesthood, God commanded Moses to bring Aaron and his sons to the door of the tabernacle of meeting and wash them with water. After putting on Aaron his priestly clothes, "you shall take the anointing oil, pour it on his head, and anoint him." The same thing was to be done to his sons. After being so consecrated, "the priesthood shall be theirs for a perpetual statute" [Ex. 29: 1-9]. The exercise set Aaron and his sons apart as hallowed and, therefore, qualified to minister to God who considered them *holy*. So, David is telling us that unity has God-sanctioned power. Unity produces love and God is love [1 Jn 4: 16].

A good example of this can be found in the early church. All the believers "were together and had *all things in common*, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all as anyone had need. So continuing daily *with one accord* in the temple, and *breaking bread from house to house; they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart*, praising God and having favour with all the people." What was the outcome? "Fear came upon *every soul*, and *many wonders and signs were done* through the apostles" [Acts 2: 41-47]. In deed, "a three-fold cord is not quickly broken" [Eccl. 4: 12].

b) *The dew of Hermon*

Dew is formed when atmospheric vapour condenses as tiny drops of water that can be seen on cool surfaces at night. When Gideon wanted to be sure that it was the angel of God that spoke with him, he requested for the fleece of wool to be dry while it would be wet all around, “and God did so *that night*. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground [**Judg. 6: 39-40**]. Also, when God was going to rain down *manna* for the children of Israel in the wilderness, the dew served as the dish for “when the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna fell on it” [**Num. 11: 9**].

Hermon is the highest mountain in modern Syria, and mount Zion on which Jerusalem sits is at a lower level of the mountain chain. At its summit is a carpet of snow. When it melts during the summer, it supplies water to River Jordan. Therefore, the “dew of Hermon” conveys the picture of beauty as the snow is seen to cover the mountain and its surroundings. It also represents a source of supply of essential needs, a kind of *safety net* for the deprived. When we say, “one for all and all for one,” we are using the same metaphor. As we saw above, the rich early believers sold their possessions and goods, “and divided them among all as anyone had need” [**Acts 2: 45**]. If unity promotes sharing and love, there is no way that charity will not follow, for “love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; ... love does not seek its own” [**1 Cor. 13: 4, 5**].

Clearly, dwelling together in unity, whether in the home or church, at work or in the nation, has enduring and endearing benefits for us. The next matter to address is what unity is all about and how we can promote it.

2. What is unity?

For most of us, unity suggests, “sticking together.” Popular clichés include one like “united we stand, divided we fall.” The word of God says, “two are better than one, ... for if they fall, one will lift up his companion” [**Eccl. 4: 9, 10**]. However, the concept of *synergy* suggests that the *whole* may be more or less than *the sum of its parts*. In other words, *two plus two* may equal four in simple arithmetic, but synergistically speaking, it may be less than four or more than four. Therefore, unity is not necessarily determined by the number of people involved but by the *quality of their interaction*. That is why the word of God says, “*If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men*” [**Rom. 12: 18**].

When people disagree, it is not only over what they want but how to get them. Therefore, the quality of unity depends on the extent of the participants’ agreement with the *ends* and *means* of unity. The ends are the *desirable* goals/values/outcomes while the means are the *methods/ways/strategies* for attaining the ends.

For illustration, let us examine the following forms of unity:

a) *The ideal type*

In this type, *all the affected persons*, whether in the family, country or church, *share common goals or values and how to achieve them*. A good example of this can be found in the church. All believers are united in the doctrine of “one body and one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all” [Eph. 4: 4-6]. The early Christians practised that faith in the *same way* by communal living, “continuing daily *with one accord* in the temple, and *breaking bread from house to house; (eating) their food with gladness and simplicity of heart*, praising God and having favour with all the people” [Acts 2: 41-47].

However, unanimity can be abused. For example, after the flood during Noah’s time, “the whole earth had one language and one speech.” That is the highest form of language/culture-based unity that you can ever have. What did the people do with it? They decided to build a tower that would reach up to heaven. God said, “Indeed the people are *one* and they all have one language, and this is what they began to do; *now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them.*” So, He confounded their speech and scattered them all over the world [Gen. 11: 1-7].

Clearly, unity is powerful but dangerous. It can be used for the good of the people or it can be used to sustain a status quo of exploitation. We saw its dangers in the Communist block to deny opposition or self-expression. There was peace but it was by conquest, not consent! Unless we are dealing with a small group of people like the early church, the ideal type of unity is almost impossible to attain or to sustain.

b) *Pragmatic unity*

Modernization has advanced social progress in most societies to the extent that traditionally homogeneous groups do not necessarily agree on the means of attaining shared goals. For example, even in a democratic country, people belong to different political parties or may choose to remain independent. In the Christian community where believers share the same faith, there are numerous denominations, which teach different ways of practising the shared faith. In such circumstances, unity is pursued by:

Focusing on shared values/ends

Here, emphasis is placed on things that unite rather than on things that divide us. For example, multiple denominations use the TBN [Trinity Broadcasting Network] to preach the word of God to believers. They all

use the same Bible and preach the same Jesus, even when they could go to war over procedural rules!

