



Editor's Note

An amazing thing happened this morning. I opened my email and there was a single sentence from a sister who had just received and read her copy of ESN sent out yesterday. It said: "Thank you for the articles." Why is that amazing? Because it rarely happens!

Quick reminder of the obvious: Our readers are thankful, we know that. Also, the last thing I'd want is to have our incoming mail box jammed with "Thank you" notes in re-

sponse to my sharing this. So why mention it?

Because it made me think of all the blessings I enjoy both in the assembly and through the week, yet often take them for granted. Let me ask you, how long has it been since you have said (in some way), "Thank you for _____" to someone serving, or to a friend or to someone in leadership? It's important. "In everything give thanks." (I Thes. 5:18.) 

Biblical Foundations

Oneness and the Early Church, Part 2 by Jack Spender

In the previous article, we considered the question, "How important is oneness?" We concluded that it's vital, and one of the most important responsibilities elders have - safeguarding unity in the church. Since elders are also called "overseers," or those who "watch over" the saints and their activities, this would be high on the list of their duties. In this article, we want to take a look at how the leaders in the early church preserved oneness in their dealings.

A key passage on the subject is Acts 15, frequently referred to as "The Jerusalem Counsel." We don't have space to give a detailed study of the background of the problem, but suffice it to say, the young church in Antioch was being disturbed by teachings originating in Jerusalem that could fracture the unity, i.e., that Gentile believers must virtually become Jews in order to be saved. When the disagreement that resulted could not be resolved, a decision was reached to send a delegation back to Jerusalem to investigate.

We know that the problem was resolved and the work of the Lord moved forward, but our focus will be on how unity was preserved in a situation that might have divided the believers and resulted in a "Jewish church" and a "Gentile church." I'd like to suggest three principles from the text that merit serious consideration in the church today.

1) The whole church was involved in the matter from beginning to end.

Whether the disruptive teachings referred to above took place during public ministry or only informally "from house to house," we cannot be sure, but once a decision was reached to send a delegation to Jerusalem, we read that they were "brought on their way by the church." (vs. 3). A.C. Gabelein says,

"The whole assembly had sympathy with the journey."

That this involvement of the believers was not a special situation, but the normal course of action is suggested by the wording in the next verse. "And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and elders..." (vs. 4). Note the order! This is reminiscent of Paul's address in the letter to the Philippians: "to all the saints...with the overseers and deacons." (Phil 1:1 NKJV). In fact, sprinkled throughout our chapter, there are no less than 10 statements or hints that ordinary believers were involved throughout.

This is a good lesson for us. The NT pictures the elders as functioning "among the saints," (see I Pet. 5:1; Acts 20:28 [Gk. text], I Thes. 5:12;), not legislating from closed door sessions. This eliminates the need for believers to get information through the "grape-vine," which is notoriously inaccurate.

Certainly there are occasional matters which require confidentiality, but in the normal course of events facing the church, clear communication from the start is better than "damage control" once word gets out and questions are swirling.

2) Coming to unity is a process

Probably on purpose, there is no record of the amount of time that elapsed before accord was reached at the council. But of one thing we can be confident, speed was not the main consideration. So how could a situation in which men held differing views, and argued forcibly for them, ever end in harmony and oneness? Back in verse 2, the words hint at sharp disagreement. An old writer offered this quaint comment, "The controversy waxed warm at Antioch."

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Biblical Foundations

The Old Testament Poetic Books: The Psalms by Robert Spender

Everyone loves a good poem. Poems come to us in greeting cards, the hymns we sing, and even nursery rhymes. Yet biblical poetry differs from our modern style by relying on parallel thoughts rather than emphasis of sound like rhyme. Repetition of similar or even opposite concepts in subsequent lines marks the poetry of ancient Israel. Psalm 24:1, for example, parallels “earth” with “world” but the thought moves us to see that the Lord’s primary focus is on the people as its inhabitants.

With opposing statements we find a different type of emphasis. By contrasting the law with double-minded persons, Psalm 119:113 emphasizes the truthfulness and stability of God’s word. Frequently added lines of poetry develop a thought or provide more information but in each case the emphasis is more upon thought parallelism than sound or meter. So when we read the poetic books we can appreciate the diverse ways that the Israelites viewed their relationship with the Lord. In short, the poetic books represent the heart of Israel’s poetic expressions. The Psalms, which we will examine, focus on relationships with the Lord while the wisdom books focus on relationships between individuals before the Lord.

The Psalms

The book of Psalms was Israel’s songbook and provided a rich collection of songs for their worship and celebrations of life. Psalms differ from one another in tone, content and purpose so our appreciation and use of each Psalm can be greatly enhanced by understanding the characteristics of the various types. Modern hymnbooks usually collect similar hymns by subject or tone and while the book of Psalms is not so arranged one can easily recognize the similarity of content and tone reflected by each type.

