

## Welcome and Reminders

Welcome to any visitors and welcome back to the group members. It is important to remember that everything said and done in this group is confidential. The expectation is that there will not be discussion about our conversations to anyone outside of the group that is represented here and now. We understand that sometimes personal insights or information may be shared by someone who feels comfortable doing so in this group and not around others. Let's be respectful of that and carry our commitment to confidentiality as we leave this group. *(Pass out the confidentiality reminder to anyone who has not yet received one).*

## Prayer and Praises

---

---

---

---

## Introduction

As I researched the Scriptures and Strong's concordance, I was amazed to find only three references for the term "unity," and two of those I found in Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus (Ephesians).

Many of us have experienced first hand the lack of unity in various churches over time, and I'm surprised at how little we hear about this very important quality. According to *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*, unity is defined as "The state or fact of being one; oneness." We read in the John's gospel that Jesus prayed that we would all become one even as our Heavenly Parent and Jesus are one – Jesus in us and the Parent in Jesus that all may be perfect (or complete) as one.

The subject for this study is maintaining unity of the Holy Spirit through the bond of peace. In Ephesians 4:3, we read, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." Various versions of the Bible translate the terms "to keep" in different ways such as "to keep yourselves" (NLT), "eager to maintain" (ESV), "joined together" (NCV), and "to remain as one" (NIRV), to name a few. Regardless of how this particular Scripture is translated, it seems that abiding in the bond of God's peace is crucial to living as one in the unity of the Spirit. And, as we live with/among one another revealing the oneness that we have with Christ, we grow to closer to God, whose love continues to thrive and grow within our innermost beings.

## Oneness

The term “oneness” or “unity” can mean various things. However, in the Ephesians passage noted above the writer is concerned that as Christians we strive to maintain the oneness that God has already provided for us through Christ. In the first chapter of Ephesians we learn that God’s intention through Christ is to gather together as one everything in the universe: “God made known to us the mystery of God’s will according to God’s good pleasure, which God purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment — to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Ephesians 1:9-10)(NIV). Truly, we have the oneness of God’s unity already alive and at work in us. Although the perfection or completion of this reality has yet to be manifested in all its fullness, we have the power through Christ to grow together in the unity of the Spirit. The reconciling blood of Jesus continually encourages us to remain in relationship with God and one another, and as we abide in Christ as Christ abides in us, we can enjoy ongoing communion and fellowship with God and each other.

Although we may not always agree, we can let the Holy Spirit more regularly express God’s own Person through what we think, feel, intuit, perceive, and how we treat one another. We then live as the family of God we were created to be. The following scriptures encourage us to strive to live as one body, growing and thriving together as a harmonious whole: “You are joined together with peace through the Spirit, so make every effort to continue together in this way” (Ephesians 4:3); “Even more than all this, clothe yourself in love. Love is what holds you all together in perfect unity” (Colossians 3:14); “and in the same way, we are many, but in Christ we are all one body. Each one is a part of that body, and each part belongs to all the other parts” (Romans 12:5). So, as we strive to grow in our faith as individuals as well as together as one body, we remind one another how important and good it is “when God’s people live together in unity!” (Psalm 133).

- *Share your thoughts with the group about what maintaining the unity of the Spirit means for you and how you strive to maintain that unity with others.*

## The Bond of Peace

John Wesley said, “The whole world is my parish.” When we grow in our relationship with God, we sense a common bond, a bond that holds us all together in love. When Christ makes a home within our hearts, we experience the bond of God’s perfect peace that transcends space and time and helps us to grow together in unity with each other (Ephesians 4:3). In every way, God encourages us to trust in God’s love for the strength and willingness to live as God’s children. With God’s love alive and active within us, we can maintain and thrive in the unity of the Spirit through grace that works on our behalf. Whether we feel like loving one another or not, we forget sometimes that God works with us right where we’re at, regardless of how we feel. And when we depend on the same Spirit that has already joined us together with the bond of peace, we become more humble, gentle, and patient with one another.

When we grow to love one another as Christ loves us, we learn that gentleness and patience work together. We discover and rediscover the willingness and strength to grow together in God’s bond of peace. In Acts 9:31 we read that the church became stronger, as the Holy Spirit encouraged it and

helped it grow. When we continue to nourish our own relationship with God, the Holy Spirit empowers us to support one another during our struggles, and the entire Christian community thrives in peace and becomes stronger over time.

Also, there is a bond of interdependence we maintain as the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:24-25 we read, "... But God has put the body together and given the highest dignity to the parts that lacked so that there would be no division in the body and so that the parts would have equal regard for one another" (NTILB). As we become well nurtured and fully alive to serve God in our communities, the love of God becomes more apparent to the people we serve.

- *Share your thoughts about growing in the peace of Christ. How has spending time with God through studying Scripture, in prayer, and active in areas of service helped you to grow in your relationship with God and others?*

## Working Together as Christians and in the World

In Thomas Merton's *Essential Writings*, the author discusses unity and ecumenical activity among all peoples. He urges the reader to consider that building unity includes working together, negotiating with others where we can, and remaining lovingly and yearnfully silent for God's love to guide us where we are not able to agree. Put another way, Merton states that, "it is work not of negotiation only, not of discussion, diplomacy, and theology, but above all sacrifice, suffering, expiation, and prayer" and that, "this silence must not however be the mere dumbness of the disconcerted. It must be turned to God in wakeful hope. It must be a religious silence of **listening** and of **beseeking**, in which the **simplicity** of the poorest and most humble prayer reaches out to God, not presenting God with projects God must fulfill, but **waiting** on God's time and God's initiative" (emphases mine)(pgs. 180 and 182).

In this same work, Merton includes a section titled, "He is Risen." After reading this selection, I came to believe that as we continue to grow in Christ by walking in the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Love, each day and one day at a time, we discover that the phrase "Jesus is risen" becomes a greater reality for us. This means Christ is at work within us, empowering us to walk in God's presence through walls of intolerance, indifference, fear, etc., in the same way Jesus appeared to the disciples after having walked through the wall of the upper room after his resurrection.

- *As you consider these ideas, what do you believe is important for us today in revealing the "unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace," not only within the family of God but also in the world around us?*
- *Open Discussion: Any further thoughts and reflections you'd like to share?*