

Ephesians 4:1 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,

² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

³ making every effort to ***maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***

⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,

⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in [you] all.

⁷ But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ...

¹¹ The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

¹³ until all of us come to the ***unity of the faith and of the knowledge*** of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

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God bless this Word to our understanding. Amen

Our conference theme carries both assurance and challenge: *Gifted with Promise, extending God's table*. The assurance is the promise we already have and the challenge is to extend the table to God only knows where or who!

This balance ---between what we already have and what we have yet to achieve --- is why we need each other at Annual Conference. Brethren from all over the map get together to **anchor our faith in the rock-solid-promise while leaning into God's longed-for-future: *Gifted with Promise, extending God's table.***

The two come together here and now.

I love the table image. Like many of you, we have a dinner table at home that expands. At its smallest it fits our family of four comfortably; but when extended, it accommodates three times as many people.

And here's the neat thing: all the extra boards for expanding that table are stored inside the table itself. Have you seen these? To extend the table all we need do is open it up and offer the promise it already carries.

You delegates are the latest in a long line of Brethren who, over the centuries, have helped us keep hold of the promise and extend God's table. And you may have noticed: Sometimes that's not easy.

There's a lot of hubbub in our church about the query raised two years ago at Annual Conference. I'm talking about the query asking if Brethren are allowed to join Secret Societies. What you may not know is that we already answered this question in 1828 but evidently not all Brethren were abiding by the rule of the Meeting so it was brought up again in 1847, 1852, 1855 (twice), then 1859, 1862, 1866, 1869, 1870, 1871, 1872, 1878, 1879, 1881, 1888, 1889, 1893, and 1895ⁱ --- and that's just in the 1800's. [How's the typist doing?] {awesome!}

Most recently, last year, we ruled again on secret, oath-bound societies. By the way, we're not in favor of them. Brethren have always said we won't pledge allegiance to anything other than God. But this year, we changed the definition of secret societies. NOW we CAN pledge to a Fraternity or Sorority, but not to the Freemasons (or, as was the case in the 1800's, the Society of Know-nothings.)

I kid you not. You can't make this stuff up!

One of my favorite Brethren discussions was about beards.ⁱⁱ In 1804 we ruled that it was wrong to ordain ... a brother who shaves off his beard. We said that "God made man with a beard and clearly commanded His people not to shave," and even though we couldn't prove it, we believed that Jesus and his disciples all had beards ---and set us an example.

Our debate on this topic lasted for 100 years and is recorded in the annual conference minutes as serious business. Could you cut off your beard? No. Could you trim your beard? No. Could you have a mustache? Yes. If it was part of the beard. In fact it was called a "beard on the upper lip." Could you have a beard without a mustache? Yes. Could you have a mustache without a beard? No.

If you had a beard of the upper lip, were you required to trim it? Yes. Why? So it would not interfere with the Holy Kiss.

As things began to change, but before we came to one mind, a question arose: If your previous congregation allowed you to shave and you moved to a new church which did not, could your new church withhold membership because you shaved your beard? Yes.

Back in the days when conference moderators had to be unanimously approved by Standing Committee, one nomination was held up by a single Standing Committee delegate who refused to support him because he had no beard.

During a break, someone took the delegate aside to explain that the beardless brother was simply born that way---physically unable to grow a beard. And when the group reconvened, the vote was unanimous and we had our first beardless moderator, J. W. Lear.ⁱⁱⁱ

One reason I like looking at old conflicts is because it is helpful to remember that we survived. Sometimes it took a hundred years, but we did it. And I notice that the way we treated each other during the argument was often more significant, in the long run, than what we actually decided. You can feel this in the minutes.

Now, some Brethren complain that we should stop looking to our minutes and go to the Bible first for our answers. I agree!

By the way, so did the Annual Conference in 1857. So let's look to the Bible this morning. And rather than reading the Bible into our arguments, let's look at the biblical argument about arguing.

What does the Bible says about unity?

It's astonishing: In the entire New Testament, the Greek word translated "unity" occurs two times.

Of course the CONCEPT of being united is expressed so many times its hard to ignore: "... no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ." (Gal. 3:28)

And "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'" (1Cor 12:21)

And "...be all of one mind having compassion one of another, love as Brethren, have pity and be humble." (1Pet 3:8 KJV)

Or read Jesus' prayer in the Gospel of John where he asks the Father that his followers would be one. (John 17:11)

The concept is unavoidable.

But out of 140,000 Greek words in the New Testament, the specific word for unity, *Henotas*, occurs only twice ... both here in Ephesians 4 where we learn

that Christian unity has two parts: first is a unity we already have and second is a unity which we have yet to achieve.

