

Serving One Another in Christ's New Community

1. Introduction: Most of the workshops on biblical equality that I have led over the past five years have been about the biblical passages on which complementarians base their beliefs. In these workshops, I have explained why I believe these passages have been misunderstood and how they have been mistranslated. Today I want to focus on the example and teaching of Jesus. In his book, *Abusing Scripture* (pp. 225-247), Manfred Brauch explains two core criteria by which we must interpret the Bible. The first criterion is that Jesus is the centre. He is the one through whom all things come to be. In John 1:3 we read, *Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.* He is the ultimate revelation of God. In John 1:17-18 we read, *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.* Jesus is the key to a correct understanding of the Bible. The second core criterion is Jesus' words and acts. Jesus spoke and lived God's words. In John 14:24; 17:8 Jesus says, *Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. ... For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.* In this workshop we will explore the implications of some of the things that Jesus did and taught.

2. The Importance of Unity in Christ's New Community: In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul tells us how Christ brought Jews and Gentiles together in one new community. Christ made peace between the two, making the two one. He destroyed the barrier, the wall of hostility that had divided them. His purpose was to create a new humanity out of the two. His plan was to form one body, reconciling both of them to God through his death on the cross. It is through Christ that both Jews and Gentiles have access to God the Father by the one Holy Spirit. All of God's people are fellow citizens and members of his family. Or to put it another way, all God's people are joined together to become the living temple in which God dwells by his Spirit.

In Eph 2:19-22 Paul concludes by saying, *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Genesis 11:1-9 tells us what happened when people began to build a tower to reach to the heavens. Up to then, the whole world had one language, but God confused their languages so they would not understand one another. This is why it has been called the Tower of Babel. Many centuries later on the day of Pentecost, when the followers of Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them. People from all over the ancient world began to hear the wonders of God in their own language. Many see this as a

reversal of what happened at the Tower of Babel. Christ is bringing together in his new community people from different ethnic groups who speak different languages.

Genesis 2:18-25 tells us that before the fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed an equal partnership in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3:16 suggests that after the fall this relationship changed. The equal partnership gave way to a struggle for dominance and control. In the new community Christ will reverse the effects of the fall and establish a new unity, a new oneness. We find this theme throughout Paul's letters. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 we read that the Holy Spirit forms Christ's followers into one body in which our differences will be overcome. Verse 25 adds that *there should be no division in the body and all its parts should have equal concern for each other*. In Galatians 3:26-28, we find the same theme. Paul says to the Christians of Galatia and to us, *In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. In God's family there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*.

This is the oneness Jesus prayed for the evening before his crucifixion. We find his prayer for us in John 17:20-23, *I pray for those who will believe in me, ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me — so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*. In this prayer Jesus stresses two very important matters. The first is the importance he gives to oneness and complete unity among those who believe in him. The second is the impact this oneness and complete unity will have on those who have not yet believed in him. They will believe that Jesus was sent by God and loves them enough to die for them.

3. The Teaching and Example of Jesus re Two Kinds of Leadership: In Matthew 20:20-28 we find a well-known teaching of Jesus. The mother of James and John came to Jesus with her sons to ask a favor of Jesus. Tradition tells us that she may have been the sister of Jesus' mother Mary. If she was the sister of Mary, she may have thought this would give her and her sons an "in" with Jesus. After all, she was his aunt, and James and John were his cousins. She asked, *Grant that one of these sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom*. Jesus did not respond to her, but spoke directly to James and John. He told them that their request was not his to grant.

When the other disciples heard what happened, they were indignant with James and John. They may have thought that the two brothers were trying to get a step up on them. Jesus called the disciples together and gave them a lesson on what it means to follow him. He said, *You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*.

In this lesson Jesus contrasts two kinds of leadership. The first is about power and authority and the other is about being servants and serving one another. Jesus tells his disciples that they should not imitate the power and authority model, but rather the servant leadership model. Then he tells them why. He has recruited them to be his disciples. Disciples obey their leader's teaching and follow his example. *I did not come, Jesus tells them, to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many.*

Apparently the early church was convinced that what Jesus taught and exemplified about being servants and serving one another was very important. Mark records an incident in which Jesus asks the disciples what they had been arguing about as they walked along the road. No one was willing to confess that they had been arguing about who was the greatest among them. Jesus sat down and called them to gather around him. Then he told them, *Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all* (Mk 9:33-35).

Luke records another incident that took place at the Last Supper. Again a dispute arose among the disciples as to which of them was the greatest. Jesus said to them, *The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves* (Lk 22:25-26).

Years later when John wrote his Gospel, the desire for power, authority, and greatness was still a problem in the church. To counteract this problem John includes the action of Jesus in washing his disciples' feet. I believe John did this to illustrate the significance of servanthood. He carefully sets the stage for what Jesus was about to do. First, he tells his readers that *Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father*. Second, he tells them that what Jesus was about to do was an act of love. *Having loved his own, who were in the world, he loved them to the end*. It is love that makes servanthood possible. Third, John points out that *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God*. There is a lesson here for all of us. Being given a position of leadership does not remove the responsibility of serving one another. Jesus' love and commitment would take him to death on the cross the next day.

