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Bearing With One Another: The Pastoral Task in Times of Struggle

Psalm 133

[1] How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
[2] It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
[3] It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

Conversely, how injurious and unpleasant it is when kindred are alienated by distrust, disagreement, or disdain. There is hardly a more miserable place than a family table where those seated side by side are at bitter odds. Even if the hostility lies between just two of those at table, everyone present is set on edge by the tension.

The psalmist's metaphors — oil flowing down the priestly beard and robe, dew descending upon the mountains — are deeply cryptic choices for analogies of family unity. Whatever else they may suggest, both metaphors share at least one striking similarity — the oil and dew descend from above to cover that which lies beneath. It's basic, old-fashioned trickle-down economics: the blessing of unity does not surge upward from the goodwill of peaceful people, but flows down to us from the Creator of all that is good (James 1:17).

The psalmist wraps up this rather enigmatic hymn by underscoring the top-down nature of kindred in unity — there the Lord ordains blessing. This ordination of blessing is a top-down action; it all proceeds from God. Yet enjoyment of this divine blessing requires human receptivity and nurture.

This psalm thus leads us at least to this most basic understanding: The unity of God's people originates in God; it is entirely gift. The question is not whether we

can *achieve* it, but whether we will *accept* it, and live as though it were in fact already a present reality.

The Reformed tradition has historically affirmed the given unity of the church. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) maintains this tradition with an unqualified affirmation that the church's unity is essential to its identity. This foundational affirmation has relentlessly impelled it to the forefront of ecumenical leadership locally, nationally, and globally. According to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s constitution, "The unity of the Church is a gift of its Lord."[1]

The English word "unity" appears just three times in the King James Version of the Bible — once in Psalm 133, and twice in Ephesians 4.[2] Yet the theme of oneness among God's people is woven throughout Scripture. The fact that the Greek word translated "unity" occurs nowhere in the New Testament outside Ephesians 4 counsels caution toward making the achievement of church unity a primary strategic objective. Church unity is not ours to produce; it is a gift to be received and faithfully displayed, as public testimony that God in Christ is indeed with us. Yet, while the church's unity is not ours to produce, we *do* set the tone that nurtures or withers it, illuminates or darkens it, enhances or defaces it, affirms or denies it.

The oneness of God's people, including the oneness of Israel with the Christian church, is a cornerstone of Reformed theology. The concrete way the church affirms the oneness of God is by demonstrating holy oneness as God's covenant people. The oneness of God's elect is rooted in, and reflects, the oneness of God. In commenting on Ephesians 4, Karl Barth puts the point eloquently:

> In all the riches of His divine being the God who reconciled the world with Himself in Jesus Christ is One. Jesus Christ, elected the Head of all men and as such their Representative who includes them all in Himself in His risen and crucified body is One. The Holy Spirit in the fullness and diversity of His gifts is One. In the same way His community as the gathering of the men who know and confess Him can only be one.[3]
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> A plurality of Churches … means a plurality of lords, a plurality of spirits, a plurality of gods. There is no doubt that to the extent that Christendom does consist of actually different and opposing Churches, to that extent it denies practically what it confesses theoretically—the unity and the singularity of God, of Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit.[4]

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[1] *Book of Order* [Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)], G-4.0200.
[2] The New Revised Standard version contains two additional uses of the English word unity: Zechariah names one of his prophetic staves "Unity" in the NRSV (KJV: "bands"), and chooses to translate a term ordinarily rendered "like mindedness" as "unity" in 1 Peter 3:8.
[3] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1,* tr. G. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 668.
[4] *Ibid.,* 675.

Thus Barth trenchantly reminds us that to be divided from one another is tantamount to denying the unity of the triune God, the One who has ordained us to bear witness to the divine nature by living together in familial affection. This is nothing less than a first-order confirmation of our very election. In the apostolic formulation, our participation in the divine nature is the "very reason" we "must make every effort to support [our] faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love."[5] Faith in the one God is made credible and tangible as we reflect the nature of the one God by loving one another with enduring mutual affection. To live in this way, the text concludes, is "to confirm your call and election." The psalmist says of the heathen that they are like the gods in which they trust; by the same token, the people who trust in the one triune God will be like the one in whom they trust — they will dwell together in unity.[6]

Being and Becoming

Perhaps Dietrich Bonhoeffer's most significant theological legacy lies in his ecclesiology — his first major scholarly work, *The Communion of Saints*, set the trajectory for his theological labors for years to come. His most widely circulated book is the wonderful exploration of Christian community, *Life Together*.[7] After spending a year in New York at Union Seminary, Bonhoeffer penned an essay, "Protestantismus ohne Reformation" ("Protestantism Without Reformation"), offering his account for the way in which Continental and American theologians seemed incapable of adequately understanding each other.[8] Bonhoeffer argued that the reason Americans and Europeans have such difficulty understanding each other theologically is that they understand the essential nature of the church in radically different ways.