The Psalms were collected into five books as indicated in most Bible versions, with each book ending in a doxology of praise. Instead of grouping similar types of psalms, the collection moves from its combined opening emphasis on the blessings of the righteous (Ps. 1:1) and their secure position in the Lord (Ps. 2:12) through the many ups and downs of

life as it moves toward the final exuberant doxology of praise to the Lord (Ps. 150). A brief examination of some of the types of Psalms will point out similarities and encourage applications for today.

Hymns

Paul encouraged believers to use psalms and hymns (Eph. 5:19 & Col. 3:16). His own use of the Psalms affirms his familiarity with the collection. Hymns and thanksgiving songs are characterized by an uplifting tone and frequently include an invitation to praise the Lord. Psalm 150 ends the book in a resounding note of praise and commands the world to praise the Lord. It begins and ends with the imperative “Hallelujah” or “Praise the Lord.”

When we think of all that the Lord has done for us and how much He loves us, how can we not respond with joyous praise! Psalm 33 begins with an invitation to praise the Lord by pointing to His power in creating the world but emphasizes His concern for the people in it, while Psalm 66 is a hymn of thanksgiving for the Lord’s deliverance and preservation.

Meditation on psalms like these encourages our hearts while providing us with needed fuel to encourage other believers along the way.

Laments

Psalms of lament compose the largest category in the Psalms. Unlike the hymns, they have a more sorrowful tone and frequently open with a plea or cry to the Lord for help. The opening cry of Psalm 13 appears to reflect the many trials and wilderness moments that David experienced before he became King. Expressions like these may also reflect our feelings when we seek the Lord’s help during a crisis. David’s cry for stability in Psalm 61 includes powerful images for the Lord like sheltering wings (vs. 4) or a bedrock foundation (vs. 2) that enhance

the message.

Images like these characterize Israel’s poetry and should be understood in their cultural context. The moving cries of laments, some from physical suffering, some as exclamations of innocence, and many for forgiveness, all seek help from the Lord. Surprisingly, a movement from trouble to trust characterizes many laments as the psalmist ends by expressing strong faith that the

Lord will hear—or in some cases already has heard—his cry. Readers identify with the intimate quality of the lament psalms and their emotional appeal for help.

Laments can provide wonderful encouragement for believers today by assuring us that the Lord both hears and knows what we go through. Hebrews 4:15 clearly shows us how the Lord Jesus identifies with all of our sufferings. The lament psalms also remind us that even as David and

others experienced difficult days, we too, can trust the Lord to carry us through and praise Him for providing for us so fully.

Wisdom Psalms

A smaller number of psalms can be grouped together as wisdom psalms. Marking these psalms is their contemplative tone and use of wisdom vocabulary. Words like *meditate*, *contemplate*, and *ponder* begin to sound a bit like Proverbs and characterize these psalms. For example, the struggles of the righteous do not appear to align with the prosperity of the wicked, especially when viewed in light of the statements of Psalm 1.

Psalm 73, then, provides a good example of the journey of one who became anxious about the problem of evil. The solution came into perspective when the psalmist viewed the picture through the eyes of the Lord. By contemplating the eternal destiny of the wicked, the psalmist was brought back to his standing in the Lord and the greater meaning of life. As believers we need to be reminded that our eternal destiny in Christ far out-

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Psalms (continued from page 2)

weighs the situations we struggle against on earth. As Paul explained, ours is an eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17). True wisdom seeks to view situations from God's point of view (1 Cor. 2:13).

Messianic Psalms

The prophetic nature of the psalms can be seen in those psalms that reveal aspects of the coming Messiah. Psalm 110, for example, the most frequently quoted Psalm in the NT, references both the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ and His high priestly ministry. Christ's quotation of Psalm 22 is recorded in all four Gospels and directs our meditation to other aspects of the crucifixion from this Psalm. Prophetic statements and allusions, written by David under

the guidance of the Spirit, help us to see the trajectory of the Old Testament and God's Word as a whole, as it dynamically moves forward in completion of His plan.

The Message of the Psalms

The powerful message of the Psalms is one reason that it is the most frequently cited book in the New Testament. Unlike narrative, the Psalms are primarily directed to the Lord. By meditating on the Psalms, the Holy Spirit turns our attention to the way people prayed and praised the Lord in the changing circumstances of life. Their focus on the Lord as Creator, Judge, King or Redeemer during moments of success or failure, along with invitations for others to join them, provides us with a greater appreciation

of who our God is and how He works, a point underscored by the many New Testament citations.

While other types of psalms exist it is important to remember that the Psalms are communal and seek to draw others into a stronger (and more verbal) relationship with the Lord. When giving thanks there is little change in our position; when praising, we elevate another above ourselves. However, when we worship, we not only lift up the Lord Jesus but we bow down humbly before Him. The Psalms are full of music and song and express the wide gamut of human emotions. But ultimately, they are about the Lord and should move believers to praise and worship the Lord Jesus Christ who alone is worthy. 

Oneness (continued from page 1)

Nevertheless, in the letter sent out from the council, we have this statement in verse 25, the literal rendering of which is, "It seemed good to us, becoming of one mind..." In other words, where disunity existed, there was now harmony. How did that happen?