Graced by Promise; extending the table.

First from Ephesians 4:3 “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,³ making every effort to **maintain the unity** of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Notice that verb: **Maintain**.

The Unity of the Spirit is something we have already been given--- something Jesus prayed for and paid for. It is a unity we are instructed to maintain, something to protect, preserve, uphold, sustain.

What a blessing; what a gift; what a promise ---- this Unity of the Spirit!!

If we don't have it, it is not because we never received it;

If we don't have it, it's not because it is impossible to have;

If we don't have it, it's because we have failed to maintain it.

The first time the Greek word for unity is used in the entire Bible it is this plea to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

And the REASON we are to maintain **that** unity is so we can get to the other kind of unity. The second unity comes in verse 13 where it talks about how we are to use our diverse gifts. Remember? Some are teachers, some preachers, some evangelists, some prophets FOR BUILDING UP THE BODY OF CHRIST until all of us come to the unity of the faith.

Catch that? Come to the Unity....

The first type of unity is something we have already been given and the second is a unity we DO NOT YET HAVE ... it is a unity for which we strive, something we are to work toward and “come to, together.”

As people of faith, Sisters and Brothers, our differences can help us mature in faith as One Body with One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, and One God... if we let them.

You see, disagreement within the Body of Christ is not just something to tolerate, it is necessary for maturity. Conservative New York Times columnist David Brooks said recently, "... you need people that disagree with you to correct your own weaknesses and your own ignorance. You need the conversation."^{iv}

Throughout our history progressives, conservatives, and in-between-ers, were needed to keep the Body of Christ healthy. We need voices as varied as those in the Bible itself if this Body of Christ is to come to the full stature of Christ.

Our progressive voice urges us forward with a prophetic witness and helps us stay relevant and responsive in a changing world. It echoes Isaiah 43 --- "Remember not the former things nor consider the things of old ... behold, God is doing a new thing." We need the progressive witness.

But sometimes I worry. Let's not forget that our goal is to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and not by conforming to the world.

So too we need the conservative voice affirming the trustworthiness of scripture and calling for obedience to God regardless of social pressure. It echoes Isaiah 46 "**Remember** the former things of old; for I am God, ... saying, 'My purpose shall stand, and I will finish what I started.'" We need the conservative voice.

But sometimes I worry that we will forget that our goal is to become obedient to Christ in each new generation and that our zeal for the past will smother the Spirit.

So then we also need the voice in the middle --- folks ready to turn our attention, get busy worshiping God, following Jesus, and reaching out to those in need of the Good News.

We need the prophetic voice toward a unity of the Spirit to help us listen for the still, small voice of God beyond the earthquakes, the hurricanes, and flaming rhetoric of our day.

But sometimes I worry that we get so tired of fighting that we will forget that there often is a goal worth fighting toward.

We need the whole collection of different body parts if we are to be the living Body of Christ.

The question isn't who; it's how.

How would Christ anchor the promise while extending the table?

That's what the earliest church asked. God was calling them to extend the table and extend the right hand of fellowship to clean shaven, uncircumcised Gentiles --- people who, on purpose, cut off the stuff God said not to cut and refused to cut off what God's word to them to.

How did the early church work this out? With all humility and gentleness, and forbearing, sharing what our Lord would argue AND *how* he would argue it

If what we hear from passionate speeches does not sound like it comes from the heart of God, then it's probably not going to help us find the mind of Christ.

Because the word of Christ is carried by the Spirit of Christ. As Eugene Peterson says, Since Jesus is the Way AND the Truth then the Jesus Truth is true only when it is brought in the Jesus Way.

You can read the minutes of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

They held firm to the promise while yielding to God's future and letting go of the past; they merged their love of God with their love of neighbor. And they did it in a way that did not break the unity of the Spirit on their way to the unity of faith.

That's what their minutes say; what will ours?

i See Miller, Price, and Hays, *Revised Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the German Baptist Brethren*, Mount Morris, Ill., Brethren Publishing House, 1899, pp. 151-155 and Winger, Longenecker, and Studebaker, *Revised Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Church of the Brethren from 1778 to 1922*, Elgin, Illinois, Brethren Publishing House, 1922, pp.193-195.

ii Miller, Price, and Hays, *Revised Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the German Baptist Brethren*, Mount Morris, Ill., Brethren Publishing House, 1899, pp. 63, 119-122.

iii Story from conversation with Robert C Bowman, 2010.

iv David Brooks interviewed on the Diane Rhem show March 10, 2011, talking about his book *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement*, Random House, 2011. <http://thedianerheshow.org/shows/2011-03-10>