In the European experience, according to Bonhoeffer, the church has been one from its inception. The church's challenge in Europe, and thus the reality which

[5] 2 Peter 1:4–10
[6] See Psalm 115:1-8.
[7] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, tr. John Doberstein (New York: Harper, 1954); *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*, tr. R. Gregor Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).
[8] Still untranslated into English, this essay is included in Bonhoeffer's *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 1*, ed. E. Bethge (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958), 323–354. A fascinating instance of this phenomenon of cross-Atlantic misunderstanding is the famous correspondence between Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth on the pages of *The Christian Century*, October 1948 through February 1949, in the wake of the 1948 Amsterdam Assembly of the WCC. The series of articles continued a conversation in which they attempted to conduct a dialogue between American and Continental theology, but spent most of their energies pointing out how each was misunderstanding the other.

shapes the trajectory of its theology, is to display in deeper faithfulness the unity of fellowship, worship, and mission that have properly belonged to it all along. But in the American experiment, churches were divided from the start. America's European colonies were first of all havens for various religious communities that had been marginalized from the mainstream churches. The European church was grounded in unity, but the American church has been fragmented from its foundation.

Thus, European theology has generally been shaped by the sense that the church's primary task is *ontological*, to be true to what it already is. But in America, the challenge has more generally been to develop, compare, arbitrate between, and bring together (in modest ways at least) a vastly diverse set of communities and doctrines. In this context, the church's primary task is *eschatological*, focusing more on what it is to become than on what it already is, a task to which American theology has been especially fitted. On the continent, the focus is more on *being*; meanwhile west of the Atlantic the emphasis is on *becoming*.

In Europe, church renewal is therefore characteristically understood as a challenge of excising ecclesial corruption, i.e., of *reformation*. In America, however, renewal movements have typically sought something far more revolutionary, to move radically "back to the future," overcoming the corruptions of church life by disowning extant ecclesial structures and their histories, and re-creating the original apostolic community. Rather than reformation, the goal of American Christianity has bent toward *restoration*. In the Continental understanding, spiritual legitimacy and integrity derive from being in continuity with and accountability to the one people of God. But in the classic American approach, ecclesial legitimacy is proven not by continuity with historical ecclesial communities, but by tapping directly into the primitive biblical church.

One cannot read Luther or Calvin, Wesley or the Pietists, without quickly encountering their passion to reconnect the church to the depths and riches bequeathed to us by the generations of saints upon whose shoulders we stand.[9] The last thing they intended was to start new churches. In contrast, American major religious reform movements, from Campbellites to Adventists to Mormons to Jehovah's Witnesses to Pentecostals, typically have sought to break away entirely from the corruptions

[9] Indeed, Calvin cites Augustine nearly as much as he cites Paul.

in existing church traditions by founding new, pristine colonies of the primitive New Testament church.[10]

Embracing Gifts, Pursuing Goals

Ephesians 4 presents the unity of the church in a way that encompasses both of these broad perspectives. In verse 3, unity of the Spirit is described as something to be guarded, watched over (*téreo*) with utmost care. It is already a given reality, rooted in the unity of God, its source. Gerhard Kittel notes, "Eph. 4:3 presupposes that the unity created by the Spirit is given from the commencement and not something yet to be effected."[11] This text picks up and amplifies the overtones of 1 Corinthians 1:13 – it is no more conceivable for the church to be splintered than for Christ himself to be divided.

The church is one, because its Lord is one. It is one body, with a single head. It has one breath, one Spirit; it is this one Spirit that animates all congregations of Christians. Yet while its unity is both given and guaranteed by the Spirit of God, the church's unity is also given to the church to guard. We cannot destroy the church's unity any more than we can create it, but we can certainly neglect, obscure, and even deface it.[12] While it is never ours to produce, the church's unity is something over which we must keep diligent watch.