Events of recent history outlining God's workings were recounted, testimonies and reports were shared, Scriptures were cited and a plan proposed. Apparently the evidence was compelling. This is a good lesson. Honest, open communication must not be viewed as an enemy, but as a friend. The Lord Jesus is "the truth," and He told us that the truth makes us free (John 8:32).

And what was the result? What could be clearer and more heart warming than the following statements: "Then it pleased the apostles and elders with the whole church to send chosen men..." (vs. 22). Note the next verse: "And they wrote letters by them after this manner: The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting..." (vs. 23). I have added the emphasis to show that the unity produced was not confined to the leadership!

The NT church is dependant upon the Lord, not only to open and close doors, but also to lead in the timing of decisions. When good men differ, it is wise to follow this principle: Stop, Pray, Communicate. History is clear that very often the mind of Christ does not lie with

the majority. Our desire to discover the Lord's mind in a matter must outweigh all other considerations—pressures from special interest groups, financial concerns, traditions, etc. Coming to oneness can be hard work! It can take time and prayer. But the reward is worth it all, as seen in the next point.

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3) Heart unity is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit

Apart from divine inspiration, how could a group explain intended plans by saying, "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."? (vs. 28). That is an amazing statement. Yet we may be sure it was true. And this was not someone's observation. It was in the letter written to all the churches! What lessons are here for us? Note that throughout the proceedings, we do not read that the Holy Spirit said anything. He had spoken clearly recently (see Acts 13:2). Accordingly, we can assume that the Spirit's leading was discerned through the unity of the believers. When saints are willing to meet together and communicate, and listen to one

another, they lay the foundation for the difficult but rewarding process described in vs. 25, "having come to one accord" (ESV). And what reward follows?

We know that one of the fruits of the Spirit is joy. When the letter was read to the churches throughout the region, we read that they "rejoiced for the consolation" (vs. 31). Certainly they were delighted with the favorable ruling, but no doubt a part of the joy was in knowing that the matter was settled. A clear word was given so that things were not left hanging to rise again later.

Twice in the chapter we find the words, "It seemed..." In vs. 25, the leaders took responsibility to meet and come to unity. In vs. 28, where the doctrine of salvation was at stake, God is mentioned before man, putting the authority where it needed to be.

Conclusion

Once again, a quote from Mr. A.C. Gabelein: "How different from the Church councils of the present time, with their political trickeries and machinery, their unscriptural division of God's people into clergy and laity, the making of laws and rules and their voting by ballot."

May the Lord raise up elders in His churches who have a concern for preserving heart unity among the saints in a biblical manner. 

Wives' Corner

The Power and Necessity of Prayer *by Marti Miller*

Prayer power has never been tried to its full capacity. If we want to see mighty wonders of divine power and grace wrought in the place of weakness, let us answer God's standing challenge, 'Call unto me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things which you know not.' Jer 33:3" (J. Hudson Taylor).

I don't know about you, dear sister, but as much as I believe in the power and necessity of prayer, I still seem to be weak in prayer. It took feeling my own sense of desperation as a very tired mother and wife to begin to devote myself to prayer. Why is it that it takes desperation to motivate us to prayer? Maybe it's because without Him we can do nothing and it takes seeing our weakness to want His strength. "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me" (John 15:4).

In my years of traveling life's road, time with the Lord has become precious, as it should be. God is always faithful to hear and respond to my prayers, sometimes in ways I cannot see. He has shown me that our strength is uniquely tied to

our prayer lives.

A good friend is at this moment in surgery. I cannot see her, yet I know that there are doctors and nurses around her as a very tedious and serious procedure is being performed. I cannot see her, but I know the One who does see her. And He is the One who is guiding that team. He is sitting beside her husband and her anxious mother as they wait for the procedure to be finished. All they, or I, can do as a friend is stand by in prayer and this is the greatest and most effective thing that

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we can do. Prayer is the vessel in which the Lord of the universe brings us into His work. This always amazes me! "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16).

Having married men in leadership roles, we are often perceived as being leaders. At times,

I feel so very weak and insufficient as "his" wife—because I am! We must draw near to God, being faithful and consistent in the Word and in prayer. Effective prayer is that which fully relies on an Almighty and Powerful God. When we cannot stand, when we are weak at best, we look to the One who "will show us great and mighty things which we do not

know." As He strengthens you, then you can encourage others through His Word.

Abram was called by God to follow and obey, and as his wife, Sarai also followed. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out...And he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Heb. 11:8). Sarai needed to learn many things about Abraham's God as she too wandered from place to place. Sarai grew in faith and learned of the faithfulness of God even amidst her mistakes, and God gave her a new name reflecting the woman she had become. Let us, like Sarah, follow on, growing strong in faith and strength. "By faith Sarah herself also received strength...and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised" (Heb. 11:11).

In the future, I would like to consider a few women of the Bible and look at their journeys of faith. In examining women like Sarai, Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah, we can learn much about their attitudes of faith and service.

2 Thessalonians 1:11: "With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of His calling, and that by His power He may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith" (NIV).



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Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.