Having set the stage, John tells us what Jesus did. *He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him*. He, who had come from God and was about to return to God, who had been given power over all things, took on the role of a slave and washed his disciples' feet. This was a service they were not willing to do for one another.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place at the table. *Do you understand what I have done for you? he asked them. You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed*

your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them (John 13:12-17).

What do we learn from this passage? Jesus has set us an example of what we should be doing. We should be serving one another, but this is not easy to do. William Temple remarks, "We would gladly wash the feet of our Divine Lord; but He disconcertingly insists on washing ours, and bids us wash our neighbour's feet." We need to remind ourselves regularly of the example Jesus has given us. Following Jesus in his teaching and his example will be difficult. Serving others is counter-cultural, but Jesus says that we will be blessed if we do.

4. Learning from Jesus How to Relate to One Another: In Philippians 1:27, Paul urges the Philippian Christians to *live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*. In 2:1-4, he explains what is involved in living this way. *Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

What do we learn from this passage about what our relationships with one another should be? First, serving one another is only possible when we are united with Christ, experiencing his love and obeying the Holy Spirit. Second, learning how to live in harmony, loving one another, is essential in living as Christian believers should. Third, refusing to act out of selfish ambition, egotism, or self-conceit is vitally important. Fourth, we are to be humble, caring about others as much as we care about ourselves.

Philippians 2:5-8 gives us the most important example of how we should relate to one another as Christians. *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!*

Three things stand out in this passage. First, Christ *did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage*. We should not use our position in life for our own advantage. Second, Christ took on *the very nature of a servant*. Third, Christ *humbled himself by becoming obedient to death*. Christ obeyed God even when that meant death on a cross. As I read this passage, I wonder if I have even begun to understand what it means to follow Christ.

5. The Message of the "One Another" Passages in the New Testament: In 1978 I bought Gene Getz's book, *Building Up One Another*. Ever since reading it, I have been impressed by

the “one another” passages in the New Testament. A few of them are about what we should not do to one another, but most of them are about how we should relate to one another as Christian brothers and sisters. As we have already seen, in the family of God there is no hierarchy, but rather oneness and equality. This is what Jesus prayed for and this is what we should seek. The Holy Spirit unites us. We should not allow race, status, or gender divide us.

Before I read some of my favorite “one another” passages, I want us to think for a moment about who the “one another’s” in these passages are. I believe that they are all those who belong to the family of God. They are the ones who believe in Jesus, the ones Jesus prayed for in John 17:20-23 that they would live in complete harmony and unity. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 they are those who are part of the body of Christ and have equal concern for one another. We need to pay particular attention to what the following verses tell us about how we should treat one another. *For we were all baptized in one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (v. 13). The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable (vs. 21-22). But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it (vs. 24-26).*

Now listen carefully as I read my favorite “one another” passages:

Jn 13:34-35 – A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Rom 12:10(a) – Be devoted to one another in love.

Rom 12:10(b) – Honor one another above yourselves.

Rom 12:16 – Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Rom 15:7 – Accept one another just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Gal 5:13 – You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

Eph 4:2 – Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Eph 4:32 – Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Eph 5:21 – Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

1 Thess 5:11 – Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Heb 10:24-25 – *Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another.*

1 Pet 1:22 – *Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.*

1 Pet 4:9 – *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.*

1 Pet 5:5(b) - *All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’*

1 Jn 1:7 – *But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

1 Jn 3:11 – *This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.*

1 Jn 3: 23 – *And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*

1 Jn 4:7-8 – *Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

1 Jn 4:11-12 – *Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

6. What We Have Discovered about Life in Christ’s New Community: First, God expects his people to live together in harmony and unity. We should not allow race, class, or gender to separate us. We are all part of the same family. We are indwelt by the same Spirit. We have the same Savior and the same heavenly Father. Second, Jesus has taught us that serving one another is key to life in his new community. The worldly desire to gain power and authority over others is to be replaced with servanthood. Third, living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ is only possible when we are united to him, experiencing his love and obeying the Holy Spirit. There is no place for selfish ambition, egotism, or self-conceit. Our calling is to love one another, live in harmony and peace, and humbly care for one another. In our relationships with one another, we should seek to imitate our Lord. Finally, the “one another” passages remind us that following Jesus requires a major transformation in how we relate to one another in his new community.

If we Christians were obeying the teaching of Jesus and following his example, we would not be at odds with one another over racial, class, and gender issues. We would not be forbidding women from following God’s calling. We as Christian sisters and brothers would be learning how to relate to one another in Christ’s new community.

Prepared by Hugh McNally, May 27, 2014