The Westminster Confession teaches that only by the Holy Spirit can we be united to Christ. This Spirit-given unity with Christ, the Confession continues, is naturally and necessarily expressed by our living in concrete unity with all others who are likewise united by the Spirit with him. "By the indwelling of the Holy Spirit all believers being vitally united to Christ, who is the Head, are thus united one to another in the Church, which is his body."[13] The unity of the Spirit is an unbreakable bond between Christ and all who are united to him. For those so united, it is no

[10] This is not to claim, of course, that these Restorationist movements are similar theologically or historically — only to point out that through a wide variety of religious communities born in America, there is woven a significant common thread.
[11] Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 8*, tr. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 143.
[12] The *Book of Order* notes that the proliferation of denominations is itself an instance of such defacement: "While divisions into different denominations do not destroy [the church's] unity, they do obscure it for both the Church and the world. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), affirming its historical continuity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ, is committed to the reduction of that obscurity and is willing to seek and to maintain communion and community with all other branches of the one, catholic Church." (G-4.0203) Surely, such statements of noble aspiration ring hollow if we are unwilling to maintain and nurture communion with one another within our own denomination.
[13] *Book of Confessions* [Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)], 6.054.

more possible to live in the Spirit apart from one another than it is to do so apart from Christ.

Yet while Ephesians 4:3 portrays the church's unity as a *given*, verse 13 presents it as a *goal*: "until we all come to the unity of the faith." Here the church's unity is construed eschatologically, rather than ontologically. So, which vision of the church's identity and witness ought we embrace? Classically Continental or American? Reformed or Restorationist? Ontological or Eschatological? Is ecclesial unity our ground or our goal?

In keeping with the larger Pauline tradition, Ephesians 4 suggests that the answer to these questions is simply, unambiguously: "Yes!" As the community of the elect, we are collectively and individually called in Christ to become what we already are. By the same token, in Philippians 2:12–13 we are exhorted to work out our salvation with fear and trembling — because God is already at work in us to save us. Colossians 3:3–5 employs a similar logic, arguing that we are dead, and our lives are hidden with Christ in God — therefore we are to put to death our ungodly passions. The New Testament writers agree that as saints in Christ we are completely sanctified already by the work and faith of Jesus Christ — yet our sanctification is a lifelong journey of one step backward for every two forward. In the same spirit, Ephesians 4 teaches that the church is already one — therefore it must always incline itself toward unity.

While our unity as the family of God is already firmly established, rooted in the unity of God in Christ by the Spirit, we dare never rest easy on the urgency of pressing toward the embodiment of the unity of our faith, of working out our unity with fear and trembling. This unity of the faith is not first of all a matter of mere agreement over doctrines or beliefs — rather, it is our common unity (our *comm-unity*) in the faith by which we all are saved, that is, the faith of Jesus Christ.

According to Ephesians 4:13, we have been endowed with "unity in the faith … of the Son of God." It is a severe reduction to taper the unity of our faith to a matter of mere doctrinal agreement. Of all people, we in the Reformed tradition should know full well that orthodox affirmation has no saving power. If it cannot save us in the first place, how could it possibly be the principle that sustains our life together in the body of Christ?

The crux of the unity of our faith is that we are united in and by the faith — i.e., the faithfulness — of Christ himself. According to Galatians 2:20: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live

by faith in the Son of God [NRSV note: 'or, by the faith *of* the Son of God'], who loved me and gave himself for me." Romans 3:21–22: "But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ [NRSV note: 'through the faith *of* Jesus Christ'] for all who believe." Richard Hays insists that (a) the specific function of the genitive case in these (and other similar) passages, and (b) the larger Pauline doctrinal framework, argue that the foundation of our salvation is the faith *of* Christ rather than our faith *in* Christ.[14]

Forbearance amid Discord

The shape of ecclesial unity in Ephesians 4 is disclosed by the focus of the wider passage — Ephesians 4 is all about how we live and work together as the children and ambassadors of the one Lord in this world, not about the content of our creed. The tone is set with verse one, and builds consistently from there: "Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." The directive is issued to "you-all" in the plural, to the entire community; it addresses our common life, not merely our individual lives. The thrust of the passage focuses upon our manner of living together rather than upon inward dispositions or personal creeds.

Calvin teaches that the overall aim of Ephesians 4 is twofold: to teach and to maintain the inherent unity of the church. Given that overall aim, he points out the significance of the way the passage begins: "With good reason does [the apostle] recommend forbearance, as tending to promote the unity of the Spirit." This is, he contends, on account of "the extreme bitterness of man's natural temper."[15] Unity in the Spirit can be maintained only to the extent that our fellowship demonstrates from first to last "all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:2) Only as our life together is built on this foundation are we able to display, promote, and guard our unity in the Spirit.

