

5. The Experience of Unity in the Early Church (4Q 2018—Oneness in Christ)

Biblical material: Acts 1:12–14, Acts 2:5–13, Rev. 14:12, Acts 2:42–47, Acts 4:32–37, Acts 5:1–11, 2 Cor. 9:8–15.

Quotes

- We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. *Tertullian*
- The early Church was birthed and sustained in almost constant persecution and pressures. *Greg Gordon*
- The church the Bible described is exciting and adventurous and wrought with sacrifice. It cost believers everything, and they still came. *Jen Hatmaker*
- We who formerly hated and murdered one another now live together and share the same table. We pray for our enemies and try to win those who hate us. *Justin Martyr*
- Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world. . . . Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachment. *Rodney Stark*
- They [early Christians] made the grace of God credible by a society of love and mutual care which astonished the pagans and was recognized as something entirely new. It lent persuasiveness to their claim that the New Age had dawned in Christ. *Michael Green*

Questions

Did the early church concern itself with unity? What was the priority of the early believers? Is unity an objective or a product? How do we apply the principles we see in the early church in today's world? What lessons do we learn from examining the unity of the early church?

Bible summary

Acts 1:12–14 records the “first” meeting of the church after Jesus’ ascension. The Holy Spirit descends at Pentecost (Acts 2:5–13). Those who endure keep God’s commandments and have the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14:12). The early believers were together, ate together, shared together (Acts 2:42–47). They were of one heart and mind (Acts 4:32–37). Damage to this unity had to be contained when Ananias and Sapphira lied (Acts 5:1–11). God blesses the generous (2 Cor. 9:8–15).

Comment

While we may be approaching our analysis of the early church from a perspective of unity, that was not their primary concern. They were unified because of their shared experience of the risen Lord. They did not have sermons or prayer meetings with “unity” as the theme. They were already one because they knew and trusted Jesus, they were one in the

Spirit. The record in the early chapters of Acts is of a vibrant community that was truly *together*. What we observe most is their happiness. The “joy of the Lord” is at the heart of their experience, recognizing that Jesus has changed everything. The contrast between the formalism of Judaism or the depraved worship of paganism and the wonderful good news of God’s true salvation could not be more obvious.

They were also unified because of persecution. They were opposed by both Romans and Jews. When Herod saw how persecution of the Christians gained him favor with the Jews, he doubled his efforts. James was executed, and then Peter was imprisoned. The early church was not idyllic in the sense that they had no challenges, but they were one together as they met the attacks.

Added to the outward attacks were the more insidious internal problems, as demonstrated by the case of Ananias and Sapphira. Their crime was not in holding back money for themselves, but in representing this as the total sum to be donated to help the poor. Such deception within the church at such an early time needed to be dealt with firmly and quickly. Lies and deceit strike at the very heart of the Christian message, and while in later times became commonplace, the strongest condemnation needed to be given in trying to keep the early witness pure.

What is not so obvious are the many discussions the early believers had regarding their faith. Those coming from Judaism had to work out what parts of their former belief system were still relevant, and what were not. The most obvious example is that of circumcision, and this debate continued over several decades. Added to this were the observance of feast days, clean and unclean foods, and other religious observances. Those from a Gentile background had also much that challenged them, and it’s clear that pagan beliefs did affect the thinking of the church, especially in later years when the influence of contemporary society was more significant in the church.

Ellen White Comments

“Jesus only”—in these words is contained the secret of the life and power that marked the history of the early church. {AA 64}

Jesus Christ is the one great Unity; he possesses the attributes that harmonize all diversities. And he, the Gift above all others, was given to our world to give expression to the mind and character of God, that every intelligent being, if he will, may see God in the revelation of his Son. {YI, August 19, 1897}

When God’s people are one in the unity of the Spirit, all of Phariseeism, all of self-righteousness, which was the sin of the Jewish nation, will be expelled from all hearts. The mold of Christ will be upon each individual member of His body, and His people will be new bottles into which He can pour His new wine, and the new wine will not break the bottles. God will make known the mystery which hath been hidden for ages. He will make known what are the “riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27) 1SM 386.1}

“Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” 3 John 2. God wants each one of us to find his place, and when each one is in his place, doing the work that God has given him, there will be perfect unity. . . . {UL 157}