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Beverly E.C.C, Chicago, IL

“HOPE FOR FELLOWSHIP”
First Thessalonians 5:13-15

● **“How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!”** (Psalm 133:1).

As for *living together*, we spend most of our hours apart. Work, school, family, home management, and a thousand other commitments separate us. Those things can be very good; but what do the physical and temporal distance do to our life together?

As for *God’s people*, many of us interact far more with secularists, people of other faiths and nominal Christians than with intentional disciples. We are called to be in the world; but what does the disproportionate volume of contacts do to our identity in Christ?

As for *unity*, the inharmonious thinking of this conflicted world has *some* impact on us. What do those divisions do to our shared faith, hope, and love, and our common mission, and our mutual relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

☑ All that notwithstanding, we can **“live together in unity”** *if* – only *if* – God is over this congregation as our leader, under us as our foundation, around us as our limit, and within us as our beating heart. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it: {Life Together, 23-25}

**a Christian comes to others only through Jesus
.... Christ opened up the way to God and to our
brother. Now Christians can live [together] in**

peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only by way of Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one, only through him are we bound together.... Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.

That is not to say that authentic fellowship is inevitable. What our Lord makes possible for his Church is not always actualized in his Church. Living **“together in unity”** requires human effort as well as the work of God’s indwelling Holy Spirit.

So *how can we* do our part to *guard, deepen, and strengthen the fellowship God has given us?*

☐ 1st Th. 5:13-15 does not teach us all we need to know about unity; still, it is a good place to start.

■ Verses 12-13: **“Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.”**

⚪ The implications for pastoral relations are obvious. However, Paul’s emphasis is not on position or title, but on ministry. Anyone (pastor or layperson, board member or volunteer) who serves in the Church with devotion and responsibility merits high regard.

Paul is not suggesting that we should give our leaders “the royal treatment” or blind obedience, much less that we leaders should demand it of others. That would violate every N.T. principle of leadership.

He is saying that leaders deserve respect, encouragement, and cooperation. We are to treat them, not as hired hands to do the ministry for us, as resources to be used up, or as scapegoats for our problems, but as brothers and sisters whom God has appointed to help the family grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps this is hard to swallow. Autonomy is a core value in North American culture. Many of our heroes (historical and fictional) have thumbed their noses at the establishment and said, "You can't tell me what to do."

Scripture takes a different approach. God requires Church leaders to live as servants who neither demand special privileges nor throw their weight around. At the same time, God requires the Church to listen to their leaders and pull with them in the same direction.

☪ This is a call to collaborative ministry and mission. The attitude and practice of cooperation guards, deepens, and strengthens Christian fellowship. Collaborative ministry and mission are indispensable to "[living] **together in unity!**"

■ On to verse 14: "**And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.**"

The apostle Paul uses four dynamic verbs here.

★ 1st, he urges us to "**warn the idle and disruptive.**" "Warn" points to correction that is equal parts kindness and forthrightness.

☹ The "**idle and disruptive**" are consumers and busybodies who do not roll up their sleeves and actually do the ministry. They watch others work – then freely offer

their "suggestions" when someone on the field drops the ball or fails to score.

Sometimes I am tempted to put these Monday morning quarterbacks in their place with a good tongue-lashing. But no: we are to clearly, gently invite them to start working with us and stop criticizing us.

★ 2nd, he urges us to "**encourage the disheartened.**" That word literally means "**to draw near and speak.**"

☹ "**The disheartened**" are anxious, defeated Christians. Like Eeyore they expect the worst to happen and travel under a self-generated cloud of gloom

{*Companion*, 11/'10} "**One [current] book on personal success** [calls such people] '**time killers**'" and advises us to "**weed them out**" because they cannot help us achieve our goals. But no: we are to get close to them and speak words of courage and strength.

★ 3rd, he urges us to "**help the weak.**" This verb evokes the image of someone holding on with a firm grip.

☹ {Ro 14; 1 Co 8} When Paul speaks of "**the weak,**" he has in mind believers who take an excessively firm stand on disputable matters (such as dancing or alcohol). Like the cartoonish "Church Lady" they strictly abstain, and are quick to judge others who partake.

It might seem backward to label such folk "**the weak**" because of their strong convictions. However, the Creator graced us with a conscience so that we

can live in liberty, free of both licentiousness and legalism. **“The weak”** are so concerned to flee the blatant sins of the Prodigal that they fall prey to the subtler, yet deadly sins of the Pharisee.

Those who are not weak tend to avoid them, so as not to get burned by their scathing criticism. But no: we are to put our arms around them so that they might and gently help them to share in the freedom of Christ.

★ 4th, he urges us to **“be patient with everyone.”**

☹ Church life is seldom easy, in part because we are so different. Our congregation is home to a dizzying array of histories, personalities, gifts, and quirks. This is a source of great beauty, opportunity and strength; but as in a dysfunctional family it is also a potential cause of irritation, misunderstanding, and dislike. And so Paul counsels patience.

→ Elsewhere, Paul explains that {Gal 5:22-23} **“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”** The comforting news is that we don’t have to create our own patience: it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The discomfoting news is that if God’s Spirit dwells within, we have no excuse for our impatience.

⊕ **“Warn,” “encourage,” “help,” “be patient”**: in short, v. 14 is a call to mutual accountability and investment in each other’s lives. These are part and parcel of **“[[living] together in unity!”**

■ Now for verse 15: **“Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.”**

→ There is nothing new about this. Hear the Word of the Lord: {Mt 5:38-39}

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.... You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven....”

{Lk 6:27} **“I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”** And so on, and so forth.

Christ Jesus’ spoken teachings and revelatory deeds establish non-violent resistance, inexhaustible forgiveness and self-giving service as the new norm for the people of God in every time, place and circumstance.

⊕ We could develop this much further, but you know where I am going with this. This is a call to reciprocal αγαπε love. Such love guards, deepens, and strengthens Christian fellowship. We must love **“each other”** (and, for that matter, **“everyone else”**) if we are going to **“live together in unity!”**

Collaborative ministry and mission, mutual accountability and investment in each other’s lives, and reciprocal love will take us a long way on our quest to **“live together in unity!”**

Some scoff at the idea. They say, “It’s impossible” – and with some reason. Our culture is increasingly fractured, and much of the institutional Church has followed suit.

Frankly, if it depended solely on our abilities, our will, our efforts, there would be no hope for real fellowship here at Beverly Covenant Church. But though the Lord calls us to strive for our unity, it is not necessary for us to do it in our own strength.

Bonhoeffer got it right: **“in Jesus Christ” we “can live [together] in peace... can love and serve one another... can become one.”** Authentic fellowship and real **“community...consists...in what Christ has done,”** and continues to do in, to, through, and among you, me, and all of us.

Deep, vibrant Church fellowship is not a fantasy. It is not an oxymoron. It is not a contradiction in terms.

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