Having stated with such clarity that humility is the necessary condition for unity, and that such humility leads us to cease insisting that everyone see things our own

[14] L. Keck, ed., *New Interpreter's Bible*, XI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 239–40. For a detailed exposition of this contention (which is contested by some, to be sure), see Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

[15] William Pringle, tr., *Calvin's Commentaries,* XXI (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 267. This account of "natural temper" points toward fallen human nature, in which the original divine image is defaced, though not obliterated. The life of Christian discipleship, in Calvin's view, is a continuous project of advancing in sanctification by setting aside the fallen human nature as we embrace and display with ever-increasing clarity the divine nature, in which image we were originally formed. It is a matter of becoming what we already are — fully human, in the Creator's image.

way on occasions of dispute, Calvin proposes that the unity of the Spirit impels us toward what he calls "a harmony of views."[16]

Surely Calvin is right in claiming that ecclesial unity will press us toward seeking a common mind in times of dispute. But we must, nonetheless, remain mindful that agreement is neither the ground nor the substance of this unity, nor is it a guaranteed outcome of this unity. The ordinary New Testament terms for harmony of views, or like-mindedness, are unrelated to *henotés*, the term translated "unity" in both Ephesians 4:3 and 4:13. (*Henotés* occurs nowhere in the NT apart from these two verses.)

Calvin has bequeathed upon the Reformed heritage the inclination to expect perhaps a little too quickly that our given unity in the Spirit be expressed in harmony of views. As a result, when our views clash, we are far too ready to break fellowship, a "solution" that would be utterly reprehensible to Calvin. To our deep shame, the Reformed wing of Christianity is historically among the most schismatic of all major streams in Christianity. We need to remember and emulate the patience exhibited by Paul when people disagreed with him: "Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you." (Philippians 3:15)

Thus we find Calvin sitting on the horns of a dilemma. He repeatedly argues in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*[17] that schism in the church is unthinkable — yet he clings to the strong hope that the church's given unity will naturally yield close harmony (if not uniformity) of views. While unambiguously affirming that ecclesial integrity requires that we must continue to walk in fellowship with people whose ideas and practices may deviate from our own, Calvin also leaves us a legacy of pressing for doctrinal harmony — a legacy that makes it all too easy to dissolve fellowship when differences of doctrine do not quickly yield.

At one point in the *Institutes* Calvin teaches that "agreement in sound doctrine and brotherly love" are the "two bonds" that bind together the communion of the church.[18] Apart from sound doctrine, there can be no union of believers, only a "faction of the ungodly." Yet elsewhere he holds that our unity depends only and entirely upon whether we have been engrafted by Christ into his body, something

[16] *Ibid.*, 268.
[17] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press: 1960).
[16] *Ibid.*, 4.2.5.

known only to the Lord.[19] He repeatedly warns against separating from those whom we might deem defective, for God alone knows the elect from the reprobate, and our Lord has ordained that they remain together in the worshiping community until he separates the chaff from the wheat in the final judgment.[20] While arguing that faithful preaching of the word and right administration of the sacraments are the marks of the true church, Calvin teaches that even when "some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, … this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church."[21]

Limits of Ecclesial Embrace

So what *would* justify separation? Which creedal claims are of absolute necessity for maintaining ecclesial authenticity? In a passage warning against what he calls "capricious separation," Calvin offers a short list of such "proper essentials" of Christian confession: "God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like." While the list is meant to be neither formal nor exhaustive (as the concluding phrase "and the like" suggests), it stands in stark contrast to the pettiness of issues over which the church has often divided. He cautions, "A difference of opinion over … nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians."[22] Schism is nearly always marked by elevation of adiaphora to the level of essentials, at the expense of the weightier matters; therefore it is crucial to keep the main thing the main thing.

In making his case against schism, Calvin beats no retreat from his mission to "reform what is offensive" in the church. In Calvin's ideal world, we'd agree on all things, small as well as great. However, the quest for doctrinal purity enjoys no priority over the mandate to preserve unity. Calvin explains, "I would not support even the slightest of errors with the thought of fostering them through flattery and connivance. But I say we must not thoughtlessly forsake the church because of any petty dissensions," provided that it maintains sound teaching on matters essential to salvation.[23]

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[19] *Ibid.*, 4.1.2.
[20] *Ibid.*, 4.1.3.
[21] *Ibid.* 4.1.12.
[22] *Ibid.* The brevity and focus of Calvin's list are both instructive. "That God is one" is the core — and, as we saw earlier, Barth argues that it is impossible to confess credibly that God is one if we who claim to belong to the one God are ourselves divided. Thus, obversely, it may well be argued that the unity of the church is for the Reformed tradition one of the few "essentials" of Christian faith. Such a judgment surely accords with Calvin's sustained argument in *Institutes* 4.1.
[23] *Ibid.*

