

JOHN BUNYAN

AN EXHORTATION TO
PEACE AND UNITY

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[We deem it proper to state, that, though the following Treatise of Christian Union appears in nearly all the collected editions of Bunyan's Works, yet its genuineness has been called in question by the Rev. Mr Philip in his admirable work, "The Life and Times of Bunyan." Without here entering into this question, we have separately appended it to the works of Bunyan in this volume, and trust that it will not prove unacceptable to our readers, especially considering the efforts that are now being made to promote the living union of all true Christians who hold the one Lord, the one faith, and the one baptism.]

Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
—*Ephesians iv. 3.*

Beloved, religion is the great bond of human society; and it were well if itself were kept within the bond of unity; and that it may so be, let us, according to the text, use our utmost endeavours "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

These words contain a counsel and a caution: the counsel is, That we endeavour the unity of the Spirit; the caution is, That we do it in the bond of peace; as if I should say, I would have you live in unity, but yet I would have you to be careful that you do not purchase unity with the breach of charity.

Let us therefore be cautious that we do not so press after unity in practice and opinion as to break the bond of peace and affection.

In the handling of these words, I shall observe this method.

I. I shall open the sense of the text.

II. I shall shew wherein this unity and peace consist.

III. I shall shew you the fruits and benefits of it, together with nine inconveniences and mischiefs that attend those churches where unity and peace is wanting.

IV. And, lastly, I shall give you twelve directions and motives for the obtaining of it.

1. As touching the sense of the text, when ye are counselled to keep the unity of the Spirit, we are not to understand the Spirit of God, as personally so considered; because the Spirit of God, in that sense, is not capable of being divided, and so there would be no need for us to endeavour to keep the unity of it.

By the unity of the spirit then, we are to understand that unity of mind which the Spirit of God calls for, and requires Christians to endeavour after; hence it is that we are exhorted, by one spirit, with one mind, to strive together for the faith of the gospel; Phil. i. 27.

But farther, the apostle in these words alludes to the state and composition of a natural body, and doth thereby inform us, that the mystical body of Christ holds an analogy with the natural body of man: as, 1. In the natural body there must be a spirit to animate it; for the body without the spirit is dead; James ii. 26. So it is in the mystical body of Christ; the apostle no sooner tells of that one body, but he minds us of that one Spirit; Eph. iv. 4.

2. The body hath joints and hands to unite all the parts; so hath the mystical body of Christ; Col. ii. 19. This is that bond of peace mentioned in the text, as also in the 16th verse of the same chapter, where the whole body is said to be fitly joined together, and compacted, by that which every joint supplieth.

3. The natural body receives counsel and nourishment from the head; so doth the mystical body of Christ; he is their counsellor, and him they must hear; he is their head, and him they must hold: hence it is that the apostle complaineth, Col. ii. 19, of some that did not hold the head from which the whole body by joints and hands hath nourishment.

4. The natural body cannot well subsist, if either the spirit be wounded or the joints broken or dislocated; the body cannot bear a wounded or broken spirit—"A broken spirit drieth the bones;"

Prov. xvii. 22, and “A wounded spirit who can bear?” Prov. xviii. 14. And, on the other hand, how often have the disjointing of the body, and the breakings thereof, occasioned the expiration of the spirit? In like manner it fares with the mystical body of Christ; how do divided spirits break the bonds of peace, which are the joints of this body? And how do the breakings of the body and church of Christ wound the spirit of Christians, and oftentimes occasion the spirit and life of Christianity to languish, if not to expire. How needful is it then that we endeavour the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace!