When Gentiles were accepted as believers, the apostles and church elders faced the crisis of whether to require them to worship like the Jews. Paul and Barnabas brought the matter to the Jerusalem Council to resolve. Arguments were strong on both sides. The Pharisees who were now believers insisted that circumcision and keeping of the Law of Moses were necessary. Following his then recent experience with the household of Cornelius, Peter maintained that salvation came by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. Paul and Barnabas testified to that, based on their own missionary journey to Gentile territory. After due consideration, the Council, “being assembled *in one accord*, wrote a letter to the Gentiles in which the Gentiles were exempted from circumcision but were required “to abstain from things offered to idols, . . .and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well” [Acts 15: 1-29]. Shared Christian values won over contentious tradition and cultural practices and promoted unity among the brethren.

Setting up a common symbol of unity

Where there are multiple power centres with different aspirations, unity among all the groups can be promoted through setting up a common symbol that unites everybody. For example, the Queen of England is the unifying symbol for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. David’s throne was the unifying factor for the 12 tribes of Israel. Soccer plays a similar role for Brazil!

c) *Separation is also a form of unity!*

Where people cannot agree on ends and means, it is stressful to keep them together. That is what has led to ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia. In that case, staying apart may in fact promote unity and cooperation among them. For example, Russia and the other former members of the defunct USSR are much closer today than in the past, whereas Russia is under terrorist attacks from Chechnya, an Islamic enclave that Russia has not allowed to go on its own.

At the family level, staying apart may be more appropriate for unity where “a man’s enemies are men of his own household” [Mic. 7: 6]. For example, when there was strife between the herdsmen of Abraham [then known as Abram] and those of Lot, Abraham told his nephew, “Please, let there be no strife between you and me . . . for we are brethren. Is not the whole land before you? Please, *separate from me*. If you take the left, then I will go to the right, or if you go to the right, then I will go to the left.” Lot chose the plains and Abraham moved away [Gen. 13: 5-11]. Later,

when marauders captured Lot, it was Abraham who went to rescue him, implying that their unity had not been hurt by separation [**Gen. 14: 14-16**]. Paul and Barnabas disagreed at Antioch over taking Mark, Barnabas' cousin [**Col. 4: 10**] along with them on their second missionary journey. They parted ways and Paul went with Silas while Barnabas took Mark [**Acts 15: 36-40**]. Look at the great prison revival that God wrought through Paul and Silas in Macedonia [**Acts 16: 16-29**]. However, that Paul kept his high regard for Mark can be seen from his second letter to Timothy, "Get Mark and bring him with you, *for he is useful to me for ministry*" [**2 Tim. 4: 11**]. Through separation, they were able to dwell together in unity!

3. Conclusions

The brethren of Jesus, according to Him, are those who do the will of His Father [**Mk 3: 31-35**]. We are His brethren if and only if we do that will, which includes dwelling together with our brethren in unity. These brethren may be found in our family, community or country, in the club or at college, at work or in the church. They may not all be pleasant or agreeable to us. In fact, they may not be interested in our good but only in our *goods*! That is how they also see us.

From the forgoing, we have seen spiritually acceptable ways to dwell in unity with others, from which we can derive spiritual power and strength, and safety nets in time of need. We can promote unity by following these simple rules:

- ❑ *Communicate* with others so as to ventilate your grievances and to resolve differences. The children of Israel almost went to war with each other over an altar until they held a meeting to find the allegations to be unfounded [**Josh. 22: 16-31**];
- ❑ *Promote truth and justice* because "he who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord" [**Prov. 17: 15**];
- ❑ Be a *producer, not a mere user of unity*! One way to do that is to render service instead of expecting to be served. Jesus told His disciples, "he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves.... I am among you as the One who serves" [**Lk 22: 26, 27**];
- ❑ Promote *equity on a win-win basis*. People are likely to buy into a relationship that benefits them instead of those that demean them. Therefore, as you go for the plum outcomes, reserve the better ones for others! In the words of Jesus, "if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?" [**Lk 16: 12**].

Unity is a major challenge to the body of Christ, and if the denominations cannot work or dwell together in unity, how can they preach the love of Christ to the heathens? That is the challenge for the end-time churches.