Calvin concurs with Augustine's advice to church officers "mercifully to correct what they can; and to bear patiently with what they cannot correct."[24] Inevitably we come to the question of the limits of due patience. How far must we tolerate what we deem foolishness, error, and degeneracy before we are justified in breaking ranks from the communion of those who in our view do not live up to their profession of faithfulness to God? This gets to the very heart of the matter, which Calvin addresses with extraordinary clarity, comprehensiveness, and passion in a crucial passage in the *Institutes*:

> On this head, Christ himself, his apostles, and almost all the prophets, have furnished us with examples. Fearful are the descriptions in which Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Habakkuk, and others, deplore the diseases of the Church of Jerusalem. In the people, the rulers, and the priests, corruption prevailed to such a degree, that Isaiah hesitates not to liken Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa. 1:10). Religion was partly despised, partly adulterated, while in regard to morals, we every where meet with accounts of theft, robbery, perfidy, murder, and similar crimes. The prophets, however, did not therefore either form new churches for themselves, or erect new altars on which they might have separate sacrifices, but whatever their countrymen might be, reflecting that the Lord had deposited his word with them, and instituted the ceremonies by which he was then worshipped, they stretched out pure hands to him, though amid the company of the ungodly. Certainly, had they thought that they thereby contracted any pollution, they would have died a hundred deaths sooner than suffer themselves to be dragged thither. Nothing, therefore, prevented them from separating themselves, but a desire of preserving unity. But if the holy prophets felt no obligation to withdraw from the Church on account of the very numerous and heinous crimes, not of one or two individuals, but almost of the whole people, we arrogate too much to ourselves, if we presume forthwith to withdraw from the communion of the Church, because the lives of all accord not with our judgement, or even with the Christian profession.[25]

This stunning passage, which is foundational to Calvin's entire ecclesiological project, needs to be pondered carefully. Here Calvin forcefully and unequivocally argues that the examples of biblical prophets and apostles, even of our Lord himself,

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[24] *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 4.1.16. Quotations of this translation are specifically noted in this paper; otherwise, the Battles translation is being cited.

[25] *Ibid.*, 4.1.18 (Beveridge). Calvin uses the term "Church" to designate the people of the covenant, both before and after the advent of Christ. Elsewhere in the *Institutes*, Calvin spreads the net of welcome still more broadly, urging us to consider and pray for *all* human beings as fellow-children of God, since we have no certain knowledge of whether or not any particular individual is or is not a member of God's elect: "Let the Christian, then, so regulate his prayers as to make them common, and embrace all who are his brethren in Christ; not only those whom at present he sees and knows to be such, but all men who are alive upon the earth. What God has determined with regard to them is beyond our knowledge, but to wish and hope the best concerning them is both pious and humane." (3.20.38, Beveridge) Calvin was generous enough in this regard to insist that the Pope be granted a place — even a place of special prominence, if that be necessary! — at the ecumenical council he was trying to call to "put an end to the divisions which exist in Christendom." (Jules Bonnet, ed. and tr., *Letters of John Calvin*, v. 2 [Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n.d.], 158).

preclude virtually any justification for walking away from the fellowship of the visible church — whether on account of heresy, immorality, or hypocrisy within the church or among its leaders, even if such defects are pervasive.[26]

Consider especially the examples of Jesus and Paul, who both continued fully to participate in and support existing church structures (i.e. the fellowship and disciplines of synagogue and temple), despite their bold opposition to their corruptions. Jesus faithfully paid his temple tax, contributing to the very coffers he would scatter when he overturned the moneychangers' tables at the temple.[27] As adamantly as they decried the corrupt practices of their church leaders, Jesus and Paul honored their offices. Jesus counseled his followers to heed the scribes and Pharisees because they "sit on Moses' seat," even though their hypocritical examples should never be emulated. In a similar spirit, when Paul was reprimanded for criticizing the high priest, he quickly apologized, explaining that had he known this was the high priest, he would have remained silent, "For it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a leader of your people.' "[28]

Despite all the falsehood and faithlessness they exposed in their church's leadership, there is no record suggesting that Jesus, the prophets, or the apostles considered leaving the church. For them, staying with the church was a matter of keeping faith with the God who gathers a covenant people, rather than a matter of deciding who has and who has not kept faith with the covenant, and setting the bounds of fellowship accordingly.

Chains of Peace

The counsel of patience through disagreement is profoundly difficult to abide. The watchful guardianship of our unity requires every bit of resolve we can muster. The term *téreo*, translated "maintain" in Ephesians 4:3, means literally to keep sentry, as a jailer maintains vigilant watch over prisoners. The jailer's responsibility is not to capture criminals, but to guard those already captive. Similarly, our task is to guard the unity of the Spirit already present among us, rather than to capture something elusive.