II. I now come to shew you wherein this unity and peace consists; and this I shall demonstrate in five particulars.

1. This unity and peace may consist with the ignorance of many truths, and in the holding of some errors; or else this duty of peace and unity could not be practicable by any on this side perfection: but we must now endeavour the unity of the spirit, till we come to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God; Eph. iv. 13. Because now, as the apostle saith, “We know in part, and we prophesy in part,” and “Now we see through a glass darkly;” 1 Cor. xiii. 9, 12. And as this is true in general, so we may find it true if we descend to particular instances. The disciples seem to be ignorant of that great truth which they had often, and in much plainness, been taught by their Master once and again, viz., that his kingdom was not of this world, and that in the world they should suffer and be persecuted; yet in the 1st of the Acts, ver. 6, we read, that they asked of him if he would at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? thereby discovering that Christ’s kingdom (as they thought) should consist in his temporal jurisdiction over Israel, which they expected should now commence and take place amongst them. Again, our Lord tells them, that he had many things to say (and these were many important truths) which they could not now bear; John xvi. 12. And that these were important truths, appear by the 10th and 11th verses, where he is discoursing of righteousness and judgment, and then adds, that he had yet many things to say which they could not bear; and thereupon promises the Comforter to lead them into ALL TRUTH; which implies, that they were yet ignorant of many truths, and consequently held divers errors; and yet for all this, he prays for, and presses them to, their great duty of peace and unity; John xiv. 27; xvii. 21. To this may be added that of Heb. v. 11, where the author saith, he had many things to say of the priestly office of Christ, which by reason of their dulness they were not capable to receive; as also that in the 10th of the Acts, where Peter seems to be ignorant of the truth, viz., that the gospel was to be preached to all nations; and contrary hereunto, he erred in thinking it unlawful to preach amongst the Gentiles. I shall add two texts more, one in Acts xix., where we read that those disciples which had been discipled and baptized by John were yet ignorant of the Holy Ghost, and knew not (as the text tells us) whether there were any holy Ghost or no; though John did teach constantly, that he that should come after him should baptize with the Holy Ghost and fire. From hence we may easily and plainly infer, that Christians may be ignorant of many truths, by reason of weak and dull capacities, and other such like impediments, even while those truths are with much plainness delivered to them. Again, we read, Heb. v. 13, of some that were unskilful in the word of righteousness, who nevertheless are called babes in Christ, and with whom unity and peace is to be inviolably kept and maintained.

2. As this unity and peace may consist with the ignorance of many truths, and with the holding some errors, so it must consist with (and it cannot consist without) the believing and practising those things which are necessary to salvation and church-communion; and they are, 1st, Believing that Christ the Son of God died for the sins of men. 2d, That whoever believeth ought to be baptized. The third thing essential to this communion, is a holy and a blameless conversation.

(1.) That believing that the Son of God died for the sins of men is necessary to salvation, I prove by these texts, which tell us, that he that doth not believe shall be damned, Mark xvi. 16; John iii. 36; Rom. x. 9.

That it is also necessary to church-communion appears from Matt. xvi. 16–18. Peter having confessed that Christ was the Son of the living God, Christ thereupon assures Peter, that upon this

rock, viz., this profession of faith, or this Christ which Peter had confessed, he would build his church, and the gates of hell should not prevail against it. And, 1 Cor. iii. 11, the apostle having told the Corinthians that they were God's building, presently adds, that they could not be built upon any foundation but upon that which was laid, which was Jesus Christ. All which proves, that Christian society is founded upon the profession of Christ; and not only scripture, but the laws of right reason, dictate this, that some rules and orders must be observed for the founding all society, which must be consented to by all that will be of it. Hence it comes to pass, that to own Christ as the Lord and head of Christians is essential to the founding of Christian society.

(2.) The Scriptures have declared, that this faith gives the professors of it a right to baptism, as in the case of the eunuch, Acts viii. When he demanded why he might not be baptized, Philip answered, that if he believed with all his heart, he might. The eunuch thereupon confessing Christ, was baptized.