This is but one of a string of metaphors in Ephesians 4 drawn from prison life. The apostle begins the chapter by claiming the status of *desmios en kurio*, a "prisoner in

[26] One of the great tragedies and travesties of the Reformation heritage is that the expulsions of Calvin and Luther from Roman church fellowship are called upon time and again by their heirs to justify acts of schism.
[27] Matthew 17:24–27; 21:12–14.
[28] Matthew 23:2–3; Acts 23:2–5.

the Lord." Some interpreters see this as a reference to literal incarceration, but the direct reference is to the Lord's bonds, not human bonds. In the Lord, none of us is free, but all are bound — to our Lord, to our vocation, to one another. Such bonds need to be guarded, even though they are imposed on us by our Lord, rather than self-assumed.

The prison metaphor extends to the subsequent phrase: We are to guard the unity of the Spirit in the *sundesmo*, literally the shackling chain of peace. The peace of Christ is no soft pillow of blissful contentment, but a chain that binds the children of the covenant together under the Lord of all. In this vein, the apostle elsewhere urges that we let this peace *rule* us.[29]

Bound together by our Lord with chains of peace, we have all the resources we need to keep the covenant family together in shalom. For the ties that bind us together are not of our own making; they are fashioned and supplied by the God of all peace. They are sufficient to the task, because they are gifts of divine grace.

Still, unity of the Spirit requires of us plenty of patient, sturdy resolve. The story of the church witnesses to that repeatedly. Buffeted by winds of worldly seduction, advocacy for error, and ravenous raging of divisive spirits, the church is tempted again and again to give up on its calling to be the one holy catholic and apostolic community that maintains the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.

Coming to a common mind in times of serious disagreement is a long, laborious, often exasperating process. It takes immense forbearance and determination alike. The great controversies of the faith have taken the church years, often decades, sometimes generations to resolve. The heritage of the great church councils reminds us that even the most faithful, willing, and capable of the church's saints need plenty of time, hard work, and unshakable cheer to come to consensus in times of disagreement.

When it comes to guarding our unity in Christ, we need to hear again the apostolic counsel: "For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised."[30] All that God has given, all that God has promised — including the unity of the church for which Jesus so fervently prayed, and for which the apostles so relentlessly fought — all this, given by God though it may already be, calls for great resolve and endurance from us.

[29] Colossians 3:15
[30] Hebrews 10:36.

Peter reminds us not to lose heart when God's promise is not immediately fulfilled — what seems to us divine slowness is in fact a demonstration of God's patience.[31] True humility and forbearance, the foundational conditions for church unity according to Ephesians 4, need much time to germinate, take root, and bear fruit. God patiently permits us to develop the character and access the satisfaction that can be gained only by running the full length of the course, rather than being immediately transported to its finish line.

The Ministry of Bearing

A disproportionate number of natural "fixers" seem to end up in church leadership. The church's officers are easily seduced by the rewards promised to those who can fix the church's problems. What begins as a caring response to real pastoral needs all too easily evolves into a pattern of compulsion, an urgent need to resolve every problem that arises in the community.

Church problems that resist quick fixes all too often propel ministers either into a frenzy of frustration or a paralysis of despair. What a relief — both to themselves and to the church — when church leaders fully grasp that they are neither called nor equipped to fix everything! Our Lord calls shepherds to tend and feed his sheep, not to fix them.[32] There are some difficulties, some shortcomings, some conflicts, some obstinacies that can never be fixed, only borne.

Every family is beset with long-term struggles that resist every effort at resolution. Still, healthy people do not disown family members. We continue to bear with one another, realizing full well that bearing together for the long haul may be the best disposition of family differences we'll ever manage.

Blessedly, we discover that when we quit trying to bend one another and settle ourselves simply to bear with one another, some of our hardened differences begin to melt. This seems especially true with children: the less we try to force them to change, and the more we accept and love them just as they are, the better likelihood they will embrace that which makes for peace and joy — both their own, and that of their family. Our ability to fix our loved ones' problems is so very limited. But this we *can* do: we can *bear with them*. In so doing, we may well discover that problems that have defied every attempted resolution begin to resolve themselves.

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[31] 2 Peter 3:8–9.
[32] See John 21:15–17.

The ministry of bearing is given to everyone in the household of faith; Paul urges all members of the church to bear one another's burdens.[33] This is one of the primary expressions of the universal priesthood of believers.

Nevertheless, there is a special ministry of bearing that is given to the shepherds of the flock. Jesus characterized his relationship with his disciples as one of "bearing with" them, and his ministry of redemption is described by the apostles as one of "bearing" our infirmities.[34] There is a special participation in his ministry given to those ordained to church offices — whether as ministers of Word and Sacrament, elders, or deacons. The shepherding ministry Jesus passed on to his disciples when he commissioned them, "Tend my sheep," continues to lay special claims upon men and women called by God and ordained by the church to offices of ministry.

Parents exercise a special place of influence in the successes or failures of their children — an influence that deepens with the years, and persists well beyond their death. Something similar happens with the church's ordained leaders and the flock for which they bear responsibility. Whether for good or for ill, its ordained leaders wield a profound impact on the well-being of the church. This impact derives not from the personal qualities of the minister, but from the sacramental power of the office. As the church's leaders embrace the call to bear with those in distress, wonders of healing grace are released into the church.[35]

Calvin argues that the wholeness of the church hangs on "the power of the keys" — Christ has given to those who govern the church (represented by Peter) the power to bind and to loose, to bring wholeness to the broken and reconciliation to the alienated. "The mission of reconciliation has been entrusted to the ministers of the church… [I]t is dispensed to us through the ministers and pastors of the church."[36]

In the Reformed tradition, the exercise of the "keys" has typically been understood especially to belong to the ministry of the Gospel through the proclamation of the

[33] Galatians 6:2; see also Romans 15:1 and Colossians 3:13.
[34] Jesus speaks of "bearing with" his slow-to-learn disciples in Luke 9:41. On his bearing our infirmities and sins, see Matthew 8:17, Hebrews 9:28, and 1 Peter 2:24.
[35] The designation "pastors" here and in what follows is meant to represent all the ordained offices of ministry. Ministers of Word and Sacrament, deacons, and elders *together* exercise the pastoral ministry of the church. Paul discloses the close affinity of pastoral and parental relationships in 1 Corinthians 4:14–15, "I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I have become your father through the gospel."
[36] *Institutes*, 4.1.22. The scriptures passages to which he refers in support of this point are Matthew 16:19; 18:18; and 2 Corinthians 5:18–20.

Word and the administration of the Sacraments. But the ministry of the keys extends beyond the church's chancel.

Calvin points out that the ministerial office of reconciliation is to be exercised "both publicly and privately as need requires. For very many, on account of their weakness, need personal consolation. And Paul mentions that not only in public preaching, but from house to house as well, he has attested his faith in Christ."[37] The power of the ministerial office certainly is exercised through the public ministry of Word and Sacrament, but it is also released simply by virtue of the leader's presence among the people of God — whether visiting the lonely, praying for the needy, moderating governing bodies, or hearing grievances.

Calvin and Barth both underscore that according to Ephesians 4 the church's unity is nurtured specifically through the offices of leadership given to the church by its Lord. Through the leadership of those ordained to ministry, the church is equipped to be true to its nature as the one Body of Christ. The unity of our covenant community is guarded, nurtured, and made explicit in the church through the special labors of its leaders.[38]

This is not to romanticize the prestige, power, or charisma of church officers; they are no more remarkable than the rest of the community in capacity, commitment, and character. Calvin makes this point with characteristic droll wit as he comments on this text: "The Lord knows what [the church's] need requires. But to keep [the church's leaders] within humility and godly modesty, he has bestowed no more upon it than he knows is expedient."[39] He notes that the Lord has seen fit to refrain from providing the church with leadership sufficient to make it pure — perfection has proven quite beyond ecclesial reach, despite all the best efforts of even the

[37] *Ibid.*, referring to Acts 20:20–21. Bonhoeffer echoes the crucial need for pastors to exercise a ministry of personal presence with the flock that complements the public proclamation of the Word and administration of the Sacraments, developing this under the rubric of *diakonia*. For Bonhoeffer, this is the aspect of ministry in which the pastor listens, rather than speaking — a ministry which is particularly necessary in times of struggle, when people are least receptive to arguments. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care*, tr. Jay Rochelle (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 30–32.

[38] In addition to making this connection in his Commentary on Ephesians, in the *Institutes* (4.3.1) Calvin quotes almost the entirety of Ephesians 4:3–16 to support his claim that the unity of the church is singularly nurtured by its pastors: "Nothing fosters mutual love more fittingly than for men to be bound together with this bond: one is appointed pastor to teach the rest.… The Lord has therefore bound his church together with a knot that he foresaw would be the strongest means of keeping unity." While five ministry offices are enumerated in Ephesians 4, Calvin considers only the offices of pastor and teacher to be ordinary; the roles of the apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic offices are perpetuated in the church by pastors and teachers. Calvin's references to the pastoral office are to be taken as shorthand for all the ministry offices.