Now, that baptism is essential to church-communion, I prove from 1 Cor. xii., where we shall find the apostle labouring to prevent an evil use that might be made of spiritual gifts, as thereby to be puffed up, and to think that such as wanted them were not of the body, or to be esteemed members: he thereupon resolves, that whoever did confess Christ, and own him for his head, did it by the Spirit, ver. 3, though they might not have such a visible manifestation of it as others had, and therefore they ought to be owned as members, as appears, ver. 23. And not only because they have called him Lord by the Spirit, but because they have, by the guidance and direction of the same Spirit, been baptized, ver. 13, "For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body," &c. I need not go about to confute that notion that some of late have had of this text., viz., that the baptism here spoken of is the baptism of the Spirit, because you have not owned and declared that notion as your judgment, but on the contrary, all of you that I have ever conversed with, have declared it to be understood of baptism with water, by the direction of the Spirit: If so, then it follows, that men and women are declared members of Christ's body by baptism, and cannot be by scripture reputed and esteemed so without it; which farther appears from Rom. vi. 5, where men by baptism are said to be "planted" into the likeness of his death and Col. ii. 12, we are said to be "buried with him" by baptism. All which, together with the consent of all Christians (some few in these later times excepted), do prove that baptism is necessary to the initiating persons into the Church of Christ.

(3.) Holiness of life is essential to church-communion, because it seems to be the reason why Christ founded a church in the world, viz., that men might thereby be watched over, and kept from falling; and that if any be overtaken with a fault, he that is spiritual might restore him, that by this means men and women might be preserved without blame to the coming of Christ; and the grace of God teacheth us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly and uprightly in this present evil world; Tit. ii. 11, 12. "And let every one that nameth the name of Christ, depart from iniquity;" 2 Tim. ii. 19. And James tells us (speaking of the Christian religion), that "pure religion, and undefiled before God, is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep ourselves unspotted from the world;" James i. 27. From all which (together with many more texts that might be produced) it appears, that an unholy and profane life is inconsistent with Christian religion and society; and that holiness is essential to salvation and church-communion. So that these three things, faith, baptism, and a holy life, as I said before, all churches must agree and unite in, as those things which, when wanting, will destroy their being. And let not any think, that when I say, believing the Son of God died for the sins of men is essential to salvation and church-communion, that I hereby would exclude all other articles of the Christian creed as not necessary; as the belief of the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment, &c., which, for want of time, I omit to speak particularly to, and the rather, because I understand this great article of believing the Son of God died for the sins of men is comprehensive of all others, and is that from whence all other articles may easily be inferred.

And here I would not be mistaken, as though I held there was nothing else for Christians to practise, when I say this is all that is requisite to church-communion; for I very well know, that Christ requires many other things of us, after we are members of his body, which, if we knowingly or maliciously refuse, may be the cause, not only of excommunication, but damnation. But yet these are such things as relate to the well-being and not to the being of churches; as laying on of hands in the primitive times upon believers, by which they did receive the gifts of the Spirit: This, I say, was for the increase and edifying of the body, and not that thereby they might become of the body of Christ, for that they were before. And do not think that I believe laying on of hands was no apostolical institution, because I say men are not thereby made members of Christ's body, or because I say that it is not essential to church-communion. Why should I be thought to be against a fire in the chimney, because I say it must not be in the thatch of the house? Consider, then, how pernicious a thing it is to make every doctrine (though true) the bond of communion; this is that which destroys unity, and by this rule all men must be perfect before they can be in peace: for do we not see daily, that as soon as men come to a clearer understanding of the mind of God (to say the best of what they hold), that presently all men are excommunicable, if not damnable, that do not agree with them. Do not some believe and see that to be pride and covetousness, which others do not, because (it may be) they have more narrowly and diligently searched into their duty of these things than others have? What then?

Must all men that have not so large acquaintance of their duty herein be excommunicated? Indeed it were to be wished that more moderation in apparel and secular concerns were found among churches: but God forbid, that if they should come short herein, that we should say, as one lately said, that he could not communicate with such a people, because they were proud and superfluous in their apparel.

Let me appeal to such, and demand of them, if there was not a time, since they believed and were baptized, wherein they did not believe laying on of hands a duty? and did they not then believe, and do they not still believe, they were members of the body of Christ? And was not there a time when you did not so well understand the nature and extent of pride and covetousness as now you do? And did you not then believe, and do you not still believe, that you were true members of Christ, though less perfect? Why then should you not judge of those that differ from you herein, as you judged of yourselves when you were as they now are? How needful then is it for Christians to distinguish (if ever they would be at peace and unity) between those truths which are essential to church-communion, and those that are not?

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