[39] *Institutes*, 4.8.12

most competent church leaders. The perfecting of the church's unity in holiness is beyond pastoral capacity; it belongs only to God.[40]

Such a modest task God gives the church's leaders: Just keep the flock together. It is not much, but God gives those in leadership all that is needed to accomplish it. The marvel is that God uses the ministry of pastoral bearing not merely to keep the flock intact, but also by the Spirit to effect measures of ecclesial peace, purity, and unity abundantly beyond what we could ever ask or think.

Indeed, this ministry of bearing is far from trivial in the final analysis — it is a ministry with profound sacramental power. What an awesome privilege to be entrusted with this humble office, in which men and women ordained to ministry give themselves to things that appear most ordinary and inconsequential, and discover to their amazement that precisely there God is mightily at work.[41]

Gracious at the Core

In its manner of life, the church reflects the nature of the God it worships. Thus, as we have already noted, the church called forth by the God of the Bible is necessarily marked by unity. The confession that "God is one" is a *sine qua non* of authentic Christianity, according to Calvin; therefore the church necessarily displays this unity in its life together.

Calvin's third "essential" of the faith is that "our salvation rests on God's mercy." To put it another way, the confession that *God is gracious* is central to Christian faith. This grace of God, according to Bonhoeffer, is free, but never cheap. "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church," he insists. "We are fighting today for costly grace."[42]

As our life together more faithfully reflects the nature of the God we worship, our community more richly embodies the graciousness of God. But just as God's graciousness has been manifest at a great price — the life of Messiah Jesus, God incarnate — so the way of graciousness in the church proves almost impossibly costly, even while it is unavoidably necessary.

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[40] *Ibid.*

[41] For a provocative unfolding of this correlation of pastoral modesty and effectiveness, see Marva Dawn and Eugene Peterson, *The Unnecessary Pastor: Rediscovering the Call* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999). Dietrich Bonhoeffer has richly summarized the nature of this ministry of "bearing" in *Life Together*, 90–103, which brings together ideas he explored at greater length in his lectures on pastoral care, which are published in *Spiritual Care*.

[42] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, tr. R. Fuller, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 45.

The Christian community reflects ever more authentically God's costly graciousness as it is led into practices of a corresponding graciousness through the word and example of its leaders. Will those called to offices of ministry bear with their critics graciously, even when their motives are impugned, their teachings are ignored, and their hopes and dreams are summarily dismissed? The church is enabled to become a community of graciousness precisely to the extent that its leaders themselves embrace the suffering graciousness exemplified by the Lord Jesus.

As prisoners of the Lord, the church's leaders are bound to follow his example by graciously setting aside the needs to be justified and to win. "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."[43]

Through the ministry of bearing, in which they follow the pattern of ministry taught and demonstrated by Jesus, the church's leaders embody God's suffering graciousness. As those in leadership display graciousness in their manner of bearing up the church in love, the church is freed to live as a compelling "exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."[44]

The call to be a community of graciousness is no warrant to be a community where anything goes. Especially as heirs of the Reformed tradition, it is unthinkable for our church's leaders to be careless about doctrinal integrity. It would be a terrible caricature of the ministry of gracious bearing to abdicate the struggle for integrity in the church. We must contend for the truth no less relentlessly than did Jesus and the apostles.

Grace, after all, is no mere wink at sin and error. Rather, it is a communication of God's power that draws us far beyond the limits of our native resources. A community that embodies God's graciousness at its core discovers that precisely in such an environment the power of Christ to build his church is given room to work. Such a community can be what the church must be, yet what no human community

[43] 1 Peter 2:21–23. While it is generally assumed that this passage is an encouragement to respond graciously to external persecution, the instruction here is even more pointedly applicable when those within the covenant community are the causes of suffering, even as was the case for Jesus.
[44] This is one of the "Great Ends of the Church" set forth in the *Book of Order*, G-1.0200.

could possibly be: A covenant people that scrupulously guards its unity in the Spirit, as it grows ever deeper in the unity of the faith.

Through the ministry of bearing, the leaders of the church embody the profound graciousness that lies at the core of God's dealings with us. Indeed, graciousness is not merely how God acts; it is the core of who God is. The freedom of church leaders to be gracious is rooted in sure confidence that God can be trusted to make the church all that it is meant to be: the one holy people of the one Almighty God. As with Israel's leaders of old, perhaps God would speak to the church's leaders today, as once again God's people seem pressed on all sides, with no place to turn: "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today.… The Lord will fight for you, and you only have to keep still."[45]

[45] Exodus 14:13–14.